

Postmodernism and the marketing imaginary

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The year is 1961. Michel Foucault has just published what would later become one of the most influential books of the postwar era, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (*Madness and Civilization*). Foucault was accompanied by several contemporary thinkers many of whom are now household names—Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Harraway, Debord, Jameson and others. In their writings, we see the beginnings of the postmodernist and post-structuralist revolution. The world hasn't been the same since then—except in fields like marketing and management which have been slow to awaken to this revolution.

Much can be said of a special issue on postmodernism and marketing, but nothing stands out more fittingly than the fact that the lead has been taken by a scholarly journal from Europe—fittingly because, Europe

was, after all, the cradle of modernism, and is now of postmodernism. In desperation as much as in justifiable confusion, somebody recently remarked that we seem to be living in an era of “post-everything,” thereby implying that any attention paid to anything that has the prefix “post” should be viewed with suspicion. Alas, this may be true of many “posts,” but, certainly, not all of them, for some “posts” deserve to be taken seriously. As Featherstone (1991, Ch. 1) so eloquently demonstrated, anyone who considers postmodernism a passing fancy will do so at considerable peril to oneself and needs to examine one's intellectual position before it is too late. This is particularly applicable to those in the marketing profession, for isn't it a fact that the marketing discipline prides itself in being the vanguard of change and new ideas? We believe that the postmodernist discourse provides such an opportunity.

It is no mere coincidence that the three of us, editors of this special issue, have joined together in bringing out this issue. Our recent writings have delved into postmodernism and its relevance to marketing and consumer behavior (Firat, 1990, 1991, 1992; Firat and Venkatesh, in press; Sherry, 1990; Venkatesh, 1989, 1990, 1992). (See also Mourrain, 1989; Ogilvy, 1990; and Scott, 1992.) We have articulated its basic premises, concepts and applications, but these writings are scattered throughout a variety of publica-

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Table 1
Relative emphases in modernism and postmodernism

Modernist emphasis	Postmodern emphasis
Object	Image, symbol
Cartesian subject	Symbolic subject
Cognitive subject	Semiotic subject
Unified subject	Fragmented subject
Centered subject	Decentered subject
Signified	Signifier
Objectification	Symbolization
Representation	Signification
Truth (objective)	Truth (constructed)
Real	Hyperreal
Universalism	Localism, particularism
Society as a structure	Society as a spectacle
Logocentric reason	Hermeneutic reason
Knowing	Communicating
Economy	Culture
Capitalism	Late capitalism
Economic systems	Symbolic systems
Production	Consumption
Shift from use value to exchange value	Shift from exchange value to sign value
Science/Technology	Science/Technology
Mechanical technology	Digital/Communicative technology
Sciences	Humanities
Euro-American centrism	Globalism
Phallogentrism	Feminism/Genderism
Orientalism, colonialism	Multiculturalism, globalism

tion outlets. For reasons of space we are unable to repeat all the ideas discussed earlier, but urge interested readers to become familiar with them for they provide the foundational ideas for the various articles included here. This does not mean that the uninitiated readers will get no help from the articles included in the present issue which, of course, contain many of the central ideas. It is just that their understanding will be made richer through a wider exposure. For easy reference, based on previous literature and the articles included here, we have summarized some important distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in Table 1. We have also included Exhibit 1 to familiarize the readers with some frequently used terminology within the postmodernist

discourse. Readers are further encouraged to make note of the references under various articles included in this issue for additional reading.

Postmodernism, along with poststructuralism, represents the most fundamental development in the history of ideas in the recent decades. Although its origins can be traced to the fields of architecture and art during the 1920s and 1930s, it is only in the last decade or two that it has gained a momentum of a revolutionary nature and made an impact on numerous disciplines. During the late sixties and seventies, the explosion of postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas first occurred in areas such as literary theory, cultural studies and philosophy, and, consequently, the fields with which we are most concerned, the social sciences (economics, sociology etc.), management and marketing have remained largely unaffected by the forces of postmodernism (for an exception, see *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 5, no. 1). These fields can no longer remain immune, and what is now perceived as inevitable can be explained by the fact that postmodernism deals both with the basic philosophical and cultural premises that underlie social scientific assumptions and with the foundational ideas surrounding our notions of social and economic reality (ontology). It treats our knowledge structures (epistemology), as well as our conceptualizations of the individual subjectivity (e.g., the consumer). It is also concerned with social formation (e.g., markets). Further, the international impact of the postmodern ethos grows with each passing year. On the free-floating level of mass mediated global consumer culture proper (Featherstone, 1991), on the locally anchored dialectical extremes of such hyperindustrial societies as Japan (Miyoshi and Harootunian, 1989), and on Islamic countries in the throes of "development" (Ahmed, 1992), postmodernity exercises its influence. It is no longer, and may never

have been, strictly speaking, a principally Western phenomenon. The transmutations that it undergoes as it passes through customs, reflecting and refracting off of the hall of mirrors that is intercultural communication, pose a challenge to marketing research.

As it will become evident from the articles included in this issue, postmodernism is not a synonym for postpositivism or interpretivism for these two concepts are very much embedded within the discourse on modernism. Postmodernism is not a methodology nor is it merely a set of techniques for research. It is a cultural and philosophical development that has far reaching implications for our notions of ontology and epistemology. Naturally, we will be forced to develop new methods and tools based on new conceptions of reality. While the debates on postpositivism and interpretivism are certainly relevant, they fall within the generally accepted paradigms of modernism and the established canons of social sciences, and thus cannot be considered as offering fundamental shifts in our visions or world view. Postmodernist debates, on the other hand, have originated outside the social sciences, in literary theory, linguistics, feminist theory, art and architecture, cultural studies, intellectual history, continental philosophy and other sub-disciplines within humanities, and hence have largely been excluded from the purview of our familiar boundaries of debate within marketing. Postmodernism is closely related to poststructuralism and deconstructionism, each of which form the basis for some reigning contemporary positions in philosophy and cultural studies.

The implications of postmodernist developments for marketing and marketing research are several and profound.

First, postmodernism is concerned with lived experiences and fragmented realities, spectacles and visualizations, non-linear contours in time and space, none of which can be captured in the objectified formulations

of established research in the social sciences. Besides objects and objectifications, postmodernism recognizes the existence of symbols, images, myths, narratives, fantasies, and micro-level practices—a world rich in possibilities, all of which are equally important in understanding our lifeworlds.

Second, postmodernism emphasizes culture over economy, and consumption over production as the site of contemporary discourse and human behavior. As a result of this emphasis, marketing has become a prime topic for social scientists and philosophers. It is imperative that marketing and consumer research disciplines be reevaluated and reconstructed from within, by their principal practitioners. As Featherstone (1991) observes in connection with his analysis of consumer culture and postmodernism, “[The question is], how is it that the study of consumption and culture—both incidentally until recently previously designated as derivative, peripheral and feminine, as against the more masculine sphere of production and the economy—are granted a more important place in the analysis of social relations and cultural representations? ... This problem ... is central to the understanding of postmodernism.” (p. viii) That postmodernism provides the framework for studying consumerism while at the same time consumerism becomes a metaphor for postmodern life is the intriguing idea raised in these special issues.

Third, our basic assumptions of what a consumer is and how he or she is constituted require a radical modification. So do our notions of “markets” and “products” and other basic categories that we deal with in our daily discourse. We have to begin to address the issue of consumers as *cultural* and *historical* products constituted by institutional mechanisms and power relationships in which marketing actors and actions play a vital role. These actors include practitioners who are busy constructing and creating con-

sumers and markets while proclaiming at the same that they in no way shape or influence consumer wants and needs. Marketing scholars—many of whose intellectual positions are ideologically motivated but are concealed behind the facades of disinterested pursuit of knowledge—and marketing researchers—whose relentless pursuit involves the discovery of new methods and technologies to disassemble and transform the consumer while they are ostensibly engaged in objective analyses of “pure data”—are also included among the actors. Postmodernism gives all of us an opportunity to be honest with ourselves, to discard our pretenses, to climb down from our pedestals and be both self-critical and celebratory.

Fourth, we need also to examine the nature of marketing research itself, both as an activity of information gathering and in its relationship to other institutional manifestations of control, persuasion and marketing seduction. If we are (following Jameson, 1991) to redeem the critiques of consumption and commodification from the realm of the merely moral and restore them to the properly radical, and push beyond a nihilistic assault (Miller, 1987) on the globalization of consumption, we will require research into all the processes and stakeholders that comprise contemporary marketing.

Fifth, marketing research need no longer be confined to the presentation of tables, equations and figures, or remain obsessive about reliabilities and validities. Its presentational forms could range from poetry to scientific discourse, from narratives, descriptions, story-telling to visual and symbolic representations. We have only to take a moment to examine how imaginatively advertisers promote their products, how packages are created and semiotically positioned, how consumer images are fragmented and transported the world over, and how shopping environments are displayed and visually transformed (Wernick, 1991). No amount of

scientific training alone gives us the capacity to comprehensively analyze these rich and varied marketing practices. We need to exploit language more powerfully and train ourselves in symbolic forms of communication to understand and represent the world around us. This may be the only available avenue for exploring in any holistic fashion such issues as the phenomenology of retail space (Jukes, 1990). No wonder researchers in the fields of mass communication, literary criticism, and critical ethnography have eclipsed the typical marketing researcher in depicting and describing the world of marketing. They not only seem to be saying more significant things but their writings are certainly more interesting to read. The typical marketing researcher is in danger of becoming an agent of drudgery, a dry and an unimaginative analyst, wilfully fossilized by a misguided view of significant research. Hasn't Holbrook (1990) asked us to be more lyrical? If we in marketing do not accept new challenges, we risk stagnation, fragmentation, and absorption into other disciplines. We certainly relinquish our claims to relevance.

Finally, in our modest effort to bring out this issue, we want to open up the possibilities for marketing writers to think of alternative forms of representation, to explore their avenues fully and without fear. We hope to encourage marketers to adopt the multidimensional, multiperspectival approach to theory and practice that the lifeworlds of our postmodern condition demand (Best and Kellner, 1991; Sherry, 1990). Some of us are better with mathematical equations, others are better at narratives, and still others among us are painters and poets. Quite a few of us are effective critics. Why should not marketing research explore these alternate forms of depiction? After all, isn't that what the practice of marketing is all about? Colors, fictitious imaginaries, impossible dreams and pure fantasies? Let us remember that consumers are much more varied in the tools

that they employ to understand the world around them, and there is no reason why we as researchers should limit our tools. Researchers should not be restricted by frameworks, but liberated by frames of mind. We should not be merely writing research proposals, reports, and findings. We should embody our varied understandings of marketplace phenomena in as plastic an array of media as our talents permit. We must learn to hallow alterity (Harvey, 1989; Taussig, 1993), not merely manage diversity. Let us explode the modernist myth and celebrate what we find meaningful in postmodernism.

As in the case of any discourse, however, one may find it necessary to tread the space cautiously and critically, yet, as postmodernism invites us to do, wittily and playfully. The work we have chosen for this and the upcoming special issue on *Postmodernism, Marketing and the Consumer* represents a cross-section of these orientations. We hope that this collection will contribute to the rethinking of marketing that momentous cultural transformations demand. The two special issues primarily represent a collaboration across the Atlantic, between North American and European colleagues. Even so, a pictorial contribution from a colleague in Southeast Asia appears in the upcoming special issue. Clearly, other vehicles must be sought to throw open the discourse to conversation among colleagues from all around the world. Somewhat paradoxically, new integrative technologies of simulated presence and image construction that are currently under control of "advanced technology" centers may also present the potential of cultural appropriation by many "capillaries" to be resignified in the use of exactly such conversation. In fact, future "conversations" may take place on line and on screen, as well as in virtual shared space, rather than in print.

In this issue we present three poems and six papers. The first poem by Sherry explores the cultural commingling of sacred and pro-

fane dimensions of consumer experience. The paper by Firat and Venkatesh and the paper by Scott both explore the conceptual issues related to postmodern culture with specific implications regarding marketing and marketing language. The paper by Belk and Bryce is another conceptual piece that investigates modern and postmodern consumption tendencies using two movies as mirrors for society. The contribution by Cova and Svanfeldt presents two case studies which illuminate the potentials for postmodern marketing management, while the paper by Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson is an empirical investigation of the reflections of feminist deconstruction of gender in advertising in the UK. The paper by Thompson addresses the philosophy of science debates currently taking place in consumer research and marketing from a hermeneutic deconstruction perspective to explore some postmodern implications. The issue ends with two poems by Schouten and Sherry. The former poem invites an intensely personal accounting of the impact of goods upon our sensibilities, while the latter provides a meditation on the role of commerce in the transformation of cultural geography.

A collection such as this is not possible without contributions from some of the most challenging minds in our community. We are greatly indebted to those colleagues who have agreed to have their work published in the special issues. We wish to thank many authors who submitted work, but whose papers did not get selected for the special issues. The great response made the selection process most demanding. Our gratitude also goes out to our reviewers who spent much time and energy in providing us and the authors with insightful and substantive reviews and guidance. Again, without their help the special issues would not have been possible.

Finally, we wish to extend our grateful thanks to Dr. Güliz Ger, member of the editorial board, who first suggested the possibility of a special issue to us, to the editor

of *IJRM*, Dr. Piet Vanden Abeele, and to the rest of the editorial board who encouraged and accepted the topic we selected. Our thanks also go to the publishing staff at Elsevier/North-Holland who have made guest editorship a pleasant experience for us.

Exhibit 1: Some basic terminology

At the risk of simplification, the following definitions and descriptions are offered as a ready guide to postmodernist and poststructuralist terminology. (See Rosenau, 1992, for example, for an additional glossary of relevant terms.)

Modernity: Generally refers to the period in Western history starting from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century till the present.

Modernism: While modernity refers to the period, modernism refers to the social-cultural-economic idea systems and institutions. It signifies, among other things, the development of science as the basis of universal knowledge, secularism in human thought, the preeminence of individual reason, and the emergence of rational structures in the social and economic order. Modernism is coterminous with the rise of capitalism and liberal democracy (and Communism), the rise of the bourgeois subject, the separation of mind and body and the premise of superiority of mind over body in human affairs, the separation of subject from object. All these developments have a unifying principle of rational, technical system of beliefs and are considered the metanarratives of modernism. The logic of modernism is that it liberates the individual from superstitious beliefs and religious excesses.

Metanarratives / Grand Narratives: These are the universal concepts designed to ex-

plain the social, cultural and economic aspects of modernity. Metanarratives are principles that attempt to explain particulars of human experience in terms of grand themes such as, capitalism, Marxism, rationality, truth, unified science, harmony, orientalism, and the like.

Postmodernity: Generally refers to the current period in world history signifying the change of course of modernity if not its end.

Postmodernism: A cultural condition and philosophical position that questions the fundamental assumptions of modernism while exposing modernist tendencies as social constructions which are arbitrary and self-serving. It critiques modernism as an oppressive development in Western history and argues that instead of truly liberating the individual as modernism claims, it has, in fact, turned out to be as oppressive as the system it has displaced. The central ideas of postmodernism can be found in related themes bearing labels such as deconstructionism, post-structuralism, feminism, orientalism.

Structuralism: Structuralism is the practice of studying phenomena as different as societies, minds, languages, literatures, and mythologies as systems or connected wholes—that is, structures—and in terms of their internal patterns of connection, rather than their historical sequence or development. It is an offshoot of Saussurian theory of language, later elaborated and adopted by Levi-Strauss. Although structuralism refers to any phenomenology that views society in terms of structures, structuralism in this context refers to the semiological structuralism, a model of language which rejects its historical development (diachrony) and establishes its synchronism. This particular view of language (and reality) was later adopted by Levi-Strauss as a universalistic basis of culture. To the extent structuralism represents a

diachronous development of language and therefore, history, and looks for universal principles, structuralism embodies modernist metanarratives. Social and literary theorists associated with structuralism of relevance to postmodernist discourse are Marx (analysis of social structures), Levi-Strauss (analysis of cultures), Saussure (linguistics), and Freud (the structure of the unconscious).

Poststructuralism: Stands in opposition to structuralism, denies the universality of structures and the transcendental nature of sign. Poststructuralism tries to undermine large-scale formal systems in the human sciences, structural tendencies in literary formulations and philosophic discourse. Derrida questions the notion of sign as a transcendental category, attacks modern metaphysics as grounded in a system of signs, and rational processes. Poststructuralism takes different forms:

- the deconstruction of Western logocentric principle in the work of Derrida,
- the deconstruction of the Cartesian subject in the work of Foucault,
- the emergence of the schizophrenic subject in the works of Deleuze and Guattari,
- the extension of these principles to the gendered subject, in the works of feminists, Kristeva, Butler, Harraway, etc.

Feminism: Is a reaction against the modernist notions of the “subject” which is interpreted to be a “gendered” subject, representing a cultural construction based on male ideology. Feminism articulates the condition of the “other” (the most problemized aspect of the modernist thought) through its discourse on gender. Several forms of feminism exist, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Poststructuralist Feminism etc.

Orientalism: The argument that the “oriental” is the construction of the Western

discourse and practices and its reference to the ascendance of Western-modernist culture through the creation of the “other.”

Deconstructionism: There is more than one meaning to the term, “deconstruction.” To “deconstruct” a text means to draw out conflicting logics of sense and implication, with the object of showing that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means. To deconstruct also means to rearrange structure and its foundations using a scaffolding, as it were, without destroying the original structure, but altering it so it has new foundations and a new superstructure. Deconstruction is a term associated with Jacques Derrida who first used it to examine the foundations of Western philosophy which he considered to be rooted in a logocentric view of the world. In the last few years, it has crept into literary theory, cultural criticism, social theory, and feminist theory and has now become one of the most powerful and controversial developments in contemporary social thought. Deconstructionism, in the hands of its proponents, is an attack on Cartesianism, logocentrism, phallocentrism and other ideological positions that have been long considered hallmarks of modernism. In this sense deconstructionism is a postmodern and poststructuralist movement.

Hyperreality: The idea that reality is constructed, and therefore it is possible to construct things that are more real than real. What is real is purely contextual, cultural, historical and timebound. Hyperreal questions the myth of the real in modernism.

Fragmentation: That there is no unified subject, that there is no need to converge to a unified truth (for none exists), and that human condition, physical, mental, or social, is fragmented, reassembled, and reconstructed without our looking for grand meanings and themes.

Decentering: That there is no reason to believe that the "individual" is the center of the universe, that it is purely an invention exploited maximally under modernism to reject competing entities. Feminists have particularly attacked the centered nature of the modern subject which has tended to mean in practice the male subject. Decentering means the unseating of the subject as it is presently constituted.

Floating Signifier: That there is no fixed object (signified) to which all signifiers eventually refer to, that the signified is itself a signifier, and the world is semiotically constructed in a chain of signifiers.

Cartesianism: Generally attributed to the principles enunciated by Descartes, which include the method of doubt, reality as comprehensible only through deductive mentalistic processes (rational knowledge), the supremacy of human reason, and the separation of mind (reasoning element) and body (experiential element). In some circles Cartesianism also represents the logic and philosophical basis of modernism.

Kantianism: Refers to the philosophy of Kant. Combines Cartesian principles of a prior knowledge (knowledge by reasoning) and synthetic knowledge (knowledge gained by senses and experience) to form the basis of modernist epistemology.

Interpretivism: Refers to the notion that understanding is as important if not more important than (scientific) explanation in human and social sciences, and acknowledges the subjective positions of authors and researchers as a legitimate basis of knowledge production. Interpretivism is part of the modernist discourse and its implications have relevance to postmodernism.

Logical Positivism: A particular epistemological position that advocates certain procedures for pursuing "scientific work." Its basic assumptions are the possibility of a unified science, correspondence theory of truth, generalizability of knowledge, the possibility of objectivity through inter-subjective verification. This is only a small aspect of modernity.

Postpositivism: A reaction against positivism and its stringent epistemological requirements and the scientific basis of knowledge. Postpositivism advocates other forms of obtaining usable knowledge. Postpositivist discourse is part of modernist discourse and has no particular significance to postmodernism.

Imaginary: Literally, imaginary means the opposite of real, therefore, something which is fictitious or a fantasy. In a rhetorical sense, it means that what is real is imaginary and what is imaginary is real. In this sense, one does not worry whether the real exists or not as long as one is able to imagine the real and realize the imaginary. From a sociopolitical perspective, the imaginary is the vision that captures the meanings of a lifeworld for a social/political group.

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