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Postmodern Marketing: Is it dead or alive?
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1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a notoriously polysemic and contested concept. It stems from the eclectic thoughts of several key philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Over time, it has been ameliorated by other notable theorists from a variety of traditions, including post-structuralism. It is far from a unified and comprehensive paradigm - that would actually be against the very spirit of postmodernism. However, it has a number of common traits, which contend to describe the nature of social, economic and cultural relations in the western world since the latter part of the 20th century. This includes incredulity towards metanarratives, pluralism and the condition of hyperreality, sustained by a barrage of mediated experiences via the ubiquitous global media industry.

These tenets of postmodernism have emerged over time, with philosophers, theorists, artists and cultural commentators applying the principles in a wide array of contexts. Thanks to its ambiguous and chameleonic properties, it has been equated to an attitude, an artistic bent and an intellectual movement, as well as a definitive epoch in time. Yet despite this breadth, a relatively limited number of theorists have explored the implications and impact of postmodernism on the marketing industry (Brown 1995, 1998, Firat & Venkatesh 1995, Cova 1996). In this context, postmodernism is often used as a lens through which to launch a polemic against modernist approaches to marketing. The traditional Kotler-inspired marketing methodology is seen as too rational and quasi-scientific to be relevant in a postmodern epoch, as it seeks to reduce the unpredictable individuality of postmodern consumers into rigid market segments and management heuristics. In contrast, postmodern marketing is seen as more salient and experimental, characterised by the fragmentation, de-differentiation, hyper-reality, playfulness and nostalgia of the prevailing cultural climate.
Through this paper, I explore whether postmodern marketing has become a naturalised matter of fact or whether modernist marketing schemas still dominate. Within this debate, I will consider to what extent the postmodern approach is consciously applied by marketers, as opposed to being a natural, latent influence on the industry. Crucially, I will also consider if postmodern marketing has been and gone, mindful that postmodernism as a whole has previously been pronounced ‘dead’ by several cultural commentators.

Firstly, using a mix of secondary and primary sources, I have appraised the key theoretical contributions to postmodernism and its relation to marketing. To avoid an unwieldy account, I have distilled the most salient theoretical contributions from an inevitably broad and divergent panoply of sources. Throughout this extensive phase of research, I have been conscious that “what constitutes leading research in an area is, to a certain extent, a subjective, ideological question.” (Oliver 2012, p11). I have therefore continually challenged my intuitive selections, with a view to compiling a well-balanced evidence base.

Using those theoretical foundations, I have completed a case study of Lego’s marketing activity to bring what is an esoteric and conceptual debate into sharp, practical focus. As a contemporary fast moving consumer goods brand, with its roots in a mass production, modernist business model, Lego has been an apposite source of insights. The case study has been informed by secondary sources, including existing analytic accounts of Lego’s business practices, as well as primary sources, such as a textual analysis of relevant marketing communications, including the 2014 Lego Movie. Although this textual research includes elements of discourse analysis, it is not fixed to any particular mode of inquiry. The use of multiple sources in this way is a recognised benefit of the case study research method (Yin 2003). Nevertheless, as with all methodologies, there are both strengths and weaknesses associated with the approach. Using Lego to bring an esoteric debate to life has underpinned a rewarding and iterative process of uncovering patterns, meanings and conclusions.
Conversely, by only exploring one brand in detail, I must acknowledge that it is an illustrative piece of research rather than an exhaustive one. Notwithstanding those parameters, I hope it is a constructive contribution to what is a nebulous and beguiling debate.

2. Postmodernism

2.1 Theoretical origins

To bring some structure and clarity to this exposition of postmodernism, it is useful to start with an overview of the discourse it ostensibly displaced. Modernism’s defining characteristics emanate from its ancestral philosophical foundations in the Enlightenment. The leading thinkers from the age of reason such as Descartes, Locke and Hume, ushered in a period of history in which the exponential progress of man and society through science, economics and politics became naturalised and instilled. This culminated in the industrial revolution and the gradual organisation of society around the prevailing logic of production. While ‘modernity’ is the definitive term for this seminal age, ‘modernism’ refers to its cultural, artistic and social conditions. In this context, David Harvey (1989) asserts that modernism is identified with “absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders and the standardisation of knowledge and power” (p9). At its core, the modernist disposition is motivated by the search for truth, affronting the era of myth and fallacy which reigned in the highly religious period that preceded it.

In this context, it is commonly asserted that “postmodern discourses thus denote new artistic, cultural or theoretical perspectives which renounce modern discourses and practices” (Best and Kellner 1991, p29). However, this apparent disjuncture with modernism should not be over-simplified as a clean break followed by the emergence of a diametrically opposed world order. Indeed, postmodernism can be conceptualised as a product of the critical restlessness of modernism itself, as Zygmunt Bauman succinctly explained “the postmodern state of mind is the radical victory
of modern culture over the modern society it aimed to improve through throwing it wide open to its own potential" (1992, p2).

Nietzsche was among the first thinkers to emerge from this perceived restlessness, as he denounced the alleged delusion that absolute certainty and truth is possible. In contrast, he championed the spirit of individuality over aprioristic knowledge derived from concepts, paradigms and scientific discourse. For Nietzsche, the modern notion of truth is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically” (1976, p46). Thus, he was an early exponent of pluralism and the notion that there is no absolute truth, only multiple perspectives.

Working in a similar vein, Martin Heidegger offered a powerful critique of modernism throughout his phenomenological musings on the nature of being. This includes his rejection of theoretical conceptualisation as the only path to knowledge, as he extolled the virtues of art and culture of ways of learning. Heidegger had various stands of thought which pre-echoed postmodern principles. This includes his argument that the forces of modernism had homogenised society, while technology had “enframed” people’s perception of reality. This notion of a mediated existence is a point that would increase in salience along with the growth of the media and communications industries in the century to follow. Ultimately, the theoretical foundations of postmodernism are rooted in this fundamental questioning of modernist practices, ranging from faith in rational knowledge and objective reality to the linear and progressive nature of time. That is not to say that some of these postulations do not precede modernism. However, it was the growth of modernism that created a dialectical terrain for the discourse to grow. Simply put, without modernism there would be no postmodernism.
2.2 Growth and popularisation

If the aforementioned philosophers laid the foundations for postmodernism, then it could be said that Jean Francois Lyotard and his contemporaries such as Baudrillard, Jameson and Hassan constructed the edifice. It would be misleading to present them as part of a systematic postmodern movement – they were from a variety of backgrounds including Marxism and post-structuralism. However, their observations were part of the theoretic currents which converged to create a postmodern consciousness in the later part of the 20th century.

Building on the musings about knowledge production by earlier philosophers, Lyotard explored the “incredulity towards metanarratives” which defines the postmodern age. In his seminal publication *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (1979) he attacks the foundation of modern knowledge upon science as little more than reliance on a constructed, self-serving discourse. This legitimacy crisis is the axis upon which postmodernism swings. Lyotard describes how the foundations of authority have dispersed and empowered the individual to legitimise their own knowledge through “petite histoires”. These micro-narratives underpin the state of democratic pluralism which has taken root in postmodernity. To support his argument in this field, Lyotard appropriates Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language games to illustrate the anarchic diversity of how meaning is created and communicated within individual communities. In this respect, there is the opportunity for a vast range of difference, opposition and independence.

It is important to note that this loss of faith in totalising metanarratives can be interpreted as a revolt against in the foundations of western society in particular. Craig Owens (1983) therefore sees postmodernism as a loss of faith in western cultural authority, meaning it is a deconstructive and revolutionary force, supporting counter-ideologies such as feminism. Similarly, it can also be mobilised as a force against elitism and the status quo within society and politics, as well as arts and culture. This was an issue that Foucault (1967) had explored number of years earlier, after he
deconstructed the existence of individual “power-discourses” in various spheres of socio-economic life, ranging from prisons to schools. Although his research highlighted the plight of marginalised groups, such as homosexuals, it revealed the potential “heterotopia” of environments which have pluralistic, non-hegemonic conditions.

Whereas many aspects of postmodernism are disputed and even contradictory, this heralding of a pervasive pluralism is recognised by all postmodern protagonists, ranging from its theoretical critics (e.g. Harvey, Jameson) to its artistic and cultural champions (e.g. Barth, Eco, Jenks). Fundamentally, it is a dangerous state of existence, which inevitably fuels discord and an inharmonious society in the absence of consensual beliefs. Yet it can also be a rich, inventive and empowering era to in which to live in terms of arts and culture. Out of the anarchic and free flowing mode of relations, many of postmodernism’s most prominent, playful and creative characteristics are born, including intertextuality, parody, pastiche and the collapse of traditional cultural hierarchies. It is the aforementioned rejection of meta-narratives and the associated modernist discourse of progress that makes all of this possible.

In this disorientating world, it’s understandable why Jameson likened the postmodern condition to a state of schizophrenia. Using Lacan’s description of schizophrenia as when the links between signifier and signified break down, Jameson critiqued the depthlessness of postmodern society, noting how free floating signifiers have begun to refer to themselves rather than a fixed, consensual referent. This observation built on the post-structuralist tradition and the nuances of deconstructionism (Derrida), emphasising the arbitrary, fluid, context dependant and interchangeable relationship between signifiers and the signified. This means new links in the signifying chain can constantly be broken and reforged. Thus, postmodernism is concerned with a crisis in the validity and certainty of communicative representation.
Within this philosophical territory, there have been a number of other defining contributions to the canon of postmodern thought. Not least by the notoriously divisive Jean Baudrillard, who provocatively described the contemporary mode of existence as a mere hyperreality, fuelled by subversive, mendacious and ubiquitous simulacra. Hence, whereas signs reflected, interpreted and distorted reality throughout modernity, they amount to pure simulation in the postmodern epoch. These pervasive simulacra are the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1983, p2) meaning the age of simulation is effectively a system of signs without any referents. Inevitably, this has profound consequences for all contemporary knowledge, reducing it to “a debauchery of signs: an endless play of simulation” (Bauman, p33). This superficial existence is extensively fuelled by the omnipotent global media and information industries, which are constantly encoding and circulating the sea of signs that characterise the postmodern condition. Baudrillard infamously brought this concept to the masses in a trio of three essays that were published in Libération and The Guardian in 1991, proclaiming that the Gulf War did not take place. Beneath this inflammatory statement was a serious point – namely that our experience of global events of this nature are little more than a simulated media construction. Since Baudrillard’s articles, the foothold of 24 hour news channels has arguably made this phenomena even more prevalent, especially when simplifying and enframing the complexity of conflicts in the Middle East. It is therefore impossible to distinguish what is real or imaginary when immersed in a postmodern semiotic environment.

At this juncture we should note that postmodernism extends beyond the confines of philosophical conjecture and exists in a number of guises. This includes as a definitive movement in arts and culture, which served to reify the complex strands of aforementioned philosophy. Fundamentally, when the postmodern attitude was applied to the world of arts and culture, it was ameliorated, popularised and made real. Charles Jenks (1992) notes the “radical eclecticism” and “double voice discourse” of postmodernism, illustrating how it has changed our world, including the built environment. The notion of a double voiced discourse is an intriguing way of describing how
postmodern artefacts self-consciously use and critique existing styles and forms in an ironic way. This double-coding “is a strategy of affirming and denying the existing power structures at the same, inscribing and challenging differing tastes and opposite forms of discourse” (p13). It is possible to see this dynamic at work in various fields of arts and culture. For instance, famed postmodern writer Douglas Coupland uses various narrative devices to ironically expose the functionality of his work. This includes appearing as a character in his 2006 novel Jpod, disrupting the willing suspension of disbelief that is normally required to read a novel. This particular postmodern device is echoed in other forms of culture, such as photography. Cindy Sherman famously appears as the subject in her own photographic exhibitions, again exposing the artifice of the work. Sherman’s photographs are often a pastiche of typical female stereotypes, including from the world of cinema. This too, is a postmodern trait - “by borrowing from popular culture rather than high culture, she questions the vitality of the fine-art tradition” (Grundberg 1981, p1). Thus, her work attacks modernist artistic sensibilities by converging with popular culture, in the same provocative fashion that the pop-art of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein did decades before. Usefully, these examples of postmodernism in practice embody what can be a nebulous and esoteric concept. The products, tactics and campaigns of the marketing industry have a similar utility, as they are interwoven with postmodernism in a complex and symbiotic relationship, which brings the discourse to life. It is a debate I will explore in greater detail throughout this paper.

2.3 Decline and criticism

Over recent years, there have been various obituaries for postmodernism in all its guises. Whether that is as a valid description of our contemporary experience or as a relevant artistic perspective. However, even before now, its existence has been denied, attacked and ridiculed. Arguably this is because postmodernism has been a victim of its own seductive appeal. From the 1970s onwards, the term has been applied to a bewilderingly wide array of philosophical positions and cultural phenomena, meaning it can legitimately be dismissed as a buzzword (Hebdige 1988). Indeed, many
of the individuals that have shaped the discourse as we know it, are suspicious critics rather than positive proponents. Jameson for instance, is amongst the significant number of contributors that take a Marxist position and limit postmodernism to being the “cultural logic of late capitalism”. In distancing himself from the phenomenon he describes, Jameson (1991) warns against “the complacent (yet delirious) camp following celebration of this aesthetic new world” (p197). Hence, when considering if postmodernism it is alive and salient today, we must acknowledge that there has never really been a consensus about its exact form or actual existence.

While accepting that fact, we can observe that its decline as a mode of philosophical enquiry has been most pronounced over approximately the last two decades. In particular, Alan Kirby (2006) believes the twin towers attacks in 2011 sounded the death knell for postmodernism, followed by the gradual emergence of pseudo-modernism as a successive world order - “pseudo-modernism was not born on 11 September 2001, but postmodernism was interred in its rubble” (p1). The event symbolises a fracture from postmodernism, which took an intelligent and ironic swipe at established metanarratives, to pseudo-modernism, which is basic, brutal and thoughtless. In pseudo-modernism teenagers use technology for inane and thoughtless communication, rather than the utopian state of intellectual pluralism that Lyotard et al envisioned. Latterly, Kirby has evolved his pseudo-modernism concept into digimodernism, as a way of describing of how ubiquitous mobile, digital technologies have reconfigured notions of truth and authority in our world. Not only does it explain how we now consume texts via a new set of interfaces, rules and conventions, it infers that authorship as we know it has died. As Kirby (2006) pronounces “You are the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded”.

Another ostensible successor to the postmodern mantle is that of metamodernism (Vermeulen and Van den Akker, 2010). According to this viewpoint, contemporary society has reacted to the global
forces of instability, including financial crises, with a renaissance of modernist idealism and renewed faith in totalising discourses. In this respect, metamodernism “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness” (5).

Whatever the nuances of the debate may be, since the 1990s there has been a pervasive mood that postmodernism has lost its topical flavour as both an overarching philosophical standpoint and a related artistic bent. This latest era has been loosely badged as post-postmodernism in some quarters, including by Nealon (2012) who sees it as an intensification of postmodern capitalism and cultural logic, rather than a sharp dialectic turn. Ultimately, there is not much consensus about the precise form and nature of this alleged post-postmodern period, with philosophical contributions being piecemeal and rather isolated. As a consequence, there is comparatively little depth to the conceptualisation of postmodernism’s supposed successors, many of which merely reinforce the fundamentals of postmodern existence alongside an epoch-shifting change. Digimodernism for instance, emphasises the rapid digitalisation that has affected every sphere of lived experience, yet many of its effects on consumerism, such as neo-tribalism, intertextuality and consumer co-creation, have already been observed as symptoms of the postmodern era. Just as postmodernism can’t be seen as a simple disjuncture from modernism, the relationship between postmodernism and its ostensible replacements is rather opaque.
3. Postmodern marketing

3.1 Key features

Naturally, the concept of postmodern marketing is best understood by juxtaposing it against the traditional marketing paradigm. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) defines marketing as “the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably” (2009, p1). From even a cursory glance at this definition we can see the heavy influence of modernist philosophy, including the notion of control, power and methodological authority. The CIM’s definitive overview of marketing goes on to add that “both business history and current practice remind us that without proper marketing, companies cannot get close to customers and satisfy their needs” (p2). Thus it resembles a meta-narrative in its own right, denouncing the very possibility of engaging in commerce successfully without adhering to its management rigour and particular schemas. These models are based upon the pillars of ‘marketing mix’, otherwise known as the seven P’s – product, price, place, promotion, people, processes and physical evidence. The first four were introduced by seminal marketer E. Jerome McCarthy in 1960 and have been expanded by various marketing scholars in the years since, with the latter additions of people, processes and physical evidence being seen as key to service oriented businesses in particular. Fundamentally, the seven P’s act as staging posts for the detailed planning, research, delivery and monitoring of marketing activities.

Upon this theoretical tableau, sits a multitude of instructive frameworks and models to guide marketers in the creation of strategies and implementation plans. Popular examples include the notion of ‘product life-cycles’ to map the growth and maturity of products, to the idea of ‘adoption curves’ to understand how, why and when different types of customers purchase new products. Heuristic devices of this nature are ubiquitous within the marketing industry and serve to simplify the infinite possibilities of consumer behaviour into basic predictable patterns, with corresponding
rules for how a marketer should respond. They are predicated on the notion that marketing is a bone-fide scientific discipline, capable of mastering the consumers and markets it targets. Hence, it preaches a singular, realist dogma, as opposed to the pluralism of postmodernism. One of the chief evangelists of marketing’s theoretical tradition is Philip Kotler, who has popularised various derivations of the traditional marketing methodology within a host of sectors and categories, notably including the not-for-profit arena. Over time, the prolific academic has recognised the evolution of marketing, such as its application in a networked, knowledge-based economy (Achrol and Kotler, 1999). However, the primacy of marketing’s scientific principles and rigid delivery models has remained in all of this work, as well as that of his peers.

In contrast, postmodern marketing can be seen as a polemic against the traditional Kotler-led school of thought, acting as a disruptive force which questions the business conventions forged throughout modernity. Naturally, this movement gathered momentum in the 1990s when the postmodern discourse as a whole was of the intellectual zeitgeist. In this context, marketing was portrayed by some academics as in the midst of a methodological crisis, which mirrored the crisis of representation that marked the ostensible shift from a modern to a postmodern epoch. Admittedly, many of marketing’s critics at this time were not coming from a consciously postmodern perspective. Some merely suggested that marketing needed to evolve in the face of technological advancement and its effect of rapidly increasing competition (McKenna 1991) while others (Wensley 1995) criticised marketing’s over-deterministic and simplified research traditions, including its principle of ‘manageable heterogeneity’ as it forces complex, individualistic buyer behaviour into generic segments. On the other hand, Stephen Brown (1995) made a decidedly postmodern critique of marketing as we know it, and went on to become by far the most prolific exponent of the postmodern marketing ideology.
For Brown, the traditional marketing paradigm is a positivist discourse based on the notion that a single, knowable version of reality exists, whereas the condition of postmodernism is fundamentally a relativist position. This turns the research traditions and rigid frameworks of marketing on their head and undermines the principle of hypothesis development and testing that has legitimised the industry for decades. Brown therefore laments the fact that the marketing intelligentsia have failed to specifically absorb postmodernism in a theoretical sense, while the influence of postmodernism pervades the discipline on a day to day level. He shares this frustration with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) who note that “marketing practice has become postmodern while marketing theory continues to be developed in a modernist mode” (p40). Marketing is therefore seen as a de-facto postmodern discipline in the sense that it displays and reinforces many related key features, including fragmentation, dedifferentiation, hyper-reality, pastiche and anti-foundationalism (Brown).

To this taxonomy, we can add pluralism (Van Raaij, 1993), as well as the reversal of production and consumption, decentring of the subject, and paradoxical juxtapositions of opposites (Firat and Venkatesh). Although a number of other theorists have reflected on the implications of postmodernism for marketing (Cova 1996, Addis & Podesta 2003, Beaver et al 2007) they have only served to reinforce the aforementioned characteristics of postmodern marketing. Through the Lego case study, I will further examine these issues and explore their credentials in a contemporary context.

Not only have Brown et al identified the core attributes of postmodern marketing, they didactically eulogise about them, and call for a more systematic and conscious application of postmodern mindset throughout the industry, thereby overthrowing the traditional marketing paradigm. Inevitably, these beliefs are not shared by all of their contemporaries. Morgan (2003) for instance, believes that the approach is “superficially attractive, but as a social critique of marketing is considerably limited” (p21). This is largely on this basis that the principal champions of postmodern marketing romanticise the discipline and fail to explain how it relates to the operation of markets and the prevailing
economic system. Similarly, Tadajewski and Brownlie (2008) believe postmodern marketing’s emphasis on the emancipatory power of the consumer is overstated and depends on their particular socio economic conditions. For a factory worker in the developing world for example, infrastructure links have a greater impact on their identity and community formations than consumerism. This opposition appears to be mobilised against the idea of consciously applying postmodern principles in the delivery of marketing strategies. The idea that postmodern marketing is too opaque and abstract to plan, predict or prove results certainly has merit, given that it is unashamedly an ‘anti science’. However, the premise that marketing in practice already mirrors the symptoms of postmodernity is much harder to discredit, as we are surrounded by tangible examples to the contrary. It is a dichotomy we shall explore in further detail throughout the paper.

3.2 The postmodern consumer

Much of the discussion about postmodern marketing concerns the evolution of consumption practices. This is rooted in the collapse of traditional socio-economic classes and the decline of the nuclear family unit which is synonymous with classic notions of modernity. By contrast, postmodern consumers live in a fluid and less stable set of conditions, in which consumerism can be seen to fill the gap of family and social relations, enabling people to actively construct their identities. This can be construed as a dark and empty existence, marked by “fragmented consumers seeking compensation through the consumption of signs, spectacles and the superficial” (Goulding, 2003, p153). This shallow and depthless environment is the setting for a tension between subject and object, in which unlike the height of modernity, the consumer is no longer king. They are an empty shell, with multiple and fractured identities, which reveres brands for their promise of fulfilment. Alas, they are “touristic consumers” (Firat and Shultz, 1997).

This ‘de-centering’ of the subject has various implications, including that the traditional marketing methodology of researching your customers’ needs and designing your services around them
becomes defunct. Instead, they need to be told what they need and want, meaning that brand new markets are created from scratch rather than merely discovered or entered. Another ramification is the “objectification and commodification of one’s own body and self allows one 'to be consumed' by others, just like a product fulfilling a function in the marketplace” (Van Raaij, 1993, p553). In this sense, the reversal of production and consumption noted by Firat and Venkatesh becomes literal and even corporeal.

Conversely, being a postmodern consumer can be an emancipatory and liberating way to exist – “the postmodern consumer wants to experience the diversity of many themes, past and future, and not to become fixed in any one” (Proctor and Kitchen, 2002, p147). In this respect, postmodern consumption can be interpreted as the radical victory of individualism and autonomy, a precedent which was ironically borne out of modernist ethics. In reaction to the ever present risk of isolation, postmodern individuals still coalesce within communities and interest groups, albeit based around their consumption patterns and favourite brands rather than the tradition pillars of society. These transient, multiple and organic communities have been termed as ‘neo-tribes’ by various marketing scholars, and they are said to “use consumption as a kind of social glue, a glue that replaces religion and the family in bringing people together” (Patterson, 1998, p171). Although the neo-tribe phenomenon was observed long before the emergence of social media platforms, digital media has inevitably accelerated and sustained the existence of these virtual communities. Brands have entered this space en-masse, creating the conditions for the neo-tribes to thrive, particularly through Facebook fan pages for instance. This is based on the premise that simply promoting your products and services to the increasingly savvy and unpredictable postmodern consumer is not as fruitful as building a dialogue with them in their own environment – “postmodern methodologies, based on participation with consumers, resemble an anthropology of consumption.” (Cova, 1996, p22).
In this environment, a postmodern marketer would argue that traditional market research techniques are antiquated. The notion of understanding consumer demands followed by profiling and segmenting them seems perverse if their personas are multiple and unstable. Similarly, artistic and instinctive sources of knowledge should be held in a parity of esteem with empirical research, given that postmodernism undermines the principle of objective knowledge generation. For marketers with the necessary disposition, it has opened the doors to a new way of doing business.

4. Lego Case Study

4.1 Marketing Strategy

In September 2014, Lego’s financial results confirmed that it has become world’s leading toy maker, with sales of over $2bn in the first six months of the year. This was a momentous achievement for a business with famously humble roots. Originally, its founder Ole Kirk Christiansen started building simple wooden toys for his family at his home in Billund, Denmark. In 1932 he created a small business which manufactured the toys, alongside other household goods and furniture. By 1934, it has become a dedicated toy company called Lego, derived from the Danish phrase ‘leg godt’ which translates to ‘play well’. However, the interlocking plastic bricks that have become synonymous with the brand weren’t in production until 1949.

In the subsequent years, exponential growth in production, turnover and profit continued to create the company we know today. Nevertheless, it encountered severe business problems at the turn of the millennium, with a series of major losses that destabilized the business and threatened its very existence. The resurgence of the company began in 2003 as the then head of financial performance Jorgen Vig Knudstorp completed a root and branch review of its operations. Jorgen want on to lead the organisation as CEO and implement the various reforms he identified, leading it to a dominant
market position. Importantly, although this paper is concerned with the contemporary practice of postmodern marketing, it is instructive to start this case study with Knudstorp’s reforms. After all, he continues to lead the organisation today and the principles he introduced around decade ago remain the bedrock of Lego’s business and marketing philosophy.

Reflecting on the state of Lego when he took control in 2004, Knudstorp was quoted in the Harvard Business Review as saying “to survive, the company needed to halt a sales decline, reduce debt, and focus on cash flow. It was a classic turnaround, and it required tight fiscal control and top-down management” (O’Connell, 2009). From an initial reading of this premise, the rational narrative of business management is clear. The heuristics of control, planning and focus are at the heart of his sentiments and resonate with a modernist view of the world. This is a far cry from the relativism and instinctive business practices that a postmodern approach would support. Furthermore, it’s important to note that Lego’s return to profitability was based on rationalisation and the culling of sub-brands that had not proven to be successful with consumers. In his case study of Lego’s commercial success, John Ashcroft glibly describes the approach as “managing the business for cash rather than sales growth. Sell off the theme parks, slow retail expansion, slash the product offer and cut 1,000 from the work force.” (2014, p15). In this respect, they were responding to what the market was telling them, not bolding creating products, building demand and telling ‘de-centred subjects’ what it was they really desired, which would be the postmodern alternative.

Indeed, that modus operandi appeared to have been tried by Lego in the past, with disastrous results. Knudstorp has lamented the side-effects of this previously unfocused approach, particularly the way Lego had been creating ‘adjacencies’ by entering new markets and introducing new products based on little more than instinct and opportunism, without recourse to solid business planning models. During the 1990s the number of Lego parts had ballooned from 6,000 to 12,000, while products that deviated away from the classic Lego brick such as Znap and Galidor were
pursued to little commercial success. In an interview with Adam Burns (2010), Knudstorp said “Rather than doing one adjacency every 3-5 years we did three to five adjacencies every year. So I think that’s what nearly killed us” (p1). Within Knudstorp’s emotive words, we can see his admonishment of not adhering to the marketing convention that just one new market every 3-5 years is the correct approach. Instead, Lego’s future marketing strategy was to be founded on a traditional understanding of product lifecycles, with a greater emphasis on promoting existing products during their growth and maturity stages, rather than the much more expensive and risky approach of promoting too many completely new products at the introduction stage. This shift in strategy relied on a conventional, quasi-scientific and ultimately modernist approach to marketing.

The preceding haphazard management of the business was reflected in the way its brand was developed and managed, with a confusing array of product brands. Up until an overhaul of the corporate brand in 2002, Schultz and Hatch (2003) noted that “the brand architecture was never deliberate. Rather, it was a mosaic of sub-brands and product lines that had grown in multiple directions over a 15 year period” (13). This pre-reform description of Lego’s marketing strategy seems to closely mirror several features of postmodern marketing, as described by Brown et al. This includes the notion of fragmentation - in which contemporary organisations enter new markets and produce niche products in response to the individual whims of different market segments. In this climate, the identity of the company itself appears to become fractured and instable, matching those of its consumers.

In 2005, a five year action plan called ‘Shared Vision’ was launched to make Knudstorp’s more rational business and marketing aspirations a reality. It focused on reducing debt, streamlining product lines and simplifying production. Fundamentally, the plan attempted to shift liabilities, as key assets were either sold or outsourced, including its own mould making factory and the Korean packaging facility. This ultimate resort to cold and hard business dynamics, is what critics of
Postmodern marketing such as Morgan (2003) would point to when attacking its fanciful and abstract approach. In particular, the postmodern trend of ignoring so-called marketing ‘pseudo-science’ is hard to fathom when such science leads to tangible changes in production. Not to mention the fact that it is evidently successful - Lego returned to profit in 2005 as the first phase of Shared Vision was enacted. It could be read as a triumph for the pragmatic basics of marketing, getting a product to market in the cheapest and most direct way possible with the least exposure to financial risk.

Hence, under Knudstorp there has been a return to archetypal, modernist marketing heuristics. In Lego’s 2005 Annual Report, Knudstorp’s summary of Lego’s strategy breaks into revealing sub-headings including “products” “the market” “revenue and profit” and “strengthened approach to sales and distribution channels”. From this use of language, it is possible to decode the rhetoric of the classic four Ps - i.e. product, place, price and promotion. Moreover, within Knudstorp’s opening précis, traditional marketing theory is used to explain the difficult trading conditions that have led to the change in strategy. This includes how children are adopting digital entertainment at an increasingly young age, thereby “shortening the market life cycle of traditional toys.” (p7). In this sense, the pervasive influence of applied ‘Kotlerite’ marketing knowledge is readily apparent. It is hardly surprising that a huge organisation, under intense scrutiny, would recourse to well established marketing frameworks in times of distress.

Consequently, it is tempting to conclude that Lego turned its back on any semblance of postmodern marketing philosophy in the early 2000s as different foundations for their recent success were laid. However, such an assumption would rely on a rather limited reading of the ‘Shared Vision’ business and marketing strategy. In addition to the cost-cutting and debt management activities, came a new tactic for growth that was based on innovation. At the same time as reducing product lines back to the original Lego brick, Knudstorp was enquiring how the simple plastic product could be used in
new and exciting ways. Crucially, he wasn’t just asking his staff this vital question; innovation was to be based on engaging the army of consumers and fans that religiously, and creatively, support the brand.

4.2 Consumer relationship

Lego has forged a productive relationship with its consumers in a plethora of ways, ranging from workshops at official events and exhibitions, to directly enlisting skilled fanatics to come and spend time in Lego factories. To engage children, Lego’s fan club has been put at the heart of its strategy, facilitating an ongoing dialogue between the brand and its youngest fans. Meanwhile the widespread Adult Fans of Lego (AFOL) coalesce in online communities that are independent from the brand, but interact with it directly on a regular basis. These communities are part of a relentless, global ideas factory, which engage in Lego competitions such as ‘You design it- we build it’. They also help sustain its permanent co-creation channels such as the Lego Ideas website, which invites fans to upload product suggestions and if they get 10,000 votes, the concept is appraised by Lego staff, with approved ideas put into production. One of the most notable results of this channel was Lego’s first ever set of female scientist figures in 2014. The ‘research institute’ characters, which include an astronomer and chemist, were launched following a successful proposal by geophysicist Ellen Kooijman, who critiqued the stereotypical female figures Lego had produced to date. As well as the aforementioned co-creation channels, there are also less structured opportunities - for instance, according to Marketing Week, Lego gets more than 20,000 unsolicited ideas via its call centre every year.

In this context, Lego’s marketing philosophy has recognised the nature and potential of the postmodern consumer. By systematically encouraging co-creation, it offers the opportunity for the fractured subjects of postmodernity to take an active role in satisfying their transient identity and
symbolic consumption needs. That is why Beaver et al (2007) are amongst the many marketing academics that see ‘mass customisation’ as the future of marketing in a postmodern climate. It should be noted however, that Lego’s pursuit of this strategy hasn’t been entirely successful. In 2005, it launched Design By Me – a mass customisation service through which consumers could design whatever they imagined using Lego Digital Designer software, and subsequently purchase the real model in a personalised Lego box. The initiative closed in 2012 after prolonged difficulties maintaining quality standards, although the design software is still available for consumers to use and share designs digitally. Despite these problems, Lego’s underlying intention to embrace the conditions of postmodern consumption is clear to see.

Regardless of official corporate patronage, AFOL and children alike have assembled in postmodern neo-tribes with their own conventions and community practices. There are numerous communities in the UK alone, such as The Brickish Association, in which AFOL share news, ideas and meet regularly. The most popular international online communities range from MOCpages, where enthusiasts share ‘my own creations’ to Brickipedia, an online Lego encyclopaedia with around 28,000 user generated pages. In this sense, Lego has become the postmodern ‘social glue’ (Patterson 1998) which holds such communities together. The breadth and scale of such communities ostensibly serves to satisfy the niche and fragmented tastes of the postmodern consumer. Breen and Robertson (2013) note how Lego’s “tribal assemblages range from the mainstream (The Netherlands’ Lego World, which pulls in more than seventy five thousand kids and their families) to the fringe (Munich’s Lego Graffiti Convention, a freak and geek fest of brick themed art)” (p7).

Lego actively engages and empowers this panoply of individual communities. For example, official Lego branded stores give some AFOL communities the chance to display their creations in store. Crucially though, they remain autonomous communities, with the ability to invite corporate
involvement or otherwise. This kind of relationship resembles the ‘social anthropology’ that Firat and Venkatesh see as the crux of postmodern marketing, in which brands observe consumer communities in their own environment and learn about their needs, before engaging with them on their own terms. By leaving the AFOL communities to operate independently, but monitor and respond to their feedback, Lego benefits from pure, unmediated knowledge about its consumers. This is far different to the aprioristic knowledge derived from typical market research surveys and focus groups, which unavoidably set the agenda and ideologically enframe the insights that are generated. Fundamentally, this is the key difference between a modern and postmodern approach to market research.

As well as embodying the neo-tribe paradigm and being a source of unfettered knowledge, the AFOL communities represent several other features of the postmodern marketing phenomenon. This includes the premise of de-differentiation, as adult consumers enjoy products that are originally aimed at children and thereby subvert the traditional categories of consumption. It is part of a prevailing postmodern cultural current in this respect, with other child-focused brands, such as Harry Potter, often adopted by adult consumers en-masse. This phenomenon is intrinsically related to the ‘juxtaposition of opposites’ feature of postmodern marketing which encourages and exploits the capacity of people to embrace the paradoxes of their contradictory consumption patterns, and almost revel in their playful irony. This dynamic pervades the practice of postmodern marketing, as Cova (1996) observes the clash of “heterogeneity with uniformity, passive consumption with active customization, individualism with tribalism, fragmentation with globalisation, and so on” (16). Lego’s consumers are at the crux of this juxtaposition in a number of ways. This includes how they assemble creations alone in isolation, yet coalesce in neo-tribes to share them, as well as how they construct Lego the old-fashioned way, yet use digital media to showcase what they’ve done. That said, we should acknowledge that the so-called juxtaposition of opposites feature of postmodern marketing is perhaps a too convenient and all-encompassing paradigm to be of constructive critical
use. In this respect, it typifies the type of vague observation that leads critics to attack postmodernism as vacuous rhetoric or a declining buzzword.

The rise of AFOL, is also a symptom of another classic postmodern trait – nostalgia. Lego’s business and marketing philosophy has embraced this fact by focusing on products and sub-brands that promote the classic Lego brick. One of its most successful ranges remains Lego City, which includes timeless products such as police stations and fire engines. It is therefore an example of what Brown, Sherry and Kozinets (2003) would call ‘retro branding’ in action, as it has revived an original, classic product in a contemporary context. This enduring, nostalgic appeal even helped to shelter the brand from global economic turbulence after the credit crunch struck. When commenting on Lego’s strong economic performance in 2010, Marko Ilincic, MD of Lego UK and Ireland said “It’s still a tough time for the market but the current trend for nostalgic toys and public demand for brands they know and trust has meant that we’ve fared well” (Dungan 2010, p1).

Curiously, not only is Lego an example of this pervasive yearning for the past, it intersects with other historic cultural phenomena. For instance, members of the Brickish Association write articles for their community, showcasing how they have used Lego to create Daleks, Classic Railways and Art Deco architecture, tangibly resurrecting artefacts from years gone by. In this respect, Lego is entwined in an intertextual and timeless fusion of signs – quite literally playing with fragments of the past in an archetypical postmodern fashion. It is a consumer-led process as much as a corporate strategy. Either way, it is a reverberation of the postmodern tendency to “plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present” (Harvey 1989, p311).

As well as bridging different historical eras, some Lego fans are breaking down traditional cultural barriers. Nathan Sawaya is one of numerous contemporary artists to use Lego to create art installations (fig 1) and is currently taking his collection around the U.S in the ‘art of the brick’ tour.
The humble plastic brick has emerged as a serious artistic medium, reinforcing the collapse of artistic distinctions that pop art first achieved decades ago, seen by many as a high point of postmodernism.

In this context, Lego no longer signifies its intended use and is part of the twisted and fluid milieu of meaning production in the postmodern era, originally observed by Derrida. It occupies a similar territory to the postmodern photography of Cindy Sherman and her peers, which borrows forms from popular culture the question the validity of serious art. Lego is therefore entwined in the collapse of cultural boundaries and distinctions that typifies the postmodern sensibility. We should acknowledge that this is an organic development rather than a concerted marketing ploy, but it serves to promote the brand in a postmodern fashion nonetheless.

**4.3 Product development**

Since the bonfire of superfluous product lines around ten years ago, Lego’s range has proliferated yet again, to the point that each year new launches account for approximately 60% of the Lego Group’s sales to consumers (2013 Annual Report). However, in-line with its incumbent philosophy, there has been a continued emphasis on the original Lego brick concept and derivatives of mature product lines, as well as a far less confusing array of sub-brands.

It’s important to note that a number of notable sub-brands survived the product cull in the first place. This includes the ‘Mindstorms’ range, which combines an interlocking brick system with
programmable electronics. As Lidz (2013) explains, the product enables “budding Edisons to assemble robots, program them on PCs and Macs, and control them via Bluetooth, downloadable apps and voice commands” (p1). Perhaps more so than any other Lego product, Mindstorms helps the fantasies of Lego consumers come to life in an act of reification. To re-quote Baudrillard, it is the very definition of simulacra i.e. the generation of “a real without origin or reality”. Thus, like many Lego manifestations, it facilitates an imaginary realm and the creation of a mendacious hyperreality, albeit on a self-aware, micro scale. Taking this argument further, it could be said that Lego is part of a wider cultural milieu that starts to condition us into the hyperreal, from our childhood onwards.

As with the mainstream Lego products, fans are at the hub of Mindstorms research and development with a group of leading fans dubbed ‘the 12 monkeys’ having authored the latest version. Again, this reflects the reversal of production and consumption that characterises postmodern consumerism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In the United States, Mindstorms is used constructively as an education tool, with school children operating in Mindstorms teams and participating in national robotics leagues. This merging of education, commerce and play is an intriguing example of de-differentiation at work – a key trait of postmodern marketing espoused by Brown et al. However, it can also been seen as a classic symptom of modernity, with classroom education organised around the ethics of science and technology, supported by the latest tools at its disposal. The dichotomy highlights a key paradox – the fact that seemingly postmodern marketing techniques inadvertently support the tenets of modernity and modernism – including the application of scientific reason and the ethos of progress.

Notwithstanding this debate, the postmodern belief in de-differentiation is something the brand is very familiar with and almost seems to revel in. The launch of ‘Lego Serious Play’ has even seen the toy brand enter the corporate team building market, offering facilitated workshops based on Lego-related group tasks and challenges. On Lego.com, the patented serious play methodology is
described “a radical, innovative, experiential process designed to enhance business performance”, while its brand name is a self-conscious oxymoron, clashing ‘play’ and its cultural associations of fun and joy, with ‘serious’ and its opposing connotations of sobriety.

At this juncture, another technologically advanced Lego product worth reflecting on is Lego Fusion. Launched in 2014, it combines traditional brick building sets, with an app that enables children to upload real-world creations into a 3D digital environment and complete various challenges. In some respects, Fusion can be viewed as a symptom of the post-postmodern era – an example of digimodernism (Kirby 2009) in action. That’s because it represents a complete paradigm shift in the way Lego is consumed, tacitly acknowledging that digitalisation is the primary force of contemporary existence. In this sense, it is not a merely playful or ironic twist on the use of Lego, it puts into a new dimension altogether. The type of scenarios and character based stories that previously only existed in a child’s imagination are now made available, pre-programmed on a digital platform. They are encountered via a new set of conventions for how Lego can be played with. Thus, it can be seen as a step past postmodernism into an entirely new digimodern environment. However, the product doesn’t add credence to the key pillar of digimodernism – that the author is dead and the consumer is God. The digital environments, games and scenarios are pre-prepared. There is space for individualisation, but only within prescribed limits.

Aside from the classic Lego City products, the brand’s biggest seller is the Star Wars range, which along with other franchises such as Toy Story and Batman, takes advantage of another brand’s equity. From a theoretical perspective, this can be interpreted as a playful and intertextual trend in a postmodern world, marked by multimedia convergence. However, it can also be read as an archetypical cross-promotional activity, which has been propagated by modernist marketing gurus such as Kotler for decades. In classical marketing terms, these collaborations are simply another route to market, offering the opportunity for lucrative brand extensions. Similarly, the proliferation
of Legoland theme parks and video games can be interpreted in a multitude of conflicting postmodern and modernist terms. On one hand, they are evidence of fragmentation, as Lego spreads across an ever increasing array of markets. Yet although this postmodern trend is apparent, it is not a conscious or intentional aspect of Lego’s marketing philosophy. Knudstorp reinforced this fact in an interview with the Telegraph - “If people want to create theme parks, books or video games, it’s great because it’s a way to embed the child even more in Lego, but we don’t consider them new growth avenues for the company. We will focus on the brick and bringing it to more and more children” (Anderson, 2014). Thus, Lego’s rational marketing dogma persists, meaning the fragmentation of its product lines is postmodern in practice, but not in intention. Judging from Knudstorp’s marketing philosophy from 2005 onwards, the brand has almost fought a battle with the postmodern forces of fragmentation and resulting threat of deviation from the pure Lego brick concept. It’s a situation that has been rationalised by Lego outsourcing and distancing itself from relatively superfluous products. This includes its portfolio of theme parks which were sold to Merlin Entertainments in 2005.

Of all the products associated with Lego, the six theme parks are the most palpable examples of the hyperreal; copies of a fictitious original that underpin the perplexing subversion and simulation of postmodern existence. In this sense they are an archetypal postmodern marketing technique, immediately comparable to Disneyland, which Baudrillard (1994) rigorously condemned in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Importantly for Lego, the theme parks offer the chance to present the product in its best and most spectacular light, removing any of the frustrations and negativity consumers may normally encounter. This quality has been observed as a key benefit of the hyperreal marketing environment by Proctor and Kitchen (2002). In contrast to this postmodern interpretation, ancillary products such as video games and theme-parks can be seen as a logical next step in the voracious, traditional marketing model that seeks vertical and horizontal integration of product brands. They are yet another way to reach niche market segments and increase market share, albeit in a rational,
low risk fashion via third parties such as Merlin Entertainments. Evidently, the extent to which Lego is pursuing a postmodern marketing strategy is shrouded by paradoxes and confusing interpretations like this. To bring the debate into sharper focus, it is necessary to analyse individual examples of its marketing communications.

4.4 Marketing communications

Taking into account the objectives and methodology of this research, the forthcoming analysis of Lego’s marketing communications prioritises depth and detail of analysis rather than quantity and coverage of samples. With this in mind, I have selected texts which arguably had the greatest impact on Lego sales over the past 12 months - namely, *The Lego Movie* and its supporting promotions. It was seven months after the movie was released in February 2014, that Lego overtook Mattel to become the world’s leading toy maker. Although this was obviously the result of exponential growth over a ten year period, the movie had an important impact on awareness and sales, after taking $470m at the box office worldwide. Since then, it has won multiple awards, ranging from a golden globe to a BAFTA, while being hailed by the marketing industry as an exemplar of branded content.

The Lego-based animation centres on the story of Emmet Brickowski – a seemingly average protagonist who works on a construction site in Bricksburg. After inadvertently finding a Lego component dubbed as the ‘piece of resistance’ he becomes embroiled in a battle against Lord Business, who crushes the creativity of the universe’s inhabitants and insists they ‘follow the instructions’. The battle is waged by a number of ‘master builders’ including WildStyle (Emmet’s love interest) and figures from Lego’s product range past and present. The primary animation is a movie-within-a-movie, as it emerges that the characters are actually toys being played with by humans in the real world.
As an example of marketing communication in its own right, the movie is infused with features that we commonly associate with postmodernism. Fundamentally, it is a pastiche, loosely based on the plot of the matrix, with Emmet referred to as “The Special” in an ideological fight against Lord Business. As well as these narrative elements, the movie playfully converts visual references from the Matrix into a Lego setting, including slow-motion twists and turns through action sequences. This adds to the humour of the movie, as tropes we are used to seeing though high-budget special effects seem incongruous in a Lego character environment. As previously discussed, this clash of conventions can also been seen as a postmodern trait, although it is hardly the sole preserve of postmodern culture.

Aside from the Matrix, the movie is densely entwined with other intertextual elements. This includes characters from Lego’s superhero product range, such as Batman and Superman, as well as its Star Wars and Harry Potter themes. Clearly, this serves to promote Lego’s products, yet it is far from advertising in the traditional sense. The movie even makes a tongue in cheek reference to failed products from the past, when WildStyle provides an overview of the different Lego universes to Emmet, including some previously abandoned product lines, saying “we don’t talk about them”. This self-reflexive and self-depreciating humour is certainly a postmodern device. Arguably, the movie appears particularly postmodern when it makes a wry, self-referential and ironic commentary on itself in this way. This approach becomes quite philosophical in terms of the movie’s overall plot, which attacks the uniformity of modern life and the inane, homogenised culture that capitalism supports. The ‘everything is awesome’ song Emmett and his colleagues use as their mantra, as well as the step-by-step self help guide he refers to at the beginning of the movie, are an ironic swipe at how some of us live. This counter-hegemonic message brings us back to the positive, ideological pluralism of postmodernism. The capacity to question the conventional and challenge the status quo, however small-scale, is what the likes of Owens and Foucault had observed as the
emancipatory essence of the postmodern condition, several decades before this movie was produced.

Although the movie works within this spirit of ‘heterotopia’, Lego is part of the very system that sustains the western existence it critiques; a market-leader producing a movie designed to sell the populous more products. In this context, the movie reflects a contemporary trend in which brands acknowledge their own intentions, fallibilities and contradictions as they market themselves to us. In this postmodern era, the brand “is hyperaware of its own fictionality and thus earns the right to simultaneously denigrate and elevate itself as divine” (Gauld 2014, p1). This is a far cry from traditional marketing communications, in which brands make an earnest proposition to their target audiences, based on the rational or emotive benefits of their products and services.

Within the movie, this hyper-awareness extends to inferences about Lego fans. In the closing scenes, the meta-fiction of the film is revealed with the animated universe we have been witnessing turning out to be a basement filled with Lego creations by a real-world AFOL. His son has been playing with the toys (i.e. the movie’s protagonists) much to the annoyance of his father, who exclaims “This is not a toy – it’s a highly sophisticated interlocking brick system”. In this sense, the movie is making a self-mocking, humorous statement about the fans that have contributed to its success. It is one of several pieces of content that are designed to appeal to older consumers and fans of the brand. Building on the brand’s emotional connection with AFOL, one of the master builders is a ‘1980 something space guy’ which was one of Lego’s biggest sellers over two decades ago. His faded and chewed appearance, signifies his position as a relic in the new world, with older viewers nostalgically experiencing the film vicariously through his eyes. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that self-reflexivity is not confined to postmodernism and was a linchpin of modernist culture, from cubism to James Joyce. In the case of the Lego movie, it is the irony derived from the self-reflexivity
that adds to its postmodern credentials. It also has to be considered in context, not least in the way the film has been promoted by supporting marketing communications.

From the onset, marketing of the film in the US and UK could legitimately be described as having a postmodern twist. As part of its pre-launch awareness building campaign in February 2014, an entire primetime television advertising break during ITV’s Dancing on Ice was converted into a Lego animation. The collaboration meant that established adverts for brands ranging from BT to confused.com were playfully recreated visually, while retaining the same soundtrack and voiceovers. As well as being intertextual, it subverted the traditional rules of advertising – usually based on understanding your target market, carefully tailoring your message and booking media space with requisite gross rating points. Instead, it was pure opportunism from the collaborating brands which were approached by Lego about the opportunity and collectively hoped the stunt would be well received by their target markets. As well as the intention of the advert, interesting observations can be made about the way it was executed. For instance, the act of transforming the adverts into Lego exposed their artifice in an obvious and parodic way. Thus, they referenced and critiqued themselves as advertisements in a ‘double voiced’ discourse, just as postmodern art and architecture revels in its obvious and contrived construction. In this sense, the adverts are self-conscious simulacra, inviting us to share the joke and be amused.

As with Lego’s overall marketing philosophy, the movie’s awareness raising activity recognised the impulse of contemporary consumers to get involved. Ahead of the movie’s release, a contest was launched, offering children and young adults the chance to create a vehicle for inclusion in the film. The contest was promoted on Lego's Facebook and YouTube pages and coordinated through the movie’s microsite. The initiative chimes with the discourse of postmodern marketing – that “consumers must not be perceived simply as targets, but as collaborators or partners in generation of meanings for the organisation’s offerings” (Christensen et al, 2005, p164). However, it could be
argued that it is a relatively small, prescribed and facile chance for consumer involvement. Examples of preconfigured engagement opportunities like this are abundant in contemporary marketing, and serve as calculated milestones in integrated marketing plans rather than a fundamental paradigm shift. They have crudely become part of the relationship marketing paradigm, which was first coined in the 1980s, but which has latterly become a ubiquitous promotional philosophy. It shares the customer-empowering ethos of postmodern marketing, albeit in a more regimented environment, designed to capture consumer data and individualise promotions accordingly. Ultimately it seeks to secure customer loyalty through carefully managed opportunities for engagement and customisation.

Figure 2: Lego Movie SigFig Creator

In a similar vein, Lego launched the SigFig creator on the Lego Movie website (fig 2) which continues to this day. Fans can use it to digitally construct a Lego character, using a set of predefined options covering everything from eyebrows to accessories. It can be downloaded and saved using a unique code for use in future online Lego games. Again, this promotion can be construed as a contrived
effort to empower the postmodern consumer. Given that it relates to the complete digitisation of a traditional product it is also redolent of the digimodernism discourse, with Lego’s communications completing adapting to the textual conventions of its younger consumers. Digimodernism’s heralding of the death of the author is not entirely substantiated though. Consumers may have the change to construct their own figure, but it is still within parameters and tools set by the ‘corporate author’, which in this case is Lego.

Through its YouTube channel in January 2014, Lego ran a competition for fans to swede (i.e. recreate) its official movie trailer, incentivised by cash prizes. Not only does the creation of a sweded film require a great deal of effort and imagination, it offers a breadth of artistic licence and capacity to construct symbolic meanings. In this sense, it is arguably closer to the emancipatory ideal of postmodern marketing than the aforementioned examples, and recognises that “In postmodernity, the consumer is not a passive target for image marketing but an active link in the continual production of meanings” (Cova, p20). Nevertheless, by running initiatives like the sweded movie trailer and movie vehicle competition, Lego is setting the agenda for those meanings, including how it wants to be perceived by consumers. Its official brand values are therefore easily decoded from the way it delivers its marketing communications, including imagination, creativity, fun and learning.

They’re also evident in the consumer activity it endorses, including the winning swede, which was a witty parody of the original Lego Movie trailer, using sets and characters constructed of cardboard and decorated by felt-tip, backed by homemade sound effects. In a postmodern age, in which consumers engage with products for their symbolic benefits, rather than purchase them for their tangible utility, this clear articulation of Lego’s brand personality is crucial to its success. It’s a tactic which latently rests on Baudrillard’s theory of sign-value, in which consumers purchase products for their fluid and arbitrary significations.
Lego’s playful brand values can be easily decoded from the way the official Lego movie Facebook page promoted the movie. User-generated content was frequently shared, such as photographs of children using specially designed point of sale displays in stores that enable them to pose as Emmet (fig 3). This worked particularly well due to the way Emmet was characterised as a regular, non-entity in the movie, disappointing the other characters such as WildStyle who were expecting ‘the special one’. Emmet’s perceived lack of identity makes vicarious consumer experiences like this all the more possible. It recognises that postmodern consumers of all ages desire more than a basic product, they crave interaction and experience.

As well as underpinning this aspect of Lego’s marketing philosophy the Facebook page continued the meta irony of the movie itself. The ‘Everything is Awesome’ mantra is used frequently, including on seasonal campaign posts (e.g. #ChristmasisAwesome). However, when taken out of the context of the movie the sentiments behind this ironic swipe at modern life appear to be lost and it arguably becomes little more than another inane viral fad rather than an example of a sophisticated double voiced discourse. Superficially, the same can be said of much of the content on the Lego movie Facebook page. Yet whether intentionally or not, it is caught in the semiotic maelstrom of postmodern life. The post featuring an image of Emmet on the side of Marylebone railway station in the style of a Banksy mural is a typical example (fig 4). Through this pastiche, Lego mimics art and bridges different cultural boundaries. Facebook is therefore a platform for the exchange of...
intertextual and meaning laden texts. Essentially, it facilitates the postmodern consumer experience and acts as another territory for Lego to observe its fans in a form of cultural anthropology.

Figure 4: Banksy pastiche, Marylebone Station
5. Conclusions

Inevitably, the consideration of whether postmodern marketing is dead or alive has proved to be a nebulous and complex debate. From Nietzsche’s questioning of knowledge generation to Baudrillard’s denouncement of hyperreality, the growth and popularisation of postmodern thought takes a long and convoluted path. Moreover, the translation of the postmodern sensibility into the field of marketing is particularly complicated. Unlike the comparative abundance of postmodern artists and architects, there have been relatively few protagonists to champion its cause in the world of marketing. A number of theorists have effectively shone a light on the potential of postmodern marketing from an academic perspective, but there has never been a widespread fraternity of celebrated postmodern marketers in practice. To some extent, the Lego case study has highlighted why this is the case.

Applying postmodernism to the marketing sphere is fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. Not least, how can you successful promote and sell a product, while shunning the planning and control that is necessary to evidence your success and satisfy your commercial masters? The detailed consideration of Lego’s strategy poses further, related questions. For instance is a toy company entering new markets such as corporate team building an example of postmodern de-differentiation or just simply classic Kotlerite marketing at work? In this context, Lego’s overall business and marketing philosophy has a fundamental tension, embodied by its corporate Mission and Vision statement.

**Mission:**

‘*Inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow*’

Our ultimate purpose is to inspire and develop children to think creatively, reason systematically and release their potential to shape their own future - experiencing the endless human possibility.
Vision:

‘Inventing the future of play’

We want to pioneer new ways of playing, play materials and the business models of play - leveraging globalisation and digitalisation...it is not just about products, it is about realising the human possibility

Evidently, both of these guiding statements speak the language of modernism, of progress, and of facilitating ‘human possibility’. It is redolent of the rhetoric of the enlightenment as the mastery of man over his environment was philosophised and debated. Yet this bold corporate vision and ambition relies on the provision of a realm of fantasy, experimentation and community empowerment. In this respect, Lego operates on an intriguing intersection between modernist ideals and postmodern practices.

Notwithstanding this context, the case study has revealed the great extent to which many of the ostensible characteristics of postmodern marketing are readily apparent in the way Lego operates. The shifting relationship between producers and consumers, including the growth of neo-tribes and the reversal of production and consumption is particularly clear in its marketing practices. It is also easy to track how this activity is a specific objective of Lego’s strategy, arriving as part of Knudstorp’s reforms in 2004. In this respect, we can say it was a conscious response to the changing nature of the postmodern consumer, although Knudstorp wouldn’t use that particular terminology of course. Similarly, Lego’s emphasis on nostalgic product lines and communications campaigns is an intentional exploitation of the prevailing cultural climate. One in which consumers are increasingly craving the security of the past.
The same concerted approach is not evident in all of the other postmodern traits we’ve witnessed in Lego’s activity. Rather, they are organic and unplanned symptoms of the contemporary environment. The fragmentation of Lego’s products and marketing communications is something it has constantly fought a battle to avoid since its financial crisis at the turn of the millennium, yet the trend has persisted, particularly through the proliferation of digital offerings. Also, the extreme intertextuality inherent in the use and promotion of Lego’s products is often outside its control or influence. This includes the way Lego has been appropriated as an artistic medium, or used as a form of creative expression by AFOL.

It is also important to make the distinction between marketing techniques that can be described as postmodern and some of Lego’s marketing communications, such as the Lego movie, which can be simply be read as postmodern texts. In this sense, the Lego movie is a cultural artefact of its time, which like many of the era is ironic, self-referential, nostalgic and intertextual. Taken in isolation, this does not equate to an overthrow of the traditional marketing paradigm. It is only when contextualised within Lego’s wider marketing strategy can we consider whether postmodern marketing is truly alive and well. In the instances, when Lego’s activity has displayed the attributes of postmodern marketing, it has rarely appears to be the result of applied postmodern theory – more a case of business logic (e.g. Knudstorp’s reforms) or merely reflecting the wider cultural zeitgeist (e.g. nostalgia). The case study therefore adds credence to the hypothesis of Firat and Venkatesh (1995) that marketing practice is postmodern, while its theory remains modernist. It is very striking that in the 10 years since this original observation, the use of postmodern techniques has proliferated through companies such as Lego, yet it has still not been reflected in theory. Instead, some of its attributes have been absorbed into traditional marketing frameworks, such as the reversal of consumer relationships under the banners of ‘relationship marketing’ or ‘community empowerment’ for instance.
Postmodern marketing simply hasn’t captured the imagination of marketers as an overarching cohesive concept, despite the sense that it goes some way to define the industry of today. Perhaps this is because postmodernism can be such an impenetrable subject that intentionally defies the very idea of being a unified concept. The fact that “postmodern marketing comes in many shapes and forms” (Brown, 1998, p46) hasn’t helped its cause either. Almost any form of marketing seen as a deviant from the traditional approach can and has been branded postmodern, albeit often incorrectly. Additionally, postmodernism’s gradual decline as a mode of enquiry in the face of digimodernism or metamodernism may explain its failure to become truly embedded.

Through the Lego case study, there is little evidence to suggest that the more provocative and challenging aspects of postmodern marketing have taken hold. A pluralist curiosity and experimentation hasn’t replaced financial business planning and conventional marketing heuristics. From a strategic point of view, a robust, familiar and traditional marketing dogma is clearly still king. However, through the growing role of fan communities, fragmentation of products and breaking down of traditional market boundaries, it’s possible to conclude that the postmodern marketing revolution must have happened at least in part. Significantly though, it is a transformation that has never been claimed under the banner of postmodernism, with the influence of digitisation taking much more precedence. As a result, its opportunity to become embedded as an overarching marketing philosophy has passed away, even if its techniques live on in practice. After all, what could be described as postmodern marketing can be seen all around us, but it has been engulfed by the conventional marketing machine, with its influence assimilated into contemporary marketing frameworks. We are therefore left with a hybrid of conflicting and contradictory approaches - a collision of strategy and opportunism, of rationalism and instinct, of control and empowerment. Curiously, this tension resembles the battle between Lord Business and Emmet Brickowski. One in which the battle lines are drawn over freedom and innovation. It’s a struggle that breeds creativity and helps define the marketing industry we know today.
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