Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption

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ALLADI VENKATESH*

In this article, we elaborate on various key ideas about consumption and consumer from a theoretical position that we have labeled "liberatory postmodernism." By unmasking the limitations of modernism that have to do with the onerous nature of its metanarratives and narrow conventionalism, we show that postmodern developments offer alternate visions of consumption processes that have an emancipatory potential. The analysis in our article begins with a discussion of the philosophical foundations of modernism and postmodernism followed by a cultural critique of modernism—exposing, for example, the modernist distinction between production and consumption and the privileging of production over consumption. We demonstrate how postmodernism is concerned with the reversing of the conditions of modernity and with a wide range of issues regarding the construction of the subject (i.e., the consumer), the role of the symbolic in consumption processes, the notion of the spectacularization of life, the creation of the hyperreal, and the cultural signification of fragmentation. We conclude the article with a proposal for an epistemology of consumption that subsumes scientific knowledge under a broader category of narrative knowledge and recognizes multivocality of consumption forms.

Consumer research has been experiencing a stimulating period of self-study, debate, and rejuvenation in the last decade. One influential framework within which the debates have been conducted is labeled "modernism versus postmodernism" (Brown 1993; Featherstone 1988; Firat 1990; Firat, Venkatesh, and Sherry 1993/1994; Foster 1983; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Sherry 1991; Turner 1990; Venkatesh 1989). We have also seen ongoing debates in the various social and behavioral science disciplines exploring alternative epistemological positions based on postmodern concepts. Examples include anthropology (Clifford 1988; Crapanzano 1991; Marcus and Fischer 1986), cultural studies (Fiske 1989; Grossberg et al. 1992), geography and cultural spaces (Harvey 1989; Soja 1989), psychology (Gergen 1991), and sociology (Lash 1991; Turner 1990). Most of our taken-for-granted notions related to the consumer, consumption, markets, and consumer culture rest on certain cultural and philosophical foundations that are found in the general historical framework known as modernism (Lash 1991; Ross 1988). Postmodernism has emerged not only as a critique of modernism and its foundational domination over established constructs in consumer culture, but, in its own right, it also has emerged as a new philosophical and cultural movement (Borgmann 1992; Vattimo 1992). In this article, we propose to demonstrate how postmodernism exposes the limitations of modernism for the study of consumption and offers alternative perspectives that have a liberatory potential.

Four pressing concerns motivate our thinking in this article. The first concern is philosophical, exploring the conceptualizations that would be appropriate regarding our notions of the consumer and consumption in a postmodern world. The second concern relates to the development of appropriate epistemological positions that fully capture the postmodern consumer and postmodern consumption. The third concern is epochal and emerges out of the realization that the world of consumption is changing dramatically and new possibilities are emerging that did not exist before. This expanded scope pertains to the rise of ethnic consciousness, multiculturalism, and the global diffusion of consumer culture (Costa and Bamossy 1995; Peñaloza 1994; Sherry 1995; Shultz, Belk, and Ger 1994; Venkatesh 1995) accompanied by the rapid growth of new technologies of information and communication. Finally, the fourth concern relates to the issue of how we might avoid the reductionism of all consumption into a single logic, namely, the market logic.

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PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MODERNISM AND ITS CRITIQUE

The label "modernity" generally refers to the period in Western history starting from the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century (Borgmann 1992, p. 22) up to the present. Modernity usually refers to the time period, and "modernism" refers to the philosophical and sociocultural ideas and conditions marking this period. Among other things, modernism signifies the following conditions: (1) the rule of reason and the establishment of rational order; (2) the emergence of the cognitive subject; (3) the rise of science and an emphasis on material progress through the application of scientific technologies; (4) realism, representation, and the unity of purpose in art and architecture; (5) the emergence of industrial capitalism; and (6) the separation of the sphere of production, which is institutionally controlled and public, from the sphere of consumption, which is domestic and private. Figure 1 shows a genealogical map of the elements of the modern versus postmodern\(^1\) debates and the relevant postmodern ideas.

The recent historical evolution of the West is hailed as a success story by many because of its scientific, technological, and material accomplishments (Cahoone 1988). Despite these accounts of success, postmodern skepticism questions and criticizes modernism’s claims on philosophical, cultural, and empirical grounds. Appendix A identifies some of the core ideas of modernism that are under attack by postmodernists. Postmodernism offers a set of worldviews that distinguish it from modernism. These worldviews are varied, yet carry some common themes. In a distinction similar to the distinction between modernity and modernism, postmodernity refers to the time period overlapping with late modernity, and postmodernism refers to the cultural conditions associated with postmodernity. We use the term “associated” to emphasize that postmodern conditions (designated by the label “postmodernism”) did not suddenly appear and in fact are known to have existed during modernity (some of them even during premodernity) but were not given conceptual recognition until recently.

Critique 1

Modernism, as a social/historical construction founded in the principles of Enlightenment, has run its course (Foucault 1984). In modernity, our notions of what constitutes a modern individual or society have been guided by particular historical forces—in this case, science, rationalism, and technology. Postmodernists point out that what we see around us are not just the products of science and technology, but the processes of cultural presence that include aesthetics, language, discourses, and practices. Our notions of consumers and producers, and consumption and production are constituted as much by these cultural processes as by economic forces. Postmodernists argue that modernism has become narrow, dogmatic, and unidimensional in its working philosophy. Modernism, according to this critique, is unable to tap into the richness of human experience, regards the social order to be transparent, and deals with surface realities and simple solutions (Vattimo 1992). Concurrently, modernism has come to represent a limiting view of the individual (or the consumer) as merely a cognitive agent. By privileging science and technology over cultural and symbolic representations, it has become suspicious of pluralism looking askance at alternate or contradictory viewpoints (Said 1979).

Critique 2

Simply put, the second critique states that modernism has failed in its quest for an ethically ordered, rationally constructed, technologically oriented, seemingly progressive, and relentlessly unifying social order (Rosenau 1992). It failed because the material progress it promised has turned out to be illusory, and conditions of poverty, human misery, and violence still mark our lives. The modernist project has rendered the consumer a reluctant participant in a rational economic system that affords no emotional, symbolic, or spiritual relief to the consumer (Angus 1989). In essence, modernism has marginalized the “lifeworld” (Habermas 1984).\(^2\) The postmodernist quest is therefore to “reenchant human life” and to liberate the consumer from a repressive rational/technological scheme.

Critique 3

Modernism reduces the world into simple dichotomous categories: subject/object, male/female, producer/consumer, culture/nature, signified/signifier, Occident/Oriental, and so on. Each pair represents a difference, and usually the first term is given a superior status over the second term. Postmodernism regards these dichotomies as unsuccessful historical attempts to legitimate partial truths. Vattimo (1988) calls postmodernism a movement toward reconfiguring the “philosophy of difference” that permeates the modernist dogma.

\(^{1}\)A very closely related terminology to modernism/postmodernism is structuralism/poststructuralism. Although not synonymous, postmodernism and poststructuralism have overlapping meanings, but slightly different histories. In the social sciences, the preferred terms are “modernism” and “postmodernism” rather than “structuralism” and “poststructuralism.” For this reason and to minimize tedium we have decided to use these two terms in the text (i.e., modernism and postmodernism) while acknowledging that many postmodern ideas discussed in this article can as easily be labeled “poststructuralist.”

\(^{2}\)“Lifeworld” is a term used in phenomenological sociology and refers to civic life and community where the individual can find self-expression through more traditional forms of action and participation.
FIGURE 1
GENEALOGY OF POSTMODERNISM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Founders of Modernism</th>
<th>Key Thinkers and Early Critics of Modernism</th>
<th>Architecture and Postmodernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism as a Cultural Critique</th>
<th>Postmodernism Aligned with Poststructuralism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descartes (The Cartesian Subject as the Centered Subject, Rationalism)</td>
<td>Freud (The Unconscious Subject)</td>
<td>Critique of Modernist Architecture</td>
<td>Lyotard</td>
<td>Derrida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant (Cognitive Subject, Transcendental Truth)</td>
<td>Hegel (Phenomenology)</td>
<td>Attack on the rigid principles of Rationalism, Functionalism, Universalism.</td>
<td>Janssen</td>
<td>Foucault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locke/Hume (Empiricism, Individualism, Experimentalism in Science)</td>
<td>Marx (The Alienated Subject, Capitalism as an Ideology of Production)</td>
<td>Baudrillard (The Political Economy of the Sign, Reality as Simulation)</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Orientalism (Edward Said)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Smith (Individualism and Capitalism)</td>
<td>Heidegger (The Existential Subject)</td>
<td>Surface Life and Pastiche</td>
<td>Truth as Negotiated</td>
<td>Postmodern Society as a Consumer Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Critique of Capitalism</td>
<td>Decentering of the Human Subject</td>
<td>Deconstruction of the Cartesian (Male) Subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Normalization as a Cultural Process</td>
<td>Orient as the Other</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Critique of Objectification of the Female</td>
<td>Orient as the Creation of the West</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Epistemological Discontinuities</td>
<td>Postmodernism as a Cultural Critique</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge and Power</td>
<td>Postmodernism Aligned with Poststructuralism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications for Consumer Research:
- The role of Symbolism in Consumption: Consumer as Cognitive Agent
- Fragmented Consumer: Consumer Research as the Establishment of Scientific Truth
- Juxtaposition of the Opposites: The Study of Consumer Behavior as a Scientific Activity
- Deconstruction of the Consumer: Fragmentation as the principle of Postmodern Consumer Culture
- Social Construction of the Consumer: Hyperreality
- Radicalization of Consumer Theory: Advertising as the Ultimate Form of Symbolic Communication
- Globalism and Global Culturalism: The World as Spectacle

- The idea that the (female) consumer is packaged as a product
- Consumer Images in Advertising
- Body Culture
Critique 4

This is directed toward the paradoxical—if not outright inconsistent—character of modernism. It has to do with the ideality and reality in our lives, where real (imaginary) becomes imaginary (real), representation becomes interpretation, substance becomes form, and objects become images. Modernism, while incorporating uniqueness, actually produces conformity (Ross 1988). Thus, the paradox of modernism is the unconnectedness of its ideality to its reality. Nowhere are the paradoxes and inconsistencies of modernism more evident than in its consumer ethos. For instance, three different views or discourses of the consumer persist in modernity. According to the first view, which places the consumer in opposition to the producer, the producer creates value while the consumer destroys it. By this account, consumption is a profane act, a devouring act, for no value is produced by devouring. The second view treats the consumer as a commodity, fetishized object (Jhally 1987, chap. 2). In contrast to these unflattering views of the consumer, modernity has also rendered the consumer “sovereign” through popular marketing slogans, such as, “The consumer is king,” and “The consumer is always right.” What are we to make of these paradoxical perspectives that simultaneously vilify and glorify the consumer? Postmodernism exposes these contradictions and elevates consumption to a level on par with production, where consuming is also viewed as a value-producing activity.

Critique 5

In the field of art and architecture, modernist notions were found to be very stifling and repressive because of the primary emphasis on rationalism, functionalism, and universalism (Jencks 1987). The postmodern movement in these fields moved closer to expressive forms, symbolic representations, and the mixing of the genres. This liberatory transformation opened up countless possibilities in the world of art and architecture. Our own position (to be detailed later) reflects a similar move.

Critique 6

A final critique can be found in feminist writings (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Fraser and Nicholson 1990;Joy and Venkatesh 1994). While early forms of feminism represented a political movement toward equality for women in a male-dominated world, more recent feminist works appear to be attacks on modernism, as they are grounded in Foucauldian views of power and regimes of truth, Derrida’s deconstructionism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis.3 (See App. B for brief discussions of Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan.) Feminist attacks on modernism argue that the Cartesian subject is ultimately a philosophical construction of the masculine subject under the guise of a more universally gendered subject. That is, feminism takes its cue from deconstructionism, which itself attacks the Cartesian formulation of the centered subject. In other words, feminism turns Derrida’s critique of logocentrism into a critique of phallocentrism (Jardine 1985). This feminist critique of modernism tends to expose the modern construction of the consumer-self as the mind separable from the body, the individual separable from the social, and the human subject in control over objects of her/his creation. As the rest of this article explores, postmodernism not only reveals the paradoxes in the modern construction of the consumer, but also proposes radically different perspectives of what a consumer is.

APPRAOCHES TO POSTMODERNISM AND OUR OWN POSITION

The aforementioned critiques point to some of the major differences between modernism and postmodernism. Although there is a tendency to refer to postmodernism as a unified body of knowledge, some writers note that perhaps it is more appropriate to use the plural “postmodernisms,” to signify that it refers to a compilation of several themes with different origins or starting points (Borgmann 1992; Rosenau 1992). We have attempted in Figure 2 to illustrate this in a schematic fashion. The main ideas or metanarratives of modernism are at the center of the figure. Representing postmodernism, we have constructed different perceptual positions based on the sources of these positions.

modernist ideas by feminists. Fraser and Nicholson (1990) have argued that the postmodernist framework as represented in the work of Lyotard (1984) is inadequate to deal with the issues raised by the feminists. This is because, according to them, postmodernism is basically a philosophical critique that argues for the dissolution of metanarratives, whereas feminism is a social and political movement whose ideas are embodied to a great extent in the “social criticism” of modernism. Accordingly, feminism questions both the cultural practices of modernism and the underlying male ideology contained in such practices. Feminism is unwilling to give up its position as a metanarrative or an alternative metanarrative to male ideology and risk marginalization. In spite of this criticism of postmodernism, Fraser and Nicholson (1990) and Hekman (1990) find it necessary to combine postmodernism with feminism because their ultimate goals are the same, that is, to question the essentialism and foundationalism of modernism. As Hekman states, “Feminists, like postmodernists, attack Enlightenment epistemology, specifically its rationalism and dualism [i.e., subject/object distinction]. . . . [However] they refuse to accept the argument that these dualisms must be dissolved. . . . [only that they be] reversed” (p. 5). The project of feminism is essentially directed toward centering both the subject (i.e., the male as subject) and the object (i.e., the female as object), the former from domination and the latter from the dominated position. Because feminist theory runs parallel to postmodernism, even if it does not overlap with it, “postmodernist feminism” seems to be a label that has received greater acceptance.

3Controversy exists as to how the feminists view the postmodernist developments. There is some ambivalence in the reception of post-
These different perspectives have tended to influence each other over a period of time while maintaining their own histories and central ideas.

Central to postmodernism are ideas of culture, language, aesthetics, narratives, symbolic modes, and literary expressions and meanings. In modernism, these are all considered secondary to economy, science, concrete objectifications, analytical constructs, essences, and metaphorical representations. In terms of processes, modernism is more interested in continuities, progressions, stable order, and harmony. Postmodernism considers these processes to be illusory and fictional and argues that the micropractices of everyday life, discontinuities, pluralities, chaos, instabilities, constant changes, fluidities, and paradoxes better define the human condition. Nothing in the logic of human affairs defines the categories privileged under modernity as natural or timeless. Postmodernism rejects rigid disciplinary boundaries and is eclectic in thought and practice. In terms of social and political theory, postmodernism accepts the possibility that several theories, which may or may not agree with each other, can each have a legitimate position in human discourse. In the economic sphere of life, postmodernism considers both symbolic production and consumption to be major areas of community participation. As asserted by Soja (1989), the political economy of land as a factor of production has now been replaced by a different discourse—the cultural economy of space. Similarly, it includes multiple voices in its discourse based on gender, race, and colonial past. In particular, it decenters the modern subject first by unmasking it as a particular sociohistorical construction based on Cartesian (and male) conception, and second, by proposing alternative formulations. That is, instead of looking at the human subject in mere cognitive terms, postmodernism considers other possible profiles, such as human beings as communicative subjects guided by language as much as by rational thought. Postmodernist

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4For similar reasons that define the affinity between postmodernism/poststructuralism and feminism (see n. 3), the idea of "orientalism" (Said 1979) has been developed as a critique of modernism. Here the dualism refers to the superior colonial position of the West as the subject and the inferior colonized position of the East as the object (see also Appadurai 1993). History tells us that the Western colonization of the East blossomed with modernity.
ideas have gathered momentum in the information age by pointing out the key role electronic communications and technologies play in spectacularizing our realities. Postmodernism is very much concerned with the aestheticization of contemporary culture and the cultural signification of our contemporary lives. As Featherstone (1988) argues, the culture we live in may best be described as a signifying culture.

In sum, postmodernists view all knowledge to be a construction of one sort or another and the product of language and discourse. Thus, for example, they contend that there can be no such thing as transcendental signified or transcendental truth (Derrida 1970), or ultimate truth (Foucault 1980), or a metanarrative (Lyotard 1984), or a unilinear vision of history (Vattimo 1992). (See App. B and C.) Postmodernists view many of the modernist narratives as time-bound cultural and historical constructions. They question the universal and transcendent status accorded to such categories as reason, truth, science, knowledge, rationalism, progress, and the like. Because these categories are considered foundational to modernism, the postmodernist critique appears to attack the very foundations of modernism and in the process has been unfairly characterized as being nihilistic, if not destructive. This is, in fact, a central claim in Habermas’s (1981) critique of postmodernism. We believe that the nihilistic posture of postmodernism is more apparent than real, for what postmodernism proposes is the construction of a cultural and philosophical space that is both human and sensible. Instead of universalism in thought and practice, it offers localisms and particularisms. Instead of subject-centered reason, it offers subject-centered experiences. Instead of single truth, it acknowledges regimes of truth. Instead of science as the primary vehicle of knowledge, it gives equal status to narratives, discourses, subjective accounts, and aesthetic concerns in the grounding of knowledge. Instead of a teleological view of progress, it offers circular conceptions of historical motion and action. Finally, instead of metaphysical certainties, it proposes pragmatic contingencies. In sum, these several themes are offered as alternative visions of the world.

Celebratory Postmodernism

The celebratory or affirmative postmodernism combines a critique of modernism with a rejoicing of its end, especially the end of its grand schemes or metanarratives that once appeared to be timeless and unshakable. In anticipation of the impending dissolution of these metanarratives, celebratory postmodernism has welcomed localized narratives and the freedoms associated with them (Vattimo 1988). Affirmative postmodernism is a call to playfully, artfully, and unabashedly practice these conditions to reenchant human lives rather than sacrifice them through commitments to what postmodernists consider dead-end projects.

Critical Postmodernism

Critical or skeptical postmodernism, on the other hand, does not consider these conditions with the same enthusiasm. Rather, it is either ambivalent about the meaning of these conditions (Baudrillard 1981, 1983) or highly critical of their consequences for human society, and therefore seeks to transcend them (Jameson 1984). Skeptical postmodernists dislike the negative consequences of these conditions such as endless commercialization and commodification, loss of commitment to worthy causes, hedonism, and the general loss of social compassion. Postmodernists who are highly critical view the postmodern conditions as resulting directly from the excesses of modernism, or what Jameson calls the conditions of “late capitalism.” These critical postmodernists also differ from others in terms of what they see as the final solution. They do not suggest a return to modernist metanarratives, because, in their view, the postmodern conditions represent the culmination of these metanarratives. What they advocate is a radical break from the culture of late capitalism and a return to some sort of (unattainable?) moral utopianism (Jameson 1984; Ziegler 1991).

Liberatory Postmodernism

Our own position is akin to, but differs from, the approaches discussed above. We label our position “liberatory postmodernism.” We are closer to celebratory postmodernists in their critiques of modernism and believe in the liberating potentials of the postmodern conditions and postmodernist ideas regarding discourse and epistemology. We partially agree with Jencks (1987) that postmodern conditions cannot be considered a break from modernism but a radical extension and maturing of it.

We maintain that adopting a postmodernist position does not mean denying the existence of postmodern conditions in modernity. Rather, we argue that these

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5With a background in architecture and art history, Jencks (1987) labels postmodernism as the new social order, which is both the continuation of “modernism and its transcendence.” The principle that defines this new order is labeled by Jencks as “double coding.” In double coding, the elements of modernism are retained but their meanings and symbolic properties are altered. The result is a simulation of sorts. Jencks views postmodernism as an era of “incessant choosing. . . in which all traditions seem to have some validity. . . . The challenge for postmodern Hamlet, confronted by an embarras de riches, is to choose and combine traditions selectively, to select those aspects from the past and present which appear most relevant to the job at hand. The resultant creation, if successful, will be a striking synthesis of traditions; if unsuccessful, a smorgasbord” (p. 5). For a more updated version of Jenck's perspectives on postmodernism see his introductory essay, “The Postmodern Agenda,” in his edited volume, The Postmodern Reader (Jencks 1992). While Jencks views postmodernism and its possibilities in positive light because of the many freedoms the development suggests, Jameson views these more skeptically. Jameson (1983) calls these multiple perspectives “pastiche,” which signifies a juxtaposition of unrelated ideas, consumer experiences, and historical moments.
central to our analysis is a set of dichotomies that stem from the modernist idea of difference (Derrida 1976). The first order of dichotomies refers to the philosophic basis of the dichotomies: truth/nontruth, objectivity/subjectivity, rational/experiential, mind/body, structure (order)/organic, signified/signifier. The second order of dichotomies may be called phenomenological or social constructivist: economy/culture, production/consumption, value creation/value destruction, male/female. The third order may be loosely called epistemological: science/art, rational/irrational, functional/symbolic, universal/particular.

The first order of dichotomies helps us analyze the notion of reality and the constitution of the human subject (or the consumer). The postmodern critique enables us to consider hyperreality to be a more plausible version of reality, and it treats the human subject not as a centered, unified subject, but as decentered and fragmented. We relate the notion of fragmentation both to our perception of reality and to our construction of it. Using the second set of dichotomies, we begin the next section with an analysis of the foundational premise of modern industrial capitalism that considers production to be a value-creating activity and consumption to be a value-destuctive activity. The production/consumption dichotomy is also mirrored in the economy/culture dichotomy, which has similarly placed economy over culture as a privileged realm of discourse. We also posit that the production/consumption dichotomy is a gendered distinction, as borne out by the historical portrayal of woman as consumer and man as producer—

Modernist Construction of the Consumption/Production Dichotomy and the Beginnings of the Postmodern Critique

Given that our task is to understand the development of postmodern consumption, we must first examine what consumption means in contemporary society or, to use Foucauldian terminology, how consumption is constructed in contemporary society. While human beings have always engaged in consumption, the modern concept of consumption as separate from other phenomena seems to be rooted in other separations: the separation of home from workplace; the separation of time for work (job) from time for play (recreation, leisure); the separation of activities into public and private domains. With these separations has come the separation of consumption from production. Increasingly, activities in the private domain—that is, at home, during play—have come to be considered consumptive, and production is relegated to the public domain—the factory, the office, the workplace.

Consumption was regarded as secondary to production. It did not create anything of significant (i.e., economic) value for society or humanity. (See Table 1 for a modernistic distinction between production and consumption as value-creating and value-destuctive activities, respectively.) Consumption was only to replenish the individual to carry out the really important, meaningful, productive—thus valuable—activities in the public domain. Production was creation, because it added something of value to human lives, and thus it was considered a sacred activity (Polanyi 1977; Saffioti 1978). As such, the modern definitions of consumption and production, as well as their distinction, depend

6It is especially important for us to understand the meanings of consumption in capitalist society because capitalism is clearly the most enduring and defining form of modern social order. Furthermore, as is well explained in Mandel (1987, esp. chaps. 3 and 12) and also in Featherstone (1991), capitalism entered into an especially cozy relationship with consumer culture first with industrial production and next with therapeutically sanctioned consumption. For an interpretivist and experiential view of consumption and its multidimensional aspects in everyday life, see Holt (1995).
TABLE 1
MODERNIST CONCEPTIONS OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of production</th>
<th>Passive objects</th>
<th>Productive act</th>
<th>Mechanism factors</th>
<th>Transformational act</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production as value generation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Raw material, grain, meat, vegetables, etc.</td>
<td>Manufacturing process</td>
<td>Human labor, capital, land, technology</td>
<td>Manufacturing process and marketing</td>
<td>Useable product leads to consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>Privileged status in society, special social skills/ knowledge required</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creation of value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of consumption</th>
<th>Passive consumption object</th>
<th>Consumptive act</th>
<th>Mechanism act</th>
<th>Transformational act</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Renewable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as value destruction:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Any edible product</td>
<td>Eat, drink</td>
<td>Human body</td>
<td>Digest</td>
<td>Human waste</td>
<td>By natural processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>Wear</td>
<td>Human body</td>
<td>Wear out</td>
<td>Rags, old clothes</td>
<td>Hand-me-down or give away to poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Sit</td>
<td>Human body</td>
<td>Use/wear out</td>
<td>Old furniture</td>
<td>Give away to poor or make an antique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>Drive</td>
<td>Human body</td>
<td>Use/wear out</td>
<td>Junk</td>
<td>Give away to poor or make an antique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>Low status, no special skills required</td>
<td>Low status, no special skills required</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Destruction of value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

solely on the meaning of value. If the community of definers sees the outcome of a process or set of activities as something of value, then production has taken place. Otherwise, the activity is a profane act of consumption: pure use, devouring, and destruction.

MODERNITY, MASS CONSUMER SOCIETY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN CONSUMER

As studied elsewhere (Firat 1987; Firat and Dholakia 1982), creative activity at home has been supplanted increasingly by products bought in the market, and enterprising activity in the private domain has waned and now consists of following the instructions and standards for using these products. Consistently, activities historically performed at home, such as gardening, cooking and baking, knitting and weaving, and the like, diminished and were replaced by finished products such as silk plants, canned foods, frozen dinners, packaged bread, and ready-made clothing (Hartmann 1974). In a sense, creative labor at home has quietly surrendered its power to "productive" labor in the public domain.

The transfer of labor power from the home to the public domain, however, has not always meant equality in the transfer of people (specifically, women—the occupants of the private domain) from the private domain to the public. The transfer has been in terms of abstract labor, not of concrete labor (Hartmann 1974). The actual history of this transfer has been much more complex, of course, with women and children initially being pulled into the factories as cheap labor during the industrial revolution and then being returned to the home as "pure" consumers, their labor in the workforce being replaced by machines and male workers. The co-optation of family wages and other labor demands for benefits into the industrialists' political agenda seems to have had much to do with the growing necessity for mass consumers to broaden the market for the expanding production under a "regime of accumulation" (Harvey 1989).

Growth of Consumer Society

At the same time that the separation of production and consumption was conceived in economic terms, a parallel body of knowledge examining consumption as a sociocultural process was beginning to appear. Campbell (1987, p. 5) contends that "consumer revolution forms the necessary analog to industrial revolution." McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982) provide a de-
telled account of what they call the “emergence of consumer society.” Similarly, Marchand (1985) analyzes the growth of consumerism, in the American context, as a market-aided cultural transformation. According to these accounts, the growth of the consumer society was triggered by four major moves: (1) the separation of the private and public domains (i.e., the identification of consumption with the private [home] domain and production with the public domain); (2) the construction of the consumer society through various public discourses and practices and by media initiatives; (3) the assignment of men to the domain of production and of women to the private domain to be in charge of consumption-related activities (i.e., the conversion of women into consumers within the capitalist market process); and (4) the conversion of consumers into shoppers by the use of marketing techniques.

A point that needs to be made is that modernity gave birth to the consumer society in much the same way that it produced the industrial society. The writings of historians show that the notion of the modern consumer with culturally oriented tastes and aspirations was a social construction of the modern era. In order to make full sense of these developments, we invoke the Foucauldian framework to demonstrate that the consumer was not discovered by market processes but rather was constructed by them. Campbell (1987), Jhally (1987), and Marchand (1985) have shown that this construction was made possible through a variety of factors: consumers living a life of rising expectations, the relentless activism of marketing and advertising in creating new wants and needs that did not exist before, and the establishment of a new identity for the modern subject in the form of consumer.

To quote Hartmann (1974) in this regard, “Business literature indicates that many business leaders believed it was necessary to increase people’s desire to buy and ability to purchase, both of which they saw as a prerequisite for a consumption-oriented society. Through advertising, shorter work hours, higher wages and installment credit, they sought to create ‘a consuming family’ to supersede ‘a working family’ of the nineteenth century . . . within the ‘consumer family’ the job of setting the consumption standard and purchasing the new products fell to women” (pp. 330–332). Thus, the rhetoric of the market overlaps with the expanding role of women in the consumption process.

Women, forced back into the private domain through the social policies of the industrialized Western economies, represented their culture’s ideal image of “the consumer,” the consummate shopper (Galbraith 1973; Gerstein 1973). In such a role, women lived extremely perplexing lives and were confronted with paradoxical rhetoric and behaviors. Postmodernist claims of the paradox in modern life are easily supported by scrutinizing the conditions of women in the private domain. First of all, the so-called private domain was not private at all. Rather, the practices in and the products of the public domain largely determined life and relationships in the private domain, in terms of political-legal outcomes and products for consumer markets. Neither were women’s lives private, because women were, in many respects, the private property of men. All “assets” in the household belonged to its male head (Saffioti 1978), and a woman could do little without the man’s permission (Chodorow 1979). At the same time, public rhetoric contained much praise and flattering of women. Mothers, especially, were put on pedestals for raising stout sons and for looking after the needs of men.

This contradiction in rhetoric and economy has produced much paradoxical indoctrination of women. They have been given contradicting signals regarding what they ought to be, how they should look, and, more recently, the images they should represent. To a large extent, this seems to be an inevitable part of being a modern consumer.

Feminist Critique

The feminist critique of consumption arising out of a reaction to these various developments covers a wide spectrum of issues as exemplified in some recent publications. Some of them contest the epistemological positions of existing consumer research (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993), while others employ feminist theory to deconstruct consumer images generated through advertising (Artz and Venkatesh 1991; Stern 1993). There is also much original work outside the traditional consumer research, for example, Kaplan’s (1987) work on male voyeurism and gaze in MTV, and Bordo’s (1993) critique of the representation of the female body in contemporary consumer culture.

In light of the recent social transformation of gender roles, the consumption consequences of women’s choices regarding their work and home lives have become quite profound. Women are no longer tied to their homes as in the past and now can choose to stay in marriage or not rather than being forced by social dictate. Freedom in the social arena has transferred to the marketplace, which now recognizes the wisdom of treating women as postsuburban consumers of change instead of passive suburban housewives. Furthermore, more recent interpretations of the constitution and organization of “families” have been aided by postmodern cultural tolerances and recognition of differences (Weston 1991). This includes tolerance for same-sex parenthood, homosexual couples, and out-of-wedlock households. These interpretations challenge and transform traditional modern family gender roles and structures, thereby introducing profound changes in the significations of the consumer and consumption.

THE CULTURAL BEGINNINGS OF POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION

Culture, which originally signified all that was not nature, that is, all that was humanly constructed, be-
came separated into its components as modernity progressed. At the epistemological level, the separation yielded the distinct spheres of science, art, and morality, each with its own norms and internal logic (Foster 1983; Habermas 1981). The sphere of science was assigned the norms of reason and truth, and the purity of science became a condition for maintaining social progress. At the institutional level, similar separation resulted in the creation of the three spheres of economy, society, and polity. The idea was that with each sphere operating through its own norms or guiding principles, modernity would work more rationally. The economy, with its norms of resource efficiency, took center stage, becoming the engine of modern society, because the most important goal of the modern project was to improve human lives, particularly by providing more and better products through scientific technologies.

It is understandable, therefore, that even the most radical modernist critiques of modern systems—for example, Marxist critiques of capitalism and liberal (market-oriented) critiques of collectivism—were essentially economic critiques. Furthermore, the principal focus of these critiques was to deconstruct the system(s) of production, and they hardly ever problematized consumption.

The postmodern critique, on the other hand, is much more penetrating because it adopts a cultural position rather than a purely economic one. For example, it contends that the advent of the economy becoming so central and dominant in modernity was itself a cultural moment; that is, a modern narrative was rendered “real” with everyone treating it as if it were the “truth.” There is no doubt that culture has become a contested terrain under postmodernism. It must, however, be noted that the notion of culture is not new to human sciences; anthropologists have been studying comparative cultural systems for a long time. As Rabinow (1986) and Marcus and Fischer (1986) have noted, the historical role of anthropologists in the study of cultures has been to view them from a distance, to represent cultures as realistically and objectively as possible through observation and ethnography. It was Geertz (1973) who first introduced the idea that cultures are not represented as much as interpreted. However, as Rabinow (1986) observes, Geertz is still in the positivist or modernist mode, for interpretivism does not automatically become nonpositivist or postmodernist, just as the philosophical basis of culture as an observed reality does not change just because it is interpreted. It was therefore left to writers like Marcus and Fischer (1986), Rabinow (1986), Clifford (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and Strathern (1987) to contest the traditional approaches to the study of culture by problematizing the very idea of culture itself as an observable (not merely observed) reality. In the last decade or so, the field of anthropology has experienced a profound critical turn, but the very idea of cultural critique is not anthropological in its origin. The critique was already initiated by the members of the Frankfurt School (see Hetrick and Lazada [1994]; Murray and Ozanne [1991] for reviews) with further rupture taking place in the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, and other poststructuralists and postmodernists.

CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION

Modern and Late Modern Phase

One of the first thinkers to examine the relationship between consumption and culture was Simmel ([1900] 1978, [1903] 1971), who argued that consumption cultivated individuals by allowing them to attach their own meanings to and act upon the objects in their world. Consumption determined many consumers’ values and experiences regarding life and being. Simmel was particularly impressed by the emergence of the modern metropole and cultural economy of the city. He argued that a new identity of the consumer was being established as a result of cultural urbanization.

Taking us back into an earlier time period in history, Agnew (1986) finds some similarities between the contemporary landscape of consumption and the markets of the early Renaissance period. In an analysis of social and economic practices in England between 1550 and 1750, Agnew shows how the intersection of “commerciality” and “theatricality” became the focal point of cultural discourse during the period. He introduces the “market” as a vibrant clash of culturally mediated sensibilities and historical images that make the market appear more like a theater than a timeless, context-free site of economic exchange. To Agnew, “commerce” and “theater” are complementary terms, and his description of the market economy avers that it was always replete with meanings and cultural images. In fact, Agnew rejects, very specifically, the dichotomy of market and culture; he brings “the culture theory” down to the level of the so-called price system. Similarly, he attempts to raise economic thinking from unbridled reductionism to “higher” levels of cultural discourse.

More recently, the idea of the culture of consumption as a framework within which consumer behaviors can be studied and understood has been put forth forcefully by Douglas and Isherwood (1979): “The individual human being, stripped of his humanity, is of no use as a conceptual base from which to make a picture of human society. No human exists except steeped in the culture of his time and place. The falsely abstracted individual has been sadly misleading to Western Political Thought. But now we can start again at a point where major streams of thought converge, at the other end, at the making of culture. Cultural analysis sees the whole tapestry as a whole, the picture and the weaving process, before attending to the individual threads” (p. 63).

Douglas and Isherwood go on to show how in various domains of consumption, such as food, clothing, and various other goods, activities become highly symbolic
acts that are invested with meanings derived from cultural frameworks. Goods become means of conveying messages among individuals and groups of individuals. A similar idea is also to be found in contemporary consumer research, especially in the works of Levy (1981) and McCracken (1988; see App. D).

Marcuse (1956) had earlier argued from a Marxist position that consumerism was a product of capitalism, a system in which producers created false needs and exploited consumers. Barthes (1972) further problematized the whole notion of false and true needs by arguing that what was missing in this analysis was the symbolic code of consumption. He maintained that there was a dual aspect to consumption—first, it fulfills a need, and second, it is also embedded within the social, cultural, and symbolic structures. The function of consumer goods satisfying material needs cannot be separated from the symbolic meanings of commodities, or what Barthes calls “significations.” Consumption for Barthes is embedded within systems of signification, of making and maintaining distinctions.

Bourdieu (1984) takes the structures of signification to new dimensions. In his book *Distinction*, he provides a comprehensive framework for the symbolic processes in consumption. He contends that social “reality” is constructed for human beings through structurations that are crucially determined by the economic that, in turn, has to be mediated by the symbolic. As a result of structuration, then, consumer tastes develop that are determined socially, not privately. Bourdieu appears to be both a structuralist and a poststructuralist in his analysis. He states that consumption takes place within the social structures. In this sense the element of social class is key to the formation of tastes. However, the social class characteristics are not merely determined by the usual demographics but are also based on what Bourdieu calls the “habitus,” the set of practices appropriate to the differential groups. These tastes, as much constructed by consumption experiences as by the economic condition, reflect and represent a symbolic hierarchy that further determines consumption choices. The symbolic hierarchy is based on what Bourdieu calls symbolic power, which is derived from the different types of capital people possess. Countering the conventional wisdom that sees capital only in economic terms, Bourdieu identifies four kinds of capital: economic, cultural, educational, and symbolic. These systems of capital give power to people to determine how tastes are developed within social groups. Bourdieu argues that what confers distinction on people is the notion of difference—resonating a Derridean idea. That is, distinction through symbolic differentiation is what underlies the cultural system.

Finally, for Bourdieu, while the social structure is the site of consumption, it is not a determinant of specific consumption practices and the symbolic aspects of consumption. In other words, structures may provide positions, but not necessarily the symbolic codes or meanings. Bourdieu argues that structures do not account for all symbolic activities. For example, people in lower social groupings may emulate those at higher echelons by adopting their codes, and vice versa. While Bourdieu’s work has defied traditional classification, either in terms of structuralism/poststructuralism or modernism/postmodernism, Lash (1991) views Bourdieu as a postmodernist, contrary to some other claims (see Wacquant 1989, p. 27 and n. 8).

Once we acknowledge the role of culture and the symbolic modes, practices, and behaviors as the basis of understanding consumption, we have to look for cultural spaces where such practices occur. Instead of evaluating cultural practices as part of a metanarrative or of a grand scheme of social behavior, we need to turn to everyday life as the site for expressions of cultural symbolism. The idea of everyday practices as guiding themes of life can be found in the writings of postmodern thinkers. For instance, Foucault (1977) refers to micropractices of normalization as possible sources of insights, Lyotard (1984) discounts metanarratives as too troublesome and opts for local narratives, and feminists prefer to examine the practices of discrimination in everyday life, while Bourdieu (1984) looks to tastes and behaviors as everyday significations.

In sum, the writings of Douglas, Barthes, Bourdieu, and others lead us to an important postmodern conclusion that culture and economics are closely linked; material production and cultural configurations go solidly hand-in-hand (Angus and Jhally 1989; Ross 1988). In addition, aesthetics and economics interact dialectically to produce the aesthetics of commodity form and the commodification of the aesthetic subject. There is a simultaneous reification of aesthetics and economics into a single cultural form that becomes the essence of the consumer society (Baudrillard 1975). For example, artistic works that rebel against economic domination are themselves converted into economic objects and brought into the world of commodification, which the artistic work was created to oppose in the first place. This is an example of commodification of a critique in which the critique is rendered incapable of standing on a footing equal to and opposing its original target of attack. If the critique cannot be reappropriated successfully by the market economy, then it is marginalized. Thus, there are only two possibilities for cultural critique in a modern market: reappropriation or marginalization. There is no way for the critique to mediate between the dominant and dominated, for it is always and already dealt with by the dominant mode.

**Postmodern Phase**

It is the exposing of these possibilities and those beyond marketization that identify postmodernism as

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7Here is the relevant quote from Lash (1991, p. 254): “Bourdieu’s position on these matters is a far cry from Habermas’s universalistic modernism. It is instead much closer to the postmodern-type power/knowledge assumptions of Foucault.”
both a critique and a celebration. In other words, the logic of production (order, coherence, and systematic and scientific thinking) is no longer the criterion by which consumption is evaluated, nor is it necessary for consumption. The process of consumption, therefore, is liberatory, paradoxically combining both the “real” and the imaginary; in it, one can consume objects, symbols, and images, increasingly recognized to be one and the same. The only requirement in modernism is that consumption take place within the (capitalist) market logic, that is, through the exchange of money for goods and services or with money itself as an exchangeable commodity. However, as the tight reins of the modern metanarratives on social consciousness become looser and a postmodern sensibility waxes, the perceived dependency on products and their claimed universal and unique functions, utilities, and values wanes. The understanding that no object has any inherent function or value independent of the symbolic gains greater acceptance, and the illusory separations between the real and the simulation, the material and the imaginary, the product and the image dissolve. This dissolution enables the consumer to actively engage in the aesthetics of life experiences. On the other hand, it also propels the marketer to spectacularize the living environments. It becomes clear that the Disney World fantasy is no more a fantasy than the suburban communities or the metropolitan cities where we are compelled to conduct our everyday lives. A McDonald’s hamburger is no more or less a simulation of a homemade hamburger, adapted to fast-food production requirements, than the hamburger we cook at home is a simulation of a Big Mac; but Big Mac has now become the image of a hamburger around the world. In fact, they all become simulations of one sort or another, some more fantastic than others and more spectacular, but all (ready to become) a spectacle, nevertheless. With this growing awareness, the consumption sector turns more and more toward the consumption of images, the society at large becomes more and more a society of spectacle. The best articulation of the society as spectacle, and of the relationship between production and consumption within the context of the spectacle (which Baudrillard [1983] calls the hyperreal), is contained in the following passage by Debord ([1967] 1983):

The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. The spectacle’s form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system’s conditions and goals. The spectacle is also the permanent presence of this justification, since it occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production. (Chap. 1, par. 6, p. 3)

POSTMODERNITY AND THE WORLD OF SYMBOLISM AND SPECTACLE

The age of postmodernism may truly be called the age of the symbol and spectacle. Vattimo (1992) has argued that the new technologies of information and communication permit spectacularizations that have not been possible before, leading to what he calls “the fabling of the world” (p. 24). Appadurai (1990) has shown that the spectacularization of consumer culture knows no national boundaries but has become clearly global. Living the spectacle reinforces the dominance of consumption over production. In postmodernism, production is considered neither the most meaningful
activity nor the domain of creation of value as it was in modernism. Postmodernism "has displaced the locus of analysis from the domain of production to the realm of consumption" (Mourrain 1989). Consumption is the moment in the process where symbolic exchanges that determine and reproduce the social code occur, where "there is an active appropriation of signs, not the simple destruction of an object" (Poster 1975, p. 6). The implication of this reversal in postmodernism is that consumption is not the end, but a moment where much is created and produced. It is not a personal, private act of destruction by the consumer, but a very social act wherein symbolic meanings, social codes, political ideologies, and relationships are produced and reproduced (Breen 1993). Postmodernist insights lead us to conclude that production never ceases, that it is a continual process, that at every moment of consumption something is produced: an object, the person, or in general, the signifier, the image, and the symbol. The production of the symbol becomes a spectacular activity. Symbols have no particular origins and can be manipulated via a system of signs. In this process, the consumer becomes a consumer of symbol/spectacle, for that is how objects are presented to her/him. In this symbolic/spectacular universe, at a time when the market rules, consumers look for meanings and experiences while marketers produce the spectacles.

As mentioned earlier, Debord (1983) describes contemporary society as the society of the spectacle, a realm in which everything is removed from real experience and becomes an inverted representation of itself. The spectacle circumscribes reality, and any experience or discourse that arises within it becomes a spectacle. In the contemporary market, ordinary gestures and the activities of daily life are prepackaged as glamorous and seductive; commodities come complete with preordained roles and lifestyles; even dissent and critique are commodified and sold to those who experience and produce them. In Debord's words, therefore, "Reality rises up within the spectacle, and only the spectacle is real" (chap. 1, par. 8, p. 4).

Baudrillard (1983) extended Debord's thesis by arguing that there can be no possibility of critical discourse if the spectacle is all-encompassing. Baudrillard, therefore, has come up with the notion of hyperreality and called it "more real than reality itself" (Baudrillard 1983, p. 147). He means that one can always come up with a better version of whatever one regards as reality (i.e., a social construction), and that constitutes the basic ontology of our contemporary society.

To Baudrillard (1981), the society of the spectacle has become the society of signification, and "an object is not an object of consumption unless it is released from its psychic determinations as a symbol, from its functional determinations as an instrument, from its commercial determinations as a product; and is thus liberated as a sign to be captured by the formal logic of fashion, i.e., by the logic of differentiation" (p. 67). Moving beyond the Marxian analysis of exchange value, he sees all human relationships as grounded in the sign value. The world is neither representational nor material, but purely symbolic. It is more than symbolic—it is significatory. The consumer-object becomes a code or a signifier, and a free-floating one at that, for meanings change through a logic of fashion or differentiation.

While we agree with Baudrillard that the current consumption scene is embedded in the cultural economy of the sign, we do not subscribe to his pessimistic conclusion that the consumer loses her/his sense of identity and purpose in the aura of the spectacle. On the other hand, as Harvey (1989, pp. 288–291) has shown, postmodernism creates arenas of consumption that are fluid and nontotalizing, which means that consumers are free to engage in multiple experiences without making commitments to any. 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 these 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.

CONDITIONS OF POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION

The notion of representation is already fundamental in modernist thought. The original meaning of representation was the capturing or comprehending of "objective reality" through direct observation, artistic transformation (e.g., painting, photography), or scientific modeling. Scott (1994a) calls this "mimetic" representation, which dates back to the period of classical Greece and was later reformulated during the Renaissance through the development of the "rules of perspective." In postmodernism, representation has also come to mean the construction of the real as played through the human imagination without reference to objective reality. This means that intervention into reality is possible not only by the application of technology but also by other forms of human control. The construction of reality, therefore, suggests that reality is not always treated as a given but is subject to manipulation for aesthetic or commercial purposes. Such a notion of representation lies at the heart of the postmodern market culture, as witnessed in the design of products and packaging (Meamber 1995), in the creation of spectacular shopping environments and other private and public commercial spaces (Belk and Bryce 1993; Harvey 1989), and even in the (re)making of the human body (Joy and Venkatesh 1994). The postmodern imaginary tends to liberate this process of repre-
sentation from the current control of marketing organizations, allowing the individual consumers to participate in the process. Expressed in a different way, postmodern consumption is a movement toward the deconstruction of the marketing organization, its capillarization, that is, its diffusion into the hands of each and every consumer. In this universe of the symbolic and the spectacle, the sensational plays a role as important as the role of the rational. The omnipotence of the sensational, along with the rational, is powerfully evidenced in the role that the spectacle and the simulation play in the construction of social reality. (See Exhibit 1 for a chart of postmodern conditions and their main themes.)

Hyperreality

According to Vattimo (1992), we live in a world that is a continuous making of the present, especially through electronic media. What is experienced momentarily becomes the real, and the construction of this condition and its intensification constitute the hyperreal. An aspect of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983; Eco 1986) is the inclination or willingness among members of the culture to realize, construct, and live the simulation. A simulation can also be described as a chain of endless significations wherein a signifier is replaced by another signifier in a continuous play (Derrida 1970). When these simulations capture the imagination of a community, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community. Examples abound, as in the case of the thematization of urban centers (Soja 1989) and the growth of cultural technologies (Berland 1992).

There are many ways in which the consumer society exhibits its enthusiastic involvement in such simulations: tourists in droves visit the IMAX theater next to the Grand Canyon to watch it on film to “really experience it”; visitors to Las Vegas become absorbed in the experience of the simulated volcano in front of the Mirage Hotel or the “Forum” at Caesar’s Palace that simulates a Roman marketplace; theme and simulation parks, such as Fossil Rim in Texas that recreates an African Safari, induce great excitement in their visitors. There is also widespread “Disneyfication” and/or the thematization of all urban and suburban experience, from the shopping malls to town centers. All of these developments require technologies of simulation, and we continue to locate new possibilities in the new technologies of information and communication.

The images, sensations, and ideas (re)presented or evoked in and through these simulations seldom, if ever, follow a linear logic. Most often, they are disjointed—as in music videos (Kaplan 1987)—and lack a unified meaning or center. On the other hand, no one can claim that they do not conjure meanings or emotional and cognitive reactions. These meanings and reactions are just as often disjointed and disconnected, yet they leave the human being with a sense of encounter that poses and constitutes her/his experience of life (and reality). These meanings and reactions seep into our senses and impact our reason; they impress themselves upon us. It is the effort on the part of modernists—their attempt to reduce all this richness and complexity to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit 1</th>
<th>POSTMODERN CONDITIONS AND THEIR MAIN THEMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reality as part of symbolic world and constructed rather than given</td>
<td>Consumption experiences are multiple, disjointed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signifier/signified (structure) replaced by the notion of endless signifiers</td>
<td>Human subject has a divided self</td>
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<tr>
<td>The emergence of symbolic and the spectacle as the basis of reality</td>
<td>Terms such as “authentic” self and “centered connections” are questionable</td>
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<tr>
<td>The idea that marketing is constantly involved in the creation of more real than real</td>
<td>Lack of commitment to any (central) theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The blurring of the distinction between real and nonreal</td>
<td>Abandonment of history, origin, and context</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marketing is an activity that fragments consumption signs and environments and reconfigures them through style and fashion</td>
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<td>Fragmentation as the basis for the creation of body culture</td>
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Persistence of the pastiche as the underlying principle of juxtaposition | Consumption experiences are not meant to reconcile differences and paradoxes but to allow them to exist freely | Acknowledges that fragmentation, rather than unification, is the basis of consumption |

Pastiche as the underlying principle of juxtaposition | Consumption experiences are not meant to reconcile differences and paradoxes but to allow them to exist freely | Acknowledges that fragmentation, rather than unification, is the basis of consumption |
the singular dimension of reason, a linear logic—that the postmodernists repudiate and find disenchanting. Thus, the postmodernist purpose is to find enchantment in life. Therefore, the movement has originally and continually been aesthetic and cultural (Foster 1983).

One development that is closely related to hyperreal condition is the emergence of cyberculture. This represents a major social transformation brought about by the technologies of computers, information, and telecommunications, which are referred to as postmodern technologies by some key thinkers (Lanham 1993; Poster 1990, 1995; Vattimo 1992). As Escobar (1994, p. 213) reminds us, “Cyberculture is in fact fostering a fresh reformulation of the question of modernity in ways no longer mediated by (conventional) literary and epistemological considerations.” While modernist technologies were viewed basically as machines of production and in instrumental terms, postmodern technologies are viewed as communication tools that permit movement in cyberspaces, virtual realities, and computer-mediated environments. Poster (1995) refers to these developments as creating new forms of identities and new symbols of communication and consumption. In his earlier work (Poster 1990), he identified them collectively as “the mode of information,” as opposed to the “mode of production” (the paradigm of modernity). The postmodern nature of the new technologies becomes apparent as one sees in them the intensification of the hyperreal, the unraveling of power hierarchies (e.g., via the internet), the reempowerment of the consumer, and the fragmentation of cultural and social spaces. Granted that the full implications of these developments have not been understood and that we are forced to engage in speculative modes of thought, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the various discursive practices associated with the experiences of these new technologies.9

Today, the dominance of marketing and advertising over everyday life may be viewed as a culture in itself: the marketing culture. Marketing culture is defined as the systematic creation of cultural forms through the actions of marketing and advertising. Goldman and Sapson (1994) call this a culture of “hypersignification.” The key to the dominance of marketing culture, to use Derridean terminology, is the transformation of the commodity from a natural thing into a linguistic sign. Several observers of contemporary culture have expressed that advertising has become the prevailing form of public discourse (e.g., Ewen 1988; Miller 1988; Moyers 1989). The fact that the sign is now marketed, rather than the thing, yields a curious result: because signs cannot wear out in the way things do, contemporary culture is characterized by an endless reappropriation and recontextualization of past signs. Postmodern culture, in this sense, is fashion—the continuous rehabilitation of images, styles, and tropes (Barthes 1983; Faurschou 1987). It is in the realm of consumption, therefore, that such rehabilitation takes place and where signs—more important, the meanings of signs—are produced, reproduced, manipulated, reconstructed, appropriated, and discarded (Leary 1968).

Fragmentation

In this greater attention to the symbolic and the spectacle—the multidimensionality and multilayeredness of the collages of images that determine human sensibility and sensitivity beyond reason—there is a fragmentation of life, experience, society, and, most important, of the metanarratives (Lyotard 1992; Wilson 1989). Such fragmentation is not necessarily viewed negatively in postmodernist thought. After all, fragmentation of the metanarrative allows the liberation and acceptance of indifferences, as well as putting an end to the dominance of any one “regime of truth.” Fragmentation means, literally, the breaking up into parts and erasing of the whole, single reality into multiple realities, all claiming legitimacy, and all decoupling any link to the presumed whole. With the increasing role that consumption plays in human lives, fragmentation now pervades all activities. The fragmentation in communications is of much significance, the reason being that signification and representation, both largely communicative processes, determine and transform reality. The individual is freed from seeking or conforming to one sense or experience of being; the disenchantment from having to find consistent reason in every act, in every moment, is transcended, and the liberty to live each moment to its full emotional peak, for the experience, for the excitement of the senses, for the pleasure, is regained, even when each moment, each spectacle, does not connect into a logical, centered, unified meaning. Thus, we have the emergence of the fragmented subject, a subject whose multilayered existence seeks neither depressive unity nor conformity but freedom of movement in an expansive space.

With the end of metanarratives due to fragmentation, and with the freedom to live in fluid spaces, comes the end of pretension to commitments. All is represented as a bricolage (Newman 1986) of recontextualized, multilayered, and multimeaning images. In this world of shifting images, there is no single project, and no one lifestyle, no one sense of being to which the individual needs to commit. Furthermore, the postmodernist is well aware of the incongruousness and disillusionment associated with modernist projects that promised much “progress” yet produced only disenchantment. The postmodernist is willing to live the fragmented moments and the thrill of the spectacle without committing to any one moment. S/he is content to live with the paradoxes that may arise from the fragmentation, the free

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9 Limitations of space do not permit us to expand on the nature of cyberculture and virtual communities, but readers are referred to some recent electronic essays (see, e.g., Curtis and Nichols 1994; Serpentelli 1994).
juxtapositions of objects (therefore, even of opposites) in the bricolage. Yet, in its current state, the market still adheres to modern criteria while awaiting a postmodern deconstruction (Süderem 1994). As we expressed earlier, it constantly regulates the consumers’ desires and intents to signify and represent rejection or repulsion of the dominant culture or, constructively, for a new vision. It manages this through resilient co-optation of the countercultural expressions into the mainstream culture, as items for the commercial market, by emptying these expressions (and symbols) of their initial meanings.

Decentering the Subject

The idea of the subject is at the heart of postmodern thinking. The fragmented subject, discussed earlier, represents a state of destabilization of the Cartesian unified subject. Destabilization also means decentering of the subject from its privileged position. For Derrida (1976), the deconstruction of Western metaphysics cannot be accomplished without decentering the human subject from such a position. Similarly, for Foucault, there can be no transcendental subject, but only an everyday subject, that is, a subject who is very much a product and part of the discourses and practices in which s/he is embedded. Being embedded should not be confused with being centered. Postmodernist perspective on the decentered subject can best be described by a quote from Fiske (1989):

The classic theories of subjectivity (whether social or psychoanalytical) stress the resolution of contradictory forces in favor of the dominant: they explain the construction of social subjectivity in terms of the victory of the dominant forces. Their outcome is, inevitably, a relatively unified single subject, or subject in ideology. More recent theories, however, stress the disunity, contradictory subject, in which the social struggle is ongoing, in which the contradictory subject positions sit sometimes uncomfortably, sometimes relatively comfortably, together. (P. 180)

Recognition dawns that the centering of the subject and her/his position of control over her/his own ends and life were always suspect or could never be realized. Postmodernists neither seek nor buy into the necessity of centering the subject. The subject is just another modernist narrative, just another story constructed and then committed to. In postmodernism, the individual is freed from having to be, have, or seek a center, freed from another commitment imposed by modernist metanarratives. Given the suspicion that the subject was never the center or in control, and coupled with the intention to free the subject (oneself) from commitment, postmodernism embraces the confusion (or the fusion) between the subject and the object. As a matter of fact, examples from modern society abound wherein the object is in control of the human being, once constructed and culturally signified. Thus, the object (the product consumed) can set the parameters and the rules of the consumption process (Firat 1987; Firat and Dholakia 1982).

Recent work on consumer possessions (Belk 1988) and the application of object relations theory in consumer research have added some new dimensions to our understanding of how consumers relate to objects and objects relate to consumers (Sherry 1986, 1993, 1995). Postmodern subjectivity problematizes this relationship as consumers increasingly have come to be acted upon by objects. The products have begun to determine the process and procedures of consumption activity, with consumers merely following product instructions. Failure to follow instructions can and often does have adverse, sometimes fatal, consequences. More and more, in an ironic twist of social ordering, individuals, as economic actors, are defined by their role that aids the market in achieving its economic goals, rather than the market and its products being the instruments of consumer welfare. Products of the market become active agents, as in the case of television that has re-organized human lives and relationships, or as declared in many an advertising copy (e.g., “Coty makes it last”). This argument is developed in very interesting ways by Appadurai (1986), who argues that objects have lives, not in the psychophysical sense, but in the imputed sense of cultural fetishism. In a similar fashion, Sherry (1995, p. 31) talks about the centrality of phenomenological relationship between the consumer and the object that leads to “the production of consumption.”

Reversal of Production and Consumption

In this process of merging the subject and the object, another myth in the modernist ideology is exposed: there is no natural distinction between consumption and production; they are one and the same, occurring simultaneously. Each act of production is also an act of consumption, and vice versa, that is, there is a cycle of production and consumption. During the moment that is called consumption in modern (economic) literature, the products are acting on the individual to produce a certain type of human being. Different consumption patterns produce different mentalities. In modern society, the human being thus produced is one who is ready, able, and willing to be commodified and objectified, to be consumed by the system, which needs it as labor power. Postmodern sensibility does not oppose this condition, but removes the stigma that modern thought would attach to such objectification since the issue in postmodernism is not to dwell on oppositional, binary categories, such as object/subject, but to liberate the construction of all from imposed narratives and myths.

Juxtaposition of the Opposites

Once the opposition between subject and object is dissolved, they can be mutually represented and jux-
tapsed at all times. Opposing and disconnected juxtapositions are found increasingly in contemporary culture, as in architecture where the modernist, universalist requirements of technical and functional efficiencies have been abandoned (Jencks 1987). It is now possible to juxtapose rococo, Roman, modern, and Greek architectural features in one building. The purpose is to consummate artistic or aesthetic pleasure by abandoning the received rules in architecture. Liberation from commitment and necessity of centered connections, and a tolerance for juxtaposition of anything with anything else, allow for abutting opposites. This new “architecture” of all consumers’ surroundings, from thematized shopping malls to the forms and sights of the city (Gottdziener and Lagopoulos 1986; Kling, Olin and Poster 1991; Soja 1989), also contributes to the redefinition of the conditions for consumption.

“Postmodernism refuses to privilege any one perspective, and recognizes only difference, never inequality, only fragments, never conflict” (Wilson 1989, p. 209). This is largely the consequence of the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions and cognitions regarding perspectives, commitments, ideas, and things in general. Anything is at once acceptable and suspect. On the one hand, this “very imprecision of the concepts of postmodernism and the postmodern is exciting, even liberating” (Wilson 1989, p. 208). On the other hand, juxtaposition of opposites, when it becomes a dominating orientation toward anything, tends to create total irony, ambiguity, and finally, pastiche (Bouchet 1994; Jameson 1983).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE POSTMODERN CONSUMER

The postmodern conditions that best describe the consumer are fragmentation and decenteredness. We demonstrated earlier that the fragmented subject is also a decentered subject. Fragmentation does not mean that the consumer is resorting to some sort of nihilism or occupying an inferior social or personal space (Gergen 1991). We consider fragmentation an emancipatory response to the totalizing logic of the market. The postmodern consumer attempts to restructure his/her identities in the face of overpowering market forces. As Patricia Waugh (1992, p. 123) reminded us, fragmentation is an “onslaught on the bondage of thought to regulative ideals such as ‘unity’ and ‘truth.’” Fragmentation and decentering constitute moves toward greater emancipation. As various theorists (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990; Nancy 1991; Vattimo 1988) have pointed out, modernity conceives of emancipation in linear, evolutionary, and progressive historical terms, only to ensnare the individual in binary oppositions and repressive uniformities. Similarly, conventional views of the consumer are couched in terms of hierarchy of needs, binary decision-making processes (yes/no, go/no go, etc.), choice and choicelessness, all of which are claimed to rest on the ostensible autonomy of the consumer but are, in fact, totalizing concepts. Postmodernism permits us to conceive of the individual as engaging in nonlinearities of thought and practice, in improbable behaviors, contingencies, and discontinuities (Gergen 1991).

It is in this regard that postmodernism begins to locate the consumer in emancipated spaces. We also view the consumer in a decentered context or within the context of everyday life and practices instead of trying to examine the consumer under the lens of grandiose or unifying theories. That is, the picture of the postmodern consumer that is most plausible is the view presented to us by Bourdieu (1984) in terms of his “habitus,” or what Fiske (1992) calls the culture of everyday life.

We see the unfolding of fragmentation in real life in many interesting ways because of the contemporary lifestyles. Even within families, as the number of cars, television sets, microwave dinners, and so on, multiply, the family members find options that did not exist before. Each individual consumer—each family member—can watch a different television program (which, recently has been causing major problems for Nielsen ratings), eat prepackaged meals according to individual tastes and schedules, and jog along his/her own preferred route listening to his/her own music choices on his/her own Walkman. To represent the variety of different images sought, each private consumer engages in multiple consumption experiences.

To say that fragmentation leads to an emancipatory position for the consumer is not to deny that the market continues to exploit the notion of fragmentation in its treatment of the consumer. In a period of largely modern production systems and postmodern consumer sensibilities, the consumers frequently find themselves in a dilemma, and most experience some level of stress. Anxiety becomes one of the major motivators of consumption (Bouchet 1991). The cartoon in Figure 3 illustrates this point much more vividly than words can. To quote Goldman and Sapson (1994) in this regard: “Advertisers perfected the art of depicting self in terms of constituent body parts, fetishising each body part so it corresponded to appropriate commodities. Typically, advertising fetishism was defined by linear editing practices that set up assumptions of causality between properly commodified body parts and desirable social outcomes” (p. 36).

Given a system that centralizes (in large corporations) the “production” of objects, in the search to present an individual image, the consumer ends up, paradoxically, in the position of buying and consuming more of the same products (cars, television sets, designer clothing) that millions of others buy, only to wind up in limbo, never committed to one special image, product, or lifestyle, and always experiencing conflicting emotions and cognitions (such as hating being a “couch potato” while enjoying watching television). Left with the role of the voyeur (as in watching television), the consumer is in-
creasingly passive, being the presence necessary, so to speak, for the product to perform a function.

Indeed, in all its roles, the market itself is highly fragmented. Each product in the market is the star as it is presented (e.g., in advertising) and purchased, fragmented from all others. Consequently, in the supermarket, for example, you do not find the ingredients for an omelet all together. The eggs, salt, onions, and cheese are all in different departments. These departments do not bring ingredients of a meal together; rather, they bring together different brands of the same ingredient, making each consumption item stand on its own, removed from its companions in the preparation of a dish. This simple example generally holds true in other cases, such as clothing items and household durables. This indicates the potential autonomy of each product, the rather increased specialization that each product represents, having its own singular purpose, doing its own specialized task.

Yet, a product is also autonomous of its use. As we expressed earlier, there is no natural link between a product and its use. Rather, the link is cultural and arbitrary. Imagine, for example, the uses to which a mixer could be put by a child who is not yet acculturated into the system of a kitchen. It is questionable whether even an adult who has never seen a mixer nor had experience in a Western kitchen would be able to guess the purpose ascribed in this culture to a mixer. Artists recognized this freedom of objects from their use as early as shop window designers began juxtaposing independent objects in shop windows to create "spectacles." Thus, utilitarian objects, such as toilet seats, meat grinders, and sewing machines, were signified (attached or imbued with meanings) beyond their utility; on the canvases of painters, in sculptured pieces, each product of industrial production became an icon in its own right (Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990).

The fragmentation, reinforced by the autonomy of products from each other and their initially designated functions, has contributed to another process which extended and expanded the market. The growing substitution of household creative activity by products of socially organized production almost necessarily led to greater specialization of products. It has been hard to provide the market with products that have multiple uses, especially when these products are mass-produced and have to satisfy different consumer segments. A refrigeration unit or a washing machine, for example, can be manufactured with only a single function in mind. The paradox here is that the culture limits the use of a produced object that is, in fact, independent of its use. This cultural limitation or specialization is not adverse, of course, to the growth of the market needed by the industrialized mass-production in the public domain. The fact is that the more specialized each product, the more products a consumer must buy to do different tasks, thus the greater the potential for market expansion. The developments in culture, evolving structures in consumption, and the necessities of market growth have been "surprisingly" consistent and complimentary.

But this is not postmodern consumption. It is consumption stimulated by the postmodern conditions that were always already present in modernity—but that are now increasingly liberated thanks to the waning of modern ideologies and the waxing of postmodern culture—caught in the contemporary primacy of the market. As the hegemony of the market decreases and the postmodern culture gains ground, consumers, as producers of their self-images and (hyper)realities, will find a new freedom that is partially possible to predict and partially yet to be discovered.

**TOWARD AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION**

From our previous analysis in this article of postmodern developments, we believe it is clear that we need to rethink our conceptualizations of consumption and the consumer. In this regard, we continue what has
TABLE 2
SHIFTING EMPHASIS FROM MODERNISM TO POSTMODERNISM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophical system</strong></td>
<td>Reality (single)</td>
<td>Hyperreality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logocentric reason</td>
<td>Multiple realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge (essentialism)</td>
<td>Constructed realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth (objective)</td>
<td>Virtual realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mind</td>
<td>Realities as paradoxes and contradictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>Hermeneutic reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumption system</strong></td>
<td>Reality cognitively comprehended</td>
<td>Consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Production</td>
<td>Consumer as consumer and producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer as consumer</td>
<td>Consumption as symbolic system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumption system as economic system</td>
<td>Consumer research as constructive knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer research as distance/objective knowledge</td>
<td>Culture and cultural economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Shift from exchange value to sign value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject/consumer</strong></td>
<td>Cartesian subject</td>
<td>Symbolic subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive subject</td>
<td>Communicative subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unified subject</td>
<td>Fragmented subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Centered subject</td>
<td>Decentered subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Totalized subject</td>
<td>Liberated subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Signification system</strong></td>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>Signification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Objectification</td>
<td>Symbolism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science/language/myth/humanism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

been set in motion earlier by Sherry (1991). In suggesting a possible epistemology, we make no claim that it is a definitive epistemology of postmodern consumption but seek to explore the possibilities.

In developing our ideas we are closer to the spirit of the epistemological debates that have preceded us in some other disciplines. For example, in anthropology, the works of Appadurai (1990), Clifford (1988), Fox (1991), and Marcus and Fischer (1986) clearly point to some serious concerns about the traditional notions of subjectivity and identity, and of scientific writing and interpretation; the relationship between the researcher and the researched; and the global dynamics between the East and the West. In sociology, the epistemological concerns have been expressed in phrases such as “the end of sociological theory and the postmodern hope,” “postmodern story telling versus pragmatic truth seeking,” and “postmodern anxiety and the politics of epistemology” (Antonio 1991; Lash 1991; Seidman 1991). We encounter similar debates in cultural studies (Grossberg et al. 1992) and organizational studies (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Clegg 1994). These and other discussions reflect the insular nature of various social science disciplines and a certain discomfort in clinging to the modernist paradigm.

**Systems for Exploration**

We have delineated four areas for exploration: (1) the philosophical system, (2) the consumption system, (3) the idea of the subject/consumer, and (4) the signification system. Under each area of inquiry we have identified several categories. These categories should not be considered exhaustive, but they do represent the themes we have touched on in this article.

To aid us in this project, we have developed a scheme that is shown in Table 2. The two columns of the table represent the categories under modernism and postmodernism. Instead of detailing each category, we provide a general discussion of the contents of the table.

In reference to the philosophical system, we reiterate that the postmodern conception of reality is not in terms of how reality is cognitively comprehended or represented. It is a lived or phenomenological, experienced reality (or realities) that is constructed or virtual (Deleuze 1994). We also see reality as a system of signs (Derrida 1970). Clearly, postmodernism favors the idea of hyperreality that follows from the argument that reality is not something out there but something that more often than not is created. The notion of hyperreal is intended to distinguish it from the modernist notion of reality as uncontested and singular. Similarly, truth is regarded as a construction (Foucault 1977). In-
stead of a generalized notion of universalism, the postmodern conceptualization of truth accommodates localisms and particularisms that may indeed stand in contradiction to each other. This immediately raises the issue that we cannot have a single or unified theory of consumption, so we need perhaps several theories of consumption. This means that as consumer researchers we have to recognize that consumer processes may not be the same across cultural and subcultural groups both as empirical reality and theoretical possibility. As consumer researchers, we must resist the temptation of developing overarching theories of consumption processes that ignore localisms and particularisms based on phenomenological experiences. In an earlier article, we had proposed a new paradigm, which was labeled “ethnocorporalism,” to deal with alternate modes of thinking about local consumption practices (Venkatesh 1995). Market efficiency arguments run counter to everyday experiences of consumers, for market power recedes in the face of such accommodation. The critical consciousness of postmodern thinking impels us to situate ourselves in the phenomenological realm of microconsumption practices of everyday life rather than embracing theories based on universalism and reductionism. Phenomenological studies have already been initiated by consumer researchers through existential contexts (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), consumption experiences (Arnould and Price 1993), possessions and object relations (Belk 1988; Sherry 1993, 1995), critical hermeneutics (Hudson and Ozanne 1988), and reader-response issues (Scott 1994b). What we propose is to extend them into a postmodern framework.

The philosophical system also considers that one of the severe limitations of modernism is that it pays exclusive attention to the “mind” and completely disregards the “body.” The body represents an important locus of human knowledge and discourse, and this locus is particularly critical to the epistemology of consumption (Bordo 1993; Joy and Venkatesh 1994). To ignore the body in any discourse on consumption is to accept a very restrictive view of social reality.

Our next concern is with the consumption system. The shift from production to consumption is the defining mode of our contemporary life and of postmodern discourse. This does not mean that production is ignored, but we must try to establish a discourse in which both production and consumption are problematized simultaneously. Our position is that the modern separation between production and consumption must end. The limiting nature of such a separation becomes evident once it is understood that production—of the body and/or the mind of the consumer, as well as her/his self-image\(^{11}\)—takes place in every act of consumption, and therefore, the modern separation of consumption and production was based on an arbitrary and singularly expedient—specifically, for the welfare of a market economy—concept of value. We need to base our inquiries on a multiplicity of moments in an ongoing cycle of production and consumption, rather than on a bipolar opposition between the two concepts that is clearly a modernist tendency. The consumer should now be viewed as a producer, as well as a consumer, of symbols and meanings that are incorporated into the symbolic system, which all human activity has become. Unlike in modernism, which views the consumer as a cognitive agent, we propose viewing the consumer as a communicative, symbolic being. Finally, our focus is on everyday practices of the consumer and how s/he negotiates his/her cultural spaces in an ongoing basis (Bourdieu 1984).

Modernism views the consumer and consumption solely in terms of the market logic. Current consumer research, on the other hand, has to ask the question, Can consumption take place without the perennial presence of the market? The modernist approach that places consumption in opposition to production has practically ignored consumption except as part of the logic of the market. As long as the consumer is viewed as being located solely within the market, the liberatory potential of the consumer cannot be fully realized. It is therefore necessary to identify a social space beyond the reach of the market by positioning the consumer in the “lifeworld” and outside the market system. This is one of the ways the postmodern consumer can successfully distance himself/herself from the logic and presence of the market system. The recent work of interpretivists in consumer research clearly shows that much consumption does take place outside the market system—in swap meets, flea markets, family reunions, and other social situations (Belk 1991; Joy 1991; Sherry 1983, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). True emancipation of the consumer can materialize if s/he were able to move in these social spaces without the perennial panopticon of the market. (For an engaging discussion on “Breaking the Tyranny of the Market,” see Bellah et al. [1991].)

In a Foucauldian sense, we also propose that the discourses of the consumption system be extended to include the producers of consumer research. We say this advisedly, because the notion of an individual consumer is as much a construction of the social system as it is a product of the knowledge system that claims to study consumers objectively from a distance, but is, in fact, constructing her/him from this imaginary distance. In other words, we, as consumer researchers, construct the

\(^{11}\)While the production of the consumer in and through consumption is of central interest to us, clearly consumption produces other outputs, such as living patterns, community relations (e.g., neighborhoods), and environmental conditions (e.g., pollution, waste, endangered species).
consumer in much the same way as the contemporary market system determines what s/he is.

Clearly, much of past consumer research has produced fruitful insights into the human dimensions of the consumer, and indeed much of present consumer research continues to do so. Postmodern sensibility, as we have articulated throughout this article, does not reject these insights or declare them to be false. On the contrary, postmodern discourse recognizes these contributions as indicative of the perspectives taken and, therefore, constituting partial terrains that have discovered the conditions, cognitions, decisions, and feelings experienced by consumers. Both the quality (nature) and the meaning of the insights gained—and those that go undiscovered—will depend, according to postmodernism, on the cultures that construct them: the general culture of the society at large, and the culture of the community that signifies and directs inquiry—which, under modernity, is the scientific community. Postmodernism reinforces the recognition that in and through their inquiry, not only do scholars discover facts, theories, and representations, but they also construct them. Accordingly, consumer researchers have, as scientists approaching their “subjects” with certain perspectives, contributed to the reflections or images and, therefore, to the existential realities of being a consumer in the modern world. No single probe into the lives of consumers can provide a complete picture of the actual consumer and, certainly, never a complete picture of the potential consumer. Yet, if and when each “discovery” is received with belief in its validity and expectations of its confirmation, especially by a community that can be powerful in its representations, these discoveries tend to mold and construct the consumer in their own image.

This recognition of hyperreality is likely to produce the greatest impact of postmodernism on future (scientific) consumer research. It will force a broadening of the boundaries of “scientific” research by forcing greater acceptance of different perspectives and methods, thereby changing the nature of science. It will also force a change in the stature of “scientific” research, from a role of being the norm against which all other philosophies, methods, and perspectives are measured, to a role as an alternative means of generating knowledge. From a postmodern point of view, this is not a weakening of science but a potential reinvigoration of it due to the necessity of making itself appreciated and sought in view of competitive knowledge structures. Science has always been a language of persuasive communication, but it managed to lose its rigor and its creative, socially beneficial position when it was burdened with expectations of producing the only acceptable and meaningful truths.

Another concern is the subject (i.e., the consumer) herself/himself. It has been argued that under modernism the subject is too regimented because the definitions used in the construction of the subject are very restrictive (cognitive, unified, centered, and totalized). The true liberation of the subject comes from opening up multiple possibilities of experience and creating these possibilities as a way of making the subject both malleable and adaptive. Accordingly, our conception of the consumer must move away from rigid formulations to more fluid formulations. We have thus identified the subject in terms of categories such as one who is decentered, communicative, fragmented, liberated, and symbolic. In other words, the subject makes sense of the world in terms of symbols, meanings, and experiences, as opposed to an unmediated encounter with objects and ideal forms. This is the reason why we propose the consumption environment as a signification system.

The signification system requires us to deal with discourses that extend beyond sciences to the world of narratives, myths, and symbolic regimes. We need, therefore, to produce knowledge that is regarded as legitimate, not merely because it is scientific but because it has worthwhile literary and narrative qualities as well. As we have already indicated, we must conceptualize realities not in terms of objective realities but as virtual and imaginary realities created by new forms of technologies and discourses (see Solomon and Englis [1994] for an interesting development of this idea in the field of advertising).

In terms of how the object is perceived, we replace the notion of the object with the notion of a generalized symbol. The elimination of the object does not mean that there is no empirical object, for empiricalness is not the issue here—construction is. Our conceptualization of the object therefore needs to be in terms of the symbol rather than concrete form. Consequently, our focus is on the symbols that objects themselves have become, in one way or another. This is the crux of postmodernism and of our analysis of postmodern consumption as symbolic activity.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE CONSUMER RESEARCH**

In concluding the article, we wish to suggest possible avenues that consumer research could take, given the insights regarding the contemporary transformations illuminated by postmodern discourse. Probably the most substantive consumer research implication is that the consumer is a constant producer, not only in the realm of public spaces (offices, factories, production lines) during work, but also in the moments signified as consumption in modern discourse. The idea that the consumer is at the end of a process, exemplified by terms such as the “end consumer,” therefore needs to be debunked. The consumer needs to be studied as a participant in an ongoing, never-ending process of construction that includes a multiplicity of moments where things (most importantly as symbols) are consumed, produced, signified, represented, allocated, distributed, and circulated. Given that each and every one of these
moments is present in every act of construction, they should not be used as independent, separate phenomena to be studied, but as perspectives that may be useful in articulating insights into the multiplex moments. Scott (1994b) has provided a very insightful example of how it is possible to view the consumer as a consumer of ads not in the conventional sense of a conscious decision maker preparing to purchase a product but as a reader consuming a text.

In modern discourse, where the individual consumer was considered to be at the end of a process, and consumption to be the end, consumption was necessarily conceptualized as a need-driven activity. The knowing subject gained awareness of his/her needs as a cognitive agent, using science to learn about her/his needs, which were dictated largely by her/his nature. Consumption, therefore, was a naturally guided activity. The nature of needs, which reflected human nature, provided the standards for the maintenance of human life in, again, a naturally dignified manner. Typically, the human individual was considered to have superior life goals, to be achieved through productive/creative or spiritual activities, not through consumption. Consumption was viewed almost as a “necessary evil” to physically and psychologically maintain the individual so that s/he could have the energy to attain the higher goals of life.

It seems no longer possible to uphold such conceptualizations because, as realized by many students of contemporary life, the individual consumer is not driven by needs dictated by her/his own nature, but by the organization of the system of objects. Through consumption, the consumer is produced. Postmodernism is a call to make each willing consumer an equal participant in the determination of this production (construction) of self, as well as in all production—symbolic construction by the myths, narratives, and simulations that result from signification and representation processes. Deconstruction and reconstruction of the modern (i.e., capitalist) market in the image of the diversity and multiplicity of the political, social, artistic, and other discursive fields will be evidence that this call is indeed being heeded. Such deconstruction and reconstruction will begin when postmodern discourse, which has always been preoccupied with describing the market and its major practice, marketing, becomes critical of the market’s philosophical and operational logic.

This means that we do not study the consumer as someone seeking to satisfy an end (needs), but as someone seeking to produce (construct) symbols. The individual consumer’s demand, therefore, needs to be judged and studied similar to derived demand, as in the case of organizational (business) consumption, because the consumer is a producer and what s/he chooses to consume is for the purpose of producing something (e.g., self-image, lifestyle, attractive personality, expert labor, a healthy environment). The idea that consumption merely maintains, sustains, replenishes, or satisfies is no longer a viable one, especially given the recent social consciousness about the relationships between consumption and ecological balances or between consumption and personal attributes, such as health, addiction, and competence.

An important result of this recognition is the issue of how much control the consumer has over his/her own construction. We have to understand, for example, the purposes that the postmodern consumer has and the methods s/he uses in customizing herself/himself as a meaningful entity, therefore, attaining the power to seduce and signify, create her/his own simulations to articulate his/her own visions of life. We must also understand the constraints or limitations facing the consumer in such articulation. Greater attention needs to be paid to consumption being used as a means to register rebellion (by women, by the young) by those who otherwise do not have the means to express and signify their discontents and visions of a different “reality” (Breen 1993). Paradoxically, such studies will provide the basis for a political agenda of consumer researchers, which intends to differentiate consumer research from marketing, by making the consumers the actors for whom information is developed instead of the objects or targets of study—to be explored in order to develop information for those who will market to consumers. Also paradoxically, this postmodern approach will help consumers in gaining the status of being in control of (or at least effective participants in) the construction of their world—a status promised but not delivered in modernity. Consumer research will thus become an enterprise in the service of consumers.

We can no longer view the consumer as a unified subject. First, we recognize that the consumer lives in a world of contradictions of his/her own making. The postmodern consumer is not attempting to reconcile these contradictions to produce a unified experience, but, more likely, s/he lives these contradictions as an existential condition. The idea that the consumer is pursuing a goal of unification to make sense of this existence can be traced to the modernist notion that the individual is a unified subject. We cannot study the consumer as a self-contained object of scientific study, as the modernist discourse would advocate.

We therefore ask the consumer researchers who are steeped in the methods of cognitive psychology and information processing and in mathematical choice modeling to come out of their protective shells, to set themselves free from unidimensional conceptions of scientific discourse and engage in postmodern reconceptualizations. We do not advocate the abandonment of “scientific” procedures, for nothing in postmodernism suggests such a move. Postmodernism simply argues that “scientific” knowledge is not the only knowledge and that science should not relentlessly pursue universal knowledge. Translated into the field of consumer research, it means that we must opt for multiple theories.
of consumer behavior rather than a single theory that silences all other theories. In addition, we should expand the notion of what a theory is to accommodate different kinds of conjectures and not get bogged down in the correspondence theory of truth. There can never be the answer to a question. Besides, scientific argument should combine with narrative discourse to produce a richer texture of our knowledge base regarding consumer and consumption processes. Consumer experiences are too complex to be boxed into a single experimental moment, and the joys of doing research must be found not in the pursuit of a holy grail of singular knowledge but in capturing many exploratory moments. Postmodernism is not postscience, only post-universal science.

Given that gender has played a most important role in the significations of the consumer and consumption, to fully understand consumption, gender must be made a central subject of study. An awareness of the changes that significations of gender are going through now, given the postmodern trends, will help us understand future changes in the constitution of the consumer, and thereby the changing meanings of consumption. Of special interest is the break between the categories of gender (feminine/masculine) and sex (female/male). Its consequences give rise to the following crucial question: What meanings will evolve for consumption, and what motivations will guide consumption when the modern significations of the feminine and the masculine are no longer in effect and when both males and females are afforded greater latitude to represent both feminine and masculine qualifications at the same time that these qualifications are transforming?

Postmodernist insights also reinforce the recent interests in consumer research in the symbolic over the material, and in culture over nature and the economic. Specifically, as the discussions of the hyperreal attest, it is image that essentially determines the object (product/consumer), thus image must be studied as symbolic production. To understand contemporary life, we need to approach our study of consumption from this new perspective.

As a final note would add that, in this article, for reasons of space, we have not dealt with the globalization of consumer culture and its postmodern consequences, or the connection between postmodernism and postnationalism (Appadurai 1993; Venkatesh 1995). This is a major topic in itself and deserves much attention from consumer researchers.

APPENDIX A

Central Tenets of Modernity

Postmodernists trace modernist philosophical origins to Cartesianism and Kantianism (Rorty 1979), which Derrida (1976, p. 3) labels the philosophy of logocentrism. Logocentrism describes a philosophical position that captures the world in terms of transcendental reason and transcendental truth and renders the individual as a cognitive subject and the center of the lifeworld.

The rule of reason and the establishment of rational order:
- The secularization of religion
- The liberation of the individual from superstition
- The recognition of subject-centered reason and the subject-object distinction
- Reality as objective and knowable
- The primacy of reason as the supreme guiding force of all action
- The primacy of the individual as the sole repository of reason
- The primacy of the individual in this lifeworld
- The pursuit of truth as the only goal of all intellectual activity

The rise of science and scientific enterprise:
- The rise of science and scientific rationality as the dominant mode of thinking
- The emergence of logical positivism in both natural and social science inquiry
- The separation of science from knowledge, art from aesthetic values, and morality from ethical behavior
- The control of nature through the creation of technical knowledge and the employment of technological means
- The treatment of technical advancement as synonymous with material progress, and material progress with human progress

The emergence of industrial capitalism and bourgeois culture:
- The rise of bourgeois culture as the defining mode of life
- The rise of capitalism and the birth of industrial revolution
- The decline of personal authority as the source of political power and the ascendance of rational rule-based law
- The replacement of monarchy by a republic form of government
- The establishment of rationalized bureaucracy in the place of personalized governance systems
- Art as representation of reality and as a reflection of rational order

The foundations of modernism, built on such Cartesian and Kantian ideas, have been subjected to criticism over the years, prominently by Nietzsche and Heidegger in the past and more recently by Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Vattimo, and others (see App. B and C). Postmodernism contests the construction of the modern subject and the distinction between the object and symbol. It regards truth as neither timeless nor immutable but as a construction. It is concerned with the notion of spectacularization of life and the creation of the hy-
perreal. It leans toward recognizing the cultural signification and aestheticization of life and the key role language and communication forms play as opposed to cognitive forms. It comes out on the side of the primacy of consumption over production or, more accurately, the effacement of the difference between production and consumption.

**APPENDIX B**

Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan

*Derrida.* Derrida’s (1976) main project is to deconstruct Western metaphysics. For Derrida, deconstructing means unmasking or exposing the logocentric structure of Western metaphysics using the elements of the existing structure. Logocentrism refers to philosophical thinking that rests on abstract reasoning, the methods of logic, and the structural relationship between the signifier and the signified. Using Saussure’s conception of the sign made up of these two elements (the signifier and the signified), Derrida demonstrates that the relationship between the two is not only arbitrary (as Saussure claims), but is also not fixed forever. Language thus is an endlessly evolving structure of signifiers with no ultimate signified (meaning) in sight. Derrida uses the term “deferral” to indicate the shifting of meanings. If there is no fixed signified but only an endless chain of signifiers, there can be no transcendentally signified in a Kantian sense. That is, no ultimate truth exists on which language can come to rest. Truth is always contingent, and this contingency depends on how we employ language.

Derrida introduces the notion of “différance” into language, a term that includes both difference and de- ferral. The idea of difference is transported to the domain of Western metaphysics which, according to Derrida, relies on a series of dichotomies or oppositions—between mind and body, the rational and emotional, culture and nature, male and female, future and the past, subject and the object, reason and emotion, and so forth. These oppositions not only signify the differences between the terms in each pair, but one of the terms in the pair invariably is considered superior to the other. Derrida suggests a deconstructive approach to examine how these dichotomies or differences come about.

The final Derridean idea, decentering, involves the notion that the individual subject does not have a naturally privileged position in relation to the object. Feminists use the arguments associated with the deconstruction (of difference) and the decentering of the subject to show that the modernist subject is indeed a male subject. By decentering the male subject, they are able to negotiate and renegotiate feminine identity in opposition to male identity.

*Foucault.* In Foucault’s work, we find some echoing of Derrida’s work, but there are also differences. Foucault uses the notion of regimes of truth, power, and knowledge, and historical discontinuities in social knowledge production to formulate his own ideas (Foucault 1977, 1980). He argues that truth is a construction of a particular period in social history by particular groups of people who hold particular positions. Thus, no transcendental truths exist, but only arbitrary truth positions. People hold on to these truth positions as long as they are expedient and discard them as soon as something more suitable emerges. In relation to each truth position is an appropriate construction of knowledge. For Foucault, the human subject is himself/herself a particular construction, a Cartesian construction that has been refined over a period of time. Nothing about the Cartesian subject is transcendental, it is only the product of the enlightenment ideology. When truth is removed from its cultural foundations, and reified as if it were something special or transcendental, cultural practices begin to remove themselves from this abstracted truth. So, when cultural practices change and no longer seem to correspond to the abstracted truth, a need for a different kind of truth emerges. This is what Foucault terms the relationship between discourse and practice. In modernist practice, because truth’s position is transcendental, the legitimation process must also be transcendental. Thus, science has become a transcendental field of knowledge with a goal of producing knowledge that is eternal and universal (modernism). Such legitimation does not exist in postmodernist discourse where truth is contingent, localized, and particularized.

Foucault also argues that truth is like capital in that it accumulates. The more truth (capital) a person or community has, the more powerful that entity is, because more resources are available to him/her with more truth (capital). Intellectual disciplines are corporate in the sense that they are organized around certain types of truth producing (disciplines) industries. So Foucault used the term “discourse” as a way of describing the regimes of truth. Each regime creates and defends its own truth position (paradigm) and recruits researchers who sustain the regime through membership, intellectual production, and participation, and other kinds of discursive practices. To quote Foucault (1980): “Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of [discourses]....Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which it induces and which extend it” (p. 133).

*Lacan.* Lacan (1977) influenced the direction of semiotic theory by combining Freud’s theories with Lévi-Strauss and Saussure’s works, thereby demonstrating the connections of linguistics and anthropological semiotics with psychoanalysis. Thus, he articulated the theoretical relationships among subject, signifier, and cultural order (Silverman 1983).
Several concepts stand out in Lacan’s formulation of his ideas, many of which relate to the construction of the (consumer) self. One is the concept of “lack,” which almost entirely defines the Lacanian subject and forms the foundation of “desire.” At birth, the lack arises from the division into being either a man or a woman and, therefore, the loss of the other half. Consequently, the entire existence of the individual is guided by desire to recover the missing component. As such, desire can never be totally fulfilled and is constantly redirected by “symbolic order” and “imaginary,” terms used by Lacan to define the subject’s experience of identification in the world. Within this is the recognition of the other, as both one’s mirror image and self, which promises an ideal image as signified by the symbolic order. The lack that can never be filled is represented by the petit a, which is the desired object. In the symbolic world of relationships, the lack is projected onto the woman’s lack of phallus, and phallus becomes identified as power. Mother lacks phallus, therefore she lacks power. Woman, then, becomes positioned as the Other, that is Not Male.

While the seeming unchangeability of the discursive organization proposed by Lacan has been criticized by feminists, many feminist theories have been influenced by the construction of subjectivity in Lacan’s theories, especially by the shifting of the cause of women’s oppression from men, per se, to the linguistic and cultural order (Sarup 1993). From the point of understanding modern consumption, Lacanian theory provides insights into how the subject’s lack has been directed, through desire, toward the amassment of material objects.

**APPENDIX C**

Lyotard and Vattimo

**Lyotard.** Although not the first person to use the label postmodernism, Lyotard’s name, more than anyone else’s, is associated with it. Lyotard (1984) also introduced several other terms that have since entered the postmodern vocabulary: metanarratives, grand narratives, fragmentation, narrativity, performativity, and legitimation.

Lyotard equates modernism with the age of science or the age of enlightenment. For him, “modern” designates “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative [such as reason, science, truth].” Postmodernism is defined as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” According to Lyotard, in the contemporary world, the metanarratives of modernity are either diminishing in value or ceasing to function as motivating concepts, which has resulted in self-doubt, a condition of loss and alienation of the individual from the social order.

Lyotard views postmodernism in terms of fragmentation, that is, the coming into existence of different viewpoints and realities, that must each establish its own legitimacy. He does not view fragmentation in negative terms, but sees it as an escape from the repressive uniformity of modernism that elevates scientific knowledge as the only legitimate knowledge in human discourse.

**Vattimo.** The project of modernity, according to Vattimo (1988, 1992), is to create a society that is transparent to its members. It is labeled “transparent” because it is made to appear as structured, understandable, and visible, and has an underlying universal theme applicable to all situations. Vattimo says that in reality there is no such visible, universal structure to human experience, rather, it is chaotic and confusing. There can be no universal framework to judge this experience, only individual schemes; thus, any transparency is an illusion.

The contemporary society, on the other hand, is a “society of generalized communication,” nurtured particularly by mass electronic media. All experience in this world is on a real-time basis, and we live in a world that is continuously making itself in the present. Vattimo is one of the very few postmodern philosophers who have directly linked postmodern developments to new electronic media.

Vattimo questions the thrust of modernity as a unilinear vision of history and the idea of progress as a teleological end-point. He tries to undercut these two notions by stating that they are inherently onerous and run counter to the emancipatory prospect for the individual. For example, in practice, progress is always defined as something better than what we have had and something that probably is not here yet. Because this is an extremely subjective interpretation of progress, the society ultimately tires of this pursuit, though, surprisingly, it is not ready to reject progress as a central idea. Both history and progress thus become traps for human existence. True liberation lies in releasing the individual from the heavy utopian burden imposed by modernity, and the true emancipation of the individual lies in the dissolution of centralized perspectives.

**APPENDIX D**

Levy, McCracken, and the Symbolic in Consumer Research

One of the early conceptualizations of the “symbolic” in consumer research literature can be found in the works of Sidney Levy (1959, 1981). In his 1959 paper, Levy gave equal importance to both symbolic and functional attributes of products without necessarily privileging one over the other. To him, symbolism was simply another dimension that complements the functional dimension.

By 1981, Levy had become somewhat more forceful in elevating the symbolic over the functional. At this point, he positioned himself as a strict structuralist in
the manner of Levi-Strauss. Methodological concerns aside, Levy unfolded the theory of structural symbolism as the basic episteme for employing the symbolic approach in consumer behavior. He treated the process of generating meaning as unproblematical, however, in that he did not question how, only whether they are generated and incorporated into consumer thinking. In this sense, Levy is a modernist, for he looked at the world in terms of the signifieds. To him, myths are explainable in terms of the structures of meanings, and if meanings are hidden, it is only because they signify something else. There is no cultural critique of the symbols, myths, and meanings, as would be more common in a postmodern discourse. Compare this to Barthes, whose myths traverse the whole spectrum from utilitarian to symbolic to ideological.

While Levy represents a structuralist approach to the analysis of the symbolic, McCracken (1988) seems to fall midway between structuralism and poststructuralism. As a structural/functionalist, he argues that goods serve cultural functions in society by representing concrete forms of meanings that are abstract in the first place. Meanings act as arbiters between stability and change and maintain order in the consumer's life. He is also interested in the process by which meaning transfer takes place within the society through institutional arrangements, such as rituals. While Levy's primary interest is in uncovering the structures of symbolic codes, McCracken is more concerned with the processes by which cultural transformation occurs through the transfer of meanings from one site to another.

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