

# Marketing in a postmodern world

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This article begins with the premiss that we are in the midst of an epochal transformation from the modern to the postmodern era. Although this is a premiss and therefore need not be dwelt on at length, we believe a short introduction to the concept of postmodernity is necessary because of the intellectual controversy surrounding it and the relatively sparse discussion of postmodernity in marketing and business literatures (for exceptions see [1,2]). The bulk of this article, however, focuses on the relationship between marketing and postmodernity.

The next section, entitled "The postmodern age", discusses the major characteristics of postmodernity, especially from the perspective of those interested in marketing and consumption phenomena. This is followed by a section entitled "Marketing and modernity", which explores some of the tensions that arise because marketing practice has become postmodern while marketing theory continues to be developed in a modernist mode. The final section, entitled "Marketing and postmodernity", focuses on the growing nexus – indeed an identity – between these two phenomena and explores some themes that characterize the nature of postmodern marketing.

## **The postmodern age**

### *Modernism versus postmodernism*

Possibly the main defining difference between modernism and postmodernism is postmodernism's rejection of the modernist idea that human social experience has fundamental "real" bases. To the contrary, postmodernism posits that social experience is an interplay of myths that produce regimes of truth [3-6]. According to postmodernism, many of the fundamental modernist idea(l)s regarding the individual, self, freedom, agency, and structure are arbitrary and ephemeral rather than essential and fixed. The existence and

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persistence of such ideas, therefore, depend on the continued dominance of the mythical system – the *imaginary*. Any community (including of course the community of researchers in marketing) which values these idea(l)s must, therefore, constantly defend this myth system against others and cannot find refuge or solace in the belief that these idea(l)s are either “natural” or “eternal”.

The political position of postmodernism is that different myths ought to be allowed since they are products of the different “realities” of communities, and that each myth system ought to show respect and tolerance to the presence of others[7]. Postmodernism posits that the culmination of modernity renders this multi-mythic position both advisable and inevitable. The possibilities and potential alternatives that modern technologies have created on the one hand, and the cynicism and frustrations resulting from the crumbling modern experience on the other hand, result in the fragmentation of experience and the growth and efflorescence of multiple, often highly incompatible, lifestyles, ideologies, and myth systems. If humanity were to try to resolve these differences through war, violent confrontation, or political subjugation, the results would most likely be catastrophic – especially since modern technology has also succeeded in decentralizing the means of destruction.

Postmodernist positions arise from several key insights into the history of modernity and modern thought as well as into conditions that were at once reinforced by the modern experience yet suppressed by modernist ideologies and rhetoric. Students of culture, especially Western culture, observe a growing pervasiveness of the postmodern conditions as the norms, ideas, and fundamentals of modern culture encounter increasing critique and deepening crises[8-10]. Also influential in greater entrenchment of these conditions are the technologies of information and communication[11,12]. Consequently, claims of the dawning of a post-industrial era, or an information age, run parallel to, and generally resonate with, themes that correspond to the growing pervasiveness of the postmodern.

#### *Postmodern conditions*

The literature on postmodernity is already vast and is growing with increasing velocity. Contributions to this literature come from a large variety of disciplines and, therefore, the vocabularies and perspectives are also varied. While it might be difficult to fit all the discussions in one concise framework, certain conditions do seem to receive the greatest attention. These conditions tend to be hyperreality, fragmentation, reversals of production and consumption, decentring of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites), and loss of commitment (see[13]). Much of the discussion on these conditions, regardless of disciplinary origin, pertains to marketing and the consumer[1].

Many contemporary examples of the *hyperreal* are grounded in consumption experiences, for example, in the simulations experienced by the customers of the now largest industry, tourism, in theme parks such as Disney World and Universal Studios, or in Las Vegas[14,15]. More than physical surroundings are simulated in the image of hypes that are constructed and, then, thoroughly

believed in by their producers and consumers alike. Consider, for example, the experiences one is promised and one finds in wearing certain brands of sports shoes, denim jeans, and the like. When a community trusts in the promise that a certain brand of jeans, for example, is a statement of privilege or attractiveness or sexiness, for that community the jeans indeed provide the experience promised. Consumption and marketing, therefore, tend to be the most fertile ground for the hyperreal, as they are for the other conditions mentioned. This might be why marketing and consumption tend to take centre stage in discussions of postmodernity regardless of whether philosophers, sociologists, media specialists, artists, literary theorists, or others are the discussants.

A similar argument can be made in the case of other conditions of postmodernity. Consider the postmodern condition of *fragmentation*. One major force that fragments life experiences in contemporary society is the fragmented moments in consumption experiences and, especially, in marketing communications. In the USA, 30-second commercial television spots succeeded the one-minute or longer spots of the 1960s. The 30-second spots are now being succeeded by 20-, 15-, ten- and even five-second spots and these spots themselves are divided into many fleeting split-second images. A novel trend is to fragment a television commercial by slicing it in the middle. This is done by either slicing a “fake” commercial by a real one (the “Energizer” bunny in the USA) or by sandwiching a real, different commercial between two spots for a product. These dizzying, kaleidoscopic, fleeting forms are increasingly being imitated in all human experience and in all other communication media such as music videos, situation comedies, films, and even news media.

The *reversals in production and consumption* arise from production losing its privileged status in culture and consumption becoming the means through which individuals define their self-images for themselves as well as to others; marketing, of course, being the primary institution which reinforces this trend. It is also in this (re)presentation of self-image(s) through one’s consumption that the consumer begins to conceive “the self” as a marketable entity, to be customized and produced, to be positioned and promoted, as a product.

The ultimate consequence of this is the decentring of the subject. The revered “subject” of the modernist narratives is decentred and (con)fused with the object. It is also decentred in the sense that this subject is no longer one but multiple and changeable according to the situation she or he encounters [16-18, p. 208]. Commercials for Pepsi Cola, Budweiser beer, and Energizer batteries have sometimes portrayed the brand object as the hero; capable of transforming dogs or chimpanzees into party animals or defeating evil men. The consumer, the human subject, is at the margin – decentred, enjoying the show, and irreverently worshipping the brand object/subject.

Fragmentation, hyperreality, the decentred subject – these postmodern conditions create openings for *juxtapositions of opposites*. The ability and willingness to (re)present different (self-)images in fragmented moments liberates the consumer from conformity to a single image, to seeking continuity

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and consistency among roles played throughout life, and the postmodern generation seems ready for such liberation. What in modernist sensibility would be considered disjointed, paradoxical and inconsistent, hence schizophrenic and pathological, is not so considered in postmodern sensibility. To the contrary, the consumer of postmodern culture appreciates and enjoys the paradox and the playfulness, the difference and the satire that such juxtapositions provide and enable. The uniformity of style, function, form and content inherent in the modern, whether it be in architecture or fashion, for example, that is predicated on a “universal” rationale of, particularly, economic efficiency is increasingly rejected[19]. Instead, postmodern culture liberates the experiencing of that which is different, even paradoxically opposed. Consequently, such juxtapositions in style, imagery, discourse, communicative action, etc., abound with examples increasingly found in art, architecture, literature, and the media[11,20-22].

Disillusionment with the inability of the modern project to deliver its promises and the growing willingness to experience differences mentioned above both reinforce the tendency in late modernity and in postmodern culture for a *loss of commitment* to either grand or singular projects. Rather, the postmodern consumer takes on multiple, sometimes even contradictory projects, to which s/he is marginally and momentarily committed, not taking any one too seriously. This loss of commitment is observed in all walks of life: in personal relationships, professional tasks, consumption activities, etc. Marketing managers experience this when the consumer loyalties to brands and corporations that they took for granted are jeopardized.

### **Marketing and modernity**

In chronological terms, the formalization of marketing as a field of practice and study (in the early 1900s in the USA) preceded the phenomenological delineation of and the intellectual discussion about the transition from modernity to postmodernity (in the 1970s). In retrospect, however, it could be argued that, as a field of practice and study, marketing had elements of postmodernity from its very inception. In a sense, marketing was born postmodern – a precursor to the larger society to come. We will return to this point in the discussion on postmodernity and marketing. It is important to note at this point that there is a tension between the modern and postmodern elements of contemporary marketing. Marketing today is thoroughly postmodern in practice, especially at its leading edge in the economically advanced North American, West European, and East Asian settings, but modern in terms of its theoretical and philosophical constructs[1]. We would like to illustrate this by discussing three core philosophical and theoretical constructs of contemporary marketing.

#### *Behavioural consistency*

Consumer behaviour theories believe in consistency and orderliness of consumer behaviour. Starting from the 1960s, marketing and consumer

behaviour researchers justifiably rejected the simple economic rationality model of the past. In its place they substituted a more complex model of psycho-social-cultural-economic rationality. In effect the basic philosophical underpinning of behavioural consistency and orderliness was maintained but the theoretical base of the model was expanded to allow for a complex range of behaviours, beyond what economics alone could handle[18]. In other words the simpler "rational" consumer of the past was replaced by a more complex "explainable" consumer[23].

The practical reality of consumer behaviour has always been, to an extent, otherwise, and is increasingly so today. Global competition and technological innovations ensure that, as soon as consumer behaviour in any field is on the verge of stability and explainability, new products and services are introduced to destabilize the consumer behaviour model so as to create competitive openings for challengers, niche players, and other contenders.

Contemporary actions of consumers tend to indicate that they may be more "fickle" than explainable and, therefore, predictable. That is, the traditional variables used in explaining consumers' behaviours are no longer as helpful. These variables, such as, values, attitudes, (brand) preferences, incomes, social class, in general, psychographics and demographics, assume, in the final analysis, a certain stability or largely predictable change. After all, one's demographic and psychographic characteristics do not change momentarily. One does not *often* change one's sex, or even social class, and one's age, peer groups, family life cycle stages change with some predictability. Values and attitudes, too, although changeable, take time to change and rarely jump to opposite poles immediately. Thus, the general assumption has been that if and when informed about such characteristics of the consumer, some meaningful prediction of their actions can be achieved. In a modern culture which has promoted the attainment of a stable, consistent and authentic identity, character or self-concept, individuals often behave in ways to realize this goal, making predictability and explanation more likely.

This need for authenticity or consistent identity is exactly what is waning in postmodern culture, and consequently, so are predictability and explanation in the traditional sense. It is no longer just that consumers frequently change their self-concepts, characters, values, etc., for they indeed do, but that they often subscribe to multiple and often highly contradictory value systems, lifestyles, etc., concurrently, without feeling inconsistent and improper. That is why it is so easy to find many subscribing to progressive and conservative ideas and movements at the same time – something very unlikely in modern politics. So do we find medical doctors and lawyers, typical members of mainstream professional communities during the week, belonging to motorcycle "gangs" (in complete attire, etc.) in the weekends. As a result, for example, brand loyalty is eroding and, with few exceptions, the reigning icons of consumption in most categories are toppled at some point by challengers. A major recent example of such dethroning is the rapid eclipse of IBM as the leading computer company by a host of challengers. This changeableness of the consumer may create

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discomfort among students of consumer behaviour and marketing but is a condition that may have to be recognized nevertheless. It will require qualitatively different approaches to consumption, communication, and management, some of which will be discussed later in this article. This is disconcerting to a discipline that is coming of age and just finding its feet in the academy – the very frameworks that give it academic legitimacy are being vitiated by competitive forces and social change.

Marketing practice, however, has not waited for consistent explanations of consumer behaviour to emerge. Through trial and error, practice is always seeking ways of eliciting consumer response – even if, and in case of some marketers and advertisers, especially if – the consumer's behaviour is inexplicable. For example, the application software industry is in a continual turmoil as new companies and new programs try to destabilize and upstage popular application packages. This is also the case in popular culture industries such as music videos where genres and groups try continuously to upstage each other, making the extremization of everything a useful competitive strategy appealing to the changeable consumer.

#### *Products projecting images*

Modern strategic marketing theory has held since the 1970s that products have value and that the image of the product reflects this value as perceived by the consumer[24]. The attempt of strategic marketing theoreticians and modellers has been to establish empirically verifiable links between product features and other marketing mix elements – the controllable elements of a marketing programme – and the image resulting from it. This exemplifies a modernist, Cartesian rationale: products *project* images, therefore it is necessary to control related marketing mix elements so as to achieve the desired image position[25].

For marketing practitioners, on the other hand, from the 1950s and even earlier, image is what they sell. Long before intellectual discussions on postmodernity had started, practising managers were quoting the famous adage: "Sell the sizzle, not the steak". This is a quintessential postmodern approach – the image is the marketable entity and the product *strives* to represent the image. It is important to note that this well-known (postmodernist) managerial approach to marketing stands the logic of (modernist) strategic marketing theory on its head. In marketing practice that is most likely to succeed in contemporary society, image is primary and the product is treated as merely a variable that attempts to represent the image. Caught up in the modernist project of quantifying and optimizing the links between product features and product image, strategic marketing theory has assigned a primacy to the product and its associated marketing mix. Such theory has therefore only provided guidelines for incremental product repositioning and marketing mix improvement, and spectacularly successful strategic marketing acts continue to be consigned to the categories of "genius" or "art" – categories beyond modernist analytical reach[26].

Modern marketing theory remained focused on the product even when the marketing concept became widely accepted. The reason for this lay largely in the belief that consumer needs were satisfied by the product developed for these needs. That is, the idea was that satisfaction resulted from "material" elements contained in the product. Consequently, it was these elements present in the product that provided value.

When the tenets of modernist thought are understood, this focus on the product as the crystallization of value is not at all surprising. Modernism emphasized the object as the locus or "essence" of economic activity. Understanding the reality of the subject – the human being – largely meant understanding the nature of the objects in the subject's environment. These objects constituted the material which determined the "real" and the "observable". Therefore, objects constituted the human being's truth, and consequently, whether in capitalist or Marxist ideologies, the relationships among objects determined and embodied value. Objects were material and "real". Ideas, images, and the like only *represented* the material and the real. On their own they were merely illusions.

On the other hand, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, marketing practitioners were often aware that not the product but the image possessed the value, that it was the image which was marketed, not the product. The product represented the image and the value imbued in the image. The better the representation the more successful was the product. Recent marketing success stories emphasize the growing recognition of this relationship between image and the product. Successful marketing organizations, such as Nike, realize that they are not in the business of selling shoes but of crafting images. Such organizations communicate the image, not the product in their promotional campaigns. In fact, Nike advertisements are often a form of video poetry – high art that elevates human physical achievement to the level of the sublime. The product – the sneaker – is a mere representation of this image. In the postmodern marketplace, products do not *project* images; they *fill* images.

#### *Consumer sovereignty*

The notion of consumer sovereignty is near and dear to the heart of economic and marketing theorists. Even most business people, pragmatic and sceptical as they are about other theoretical aspects of marketing, believe in this particular philosophical underpinning of economic and marketing theories. The sovereign consumer is idealized and idolized.

The theoretical and philosophical notion of consumer sovereignty demands that marketing practice follow the logic of what is popularly known as the "marketing concept", namely, first find out the consumer's need and then satisfy it [27, pp. 12-13]. In other words, it is demanded of practitioners that they study the reality of the consumer and respond with market offerings appropriate to it. A lot of marketing practice, and especially what in retrospect generally becomes considered as brilliant marketing practice, defies this. In fact,

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successful marketing practice (in terms of conventional business and economic criteria) constructs a hyperreality that the consumer buys into particularly because it is many times unusual and not expected, yet imaginative, creative and so exciting. For example, the entire approach of the Disney enterprise is to create the fantasy first – a fantasy that is not consumer-derived but a completely worked out vision of key designers that all actors – consumers, employees, agents, reviewers, etc. – will buy into. We observe the same phenomenon in high-technology marketing. Apple's Macintosh computer was not a consumer-driven innovation but a compellingly seductive vision of a computer that could be a *friend* to one ("friendly") worked out by Steve Jobs and his design team. The computer – the product – was then developed to fill this vision[28]. Marketing practice, therefore, is not driven so much by the ideal of a sovereign consumer as by the quest for a powerful hyperreality that consumers and marketers alike can believe in. It is the image (realized and communicated by the product), not the consumer, that is sovereign. In a Pepsi commercial, when deprived of Pepsi in an isolation chamber, sultry supermodel Cindy Crawford turns into ugly-duckling comedian Rodney Dangerfield. In other words, without the potency of the product image, the beautiful consumer disintegrates.

#### *From modernity to postmodernity*

This tension between strategically postmodern marketing practice and stridently modern marketing theory did not lead to many problems in the days of not-so-global competition in a mostly modern social setting. As the larger social setting began transforming headlong into a postmodern setting, and as global competition swept away stable consumer loyalties, marketing theory has been severely challenged. In a sense, the postmodernity inherent in (some) marketing practice from the very beginning has now engulfed most marketing and social practice. Marketing must now come to terms with its multivalent, sometimes ambivalent, discomfoting, postmodern core.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for today's marketing theorists to *reject* the notion of postmodernity. After all, marketing and advertising phenomena are at the very centre of discussions of postmodernity. Many commentators on postmodernity celebrate the marketing-rich postmodern styles. How can then marketing theorists reject postmodernity? It is imperative, therefore, to turn the attention of the marketing profession to the relationship between marketing and postmodernity and to explore the characteristics of marketing theory and practice in the postmodern era.

#### **Marketing and postmodernity**

Some observers argue that like many other institutions of contemporary society, marketing is undergoing some transformations as a result of the impact of postmodernity on society. In other words, changes observed in marketing and other business practices are part of a general process of social change[29]. Marketing has no special role in these changes and the impacts of



postmodernity that are found in marketing are qualitatively and quantitatively comparable to the impacts in other fields such as medicine, the legal system, or education.

Others hold that marketing is one of the primary engines of change in the ongoing transition from the modern to the postmodern era. In other words, along with the media and the cultural industries, marketing is at the forefront of the transition to postmodernity. In fact, the major impetus for this transition comes from media activities, marketing practices, and the realm of popular culture. These writers assign a special place to marketing in the transition to postmodernity – at the vanguard of change[30,31].

Finally, the strongest view – the one that we would like to endorse and elaborate on – holds that marketing represents the *essence* of the ongoing transition to postmodernity. In other words, the postmodern age is essentially a marketing age – there is an *identity* between marketing and postmodernity. Firat and Venkatesh[13, p. 246] have enunciated this forcefully. They write:

Marketing is the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation, the paramount processes of life according to postmodern 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.

What does the identity between marketing and postmodernity imply for theories of marketing and consumption? What are the implications of this for marketing practice? How does one operate in conditions where each time one thinks one has a handle on the way things work, and begins to comprehend the fundamentals that are guiding actions and relations, the ground becomes fluid? What are the principles of operation under such circumstances? The analogy might be that of a capricious game in which, as one nears mastery, there is a mercurial change in rules.

We believe these questions constitute the primary research agenda for students of marketing, management, culture and consumption in the postmodern age. In the paragraphs to follow we outline some of the dimensions along which marketing and consumer behaviour theories and practice must change.

#### *Consumer and needs*

Modern society settled once and for all that consumers would no longer be need-driven but have driven needs. It extended the simulation to heights and intensities human society had not experienced before. For every step in the direction of controlling nature to improve human life and conditions, modern science and technology created circumstances, objects, and environments which reshaped and restructured needs. In effect, human needs were, and still are, increasingly constructed, driven by the necessities and circumstances created by the reorganization of the human condition through scientific

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technology. Modernist philosophers and social scientists were aware of this and developed theories about needs based on this recognition, although their theories were based mostly on *material* conditions[32-35]. Postmodernist philosophers and social scientists also recognize this fact, and their theories reflect the greater role of the *symbolic* in this process of construction of needs[7,31,36,37]. These theories, observations and awareness have largely remained on the sidelines, however, when it comes to behavioural sciences and, especially, business disciplines. This is because postmodern theories contradict two fundamental modernist foundations: the belief in the independent rationality of the subject, and the sacredness of human nature and its fundamentally free constitution. The marketing literature, for example, through its commitment to the idea of the marketing concept and the principle of consumer sovereignty, has been thoroughly loyal to the centrality and principal freedom of the human subject. The social-political-economic conditions surrounding the human being have always been reflected as constraints on consumer behaviour, not as determinants of any degree.

In a way, the myth of the primitive human community or a Robinson Crusoe mentality is being extended into the present: The consumer with her/his basic needs confronting raw nature. But, is it possible, even thinkable, that the modern subject is so alone with one's basic needs and confronted by an untouched nature? Is it not true that the objects which modernity has introduced into human lives, say, especially the automobile and the television, have completely reorganized and repatterned lives, meanings and needs? The need for the automobile and the television, itself, is a determined need that has been introduced and imposed by the organization of life due to modern relationships of work and home. Then, the existence of these objects in our lives produce needs for time, cable, gasoline, rubber, and the list goes on. It might be too easy and trivial a response to say that the basic need for mobility and entertainment is or remains the same, for such a response summarily lumps together and then omits needs that directly compete and frequently win over these seeming fundamentals, including nutrition. The presence of the automobile, for example, completely reorganizes the transportation systems at the social level, and, at the individual level, prioritizes perceived needs, and expenditure patterns.

The above examples are still modernist in the sense that they emphasize the role of material conditions in shaping needs and demand for products. Postmodernist insights, on the other hand, emphasize the impact of the symbolic in the shaping of needs. The fact is that the object is independent of its functions, or the link between the object, say the automobile, and the functions it serves is cultural and arbitrary. The same can be said for the television. In different subcultures, for example in auto-racing or at the demolition derby, the functions of the automobile are quite different from its functions in the mainstream culture. This results, in these subcultures, in a different system of needs, priorities, functions and meanings for the automobile. Similarly, a culture where television will be used for interactive purposes will produce a

new set of needs and structures. That is, in the end, it is not the object, but the way that the culture signifies and uses the object that organizes and structures the needs[30,38].

*Consumer and consumption*

The transition to postmodernity is bringing about a reversal in the subject-object relations of the consumption process. In modernity the consumer was the actor in control – the knowing subject – who acted on the consumption object. In postmodernity, the consumer is the consumed, the ultimate marketable image. It is the object which acts and determines to a large extent, based on a myriad of significations anchored in a symbolic system that identifies the meanings and functions of objects. The human being finds himself or herself able to be part of this determination only through his or her own objectification, thereby the power to seduce[39], in (re)presenting oneself as a marketable image.

The notion of the consumer as the consumed, as a marketable image, has been present in the fashion industries for quite some time[40]. What is happening in postmodernity is the generalization of the fashion system to the consumption system as a whole[41]. Today, fashion consciousness pervades all consumption – clothes, cosmetics, music, film, cars, appliances, furniture, architecture, travel, food, and every other (re)presentable aspect of consumption that can be rendered as an image-producing act.

In postmodernity, we are witnessing the emergence of the “customizing” consumer[42] – the consumer who takes elements of market offerings and crafts a customized consumption experience out of these. In modernity the consumer was declared as the sovereign, the subject, and yet was increasingly objectified and divorced from her/his ability to control the objects or his/her life. Ironically, it is in emerging postmodernity that the consumer may be finding the *potential* to become a participant in the customization of his/her world by immersing her/himself as an object into the world of objects, instead of trying to maintain a position that is privileged to and detached from the objects.

Arguments can be and have been made that even in modernity the consumer was not and could not be passified in his/her relations with the objects, that s/he always employed the objects in a world of meanings that s/he produced in her/his relationships with the objects. This is a logical extension of the modernist assumption that the individual mind, especially in terms of its imagination and meaning production capabilities, is independent. The validity of this assumption is highly suspect, however, given the fact that so little subversion of the socially intended functions of objects (products) occurred in modern society. Postmodernist insights alert us to the fact that products are only arbitrarily linked to their originally intended functions, and therefore, infinitely open to subversion. Why has there been so little of it?

The answer may be in the fact that consumers were seized by the modernist idea(l)s and involved in seeking common projects and goals. The postmodern consumer lacks commitment to grand projects and seeks different experiences,

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and is willing to see oneself as a (marketable) object in the different situations s/he encounters in order to make each a supremely exciting and enjoyable experience. A simple but powerful example of this trend is a popular "screen saver" software product called After Dark. When a computer is idle, After Dark switches off the screen and turns on a show that is interesting but prevents screen "burn in". The After Dark show, however, can be customized in a myriad ways – laser beams, exploding supernova, twinkling stars, scrolling messages, startrek imagery, etc. – by the consumer. Each show is not only for the enjoyment of the particular customizer but also a statement of the image that she or he wishes to (re)present to others in her or his office, displaying who she or he is at the moment, since the show can be recustomized repeatedly for the same user. As one walks past various desks in a contemporary office, one is likely to encounter hundreds of customized After Dark screens on people's desktop computers. Examples of such customizing continue to multiply. As information technologies push the cost of customizing down, the trend towards customizing will become explosive.

#### *Product and process*

The boundaries that demarcated one product from another, and that gave products identities distinct from their sellers, distributors, consumers, uses, use occasions, etc. are crumbling in postmodernity. In postmodernity, the product is likely to become less and less a "finished" object and more and more a process into which the "consumer" can immerse oneself and can provide inputs. The example of the screen-saver software cited earlier is a case in point: After Dark is not just a product but a process that the user modifies depending on personality, mood, and whim. Other more elaborate examples include a virtual-reality kitchen design service in Japan where the consumer can immerse oneself into one's virtual dream kitchen, play with and manipulate the design in a virtual space, before having it delivered and installed[43].

In the services sector, aided by information technology, the effacement of the product-process distinction will proceed far and fast. As an example, consider Charles Schwab, a leading discount stock brokerage service in the USA. Schwab gives its customers the ability not only to retrieve information on general market indices and their individual stock portfolios by means of a touch-tone telephone, but even to enter instructions to conduct specific trades (buy/sell) through their phones – all without the need for a human operator. In other words, the customer assumes to a large extent the functions of the broker and trader – the customer participates in the creation of, indeed defines, the service.

To engage the mercurial consumer of the postmodern age, marketers will resort more and more to opening up their proprietary processes and systems – design, manufacturing, assembling, packaging, accounting, delivery, billing, etc. – to the consumer.

Indeed, on the overall social plane, we are witnessing the eclipse of the *citizen*, bounded by rationality, nationality, responsibility and seeking rights and legal

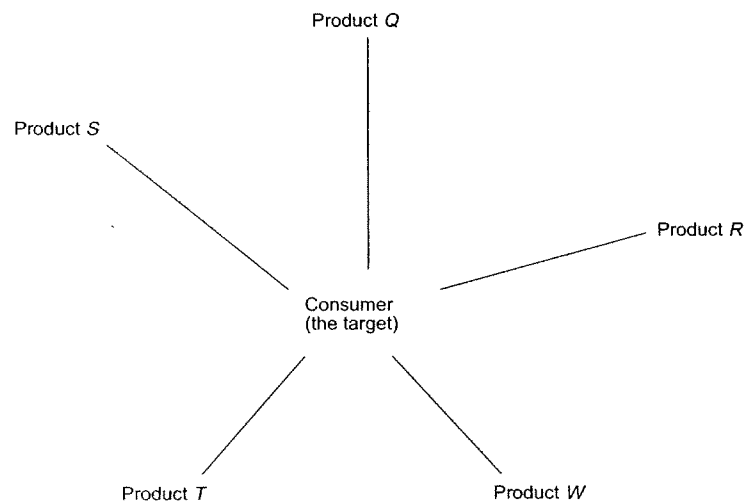
remedies, and the rise in its place of the *consumer* – boundaryless, mercurial, hedonic, whimsical, simulation-loving and experience-seeking. The substitution of the citizen by the consumer is vividly illustrated in the contemporary US political process that has essentially become a marketing process. Every major policy move, from its inception to its final implementation or rejection, is tracked carefully by “consumer polls”. Based on these polls, the proponents and opponents of the policy develop strategies for constructing images that they hope everyone, or at least a substantial majority, will buy into. The American citizen is no longer; along with their morning bowls of breakfast cereals, Americans have become avid consumers of politics and policies.

*Consumer as producer*

Paradoxically, the consumer who is the consumed, the ultimate marketable image, is also becoming liberated from the sole role of a consumer and is becoming a producer. In customizing oneself to (re)present marketable (self-)images, the consumer is interacting with other objects in the market to *produce* oneself, to purposefully position oneself. In this production process of the self-image(s) the consumer also acts as the marketer of self, selecting to use and interact with different other products that fit and enhance the image to be cultivated in each situation. The more literate the consumer becomes in sensing (reading), manipulating and constructing (writing) symbolic systems – that is, in multimedia signification, representation and communication – the more will s/he be able to participate in the control of these images rather than simply reproduce images that are externally controlled, especially by marketing organizations. As Baudrillard[44] suggests, consumption is increasingly becoming a productive process, goal-oriented, and purposeful; furthermore, it requires that individuals be educated to carry out this process. Consumption, now a productive process, can no longer be performed instinctively, naturally, without development of special skills.

It was unlikely that the consumer *qua* producer, cultivated by the marketing culture that encouraged a conscious production of the self, would limit him/herself to just the production of a marketable self. This is probably why one observes the growing interest in the postmodern consumer to become part of processes and to experience immersion into “thematic settings” rather than merely to encounter “finished” products. That is why in its new frameworks marketing has to include the consumers not as a target for products but as a producer of experiences.

This is, indeed, a major departure from the modern models of marketer-consumer relationships. These models largely assumed a relatively passive consumer encountering an active marketing agent. The consumer occupied a rather fixed position, as a *target*, receiving various products – projectiles driven towards the consumer targets through marketing action (see Figure 1). Consumers were stationary, products moved. The new frameworks in marketing have to abandon these models and consider frameworks where products are stationary and the consumers move, or more likely, where both



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**Figure 1.**  
Consumers and  
products in modernity

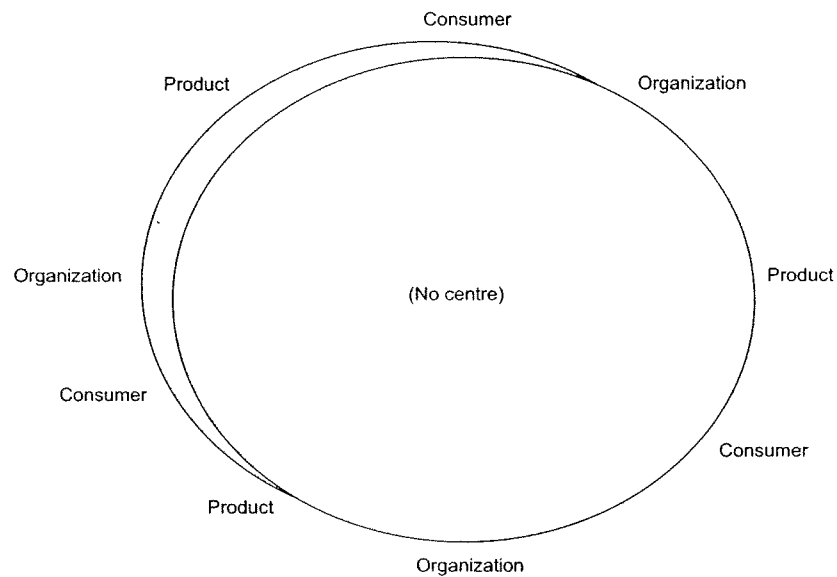
consumers and products move. In postmodern marketing, the consumer is not a target, not even a moving target, but an active link in the continual production and reproduction of images and symbolic meaning. Organizations producing symbolic offerings represented by meaning-laden products that chase simulation-loving consumers that seek experience-producing situations – this is the spiralling state of postmodern consumption and marketing (see Figure 2). Existing paradigms are totally incapable of handling this situation. Marketers have to ask what kind of models are appropriate to capture the postmodern dynamic of continual motion, fragmentation and shifting signifiers.

### Conclusions and openings

Postmodern conditions call for major transformations in the way marketing is practised, theorized, researched, and evaluated. The following conclusions are offered not as finalities but as openings for what we hope will be new discussions and explorations in marketing.

Marketing and postmodernity are so intertwined that it is no longer possible to treat the two subjects at arm's length or as peripherally-related topics. If marketing is the master narrative of postmodernity, as we have argued, then marketing scholarship has to move to the centre of the ongoing discussions of postmodernity in the humanities and the social sciences. Marketing can no longer pretend to be an instrumental discipline that *affects* consumers and society but has to become reflexive and has to be studied as the sociocultural process that *defines* postmodern society.

This has implications for how marketing processes and phenomena are researched and studied. Image creation and mythologization processes are not linear, causal, instrumental, and unidisciplinary. They cannot be captured



**Figure 2.**  
Consumers and  
products in  
postmodernity

solely by empirical, positivist, and uncritical modes of analyses. Some of these may not be "researchable" in the sense we understand social science research but only "experienceable" and subject to critique the way the arts and the humanities are.

In postmodernity, some of the nearest and dearest notions and axioms of marketing may have to be re-examined, recast, or even abandoned. These include the concepts of consumer needs, consumer sovereignty, behavioural consistency, customer orientation, value, product image, buyer-seller separation, individual-organization distinction, product-process separation, and consumption-production division. In all these cases, we need to retheorize in view of the emergent postmodern conditions and some cases be prepared for the uncomfortable reversal of long-held views and ideals.

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