

Reactionary Modernism: An Essay on the Post-postmodern Condition

AUTHOR:

Jeffrey S Podoshen, Associate Professor and Chair, Business, Organizations and Society,
Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, USA.

ABSTRACT:

With the ending of postmodernism, a new age has been ushered in. This viewpoint essay introduces *reactionary modernism* as a new direction away from postmodernism. It briefly outlines the key components that comprise reactionary modernism in terms of condition related issues related to its philosophical, consumption and signification systems. The purpose of this non-empirical paper is to continue the discussion regarding “what comes next” and provoke additional thinking and discourse. This paper is a very early starting point and should not be viewed, in any way, as an ending.

KEYWORDS:

Post-postmodernism, postmodernism, modernism, consumer culture theory

What is Reactionary Modernism?

The epoch of postmodernism and enchanted consumption is over and its emancipatory attributes linger in subterranean stasis. As Cova, Maclaran and Bradshaw (2013) mention, the second decade of the new millennium has marked the end of postmodernism. In the past few years we have witnessed a more significant attempt at the suppression of multivocality related to knowledge (outside of the gossip and hyperpromotion found in social media), and a shift away from the cultural economy towards the monolithic, global, brand-centered, experience. The role of the aesthetic and the symbolic has given way to concrete objectification facilitated by constructed myth that supports a burgeoning dogmatic, all-encompassing philosophical system.

With this ending of the postmodern era, a new age has been ushered in. This paper introduces a unique conceptualization, as one possible replacement; the age of *reactionary modernism*. Reactionary modernism, while similar to other *post-postmodern* (Boje, 2006; Cova and Maclaran, 2012) conceptualizations such as metamodernism (Vermeuleun and van den Akker, 2010) and remodelism (Childish and Thomson, 2000) in terms of its temporality, differs from them in terms of politics and its reactionary focus, which more closely embraces the re-emergence of global fundamentalism and nationalism coupled with attributes representative of early to mid-twentieth century logocentrism. Further, related more specifically to consumption, reactionary modernism integrates distinct conditions tethered to the overarching consumption system, specifically incorporating the relatively

new phenomena of crowdsourcing (or production by the masses for the masses) as well as the increasingly worldwide embrace of materialism (Podoshen, Li & Zhang, 2010), hyper-consumption (Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997), hypervocality and over-consumption (Kjellberg, 2008) practices as consumers living in many western capitalist societies are directed to consume in order to “stimulate” the economy and maintain the social order. Further, reactionary modernism occurs in a condition and global environment rife with growing nationalism and fundamentalist tendencies. This paper briefly outlines the key components that comprise reactionary modernism, in terms of marketplace issues, specifically related to its philosophical, consumption and signification systems.

Philosophical System

One of the key differences between modernism and postmodernism is related to knowledge and the overarching philosophical system. As modernism leans towards an adherence to essentialism, whereby attributes of an entity are essential to identity and function (Cartwright, 1968), products for consumer use are limited to the rational and functional. This is seen in modernist architecture and consumer products developed in post-war America whereby intricacies and ornamental finishes of the previous periods (such as art deco) are dispensed with, and utility lies at the center of paramount importance. Conversely, as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) mention, the resulting postmodern movement allowed a liberatory transformation, embracing increasingly expressive forms, symbolism

and genre-mixing as well as multivocality. The condition of postmodernity was characterized by skepticism and a hostility towards generalizations (Brown 1993).

Consumers in the postmodern world could look for their own meaning in objects, and blend and bridge symbols as they saw fit. Utility and practicality played a somewhat less prominent role in favor of personal meaning.

The reactionary modernist notion of knowledge shuns multivocality and moves towards univocality. It is both a protection-oriented and aggressive mechanism. While the lack of genre mixing (associated with multivocality) points somewhat towards the modern condition, the reason behind this lack of it is where the key difference lies between modernism and reactionary modernism, whereby the latter is influenced by the spread of universal values and its oft-resulting nationalism related not necessarily to function, but to social order. While many in the western world espouse a universalist view of uncompromising human rights, gender equality and open markets, a counterinsurgency appears throughout specific pockets of extreme nationalism (see Kaplan, 2012) and anti-secularism. The one “more powerful” voice wins the day. This is found in many examples of consumer products and marketing campaigns. Take, for example, the 2012 incident involving Ikea’s catalog in Saudi Arabia which “erased” women altogether from its pages (Hsu, 2012), fearing an offense to the Saudi market. This move was in sharp contrast to Ikea’s generally “progressive” image they fervently maintained for decades prior to today that focused on diversity-embracing themes such as the open courtship of LGBT families and individuals as consumers.

Hypervocality, in the form of tweets and Facebook postings has not panned out as the utopian dream many thought it would be. Instead of adding a realm for moderated and well-positioned discourse, mechanisms such as the facebook Facebook “Like” button, the desire to gain followers on Twitter and the quest to be “re-tweeted” for the sake of popularity, in and of itself, has lead to a race for mere self-promotion. Even the President of the United States has engaged in the practice of the “selfie,” using social media to essentially convey a promotional message that is realistically devoid of true two-way communication and discourse. In the case of the selfie or the popular tweet, the desire for well-conceived discourse or sharing of deep thought is largely vapid. In fact, Twitter’s 140 character limit purposefully reigns in the desire for deep thought – if that deep thought even exists among its users.

In terms of more tangible, product-related manifestations of extreme or fundamentalist values, we can examine products like Mecca Cola, which was launched to counter the American “idyllic” Coca-Cola in the global Muslim market. In general, markets for products that facilitate nationalist and fundamentalist tendencies have emerged at a rapid rate, such as the market for “modesty glasses” worn by some ultra-orthodox Jews, which allow the wearer the “benefit” of distorting women in view who may be immodestly dressed (Fleet, 2012). Al Hilal Bank offers a credit card with a built in compass that allows the user to always know the direction of Mecca (Finextra, 2012), reinforcing religious doctrine and facilitating a greater immersion of religion in everyday, non-religious transactions. We consider that products such as these project images to others and that in

this image is where the real value manifests. As Firat, Dholkia and Venkatesh (1995) mention, modernism emphasizes the product as a crystallization of value. Material goods such as these possess value related to image and this particular image value goes far beyond the desire to quench a thirst or complete a credit transaction.

Further, turning to the resurgence of nationalism in the global marketplace, in some developing economies, such as India, governments and commerce agents have taken action to protect native business in the newly “liberalized,” globally competitive, landscape (Dholakia, Dholakia & Chattopadhyay, 2012). In China, foreign brands have to compete on store shelves in the midst of a surge in grassroots nationalism (Gao, 2012). Nationalistic products, protectionism and products that encourage a deeper relationship with fundamentalist principles act as markers that signify the end of the postmodern era as they usher in a return to the logocentrism of the modern, but this time they are peppered with the dogmatic, often found in nationalistic environments. This return to dogmatism is not unprecedented, as in difficult economic times consumers often look towards more traditional and conservative consumption practices that may be “closer to home.” The global economic downturn of 2007 onward has seen an increase in religious fundamentalism and reduced acceptance of postmodern-oriented philosophical systems. There is ultimately only room for one myth, one nation, one religion in the reactionary modern world, and as such, we have further evidence signaling the turn from postmodernism.

Consumption System

Consumerspaces

Many have posited that consumers in the current age of retailing seek out unique brand experiences that go beyond simplistic purchases (Kozinets et al., 2002) and require deep consumer involvement (Kozinets et al., 2004). Retailing, for many consumers, is engrossed with moral values (Borghini et al., 2009). In this respect, the system of consumption is related to our culture and cultural economy, however, it also needs to be noted that shopping experiences and locales are becoming more monolithic; more homogeneous. With large real estate trusts, multi-national corporations and private equity firms (precisely focused on risk-minimization and revenue maximization) controlling much of the retail space, there appears to be only room for large, powerful and/or established brands in the sought-after retail landscape. Shopping malls and plazas in today's global environment resemble cookie-cutter consumerspaces that result from intense central planning. Non-established, innovative retailing tends to occur in locales where rents are low and appetite for risk is high. Over recent decades there has been a crowding out of independent or "mom and pop" stores (that are often tailored to unique local interests) in corporate owned strip and shopping malls and they have been replaced with a set of nearly uniform retailers and focused brands that have more recently been marketed to citizens across the globe. Thus, consumerspaces in the realm of reactionary modernism are centered on the powerful, well-funded brand found in retail centers owned by risk-

minimizing firms operating in an oligopoly.

Construction of Consumption and Production

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) mention the modern concept of consumption is separate from other phenomena such as production. They state that this separation exists because of root divisions in other aspects of life. For example, they describe how there is a separation between home and work, between work and play, and a separation between public and private. In today's world, the lines denominating these separations have blurred significantly. Workers in today's capitalist society often cite how work life and personal life are closely intertwined with no firm demarcation (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Further, today's workplace for many is indeed the home itself with the surge of telecommuting and/or the process of simply bringing work home "after hours." The rapid ascent of personal "smart" devices such as tablet computers, 4G enabled laptops and smartphones ensure that we're never more than a click away from the "office." Adding to this, the ubiquity of social media has changed the face of our private and public lives forever. The blending of work and home was clearly facilitated by modern tools, however, as a consumption system, this process of blending deviates sharply from the modern realm whereby consumption and production are no longer separate entities. They are now inexorably intertwined as one can easily create economic value with personal devices, virtually anytime, anywhere. Value creation is no longer left to the office nor is it left between the hours of 9 to 5. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) describe, consumption, in the

modern world was regarded as secondary to production and created nothing of significant value to society. It was a separate production system where value was derived. In today's reactionary modern realm, entire entities have sprung up based almost entirely on consuming the "leisurely" musings of our personal lives. Facebook and Twitter are predicated (if not dependent) on the act of sharing our minute-by-minute accounts of the mundane, the leisurely, or the seasonal. If not for these crowd-sourced creations and our voyeuristic consumption of them, social media would barely exist. We also then must ask ourselves, what does the production of social media crowd out?

Signification System

Ross (1998) writes that modernism produces conformity. Goods are produced by producers for consumers; consumers then consume these goods for a variety of reasons, but one of which is to conform with society and maintain the social order. Shopping for objects and its resulting materialism involve placing these objects and their acquisition at the center of life with a belief that acquiring objects leads to happiness (Podoshen and Andrzejewski, 2012). A result of this is that consumers tend to judge one's self and others in terms of what is possessed (Veer and Shankar, 2011). This process of acquisition and judgment, some argue, is key to maintaining the social order in capitalist society. For example, Veblen (1902) argued that the use of conspicuous items helps establish a social system of classification. These conspicuous goods can be used as markers for prestige and achievement (Douglas and Isherwood, 1982; Heisley and Cours, 2007). Thus, as Firat and

Venkatesh mention (1995), modernism is ripe with objectification, however, the postmodern realm deviates from this notion of objectification and instead embraces signification and symbolism whereby consumption is not an end, but rather a moment. Here consumers search for their own meanings and experiences in the consumption process.

Reactionary modernism brings us back to the modern and its objectification, but with an additional dose of constructed myth and propaganda. Producers in the reactionary modern realm do not just seek consumers to consume for mere conspicuous purposes but rather to fully embrace the object and all that augments it as a “lifestyle.” Products are more than just tangible products with core benefits, and they’re even more than markers for social stratification. In this realm, marketers envelope consumers into 360 degree, all encompassing brand experiences. Going shopping is more than an opportunity to purchase goods, it is an experience to “live the brand.” The results are deep affinities for “mythic” brands that act as the focal point in our lives. In some cases, consumers are so enamored with the brand myth that they engage in increased concern for conspicuous consumption and increases in impulse buying (Podoshen and Andrzejewski, 2012), not for enchantment purposes, but for moving up in and/or maintaining the social order.

Concluding Remarks

Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh (1995) called for a major revolution in terms of how marketing was theorized, researched and evaluated, stating that marketing and related

consumption study could no longer be perceived merely as an instrumental discipline (studied as something that is linear and/or causal) – rather it had to become reflexive, integrated and studied as a sociocultural process. In postmodern society, this certainly held true. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), as a tradition, clearly embraced the fundamental postmodern condition. Today, however, in the reactionary modern time of transition, scholars and researchers have to understand that there is another turn taking place in the global environment, and for some, this is indeed an environment where consumers act in linear fashion; a place where conformity is king and multivocality is discouraged. For many consumers, there are no “different myths” or “different realities” – there is one acceptable myth, one acceptable reality, one acceptable narrative.

This consumption landscape is ultimately not beneficial for consumers. The age of postmodernism embraced diversity; embraced the individual. Risks could be taken in the global marketplace and individual passions could be indulged. While some may be critical of the amount of “over-indulgence” consumers engaged in, this often is an externality of enchanted consumption. The age of postmodernism should not be judged solely by its overindulgences but rather its emancipatory fervor and zeal. Conversely, this new age of reactionary modernism puts some consumers at an untenable situation with businesses, other consumers and culture. Consumers may feel compelled to conform to consumption norms or suffer the repercussions. Consumers may be discouraged from expressing themselves in over 140 characters and consumers may be conditioned to ignore prose over 140 characters. Consumers may have to deal with a loss of self-expression in the face of

modernist taskmasters. These are not good things for consumers.

From a more macro-level perspective, the age of reactionary modernism is strongly based on encouraging consumption – often to “stimulate” the economy. Consumers are directed by politicians to spend and then spend some more, largely for the quick benefit of artificially inflating the perceived success of the policies of these politicians. The result is a society whereby values are based even more specifically on consumption; not consumption as self-expression or enchanted consumption, but as consumption for the greater good. It’s over-consumption for the masses and the negative externalities associated with it will simply be buried, dealt with later or simply not mentioned at all. Critics of such policies may even be derided. In a sense, this is the modernism of the Soviet Union juxtaposed – simply substitute “production” for “consumption.” As the Soviet Union collapsed under its own weight, so will consumerspaces built on the “quick-fix” overconsumption encouragement engine.

Finally, the rise of fundamentalist-oriented products can have significant impacts on global consumer culture. Given the conspicuousness of products like modesty glasses and Mecca Cola, consumers engage in a signaling process to other consumers both inside and outside of the community. Some of these products may demonstrate to other consumers that the user is at the apex of the fundamentalist movement, and, in an effort to keep up with the fundamentalist Joneses, likeminded consumers may engage in consumption practices that outwardly appear to be even more fundamentalist and nationalist in nature – a hyperconsumption of fundamentalist-oriented products – or *conspicuous fundamentalism*.

As with conspicuous consumption, the end result may be one that harms both consumers and society as a whole; a stratified society based outward displays of possessions related to levels of engagement with modernist and reactionary ideologies and lifestyles.

Presented here are thoughts on a new age. For many, the postmodern age is one that will be missed as it ushered in a new interest and understanding related to consumption phenomena. The nature of marketing and consumption in the post-postmodern era is one that is still being distinguished, and as such, what has been written here should not be taken as the new consumption dogma (a very modern notion in itself), but rather as a starting point to a much larger conversation as we collectively navigate and explore our realm.

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