

## A prospectus on marketing futurology

It's not just about predicting what the future will be, but about shaping it into the future we want to be.

— Janette Sadik-Khan

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### Introduction

Although our world is verging on dramatic societal and economic shifts, business in general – and marketing in particular – seems unprepared for them. Consider, for example, Jeremy Rifkin's (2014) prediction about the rise of a global Collaborative Commons and the eclipse of capitalism. He contends economists, who perpetually welcome marginal cost reductions, have not anticipated a new infrastructure – comprised of the Internet of Things, globally fungible energy, and decentralized production and distribution – that will incite a technological revolution driving marginal costs to “near zero”. In essence, he argues the Communication Internet will converge with the Energy Internet and Logistics Internet to create a technological platform connecting everyone and everything (Rifkin, 2011). As a result, plummeting marginal costs will foster a new, hybrid economy that is part traditional capitalism and part Collaborative Commons (i.e. distributed and decentralized environment that encourages open-source innovation, transparency and community). In a Collaborative Commons, access will be more important than ownership, sustainability will dominate consumerism, cooperation will dominate competition, and “sharable value” will replace “exchange value”.

Whether this futuristic outlook is accurate or not, new technologies will continue to emerge so rapidly that anticipating all their intended, unintended, and synergistic effects will be impossible. Human intuitions honed for eons by an environment that rewarded accurate linear projections (e.g. hunters succeeded by aiming their spears at a fleeing animal's future location) cannot fully envision the societal consequences of exponential advancements in genetics, robotics, information technology and nanotechnology (Eckersley, 2001; Garreau, 2005; Kurzweil, 2005). If humanity ignores the highly dissuasive rhetoric of the Luddite/technophobe legion, then such technological advances will transform post-industrial society permanently, and the “point of no return” already may have passed (Bell, 2003; Joy, 2000; McKibbin, 2004).

Thinking about possible futures is a learnable skill (Frame, 2018). Futurists, whose field of inquiry is “future studies” or futurology, explicitly and systematically examine and evaluate possible, probable, and desirable futures, inform societal expectations about the future, and promote efforts to shape the future (Bell, 2003). In response to forecasts portending exponential change (Kurzweil, 2005), scholars and science popularizers have advocated “futurizing” technology and the sciences (including social) by incorporating futurology principles into their weltanschauung, theories, teaching, and research (Bell, 2003; Cowen, 2013; Schor, 2010). We concur, and thus urge marketers to “adopt a mindset of professional futurists... [and] embrace whole-system change” (Eckersley, 2001, p. 22).

As futurists urge organizational decision makers to anticipate the future and to control it by preparing for expected trends (W. Bell, 2003), marketers can develop capabilities “to invent the future, to learn the future faster, and to deliver the future earlier” (Pattinson and Sood, 2010, p. 417). Our goal here is not to warn against an impending apocalypse caused by



global warming, hostile artificial intelligence (AI), massive systemic unemployment, errant asteroids, plagues, or other potential disaster inducers (Bostrom, 2009, 2014; Bostrom and Cirkovic, 2008). Nor is it to laud technological breakthroughs that will usher in humanity's Golden Age. Rather, our goal is to suggest a perspective from which marketers may

- identify and ponder alternative futures and their consequences; and
- effectuate a desirable future for all stakeholders (i.e. circumscribed by a fair distribution of costs and benefits).

In essence, marketing futurology should inform decisions that create a future reflective of humanity's sustainable preferences. Given its synergies with other social sciences and tech-related disciplines, marketing is the ideal field of scholarship to orchestrate humanity's future.

Our exposition proceeds as follows. After providing preliminary evidence about the extent and positivity (or lack thereof) that marketing scholars have engaged in futures discourse, we discuss marketing's unique future-inducing position and offer a research agenda centered around a new aspirational definition of marketing. Next, we suggest an organized set of higher- and lower-order questions and a prescriptive tool for avoiding dystopia-inducing negative externalities. Finally, we introduce the articles appearing in this special issue and close with a brief discussion.

### **Futures: a content analysis**

Although an exhaustive review of the futurology literature is impossible in this short introductory essay, a content analysis of *Futures*, a leading multidisciplinary futures studies journal, provides preliminary evidence for the extent that marketing scholars have engaged in futures discourse. With an impact factor of 2.26, h-index of 66, and SCImago scientific influence rating of 1.23, *Futures* is the only futures studies journal rated 'B' or better by the Australian Business Deans Council. A search for the term 'marketing' in all issues published from 2009 to 2018 yielded 172 articles. After eliminating articles tangentially related to marketing, 69 articles remained. For each article, the following information was recorded:

- type of article (i.e. conceptual, methodological, empirical or meta-analysis);
- explicitly expressed attitude towards marketing's role in futurology discourse (i.e. positive, negative, or none);
- presence of practical business implications (i.e. either explicitly defined and actionable, or absent); and
- authors' main field of expertise (operationalized as "discipline of first author's highest degree").

Tables I and II, which summarize this analysis, offer several cautionary results. First, marketers (co)authored only 10.14 per cent of marketing-related articles, which implies they contribute only minimally to multidisciplinary discussions about the future, even when those discussions focus on marketing. Perhaps marketers are philosophically detached from contemplating possible, probable, and desirable futures (Bell, 2003) or from using futurology research tools. For example, a recent meta-analysis of research that assessed prospective future scenarios showed only 13.5 per cent from business and management sources (Oliveira *et al.*, 2018).

Second, and likely related to the first result, fewer than half (40.6 per cent) of marketing-related articles featured implications pertinent to marketing practitioners, which hints these practitioners lack the conceptual and methodological tools needed to plan for the intermediate or distant future. Concurrently, long-range enterprise-level planning has grown

Main questions	Related values-laden questions
<i>Higher-order questions</i>	
What is a person?	<p>Should sentient machines be considered persons?</p> <p>What forms (i.e. human-like and non-human-like) should complex non-human semi- or fully autonomous entities take?</p> <p>Should 'conscious' AIs be allowed?</p> <p>To what extent should humanity re-engineer/enhance itself biologically and artificially? (i.e. transhuman/posthuman entails questions about longevity and capabilities)</p> <p>Are minds transferred to a non-biological substrate still persons?</p>
What is the good life?	<p>What is the main goal for sentient life?</p> <p>'Progress' as a species versus individual happiness</p> <p>Unless outcomes are identical, should positive experiences be maximized or suffering minimized?</p> <p>Should personkind strive towards greater purposes (e.g. space colonization, terraforming Mars) or embrace banal contentment (i.e. hedonistic imperative)?</p> <p>How should various quality-of-life objectives for personkind—flourishing, self-believed happiness, societal productivity, freedom—be weighted?</p> <p>Can persons live a 'good life' in a virtual world?</p>
Who is in charge and how do they decide?	<p>Should AI and machine learning algorithms 'choose' for personkind?</p> <p>Should personkind be controlled by systems they cannot understand (e.g. cannot understand verdicts of robojudges)?</p> <p>What decision rules should prescribe autonomous device behavior (e.g. Asimov's three laws of robotics)?</p> <p>Who assesses what is desirable and how (self-report, expert judge)?</p> <p>To what extent should deontology or teleology (i.e., intention versus outcome) criteria be used to base and assess decisions and outcomes?</p> <p>Whose values will be programmed into simulations to determine/ forecast the 'right' path?</p>
<i>Lower-order questions</i>	
Category	Related values-laden questions
Philosophical/ Ethical	<p>What are people's basic rights (e.g., universal health care, basic minimum income, broadband internet access)?</p> <p>Should 'equality of opportunities' or 'equality of outcomes' be favored?</p> <p>Should autonomy and privacy be swapped for technological progress and economic efficiency? (e.g., pros and cons of big data and biometrics era)</p> <p>What are the ethical issues within organizations in the context of possible and probable futures? (e.g., degree of labor automation in pursuit of increasing efficiency)</p> <p>What are the ethical methodologies for assessing consumer and organizational preferences for the future?</p>
Psychological	<p>Even if suboptimal, is there psychological value in personal rather than augment decision-making?</p> <p>Is there value in performing mundane daily tasks (e.g., driving, shaving)?</p> <p>How can people avoid the hedonic treadmill?</p> <p>Should people have intimate relationships with sentient non-biological entities?</p> <p>Should video makers 'reverse engineer' their videos based on expert systems that recognize current viewers' biases and preferences?</p>
Economic (i.e., resource allocation)	<p>Given the effects on current and future generations, what implicit discount rate should be used in net present value calculations?</p> <p>How should positive and negative externalities be weighted in net present value calculations?</p>

(continued)

**Table I.**  
Example questions

Table I.

	Main questions	Related values-laden questions
Political		Should people's work lives be organized around institutions (e.g., corporations) or a personally customized path (e.g., entrepreneurship and gig economy)?
		Should working be decoupled from surviving once automation make that possible?
		How close should Earth's carrying capacity (i.e., maximum sustainable personkind population) be approached?
		Should existing forms of democracy be re-designed to better adhere to the alternative futures?
		To help people evolve their thinking, how much exposure to alternative perspectives (e.g., avoid the media echo chamber) is optimal?
		Should post-truth/post-factual/post-reality politics be tolerated?
		Should nationalism replace globalism?

Table II.

Marketing-related  
articles published in  
futures, January 2009  
to June 2018

Year	Conceptual	Methodological	Empirical	Meta-analysis	Pro-marketing	Anti-marketing	Practical business implications
2009	7	1	0	0	0	0	0
2010	3	2	4	0	0	0	4
2011	4	0	0	0	0	0	1
2012	11	1	1	1	0	2	5
2013	3	1	2	0	0	0	3
2014	3	0	4	0	2	0	2
2015	2	0	1	0	1	2	0
2016	1	2	3	0	5	0	5
2017	0	4	1	0	0	0	4
2018	5	1	0	1	2	3	2
Total	39	12	16	2	10	7	28
(%)	(56.5)	(17.4)	(23.2)	(2.9)	(14.5)	(10.1)	(40.6)

evermore challenging, so future studies are likely to become increasingly important to organizations (Michman, 1984; Oliver-Schwarz, 2008). Hence, we fret marketing scholars are failing to develop and improve the futurology-related research tools marketing practitioners require (Oliver-Schwarz, 2008).

Third, the percentages of marketing-related articles engendering a positive or negative outlook are roughly equal (i.e. 14.5 per cent versus 10.1 per cent, respectively), which implies 'marketing as a positive influence' is a strongly rivalled view. Despite a throng of marketing advocates, many social scientists and commentators have argued marketing induces society-harming outcomes, such as:

- squandering limited resources while providing no social value and accounting improperly for externalities (e.g. sustainability issues often are ignored and planned obsolescence is encouraged) (Slaughter, 2018);
- distorting/corrupting marketplaces with problematic practitioner tools like exaggerated/deceitful promotional messages and high-pressure sales tactics using pervasive and manipulative ploys (Krawczyk and Slaughter, 2010; Nash, 2010);

Field of expertise	<i>n</i>	(%)
Futures Studies	10	14.49
Marketing	7	10.14
Economics	6	8.70
Geography	6	8.70
Management	6	8.70
Sociology	4	5.80
Education	3	4.35
Engineering	3	4.35
Philosophy	3	4.35
Strategy	3	4.35
Architecture	2	2.90
Communication and Media Studies	2	2.90
Information Systems	2	2.90
Political Science	2	2.90
Social Science	2	2.90
Anthropology	1	1.45
History	1	1.45
Innovation	1	1.45
Literature	1	1.45
Mathematics	1	1.45
Production and Systems	1	1.45
Regional Science	1	1.45
Supply Chain Management	1	1.45

**Table III.**

First author's field of expertise, marketing-related articles published in futures, January 2009 to June 2018

- spurring needless consumption, unhealthful purchases (e.g. cigarettes, junk food), and materialism rather than voluntary simplicity and mindful consumption ([Hampson, 2010](#); [Pierce, 2000](#); [Pohl and Kornbluth, 1953, 1984](#)); and
- focusing on current performance goals rather than the intermediate and/or distant future ([Hampson, 2010](#); [Nordlund, 2012](#); [Van der Steen and Van der Duin, 2012](#)).

If only some of these criticisms are justified, then changes within the marketing discipline are warranted ([Stoeckl and Luedicke, 2015](#)). In good news for marketers, our field of scholarship is uniquely positioned to resolve these and other issues that pervade a modern consumption-focused society ([Hackley, 2009](#)).

### Marketing: supreme social science for realizing a desirable future

In an invited essay, Malcolm McDonald posited, “the discipline of marketing is destined to become increasingly less influential unless there is some kind of revolution, or at the very least a new beginning. Perhaps some kind of paradigm shift will emerge” ([McDonald, 2009](#), p. 433). He then identified marketing’s lack of a consensus definition as a major culprit in this likely decline. Although unsaid, the lack of a consensus general theory is symptomatic of this definitional shortcoming.

The current major candidates for a general theory of marketing – Resource-Advantage or (R-A) theory and Service Dominated Logic (SDL) – disappoint for various reasons. “A general theory of competition that describes the process of competition” ([Hunt and Arnett, 2003](#), p. 4), R-A, which draws from many economic (e.g. evolutionary, Austrian, institutional, transaction cost) but no psychological domains, is merely ‘towards’ a general theory of marketing ([Hunt, 2000, 2002](#)). SDL, which circumscribes the ideas of value co-creation and

reciprocity in service-for-service exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), has been criticized for oversimplification, myopic perspective, ethical dim-sightedness, and disconnectedness from consumer culture (Arnould, 2014; Brodie, 2017; Hackley, 2009; Hietanen *et al.*, 2018).

Although the lack of a general theory (Hunt, 1983) has long compromised marketing's scientific status, marketing's definitional and general theory deficiencies have created a substantial futurology-related 'silver lining'. Specifically, marketing is the best-positioned discipline for orchestrating efforts to realize a desirable future because its internal theoretical shortcomings often compelled its scholars to borrow theories and constructs from other disciplines, which amplified its interdisciplinary status. As a result, marketing is not beholden to a single scholarly weltanschauung. Hence, marketing is the apical social science for identifying, pondering and effectuating alternative futures because it can serve as a nexus for futurology-related scholarship.

Moreover, marketers are uniquely positioned to shape the future because they are skilled in molding consumer consciousness and routinely track internal and external signals critical to foreseeing opportunities and threats (Bilgin, 2010; Mendonça *et al.*, 2012). Central to successful business-to-consumer marketing is ascertaining consumers' preferences accurately despite high uncertainty. Fortunately, the knowledge and tools needed to reveal those preferences also pertain to ascertaining humanity's preferences for a future world.

### Organizational scheme for marketing futurology

We considered but rejected several organizational schemes for marketing futurology. For example,

- By technology domain. Because many high-tech products tap into multiple fields (e.g., genetics, robotics, nanotechnology), such frameworks would fail Hunt's mutual exclusivity requirement for classification schemes (Hyman, 2004). Furthermore, new product decisions should not rely excessively on technical feasibility or profitability, as such criteria do not mitigate producers' temptation to develop addictive or substantial negative-externality-creating products (Alter, 2017; Foer, 2017).
- By likely societal and environmental pros and cons of future technologies and their sustainability-related production constraints. Again, any tech-centric scheme would fail Hunt's mutual exclusivity requirement. Furthermore, forecasts needed for such analyses tend towards gross inaccuracy due to 'black swan' events (i.e., unexpected and highly disruptive events amenable to retrodiction and post hoc explanation) and confounding societal forces that reduce prediction accuracy (Taleb, 2007).
- By type and magnitude of positive versus negative externalities. As many externalities are unintended and unanticipated, a scheme for organizing flawed expert foresight is useful only as a compendium of wildly inaccurate predictions (Meadows *et al.*, 1972).
- By degree of advisable government and/or industry oversight (with laissez-faire free market as zero degree). Because political processes advance far slower than marketing processes – think lags for new ethical drug introductions – many firms working on state-of-the-art technology and concerned about 'being scooped' might choose to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. In addition, government oversight of emerging technologies will differ among jurisdictions. In essence, organizing by degree of external oversight relates more to limiting the damage caused by errant technology than to preventing negative externalities.

Instead, we posit structuring marketing futurology around an aspirational definition of marketing unencumbered by macromarketing-level criticisms (e.g. encourages waste), a set of higher- and lower-order questions, and a basic prescription for avoiding dystopia-inducing negative externalities. Our exposition proceeds accordingly.

### **Normative aspirational definition of marketing**

Our proposed aspirational and futurology-concordant definition of marketing is as follows: *Marketing is the interdisciplinary normative social science addressing multi-party, volitional and value-creating exchanges that promote personkind's sustained flourishing.* This definition is consistent with the late Robert Lusch's argument that marketing has evolved during the last century from a "to market" philosophy to a "marketing with" philosophy, which "views the customer as endogenous and as a partner in the cocreation of value" (Lusch, 2007, p. 265). As with Lusch's definition of marketing, our definition includes normative elements, such as sustain[ed] value and exchange. Now consider our definition's component words in turn.

#### *Interdisciplinary*

Marketing already is a nexus for the social sciences and business disciplines. To provide insights into (a) consumers' wants and needs, and (b) producers' technical and business-related capabilities (e.g. value engineering, distribution), marketers draw from the theoretical and practical archives of marketing, other business disciplines (e.g. management and finance), and other social sciences (e.g. psychology, behavioral economics, sociology, and anthropology).

#### *Normative social science*

One of us (Mike) has argued 'positive marketing science' is an oxymoron. Instead, marketing has been a normative science for the last 75 years because its scholars have grounded their systematic inquiries and theories in normative constructs such as needs, wants, and ownership (Hyman, 2004, 2011; Skipper and Hyman, 1995). "Marketing language is so saturated with value-laden terms and marketing theories are so thoroughly imbued with normative claims that no translation into positive language is conceivable" (Hyman *et al.*, 1991, p. 420). As such, normative human values (related to flourishing) should be central to marketing theory and practice despite misguided attempts to construct a value-free positive science of marketing. Furthermore, a normative definition is consistent with many previous attempts to define marketing. "Normative definitions might contain positive elements but are also concerned with what marketing ought to be" (Ringold and Weitz, 2007, p. 253).

#### *Addressing*

"Addressing" means thinking about a problem or situation and deciding how to handle it. More than just "considering" or "exploring", "addressing" embraces marketing scholarship and practice. Like positive psychology and positive marketing (Positive Psychology Center, 2018; Center for Positive Marketing, 2018), our definition is aspirational, as it speaks to marketing's normative goals rather than specifies a core set of functions or activities (Sheth *et al.*, 1988).

#### *Multi-party*

Although authors of many self-help books implore readers 'to sell yourself to yourself' (Maltz, 2015), our definition assumes marketing requires at least two parties. Multiple parties to value-creating exchanges generally have discrepant as well as congruent preferences, so marketers have extensive experience reconciling at least partly contrary



needs and wants. Because reasonable and informed people will differ in their preferences for a future world, such expertise should prove invaluable for resolving those differences.

#### *Volitional*

Volitional means intentional, honest, and non-coercive for all value-creating parties. For marketers, it means maintaining “a moral environment wherein people freely agree to mutually beneficial exchanges that promote worthy purposes [. . .] [and assuming] (1) all affected parties (or their representatives) must be considered and included; (2) participation by all affected parties (or their representatives) must be voluntary, and (3) the distribution of benefits among affected parties must be non-prejudicial” (Hyman and Curran, 2000, p. 326).

For consumers, it means exercising their personal will and making informed decisions. From a philosophical perspective, we assume consumers are self-aware and informed sufficiently to recognize and attempt to adjust their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in accord with environmental changes (i.e. they have free will; Harris, 2010).

#### *Value-creating exchanges*

Value co-creation is the joint effort between proactive customers and product providers to co-construct personalized experiences (Bharti *et al.*, 2015; Grönroos, 2012), which implies customers prefer sufficient interaction with providers to ensure an exchange process that best satisfies the former’s needs. In essence, the joint customer-provider effort to co-create value boosts customer self-involvement and self-control, which ultimately enhances consumer satisfaction (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Although one of us (Mike) has argued “exchange” is not the core construct of the received “positive science of marketing” (Hyman and Tansey, 1992), it could be the core construct of a normative science of marketing, as “exchange” relates closely to Alderson’s notion of assortment optimization (Alderson, 1965). “Exchange” is preferable to “transaction” because the former need not involve money transfer. Furthermore, “exchange” is concordant with the broadened definition of marketing (Kotler, 1972; Kotler and Levy, 1969) because it assumes neither product acquisition nor consumption.

#### *Promotes*

Collective intentionality is requisite to a desirable future. Although people’s attitudes and preferences differ, we assume humanity can identify and perform tasks that advance it towards such a future. Societies can conduce an enlightened collective agenda by promoting supportive ideas and behaviors (e.g. “citizens are duty-bound to vote in political elections”). Marketing is well-equipped to undertake a proactive role in this process. However, to satisfy the “volitional” requirement, this promotion must be transparent and educational rather than manipulative (e.g. engineering decision environments to “nudge” consumers’ behaviors in a seemingly positive direction) (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

#### *Personkind*

Although our world’s well-being requires a healthy ecosystem that includes numerous lifeforms, marketing is limited to persons. For example, one of us (Alena) likes to pretend her dogs appreciate the colorful toys she purchases for them, yet these products do much more for her peace of mind during long days on campus than they do for her dogs, which have limited color vision (Coren, 2018).

Due to likely transhumanism- and other tech-related advances, a forward-looking aspirational definition should accommodate more than extant humans (Buchanan, 2011;



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Cooney, 2004; Nayar, 2014; Paul and Cox, 1996; Pepperell, 2003). Ultimately, persons would include all entities capable of multi-party value-creating exchanges, such as self-aware androids, cyborgs, and genetically modified humans (Bendle, 2002; Braidotti, 2013; Tegmark, 2017). Hence, our use of ‘personkind’ rather than ‘humanity’.

### *Sustained*

One goal of macromarketing is “to optimize outcomes for the largest number of stakeholders in a marketing system not only now but also for future generations” (Schulz, 2007, p. 294). Sustainability is vital to answering marketing’s eschatological questions hopefully, such as “How many people can market exchange systems enable the Earth to support as population and consumption growth rates increase?” (Fisk, 1997, p. 720).

### *Flourishing*

‘Positive marketing’ has been defined as “any marketing activity that creates value for the firm, its customers, and society at large” (Gopaldas, 2015, p. 2446), or marketing “in which parties—individual consumers, marketers and society as a whole—exchange value such that individually and collectively they are better off than they were prior to exchange” (Center for Positive Marketing, 2018). These and other definitions limit positive marketing to win-win situations. The dearth of positive marketing literature suggests none of these definitions has become the *de facto* standard embraced by marketing scholars and practitioners. Perhaps the lack of interest is attributable to many firms’ quarterly performance focus or the pressure on many marketing scholars to deliver insights and tools useful to marketing practitioners.

In contrast, positive psychology has generated far more interest. First advocated by Martin Seligman during his term as American Psychological Association President in the early 2000s, positive psychology is “the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play” (Positive Psychology Center, 2018). Positive psychology studies human happiness as “the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable and Haidt, 2005, p. 104), and stresses a somewhat Aristotelian approach that focuses on moral virtues and character strengths for sustaining a flourishing life (Kristjánsson, 2013).

Positive psychology focuses on positive subjective experiences (i.e. directly pleasant emotions and more obliquely pleasant flow), positive traits (e.g. character strengths, personal resiliency), and positive institutions (e.g. democracy, supportive families, free press) (Bonniwell, 2012; Seligman, 2002a; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). “At the individual level it is about positive personal traits—the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic” (Seligman, 2002b, p. 3). In essence, positive psychology addresses the elements and predictors of ‘a good life’.

Although many consumers believe “more is better”, extensive evidence suggests otherwise; for example, income beyond a certain amount does not increase happiness (Gilbert, 2006; Seligman, 2004; Sison, 2015). Rather than the extrinsic values associated with materialism and the hedonic treadmill, such as financial success and popularity, intrinsic values like affiliation and self-acceptance are more compatible with flourishing (Diener *et al.*, 2006; Jackson, 2017). By speaking to personal values,

materialism is antithetical to the collective values (e.g. family) that promote happiness (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002).

### Higher- and lower-order questions

To identify and then effectuate a future that promotes humanity's sustained flourishing, marketers must answer three higher-order questions, which in turn relate to groups of value-laden questions (Table I). The higher-order questions and a few examples of related value-laden questions are as follows. Note these questions do not address agency. For example, neither resource nor instrumentality questions are posed (e.g. affirmative action). Regardless, these are basic questions for deciding about a desirable future.

#### *What is a person?*

This question has inspired science fiction novels (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and *We Can Build You* by Philip K. Dick), movies (e.g. *Blade Runner*, *Her*, *AI*, *Ghost in the Shell*), and television series (e.g. *Star Trek – The Next Generation*, with its android officer Lt. Data; *Star Trek – Voyager*, with its holographic doctor; *Doctor Who* and its Cybermen) for almost a century. To achieve a desirable future, humanity must decide the necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood, which requires answering many questions (Bendle, 2002). For example, does a genetically and/or mechanically enhanced human qualify as a person? In essence, at what technological stage would an enhanced human or cyborg become a non-human? Are minds transferred to a non-biological substrate still persons? Does AI capable of passing a Turing test qualify as a person? What forms (i.e. human-like and non-human-like) should complex non-human semi- or fully autonomous entities take? Answers to such questions will help realize a desirable future by deciding 'who has a vote' (Braidotti, 2013; Buchanan, 2011; Tegmark, 2017; Malapi-Nelson, 2017).

#### *What is the good life?*

Another set of questions addresses the type of existence universally (or at least overwhelmingly) preferred by personkind. Determining the importance of many (often contrary) quality-of-life objectives (e.g. individual happiness, progress as species, et cetera) will pose a substantial challenge to orchestrating a desirable future. For example, Universal Basic Income (UBI) advocates argue that employment should not be requisite to satisfying essential life needs in an anticipated largely jobless (due to automation) future society (Covert, 2018). These advocates contend such an allocation of financial resources offers true freedom by encouraging people to follow their passions and to lead a good life devoid of personal financial concerns (e.g. becoming an entrepreneur without facing risks typically associated with this endeavor) (Widerquist, 2013). Yet, voters in many countries (e.g. Germany, Switzerland) rejected UBI partly because they feared it would destroy most humans' work motivation. Without work-related duties and responsibilities, many people may experience an existential crisis.

#### *Who is in charge and how do they decide?*

To what degree should Big Data, AI, and machine learning dictate persons' lives? In a way, this question, which entails far more than privacy concerns, addresses an issue marketers have debated since Packard's (1957) hidden persuaders and Dichter's (1964) use of depth interviews and Freudian/psychoanalytic analyses. Answering this question can help organize the debate about the light-side versus dark-side of the marketing concept: Do marketers' efforts to understand consumer psyches help consumers maximize their

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objective function (e.g. for Alderson, optimize their assortment) or reduce their personal autonomy and compromise their free will?

Lower-order value-laden questions organized around four categories now help set the research agenda for marketing futurology.

### *Philosophical/ethical*

Marketing scholars may be best suited to answer ethical questions that arise from new technologies because they tend to consider the “positives” and economic/commercial benefits along with the “negatives”, such as threats to existing value systems and consumer culture. Thus, a marketing perspective should be better balanced than a tech-centric perspective.

Questions in this category focus on consumers’ and organizational decision makers’ philosophical and ethical responses to possible and probable futures. For example, in an era of widespread AI use, what will most consumers agree are ethical boundaries for personal data collection? In contrast, what degree of AI-enabled labor automation will most marketing practitioners believe is ethical? This area of inquiry also entails ethical methodologies for consumer and organizational ethics investigations.

### *Psychological*

Marketing scholars have adapted many psychological theories and methods applicable to exploring consumers’ and other stakeholders’ mental responses to alternative futures. Ubiquitous high-tech will raise many personal and collective self-identity issues. Consumers’ emotions will affect their adoption and use of highly interactive technologies, such as fully immersive virtual reality and AI assistants. Policy makers must anticipate the evolution of attitudes related to new technologies requiring universal, or at least overwhelming, acceptance (e.g. autonomous vehicles).

Is there psychological value in making personal decisions even if suboptimal? Assuming AI can make superior decisions, what types of decisions will persons defer to AI? These questions – which could relate to trust, fun and other psychological notions – represent the obverse of the libertarian paternalism/nudging debate ([Aguirre and Hyman, 2015](#)). Nudging proponents ([Thaler and Sunstein, 2008](#)) assume consumers will make suboptimal product-related choices (relative to themselves and society) unless social scientists engineer marketing environments to encourage “good” decisions and discourage “bad” decisions. Perhaps persons will prefer to make their own mistakes, provided those mistakes do not harm other persons.

### *Economic*

These research questions address economic actors’ behaviors when interacting with emerging high-tech. Based on marketing and economics insights, optimal consumer behavior and organizational strategies for various viable futures may be identified. For example, how should managers weigh the anticipated positive and negative externalities of introducing a new-to-the-world product? Could possible futures and their probabilities be incorporated into decisions that heavily rely on anticipated financial outcomes? These types of questions and suitable methodologies for answering them lie within this domain.

### *Political*

Data about the political and legal consequences of consumers’ and organizational behaviors under alternative futures can help to select among them. Most possible futures will incite

Independence and interdependence vary among cultures. Many Western cultures tend to praise independence and focus on personal emotions; in contrast, many Eastern cultures embrace the communal aspects of their people's lives and derive happiness from socially-engaged affect (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). When describing happiness, Westerners mention social experiences far less often than their Asian counterparts, yet members of all cultures tend to be happier when they embrace other members as sources of happiness and life satisfaction (Shin *et al.*, 2018). Under Maslow's (1943) classic hierarchy of needs, only lower-level needs exclusively entail personal well-being (e.g. physical comfort). In contrast, higher-level needs entail human interactions and rely on other people for social belonging, social recognition, and the like. On this view, self-actualization through a "meaningful life" (Seligman, 2004) cannot be achieved without other people or social institutions.(Figure 1).

At the other end of the values spectrum, a focus on intrinsic values means prioritizing personal preferences and well-being above all else. For example, catering solely to personal convenience can deter consumers from minimizing their carbon footprint, recycling, or other environmentally friendly behaviors. Embracing such unsustainable behaviors can produce apocalyptic outcomes, including the end of intelligent life on Earth (McGuire, 2004).



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As advocated by many sages since ancient Greek times, ‘moderation in all things is important’. Although humans are social animals (Aristotle, 2000), total reliance on other people as a source of happiness can produce a life of sorrow and disappointment. Spanish poet Judah Halevi wrote, “Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” Neither an excessive focus on others nor an excessive self-focus promotes personal happiness. To prevent (or at least mitigate) a dystopian future, marketers must navigate a golden mean between intrinsic and extrinsic human values. Pursuit of this careful balance can lead to a desirable future. In practical terms, this prescription implies studies of possible, probable, and desirable futures are needed at many levels (e.g. consumer, organizational, regional, macro-level).

### Special issue overview

The six articles included in this special issue address several of the previously broached research questions. In “Markets, Consumers and Society in the Age of Heteromation,” Dholakia and Firat tackle the higher order question “what is a person?” They discuss ethical, social and economic implications of human coexistence with advanced machines. More specifically, they compile a set of possible automation-related futures, analyze consequences for consumers and organizations, and speculate about the role of marketing in the age of AI-powered devices. Although their speculations about the specifics of marketing’s future are debatable, we concur that the unique challenges posed by alternative futures requires marketing be redefined.

In “Future Thinking: The Role of Marketing in Healthcare,” Anderson, Rayburn and Sierra present an example of marketers’ possible new agenda. The article illustrates how marketers’ viewpoint can help shape a desirable future. Specifically, they assess the future of US healthcare organizations from the collective perspective of various stakeholders (i.e. healthcare professionals, scholars, and patients) by investigating psychological and economic outlooks in the context of alternative paths for the entire industry.

“Making the World a Better Place by Making Better Products” shows how marketing devices can promote societally beneficial agendas. Paparoidamis and Tran discuss eco-product development with increased adoption rate in mind. Their analysis focuses on the psychological aspects of consumer interaction with emerging green technologies. Rather than merely suggest a desirable future, they provide a proactive outlook that includes marketing tools for shaping that future.

“Prioritizing Marketing Research in Virtual Reality: Development of an Immersion/Fantasy Typology” offers an in-depth investigation of emerging technologies. Cowan and Ketron propose a framework for research questions related to virtual reality (VR). They outline four basic types of VR applications as well as research questions and methodological considerations for each of these four types. Given VR’s potential to explore possible futures and people’s psychological and behavioral responses to those futures, their article is timely and provides a useful structure for VR-related scholarly research in marketing.

“How Real are Virtual Experiences?” also considers the blurring borders between physical and virtual. Trabelsi-Zoghalmi and Touzani investigate the effect of virtual experiences on single consumers and consumer groups. Their research is crucial from two perspectives. First, as VR is incorporated into more marketing activities, the systematic effect of virtual interactions on society needs to be understood. Second, the methodological approach can serve as a template for researchers planning to use virtual simulations to study possible futures.

“LARPhography: An Embodied Embedded Cognition Method to Probe the Future” also focuses on futurology research methods. Orazi and Cruz propose a data collection method for researchers studying possible and probable futures. Their approach—which includes

observation and exit interviews—overcomes limitations of cognitive abstraction and allows simulation participants to experience life in the ‘brave new world’. Perhaps the main advantage of their methodology is its ability to collect behavioral (as opposed to attitudinal) data from consumers and producers useful for assessing alternative futures.

### In closing

Given likely structural, technological, economic, and social shifts, we urge marketers to recognize, support, and advocate for marketing’s role in creating a desirable future. Reactive strategies based on expert forecasts are problematic, as such forecasts – whether positive or negative – are prone to substantial error. For example, most experts repeatedly mispredicted world oil prices for the last century despite such forecasts merely requiring accurate supply and demand estimates (i.e. few additional confounding and interacting variables) ([Gardner, 2011](#)).

Marketing futurology can be contemplated from either or both of the following perspectives:

- What is technically possible?
- What is in personkind’s best interest?

Most non-fiction-based futurology tends to address the former. Typically, the first step is to formulate a technology typology/first-letter mnemonic such as GRIN (i.e. genetics, robotics, information technology, and nanotechnology) or a previously unrecognized driving force (e.g. near-zero marginal cost) ([Garreau, 2005](#); [Rifkin, 2014](#)). Instead, we contend a better first step is to ground marketing futurology in an aspirational definition that focuses on personkind’s best interests. In turn, we can relate that definition to a set of researchable questions.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) currently defines ‘marketing’ as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” ([American Marketing Association, 2018](#)). Unlike the current AMA definition, our definition implies morality and ethics ([Mick, 2007](#)) by including the words normative, volitional, sustained, and flourishing. Our definition, like the definitions of positive psychology and positive marketing, is aspirational because personkind’s sustained flourishing is an ideal. However, our definition makes one huge assumption: posthumanist technology will not change basic human nature.

In closing, we leave you with this quote from [Kuo \(2012\)](#):

In the end, prosperity resides in our ability to flourish as human beings—within the ecological limits of our finite planet. Anyone concerned with planning for a better future must take account of the totality of human experience and be aware that sustainability can only be maintained through balancing human aspirations with the physical limitations of our environment (p. 18).

**Michael Richard Hyman**

*Marketing, New Mexico State U, Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA, and*

**Alena Kostyk**

*Marketing Department, NEOMA Business School, Mont-Saint-Aignan, France*



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