

Postmodern Marketing: Everything Must Go!

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Grand Opening Offer

Whatever else it is, 'postmodern' is a byword for pretentiousness. It is one of the most obnoxiously ostentatious words around and it is meaningless to boot. Its opacity, indeed, is surpassed only by its ubiquity. It has been applied to everything from making love (over the Internet, by means of teledildonic body suits) to making war (as in the Gulf or Kosovo, where virtual attacks are mounted and western casualties avoided at all costs). What's worse, it has attracted the anoraks of this world, like legendary moths to a proverbial flame, all determined to define the indefinable.

The inevitable upshot of this mission to explain the postmodern is a massive, rapidly growing and almost unreadable mound of books, articles and anthologies. The shelves of our libraries and bookshops literally groan under the weight of texts with 'postmodern' in the title; the A to Z of academic disciplines – from accountancy to zoology – has been infiltrated by postmodern fanatics; and many academic careers have been made, or unmade, on the back of this infuriating intellectual beast (Appignanesi and Garratt 1995; Best and Kellner 2001; Calás and Smircich 1997; Crews 2001; Ward 1997).

Indeed, so pervasive is the discourse on the postmodern (and so pervasive is the discourse on the discourse...), that postmodernism has become one of the dominant organising concepts – if it is a concept – across the social and human sciences. Granted, comparatively few people in each academic discipline espouse a postmodernist position, albeit many more are involved in the wider pro/con debate. Some subject areas, moreover, are further down the postmodern road than others (in org. studies, for instance, it is fairly well established, whereas in marketing and consumer research it remains the preserve of the fighting few). Be that as it may, the very omnipresence of postmodernism is deeply ironic since it is opposed to universal modes of thought and sets great store by difference, diversity, singularity and so on. For postmodernists, however, this ubiquity of the unique is not a major problem, because contradiction, inconsistency, and paradox are themselves characteristic features of the postmodern. They are to be celebrated not condemned, flaunted not faulted, encouraged not excoriated.

The *real* irony of the postmodern is much, much closer to home, insofar as many sociologists, anthropologists, literary theorists and cultural studies specialists consider marketing and consumption to be central to the postmodern condition (e.g. Bocoock 1993; Falk and Campbell 1997; Featherstone 1991; Warde 2002). Consumer behaviour, global brands, advertising campaigns, department stores, regional malls, positioning strategies and the entire apparatus of marketing are widely considered to be part and parcel of the postmodern. Yet postmodern perspectives remain comparatively rare within the academic marketing community. Indeed, the ultimate

irony is that the analyses of marketing artefacts undertaken by non-marketers are often superior, more insightful and much more in keeping with our paradoxical postmodern times than those which derive from the positivistic, model building, law abiding, information processing, truth seeking marketing scientists who continue to hold sway in our field (Brown 1996, 2002).

No Down Payment

Perhaps the best way of getting to grips with the postmodern is to recognise that the very word is multifaceted. It is a signifier with many signifieds, a portmanteau or umbrella term, an ever-expanding linguistic universe, if you will. However, for the synoptic purposes of the present chapter, four forms of the formulation can be set forth (see Brown 1995, 1998a).

Postmodernism

For many commentators, postmodernism is primarily an aesthetic movement, a revolt against the once shocking subsequently tamed 'modern' movement of the early- to mid-twentieth century. (In fact, some reserve the term 'postmodernism' for developments in the cultural sphere.) To cite but three examples: in architecture, PoMo is characterised by the eschewal of the austere, unembellished, 'glass box' International Style of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, and a return to inviting, ornamented, mix 'n' matched, vernacular or pseudo-vernacular forms, as found in the work of Venturi, Portman and Jencks. In literature, likewise, the spare, experimental, and, as often as not, inaccessible writings of the giants of high modernism - Joyce, Proust, Eliot etc. - have given way to the parodic, reader-friendly vulgarities of Martin Amis, Will Self and Bret Easton Ellis. In popular music, moreover, the 'modern' era of The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys and Bob Dylan (albeit there is some debate over the existence of modernist pop/rock), has sundered into a multiplicity of modalities - house, jungle, techno, rap, roots, world, drum 'n' bass, speed garage and the like - many of which are parasitic upon (sampling, scratch), pastiches of (the tribute group phenomenon) or cross-pollinated with extant musical forms (alt.country, nu-metal, neo-disco *et al*).

Postmodernity

A second thread in the tangled postmodern skein is drawn from the economic base, as opposed to the aesthetic superstructure. The world, according to this viewpoint, has entered a whole new, qualitatively different, historical epoch; an epoch of multinational, globalised, ever-more rapacious capitalism, where traditional ways of working, producing, consumption and exchange have changed, and changed utterly. Frequently described by the epithet 'postmodernity', this is the world of the world wide web, 24/7 day-trading, satellite television, soundbitten and spindoctored politics, mobile phoneophilia, pick 'n' mix lifestyles, serial monogamy and relentless McDonaldisation. It is a world of ephemerality, instability, proliferation, hallucination and, above all, chaos. It is a world where the beating of a butterfly's wings in South America can cause a stock market crash in Hong Kong or swerve the ball into the net at Old Trafford. It is a world of unexpected, unpredictable, uncontrollable, unremitting, some would say unnecessary, upheaval.

The Postmodern Condition

Paralleling the transformations that are taking place in the aesthetic and economic spheres, a postmodern turn in the nature of knowledge and thought has transpired. The so-called Enlightenment Project, which commenced in western Europe during the eighteenth century and comprised a systematic, rigorous, supposedly dispassionate search for objective knowledge, universal laws, meaningful generalisations and absolute truths, has run slowly but irreversibly into the sand. Its replacement, to some extent at least, is a low-key postmodern worldview, which emphasises the boundedness of knowledge, the limits to generalisation, the lack of universal laws, the prevalence of disorder over order, irrationality rather than rationality, subjectivity instead of objectivity and passionate participation as an alternative to dispassionate spectatorship. Thus, the 'grand narratives' of the project of modernity – progress, freedom, profit, utopia, liberalism, truth, science etc. – have been superseded by an awareness of the lack of progress, the absence of freedom, the price of profit, the dystopia that is utopia, the illiberalism of liberalism, the fiction that is truth and the artistry of science.

Postmodern Apocalypse

Another, and in certain respects the most straightforward, way of grasping the postmodern is to eschew the idea that it is an 'it'. It's 'itness', after all, assumes a referential model of language (i.e. that there are 'things' out there in the world that the word 'postmodern' refers to), which is something card-carrying postmodernists are loath to concede (assuming, of course, that there are things out there called postmodernists). Postmodernism, rather, is better regarded as an attitude, a feeling, a mood, a sensibility, an orientation, a way of looking at the world - a way of looking askance at the world. A pose, if you prefer. Irony, parody, playfulness, irreverence, insolence, couldn't-care-less cynicism and absolute unwillingness to accept the accepted are postmodernism's distinguishing features. Hence, the progressive, optimistic, forward-looking, ever-onward-ever-upward worldview of the modern era has been replaced by a pessimistic, almost apocalyptic, sense of apprehension, anxiety, apathy and anomie. The postmodern, then, is suffused with an air of exhaustion, ending, crisis and (calamitous) change. Its characteristic attitude is a 'mixture of worldweariness and cleverness, an attempt to make you think that I'm half-kidding, though you're not quite sure about what' (Apple 1984: 39).

Money Back Guarantee

Now, it doesn't take a great deal of cleverness, let alone world-weariness, to recognise that many of these postmodern modalities are discernible in today's marketing and consumer environment. Consider shopping centres. The archetypal Arndale developments of the 1960s – all reinforced concrete, flat roofs, straight lines, low ceilings and oozing mastic – have been eclipsed by postmodern shopping malls, which are bright, airy, eclectic, ornamented, extravagantly themed, unashamedly ersatz and invariably welcoming. Instead of a glowering, intimidating, brutalist bulk, a blot on the cityscape that seemed to say, 'enter if you dare, go about your business and get out as quickly as possible', postmodern centres suggest that shopping is a

pleasure not a chore. They say, in effect, 'enjoy yourself, call again, bring the family, fulfil your fantasies, relive your childhood, imagine yourself in another world or another part of the world, or both' (Shields 1991; Goss 1993; Maclaran and Brown 2001).

In advertising, likewise, the straightforward marketing pitch of tradition – 'this product is good, buy it' – is almost unheard of these days (except when it's used ironically). Contemporary commercials are invariably sly, subtle, allusive, indirect, clever, parodic, insouciant, self-referential (ads about ads), cross-referential (ads that cite other cultural forms – soap operas, movies etc.) and made with staggeringly expensive, semi-cinematic production values. They not only presuppose a highly sophisticated, advertising- and marketing-literate audience, but work on the basic premise that advertising-inculcated images (cool, sexy, smart and the like) are the essence of the product offer. Products, in fact, are little more than the campaign's tie-in merchandise, along with the videos, CDs, PR hoopla and media coverage of the agency's self-aggrandising endeavours (Berger 2001; Davidson 1992; Goldman and Papson 1996).

Consumers, too, are changing. As Chapter 6 explains, the certainties, uniformities and unambiguities of the modern era – where mass production produced mass marketing which produced mass consumption which produced mass production – are being trumped by the individualities, instabilities and fluidities of the postmodern epoch. Postmodernity is a place where there are no rules only choices, no fashion only fashions, the Jones's are kept well away from and anything not only goes but it has already left the building. It is a place where 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonalds food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong' (Lyotard 1984: 76). It is a place where 'we have literally shopped 'til we dropped into our slumped, channel surfing, couch-potatoed position, with the remote control in one hand, a slice of pizza in the other and a six-pack of Australian lager between our prematurely swollen ankles' (Brown *et al* 1997). It is a place where the world is no longer contained in William Blake's grain of sand but stocked, bar-coded, date-stamped and on special offer at your local Sainsbury's superstore or friendly neighbourhood category killer (Urizen U Like, Zoas R Us...whatever). It is a place, as the irascible novelist Will Self notes, where anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation, anti-marketing protesters 'take global airlines so that they can put on Gap clothes to throw rocks at Gap shops' (Dugdale 2001: 37).

Batteries Not Included

At a time when consumption is all the academic rage -- as demonstrated by the outpouring of books by non-consumer researchers (e.g. Corrigan 1997; Edwards 2000; Howes 1996; Lury 1996; Miles *et al* 2002; Miller 1995; Nava *et al* 1997; Ritzer 1999) -- it is difficult to 'step outside' and comment meaningfully upon this marketing maelstrom. The most cogent attempt to do so has been made by two prophets of the postmodern turn: A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995). In a lengthy article on the 're-enchantment of consumption', they contend that postmodern marketing is characterised by five main themes: *hyperreality*, *fragmentation*, *reversed production and consumption*, *decentred subjects* and the *juxtaposition of opposites* (Table 2.1).

[Table 2.1 about here]

Hyperreality

Exemplified by the virtual worlds of cyberspace and the pseudo worlds of theme parks, hotels and heritage centres, hyperreality involves the creation of marketing environments that are 'more real than real'. The distinction between reality and fantasy is momentarily blurred, as in the back lot tour of 'working' movie studios in Universal City, Los Angeles. In certain respects, indeed, hyperreality is superior to everyday mundane reality, since the aversive side of authentic consumption experiences – anti-tourist terrorism in Egypt, muggings in New York, dysentery in Delhi – magically disappears when such destinations are recreated in Las Vegas, Busch Gardens, Walt Disney World or the manifold variations on the theme park theme. Ironically, however, the perceived superiority of the fake is predicated upon an (often) unwarranted stereotype of reality, and the reality of the fake – e.g. the queues in Disneyland – may be much worse than anything the average visitor would actually experience in Egypt, New York, Delhi or where-ever. But such is the cultural logic of postmodern marketing.

Fragmentation

Consumption in postmodernity is unfailingly fast, furious, frenetic, frenzied, fleeting, hyperactive. It is akin to zapping from channel to channel, or flicking through the pages of the glossies, in search of something worth watching, reading or buying. Shopping on Speed. This disjointedness is partly attributable to the activities of marketers with their ceaseless proliferation of brands, ever-burgeoning channels of distribution, increasingly condensed commercial breaks and apparent preparedness to press every available surface into advertising service (sidewalks, urinals, communications satellites, fifties sitcoms and so forth). It is also due to the disconnected postmodern lifestyles, behaviours, moods, whims and vagaries of contemporary consumers. A product of profusion with a profusion of products, the postmodern consumer performs a host of roles - wife and mother, career woman, sports enthusiast, fashion victim, DIY enthusiast, culture vulture, hapless holidaymaker, websurfing Internet avatar and many more - each with its appropriate brand name array. These identities or selves, furthermore, are neither sequential nor stable, but fluid, mutable and, not least, negotiable. Pick 'n' mix personae are proliferating. Off-the-shelf selves are available in every conceivable size, style, colour, fit and price point. Made to measure selves cost extra.

Reversed Production and Consumption

This fragmented, hyperrealised, postmodern consumer, it must also be stressed, is not the unwitting dupe of legend, who responds rat-like to environmental stimuli of Skinnerian caprice. Nor is the postmodern consumer transfixed, rabbit-like, in the headlights of multinational capital. Nor, for that matter, is he or she likely to be seduced by the sexual textual embeds of subliminal advertisers, though (s)he might pretend to be. On the contrary, the very idea that consumers have something 'done' to them by marketers and advertisers no longer passes muster. Postmodern consumers,

in fact, do things with advertising; they are active in the production of meaning, of marketing, of consumption. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995: 251) rightly observe,

It is not to brands that consumers will be loyal, but to images and symbols, especially to images and symbols that *they* produce while they consume. Because symbols keep shifting, consumer loyalties cannot be fixed. In such a case a modernist might argue that the consumers are fickle – which perhaps says more about the modernist intolerance of uncertainty – while the postmodernist interpretation would be that consumers respond strategically by making themselves unpredictable. The consumer finds his/her liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it.

Decentred Subjects

This idea of a multiphrenic, fragmented, knowing consumer is further developed in Firat and Venkatesh's notion of decentred subjectivity. The centredness that is characteristic of modernity, where individuals are unambiguously defined by their occupation, social class, demographics, postcode, personalities and so on, has been ripped asunder in postmodernity. Traditional segmentation criteria *may* be applied to such people, and marketing strategies formulated, but it is increasingly accepted that these fleetingly capture, or freeze-frame at most, a constantly moving target market. Even the much-vaunted 'markets of one', in which marketing technologies are supposedly adapted to the specific needs of individual consumers, is doomed to fail in postmodernity, since each consumer comprises a multiplicity of shopping homunculi, so to speak. The harder marketers try to pin down the decentred consuming subject, the less successful they'll be. Today's consumers are always just beyond the reach of marketing scientists, marketing strategists, marketing tacticians, marketing technologists, marketing taxonomists and all the rest. In the words of leading marketing authority, Alan Mitchell (2001: 60),

There is nothing wrong with trying to be scientific about marketing; in trying to understand cause and effect. And stimulus-response marketing has chalked up many successes. Nevertheless, it now faces rapidly diminishing returns. Consumers are becoming 'marketing literate'. They know they are being stimulated and are developing a resistance to these stimuli, even learning to turn the tables. Consumers increasingly refuse to buy at full price, for example, knowing that a sale is just around the corner. They have fun 'deconstructing' advertisements. The observed has started playing games with the observer. Buyers are starting to use the system for their own purposes, just as marketers attempted to use it for theirs.

Juxtaposition of Opposites

Although it is well-nigh impossible to 'target' or 'capture' the inscrutable, amorphous, unpindownable entity that is the postmodern consumer, it is still possible to engage with, appeal to, or successfully attract them. The key to this quasi-conversation is not ever more precise segmentation and positioning, but the exact opposite. An open, untargted, ill-defined, imprecise approach, which leaves scope for imaginative consumer participation (e.g. ironic advertising treatments where the purpose, pitch or indeed 'product' is unclear), is typical of postmodern marketing. This sense of fluidity and porosity is achieved by pastiche, by bricolage, by radical juxtaposition, by the mixing and matching of opposites, by combinations of contradictory styles, motifs and allusions, whether it be in the shimmering surfaces of pseudo-rococo postmodern buildings or the ceaseless cavalcade of contrasting images that are regularly encountered in commercial breaks, shop windows or roadside billboards.

Occasionally, these succeed in exceeding the sum of their parts and combine to produce a sublime whole, an ephemeral spectacular, a fleeting moment of postmodern transcendence, as in *Riverdance*, *Shrek* or *Kotler on Marketing*. Well, okay, two out of three ain't bad...

Limited Time Only

While few would deny that Firat and Venkatesh have done much to explain the postmodern marketing condition, their analysis is not without its weaknesses. Many commentators would contest their inventory of overarching themes and, indeed, the very idea of clearly identifiable overarching themes. Little is accomplished by reciting such shortcomings. It is sufficient to note that all manner of alternative takes on postmodern marketing are now available and all sorts of signature 'themes' have been suggested. Cova (1996), for example, considers it to be about the 'co-creation of meaning'. Thompson (2000) regards 'reflexivity' as the be all and end all. O'Donohoe (1997) draws attention to the importance of 'intertextuality'. And Sherry (1998) sets great store by PoMo's preoccupation with 'place'. The important point, however, is not that any of these readings is 'right' or 'wrong' but that postmodern marketing is itself plurivalent and open to multiple, highly personal, often irreconcilable interpretations.

For my own part, I reckon that *retrospection* is the defining feature of the present postmodern epoch and acerbic comedian George Carlin concurs (Table 2.2). The merest glance across the marketing landscape reveals that retro goods and services are all around. Old-fashioned brands, such as Atari, Airstream and Action Man have been adroitly revived and successfully relaunched. Ostensibly extinct trade characters, like Mr Whipple, Morris the Cat and Charlie the Tuna, are cavorting on the supermarket shelves once more. Ancient commercials are being re-broadcast (Ovaltine, Alka-Seltzer); time-worn slogans are being resuscitated (Britney Spears sings 'Come Alive' for Pepsi); and long-established products are being re-packaged in their original, eye-catching liveries (Blue Nun, Sun Maid raisins). Even motor cars and washing powder, long the apotheosis of marketing's new-and-improved, whiter-than-white, we-have-the-technology worldview, are getting in on the retrospective act, as the success of the BMW Mini Cooper and Colour Protection Persil daily remind us (Hedberg and Singh 2001).

[Table 2.2 about here]

The service sector, similarly, is adopting a time-was ethos. Retro casinos, retro restaurants, retro retail stores, retro holiday resorts, retro home pages and retro roller coasters are two a penny. The movie business is replete with sequels, remakes, and sequels of prequels, such as *Star Wars: The Attack of the Clones*, to say nothing of historical spectacles and postmodern period pieces like *Moulin Rouge* and *Gladiator*. *The Producers*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *Rocky Horror* and analogous revivals are keeping the theatrical flag flying; meanwhile television programming is so retro that reruns of classic weather reports can't be far away. The music business, what is more, is retro a-go-go. Michael Jackson makes an invincible comeback. Madonna goes on tour again, after an eight-year hiatus. The artist formerly known as Prince is known as Prince, like before. Bruce Springsteen reconvenes the E-Street Band. Simple Minds

are promising another miracle. Robbie Williams sings Sinatra. And U2 reclaim their title as the best U2 tribute band in the world. It's a beautiful payday.

Above and beyond the practices of retromarketing, this back-to-the-future propensity has significant implications for established marketing principles. As Brown (2001a, b) explains (after a fashion), it involves abandoning modern marketing's 'new and improved' mindset and returning to the retro ethic of 'as good as always'. It spurns the dispassionate, white-coated, wonder-working laboratories of marketing science in favour of the extravagant, over-the-top hyperbole of pre-modern marketers like P.T. Barnum (consider the postmodern publicity stunts of retro CEO, Richard Branson). It eschews the chimera of customer-orientation for a marketing philosophy predicated on imagination, creativity and rule breaking. It refuses to truck with the guru du jour and goes back to the marketing giants of yesteryear – Wroe Alderson, Ralph Breyer, Melvin Copeland and all the rest. It not only ignores the latest marketing best-seller but seeks inspiration instead in anthologies of recycled, reheated and rehashed articles by scholarly back-scratchers (two plugs and a gratuitous insult in one paragraph; must be a record!).

One Careful Owner

The retromarketing revolution is all very well, but the postmodern paradigm of which it is part poses a very important question for marketing and consumer researchers. Namely, how is it possible to understand, represent or describe postmodern marketing phenomena, when postmodernism challenges the very premises of conventional research? The logic, order, rationality and model building modalities of the modernist research tradition seem singularly inappropriate when addressing postmodern concerns. Now, this is not to suggest that established tools and techniques *cannot* be applied to postmodern artefacts and occurrences. There are any number of essentially modernist portrayals of the postmodern marketing condition (what is it?, what are its principal characteristics?, what can we 'do' with it?). Yet the relevance of such approaches remains moot. Is it *really* possible to capture the exuberance, the flamboyance, the incongruity, the energy, the playfulness of postmodern consumption in a standard, all-too-standard research report?

On the surface, this may seem like a comparatively trivial matter – if we jazz up our reports and use expressive language, everything will be okay – but it goes to the very heart of why we do what we do, how we do it and who we do it for. The decision facing marketing, as it has faced other academic disciplines grappling with postmodern incursions, is whether we should strive to be postmodern marketing researchers or researchers of postmodern marketing. The former implies that the modalities of postmodernism should be imported into marketing research, that we should endeavour to 'walk the talk', to *be* postmodern in our publications, presentations and what have you. The latter intimates that researchers should confine themselves to applying proven tools and techniques to the brave old world of postmodern marketing. Just because the market has changed, or is supposed to have changed, it does not necessarily follow that tried and trusted methods of marketing research must change as well.

Although this choice is nothing if not clear-cut, a moment's reflection reveals it to be deeply divisive at best and potentially ruinous at worst. After all, if one group of marketing researchers works in a postmodern mode, a mode that is unlike anything that has gone before, it is fated to 'fail' when conventional standards of assessment are applied. Postmodern marketing research *cannot* meet the criteria – rigor, reliability, trustworthiness and so on – that are accepted, indeed *expected*, by champions of established methods and used to judge the worth, the contribution, the success or otherwise of a particular piece of work. For many commentators, then, postmodern marketing research does not constitute 'research' as such (other terms, invariably pejorative, are usually applied). However, as academic careers depend upon the publication of research findings, the potential for internecine conflict is self-evident. True, the etiquette of intellectual discourse emphasises mutual tolerance, openness to opposing points of view, the community of scholars and suchlike, but the practicalities of academic politics belie the placid facade. Insurgence, in-fighting and intolerance are the order of the day. Hell, they'll be criticising Shelby Hunt next!

It would be excessive to imply that this latter-day postmodern dalliance has precipitated a civil war in the marketing academy – albeit 'civil', in the sense of maintaining a semblance of scholarly decorum whilst slugging it out, describes the situation very well – but the PoMo fandango undoubtedly carries connotations of crisis, of uncertainty, of catastrophe, of intellectual meltdown. Indeed, almost every commentator on the postmodern condition refers to this oppressive atmosphere of 'crisis'. Denzin (1997), for instance, describes three contemporary crises facing the citadels of cerebration:

- *crisis of representation*, where established modes of depicting 'reality' (e.g. theories, metaphors, textual genres) are inadequate to the task;
- *crisis of legitimacy*, where conventional criteria for assessing research output (validity, reliability, objectivity etc.) leave a lot to be desired; and
- *crisis of praxis*, where academic contributions signally fail to contribute to the resolution, or even clarification, of practical problems.

Although formulated with regard to the human sciences generally, these concerns are highly relevant to the state of late twentieth-century marketing and consumer research. Our models are outmoded, our theories undertheorised, our laws lawless. Reliability is increasingly unreliable, the pursuit of reason unreasonable, and there are mounting objections to objectivity. Practitioners often fail to see the point of scholarly endeavour, despite the enormous amount of energy it absorbs, and get absolutely nothing of worth from the principal journals. Except, of course, when postmodernists publish therein.

This Way Up

The picture, however, is not completely bleak. The postmodern manoeuvre in marketing and consumer research, which has been in train for more than a decade, has brought benefits as well as costs. Scholarly conflict, remember, is not necessarily a 'bad thing'. On the contrary, a host of thinkers, from Nietzsche to Feyerabend, has

observed that conflict can be a force for the good, since it helps avoid intellectual disintegration, dilapidation and decline (Collins 1992; Brown 1998b).

Be that as it may, perhaps the greatest benefit of this postmodern pirouette is that it led to dramatic changes in the methodology, domain and source material of marketing research (see Belk 1991, 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Sherry 1991). Methodologically, it opened the door to an array of qualitative/interpretive research procedures predicted on hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology, ethnography and personal introspection, to name but the most prominent. In terms of domain, it focussed attention on issues previously considered marginal to the managerial mainstream of brand choice and shopper behaviour (e.g. gift giving, compulsive consumption, obsessive collecting, grooming rituals, the meaning of personal possessions) and which has further encouraged researchers' interest in the tangential, peripheral or hitherto ignored (homelessness, drug addiction, prostitution, consumer resistance, conspicuous consumption in the developing world etc.). With regard to source material, moreover, it has given rise to the realisation that meaningful insights into marketing and consumption can be obtained from 'unorthodox' sources like novels, movies, plays, poetry, newspaper columns, comedy routines and so forth. Few would deny that restaurant critic Jonathan Meades' portrayal of the Hamburger Hades, colloquially known as *Planet Hollywood*, is just as good, if not better, than anything currently available in the academic literature (Table 2.3).

[Table 2.3 about here]

The outcome of the postmodern schism is summarised in Table 2.4, though it is important to reiterate that this rupture is not as clear-cut as the columns suggest. Truth to tell, modernist approaches remain very much in the academic ascendant, notwithstanding postmodernists' brazen appropriation of the 'cutting edge' mantle. Similarly, the preferred stance of postmodern marketing researchers is by no means consistent or devoid of internal discord. Although the postmodern/post-positivist/interpretive/qualitative perspective (the terms themselves are indicative of intra-paradigmatic wrangling) is often depicted in a monolithic manner, albeit largely for political purposes of the 'us against them' variety, postmodernism itself is unreservedly pluralist. It is a veritable monolith of pluralism.

[Table 2.4 about here]

Some 'postmodern' marketing researchers, for example, employ qualitative methods that are overwhelmingly 'scientific' in tenor (e.g. grounded theory), whereas others utilise procedures that hail from the liberal wing of the liberal arts (personal introspection). Some surmise that such research should be evaluated according to conventional, if adapted, assessment criteria (trustworthiness, reliability etc.), while others contend that entirely different measures (such as verisimilitude, defamiliarisation or resonance) are rather more appropriate. Some say that the vaguely vogueish term 'postmodern' has been usurped by non-postmodern, self-serving marketing researchers, although all such attempts to palisade the unpalisadable are themselves contrary to the unconditional postmodern spirit. Some, indeed, say it is impossible to 'do' postmodern research, since the attendant crisis of

representation renders all theoretical, methodological and textual representations untenable. The 'purpose' of postmodernism is simply to expose the shortcomings of modernist marketing research not offer an actionable alternative (see Brown 1998a).

Open Other Side

Irrespective of internal debates, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the postmodern fissure has opened up a significant intellectual space within the field of marketing research. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this 'space' is the manner in which marketing scholarship is communicated. Traditional research reports and academic articles have been supplemented with works of poetry, drama, photoessays, videography, netnography, musical performances and many more (Stern 1998). Conventional modes of academic discourse – unadorned, passive voiced, third personed, painfully pseudo-scientific prose – are being joined by exercises in 'experimental' writing, where exaggeration, alliteration and flights of rhetorical fancy are the order of the day. The success of such experiments is moot, admittedly, and many mainstream marketing scholars are understandably appalled by such egregious exhibitions of self-indulgence. If nothing else, however, they *do* draw attention to the fact that writing in a 'scientific' manner isn't the only way of writing about marketing. There is no law that says marketing discourse must be as-dry-as-dust, though a perusal of the principal academic journals might lead one to think otherwise.

The postmodernists, then, are few in number. But they have challenged the conventions of marketing scholarship and, while this might not seem like much, it is having a significant impact on mainstream marketing. Consider *Market-Led Strategic Change*, Nigel Piercy's mega-selling, CIM-certified, every-home-should-have-one textbook. The first edition was written in a very conventional, straight-down-the-middle manner (Piercy 1992). However, the reflexive, insouciant, self-referential tone of the second edition clearly shows the influence of postmodern modalities, as does the recently published third. True, Piercy goes out of his way to disparage postmodern precepts – alleging that the libel laws, no less, prevent the venting of his scholarly spleen – nevertheless there is no question that his text has taken a postmodern turn, some would say for the worse (but not me, your honour).

Pointing Piercy at the post is quite an achievement, most marketers would surely agree. Unfortunately, there's a long line ahead of him. In this regard, perhaps the most striking thing about marketing's postmodern apocalypse is the fact that it resonates with what a raft of management commentators are saying. The business sections of high street bookstores may not be heaving with 'postmodern' titles, but they are replete with works that challenge the received marketing wisdom and contend that it is time for a change. As with the postmodernists, this emerging school of marketing thought is highly variegated and somewhat contradictory. However, the principal contributions can be quickly summarised under the following Eight Es:

- *Experiential* – ecstasy, emotion, extraordinary experience (e.g. Schmitt 1999);
- *Environmental* – space, place and *genius loci* (Sherry 1998);
- *Esthetic* – beauty, art, design (Dickinson and Svensen 2000);

- *Entertainment* – every business is show business (Wolf 1999);
- *Evanesence* – fads, buzz, the wonderful word of mouth (Rosen 2000);
- *Evangelical* – spirituality, meaning, transcendence (Finan 1998);
- *Ethical* – buy an eye shadow, save the world (Roddick 2001);
- *Effrontery* – shock sells, who bares wins, gross is good (Ridderstrale and Nordstrom 2000).

E-type marketing is many and varied, yet its espousers and enthusiasts share the belief that marketing *must* change. Nowhere is this ebullient ethos better illustrated than in John Grant's *New Marketing Manifesto*. 'New Marketing', he argues, is predicated on creativity; it treats brands as living ideas; it is incorrigibly entrepreneurial; it favours change over conservatism; it is driven by insight not analysis; and it is humanist in spirit rather than 'scientific'. Granted, Grant's final chapter reveals that New Marketing isn't so new after all (retro rides again) and at no point does he align his precepts with postmodernism (be thankful, as they say, for small mercies), but the fact of the matter is that he's singing from the postmodern marketing hymnbook (Grant 1999: 182),

New Marketing is a challenge to the pseudo-scientific age of business. It is a great human, subjective enterprise. It is an art. New Marketing needs New Market Research. Old market research was largely there to objectify and to justify – to support conventions. New Marketing is here to challenge and seek the unconventional.

Thus spake postmodernism. I think...

Closing Down Sale

For many, 'postmodern' is the latest in a long line of pseudo-intellectual buzz-words that attain prominence for a moment, only to pass swiftly into merciful obscurity. However, postmodernism's fifteen minutes of Warholesque fame seems to be dragging on a bit. Postmodern intrusions are evident across the entire spectrum of scholarly subject areas, marketing and consumer research among them. Indeed, the flotsam, jetsam and general detritus of consumer society are widely regarded, by non-business academics especially, as the very epitome of postmodernity.

'Postmodern', admittedly, is an umbrella term which shelters a number of closely related positions. These range from latter-day developments in the aesthetic sphere, most notably the blurring of hitherto sacrosanct boundaries between high culture and low, to the re-emergence of counter-Enlightenment proclivities among para-intellectuals and academicians.

The multi-faceted character of postmodernity is equally apparent in marketing milieux. The phenomenon known as the postmodern consumer, which comprises

gendered subject positions indulging in playful combinations of contrasting identities, roles and characters (each with its requisite regalia of consumables) is now an accepted, if under-investigated, socio-cultural artefact, as is the so-called 'post-shopper'. The latter shops in a knowing, cynical, been-there-done-that-didn't-buy-the-souvenirs manner or loiters in the mall looking at other consumers looking at them. For Firat and Venkatesh, indeed, the essential character of postmodern marketing is captured in five main themes - *hyperreality*, *fragmentation*, *reversed production and consumption*, *decentred subjects* and *juxtaposition of opposites* – though these categories are not clear cut and other commentators see things differently.

Above and beyond empirical manifestations of the postmodern impulse, the field of marketing and consumer research has been infiltrated by postmodern methodologies, epistemologies, axiologies, ontologies, eschatologies (any ologies you can think of, really). Although there is some debate over what actually constitutes postmodern marketing research, it is frequently associated with the qualitative or interpretive turn that was precipitated by the Consumer Odyssey of the mid-80s and academics' attendant interest in non-managerial concerns. Perhaps the clearest sign of 'postmodernists at work', however, is the convoluted, hyperbolic and utterly incomprehensible language in which their arguments are couched, albeit their apparently boundless self-absorption is another distinctive textual trait. Does my brand look big in this?

In fairness, the postmodernists' linguistic excesses and apparent self-preoccupation serve a very important purpose. Their language mangling draws attention to the fact that 'academic' styles of writing are conventions not commandments, decided upon not decreed, an option not an order. But, hey, don't take my word for it; check out the further reading below...

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Further Reading

Modesty forbids, you understand, but you might find the following of interest:

Brown, S. (1995), *Postmodern Marketing*, London: Routledge. Summarises the major strands of postmodern thought, coupled with a critique of 'modern' marketing theory.

Brown, S. (1998), *Postmodern Marketing Two: Telling Tales*, London: International Thomson. Extends the first book by arguing that art, aesthetics, storytelling *et al* offer a possible way forward for 21st century marketing scholarship.

Brown, S. (2001), *Marketing – The Retro Revolution*, London: Sage. Rummages through the dustbin of marketing history and comes up with an alternative to the 'modern' marketing paradigm.

Table 2.1 Postmodern Conditions and their Main Themes

	Fragmentation	Reversal of production and consumption	Decentred subject	Juxtaposition of opposites
Part of the world and constructed a given unified replaced by the notion of signifiers the spectacle as the reality marketing involved in the more real than real of the between real and	Consumption Experiences are multiple, disjointed Human subject has a Divided self Terms such as “authentic self” and “centered connections” are questionable Lack of commitment to any (central) theme Abandonment of history, Origin, and context Marketing is an activity That fragments consumption signs and environments and reconfigures them through style and fashion Fragmentation as the Basis for the creation of body culture	Postmodernism is basically a culture of consumption, while modernism represents a culture of production Abandonment of the notion that production creates value while consumption destroys it Sign value replaces exchange value as the basis of consumption Consumer paradox: Consumers are active producers of symbols and signs of consumption, as marketers are Consumers are also objects in the marketing process, while products become active agents	The following modernist notions of the subject are called into question: Human subject as a self-knowing, independent agent Human subject as a cognitive subject Human subject as a unified subject Postmodernist notions of human subject: Human subject is historically and culturally constructed Language, not cognition, is the basis for subjectivity Instead of a cognitive subject, we have a communicative subject Authentic self is displaced by made-up self Rejection of modernist subject as a male subject	Pastiche as the underlying principle juxtaposition Consumption experiences are not reconcile difference paradoxes but to all exist freely Acknowledges that fragmentation, rather unification, is the basis consumption

Source: Firat and Venkatesh (1995)

Table 2.2 Anything But the Present

America has no now. We're reluctant to acknowledge the present. It's too embarrassing.

Instead, we reach into the past. Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, re-creations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio, and nostalgia record collections. World War Two has been refought on television so many times, the Germans and Japanese are now drawing residuals.

Of course, being essentially full of shit, we sometimes feel the need to dress up this past-preoccupation, as with pathetic references to reruns as 'encore presentations'.

Even instant replay is a form of token nostalgia: a brief visit to the immediate past for reexamination, before slapping it onto a highlight video for further review and re-review on into the indefinite future.

Our 'yestermania' includes fantasy baseball camps, where aging sad sacks pay money to catch baseballs thrown by men who were once their heroes. It is part of the fascination with sports memorabilia, a 'memory industry' so lucrative it has attracted counterfeiters.

In this the Age of Hyphens, we are truly retro-Americans.

Source: Carlin (1997: 110)

Table 10.3 Hurray for Planet Hollywood.

The genius of Planet Hollywood is that it is a restaurant which replicates the way tracksuit bottoms eat at home. It gives a new meaning to home cooking. You can come here and eat couch-potato-style grot whilst gaping at a screen. Just the way you do at home. And you don't even have to button-punch. Your minimal attention span is addressed by the commensurate brevity of the clips. Planet Hollywood is ill named. Planet MTV would be apter. Planet Trash would be aptest. One wonders if the whole tawdry show is not some elaborate experiment being conducted by a disciple of the loopy behaviourist B.F. Skinner. The Hollywood it celebrates is not that of Welles or Siodmark or Sirk or Coppola, but that of aesthetic midgets with big budgets.

You fight your way (with no great enthusiasm) past merchandising 'opportunities' up a staircase to a world of operatives with clipboards – keen, smiley people who may or may not be victims of EST. They are frighteningly keen, alarmingly smiley. Our waiter, or customer chum, or whatever, was called Mike. He cared. He really cared about whether we were enjoying the whole experience. He kept asking. The pity of it is that he probably did care – he was so hyped up by the Planetary geist that he sought salvation through kiddy approbation.

He offered a trip of the premises. Politely declined. Close inspection is not liable to improve them. Over there is the sci-fi section within zoomorphic megagirders. Look that way and you've got the James Bond room, whose entrance apes the camera shutter device those mostly tiresome films used to use in their titles. Above us slung from the ceiling was a motorbike apparently used in a film I'd not even seen. It looked dangerous and I kept thinking that there would be no more pathetic way to die than by being crushed in so dreadful a place.

Source: Meades (1997).

Table 2.4 Modern and Postmodern Research Approaches

<u>Modern</u>	<u>Postmodern</u>
Positivist	Non-positivist
Experiments/Surveys	Ethnographies
Quantitative	Qualitative
A priori theory	Emergent theory
Economic/Psychological	Sociological/Anthropological
Micro/Managerial	Macro/Cultural
Focus on buying	Focus on consuming
Emphasis on cognitions	Emphasis on emotions
American	Multicultural

Source: Belk (1995)