Postmodernity: The age of marketing

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This paper investigates the much discussed phenomenon of postmodernity as it relates to and influences marketing. The major conditions of postmodernity are discussed as hyperreality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption and production, decentering of the subject, and paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites), with the caution that marketing may already be a postmodern institution.

Introduction

A new perspective on life and the human condition is sweeping across the globe: specifically in Western cultures. This new perspective is called postmodernism. While postmodernism is the term that is most widely used to signify this perspective, it is also represented in poststructuralism in history and philosophy of science, and in post-industrialism in technology and communications. According to its most prominent philosophers and researchers, postmodernism is a recognition of the "... complex conjuncture of cultural conditions ... [that have arisen from the] ... postwar restructuring of capitalism in the West and in the multinational global economy ..." (Ross, 1988, p. x). Some consider the 1950s to be the period when postmodern conditions that were already present in modernity began to unfold, and the 1960s to be the period when they became more pronounced (Stephanson, 1988). These conditions will be discussed later.

Discussions of postmodernity in philosophy, architecture, art, literature, literary criticism, history, as well as other disciplines, indicate its complex, often paradoxical and multi-faceted nature. It is difficult, if not impossible, to define this phenomenon precisely in just a few words or sentences, since it continues to evolve. A major part of this essay, therefore, will be devoted to clarifying some key characteristics of postmodernity. As these characteristics are revealed, it will become apparent that "modern marketing" may already be a postmodern institution. Much of the postmodern phenomena, now recognized in the disciplines mentioned above, is belatedly becoming familiar to marketing scholars and practitioners. As a matter of fact, one major claim in this essay is that marketing can be considered the ultimate social practice of postmodernity. In any event, thinking about the possible links between the marketing mind-set and the postmodern sensibility can be rewarding. It is interesting, given the possible connections, that the marketing community (scholars, practitioners, etc.) has been somewhat late in its awareness of postmodern perspectives.

There are, indeed, only a handful of discussions of the phenomenon in the marketing literature. (See, for example, Firat, 1990 and 1991a; Ogilvy, 1990; Sherry, 1990; Venkatesh, 1989 and 1992). Partially, this is due to little interaction between marketing and the other disciplines listed above. Partially, it may be a consequence of the complexity of the subject

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and the resulting perception that there can be no immediate implications or applications for marketing practice. This may be a rather mistaken perception, however, as it will become apparent from the following discussions. Indeed, postmodernism presents some fresh and exciting insights into the nature of marketing and possibilities for an expanded discourse. After all, postmodernists have made marketing practices, promotional campaigns, and consumption culture central topics in their debates. This is a challenge that marketing and consumer research scholars and students cannot afford to neglect.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity, as a phenomenon, is specific to the cultural history of Western Europe and North America. However, its impacts are felt throughout the world due to the cultural, economic, and political influences of the countries from these continents. Different well known students of postmodernism have provided different definitions of postmodernity. For Lyotard (1984), it is "incredulity toward metanarratives." Metanarratives are grand, unified idea systems or ideologies which determine the meanings and perceptions regarding truth and life in general. For Jameson (1983), contemporary postmodern society is best defined as a "consumer society" marked by both pastiche and schizophrenia. Pastiche indicates an attitude of a certain detachment on the part of the individuals of postmodern culture, where all stylistic expressions of parody, nostalgia, and other illustrated feelings lack emotional depth and commitment. Schizophrenia refers to the disjointedness and discontinuity of the individual's personal identity and experiences in life. Gitlin (1989) sees postmodernism as a condition where the search for order and unity are abandoned giving way to fragmentation. For Angus (1989) postmodernity is not so much the discarding of the project of modernity—that of improving human lives by controlling nature through scientific technology—but its infinite delay. Finally, Wilson (1989) sees postmodernity as an expression of the incoherence of contemporary urban life.

As the above definitions attest, postmodernity is characterized by the disappearance of authority, unity, continuity, purpose, and commitment. It is perceived as the emergence of complexity, multiplicity, fragmentation, resistance, negation, rupture, and irreverence for any specific goal or point of view (Venkatesh, 1989). In postmodernity, the people have developed a distrust for the project of modernity which is perceived to have promised wonders but delivered disillusionment, disintegration and anxiety. The resulting distrust and irreverence for any grand project has been reflected primarily in art, literature, and architecture where discussions of postmodernity initially started (Foster, 1985; Owens, 1983). Since deep purpose and deep commitment no longer exist, living and receiving gratification from each moment, hedonism, gains importance and priority.

Modernity, the era of scientific ideology that began with the Enlightenment according to many philosophers, was characterized by metanarratives which encapsulated the centered, unified visions and perceptions of their founders and followers. These metanarratives expressed truth claims as identified by their proponents and were supported by scientific analyses and practices which exposed the biases and failures of rivals. Two examples of such metanarratives for postmodernists are bourgeois (capitalist) ideology and marxism. Postmodernists use the term "narrative," because of the signification that these are stories which people construct to tell themselves. There seems to be a postmodernist consensus that all metanarratives are just that; stories which dominate and deter-
mine a community's perceptions of what the human condition, the universe, or reality are all about. They are "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980 and 1987). Postmodernism was inspired by a desire to become detached from all metanarratives that require conformity to a single way of perceiving reality. Postmodernists call for a diversity or multiplicity of narratives, a liberation from all conformity, and a freedom to experience as many ways of being as desired. Underlying this call is also a call for tolerance for and recognition of difference (de Certeau, 1984; Sherry, 1990).

Postmodernism, especially for those who celebrate it, is, in addition to being a call to reject the commitment to metanarratives (specifically, to modernist projects), a call to practice, unabashedly, certain conditions which were present in modernity but suppressed by the modernist rhetoric. These conditions will be discussed shortly. It is necessary to note, however, that not all postmodernists embrace all implications of these conditions completely. There are postmodernists who perceive problems with some of the conditions that are likely to be entrenched as the postmodern era progresses, while recognizing their liberating potential. For example, Baudrillard (1987b and 1988), displays such an ambivalence, partially due to his awe with the omnipotence and omnipresence which he feels postmodern conditions have. Jameson (Kellner, 1989a), on the other hand, is a postmodernist theoretician who believes in the necessity and possibility of transcending postmodernity. Thus, while postmodernists largely agree on the identification of postmodern culture, they do take different stands towards it.

A common agreement among postmodernists is that in postmodernity there is no longer a metanarrative, one dominant ideology, philosophy or agenda. An ensuing discussion of the more prominent postmodern conditions may imply that this conclusion is false or misled. We may be experiencing only the appearance of a loss of the metanarrative in postmodern culture due to the fact that this culture is difficult to grasp with the familiar, modern, or currently utilized concepts and categorizations. This paper will pose the possibility that the postmodernists may be mistaken, that the market and, its predominant practice, marketing may be the new metanarrative in postmodernity.

Postmodern conditions

Postmodern conditions are very varied and the language used to represent these conditions also varies across different disciplines. A thorough review of these literatures tends to justify a classification of the most important conditions into five categories. These are hyperreality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption and production, decentering of the subject, and paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites).

Hyperreality

This might be the most studied and discussed condition of postmodernity (Baudrillard, 1983a and 1987b; Eco, 1986a). In one sense, hyperreality is the becoming real of what initially was or is a simulation or "hype." One of the more prominent postmodernist theorists, Baudrillard, presents a largely semiotic explanation for this possibility of hype to transform into its own reality. Simulations, primarily representations of imagined potentials or, in many cases, of an imagined past (Kellner, 1989b), are largely constructed through a process which semioticians have recognized at least since Saussure. All signifiers (verbal, visual, or material signs or symbols that represent things making them intelligible) are only arbitrarily linked to their original referents (Eco and Sebeok, 1983;
Santambrogio and Violi, 1988)). Through forms of communication, they can be detached from their original referents, thereby their original meanings (the signified), and, consequently, become “free-floating.” They can, then, be attached with new meanings. An example is the toothpaste. Once in the advertising medium, for example, the term toothpaste is separated from and becomes independent of the original thing it signified—a paste cleansing the teeth—it can acquire new, symbolic meanings, such as sexiness, beauty, happiness, attractiveness, etc. These newly signified meanings simulate, in turn, a new reality through the power of communication and are accepted to be true—that is, a community of consumers feel and/or attribute sexiness, attractiveness, beauty, etc., to a (special brand/kind of) toothpaste to which such meanings are attached. This simulation becomes reality for a community of believers, because now, when this toothpaste is used, the consumer feels, and is indeed found by others, to be attractive, beautiful, happy, sexy, etc. The reality thus created is said to be “hyper” for two reasons. It is a reality beyond what reality has been understood to be in the modernistic (scientific) sense—reality independent of human agency, universal and unique—and it is now constituted by what originally was (is) hype—that is, hype now is the reality.

The role of marketing culture in the phenomenon of hyperreality is immediately recognizable. In fact, marketing is the major practice in society that consciously ressignifies words, terms, and (brand) names. Consider the use of words, such as, “natural,” “unique,” “individual,” and “you!” in the context of representing brand images for products that are used to change one’s “natural” features and convince “individuals” into buying and consuming the same products that millions of others use, yet make them feel “unique” or “you!” (that is, themselves).

However, the culture of the hyperreal seems to exhibit other qualities, related to what is just discussed. One is the tendency and willingness on the part of the consumers to prefer the hype or the simulation to the “real” itself. Postmodernists often mention Disneyland or Las Vegas as examples (Baudrillard, 1987b). Other examples can be found in the numbers of tourists who visit the IMAX theater as they visit the Grand Canyon to “really experience the Canyon!” Or, it can be observed in the numbers who frequent theme areas created in our cities, such as the wharf and city center areas (re)created as simulations of an imagined past. Of course, these theme areas become realities of our urban life. It is no wonder that technologies of “virtual reality” have come to the forefront to offer such excitement and anticipation (Bylinsky, 1991; Daily News Tribune, 1990).

As we have shown elsewhere (Firat and Venkatesh, in press), the distinct characteristic of postmodernism is that it is a cultural, rather than an economic or social, critique of modernity and it is from a cultural standpoint that postmodernism begins to address and unravel the forces of modernism. The particular slant of postmodernism as a cultural analysis can be traced to the fields of art and architecture, areas that have not been taken too seriously by the social scientists as sources of modern episteme because they merely deal with our cultural lives and not with material or productive aspects of our lives.

The recognition that simulation or hype is relatively independent of social reality, that, in fact, it largely determines social reality, has substantially contributed to the change in the nature of critique. While modernist critique anchored itself in the analytical explorations of the economy and social structures, that is, the material conditions of life, postmodernist critique does not require such anchor. Rather than attempt to verify its claims
through analyses of materialist evidence, postmodernist critique tends to rely on experiential and sensible judgements. Trust in intuition and sensing of what is just, practical (pragmatic), and good based on cultural experience is much greater and valued in postmodernism. In some ways, postmodernism is the institutionalization of the generational rebellion as a consequence of the youth movements which culminated in the 1960s as a response to the post World War II politics around the world; politics which espoused all the principles of modern scientific reason, but produced much disillusionment and little progress in global peace, prosperity and security. Consequently, the postmodern cultural critic finds it easier to rely on intuitive, experiential sensibilities in seeking a better world, and the postmodern consumer feels more justified in playful enjoyment of the simulation rather than constantly seek the somber reminders of "reality."

Another much studied implication of hyperreality is the "loss of history," in the sense that all historical phenomena are detached from their historical processes or contexts and represented as a collage, without depth, on an even surface. Examples of this are seen in, for example, news programs on television. In the presentations of news items scenes and personalities are often superimposed onto one another from temporal and spatial contexts that are totally independent or disconnected. This is no longer thought to be absurd or improper journalism, for what is important is the visual excitement of the collage on the screen and not the veracity of its truth claim. The bases of the hyperreal are the spectacle and the spectacular. Voyeuristic exposure to the spectacle seems to have become the cultural pastime (Winders, 1989) of the contemporary world. The growing integration of the Hollywood film, news items, the television commercial, and the music video (Gitlin, 1989; Hanhardt, 1986; Kaplan, 1987) is an indication of marketing's compelling position and impact.

Advertising has, indeed, become an integral part of movies and music videos (Kaplan, 1987). Many products and brand names are advertised in the movies and the music videos through a system of sponsorship by marketers of these products and brand names. These brand names become sub-spectacles within the spectacle of the film or the videos. Then, these nested spectacles, the movies and the videos, are promoted to their respective markets through highly organized marketing campaigns. Furthermore, marketing, specifically advertising, adopts the styles, forms, and techniques used in movies and music videos which have, as just mentioned, already incorporated marketing and advertisements. It seems, consequently, that we are immersed in an era of metamarketing, where marketing itself is marketed (Innis, 1980, p. 125), and where marketing itself has become a prominent spectacle. The mutual merging of marketing with other media forms is not limited to music videos and movies, but occurs throughout. The blurring of genres goes on, in news programs, soap operas, game shows on television, newspapers, magazines, novels in print media, art pieces, and architectural constructions, all of which present a growing number of examples of such merging (Jencks, 1987; Varanedoe and Gopnik, 1990).

An extension of the decontextualization and the predominance of the spectacle discussed in previous paragraphs is the collapse of all substance and depth onto the surface (Baudrillard, 1987a). The argument is that nothing is hidden behind or beneath the facade; all is represented on the surface, and the duality of surface (appearance) and interior or substance (essence) is dead in postmodernity. Seeking meaning hidden behind what is reflected on the surface is a futile modernist quest. The image is the substance.
The growing awareness that positioning/image is the central strategic decision in marketing practice tends to coincide with this postmodernist claim. It is this image which, represented through the planned interplay of a multitude of signs, then reflects on the surface and becomes the “essence” that the consumer seeks in adopting a product. Consumers of postmodern culture, who increasingly acquire the skills of recognizing images and the positions these images offer them in the social (status) mosaic, play this game (Krief, 1989) of the “surface.”

Marketing, in its efforts to communicate the possibilities of how products could or will fit into consumers’ aspired lives, experiences, and self-images, has historically been a primary institution of simulation, the imaginary, and hype. As Postman (1985) articulates, the simulated situations in advertisements or other forms of persuasive communication cannot be put to a test of “true or false” in the modernist sense of scientific discourse. These are “transformational” (Puto and Wells, 1983; Wells, 1980) propositions, simulating potential experiences. They could and do become “true” only after the fact, when and if the consumer feels that s/he is having the experience.

**Fragmentation**

The collage, the predominance of the spectacle, and the disjointed moments of emotional experience provide much evidence for the increasing fragmentation in postmodern culture. The necessity to find a central meaning, to understand connections, so important in the modern sensibility, is transcended in postmodernism. Thus, with the growth of the postmodern consciousness, the marginalized fragmentations of modernity find their liberation and expression in the exciting and creative productions (music, videos, art exhibits, architecture, television programming, films, advertising) of artists of all kinds who are increasingly assuming the role of the marketing institution. The thirty second television spots which are further fragmented into many fleeting moments of exciting scenes and images, the spoken or printed blurbs on the radio or in magazines and newspapers, brand names that are highlighted on billboards that flash by constitute a primary experience in contemporary consumer society. Through more and more specialized products the marketing system further reinforces this experience of fragmentation in consumption. Each product, seemingly independent from the rest, represents an experience that is disconnected. Fragmentation implies that in each instance of consumption, for example, as the consumer eats a frozen dinner, watches television, brushes one’s teeth, feeds the cat, the consumer engages in a series of independent, separate, unconnected acts without a common purpose. Each act requires a different product, each fulfills a need that is fragmented and detached from the others. Each moment of consumption may well be cultivated to represent a different image of oneself, as if that is the guiding principle of life. The consumers of postmodernity are encouraged by marketing messages and images to play a game of *image-switching*. The caring mother, the efficient manager, the elegant partner, the gourmet homemaker, each representing a different image, requiring different styles, different personalities, are reflected by the same woman as if to say that the woman feels the need to make herself marketable, liked, adored, appreciated in each separate situation. The modern sense of a central character or a consistent identity is neither possible nor even sought. This is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Jameson (1983) refer to as the schizophrenia of late capitalism.

Marketing campaigns generally (re)present an ability to switch images by offering different products and creating different per-
sonalities for different circumstances, labelling this as consumer liberation or freedom from monotony and boredom. Indeed, the fragmentation of images, freedom from the necessity to remain loyal to original or received meanings, and from having to seek centered connections or an authentic self, afford an enormous potential for creativity in manufactured representations. Thus, the potential for choice, not only among brand names but among self-images and life styles expands and explodes. The necessity to commit oneself to a single way of being during one's life is considered too modernistic. The market becomes a pasticcio with an abundance of products, brands, and images for consumers (who can afford it) to don and doff at will.

The fragmented life experiences of the consumer are also represented in contemporary shopping environments; environments which are increasingly taking center stage in recreational and leisure activities of consumers. A good example of this representation can be found in the postsuburban transformation of Southern California (Venkatesh, 1991). The forces of fragmentation in urbanized societies are altering consumption environments through a complex interaction of high-technology production, socio-spatial configuration and spectacular shopping environments. Urbanized environments such as Southern California are called polynucleated spaces which lack a center and in which people lead fragmented lives seeking to create new networks. The ubiquitous shopping malls dramatize the semiotics of consumption in these fast-paced economies. They are not only centers of shopping but highly organized social spaces for entertainment, interaction, and other types of consumer excitement. Some (e.g., the South Coast Plaza and the Fashion Island) have acquired a postmodern theatrical character by engaging in relentless marketing activities. A perfect example is Nordstrom's, both a shopping complex and a fantasy land where the consumer can try on a pair of Italian shoes in the presence of a live pianist giving a rendition of Chopin. In such an environment the consumer can move around and sample such momentary and fragmented experiences of all cultures and forms of entertainment.

The unrestricted ability to use signifiers in creating new images and representations necessitates that each instance of communication be independently exciting, or, more specifically, exciting to the senses. In a culture of many competing representations marketing competition rests on the creation of images, and meanings, removed from any history, context, or origin. The independence of signifiers from any continuous or consistent meaning, well recognized in postmodernist culture, has removed the possibility of substantive linkages, necessitating excellence and sophistication in form and technique. It is the form, the style (Ewen, 1988), or the technique of each instance of communication that promises marketing success. Such sophisticated collages of images can also be found in the television news programs where each news item is presented in a condensed form, concentrating on the exciting, sensational aspects, with no pretense to place it in a context or history, but with much switching across many images, each lasting just a few seconds. The form, style, or technique of each segment of presentation are perfected and attain increasing sophistication with the sole purpose of exciting the senses and keeping audience attention. Each instance of communication, then, becomes a spectacle (Debord, 1983; Jameson, 1983; Real, 1979).

Commodification is another consequence of the separation of each moment or entity from its original connections. As we have seen, decontextualization leads to fragmentation, since it severs the links and suspends the moment or entity in isolation. As such, the entity becomes manipulable, for its connections are all removed. This is what Bau-
drillard calls the free floating signifier. An example is the sand painting from the Native American ceremonies. Once the sand painting was removed from its context which is the medicinal ceremony, it became an object of desire, as an art object, to be sold as a commodity. As a commodity, it loses its original meaning and function, stands out to be viewed and admired, becomes an object of voyeurism, a spectacle. It is, now, highly marketable.

All marketable products tend to have a similar quality, they are purposefully decontextualized and rendered free floating. Just like the signifiers that are only arbitrarily linked to their original referents, all products are only arbitrarily linked to their originally specified functions or purposes (Eco, 1986b; Kellner, 1989b, p. 9; Sherry, 1984). The role of marketing is to decouple the product from its original cultural context or use and place it in a new context as the situation warrants. Marketing, therefore, keeps constantly decontextualizing and recontextualizing its products.

Surrealist artists especially made use of their recognition of this freedom of objects from their use. Shop window designers used juxtapositions of unconnected objects in shop windows to create attractive displays. Sculptors and painters, such as, Duchamp, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, played a role by turning utilitarian objects such as toilet seats, Coca Cola bottles, meat grinders, sewing machines, and soup cans, into icons in their own right on canvases or in sculptured pieces (Varneredoe and Gopnik, 1990). Many of these artists and their art were no doubt used by marketing in creating illustrations for catalogues and other media.

Marketing practices have thus played a key role in the isolation of products as objects that have meanings independent of their functional uses. The underlying disconnectness of the object from its culturally ordained function has been perpetuated by marketing because of the competitive nature of the market. The isolation of a product from its context, even if partially, is not original to marketing by any means as evidenced in the sacralization of products by consumers through attributing values and meanings to them independent of their original function or status (Belk et al., 1989). However, marketing practice has exploited this potential by promoting products with specialized focus. This growing trend is truly postmodern, for it isolates products from their contexts and culturally imbued functions, and presents them almost solely as autonomous representations of images. The need for a context seems to be increasingly transcended, as in the “Just do it!” Nike advertisements (Selling the Dream, 1991). The product that is marketed is the image!

In postmodern culture, where the theme is irreverence, non-conformity, noncommitment, detachment, difference, and fragmentation (Venkatesh, 1989), images sought to be represented will be different for different people. The challenge of the capitalist market system is to manufacture different images for people who will be acquiring and consuming the same products—the microwave, the car, the television set, the designer clothing, etc.—and adopting the same consumption pattern represented by these products (Firat and Dholakia, 1977 and 1982; Firat, 1986 and 1987). The paradox seems to be that what appears to be difference at the level of symbolic culture stems from an underlying uniformity. Ironically, heterogeneity has its origins in homogeneity (Jameson, 1991). Paradoxically, therefore, cultures where markets and marketing are less developed may exhibit greater variance in both the quality and kinds of life patterns (Amin, 1982; Baran, 1957).

This fragmentation, predominance of images, of the spectacle, of disjointed moments, have transformed the form of literacy in postmodernity. Literacy, in the modern era,
refers to the ability to read and discover connections among seemingly unrelated objects in order to arrive at central meanings. This also leads to the power of understanding. It is no wonder that our youth display such ignorance when it comes to the questions of history, science or literature (ABC, 1988). They are, however, extremely "literate" in recognizing images. Present them with slogans ("Just do it," "Heartbeat of America," "The choice of a new generation") or with brand names ("BMW," "501 Blues") and they immediately recognize what they stand for. The new literacy is one of watching, of a voyeuristic gaze (Winders, 1989), or of exposing oneself to innumerable images to recognize what they perhaps represent. This ability to recognize images and attach meanings to them is at the heart of the marketing culture.

Reversal of production and consumption

The primacy given to production in modernist metanarratives, whether bourgeois or marxist, has been reversed in postmodernist thought and behavior. The idea that value was created in production and only destroyed in consumption is considered as one of the myths of the modernist rhetoric and project. Baudrillard (1975 and 1981), for example, argues that value is created not in exchange-value, as modern economists claimed, but during consumption, in sign-value (Mourrain, 1989; Poster, 1975). Postmodernists reject the revered status given to production. No longer is production considered sacred, meaningful, and valuable, while consumption profane and destructive.

Marketing practice, it seems, has lived a paradoxical existence regarding the production–consumption nexus represented in modern economics. This may indeed be another manifestation of the postmodern nature of marketing. Paradoxical juxtapositions are, as will be discussed shortly, considered inherent to the postmodern. For example, modern marketing has, consistently, played the double meaning of the word "end." Fulfiling or satisfying needs, that is, consumption, has been (re)presented as the final act, the conclusion and completion of a process, the end, but also as the purpose, aim, that is, the end, of a process which reaches this goal through consumption. "Modern" marketing practice has always glorified and promoted consumption. One might say that marketing has been quite successful in contributing to the transformation of the image of consumption from one of profanity, of something that is common, not to be talked or boasted about, to one of wide acceptance (Featherstone, 1990). Further, consumption has become, largely reinforced by the marketing system, the process through which individuals define themselves and their statuses, positions, or images in contemporary society (Bourdieu, 1984; Ewen, 1988). Personal identity is increasingly sought by the consumer, even in its fragmented forms, and recognized by others, not on the basis of what one produces but on the basis of what one consumes.

The postmodernist insights about this reversal in how an individual's identity and status are assessed and recognized in contemporary market economies point to certain interesting conclusions. Rather than being distinct processes, production and consumption prove to be just different moments of the same cycle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, pp. 1–8). As postmodernists indicate, consumption is not just a personal act of destruction by the consumer, but very much a social act where symbolic meanings, social codes, and relationships, in effect, the consumer's identity and self, are produced and reproduced (Baudrillard, 1975; Poster, 1975). That is, the choices made by or for the consumer, in terms of what will be consumed, create (produce) an individual with certain tastes, mentality, values, and ideology. In other words, the type of human being
produced by one set of consumption choices and experiences is different from another that has had different consumption choices and experiences. The distinction made between consumption and production, therefore, seems to be a superficial one, since production continues during the moments of consumption. What differs is only the form of production (Bogue, 1989, pp. 88–90). During what is generally known as production, the producers are human beings, the products are the commodities (objects, goods, services, etc.). During what is generally known as consumption, the producers are the images (represented in products, commodities, goods, etc.), and the products are the human beings.

Decentering of the subject

The modernist project placed the human being at the center, as the subject—that is, as the agent that acts through and upon others; nature and objects. The Cartesian idea of the subject, as it is known, has dominated modern thought. This subject is endowed with the ability to act independently and autonomously in the choice and pursuit of one’s goals. This subject is also constituted in terms of the separation between the body and the mind (Rorty, 1979, pp. 142–145); a precondition for the subject to graduate from a state of being to a state of knowing. The existential subject has now become the cognitive subject. Knowledge acquisition for this subject is possible by separating or distancing oneself from a pure experience of being in order to develop a cognitive understanding of being; its context and conditions. Modern society is organized to reflect and actively promise the potential of the cognitive subject by providing the knowledge and the means to act through science and technology. The products of modernity (of science) are really meant to serve the ‘subjects’ of modernity.

Postmodernists see this narrative of modernity to be mythical or illusory. According to them, there is, a confusion between the subject and the object (products of the market) as to who or what is in control (Hassan, 1987; Jameson, 1983). Rather than the subject controlling the circumstances and processes of life in one’s interactions with the object, the objects are viewed as determining the conditions and procedures of consumption (Baudrillard, 1983b). In driving cars, using microwave ovens, washing machines, computers, and the like, the human being is generally the follower of instructions, the correct ways of doing things. One’s actions are determined by the features and structures of the products. One can as easily visualize that the role of the human being is to allow products to perform their functions rather than products enabling the achievement of human goals. Concerns for the health of the economy, the market, often seem to override the concern for the goals of individuals in policies adopted by the state and/or corporations.

The confusion between the subject and the object is further reinforced by the fact that consumers tend to perceive themselves as marketable items. This tendency is reinforced by the marketing system in encouraging representations of oneself as images. The marketing orientation dominates not only the positioning of products in the market by organizations, but also in positioning of the consumer itself, say, in the social market (Firat, in press). As briefly discussed earlier, consumers assume different images and personalities in different situations to make themselves acceptable in each case. This is much in evidence in today’s “body” culture. For example, many consumers, male and female, are increasingly buying plastic surgery and body implants to customize parts of their bodies to cultural expectations. There is a distancing of one’s own gaze from one’s own body to “view” oneself and scrutinize one’s
own images, assessing each fragmented body part in terms of its contribution to these images. This scrutiny often occurs from the perspective of the other; that is, not from one’s own, autonomous perspective, but from the perspective of cultural expectations which are internalized by the consumer (Emberley, 1987; Kroker and Kroker, 1987). This is really a test of how well we fit the images required for success. In this sense, fashion becomes the metaphor for culture (Faur-schou, 1990; Sawchuk, 1987). Such objectification of one’s own body and self allows one to be consumed; just like a product, acting only to fulfill a prespecified function determined by the market system. Specifically, consumers become products consumed for the production of other objects, in the offices, production lines, and elsewhere.

**Paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites)**

There is wide ranging consensus among postmodernist theoreticians that one of the major characteristics of postmodern culture is its paradoxical nature which permits the juxtaposition of anything with anything else, however contradictory they may be, as for example, in exhibiting opposing emotions (love and hate, contempt and admiration) and cognitions (belief and doubt, reverence and ridicule) simultaneously (Foster, 1985; Gitlin, 1989; Huteseon, 1988; Wilson, 1989). This phenomenon is readily observable in art, literature, advertising, as well as in other media. Consider, for example, the advertisements where the product advertised is simultaneously made fun of and promoted, or advertisements that provoke credibility by discrediting advertising. Consider talk-show hosts who propose fondness of their guests and topics through slight ridicule, and comedians who invoke reverence for institutions, political leaders, and celebrities as they offer insults. Examples of such juxtaposition of opposites also abound in art and literature, as a matter of fact in many facets of our culture (Foster, 1985; Hutseon, 1988; Owens, 1983). They can be found, for example, in the shopping environments, discussed earlier, where the consumer may be buying shoes while listening to live classical music. Piped-in music has been replaced by something more authentic, and such a juxtaposition—high art and mundane consumption—has become a matter-of-fact event.

One interesting result of this omnipresence of paradoxical juxtapositions in western culture seems to be the growing acceptance of “doublethink” (Miller, 1989). Sometimes this demonstrates itself as the knowledge, on the one hand, that something is hidden behind a facade, while, on the other hand, continuing to act as if this knowledge does not exist. In Krief’s (1989) terms, this amounts to a metagame; playing along as if the rules are what they seem on the surface while having the knowledge that the rules of the game played are quite different from what they appear to be. Krief’s example is from the realm of advertising where, he points out, many consumers know that the objective of advertisements is to persuade, and that they are persuasive, but like to think that while other people are persuaded by advertisements, they, themselves, are not. Politics has become another area where consumers (voters) play similar games, knowing that the politicians tend to say what their pollsters find constituencies want to hear, but continuing to listen as if the politicians are espousing genuinely personal views. The media, of course, play the same game, at once stating the role of the polls and, simultaneously, reflecting the “politician’s views” with utmost seriousness. A further example can be found in the consumers’ experiences with “ethnic” restaurants. There are basically two kinds of ethnic restaurants: Those that serve ethnic immigrants and those that have transformed into “nouvelle” cuisines and cater to upscale consumers. The con-
sumers of the second type of restaurants know that the cuisines have been "modified" to fit their tastes, but nevertheless feel that they are experiencing another ethnic culture. Other consumers take commercially planned and staged nature tours in order to feel "one with nature" or to "find their true selves."

While these present examples of paradoxical circumstances to the modernist critic, for the postmodern consumer they (re)present episodes of playful experimentation and experience. For example, in the "ethnic" restaurants it is not merely delicious food that people are after, but delicious life styles of which food is just a manifestation. Participation in "exotic" foods represents a simulated adventure in a theatrical society. The postmodern consumer does not judge the experience from a privileged or foundational perspective but largely from one of whether it (re)presents an exciting, interesting experience that contributes meaning and zest to life. "Postmodernism refuses to privilege any one perspective, and recognizes only difference, never inequality, only fragments, never conflict" (Wilson, 1989, p. 209). This is largely the consequence of the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions and cognitions regarding perspectives, commitments, ideas, things in general. Anything is at once acceptable and suspect. On the one hand, this "... very imprecision of the concepts of postmodernism and the postmodern is exciting, even liberating" (Wilson, 1989, p. 208). On the other hand, it may be debilitating the power of the individual or groups to seek and follow a route toward any kind of radical transformation since nothing is sufficiently credible to merit commitment. The juxtaposition of opposites, when it becomes a dominating orientation towards anything, tends to create total irony, ambiguity, and finally, pastiche. In a fragmented culture it may disarm the individual and the masses from organized action for social and/or political change and liberation.

In market economies, this inability or unwillingness to commit or take action in the political or social arenas renders the market the dominant domain of legitimation. (See Habermas (1973) for a discussion of legitimation). No emotional or cognitive commitment beyond a single purchase for a trial consumption is required in the market. Anything can be tried and dropped as long as the buying power is existent. After all, in postmodernity one can simultaneously critique and make fun of oneself for one's consumption behavior (such as, being a "couch potato") and enjoy the experience. The final moral is that if a product is in the market and it is being paid for, it is legitimate. As a legitimating tool, marketing acculturates all kinds of rebellion and radical critique through "incorporation." By emptying expressions (music, fashion, etc.) of rebellion (e.g., punk) of their content (original meaning) it commodifies them into money making ventures and pulls the seemingly contradictory (counter cultural) movements into the "market economy."

The market has also begun to resolve social conflicts in the sense that all other means through which society historically processed its affairs, such as, politics and social relations, are being subordinated to the market. All such other means are, themselves, processed through or mediated by the market. Consider, for example, the criteria by which the contents of some news programs on television, as well as the "looks" of their anchor people, are decided. A growing number of producers of these programs are willing to acknowledge (Moyers, 1989a) that the leading criterion is the "market," not the newsworthiness of events; or, in other words, the only criterion of newsworthiness is the market. The contents and forms of news programs are decided on the basis of their ability to bring in and keep audiences, specifically for the advertisers during the programs (Hallin, 1986; Kellner, 1990, pp. 111–117;
Moyers, 1989a). Consider the elections for political offices in western societies as well as the dissemination of policies to the public via television. Increasing poll taking and marketing campaigns, as well as the growing role of image consultants and "spin doctors," evidence the "marketization" of politics. The primary criterion in politics seems to become the marketability of the policies, the possibilities of representing them through electronically manipulated images (Moyers, 1989b). Consider, further, that in the USA the 1991 Gulf War was run more as a marketing campaign than a military campaign. Finally, consider that even culture, itself, has to become a marketable item if it is to survive. "Authentic" traditional cultures of Bali, Indonesia, of Rajasthan, India, or of Native Americans in the US can only muster the resourcefulness to maintain themselves by becoming tourist attractions.

There is much discussion as to whether this trend represents a democratization or a degeneration of democracy since, many feel, the constituency is no longer exposed to "true" differences among positions on issues and in political programs, but to variations of the common images that are determined by the pollsters in terms of their marketability (Kellner, 1990). Furthermore, some are expressing the fear that such marketization may result in a "management of consent" (Chomsky, 1989). Whatever the consequence, it is clear that marketing is taking the center stage in all institutions of western society, and the market is becoming the dominant, if not the only, mediator and locus of legitimation. Consequently, for the individual consumer (or citizen, now meaning one and the same), life is increasingly experienced solely through the market.

Implications of postmodernity for marketing

The preceding discussions represent an attempt to demonstrate the mutuality of postmodernism and marketing. Marketing as a cultural process, always representing the "post-," even in modernity, has reinforced and hastened the coming of the postmodern. We shall now discuss the major implications of postmodernity for marketing. First we argue that postmodern conditions have enabled marketing processes to extend to other cultural domains. Second, we elaborate the notion of diversity and difference in the postmodern context. Third, we examine the cultural implications of the new trends in technological imagery and spectacle as contained in new visual movements represented by artists, such as Madonna, through television channels for music videos (e.g., MTV in the US) and film. Fourth, we extend the notion of hyperreality into virtual reality as a new technological possibility. Fifth, we look closely at the new literacy of consumer culture which seems to conflict with established notions of education. Sixth, we take up the issue of gender and marketing within the postmodern context. Finally, we examine the role of transnational corporations as postmodern cultural change agents par excellence.

The growing importance of marketing as a cultural institution has begun to blur the distinction between the realities of art and commerce which seem to blend into a hyperreal domain. In the traditional world of commerce, an advertisement is separated from the program in very discernible ways. Commercial space and time are distinct from programming space and time. A realization seems to have dawned that since there is nothing sacred about these distinctions, the blending of advertisement into non-advertisement is a matter of pragmatic strategy. For example, the number of advertisement-programs are on the increase on television. Sections of advertisement pages in news magazines, such as Time and Newsweek that blend with the rest of the magazine are more frequent. The merging of music videos and films
has already been discussed. All this represents, in the terminology of Habermas, the colonization of the life world—which itself is a very modernist notion. What prompts and permits marketing organizations to enter spheres of cultural activity that were once considered sacred? This is primarily due to the active cultural role marketing takes in order to augment its opportunities and to try to fill the modernist vacuum created by obsolete notions of what is good or bad, sacred or profane, high culture or low culture. Traditionally, marketing was seen as occupying the space of low culture, or non-culture, but marketing is now able to enter the world of culture with little opposition and much power. As the idea of marketing itself diffuses into other institutions, marketing asserts itself by blurring domains that were hitherto considered distinct.

A simple extrapolation of the developments in media may indicate that advertisement-programming, where persuasive communication for brands or products are juxtaposed in the typical postmodern collage form with other segments, such as news and dramas, may be the wave of the future. One can imagine, for example, the development of situation comedies or other types of serials built around brand names of sponsors. Coca Cola, Chevrolet, Nike, and others may create a new series on television where the brand names are consistently written into the script thus requiring no commercial breaks. Other brands will, of course, follow suit. Why is this a postmodern development? Because it requires the breaking down or disintegration of boundaries largely defined and institutionalized in modernity. Modernity was, after all, big on privileging order and establishing proper ways, means, places, times, and reasons for doing things. At the same time, paradoxically, it encountered opposition to its rigid posture. Diversity and difference are likely to puncture and deflate the modernist quest for communalization and normalization, for an order. Marketing, therefore, will have to recognize and cater to this greater diversity and difference. Otherwise, it may come under attack for representing only (or even disproportionately) the traditional norms (Weston, 1991).

In postmodernity, marketers cannot expect the same patterns they have confronted in the past. Fragmentation is likely to require the use of many different styles and forms. There will be a constant renewal of forms and styles at a pace and diversity not yet experienced as fashion becomes the metaphor for consumption culture (Faurschou, 1990). The products may very much remain the same, but their imaging and communication (that is, signification and representation) will have to diversify and constantly renovate. Marketers will grab onto and create all kinds of new bases for positioning. Feminism, environmental concerns, social responsibility, ideas and movements which already have gained sensational impact have now become spectacles (for example, the Earth Day) to be used in representations. In due course, they will become commodities. So will other new ideas and life styles with similar potential be turned into objects of consumption (for example, purchase of reusable and recycleable items and systems).

Currently, marketing mostly represents images of the norm(al). As a matter of fact, afraid of backlash from mainstream modern ideologies and values, the marketing profession tends not to represent, in its promotional efforts, life styles, ideologies, and behaviors that are radically different from the set of values held by financial and political elites. These traditional values, on the other hand, are currently under much scrutiny and critique by varied segments of society. As an effect of this critique, marketers are increasingly coming under attack for representing only the norm(al) and perpetuating an illusion that mainstream ideas and life styles are normal while others are not. In the US, for
example, women (especially, feminist movements), diverse ethnic groups (African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, etc.), New Age and New Wave movements, alternative lifestyle movements (such as, gay and lesbian) are but some of those who question the legitimacy of the self-ordained norm(s). While such groups and their critique have been present in the past, they are enjoying greater legitimacy as a result of being forcefully represented by popular artists, especially music celebrities, such as, Madonna, Sting, and Sinead O’Connor. We may perhaps be witnessing a new Renaissance, a time when not the political and social leaders, not the scientists and sages, not the authorities, but the artists who have achieved celebrity status are setting the new trends and values in our culture. Ironically, as already discussed, this phenomenon is something that marketing helped in entrenched.

This is, indeed, a postmodern phenomenon that has its roots in the 1960s “anti-” movements. Particularly, the postmodern style of non-commitment, not seeking grand alternatives to the rejected dominant culture and regime is very much in vogue. A large sector of rejection and rebellion exists where the members of each fragmented segment are bent on “doing their thing.” These segments “drop out,” not voting in elections, perceiving their freedoms in doing what they want in spite of the state and, especially, to protest the dominant cultural values. They are prone to creating and living their own life styles, not caring what others think. The great allure of Madonna’s rebellion in early 1991 is, therefore, not completely coincidental. She challenges the received values. But, she says, in her film Truth or Dare, “I do not endorse any life style, I only describe one.” This is the postmodern rebellion: Not challenging or endorsing or committing to any one style, including the dominant one; rebelling by doing “one’s own thing,” not by trying to overthrow or install another. By such rebellion, Madonna represents the widespread disdain of imposed cultural values and, thus, her film Truth or Dare and her music video Justify My Love have become the postmodern phenomena. Each for a short time, of course, in line with the postmodern nature of the spectacle (formulated by Warhol as, “Everyone is famous for fifteen minutes”). To be a phenomenon with greater longevity, therefore, Madonna, or any other “celebrity,” needs to create new spectacles with some constant frequency. No matter how much Madonna is criticized by the metanarrative points of view (the mainstream will criticize her “vulgarness,” and the left her “commercialism”) she will continue to find large audiences as long as she represents and combines the postmodern aspects of critique of the metanarrative and the marketable commercial sensationalism of the fragmented spectacle.

Segments of people that have dropped out on their own volition are representative of the postmodern. The paradoxical nature of postmodern culture is represented in their rebellion and life styles, however, in terms of the fragmentation and the discontinuity of their experiences. While within the domain of their conscious rejection of the dominant values the behaviors differ from the mainstream (e.g., not owning a television set), in other domains they are very integrated into the mainstream (e.g., in driving cars, having corporate jobs, etc.). Postmodern life styles differ in this respect from the modernist movements that reject the dominant regime (e.g., the Amish or the socialist communes). There is, of course, another large segment which has dropped out. It is constituted of the disenfranchised. To them, dropping out is more of an imperative than a “choice.” The market system and marketing are likely to be charged with their predicament as well. The complex similarities yet differences between the two groups, the interactions in their reactions, need to be understood and
the needs of each responded to by the marketing profession. This requires a thorough understanding of the postmodern culture.

The hyperreal, it seems, will find its best expression in virtual reality (Bylinsky, 1991; Sebeok, 1989) where computer programs will enable consumers to duplicate actual life experiences and sensations in conditions that are not actual but virtual. The technologies of virtual reality being currently developed in the Silicon Valley and other places in the US, and the computer programs which include a variety of electronically devised equipment such as, gloves, body socks and the head gear, will, no doubt, soon be available in the market.

The development of virtual reality will be (Daily News Tribune, 1990), greeted with much anticipation by the postmodern consumer who prefers the simulation to the “real.” After all, the simulation can contain all the exciting elements of experiencing phenomena minus the inconveniences or the perils. For example, one can experience the Safari at the Fossil Rim wildlife park in Texas without the tsetse flies, and lack of amenities. It may even be better in virtual reality, on the computer, without having to endure the heat of Texas in the Summer. With virtual reality, one can be on the Waikiki Beach in Hawaii without the risk of flying there and having to make hotel reservations. Given the postmodern questioning of the “real” and the refusal to privilege one kind of experience over any other (e.g., actual over virtual), the advent of virtual reality renders opportunities for new marketing forms and approaches endless. All shopping can go on at home since the sensations in trying clothing items, shoes, etc., will not be different from actual experiences. Many consumers may ask, “Why go through the inconvenience of actually shopping when it can virtually be achieved?” They may find more time for virtually shopping and buying. On the other hand, for consumers who have an absolute preference for virtual reality, purchases of actual products may cease. They may choose to perform all their consumption activity virtually. While this seems like an extreme scenario, the market for virtual products will certainly grow.

There are many other implications of the postmodern for marketing; many which are difficult to imagine currently. While all cannot be discussed here, there is one that is essential to the future of our society. That is the possible merging of education and marketing. The problems in the classroom in western societies identified by many critics of education (Bloom (1987) and Hirsch (1988) are examples in the US), seem to be isolated from the larger culture by such critics (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991). One reason why education in the classroom is not “successful” may be that in contemporary North America, and to a large extent in Western Europe, “education” is taking place mostly outside of the classroom. Today, marketing, both in terms of television commercials and other advertisements, and also in terms of films, music videos, television programs and celebrity spots, influences the education of the televisual generations (Miller, 1988). As discussed earlier in this paper, the form of literacy and, in relation to this, the form of knowledge delivery are going through significant and substantive changes. For the postmodern generation, the modern structure of education, largely represented in the current educational institutions, such as, high schools, colleges, and universities, is aimless if not redundant. To the individuals of the postmodern generation such institutions represent only a necessity forced by a fading order where they receive marketable credentials in order to get what they really want: Money to possess the consumption items and appropriate images. These images that define the goals of the postmodern generation, are not acquired in institutionalized education but through the marketing system. Therefore, the
more fundamental education, one of goals, values, meanings, and desires, already takes place through exposure to marketing culture. To the postmodern generation, what makes sense and generates sensibility already and always is in marketing. In institutionalized education this generation encounters only obligations, drudgery, and the means to achieve “positions.”

Given this trend, the conclusion seems obvious. Either the educational institutions will completely take on the characteristics of marketing institutions or they will be made obsolete and absorbed by the marketing system. The system that generates the true aspirations of the postmodern generation, that is, the marketing system, is better qualified to express and transmit the ways and means of reaching these aspirations. Already, even in universities, much education is transformed from a process of raising issues and questions for exploration to a process of persuasively communicating the necessities of knowing and following “efficient” ways of doing things. Marketing institutions are much better equipped to perform the task of persuasive communication.

Furthermore, postmodern literacy necessitates that the literate be able to go beyond linear reason based on reading and writing. It requires the postmodern generation to be able to manipulate and construct, as well as recognize and grasp, multi-layered, multifaceted, multi-media images using all kinds of signs (visual, sonic, tactile, etc.) to impress upon all senses. Again, marketing institutions seem to be best situated to educate the public in such an art of literacy.

Postmodernists, such as Baudrillard (1991), argue that the distinction between the signifier and the signified (as well as the referent) may be illusory, that everything is a signifier (Eco et al., 1988; Kroker and Levin, 1991). In this sense, the duality of the image and the product is a myth. Both are signifiable, to be imbued with meanings, and representable, constructed and (re)produced. Thus, the consumer is also a signifier; and just like a product, the consumer is constructed in the image(s) that are culturally signified. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the construction of the female by the cultural imaginary of the feminine (Brownmiller, 1984). Feminist and women’s studies literatures (Ehrenreich and English, 1979; Fehman, 1989) articulate the determination of women’s roles, lives, and bodies by the society’s ideal or idealized images of the feminine. In this idealization, in the process of putting mothers, sisters, and wives on the pedestal, resides, paradoxically, the objectification and commodification of the feminine; thereby of the female. Even metaphorically, in the placement of something on the pedestal is its exposure to the voyeuristic gaze, its exhibition as a spectacle, and, often, its seductiveness as an object of desire. Feminist studies of literature, the media, advertising, and the arts provide ample examples of this objectification of the feminine represented by the female body (Butler and Paisley, 1980; Chadwick, 1990; Jacobus et al., 1990).

Historically, modern culture has tended to identify the feminine with the consumer, and the domain of the feminine, the home, with consumption (Firat, 1991b; Firat and Venkatesh, in press). Consequently, the cycle of the feminine—female—consumer—product—object is well entrenched in modern society. This paradoxical identity of the consumer—the espoused subject—as the object, through its identity with the feminine, is now exposed given the postmodernist insights on the merging or the confusion of the subject and the object. As Baudrillard examines in his book Seduction (1990), this objectification of the subject is, on the one hand, a liberation, since it is the object which has the powers of seduction as the focus of desire and, therefore, in control. On the other hand, objectification is a loss of freedom since the object is
that which is culturally signified and constructed for functions determined outside its own power, and it is that which is a property of the other; as the female—in the image of the feminine—was often the property of the male—in the image of the masculine (Chodorow, 1979; Saffioti, 1978).

Postmodernism is also a call to do away with oppositional or bipolar categorizations (such as, active-passive, masculine-feminine, consumer-producer, rational-emotional, assertive-submissive) through which modernist thought generally operated. This postmodernist stance is a reaction against such bipolar categories because they promote images of superiority-inferiority rather than of difference, and because seeing the world in such bipolar terms is considered to be a modernist reductionism. In this vein, the oppositional, bipolar juxtapositions of feminine-masculine also erode in postmodern sensibility. Marketing, as a postmodern institution, seems to have taken a small step in this respect. Male models who represent traditionally feminine qualities (emotional, nurturing, sensitive) and female models who represent traditionally masculine qualities (aggressive, powerful, rational) are increasingly seen in some American advertisements. An ulterior motive might be suspected in this “postmodern” stance. After all, by allowing males to represent the feminine, that which has already been signified as the consumer and already objectified, another half of the population is pulled into being a consumer, and consumption becomes an acceptable, even likable activity for men as well. “I shop, therefore I am” motto, as symbolized by the postmodernist artist Barbara Kruger, becomes equally applicable to men. The traditional images of women going and enjoying shopping—spending the man’s money—while men who hate shopping, are either at work or at sports, being active, may be fading. Both men and women can, now, at different moments, play both the feminine and the masculine as well as other gender roles (Wilson, 1989, pp. 105–115). Both men and women thus become “ideal” consumers and producers, playing the right roles for the market exchange system to flourish. Such decoupling of the culturally signified categories of gender from the biologically determined categories of sex may initially produce deep rooted resistance, but it seems to be the trend in postmodern culture. These developments present us with paradoxical circumstances—which is of no surprise to postmodernists. By breaking out of gendered impositions, both males and females find a freedom to seek “authentic” selves, but simultaneously get caught up in objectification and fragmentation.

The modern(ist) consumer, one seeking a centered, authentic self, a consistent character, is perplexed by the density, the intensity, and the fragmentation of the instances of communication, by hyperreality that continuously (re)creates fresh images and meanings based on the same signifiers. The postmodern(ist) consumer recognizes the emphasis placed on being marketable in different, fragmented moments. The postmodern quest is one of imaging (representing), not one of being or knowing. In this “postmodern turn” (Hassan, 1987), the consumer becomes aware that it is the image which determines life and one’s position in it. Contrary to conventional (modernist) beliefs, the postmodern consumer appreciates that value is not a property of the product, the thing, but a property of the image; that the image does not represent the product, but that the product represents the image. The marketing literature has always emphasized, to some degree, the importance of the image, which is generally considered as the position of the product in the consumers’ perceptual maps. In this approach, the image is usually considered as a property of the product, the way that the consumer perceives and recognizes the product. Value is, also, generally considered to be
a property of the product; image represents this value to the consumer. It would behove the marketer to recognize that this is very much a modernist mentality which contradicts an institution that is fundamentally postmodernist, and that it may be doomed to failure in a postmodern era. In many respects this recognition would liberate a perpetual tendency in marketing, one that has been suppressed by modernist beliefs of marketing scholars and practitioners.

The notion that consumers are essentially consumers of symbols (Levy, 1959) rather than products, and that consumer culture is largely the construction of symbolic environments gives marketing a unique position to deal with these environments. This sort of construction is popularly known as image marketing for what is done through marketing mechanisms is the construction, alteration and perpetuation of images. Since symbols become the building blocks of image marketing, the marketing imperative is to transform symbols instantaneously and multiply them infinitely. What gives marketing its postmodern character is not merely that it deals with symbols, but that it deals with them, to use Jameson’s terminology, in a pastiche like manner. To describe marketing as manipulator of symbols would raise ethical questions if one were to use the modernist framework. But, for a postmodernist framework, this is not an ethical issue but a stylistic or a phenomenological one. It merely states that marketing is what it does. Marketing deconstructs and reconstructs consumer (cultural) environments and it is through cultural transformations of consumer environments that marketing sustains itself.

In such contemporary environments, the consumer increasingly becomes a consumer of culture, and culture increasingly becomes a marketable commodity. This may explain why tourism has become the largest industry in the world. Those cultures which find ways of translating their images into marketable products expand in global markets and entrench the culture of consumption. Appadurai (1990) has shown that transnational corporations are in a very strategic position to engage in global culturalism because of their command of resources, information and communication technologies, and marketing know-how. Using a typology of five landscapes (ethnoscape, technoscape, finanscape, mediascape, and ideoscape) as a framework for the study of global cultural transformation, Appadurai investigates how cultural flows produce consumer fetishism. Consumers are, themselves, transformed into signs representing cultural styles through commodity flows and mediascapes, with global advertising assuming the role of key technology in the worldwide dissemination of cultural ideas.

Although these messages are globally standardized, globalization need not be treated as synonymous with homogenization. It is just that globalization uses the instruments of homogenization—clothing and fashion, music and entertainment, food and aesthetic experience—to create, if necessary, fragmented or heterogenized markets and consumers, and to serve and service the locals with global universal signs. In order to achieve such a cultural transformation what is needed is that organizations have the capability to transcend national boundaries and political systems, and gain control over local cultural apparatuses and elites, local media and the technology of the modern media, the content of images, and their symbolic representations.

Today’s global culture has ties to no place or period. It is contextless, a true melange of components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, realized through the network of global communication systems. It is timeless, contextless, diffused in space, located anonymously, with no known history. It is highly
symbolic and transferable from one locale to another. Thus, it is truly postmodern and transnational.

Conclusion

Postmodernism calls for an end to all metanarratives and yet, as illustrated in the commodification/commercialization of even the consumer and culture in terms of marketable images, marketing and the market appear as a new metanarrative in this postmodern age. The purpose of a critical deciphering/deconstruction of postmodern culture is not to regress back into modernism but to transcend, through playful critique and literate (re)construction, the commodification/commercialization metanarrative of the fragmented yet universalizing (totalizing) market(ing) culture.

The conditions of postmodernity present many opportunities and challenges for marketing and for humanity as a whole. Marketing has always been a postmodern institution in its fundamental tendencies and affinity for the hyperreal, fragmentation, consumption, and the seduction of the object seems clear. On the other hand, as an idea system, it has not escaped the modern metanarratives, for example, in attributing value to the material (product) rather than to the symbolic (image). Given its natural tendencies, however, it can be expected that marketing, maybe the ultimate practice of postmodernity, will be the first institution to adapt to postmodernism. The signs already seem to be there that this is the case.

Marketing is the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation, the paramout processes of life according to the postmodernist sensibility. With this consciousness, the production and reproduction of images, simulations, and meanings are no longer accidental or haphazard. They are deliberate and organized through the institutions of marketing. In order to participate in this process it is necessary to muster power to influence and control marketing institutions. Marketing and marketers will have, therefore, a heavy burden; one that is no less than determining the conditions and meanings of life for the future. In this sense, and in terms of all that is discussed in this paper, marketing is the new metaphor for life!

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