When Steven Brown published his book ‘Postmodern Marketing’ in 1995, he was destined, irrecoverably, to become The Most Infamous Marketing Academic to be born this side of the Atlantic – ever. Both lauded and criticised for his frequently scathing attacks on the marketing orthodoxy (and its progenitors) he has ‘mixed it’ with the best. This present artefact attempts an overview of the story to date, albeit from a lowlier position than Brown might now be used to defending, and ‘criticism’ might be too strong a word for what follows. An occasional hint of sarcasm will, however, be detected in some of its more ill-judged passages, but then higher forms of wit and discrimination should perhaps not be expected of someone who has spent the best part of a year collecting references that might help unravel the mythology of an unusually prolific marketing man of letters. This paper offers, therefore, neither attack nor appreciation, but a personal interpretation of the history of Stephen Brown the writer. It is assumed that though Brown’s name will be familiar to readers his oeuvre may be less so and that, as a consequence, both postmodernism and interpretive marketing research might be similarly penumbric quantities. So, in addition to plotting the trajectory of the Brownian marketing philosophy – from early preoccupations with retail location theories to present pronouncements on revivalism and marketing excess - this paper also provides a brief commentary on such relevant issues. However, its primary objective is to encourage readers to discover what Stephen Brown has to say; then to ruminate, reflect, and assemble their own critique.

Introduction

Episode IV – ‘A New Hope’

“His name is Stephen Brown. Unedited, uncertified, and unrivalled, our hero has arrived. He is armed with some novel weapons that the bad guys have not seen before: a razor-sharp wit, an encyclopedic knowledge of the marketing literature, and his favourite and most lethal weapon, postmodernism” (Fahy 1998, p121).
Thus, in January 1998, the subject of this present disquisition was introduced to the readers of the Journal of Marketing (JoM) in a review of the often praised (e.g. Fahy 1998; Holbrook 1998b; Wood 1997), occasionally questioned (e.g. Thompson 1997) and - according to Brown (1998b) - frequently purchased, book ‘Postmodern Marketing’ (Brown 1995c). By this date, however, Brown’s lively contribution to contemporary marketing debate was already ‘out there’ - the JoM review of Brown’s book being considerably overdue (‘Postmodern Marketing’ was published in 1995). It has, however, taken the imperators of the international marketing establishment a good while to warm to his dogged espousal of the postmodern and to acknowledge that there is (mostly) content behind his style.

The first JoM paper carrying Brown’s name as author was not published until sometime later (Brown 1999a), but he has been exposing himself and his ideas (in the nicest possible way) to the academic marketing community now for more than fifteen years. In his ‘middle’ career the European Journal Of Marketing offered sanctuary for his burgeoning postmodern oeuvre, but initially he published widely (and sometimes obscurely) on ‘shopping’ or, more precisely, retail location theory. Beginning with his Ph.D thesis (Brown 1984)\(^2\) this subject, and the related wheel of retailing (e.g. Brown 1987a; 1988; 1990b; 1991b; 1991c; 1992a; 1994a), occupied him for the best part of a decade. Early papers continued the particular theme of his Ph.D - retail activity in crisis-torn Belfast (e.g. Brown 1985a; 1985b; 1985c; 1986a; 1986b) - and he occasionally returned to this, reflecting on the evolving nature of the ‘troubles’ and their causal relationship with consumer behaviour in a region with which he still retains strong links (e.g. Brown 1990a). Other, early, retail-orientated interests were shopper circulation in shopping centres (e.g. Brown 1991a) and micro-scale perspectives on retail location (e.g. Brown 1987b 1989a; 1989b; 1992b; 1993a).

Clues as to how the extant Stephen Brown came to pass are sparse in these early papers, though the arresting photograph of a man in dark glasses (Brown 1990a), rooted by the camera to the entrance of an off-licence and bearing a tray of canned lager, captioned “A Southern Irish shopper taking advantage of the lower prices that prevail in Northern Ireland” is evidence of - if not a latent postmodernist – then at least a budding ironist and seasoned xxxx-taker (excuse the antipodean vernacular). However, this did little more than hint at what was to come, later.

Early promise is expressed within a lively broadside (Brown 1992a) against three fellow writers (see Davies, Jones and Pal 1992) who had failed, ironically (why ironically? - read on) to meet Brown’s acid test of academic rigour in a paper on the wheel of retailing, hinting that the work was symptomatic of a regression in the quality of contemporary retailing research. This was touched with a nascent spleen that he would later develop and exercise on other, more auspicious marketers, whilst its extravagantly punning title - ‘Wheel Meat Again’ - was replete with “the playfulness at the

\(^2\) Reference sourced from Brown 1992c.
heart of the postmodern perspective” (Wood 1997, p358) that characterises much of his subsequent work. The ‘real’ Stephen Brown, however, was not to appear until the following year and did not reach its full flowering, or wide-screen exposure, until the year after that.

And Now for Something Completely Different - Postmodern Marketing Too

By 1993 Brown had begun to add a ‘new’ component to both his conference (e.g. 1993c 1993d) and published output. Riding the burgeoning new wave of postmodernism in marketing, first heralded in papers by Venkatesh (1989), Firth (1990), Sherry (1990) - see Venkatesh, Sherry and Firat 1993 - and Ogilvy 1990, Brown’s ‘Postmodern Marketing?’ (1993b), appeared in the European Journal of Marketing at, more or less, the same time as a special edition (on postmodernism, marketing and the consumer) of the U.S. based International Journal of Research in Marketing (Volume 10, number 3, August 1993). In the same year there was also a first attempt at preventing his first prominent academic ‘baby’ (the wheel of marketing) from being thrown out with the bath water (Brown 1993c), a tactic desperately repeated later as a self-confessed “blatant act of self-interest and academic distortion” in ‘Postmodern Marketing’ (Brown 1995c, p161). Self-mockery (or ironic allusion to his own pronouncements) now also becoming one of the defining characteristics of the Stephen Brown style.

Building on a cinematic theme, contemporaneously explored by Belk and Bryce (1993), Stephen Brown advanced his postmodern polemic a year later (Brown 1994b) by explicating the emergence of the multiplex cinema as a metaphor for marketing. (this theme was further developed in ‘Postmodern Marketing’ - Brown 1995c). Contained within is evidence of a growing fascination with the iconography of popular culture and a homage to a multiplicity of seemingly complex philosophical ideas that, collectively, give substance to the term ‘postmodernism’.

‘Postmodern Marketing?’ (Brown 1993b) was an attempt to clarify the postmodern position and to encourage marketing to move on from its extant pre-paradigmatic uncertainty. Brown called this paper an “accessible yet critical introduction to postmodernism for marketers” (Brown 1993b, p20). ‘Screening Postmodernism’ (Brown 1994b), on the other hand, represented his first overt attempt at direct participation at the “cutting edge of late-twentieth century scholarship” (p45), revealing a natural dexterity for inventive manipulation of the “spectacular vernacular” (Scott 1993).

The principal argument contained within this paper starts with the observation that traditional marketing research is premised upon an objective epistemology and an objective ontology, and that this leads inevitably to the notion of a universally prescribable reality that can be subjected to measurement, rational analysis, and prediction. Brown offers an alternative perspective by identifying a diametrically opposite position where both epistemology and ontology are wholly subjective, and where the only certainty
is that researchers are doomed to the research of the unresearchable. He argues that acceptance of the postmodern position – which he enthusiastically endorses - disables any notion of an “underpinning philosophy of science in marketing” (p44), and that traditional research methods are no longer appropriate, nor supportable. Brown concludes by suggesting that postmodernism both challenges and undermines “generations of scholarly endeavour” (p46), that it accentuates the relativist, eliminates the positivist, latches on to the reformative (but - and this is a tricky one - doesn’t mess with Mr. In-between; see later) and frees marketers from the stultifying effect of modernist dogma (see also Firat and Venkatesh 1995). All this, and more, is explored further in Brown’s best-known work ‘Postmodern Marketing’ (Brown 1995c).

Ceci N’est Pas Une Explication

Before moving on readers might consider it appropriate for the author to explore, briefly, the nature and provenance of postmodernism, both to build some context and to establish a link between the concept and common experience. Problematically, however, the very nature of postmodernism is such that both definition and explanation are, theoretically, redundant, as free interpretation – even misinterpretation (Brown, 2000b) – is a valid and encouraged response to almost any phenomena, observed or imagined. Brown himself notes, “Now, postmodernism is one of those irritatingly ubiquitous terms that is always prefaced by apologiae about its inherent indefinability and the pointlessness of definitions, per se.” (Brown 1999b, p.369); so I have, at least, satisfied the first criterion regarding discussion of this topic. The temptation, of course, is to ignore any self-imposed warning and to attempt some transgressive commentary that may, or may not, help the uninitiated. And where to start, and where to stop, is always the problem.

The key to understanding postmodernism, in its broadest sense, lies in first understanding modernism, for - in simple terms - the one is the antithesis of the other. For Brown (1993b, p21), “The project of modernity .... embraced the idea of progress, rejoiced in the power of reason, lauded scientific discovery and technological innovation, espoused the ascent of man, anticipated freedom from oppression and held that, once its fundamental laws and mechanisms were understood, the physical and social world as we know it could be analysed, planned and controlled”. From tentative beginnings in the 13th century (Brians 1998, cites the rediscovery of Greek philosophy by Thomas Aquinas) and formal establishment via the Enlightenment (characterized by the ‘new’ philosophical ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Dés cartes, Locke, and Hume, amongst others; Brians 1998) modernism itself represented a paradigm shift from “the ungrounded theories, speculations, superstitions and sorceries of the Middle Ages” (Franklin 1998, p.438). The ‘modern’ era endured well into the twentieth century and we are arguably still in its grasp today. Its underlying notions of knowledge and reality are responsible for most of the ideas that underpin current Western society, and
its heroes – including Newton, Darwin, Einstein and Freud – are men (male dominance being one of the defining characteristics of modernism) who gloried in rationality and the explanatory power of mathematical and experimental determinism.

The beginning of the postmodern age perhaps began with the onset of post-industrialism and, certainly, Drucker was using the term ‘post-modern’ in his 1957 book ‘The Landmarks of Tomorrow’ to suggest such a condition (Best and Kellner 1991). Postmodernism (note, no hyphen) as Brown essentially understands and expresses it, however, is a complex cocktail of philosophical ideas that arose primarily in the last quarter of the last century, and is based upon the writings of - amongst many others - Baudrillard, Barthes, Jameson, Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, and Foucault. Cahoone’s ‘From Modernism to Postmodernism’ (1996) offers both a useful introduction to the topic and a selection of appropriate readings, though another figure who has influenced Brown substantially - the progenitor of chronotope, carnivalesque, and heteroglossia: Mikhail Bakhtin - pre-dates this grouping and might best be explored through the musings of Brown himself (e.g. Brown 1998b 1999a; Brown, Stevens and Maclaran 1999).

For marketing, postmodernism represents a break with convention, regularity, practice, precept, ordinariness, orthodoxy, and formalism. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) suggest that postmodernism can imply a ‘paradoxical juxtaposition’ of styles, a limitlessness of realities, and a challenge to social and consumerist norms. But, further, it can denote - totally - a “disappearance of meaning and representation” (Baudrillard 1993, p. 154).

The relentless barrage of visual and aural imagery that dominates our every waking moment creates a postmodern present that, knowingly or otherwise, we all experience and inhabit. Juxtapositions of meaning, place, reality, the imaginary, metaphor, now, the past, and the future, characterise the contemporary social and consumer domain. As Jameson (1984) points out, postmodernism is a radical break with both a dominant culture and a dominant aesthetic, and marketing, of course, is representative of both.

**Marketing At The Mountains Of Madness**

Brown’s book, ‘Postmodern Marketing’ combines, and expands upon, the ideas and structures introduced in ‘Postmodern marketing?’ (1993b) and ‘Screening Postmodernism’ (1994b). Unstintingly generous in his advocacy of the postmodern, Brown concludes the book by stating that there are five key reasons why marketing should embrace its principles, if not unreservedly, then at least with enthusiastic curiosity. Despite being out of print in the UK, this book and its antecedent papers remain an influential, and frequently engaged, body of work; often cited (e.g. Desmond 1997; Firat and Schultz II 1997; O’Donohue 1997; Berthon and Katsikeas 1998; Gould and Lerman 1998; Patterson 1998; Holbrook 1998a) and also recommended as a reading for students (e.g. Columbia University 1999; Brown, 2001a ).

Though addressing a wide range of pre-millennial marketing issues its
overarching thesis contends that although marketing practice has become intensively postmodern by nature, both traditional marketing theory - as expressed through the ideas of Levitt and Kotler - and conventional, logical- positivist, marketing theory and research are disconnected from the present and, as such, can no longer claim either relevance or credibility. His foundational, and entirely convincing argument, is that marketing already inhabits a postmodern vortex of its own construction, and that the key postmodern conditions of hyperreality, fragmentation, de-differentiation, chronology, pastiche, anti-foundationalism and pluralism are influenced by, and apparent within, late twentieth-century marketing praxis. Further contemporary support is evident in Thomas (1997), and especially Holbrook (1995) who draws comparisons between marketing and postmodernism via the nine ‘P’s’ - paradox, parody, pastiche, playfulness, pluralism, proliferation, promiscuity, polysemy and panchracticalism. Cova and Svanfeldt (1993) recognise marketing as part of the ‘aestheticisation of everyday life’ and it has been argued (Firat, Sherry and Venkatesh 1994) that marketing practice may, itself, be the epitome of postmodern activity.

According to this view the customer - ‘homo consumericus’ (Firat and Schultz II 1997) - is a willing participant in a ‘spectacularized’ (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) marketing-led environment, promiscuously involved in a ‘you are what you buy’, consumingly-passionate, frenzy of consumption. As a paradox-coper (Mick and Fournier 1998), a creator of an image of ‘self’ (Sturroch and Pioch 1998), a consumer of space and place (Varley and Crowther 1998) - and with a resignation to a state of disorder and chaos (Brown 1993b) - each buyer, or “symbolically and ritually manifested” community of buyers (Cova 1996, p19), is an integral part of the show, gripped by a “preoccupation with consumption to the detriment of oneself and society” (Jacobson and Mazur 1995). Often “invisible to the categories of modern sociology” (Cova 1996, p19), the postmodern consumer is characterized by unknowable demographic and cultural variety.

Brown believes that if marketing theorists/academics can accept that this ‘marketing madness’ (Jacobson and Mazur 1995) has an intellectual foundation firmly grounded in valid postmodern theory, then a ‘rapprochement’ with marketing practitioners can be achieved; he sees neither empathy nor connectivity between the two (see also Brown 1996a). The shared reading of a ‘postmodern present’ would also lead to a universalised ontology for “today’s much-vaunted marketing restoratives” (Brown 1995c, p176) - micro-marketing, relationship marketing, et al - whilst acquiescence to the power of postmodernism’s metaphorical reasoning would enable marketing to “reconceptualise the marketing concept” (Brown 1995c, p176). Perhaps, even more importantly, embracing the postmodern position would allow marketing to shed its mantle of academic apologist and would facilitate a re-assessment of both the external marketing milieu, and marketing theory and scholarship, through a more profound and sustainable epistemology. This is the substance of Brown’s pentagonal thesis.
What’s Love Got To Do With It?

If the subject of Brown’s thesis - the suggestion that marketing per se has become inherently postmodern - benefits from substantial intuitive and academic support, its object - pointing out that marketing’s research methods are no longer appropriate to its needs - has enjoyed a somewhat more mixed reaction. ‘Postmodern Marketing’ re-states the legitimate, but ultimately dissatisfying, view that there is no absolute and generalised reality and that, therefore, no adequate means of conducting marketing research can exist. His sub-text, that ‘conventional’ scientific researchers - such as Shelby Hunt, “the fastest epistemologist in the West” (Brown 1995c, p144) - have “rendered (marketing) philosophically blind, intellectually deaf and spiritually debilitated” (Brown 1996a, p260), represents one side of an ‘art versus science’ controversy that was joined even before Brown started writing – Hunt, (1994) identifies the writings of Kuhn, Hanson and Feyerbrand, in the 1970’s, as responsible for precipitating the debate.

It is not difficult, however, to see why Brown is such a vocal, and at times contemptuously antagonistic, deprecator of the world-according-to-Hunt. Equally certain in his own thesis that only “scientific realism is coherent and intelligible” (Hunt 1990, p13), Hunt offers perhaps the most resolutely articulated argument against relativist research methods and paradigm incommensurability, and towards a renewed sovereignty for realism and empirical rigour (e.g. Hunt 1992). In a preteritional response to one of Brown’s early attacks Hunt goes on to state - in a continued narrative against the evils of ‘epistobabble’ (postmodernism) - “The time for obfuscation and obscurantism masquerading as profundity is past: the time for reasoned rethinking is just beginning” (Hunt 1994, p24.) From a Brownian perspective the words ‘bull’, ‘rag’ and ‘red’ would appear appropriate.

I’d Rather the Stars didn’t Describe Us to Each Other; I’d Rather we do it for Ourselves³

Although in ‘Postmodern Marketing’ (1995c) Brown is at pains to demonstrate his disdain for positivism, a more extreme contention - that even interpretive methods of research fail to meet the postmodern challenge - is introduced, though not pursued. A more overt surfacing of this particular argument, however, is to be found in a subsequent paper (Brown 1995b). In this exploration of the philosophical theories underpinning interpretive research methods Brown finds that humanism, semiotics, critical theory, hermeneutics, existentialism and phenomenology provide a research agenda which, “in certain important respects” (p287) is the polar opposite of postmodernism. In so doing he questions the ultimate value of postpositivist techniques which side-step postmodernism’s discourse on ambiguity and offer - he claims - not a radical alternative to positivism, but yet another way of making sense of an

³ From “China”, by Bob Perelman; reproduced in Foster 1985. p121.
exigent objective reality (see also Venkatesh, Sherry and Firat 1993 - “... postmodernism is not a synonym for postpositivism or interpretivism for these two concepts are very much embedded within the discourse on modernism.” p.217). He suggests that “the postmodern project offers little by way of shelter to dispossessed marketing researchers” (Brown 1995b, p304). This is now getting serious.

Argument for the application of more imaginative procedures for both marketing and marketing research runs parallel with the argument against positivism. According to Brown (1995b) this began with Anderson (1983), and it remains one of the three or four core dialectics inherent within contemporary marketing debate. Few, however, now completely disown interpretive research methods, and they even find practical expression within the more conservative elements of global commerce (e.g. Sheehy 1999, reports on Honda’s use of ‘value mythology’ and ‘storytelling’ to illicit customer intelligence). Even those sympathetic to the positivist paradigm have called for qualitative research to be allowed its place in the Sun (e.g. Peter 1992; Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992), whilst a number of researchers have offered either methodologies (e.g. Zaltman 1996) or arguments (e.g. Robson and Rowe 1997; Thomas 1997) observing the value of pluralism within a broadly interpretive context. The arguments for postpositivist, interpretive analysis per se are extensive.

(Note: Interpretive marketing research is largely concerned with “discovery rather than justification” (Hirschman and Thompson 1997 p.47), “the development and employment of rhetoric that is more focused on how to act and change, and less preoccupied with rigour and neutrality” (Eastman and Bailey 1996, p455) and “understanding rather than quantifying” (Woodruffe-Burton 1998, p303). Researchers in this field are a significant, if not substantial, contingent operating largely within the domain of consumer inquiry and analysis. Key names include Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook, who together explored the interpretive application of semiotics/semiology to the understanding of ‘esthetic consumption’ (Hirschman and Holbrook 1993) and who, separately, have since developed and refined methodologies that explore the marketing inference of visual allegory and metaphor (e.g. Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Hirschman, Scott and Wells 1998 - continued evaluation of mass media and its imagery; and Holbrook 1997b and 1998a - the use of stereographic and 3D photographs to enhance communication between the researcher and the researched); Lawrence Belk, whose most significant contributions relate to historical anthropological discourse (e.g. Belk 1994 - the Mormon community in Utah; Belk and Costa 1998 - inhabitants of the Rocky Mountains; Belk and Groves 1999 - Australian Aborigines); Robert Grafton Small, whose reflective essays on the minutiae of daily life heighten our understanding of what it means to possess and consume (e.g. 1993, and 1997) and, of course, Brown himself whose espousal of personal introspective analysis has led him to produce and/or contribute to at least three papers on the resonant topic of sex and shopping (Reid and Brown 1996; Brown and Reid 1997; Brown 1998a). Note that this summary merely scratches the surface of a wonderful, sometimes weird, and increasingly ironic – e.g. Holbrook 1997a – body of work.)
Brown is nothing if not inconsistent, however, and though in ‘Postmodern marketing research: no representation without taxation’ (Brown 1995b) he offers no effective curative for marketing’s lost research agenda - other than to deliver a wispy treatise on the merits of deconstruction and cognitive mapping - he returns two years later with a shiny-happy tract on the catholicism of the postmodernist church (Brown 1997a), offering us the usual interpretative suspects (Belk, Hirschman, Holbrook, etc.) as reconstructed, neo-prefixed postmodernists. He also gives us a few more ‘P’s’ to permit further alliteration around the postmodern turn - profanity, prevarication, profligacy, plurivalence, phantasmagoria, pretension, preposterousness and presumption - and revisits, with renewed ardour, his flinty diatribe against the arch positivist, Shelby Hunt. The Epistobabble Kid rides again.

There is, however, a certain lightness of touch in parts of this later work, and perhaps we can see Brown here poised ready to relinquish postmodern purity and settle for a pragmatic postmodernism that, whilst denying, immutably, marketing’s historical “futile fixation with Science” (Brown 1998b, p255), also accepts that there must be some form of usable alternative. And certainly, ‘Postmodern Marketing Two’ - following three years on from its filial predecessor - has a more optimistic feel than preceding work. With its rock ‘n’ roll allegory, emphasis on marketing passion, and avowed devotion to marketing for marketing’s sake, it is both an entertaining and challenging sequel that coincidentally re-establishes, revises, and progresses original ideas (Shapiro and Dobscha, 2000). It still, however, primarily argues against “…the misplaced scientism of the elder statesmen who have led us down the misguided path of (neo)positivism with all its enslaving doctrine and constraining dogma.” (Holbrook 1999, p. 69) and continues, unabated, in its Shelby-baiting bombast.

In his critique (or, perhaps more accurately, testimonial) of ‘Postmodern Marketing Two’, Morris Holbrook reveals that in Brown’s view “…our profession has been unpardonably slow to recognize not only that marketing is an art rather than a science but, moreover, that marketing should be an art rather than a science – indeed that art is superior to the conventional scientism.” (Holbrook 1999, p. 69). This theme has come to dominate, or at least underpin, virtually all that Stephen Brown has written over the past six or seven years, and he has even attempted to position Ted Levitt as a fellow champion of Art and Imagination (Brown 1999a). Relevant observations, however, were contained within a characteristically ‘frank’ critique of Levitt’s literary canon (acknowledged with considerable disdain by Levitt himself - see Levitt, 2000) and, for Brown, both the man and his work remain legitimate subjects for ongoing critical analysis (see Brown, 2001a, for a deconstructivist review of ‘Marketing Myopia’).
Brown’s affair with marketing-as-art remains steadfast and he has even contested, convincingly, that art itself is, essentially, marketing (Brown and Patterson, 2000c). But as his writing has matured two further themes have developed, and as with all of his post-’Postmodern Marketing’ work, these are not new ideas but extensions, or re-interpretations, of prior notions that together constitute an evolving ideology regarding how marketing has responded, and/or might respond, to the challenges posed by a confounded/confounding consumer domain that sits uncomfortably on the cusp of the 21st century. Of the two ‘new’ topics the most immediately apparent concerns the ubiquity and pervasiveness of what he calls retro-marketing - or, more correctly, a triform array of consumption-related phenomena represented by the terms repro-marketing, retro-marketing, and repro-retro marketing, this last “In classic postmodern fashion … comprises revived revivals, nostalgia for nostalgia itself and state-of-the-art reproductions of past state-of-the-art reproductions of the past”( Brown 1999b, p. 366).

He cites examples such as the Star Wars sequels/prequels; the historical memorabilia store ‘Past Times; the neo-celtic ‘Oirish’ revivalism represented by Caffreys, River Dance and O’Neillis; the nostalgia imperative central to the design of the Jaguar ‘S’ type, the BMW Z07, and Chrysler PT Cruiser; newly ironic product placing that employs references and clips from classic films of the 1960’s, including Easy Rider, Bullitt, and the Italian Job; and the recent plethora of 1970’s-based sit-coms – the Grimleys, The Seventies Show, and Days Like These; to express and emphasise the extent to which the past is culturally and commercially salient to our present lives (Brown 1999b). More recently (Brown, 2001b) he has ‘exposed’ the Harry Potter phenomena - “brand new, old-fashioned fairy tales” (p. 468) - as the epitome of retro-opportunism, describing the huge nostalgia-fuelled marketing juggernaut that has propelled J.K. Rowling and her fictional progeny to the forefront of consumer consciousness. In so doing - via the association of P. T. Barnum with the marketing tactics of Rowling’s publisher, Bloomsbury - he introduces us to his second ‘new’ idea. But more of this, later.

In the interim, note how Brown diatonically associates present and past preoccupations as he points out that “the essential point about retro and PoMo is that they are both predicated on recapitulation and thus rest upon cyclical rather than linear models of time.” (Brown 1999b, p.370). He argues that, effectively, there is nothing new under the Sun. He even suggests that relationship marketing is a form of retro-marketing in that it attempts a return to the consumer sensibility of a former age; an age typified by ‘mom and pop’ corner shops and characterised by ‘marketers’ who knew all their customers personally. This was, of course, before the cynical 1960’s when a “milk-’em dry spirit of cowboy marketing” (Brown 1999b, p.370) the concept of marketing-as-exploitation. His main point, however, (and real fear) is that - in just the same way that ‘modern’ ideas concerning literary, architectural and
artistic endeavour are being reprised - then ‘modern’, or pre-postmodern, marketing (as represented by - who else? - Kotler, Levitt and Shelby Hunt) might also be due for revival and/or revalidation (Brown, 1999b). Brown has seen a potential future, and it irks.

**Roll up! Roll up! Roll up!**

This newly contrived emphasis on retro-marketing features in much of Brown’s more recent literary output (Brown, 2001a; 2001b; Brown, Hirschman and Maclaran, 2000), but increasingly this seems to be a conceit that fronts a more pressing agenda. In fact, since ‘Postmodern Marketing Two’ Browns’ writings have begun to take on a singularly covert, seductive, and lulling-you-into-a-false-sense-of-security kind of lurch. Inevitably starting with an appertu of vaudevillian bent - a few recent first lines include, “Many years ago when I was a pustular and malodorous adolescent, I had a deeply disgusting habit.” (Brown, 2000a, and 2001a), “If, as has often been suggested, blue is this season’s black and comedy the new rock ‘n’ roll, then the past is this season’s present and old the new ‘new’.” (Brown 1999b), and, most shamefully clandestine of all, “Bam! Bam, bam, bam. Bam! Bam, bam, bam. Bam, bom, baaaammmm”: (Brown, 2001b) - Brown slowly, but ever so carefully, reveals the true purpose behind his entertainingly diverting facades. Perhaps living out - through his literature - an increasingly certain view of marketing’s future, his later articles and books attest to a new role for marketing’s dispossessed and disillusioned practitioners. Relationship marketing has failed, he argues; customers are tired, cynical and, above all, bored. What they really want is to be TEASE’d. (Brown, 2001a).

In his latest book, ‘Marketing – The Retro Revolution’ (Brown, 2001a) Brown punches home the contention that “Alongside its tricksterish credentials, marketing is characterized by exaggeration, by excess, by extremety, by exuberance, by extra, extra, extra.” (Brown, 2001a, p. 199/200). He goes on to explain that it is the very grossness, the fantastically gruesome grotesqueness of marketing, and the wiles of its conniving, artful, tricksy, slick, smart, pawky, too-clever-by-half wide boys that gives it both character and substance. Hence, it is not the ‘devils of analysis, planning, implementation and control’ (Brown 1999c) who get the job done, it’s the slepers and snake-oil salesmen that deliver. A preceding article (a rigorously researched exposition on the marketing of musa - bananas - Brown, 2000a) introduces us to a feast of consumerist prestidigitation that is subsequently extended (Brown, 2001a, 2001b) via a series of revelatory anecdotes that laud the incendiary ostentation of P.T. Barnum, Roger Ackerley, L. Frank Baum, William Henry Hartley/Sequah, Dudley J. LeBlanc, and ‘Del Boy’ Trotter - hucksters to man. Even Jesus Christ - not normally associated with the excesses of Mammon - is exposed as a “marketing man manque” (Brown and Patterson, 2000a).
As Good as Tom Verlaine Playing ‘Little Johnny Jewel’ on ‘The Rior Sessions’?

So, what - in conclusion - should we say of Stephen Brown? According to Shapiro and Dobscha (2000, p.101) we should either love him or hate him; “Some revere him - mostly those who profess to postmodern leanings. Others revile him - individuals who find Brown’s attacks on the received marketing wisdom as absurd as they are unfounded”. Dependent upon personal inclination, therefore, we are invited to perceive him as either liberator or libertine, as shaman or charlatan. We are offered alternatives of an extreme variety and, it is implied, we will jump according to our prejudices. And there is certainly evidence of such intellectual polarity, some of which has been rehearsed in this paper; but what about those who are uncommitted - how should they decide? What, as they say in the best traditions of empiricist investigation, is the evidence?

The case for the defence would argue that he has, undoubtedly, been a consistent deprecator of the conventional and, through association with authors representing the broadest sweep of relevant contemporary thought (see, for example, Brown, Bell and Carson 1996a; Brown and Turley 1997; Brown, Doherty and Clark 1998; Brown and Patterson, 2000b; and Brown, Hirschman, and MacIaran, 2001) has contributed, probably, more to the diffusion of alternative marketing research methodologies than anyone else in the UK. He has provided, additionally, a useful - if occasionally cranky - narrative focusing on the aging and potential mortality of the marketing concept (e.g. Brown 1995a; Brown 1996a; Brown and MaClaran 1996; Brown, Bell and Carson 1996b; Brown 1997b) and in so doing has challenged the academic establishment and denounced the discriminatory nature of its positivist orthodoxy. This body of work alone represents a valued and considerable contribution to contemporary marketing debate. When viewed in conjunction with his continued exposure and embrace of the postmodern, and his reviverist recommendations for the carnivalesque and extravagant persuasions of prior marketing paradigms, this, arguably, positions Brown as the most provocative and original UK marketing academic of his day. And though his is not the only strident voice in the field, it is, undoubtedly, substantial.

It is probably also true to say that he has, almost single-handedly, triggered a newly abstract and imaginative approach to marketing discourse in the UK and, via his own efforts and the encouragement of others, has extended the range, variety, ambition and artistic value of marketing literature per se, amplifying opportunities for irreverence, obliquity and willful tautology – marketingart for marketingart’s sake. His own work discloses him as a master of tropology and paronomasia; of explication and exegesis; and of bombast, palaver, prolixity and, some might say, even circumlocutory flatulence - “…despite reducing my Webster’s dictionary to tattered shreds by looking up every third or fourth word (a testament to Brown’s non pareil vocabulary of sesquipedalianisms) – I still find some terms that apparently do not exist
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anywhere on the face of this earth …” (Holbrook 1999, p.70). Crisp is not a word associated with his style, but then, neither, is baggy (and you may have noticed that his style, if not his erudition, can become contagious). Somehow, he manages to strike a balance between pretension and passion, and despite the frequently episodic nature of his more arcane meanderings his thesis is never less than focused. He is prolific, even promiscuous, and never afraid “to set the scholarly salami slicer on ‘extra thin’” (Brown 1995d, p. 684) when it benefits a (scholarly) worthy cause. And, despite a tendency to be rude, opinionated, incautious, obstinate, obsessive, improbable and wrong-headed, he continues to intrigue. So far, so good.

But, metaphorically, as good as Tom Verlaine …? When compared to ‘best in class’ where does he really rate? Is he fit to plug his guitar into the same amp. as those he so wickedly deprecates; could he, should he, share the same stage as Philip Kotler, the maestro of marketing virtuosity? Is he just a Hank B. Marvin to Hunt’s Hendrix, perhaps a mere rhythm player to Levitt’s lead; or, rather, is he a veritable Pete Townsend (or Jack white – choose your era), an incendiary and dynamic innovator - the man with the sharpest axe and keenest lyrics on the bill? Is he always playing the same old riff, a one-hit wonder who always ends his set with an acoustic/up-tempo/instrumental - any version will do - re-run of the same old Postmodern Marketing favourites? Or is he a tenacious interpreter of an immutable truth - a truth that becomes stronger with each repeated and reverberated airing?

And what motivates him? Is he obsessed with ‘Sensation’ - a Damien Hirst/Tracy Emin/Marcus Harvey of consumerism, a Brit-marketeer hoping to hang with the guys at the Groucho … or perhaps the Journal of Consumer Research? Is he just a mischievous young(ish) delinquent turned bad from loitering with the wrong crowd; picking up unconventional habits from John Sherry, Morris Holbrook and Lawrence Belk - bigger boys who should know better? Or is he his own man, a true original, stung by the iniquities of marketing convention, choked and provoked by an insufflation of archaic dogma and doctrine? Is he merely flash, vain, a swank, a skite, a man in thrall to his own literary reputation or, as ventured at the beginning of this paper, is there really substance behind his style?

Promotion! Promotion! Promotion!

Certainly he is, despite earlier allusions to the contrary, remarkable in respect of his overarching consistency of thought - the big idea ‘then’ being supremely uniform to the big idea now. In 1990 he set his present circumgyratory obsessions in train via observation concerning earlier rotary preoccupations - “the wheel of retailing” he suggested “is one of the few marketing concepts with a sense of the past” (Brown 1990b, p.144). And, as we have seen, both postmodern marketing and retro-marketing have similarly retrospective themes, whilst, in the most recent of his academic excursions (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran, 2001) he and his colleagues exhort us to “Always Historicize!” The wheel of retailing, in fact, provides clues regarding the
evolving substance of Stephen Brown in more ways than one. Writing in a 1991 issue of the ‘Journal of Marketing Management’ he unwittingly(?) provided a metaphorical commentary on the flowering of his own mystique and notoriety. His article proposed the ‘wheel’ as “a marketing enigma”; a concept that has “undiminished ability to polarise scholarly opinion” (Brown 1991c, p.132); and a theory which “is revered and reviled in almost equal measure.” (Brown 1991c, P.139).

And it is tempting to imagine the wheel’s four-stage trajectory (see Brown 1991, Figure 3) as, potentially, an ironic allegory for Brown’s own academic concerns; especially if you share with me doubts concerning the veracity of his more recent claims, and perceive in these the seeds of a disintegrating (or, drawing on Brown’s own analogue re-modelling of ‘the wheel’ - fragmenting: see Brown 1994a, figure 1) metathesis. It has even been suggested (by a colleague) that Stephen has now ‘lost the plot’. And though it can be safely assumed that he had this in the first place - approbation earned via the publication of Postmodern Marketing was, from many quarters, almost embarrassingly fulsome - this colleague could have a point. Whereas PoMo was apposite and entirely in tune with the zeitgeist, his ideas regarding marketing excess are, perhaps, merely excessive. Too much - in fact - being made of too little. Is he now really championing the “… four ‘P’s of postmodernism ... parody, persiflage, pastiche and playfulness, with just a dash of plagiarism and a dollop of pasquinade” (Brown 1999b, p.369), or is his vision now constrained by marketings’ failure to meet today’s customer challenge head-on? In ‘Retail location theory: the legacy of Harold Hotelling’ (Brown 1989b) Brown drew attention to the three most important properties in retailing: location, location, location. His more recent pronouncements appear, in similarly trifoliate vein, to endorse promotion, promotion, promotion: one-’P’ marketing for imperfect practitioners, either unwilling, or unable, to grasp what relationship marketing really means.

One of the various articles on ideological terminations (eschatology) with which Stephen Brown is associated (Brown, Bell and Smithee 1997) suggests that “there is always something after the end.” (p.637). And so it is with this paper. Almost too obviously, and with hardly any embarrassment concerning the imaginative poverty of this link, I direct the reader to the ‘References’ section below and recommend that he/she picks on a few relevant items and establishes a first-hand familiarity with Stephen Brown and his PoMo, retro, repro ruminations on the mendacity of modern marketing. You should find that if you can’t hate him, or even learn to love him, you will at least learn some new words.

“I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why” (Lovecraft 1985, p. 11)

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**About the Author**

**Tony Woodall** is a Senior Lecturer in Quality Management and Marketing at Nottingham Business School. He joined the Nottingham Trent University some five years ago following a first career in corporate management and a second in management consultancy. His primary research interests focus on the general relevance of quality and value to consumer behaviour, and current/potential relationships between quality management and marketing management. These interests in no way qualify Tony to write about Stephen Brown, and his inappropriate meddling in matters that do not concern him should act as a warning to those who might take this paper seriously. You have been warned.