

**Conceptualising Marketing Communication  
in the New Marketing Paradigm:  
A Postmodern Perspective**

by

**Wilson F. Ozuem**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

I adore it. Every day you get to make it up. Every day you get to confront an unstructured life. You get to follow your curiosity. You get to play in the organising period of what I believe is the most vibrant activity that exists today... If you think of the beginning of television. If you think of electronic communication from radio to television, to cable to satellite. Each of those was evolutionary, each was a building block on top of a previous block. From pictures to sound. From wired to over the air. Then over the sky to the ground. As a full-blown communication medium, the Internet was, I believe, a radical revolution. The reason I've been so fascinated by interactivity, the reason I still refer to the box (the PC) as magic, is because it does things that still defy your imagining them (Diller, 2003 p. 7)

#### 1.1 INQUIRY OVERVIEW

The journey which this thesis involves is a somewhat intricate one. While each separate chapter is reasonably self-contained, and might be read in isolation, the essential driving force of the project relies on the interconnections between them. The principal aim of this section of the introductory chapter is therefore to preview the major landmarks, which will appear along the way, and especially how they are related to each other. Equipped with this outline, the reader will then hopefully be in a position to examine the details without losing sight of the overall view.

The thesis begins by delineating a number of key interconnected themes. Firstly, the interplay between technologies and discourses of marketing is considered. Secondly, it focuses on the relationships that exist between consumers and the consumption process of the computer-mediated marketing environments. Thirdly, it considers the problematic relationship between technology especially Internet technologies and marketing communications, characterising the present age – conterminous with what has been

termed 'the information society' – as an age of 'postmodernity' I then outline how my grounded thematic approach – choosing three major research themes on the basis of preliminary investigations – has structured the thesis as a whole.

The second chapter attempts to provide the necessary background information to address research issues outlined in the Introductory chapter. It offers a review of marketing communications and postmodernity as related to the age of information society. The literature is divided into various sections as a way to try and impose structure on an otherwise complex and confused mix of theories and considerations. Extant literature is considered within the broad spheres of marketing, communication and marketing communications. The postmodern theory of 'computer-mediated marketing environments' was then introduced to demonstrate that marketing communications have been 'problematized' by academics and practitioners in the past.

Communications in the past have been perceived as fixed and definable in the context of computer-mediated marketing environments. The theory of postmodernity emphasises the need to consider it as shifting, dynamic, fragmentary, contradictory within a socially constructed framework. Within this context, McLuhan (1964) catch phrase- 'The medium is the message' has become synonymous with postmodernity. The basic idea here is that the means of transmitting information impacts on a society more than the content of the message (Carey, 1969).

From the outset, this investigation was intended as an interdisciplinary approach to a field that has previously only been considered in isolated units such as the consideration of marketing communication content without any reference to consumer interpretation and

vice-versa. In order to contribute to an understanding of how the evolving medium influences the relationship between marketer and consumer, it is vital to approach the question of '*meaning making*' from varying perspectives. In this way, I examine the arguments made by postmodern advocates, that current marketing communication thinking ignores the need for socially constitutive models. In this light, a postmodern ethnographic approach and interviews were chosen as the best way to generate responses from participants within the context of a fieldwork study. The flexibility possible within the confines of the methodology was also conducive to working with participants in that it would allow them to digress from a major research concern of the investigator whilst still maintaining a high level of relevance to the investigation as a whole.

Previous research into marketing communications and the Internet has tended to focus on either business to business (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Kalakota and Robinson, 2000) or the ways in which computer-mediated marketing environments are ostensibly unique and operationally distinct from the traditional consumption process. Little attention appears to have been paid to the role of consumer in the evolving medium. It is arguable that it is important to attempt an understanding of the changing roles of consumer in the consumption process. Chapter four provides an overview of contemporary marketing perspective, highlighting the evolving relationship between marketers and consumers within the postmodern paradigmatic context.

The main aim of chapter five is to identify clearly fieldwork features and to formulate a framework that will become the main point of reference throughout the investigation as a whole (*cf.* section 5.2). Placing marketing communication and computer-mediated marketing environments within a historical context of technology as consistent with social

constructivist framework, rather than thinking about the medium as an isolated phenomenon, the study aims to illuminate concretely that Internet exerts a mediating influence on the relationship between marketers and consumers. The chapter begins by systematically and theoretically categorising the emerged evidence into major (Control – Interactivity) and permeated (Reach- Information) themes. It then discusses the implications of the major and associated themes as they influenced the way customers relate to marketers principally associated to the computer-mediated marketing environments. The concluding section provides an integrative summary that permeates from the discussions.

The aim of this closing chapter is an attempt to draw together the major findings and observations throughout the course of this investigation and to relate them to the three research issues defined at the outset (see section 1.3). This process will also lead to a consideration of the implications of this study as well as suggestions for further research in the field. From an initial review of the literature, it became clear that marketing communication may be located within socially situated and socially constitutive environments.

The whole concept of marketing communication was considered in terms of 'socially constitutive' where the overriding pattern of perception and understanding in the traditional marketing communication theory was one of linear in form and sequential in processing (Lasswell, 1948; Schramm, 1948). The subsequent shape of this chapter will echo the structure of the investigation as a whole in that four elements of Control-Interactivity-Reach-Information (CIRI model), will be considered in turn, based on the research findings (see chapter five), and computer-mediated marketing environments will

provide the binding factor throughout. Before each of these elements is discussed, however, a basic overview of contemporary theoretical underpinnings of computer-mediated marketing environments is discussed, together with consideration of the research propositions.

## 1.2 SETTING THE STAGE

The pace of change brought about by new technologies has had a significant effect on the way companies and consumers relate to one another. New and emerging technologies challenge the traditional process of transactions and the way communications between consumers and companies are managed. The advent of the Internet along with its prototypical subset (Web) is having a major impact in the way in which communications between companies and consumers are conducted and maintained in the evolving marketing landscape. Much of these changes have been characterised and explicated in complex unconnected links with marketing communication processes that enshrined consumers' moulding behaviour in the evolving interactive marketplace. Current understandings tend to question whether the recent and most remarkable changes as a result of Internet ubiquity warrant a paradigm shift from the praxis of marketing especially in marketing communications.

In this context, it is interesting to recognise the profound influence of consumers changing behaviour in the nascent marketing communications landscape. Ordinarily, Internet technologies breed higher order communication between organisations and consumers and consumers to consumers. The essence of the communicative continuum

within the medium breeds interactivity. And likewise, interactivity breeds vibrant and active communicative environments where users could probably act and conduct their activities akin to conative experience. Considering the dynamics of the Internet as cohesive information repositories as well as a marketing medium, the once asymmetrical leaning upon which companies have inexorably goaded consumers in the past decades are now metamorphosing into a collaborative terrain where consumers are no longer in the dictates of the orthodox-based communication media.

Whilst there is numerous literature that explicitly foregrounds the interactive marketplace, Hoffman and Novak's (1996) new marketing paradigm for electronic commerce has become the aspic lodestar of this exploration. The authors described consumers in bifurcated environments (Presence and Telepresence) and treated consumers in hypermedia computer-mediated environments to experience telepresence (Steuer, 1992, *ibid*), the perception of being present in the mediated, rather than real-world environments.

In my opinion, this points to an expansion of perception and the experience of presence beyond the presence. Hoffman and Novak (*ibid*) urged the decoupling of hypermedia mediated environments from the transcendent and yet, surprisingly, offer few suggestions for accomplishing these dichotomous environments in the consumption processes. When one talks about computer-mediated environments, much that drives interaction does not exist in users exteroceptive experience. Rather consumers experience seemingly introspective and unipolar environments. Hoffman and Novak (*ibid*), in particular, influenced practitioners and researchers to start grappling with the consumers interactive trajectories in the evolving marketspace environment. Generally, the quotation in the

beginning of this section evinces the extent of these transformations in the interactive market landscape. The next section tautens the implicit and explicit marketing problem which engendered the research study.

### 1.3 MARKETING PROBLEM STATEMENT

Academics and practitioners are addressing the theory and practice of marketing communications and the Internet with the aim of understanding the influence of the emerging medium in the consumption process. Increased understanding of computer-mediated marketing environments championed by Internet technologies should, in turn, enhance the design of reflective and effective marketing communication programmes between marketers and consumers, which would lead to effective relationships within the consumption process.

Computer-mediated marketing environments, a commercial and pedestal facet of Internet technologies provides, marketers with a malleable context that can be used to deliver content in a variety of ways to consumers. This capability highlights the distinction between the information in marketing communication and the vehicle used to deliver the information: that is, content differs from communication. Also, the versatility of the Internet as a context for mediated communication means that marketers can integrate different modalities of marketing communications into a strategy that combines online and offline tactics to meet strategic objectives.

The integration of various conventional and hegemonic media into a hyper electronic marketplace heralds new vista within the consumption process: providing a flexible and dialogical access between marketers and consumers in a way that undermines the instrumental and functionalist view of communication. Providing fundamental opportunities where consumers are no longer passive recipients of communication but active participants in shaping their communication reality.

Despite the alienation of asymmetrical marketing communication models as perpetuated in the technical-rational view of the nature and purpose of knowledge premised in the pedagogical scientific approach, marketing practitioners are prevalently and universally incorporating the emerging marketing medium as nothing more than informing technology. As a result, practitioners seek assumed *cause-effect type action –outcome situations* in which marketing communications are wielded toward the achievement of rational objectives in aberration of the sediments of social exchange reality of the communication medium.

Driven by the perpetuation of the mainstream quantification models, practitioners are obtusely ambivalent toward the voidance and inapplicability of the conventional monologic models. The absence of understanding resulting in the continual deployment of a mechanistic communication model may impede practice, which undermines the trajectories of development in marketing theory and practice concomitant to a dominance and exclusivity of economic thinking and values and a limitation of marketing to transactions involving exchanges (*cf.* Buttle, 1990; 1995; Varey, 2000). There is a power effect of this ideological mainstream marketing, which tends to diffuse within the



professional practice with less cognisance of the interactive apocryphal epoch of mediated marketing environment (*cf.* Hackley, 2001: 106-107).

Therefore, there is a need for conceptualising marketing communication in the evolving interactive marketplace with the primal task to facilitate understanding in culturally and socially-constructed environments. To examine the nodal marketing communication context of the research process, it is worthwhile foreshadowing some research questions guiding the inquiry.

#### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ASSOCIATED RESEARCH QUESTIONS

##### RESEARCH QUESTION ONE:

Does traditional marketing communication theory co-opt the emerging computer-mediated marketing environment?
--

The purpose of this question is to elicit information regarding a traditional marketing communication model in tandem with contemporary theories in marketing communication. Both theoretical conjectures are interspersed by looking into some of the epistemic presuppositions, which underscore understanding while relating these theories to the emerging concepts in computer-mediated marketing environments. Interests are focused on the relationship between consumers and marketers in the consumption process with regard to the way they relate with each other. Contingent to the eliciting of information, it also attempts to foreground the meanings of communication and relate them to the online marketplace. Understandings of computer-mediated marketing environments converge on the instrumental information transmissions from the marketers to consumers positioning as fragmented passive recipients of information. Apropos to

conventional marketing communication models influenced by classical assumptions of causality and linearity to relative and relational assumptions, computer-mediated marketing environment is intrinsically examined in chapters 2 and 6.

## RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

Does the basic conception of marketing communications as 'transmissive' limit the scope of computer-mediated marketing environments? Does the new marketing communication medium displace the pattern of communication between marketers and consumers in traditional marketing media?

In the literature review of contemporary and traditional marketing communications issue, this question tends to foreground the pattern of communication between consumers and marketers by following the trajectories of consumer participation in the online marketplace. Drawing mainly from postmodern ethnographical assumptions that envision communication as a culturally constitutive element of meaning-making, chapter three explores some of the issues of the computer-mediated marketing environment as a nascent communication in relation to marketing activity. Given that the foreshadowed questions provide pointers toward what is going to be examined, the question is how to conduct the study. The methodological process of generating empirical material is recorded in chapter four. The next chapters expound on the emerged data, which were factually collated and helped to formulate theoretical issues in the light of the underlying assumptions of the research study.

### RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

Is a computer-mediated marketing environment necessarily an emancipatory medium (in the sense of providing dialogical contact) between marketers and consumer? Does consumer participation in a computer-mediated marketing environment offer a new sense of engagement in the consumption process?

Following questions one and two, the third question examines the Internet environment from a marketing perspective. In addition to creating the possibility for a marketplace, it tends to look at how marketers produce products and services that enable and enhance marketing activity. In essence, what aspects of the computer-mediated marketing environment lead to fundamental changes in the traditional marketing environment concomitant on how the new modality affects communication between marketers and consumers. Based on the methodological approach in chapter four and the factual themes presented in chapter five, the construct of novelties within the computer-mediated marketing environment was foregrounded in chapter six. Drawing attention to the broader marketing issues aforementioned, the next section examines the rationale of the research study.

#### 1.5 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The Internet and the World Wide Web are subject to widespread research and forecasting about the potential impact on consumers and organisations. Some researchers claim that the Internet and World Wide Web will lead organisations to more direct dialogue with consumers and other ‘publics’, and that empowered consumers will increasingly demand real information and education, thereby rejecting one-side persuasive pastiches by which -

the praxis of monolithic, unidirectional model of industrial communication was grounded (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; 2000; Kiani, 1997; 1998; Rowley, 2001, Deighton and Barwise, 2001). Other scholars maintained that the advent of cyberspace lowers the costs of information and opinion delivery in a way that puts consumers on a par with organisations (Porter, 2001; Coyne and Dye, 1998; Shappiro and Varian, 1999).

From a marketing communication perspective, it appears that cyberspace offers a monumental vista of opportunities which reduces the ability of organisations to act as authoritative makers of information that consumers want but are participants in co-creating communication processes (Blather, 1996, Parallax and Ramaswamy, 2000; Peppers et al, 1999; Deighton and Barwise, 2001). For example, Deighton and Barwise (*ibid*) stated that the transaction cost of conversing is declining to zero. Producers can talk to individual consumers at orders of magnitude lower cost than direct mail. Consumers can talk back to producers and talk to one another.

According to Deighton and Barwise (*ibid*), marketing making becomes conversation management, not merely between producer and consumer, but also among consumers. Those who use digital media well must solve the problems of scalability in using conversation to build intimacy, to foster customer relationships, and, most radically to cultivate consumer communities.

Furthermore, Porter (2001) asserted that Internet technologies trigger rampant experimentation, by both companies and customers, and the experimentation is often economically unsustainable. As a result, market behaviour is distorted and must be interpreted with caution. The growth of Internet-based business is truly meteoric in

nature, culminating in social and technological domains. Given the social and technological changes that have pervaded some aspects of marketing communication in recent years, which lead to new forms of information and access, scholars and academics have recently professed that the liminal trajectories which are the basic principles of orthodox marketing theory and practice are inapplicable to the ever-changing tapestry of the hyperreality<sup>1</sup>. As a result of these developments, current thinking about the nascent communication technologies such as the Internet with its notable prototype-WWW argues that it is a centrifugal and fragmented form in which multiple identities and diverse perspectival persona are inherently dominant- a situation akin to the postmodern<sup>2</sup> condition.

Apropos to the protean nature of cyberspace as a marketing and communication medium, the traditional centripetal unidirectional mode of communication which often privileges unity and linearity over diversity in the name of pastiches of positioning is still prevalent. There is virtually no pristine study that examines the puissant medium with its isomorphous content and interactivity. Both theoretical and empirical research are necessary to fully investigate the new medium which must be broadened to include new views of the consumers as active individuals in an interactive process. Morrison (1998)

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<sup>1</sup> Hyperreality is a term used to describe an information society socially saturated with ever-increasing forms of representation: filmic, photographic, Internet, email, and so on. Some authors make no apparent distinctions between hyperreality and the information Superhighway. There is a growing recognition amongst researchers that the term is an apt moniker for the postmodern condition (See Kincheloe and McLaren (2001); Gergen (2000); Gergen and Gergen (2001) for more exploration regarding this area)

<sup>2</sup> The word postmodern and its cognates 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism' have become pervasive in the past years but these terms have no definable contradistinctions in some major literature. The acceptable usage of these terms regarding this project are the ones designated by Malpas (2001) as the transformation that has taken place in society during the past few decades with the rise of new forms of capitalism, the development of information technologies such as the Internet and the World Wide Web, the collapse of the Soviet Union which saw the end of the cold war, and the emergence of voices from different cultures to disrupt the traditional white, male, European ideas of a universal human nature referred to as mankind. And for Fredric (1985) it is also... a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order. For a much broader understanding of these words, see Malpas (2001); Lyotard (1997); Jameson, F (1985); Habermas, J (1996); Baudrillard, J (1995); Derrida, J (1994); Eagleton, T (1991); Rorty, R (1992); Hutcheon, L (1992); hooks, b (1990)

noted that failure to view evolving media from the ordinary user's perspective might be a blind spot in the study of interactivity and marketing, which obviously affects the way organisations communicate and relate with consumers of their product. This study tends to place in the foreground consumers' perspectival interactivity in the inchoate communication and marketing medium by practically centre-staging the ordinary users' transactions activity. It considers the shift in how consumers communicate as a result of Internet technologies. Such rapid transformations have been characterised in different ways. The next section examines the context and significance, which places postmodernism as the philosophical assumptions of the current study.

#### 1.6 CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE: POSTMODERNISM

A shift is underway in some areas of the marketing arena. It is undeniable the shift in which marketing operates is changing irrevocably, affecting consumers in a global landscape. The consumer is becoming more of an abstract concept, alternating identities between the extremes of cyber-consumer and traditional buyer. Conventional heuristics and techniques that have pervaded and been deployed successfully for years are seen as increasingly less effective as marketers grapple with the enigma that is the new consumer. Several terms are used to describe this nascent movement, such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-positivism, constructivism and social constructionism (Brown, 1995; Turkle, 1996; Berthon and Katsikeas 1998; Malpas, 2001, *ibid*). For the purposes of this study, the term postmodernism will be used because it implies and characterises the social phenomenon inherent in the network economy. Postmodernism is a rubric of praxes and thoughts that 'dis-embodies' the information

age, and thus offers unique insights into information-rich contexts such as the Web where most developments in marketing are taking place.

As Best and Kellner (1991) noted:

Postmodern theory provides a critique of representation and modern belief that theory mirrors reality, taking instead ‘perspectivist’ and relativist positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated (p.4)

The project of modernism with its ‘subjects’ such as centripetal mode of communication (the monolithic-passive mode of communication) comprises the efforts to develop objective knowledge, absolute truths, universal morality and law, and autonomous art (e.g. Harvey, 1992; *cf* Best and Kellner 1991: 5-6). It is the sustained attempt to free human thinking and action from the irrationality of superstition, myth and religion. It comprises the basic summons towards human emancipation, clearly enunciated in the Enlightenment. It has at its heart the idea of the ‘rational subject’ as the primary vehicle for progress and liberation. It stresses unification and harmonious presentations. Its themes could, in contrast to postmodernism, comprise integration, differentiation, objective reality, linear time and delineated space, orthodoxy, unity and foundationalism (Berman, 1983).

Modernism is a more coherent movement (because it values coherence), which has at its heart one fairly distinct core philosophy, ideology and belief system. In contrast postmodernism is characterised by multiple beliefs; postmodernism in some of its many guises actively seeks to undermine ideology and belief (For example, Derrida, 1976). Postmodernism seeks to subvert and debunk the assumptions underpinning previous ages, thought systems and discourses.

The embryonic marketing paradigm falls in line with postmodern frameworks and turns to softer epistemologies that emphasise contextual methodologies and decentred landscapes. The constituent landscapes offer a theory for the felt experience of multiple inner voices. Although our extant communication models were traditionally presented in consistency (unidirectional communication models), feelings of fragmentation abound now more than ever. A growing number of researchers and marketing professionals (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Tapscott *et al*, 2000; Negroponte, 1995; Blattberg *et al*, 1996) argued that these feelings of fragmentation characterise the postmodern aesthetical cultural background.

According to Baker (2001), the fragmentation of markets is one of three main forces identified as driving the emergence of new style of marketing, one that focuses on meeting the challenge of the postmodern consumer. Baker echoing Brown described consumers as ‘shopping on speed’ as they hunt for something worth reading, wearing or buying. Contributing to this is the unceasing proliferation of products and the endless stream of advertising, as well consumers’ disconnected lifestyles. Other drivers of this shift to a new style of marketing can be summarised as the desire for consumer ‘experience’.

By experience Baker means the positioning of self and identities in cyberspace in fragmented themes where reality becomes blurred with hyper-reality: the fake becomes more real than the real. And finally, consumers are becoming more marketing literate. They are no longer passive absorbers of marketing messages. As such, the observed has only not started playing games with the observer, but in some circumstances dictate



which game is to be played. McKenna (2001 p.4-5) of McKenna Consulting Group gave quintessential expositions of the changes inherent in today's marketing landscape.

McKenna stated:

The kind of marketing we're seeing today is a descendant of past practices. It evolved along with twentieth-century mass production mentality, and it has become something of a pseudopsychological propaganda machine. Today is at once a corporation's most assertive public face and its most undefined and elusive activity. Marketing, like total quality management, is becoming a distributed and shared responsibility within the enterprise. We can longer view it from a single perspective, just as it no longer operates through only one medium. These changes occurred for several reasons. For one, marketing hasn't kept up with the evolution of technology and business processes, causing it to fall into a malaise with its reliance on the pure broadcast model. While technology has become more and more transparent and adaptive, many marketing strategies have remained static models of a bygone era. Brand, now the centre of all marketing activities, has been misinterpreted as attention, showmanship, events, and celebrity-even market valuation. In addition, consumer means and method of interaction are changing, as is the whole marketplace, thanks to cultural, social, and economic forces ... What we do know is that interactive consumers are not passive, as past marketing supposed. They are not anaesthetized couch potatoes mindlessly absorbing images and messages. They're proactive, but they're also overwhelmed, oversaturated, and, for the most part, passive to mass media advertising.

Similarly, Gergen (2001) perspicaciously pointed out that the romantic and modern beliefs about the self are falling into disuse, and the social arrangements that they support are eroding. This is largely as a result of social saturation. According to Gergen, emerging technologies (such as the Web) saturate us with the voices of humankind- both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self.

For everything we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. Gergen indicated that the fragmentation of self-conceptions