

## Postmodern Marketing and Its Impact on Traditional Marketing Approaches: Is Kotler Dead?

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**ABSTRACT :** The essay discusses the concept of postmodern marketing and its impact on marketing theory and practice. It explores the characteristics of postmodernism, including openness, tolerance, hyper-reality, fragmentation, and the lack of clear boundaries, and how they challenge traditional marketing approaches. The paper also looks at the contributions of postmodern marketing to consumer and marketing research and how it has redefined the way we think about marketing as a science. Ultimately, it raises the question of whether and how marketing should adapt itself to the new conditions brought about by postmodernism.

**KEYWORDS :** *Postmodernism, Postmodern Marketing, Kotler, Marketing Theory, Postmodern Consumer*

### I. CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERNISM

“Postmodern” first appeared as a word in 1870 and became widely spread only decades later, at the end of the 1960’s. This resulted from people’s disappointment in modernity. Postmodern society is built on imagined communities. Individual lives have taken the place of nuclear families in the world, and individuals can choose from a range of alternative forms of life, such as cohabitation, open marriage, and other forms of living. Being independent of the spatial and chronological constraints of modern society, the individual tends to maintain a virtual relationship with the world through television, telephone, fax, or computer. As Cova & Cova (2002) state; instead of classes, smaller, often virtual communities become orientating points for self-identification. The main characteristics of postmodernism are openness, tolerance, hyper-reality, nostalgia, fragmentation, and the lack of clear boundaries. Openness and tolerance refer to the acceptance of difference: people can live in harmony only if they tolerate different religions, lifestyles, and cultures. Such as hyper-reality-created realities are presented to us on television screens, on the internet, or in Disneyland, as Firat & Schultz (1997) also mentioned. Unlike modernism, postmodernism shows an eager interest in the past; the retro-feeling becomes fashionable again. Fragmentation can be seen in the lack of social bonding, the breaking-up of families, or in the self-constructed “net-identities. In postmodernism, old boundaries such as the ones between high- and mass culture, news and entertainment, home and workplace, holidays, and working days tend to disappear. The differences between modernism and postmodernism raise the question of whether and how marketing should adapt itself to the new conditions that postmodernism brings us.

Stephen Brown is one of the main defenders of postmodernism, and it has had a significant influence on marketing. In ‘The Postmodern Marketing’, he mainly tries to examine the maturation of postmodernism, define postmodern marketing if there is one, and explore its methods and effects on consumers and researchers. As Brown and many other postmodern marketing defender academicians also agree, postmodernism has very serious consequences for extant marketing theory. The emergence of postmodern marketing thought has made significant contributions to the development of marketing theory. The postmodern marketing concept is built more on the academic respectability of marketing and consideration of marketing as a science. Additionally, postmodern marketing has made significant contributions to consumer and marketing research.

The word “postmodernism” does not contain a precise meaning and refers to many fragmented cultural phenomena, to the extent that some have suggested the need to use the plural and, therefore, refer to “postmodernisms” in line with the postmodern spirit. As Cova (1996) mentioned, in spite of that, it is possible to recognize this complexity, fragmentation, and even unknowability of reality that was so far defied by modernism, the central element of the new philosophy. The very same concept of reality is then questioned together with that of truth. More generally, it is possible to suggest that postmodernism doubts any certainty of modernism. According to Brown (1993), postmodernism is a complex and amorphous phenomenon, and its essential characteristics can be summarized under five broad headings: fragmentation, dedifferentiation, hyper-reality, pastiche, and anti-foundationalism. Fragmentation refers to the disintegration of knowledge, language,

political and social life, mass market economics, the unified self, and the disconnected array of vivid images generated by the media. De-differentiation comprises the erosion and effacement of established hierarchies – high and low culture, education and training, politics and showbusiness – and the blurring of what were formerly clear-cut entities (philosophy and literature, author and reader, science and religion, etc.). Hyper-reality, as exemplified by the fantasy worlds of theme parks, virtual reality, and computer games, involves the loss of a sense of authenticity and the becoming real of what was originally a simulation. Pastiche consists of a tongue-in-cheek collage of past styles, an ironic, paradoxical, self-referential mixing of existing codes, be they architectural, artistic, cinematic, literary, musical or whatever. Anti-foundationalism, finally, is postmodernism's characteristic antipathy towards systematic generalizations, the totalizing metanarratives of science, socialism, humanism, etc., which form part of the modern movement's discredited search for universal truths and objective knowledge. As marketing, in many respects, reflects developments in the social and economic environment generally, it is not surprising that the characteristic features of postmodernism are readily apparent. Postmodern marketing is characterized by these five main themes, so it is important to comprehend them.

## II. POSTMODERN MARKETING AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL MARKETING APPROACHES

Most academic marketers are somewhere between the two extreme views. They admit to the change of era between modern and postmodern eras, which influences all sciences (e.g., law, medicine), including marketing. With Brown as the lead; a significant number of the academician marketers defending postmodern marketing harshly criticized Kotler's Marketing Management (a.k.a. the Marketing Bible of all times). Instead of covering allusions, several authors explicitly stated the crisis in modern marketing, arguing that the traditional interpretation of marketing cannot be accepted in a postmodern era. A new conceptual framework, postmodern marketing, should be followed under the slogans of fantasy, nostalgia, and mystery. This revolutionary style is also realized when we look through the postmodern future of marketing (if any exists), that marketing has fallen into a circle that seems to lead it towards a revolution without a way out. If it is true, as Brown states (1997), that with postmodernism, we entered an era of anti-science, the future of marketing is obscure and difficult to see. Only if marketing researchers acquire responsible awareness is it possible to have a brave redirecting of the discipline. According to this group of thinkers, postmodernism does have an effect on marketing, so marketing must adapt to the altered conditions. This adaptation has already begun since many postmodern features can be identified in today's marketing practice. Interestingly, some marketers definitely denied its relevance, saying that the postmodern marketing concept is built simply on criticism and lacks innovative ideas. They were convinced that Kotler's marketing theory and practice, with certain smaller modifications, were still applicable. Few "extremist" authors would even refer to the followers of postmodern marketing as false prophets who disgrace the "church of marketing."

In the past decades, many questions have been raised on the conceptual borders, the distinctive features, and the relevance of marketing. Since 1970, Kotler's views have become widely known and worshipped by marketers. In Brown's (1997) opinion, marketing is an all-pervading activity that is applicable in every single field of life, from political campaigns to soap selling. He re-defined the meaning of "product," "consumer," and "marketing tools" and promoted the broadening of the marketing concept. "Megalomaniac" was the word his critics used when characterizing his views, and it established the basis of modern marketing. The two extreme poles of opinions on modern marketing can be arranged on a wide scale. At one end of the scale, the faithful believers can be found: those marketers who regard modern marketing as a "church". At the other end of the scale, there are the opponents who resolutely attack the eternal relevance of the marketing concept. The majority is in between, trying to find the main mean. Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, the views against the Kotlerian theory and practice explicitly stated the crisis of modern marketing. In the 1990s, articles questioning the reliability of modern marketing in a postmodern world appeared in academic journals.

In 1995, Brown, in Postmodern Marketing, criticized the previous marketing theories and called marketers' attention to the importance of applying a postmodern viewpoint. The most radical among them announced the death of Kotler (Smithee, 1997) and his marketing model, which was declared to have failed. In 1997, the following title, 'Kotler is dead!' shocked the readers in the European Journal of Marketing. Defenders against the traditional marketing approach raised questions about the marketing concept, customer orientation, segmentation, positioning, marketing mix, and market research. Most authors supposed that modern marketing was out-of-date in today's postmodern society and, consequently, should be replaced. Brown directly attacked Kotler as one of the most determined critics; in his opinion, Kotler had a marketing empire, like a prince or a king. As Brown (2002) states; "he has established an intellectual empire on which the sun never sets". He uses this metaphor, saying that this theory is built from poor-quality materials. Thus, it cannot exist until the end of time, meaning the emergence of postmodern marketing. Researchers who tried to deal with postmodern marketing concluded their works by inviting marketing researchers to consider the limits of the modern

marketing philosophy, thus joining the “marketing-is-not-working manifesto.” Furthermore, they advised to pay attention to the new marketing issues related to the postmodern vision of the world.

### III. CONTRIBUTIONS OF POSTMODERN MARKETING TO CONSUMER AND MARKETING RESEARCH

As Brown (2002) also stresses, a postmodern version of reality is needed to put the individual, both as a consumer and as a researcher, at the center of marketing and to give space to the imagination in all its forms. Perhaps this is the most likely direction for the future development of marketing. Nevertheless, the individual is no longer the typical individual of modern marketing: the roles of consumers and researchers have been radically changed by their new perspective. On the one hand, the consumer does not end his/her relations with the company with the simple purchasing act, nor with the product when it is consumed (anymore). On the other hand, the marketing researcher does not end the study of reality after his /her observations or after the knowledge generated with models and implications. Both relate to the context by experiencing it; knowledge becomes relation, not dominion. According to Brown, the postmodern approach to marketing forms a revolution in marketing and implies that the fundamental issue to which we should address ourselves is not marketing myopia but the myopia of marketing. This is very significant to comprehend in order to be able to examine the evolution of postmodern marketing. The myopia of marketing means that we, academic marketers, must learn how to look beyond what has already been studied and taught to us. Only in this way can we see the contributions of postmodernism to marketing through consumers, researchers, and other elements of marketing. As Brown states; consumers are changing. 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 postmodernist approach brought significant changes to the understating of the consumer by marketing and turned the consumer into a partner/producer. Instead of marketing seeking to supply what the consumer does want, postmodern marketing makes the consumer part of the process, a decision maker. Firat et al. (1995) state this very clearly: 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” (Firat et al., 1995, p.52). It is easily observable that the postmodern consumer became part of the processes rather than 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. As Firat et al. (1995) also state, there is 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. Consumers were stationary, and 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 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. There, a consumer paradox is formed, as consumers are active producers of symbols and signs of consumption, as marketers are. Additionally, consumers are also objects in the marketing process, while products become active agents. From the marketing research approach, the postmodern marketing way of thinking brings non-positivist research methods involving ethnography, qualitative research, and emergent theory; rather than numbers and statistics, researchers are now concerned with the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of consumers, not cognitive and predicting the inner side of consumers. After all, in postmodern marketing consumer is what only matters! The way of thinking became sociological and anthropological, both economic and psychological. In a macro and cultural way of thinking, researchers focus on consuming and consumers with an emphasis on their emotions.

Multicultural organizations produce symbolic offerings represented by meaning-laden products that chase simulation-loving consumers who seek experience-producing situations – this is the spiraling state of postmodern consumption and marketing. As Proctor & Kitchen (2002) also state; it seems evident that postmodernism offers significant implications for the practice of marketing and communication. The old idea of finding out what consumers want and delivering it to them in an efficient, timely, and profitable manner no longer seems apt. People often do not know what they want – though they may recognize it when they see it and

certainly seem to know what they do not want. Perhaps the latter bears a pointer towards what marketing and communication should be doing – finding out what people do not want and giving them less unacceptable alternatives. When we also look through integrated marketing communication, as Christensen et al. (2005) also state, openness towards fluidity and a certain degree of indeterminacy must be nurtured if organizations wish to cope with the postmodern world. Along with tolerance toward variety within the organization, as we discussed above, organizations need to develop a tolerance for meanings negotiated together with consumer communities, such as brand communities, in the market. That is, consumers must not be perceived simply as targets but as collaborators or partners in the generation of meanings for the organization's offerings. It is very apparent that postmodern marketing will, even though some may think paradoxically, give consumers the ability to have as great control as possible and make them partners. Whereas modern marketing is founded on the principles of analysis, planning, implementation, and control, as stated by Kotler, marketers of the postmodern world need to realize that they are no longer masters of meaning, that their products and messages are creations with a life of their own, and that their intended receivers are not passive targets but creative partners in the production of experiences and identities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As seen by the contributions of postmodern marketing to the development of marketing theory through consumers, researchers, and research process, it is also one of probably the most important implications that "postmodern marketing brings marketing more respectability in the science arena; an offer affects marketing's constant search for academic respectability. As a result of possibly the discipline's lowly standing in the scholarly caste system, marketing has long left obliged to prove itself "more scientific than science", aspire to the most rigorous standards of research, and, not infrequently, apologize for the inadequacy or immaturity of its conceptual accomplishments" (Brown, 1993, p.28). As Brown states, academic marketing has effectively downplayed and de-emphasized the creativity, spontaneity, adaptability, and individual insight that often characterize successful marketing practices, and which, in the Economist's concluding words, "count for a lot more than (marketing) theory". Postmodernism not only provides the conceptual foundations for the individualistic, idiographic, and intuitive end of the "art-science" continuum but, in its espousal of heterarchy rather than hierarchy, the concept repudiates the premises of the above academic caste system. In a postmodern world, therefore, marketing would no longer occupy the lowest level of the academic firmament, with its necessity for periodic apologia and a more scientific than scientific outlook. Self-confident marketing, secure in the knowledge that it is equal to any discipline, physical or human, would be the ultimate outcome. As we can also understand from how Brown stresses it, even only this contribution of postmodernism to marketing would be enough for us to be firm defenders of postmodern marketing and be open to what it brings to the marketing arena, to the main elements of marketing such as consumers, research and researchers.

In conclusion, postmodernism has revolutionized the way we think about marketing as a science. It challenges traditional marketing approaches and encourages marketers to be more open and tolerant towards different cultures, lifestyles, and religions. Postmodern marketing has made significant contributions to consumer and marketing research, and it has redefined the way we approach marketing. However, it also raises the question of whether and how marketing should adapt itself to the new conditions brought about by postmodernism. As we move forward, it's essential for marketers to stay informed and adapt to the changing landscape of marketing to stay relevant in today's highly competitive business environment.

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