COMMENTARY

Modes of engagement for critical marketing: oppositional, revivalist and therapeutic

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Abstract This commentary reflects on the scope for expanding disciplinary space for the potential of critical marketing, focussing particularly on how the critical marketing project relates to conventional or ‘mainstream’ marketing. It proposes three types of engagement: i.e. the oppositional mode, the revivalist mode and the therapeutic mode. These are outlined following an initial consideration of the nature of discipline in marketing and the domain of critical marketing.

INTRODUCTION

This commentary reflects on the scope for expanding disciplinary space for the potential of critical marketing. This raises questions that go to the very heart of the critical marketing project: why are we writing, to whom are we writing and for what purpose? I was asked by the editors of this special edition to focus particularly on how the critical marking project relates to conventional or “mainstream” marketing. There has been no dichotomous distinction between critical and mainstream marketing along the lines of Hunt and Burnett’s (1982) taxonomy of the domain of macromarketing versus micromarketing. For this discussion however I propose three types of engagement: i.e. the oppositional mode, the revivalist mode and the therapeutic mode. These are outlined following initial consideration of the nature of discipline in marketing and the domain of critical marketing.

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ON DISCIPLINE

As the marketing discipline matures and its scope broadens, the application, relevance and actionability of many of those disciplinary principles appear to have become increasingly fragmented (Wilkie and Moore 2003). Several distinct and almost self-contained sub-disciplines have evolved each with their own domain, frame of reference, methods, knowledge base, journals, language, terminology and acronyms (e.g. B2B, CRM, ICT, CCT, SD Logic), becoming more segmented, fragmented and specialised. There are many contemporary “drivers” for the increasing fragmentation in marketing (and all disciplines), such as academic division of labour, organisation of universities, PhD specialisation, publication requirements, career imperatives, etc. The process of specialisation of knowledge is not unique to marketing and there are more general epistemological explanations for this phenomenon.

According to Heidegger (1962) the creation of contemplative space is necessary in order to reflect and theorise in more a more abstract, epistemic manner; but this separation of theoria from worldly activity results in a tendency to reductionism as the phenomena studied becomes increasingly formalised, segmented and dissected. He argues that lying behind this division of knowledge and the distancing of the researcher from the world of the researched is a change in the function and form of academic language which shifted away from – in modern parlance – “telling it like it appears” (i.e. a manner of speech which directly presents a story) to presenting the object of enquiry as more than it appears, (i.e. the substructure, hidden meanings, underlying substance) in a language of categorisation and theorisation that reveals deeper truths beyond how things may appear. Thus the discourse of scholarly discipline is necessarily separated from the appearance of the subject, as indeed is the scholar.

This separation process is manifested in mainstream marketing literature through (often unconsciously) recognising a method or a concept as constituting marketing itself. Concepts and methods become the de facto objects of inquiry in studies of marketing practice; e.g. the marketing plan, marketing department, CRM, the service encounter, etc. is marketing. It is through such representation processes that the constitutive character of language calls marketing into being (Brownlie and Saren 1997; Quinn 2008). A critical approach therefore requires a fundamental reappraisal of what constitutes marketing activity. The underlying question is: what are those activities labelled as marketing, and how and by whom are they so labelled? There is, it appears, no one individual labeller thereof.

CRITIQUE IS NOT A SPACE, IT’S A STATE OF MIND

The phenomena which constitute marketing activity for critical marketing do not tend to fit well into the themes and categorisations of conventional sub-fields of marketing such as services, B2B, strategy, branding, etc. Defining marketing in terms of these conventional categories limits the possibilities and range of critique. To paraphrase Foucault, “categories create outcomes”. Indeed, the conventional sub-groupings themselves should be subjected to critical scrutiny. As Wensley (2007) points out, the basis and purpose the critical project and its criterion for relevance should be questioned in the context of critical marketing itself.
Furthermore, the reductionism inherent in conventional marketing sub-groups tends to obscure important overriding and holistic marketing phenomena, that are important to the critical researcher. These phenomena include underlying mechanisms, structures and relations as well as more general concepts such as identity, culture and knowledge, which require an alternative approach that sets the subject in its wider contexts drawing on relevant ideas from associated literature, far beyond conventional marketing. So “expanding disciplinary space” for the critical project, involves expanding in several dimensions, including:

1. The definition of marketing activities,
2. The context in which marketing activity is viewed,
3. The scope of literature and ideas on which the discipline draws and
4. How critical academics engage with mainstream marketing.

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT FOR CRITICAL MARKETING AND THE MAINSTREAM

Critical marketing is a minority sport, often ignored by our mainstream academic colleagues, at best tolerated and at worst reviled. How then can we and should we “critters” engage with the mainstream community? I propose three possible types of engagement: the oppositional mode, the revivalist mode and the therapeutic mode.

Mode 1 Oppositional

In this mode critical marketing engages dialectically in opposition to the mainstream as a separate, alternative and self-contained approach to the marketing discipline. This necessitates the development of its own distinct critical frame of reference, methods, knowledge base, terminology, etc. and separate critical networks, conferences, journals, etc., in opposition to the mainstream ones. The aim is to establish an alternative marketing agenda and power base to attack the mainstream canon and its institutions and ready to take over from it.

These separate critical marketing institutions and networks would act as a central hub for developing theory and methodologies, research and teaching programmes, attracting dissident scholars, attacking established ideas, preparing to replace the mainstream. What could be a better example of an object of critique in critical marketing than marketing education itself? Mainstream marketing education is an obvious oppositional target in this mode of engagement as one of the main factories of the marketing practitioners of the future. (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) for the “ministers of propaganda of the consumer culture” (Adorno 1991).

Our students are being trained for a world that will never materialise. Higher education in business schools and universities in Europe and USA has undergone a thorough marketisation during the last ten to fifteen years (Lowrie and Willmott 2005). So close to home, such a clear oppositional engagement with the mainstream could begin by interrogating the concepts and policies of customer orientation and marketisation imposed upon university education itself as a direct consequence of the marketing disciplinary ideology.
Mode 2 Revivalist

Here the critical project engages with the mainstream and attempts to encourage it to return to its original methods and values of academic scepticism and critical inquiry. It argues that over time mainstream marketing has lost its original heterogeneity and creativity, which was counterbalanced by a healthy scepticism and critique of established ideas. Instead nowadays, through the dominant practices of knowledge transmission, a narrow normative canon has become ossified in the received texts of Kotler et al. handed down as the taken-for-granted position of managerialist orientation and positivist research methods. These concerns are also articulated by the mainstream, e.g. the 2009 European Marketing Academy conference theme warned of;

...the dangers linked to the hyper-specialisation seen within certain research areas in marketing, and the increasing gap between economic and social considerations and the preoccupations of researchers. Can 'applied' disciplines in the framework of a widened dialogue be the answer to the debate on the reform of marketing? Can this notion help to re-establish the place marketing deserves within society and the corporate world?

(EMAC 2009)

Critical marketers can help address such questions by encouraging a revival of the original ideas and spirit of questioning by seminal thinkers such as Alderson, Levitt, Bartels, Baumol and Buzzel, which have been lost and forgotten by the discipline over the past 50 years in its quest for scientific verification and recency of citations (Tadajewski and Saren 2008). They would also argue that the study and teaching of marketing has to move beyond the structure imposed on it by the so-called core marketing functions in companies - advertising, distribution, strategy, sales, product development, etc. to take a more critical approach to these “old” functional categories and start to view afresh how companies and managers think and go about marketing in their businesses. Such critical arguments would not be out of place alongside contemporary ideas of relationship marketing and service dominant logic. Reviving the variety of the past could also provide alternative techniques for the analysis of marketing practice, methodologies for interpretation and potentially for the development of theory (Nevett 1991).

In this mode the critical project would not attack the mainstream across a wide front but engage in persuasion, debate, and argument with mainstream marketers and encourage them to encompass more critique themselves and revive the discipline’s original dynamism and spirit of inquiry. This would also help mainstream researchers avoid falling into the twin traps of path dependency and confirmation bias. Critical marketing should therefore engage within the mainstream, involving more debate and dissent, heterodoxy and heterogeneity; thus adding to the academic authority and intellectual vitality of the discipline, instead of the current dead weight of dogma masquerading as scholarship

Mode 3 Therapeutic

This approach views the fixation on the mainstream marketing canon as a symptom of the power relations of marketing knowledge in the academic and socio-economic system (Willmott 1999). The role of critical marketing is to demystify and democratise marketing knowledge and to help wean the mainstream away from their tendency to fetishise marketing techniques and texts.
In the therapeutic mode the critical marketer needs to adopt the role of analyst for the mainstream. The first task is diagnosis of the problem, followed by prescription of the cure. One antidote to the tendency to impose discipline by fetishising techniques and strict methods is to encourage a more free and receptive frame of inquiry in the patient. Therefore the mainstream has to be helped to become more aware and open to a variety of methods of enquiry and approaches to establishing facts, relevance, and causality, which are more impressionistic and intuitive than positivist “scientific” analysis. Pearce (2004) views knowledge more as “folk wisdom” rather than “scientific knowledge”. Mainstream researchers would begin to understand that the world appears already interpreted, which would help them reorient their assumptions about and their relations with the objects of their enquiry e.g. the role of the researched as co-creators of meaning.

This mode would also encourage the mainstream to pursue wider public engagement with marketing ideas, contrary to regarding marketing knowledge as the specialist domain of professional academics and managers (Saren and Svennson 2009). Dialogue with the wider public would act as a sort of care in the community for those who have become locked in their ivory towers. Other disciplines ranging from history, physics and biology have benefited from their efforts to broaden public awareness of their contribution.

Each of these modes of engagement with the mainstream has different implications for critical marketing. Mode 1 would certainly expand a separate disciplinary space for critique. Being outside the mainstream however could present dangers of being completely cut off and losing touch with the rest of the marketing academy and at worst retreating into a self-referential isolation. Mode 3 also has potential for expansion of disciplinary space, but in this case within the mainstream. It could open up new frontiers and scope for research if the mainstream accepted some of its prescriptions, but the critical marketers would have less control over it. Mode 2 would also work inside the mainstream, but might constrain its space and scope by making it more critical and sceptical, questioning its applications in several areas. Thus it could actually reduce disciplinary space, but help marketing create more critical and conceptual grounds for defence of its territory and greater control over it.

So how far should the expansion in these directions go? The paradox of “expanding space” for the critical marketing project is that it should not be spread out too far. A focussed and sharpened concentration of force might be more effective, which mobilises material from wider fields, but refines and focuses these as critique, not dissipated across a broad front.

REFERENCES


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