

Postmodernism, marketing and the consumer

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The timing of these two special issues on *Postmodernism, Marketing and the Consumer* (Vol. 10, No. 3 and Vol. 11, No. 4) is, indeed, curious. On the one hand, postmodernism is just becoming a recognized discourse within business disciplines, and these special issues represent the first concerted effort within the consumer research and marketing disciplines to treat the subject. On the other hand, postmodernism, as a term and concept, is already beginning to encounter either opposition or indifference because critics feel that it represents too much, thus losing the ability to have a clear message, or that it has taken on the character of a faddish, overused, over-abused signifier. Thus, they feel it can no longer excite or provoke meaningful and insightful discourse regarding the human condition. Clearly, debates and discussions regarding postmodernism, postmodern culture, and postmodernity have created some of the most prolific, heated and exciting publications and productions in, especially, the last decade. This is true for practically all humanities and social science disciplines. A simple count of books published on the topic will provide sufficient evidence of the fact, as

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will the proportion of articles published in journals.

The success of the subject, and the many meanings with which it has been freighted, has produced a paradoxical result: critics proclaim postmodernism a non-subject. The term *postmodern* is so polyvalent that it is non-distinct and non-descript. The very wide ranging interest in the phenomenon and its incredible popularity contributes to its demise, since it is no longer “distinguished” to talk about it. Consequently, we have a growing number of people talking, writing, performing, inquiring about it and studying it without mentioning “that word.” Then come these two special issues!

We feel that these special issues are, nevertheless, timely because postmodernism is a phenomenon that can no longer be escaped, even if almost everyone wants to avoid it. As postmodernists inform us that paradox is omnipresent, postmodernism, itself, presents us with one of the major paradoxes of our time. Despite all these drawbacks and the self-consciousness, which all the anti-postmodernist forces may induce among those who wish to study this pervasive phenomenon, it is important to continue the effort because, by whatever name you call it, it is here. As the articles in these two special issues demonstrate, studying the phenomenon may be especially important for the lives of the consumers and for marketing practice – which may be, in itself, the epitome of postmodernity.

Postmodernism, recognizing that all contemporary social human conditions are hyperreal or constructed on the bases of powerful simulations that are alluring and, thus,

marketable, allows for different simulations, different "regimes of truth," and the construction and living of different myths. Modernity's popularity may have been due to its promotion of the idea that human beings have (had) control over their own fates, and to its promise of emancipation. The modern project promised a future where, indeed, the human beings would be emancipated from the impositions of a fate designed by any being other than the human being, but also from impositions of nature or by other human beings. For this future to be realized, modern society required commitment to the project from its members, as well as to an order that would allow its achievement. Maybe ironically, postmodernism also asks for additional emancipation: emancipation from commitment to projects of emancipation. This is understandable since postmodernists display an extreme skepticism of any grand scheme, project or narrative. A postmodern political stance, if this is possible, is to allow all to live their own myths or stories (narratives) instead of otherwise enforced or imposed ones. In that sense, even the modernist myths are acceptable for the postmodernist as long as they tolerate other myths and do not try to impose themselves as universal "truths." This scenario is not free of paradox. The postmodern stance does, after all, call for a universally accepted or agreed upon principle; that of tolerance, acceptance of difference as difference without inter-paradigm valuations of superiority/inferiority. The irony of a marketplace of ideas, in an era of globalization and proliferation of particle markets, is the pluralization of myths. The personal narratives or multiphrenic selves may or may not cohere within or across individuals or groups. This ambiguity produces conditions that may liberate thinkers to identify new problems, as attack old problems with fresh approaches. Postmodernism does not offer a single proposal as to how those myths that wish to impose themselves

upon others, or that have characteristics which do impose indirectly (for example, a way of life that heavily pollutes the Earth's environment) should be addressed, beyond the call for vigilance in identifying the alternative myths awaiting discovery.

In the end, there may arise two clearly different, maybe even opposed, orientations to life. One may have no concerns of control over or participation in the conditions one lives – that is, issues such as freedom or self-determination may be non-issues – and the other may highly value freedom and self-determination. For those to whom fairness, freedom, equality, and self-determination are important components of leading a meaningful (dignified, happy) life, the question remains: What kind of society will promote such life and how can it be created? To many who have this desire, thanks much to modern ideologies, this, in fact, is the primary issue and quest. Modern ideologies provided answers for this quest, in capitalism, communism, etc., yet each clearly lacked much, since the quest remains still greatly unachieved, maybe even further aggravated and frustrated. After all, do not the seemingly unsolvable regional, ethnic and other strifes, and, despite the success of some medical breakthroughs, the many miserable conditions in contemporary times begin to tell us that our modernist projects have taken us into deeper dead-ends than ever before? Have we not created enmities, seemingly unbreakable hatreds and conflicts of interests and dreams, with greater forces of destruction available to all? How is all this to be resolved? Is expecting a resolution, in itself, a dream doomed to failure?

Modernism was the effort to make sure failure did not happen. Towards this end it designed the grand projects. Postmodernism is the recognition that these projects, themselves, are failures. Consequently, it calls for an end to commitment to such grand(iose) designs and for turning our sights unto the

present rather than the future. Modernism insisted that the modern project equipped with reason could accomplish the future it promised. Yet, at the same time that modern discourse insisted on the necessity of using reason, modern practices kept trying to circumvent reason by creating means of reaching and affecting emotions directly to influence human behavior. Each time education provided the means (tools) of *reading* (making sense of) communicative media, modern technologies produced new media and means to transmit *unreadable* but *deeply felt* signals (messages).

Modernists may blame the postmodern trends of noncommitment and fragmentation as the culprits for many regional and national wars, crime, and other ills that worry many of us today. They will and do argue that the break-down of the authority of all ideas, values and reason which provide order and common goals can only lead to chaos and lawlessness. While postmodernists may blame the long repression of social groups and alternative imaginaries by modern meta-narratives for the current ailments, modernists will be adamant in arguing for the necessity of common ideals, values and reason for the existence of an orderly society.

Is there anything that marketing and consumer research disciplines can contribute to such debates and questions? Where in the frame of current debates, discourse and developments are our disciplines positioned? This second special issue on *Postmodernism, Marketing and the Consumer* is a continuation of the presentation of perspectives that may guide us in finding our bearings in this respect. It also continues the tradition of the first special issue in including contributions other than papers.

In this issue there is an essay on New York by Morris Holbrook, a professor at Columbia University in New York. In this essay, he explores the paradoxical emotions and thoughts to be experienced in living in

New York. Clearly, it is a love-hate relationship for Holbrook. There is a pictorial essay by Richard Mead, a British scholar and artist living in Thailand. He explores the paradoxical aspects of consumer culture in Thailand, especially when looked at from a westerner's point of view, in his written essay as well as in his accompanying paintings. There are excerpts from a poem by George Zinkhan, a marketing professor at the University of Georgia, exploring the paradoxical feelings one has in "returning to nature" on hiking trails and camping grounds, as well as the paradoxical conditions one observes others and oneself living during such excursions. It explores the commodification of the nature/culture dialectic. The theme seems to be paradox when one explores the conditions one is *immersed* in rather than when one is making *detached*, academic observations on *researched* topics.

The body of this second special issue is constituted of six articles. In the first article, Fischer and Bristor provide insights into the fact that marketers' perspectives regarding the consumer-marketer relationships are largely constructed by the language that the marketing profession, including the marketing academy, uses. Using a poststructuralist feminist reading of this language, they deconstruct some of the underlying ideological themes in marketing literature, specifically, how the notions of patriarchy and seduction are integral to frameworks of exchange.

The article by Joy and Venkatesh explores the various discourses on the body, and by taking a feminist perspective informed by postmodernism, examines the production and consumption of gender significations. This article by Joy and Venkatesh demonstrates that especially the female body becomes a medium through which cultural rituals and meanings attached to production and consumption are played out in contemporary society.

Peñaloza's article examines the border

crossings across gender boundaries which seem to be accelerating. Such border crossings tend to violate and dissolve gender positions established in modern society. On the other hand, as Peñaloza indicates, modern gender significations are sustained in marketing and consumer research. This results in masculine bisases as well as an increasing loss of touch with consumers' experiences in such research.

The analysis of the concept of authenticity in advertising in the article by Stern is, again, informed by postmodern theory. Such a perspective enables the articulation of the paradoxes that are present in the construction and representation of the advertiser's persona. Stern investigates the interesting questions raised by these paradoxes about authenticity in advertising as well as about the ways that consumers cope with such paradox.

This second special issue ends with two articles which provide philosophical perspectives on recent postmodern developments. The Bouchet article presents perspectives into understanding some of the major differences between modernity and postmodernity. Bouchet agrees with most of the insights of postmodernist observers regarding the conditions of postmodernity, and provides further insights to identify that which is postmodern. Yet, he is not happy with these conditions, since he sees them as departures from critical, responsible and socially conscious ways of being. He calls for the recognition of the liberating aspects of postmodern culture, but also for a more critical and socially responsible orientation. Bouchet is presenting a critique of postmodernity from, as he writes, "within the modernist point of view."

On the other hand, in Suerdem's article we encounter a thoroughly postmodernist interpretation of consumer society. He is unwilling to subscribe to any single perspective on critique or responsibility. He is relentless in his perspective of seeing the consumer as a player in the system of symbols and the

symbolic. He will not accept any attempt of differentiating the abilities of individuals in "reading" and "interpreting" the signs, in "weaving their own stories." Power is no longer, only seduction exists, and seduction is an affair between the object and the one who interacts with it; together they "write" their own stories and play their own myths.

It is important for us in marketing and consumer research fields to expose ourselves to this impassioned and, at times, poetic postmodernist perspective. Even for those of us to whom the interpretation does not ring very "true," it may provide a most valid insight into the vision of the postmodern consumer. The discrepancy between this thoroughly celebratory postmodernist position and the critical, skeptical or ambivalent positions toward postmodernism may well be due to the transitional character of our time, where modern ideologies and ways still linger, and in some cases prevail, while constantly losing ground to the postmodern culture. Under the circumstances, while certain bastions of power still seem to operate and all members of society feel their weight, it may be difficult to come to terms with the idea that power has (or always was) dissipated into the hands of individual consumers who construct their own myths with the objects they interact. Even when one may agree, in principle, that such bastions of power exist only in and through the myths allowed by the members of society, our contemporary cultural experiences may be indicating to us that the construction of myths may not be completely independent but interdependent, that for any current myth to have its own sovereignty it may have to possess a "market" allure.

This may be how the fact that we are in a transitional era has its greatest impact. The *market* is left as, practically, the sole arbitrator and the sole locus of legitimation in society as all other forms of attending to society's affairs, such as, politics and social relations,

have waned – at least partially due to the success of postmodernist discourse. However, the market still seems to operate based on the logic of modern capitalism; it has not yet been “postmodernized.” That is, the working criteria of the market are still largely economic and its performance is still judged on the basis of economic efficiency. The market has not yet adopted the multiplicity and the multidimensional tolerance advised and found in postmodern discourse. As modern ideologies and systems break down due to the popular disenchantment with their performance and to the success of postmodernism, the void created is filled by yet another, still modern institution: the market. The discovery of how the plurality of the logic of the market is to be achieved may be one of the most important tasks that await us.

In this vein, the discussions across the two special issues suggest that we need to study postmodernism for different reasons:

1. To understand the constitution of the “consumer” in the present and in the future,
2. To have an inkling of what challenges marketing may face in the future and what immediate challenges it encounters now,
3. To understand the philosophical, social, cultural trends and issues we can encounter now and in the future,
4. To recognize the way(s) that signification and representation processes work or are constructed, if we have an interest in conscious contribution to the conditions for humanity, in taking positions, in participating in the creation of (a) realit(y)ies that are attractive.

But, then, when sensitivity to a postmodern orientation develops, one cannot help ask the questions:

1. Is an emphasis on understanding, exploring, finding out (*knowing*) still very much a modernist quest? Should we, to the contrary, concentrate on *communicating*, in

order to acknowledge our preferences for life styles and/or ways of being?

2. Do we, should we take positions, have projects or future goals anymore? Is it worthwhile? Is it possible?
3. Should anyone care about projects, betterment of the human condition (however this is defined), or is this just another call to conformity?
4. In whose interest is it to have projects, and whose interest is it not to have any?
5. Do distinctions, of class, interest groups, etc., make sense anymore? Are there new distinctions developing that were not discovered (constructed) before?

These questions are, on the other hand, extremely paradoxical, since if we do have hyperreality, anything is possible – any social reality can potentially be constructed. Consequently, what type of life or orientation is *worthwhile*, is solely a matter of choice. Again, paradoxically, power – ability to make choices, to control circumstances – becomes centrally meaningful. After all, it is nice to proclaim “Let’s bring an end to conformity; let’s allow choice.” Yet, who will be able to afford (financially, intellectually, etc.) it?

Marketing institutions are the grounds where *conscious* signification and representation processes take place, and given the postmodern consciousness, it is these processes that construct the realit(y)ies we live. Consequently, a socially responsible, critical postmodern position is to make these processes available and accessible to all members of society. Our discourses may be pragmatic in the sense that they may aid in liberating marketing from being the domain of only certain groups or organizations and make it the domain of all consumers; put marketing under the control and in the service of all. In that sense, postmodernity may be conceptualized as the phase when everyone becomes a marketer. This is, indeed, a paradoxical blessing, for it requires a continuous vigilance on everyone’s part; a contin-

ual need to be on one's toes, to be strategic, continuously planning, etc. No time to just let go – unless letting go is strategically positioned and signified as a marketable, alluring, seductive quality.

Together these two special issues serve to highlight the egocentric nature of inquiry into marketing. Scholars who typically present their ideas in conventional prose in the ritual mode of preference of management journals – the academic “article” – have employed more humanistic formats in these pages. Differences in language use, both stylistic and strategic, are apparent even among the North American and European contributors who have employed the article format. An appreciation of the evocative power of language in animating an under-

standing of marketers' and consumers' behaviors is long overdue in our field. The wisdom of re-integrating the humanities and business disciplines in our quest for interdisciplinary knowledge seems apparent. We hope that these special issues will contribute to the ongoing blurring of genres that is the postmodern enterprise.

Finally, we wish to repeat our thanks to the editorial group of *IJRM*, to our reviewers, and to the publishing staff at Elsevier/North-Holland. Mostly, we thank all of our contributing authors, without whose commitment to this project it could not have been completed. We hope that the readers of these two issues will find as much meaning and excitement in them as we did in helping their birth.