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A light gray world map is centered in the background of the cover page, showing the outlines of continents and major islands.

Assessing Communication in a New Institution: Postmodernism and the Internet

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an overview of traditional marketing communication models and the interactive marketplace of computer-mediated marketing environments to study the nascent consumption processes. The ways of conceiving the process of marketing communication have changed along with the evolution of theoretical paradigms in marketing and communication studies. The overall approach of this paper is guided by a principle that the trajectory of consumption process as witnessed in the computer-mediated marketing environment lies less on the monolithic dissemination of information by the marketers as the primary maker of meaning-making in the consumption process. To encourage such studies, we draw upon the multiple theories employed in postmodernism as a guide to review studies that examined the ever-changing marketing communication tapestries. Based on this review, we highlight postmodernism have received little attention in the marketing communication literature and thus, represent opportunities for future research. We conclude by discussing computer-mediated marketing environment (CMME) involves user participation in both interactive frameworks of production and in interactive frameworks of reception.

Introduction

How do we understand contemporary marketing communications in the evolving interactive marketplace? What are we to make of the interactive marketplace engendered by Internet technologies? What is really new with the way consumers relates with marketers in the age of information ubiquity? What does the noted Canadian scholar McLuhan (1964) mean when he says ‘the medium is the message’? The basic idea here is that the means of transmitting information impacts on a society more than the content of the message (Carey, 1969). Obviously, there is no uniform framework within which all these marketing communications developments can be described. However, a term that has been frequently used to describe these ‘multiphrenic’ developments of the new world order is postmodernity. In the realm of technological innovations and advanced industrial economy that allows it to progress at exponential rate, is the catalyst that has moved contemporary culture into the postmodern era.

The origins of postmodernism cannot be traced to a single source or a single set of circumstances. It is varied and disparate and might even appear to be disconnected (Venkatesh, 1999). Because the origin is too diverse representing various disciplines and cultural terrains, one of the unifying forces of postmodernism is a trajectory that is becoming increasingly against metanarratives and foundationalism; it foes grand schemes of legitimisations; it is for heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, and pragmatic construction of local rules and prescriptives agreed upon by participants (Best and Kellner, 1994). Postmodernity is a transformative, disruptive cultural change from a modernist epoch to a postmodern one. In it, modernity is incorporated, but problematised. It is seen as constituting a cultural force from the 1960s (Bagnall, 1994). In this paper, we discuss how the increased in technological innovation as noted by McLuhan (1964) leads to postmodern culture. By alluding to the Internet technologies as the prototype of these manifestations on how the interactive marketplace of computer-mediated marketing environments alters traditional marketing communication models. The paper discusses postmodernism and marketing communications and the Internet as the progenitor of the ongoing cultural shifts.

The Internet as a Post-modern Arena

The pace of change brought about by new technologies has had a significant effect on the way companies and consumers relate to one another. New and emerging technologies challenge the traditional process of transactions and the way communications between marketers and consumers are managed. The advent of the Internet along with its commercial offshoot (Web) is having a major impact in the way in which communications between companies and consumers are conducted and maintained in the evolving marketing landscape. Much of these changes have been characterised and explicated in complex unconnected links with marketing communications processes that enshrined consumer's moulding behaviour in the evolving interacting marketplace. Current understandings tend to question whether the recent and most remarkable changes as a result of Internet ubiquity warrant a paradigm shift from praxis of marketing mix concept and the traditional monologic marketing communication models or whether the Internet represents a novel and powerful communication and marketing medium after several decades of pedagogical foundationalism.

Postmodern theories are critical of modernism's philosophical groundwork. Deconstruction of modernist assumptions of truth have amenably allowed a greater intellectual freedom of thought; one inclined to relativity, not absolutes Postmodernism in its backlash against view held dear to modernism embraces a greater tolerance of difference and/or the insignificant other, going so far as to deny the distinction at all. Disaffected with modernism's belief in rationality and science, and articulated in the philosophies of Nietzsche and later French poststructuralists Saussure, Derrida and Foucault, postmodernism has radicalised pre-existing notions of ultimate truth. By 'deconstructing' modernist systems of knowledge, and reworking the structure of our world in terms of 'intertextuality' notable on the omnipresent World Wide Web, new ideas about subjectivity have developed and affected the way marketers and companies relates with consumers (Clayton, 2002). The 'totalising meta-narratives' such as functionalism or Marxism, which lay claim to total explanation of history and social life are no longer credible in the information-infused economy:

Truth is what we should rid ourselves of as fast as possible and pass it on to somebody else. As with illnesses, it's the only way to be cured of it. He who hangs on to truth has lost. Baudrillard (1987) p.10

Lyotard and Baudrillard both see modern societies as an unreflective and narrow instrumental adoption to co-creating cultures. In such cultures, where signs predominate, any distinction between appearances and 'reality' is lost. The overproduction of signs by the media, especially the nascent digital medium wipes out the distinction between the image and the reality and leads to the cacophonous loss of stable meaning. The concept of 'meaning' has been fundamentally challenged by Derrida's consideration of the ambiguity of language. The inability of language to anchor truth, except in relation to the signified, has far-reaching implications, particularly as this notion undermines the certainty of origins and subsequently receptions. As such marketing communications is perceived as fixed and definable, the meaning of a word is taken to be what it references, correspond with or what it stands for. Underpinning this is the premise that the essential task of language is to convey information and describe 'reality' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994) the notion of being able to capture and described accurately the nature of reality is a contentious issue, and one which tends to be confounded, particularly when one adopts the view that individuals may experience multiple realities and multiple selves in subjectively web-enabled communication medium (Gergen, 1997; Turkle, 1995).

If subjectivity as witnessed on the web is in a continual state of flux, the origins and receptions are unstable referents (Castells, 2001). Therefore, computer-mediated marketing environments engendered by Internet *debouchment* as a site of experiential metamorphic production is worthy of further investigation by researchers and scholars alike. The Internet

network has definitely inspired a complex and multifaceted marketing and communications environments where the consumption process is neither local nor global. Consumers are witnessing a gamut of near and far species of products and providing seemingly avant-garde consumption patterns for both consumers and sellers of these products. The incarnation of the World Wide Web as a commercial medium has created a hyper-communication channel where physical and virtual, connected and disconnected, services and products, researchers and respondents etc are glued together.

Numerous researchers have delineated the ongoing transition (Brown 1995; 1999; Venkatesh et al 1995; Hackley 2001) and identified postmodern marketing as a possible philosophy able to explain and characterise the new consumption and communication phenomena. Internet technology championed by its commercial progeny is visibly represented in some aspects of postmodernism. For example, the loss of connection between signs and signifiers is seen, notions such as 'knowledge as commodities' are raised as the pivot of the information economy, the existence of 'multiple and fragmented selves' is visible and questions of 'what remains real' are becoming complex. With the Internet, more specifically, the World Wide Web, marketers have the ability to combine the modalities of television, print, and radio into a hyper marketing environment.

The richness of images, symbols, use of icons; fragmentation and decentralisation envisioned on the Web in all its infinite manifestations; communication as main element of the society witnessed in various ways on the medium; hyper reality of the contents; swiftness in consumption and modification; complex cultural value and different levels of the contents. These facets are all corralled and conterminous in postmodern age, which render traditional marketing communication models along with its umbilical chord of linearity and quantifications ineptitude to implement in the ever- changing marketing tapestry. Yet, marketing practitioners have been blighted by the cause-effect factors of quantification programmes of the monologic media. Thereby, proffering terminal marketing communications diagnoses, which ominously withered away and classified unproductive. Marketing communications in the evolving marketplace requires some basic knowledge, which recognises the disparate and diverse orientations, knowledge that eschews universalism and rationalism. Instead, it requires knowledge that fragment, defragment and particularise communication programmes by recognising the socially-constructed elements of the participants (Berger and Luckman, 1967).

The general conception of postmodernity upon which this analysis is based has been articulated elsewhere (Turkle, 1995). In it, postmodernity is seen as culture that is self-consciously informed by an understanding of: 1) the interpretative nature of human perception; 2) multiple realities are no longer for the margins; and 3) the contextualised and fragmented nature of selves and beliefs. The conception of 'culture' here is a broad one – encompassing any given set of socially constructed realities, either perceived or postulated. It therefore encompasses not only the traditional passive marketing communication pattern, but also all other realities of a contrived nature as witnessed on the computer-mediated marketing environments. The Internet reflects and creates postmodern ideas by enabling some novel ways of shopping. Simultaneously, this medium offers an avenue in which a different form of homogeneity and connected global marketing environment is experienced. Interactivity, accessibility, control and shift of time and space allow for a larger presence and more individual actions online.

The very pattern of existing marketing communication models adopted and operationalised by practitioners are devoid of the fundamentals of postmodern thinking which ultimately privileged and required perspectival seeing and interpretations to grasp the uniqueness of concrete phenomenon like Internet. Computer-mediated marketing environments, a commercial and pedestal facet of Internet technologies, provides marketers with a malleable context that can be used to deliver content in a variety of ways to consumers. This capability highlights the distinction between information in marketing communication and the vehicle used to deliver the information: that is, content differs from communication. Also, the

versatility of the Internet as a context for mediated communication means that marketers can integrate different modalities of marketing communications into a strategy that combine online and offline tactics to meet strategic objectives.

Trajectories of Content and Interactivity

The World Wide Web is repositioning the basic interactivity upon which the principles of marketing are being formulated. Communication content in the industrial economy was permeated purely in monolithic fashion as companies and agencies reigned supreme giving nothing but a passive position to the consumers. As the Internet unfolded and consumers accessibility to the medium gained ascendancy, interactivity between companies and organisations marketing their products or services became more elastic and fluid than the evanescent unidirectional communication paradigm. The elastication of discourse within this medium is not only a boon to consumers but has given them a pivotal role in the decision-making process of products and services development. As the currency of this advantage to consumers grows, the extant communication model, which celebrates the passive and lethargic role of consumers, is inapplicable in the ever-changing digital tapestry where interactivity is the facet of the new medium. As Deighton and Barwise (2001) have noted:

The World Wide Web holds the promise of powerful and subtle interactivity. When a consumer visits a Web site, many cycles of 'send' and respond can occur in a short time. When the consumer visits some later, the circles can resume just where they left off. The result is a medium with the potential to be flexible, as pertinent, and as persuasive as good conversation, with a better memory than the most diligent salesperson and no distaste for repetitive tasks. While other media may be more involving, the Web is uniquely responsive ... An interactive medium is one that can reach out to a consumer, collect a response, and then, in the defining step, reach again with a new message whose content takes account of the response.

Parallel to the iterative concept espoused by Deighton and Barwise, Peppers and Rogers (1997) contend that the art of broadcast advertising, constrained in its ability to create conversation, has always been a thin game of surfaces, of enticement. It has depended on handing prospective customers to a second stage, the retailer, the salesperson of digital interactivity, who offers the prospect of integrating these two facets of selling, enticement and engagement into one seamless whole. Corresponding to this explanation, McKenna (2002; p 80) averred:

As broadcast media converge with the Internet, radical changes will take place in the economic and social interplay between the interactive consumer and interactive responding producer. Consumers will have tools for managing broadcast commercial messages, which will change marketing people's long-held assumption that millions of viewers are absorbing their messages and responding appropriately. With an interactive digital medium at their disposal, proactive consumers are powerful. The Internet is proving to be the perfect match for these proactive consumers, almost surreptitiously awakening them and drawing them into active participation. This awakening is the Internet's most significant effect on consumers, an effect that has yet to be fully realised.

The idea that the World Wide Web can be interactive media has generated some cogent attention amongst scholars. Compared to traditional mass communication media, the Web is seen to offer several advantages (e.g. continuous presence and the flexibility of asynchronous communication, Coupey 2001; Slevin, 2001). In addition, marketers conceive of the web as a pivotal and momentous component of 'one to one' marketing that enables a mutually beneficial 'learning relationship' between a customer and a company (e.g., Peppers and Rogers, 1997). Other scholars have articulated the Web as a system of support principles that organisations should follow so as to facilitate more equitable relationship with publics (McKenna, 2002).

The early days of research on new communication technologies such as the World Wide Web and E-mail were characterised more by the juxtaposition of unabashed awe and uncritical rejection of technological benefits and organisational immersive interactivity with their publics than by thoughtful or rigorous research on conceptualising the communication content prevailing in the New Marketing Paradigm. Studies recently carried out on corporate websites indicated that many corporations embrace the interactive features of the Web in word but not in deed (Trompenaars and Woolliams, 2004). Indeed, most notably, they suggest that a cultural lag exists between email links within the Web and on how to develop the policies and infrastructures to support interactivity. Other studies in computer-mediated communication indicate that in an unmediated conversation interactivity has often been taken literally and is generally assumed to be a natural attribute of face-to-face conversation but it has also been proposed to occur in mediated communication settings (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Hagel and Rayport, 1997). The study of interactivity is part of the evolution of the ontology and epistemology of new communication technologies in general and computers in particular. Traditionally, the process of communication is described in terms of the transmission of information, as a process linking sender and receiver. Media are, therefore, important only as a conduit, as the means of connecting sender and receiver, and only to the extent that they contribute to or otherwise interfere with the transmission of message from sender to receiver.

In contrast to this understanding, Rafaeli (1988) offered a much broader and concomitant exposition of interactivity in relation to new communication technologies. According to Rafaeli, 'interactivity is a variable characteristic of communication settings'. Formally stated, 'interactivity is an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions.' Rafaeli stressed that the construct of interactivity is a framework for a wide variety of communication arrangements. It should allow for treatment of channels and media as surrogate or real 'participants' in the communication process. As such, interactivity should apply to a wide range of communication settings: from the unmediated, face-to-face, and intimate to the relatively anonymous and mass mediated.

The primary assumptions of Rafaeli's explication is that interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium. It is a process-related construct about communication. It is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages. As noted by Rafaeli, Interactivity varies along a continuum: At one end is declarative (one way) communication (e.g. most radio and television) and at the other is reactive (two-way) communication where one side responds to the other side. The recursive nature of Rafaeli's explication has in recent times raised opposing view on what interactivity means to the global and corporate matrix of the Web and the Internet. As this research requires an explanation for Interactivity that uses the term from an epistemological perspective, and which encompasses the interpretative, intuitive appeals in communication discussed above, a more pragmatic explanation that integrates content in Interactivity akin to postmodern thoughts would be acceptable.

Steuer (1992), as discussed in the previous section, examines the relationship between an individual who is both a sender and a receiver, and the mediated environments in which he or she interacts. As noted by Steuer, interactivity is the degree to which users of the medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environments. He categorises interactivity into three axes: *speed*, which refers to the rate at which input can be assimilated into the mediated environment; *range*, which refers to a numbers of possibilities for action at any given time; and *mapping*, which refers to the ability of a system to map its controls to changes in the mediated environment in a natural and predictable manner. Congruent to Steuer's propositions, Hoffman and Novak (1996) developed this thought a step further and proposed four dimensions of interactivity in the mediated environments. In mediated environments, consumers can interact with the medium and with each other; firms can

provide content to the medium and interact with each other; firms and consumers can interact and, in the most radical departure from traditional marketing environments, consumers can provide commercially-oriented content for the medium. According to the authors, the primary relationships are not between sender and receiver, but rather with the CME with which they interact. As a result, information or content is not merely transmitted from a sender to a receiver, but instead, mediated environments are created by participants and then experienced.

Evolving Marketing Communication: A Postmodern Trajectory

The traditional marketing communications models for mass media (Lasswell 1948; and Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) were used to examine consumers' perception of the evolving hypermedia marketing communications model. Hoffman and Novak referred to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Steuer (1992) and hypothesised that the marketing communications model of the unidirectional broadcast-based model is no longer relevant to technologically- information infused consumers. Markedly, Hoffman and Novak stated that the hypermedia mediated marketing environment is remarkable because of its unique traits: the Web is a virtual - it is a many-to-many hypermedia environment incorporating interactivity with both people and computers.

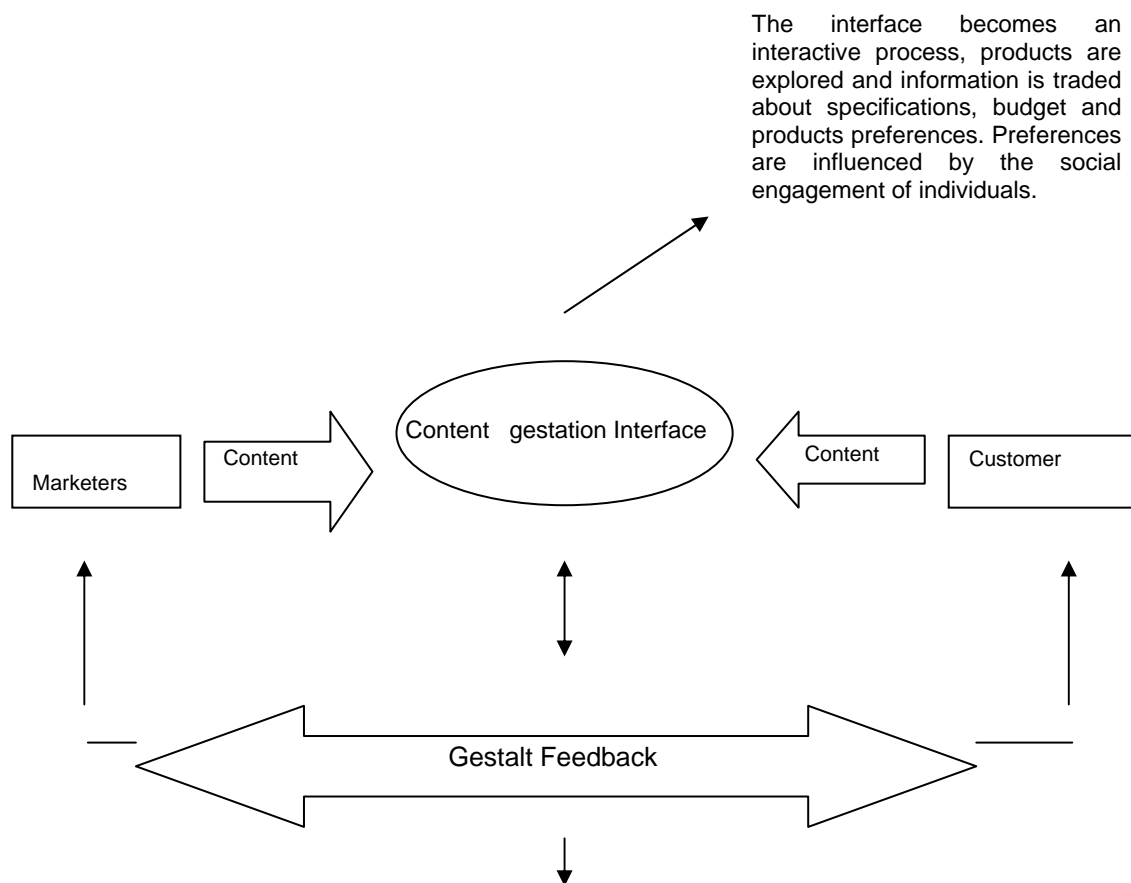
As they cogently demonstrated, the Web is not a simulation of a real-world environment but is an alternative to the real-world environment where consumers may experience telepresence. The current study is consistent with the ideas of Hoffman and Novak and went further to expound that the consumer experience in hypermedia marketing environments is an integrative and unipolar part of the consumption process. The present work recognises that the computer-mediated marketing environment as seen through consumer perspectives is an integral and extension of the transactional purchase experience. It builds on the earlier trajectories of the substantial contributions of Hoffman and Novak (1996) that consumers in hypermedia marketing environments experience dichotomised but seemingly integrated worlds of marketing realities: presence and telepresence – the unmediated world of the physical storefront and mediated world of the online store. Hoffman and Novak graphically explained the new marketing communications concept by adopting a mediated communication approach (Steuer, 1992). This suggests that the primary relationship is not between sender and receiver, but rather with the 'mediated environment' with which they interact. For Steuer, users in mediated communications are exposed to two apparent environments: presence and telepresence, where presence is 'the natural perception of an environment' and the telepresence is 'the mediated perception of an environment'.

Following Steuer's study, Hoffman and Novak hypothesised that consumers, when interacting in a computer-mediated environment, experienced two environments: 1) the physical environment in which he or she is present, and 2) the environment defined by the hypermedia computer-mediated environments. According to Hoffman and Novak, the strength of the experience of telepresence is a function of the extent to which one feels present in the hypermedia computer-mediated environment, rather than in one's immediate environments. Perhaps, as they noted, the Web as a commercial medium is not a simulation of a real-world environment, but an alternative to real-world environments. It appears that consumers are exposed to bifurcated and ambidextrous environments: presence and telepresence. The implicit assumption is that the characteristics of consumers' perceptions in the hypermedia-mediated environments are distinct and separate from the conventional marketing communications environments. As noted by the present study, online marketing is devoid of one or more kinesiological nuances that characterise some product purchases. These kinesiological needs are fundamental in making pre-purchase and purchase decisions. In the quest for satisfaction, consumer participation in the online milieu provides a product gestation forum (an early transitional purchase stage) where relevant information

concerning consumers' preferences are evaluated and, in some situations, transactions are conducted.

As graphically described in Figure 1, communications in the computer-mediated marketing environment involves user participation in both interactive frameworks of production and in interactive frameworks of reception. When users participate in content gestation interface, they reduce information asymmetry and enhance transactional effectiveness in both offline

Figure One. Marketing Communication in Computer-Mediated Marketing Environments (CMMEs)



Every activity in the gestation stage engenders gestalt feedback where communication becomes co-productive interaction (conjoint action) – meanings are not transferred but jointly produced in social interaction.

and online activities. Users' activities in offline purchases could sometime prompt participation in content gestation interface. Such gestation engagement within the interface improves users understanding of product informational attributes. Users derived gestalt feedback when interacting with specific and implicit attributes instantaneously receiving actions of such attributes.

Opportunities inherent in the ubiquitous networked environment offer consumers a new vista for the shopping experience, an experience that converges consumer needs both for physical and virtual transactions usually in a fixative and deliberative pattern. Ozuem (2004) has identified that consumer's online participation was motivated by the desire for 'incisive information excavations' concerning products. Such a primal objective provides consumers

with a backdrop of product information use in furtherance of their rational (or irrational) purchase in the physical environment. This paper puts consumers' perception at the centre stage of investigation and distinguishes itself from the functional intellectual and pragmatic craftsmanship that surrounds the current thinking in marketing practice. It highlights computer-mediated marketing environments as a concatenation of marketing communications media grounded in fragmentary and de-fragmented open architecture, a nascent architectural provision where consumers are no longer passive recipient in the consumption process but co-equivalents in making fundamental decisions melded in cognitive frameworks. The fragmentary nature of the Internet marketplace enables users to form virtual communities and share opinions and ideas beyond their time-space distancing. Access to the Internet means access to other individuals that are a part of the network. Metcalf's posited that a network is valuable only in proportion to the number of individuals involved in the network. This phenomenon emphasises a positive externality evolving from participation in a network group. The essence of this externality leads to the value of what has been called community on the Internet.

Users collaborate and discuss individual issues concerning their needs and shared solutions to those problems. Solutions are intensively debated among the communities and product referrals are sometime suggested. While virtual discussions might involve participants globally, transactions tend to be limited within individual physical marketplaces. The prosaic feature of information in the computer-mediated marketing environment is that users offered unprecedented opportunities to access information at any time. The profusion of information in the computer-mediated environment provides users with ample means of exploring alternative ways to purchase products. The Internet medium provides several means for critically reflecting on products before transactions are made. Critically reflecting on products by looking into other means and alternatives user establishes more confidence when making purchases in the physical marketplace. One of the unique features of computer-mediated marketing environment is timing-flexibility. The study participants indicated that a perception of interactivity is that both machine consultations and individual communications can be effected via machine. Machine consultation is the ability to access required information regardless of time.

Addressing the limitations of the physical marketplace in providing instant information beyond the determinable constraints of time and places has recently become the primal activity of the computer-mediated marketing environments. User perception of the disparate potentialities of the interactive marketplace realities was distinct from the unidirectional broadcast model now moving towards omnidirectional trajectories where individual users perceptively control their entire activity in unimaginable proportions. The Web is an ubiquitous phenomenon proliferating unimaginable quantities information. Users explore the medium when several ways in searching for information. Some access the medium in real-time. In real-time, feedback is almost instantaneous among individuals. Machine interactivity is embedded on the open network architecture where access to information is basically fluid and modifiable. Study participants indicated that, although access to the web might be consultatively one-way, experience as a result of the activity is interactive in nature. The formation and access to information is mediated through machine. Instant results are normally generated as a result of the search. Users perceived benefits from the possible end-results of the search in several ways: Information generated could be used to predetermine offline purchases; in situations where purchases were not imminent, information generated could elasticise knowledge pertaining to certain products. The convenience of easy product searchability within the computer-mediated marketing environment provides endless avenues where decisions about products can be deliberated at will amongst an array of competing choices.

Conclusion

We have seen how the studies of marketing communication went from the models of monolithic and unidirectional communication to more complex models in which the basis of communication cannot be conceptualised through the mainstream quantification models characterised by the process of transmission of information linking sender and receiver. With the advent of Internet technologies and their prototypical commercial manifestation – the world wide web (www), the once venerated communication concept rooted in monolithicism – ‘source and receiver’ is now diminishing and losing the hegemonic grip as the source (message maker) and consumer (passive recipient) in the consumption process partake in the co-producing messages.

Following this articulation, the adoption of *cause-effect* type – *outcome situations* in which marketing communications are conceived and wielded toward the achievement of rational objectives in aberration of the sediments of the social exchange reality of the communication medium undermines the trajectories of development in marketing theory and practice. This paper adds to the limited body of empirical data on marketing communications, and illustrates how conventional approaches can lead to a distorted picture of marketing communication programmes. In this sense, it can lay claim to greater rigour in understanding communication as a socially-constructed in which marketers and consumers are at par in sensitising and meaning –making of the omnidirectional and processual dynamics of the computer-mediated marketing environments (CMMEs).

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ⁱ Gestalt theory originated in Germany and Austria toward the end of the 19th century. One of the earliest advocates and populariser, Max Wertheimer (1924) in 'Gestalt Theory' has been much credited as an exemplar of the gestalt movement. Since then, gestalt theory has evolved from a reaction to an associativist theory to a school of thought that has become fundamental to several disciplines, including marketing and communications (see Berthon and Katsikeas, 1998). Gestalt theorists followed the basic principle that the whole is grater than its parts. In other words, the 'whole' (computer-mediated marketing environment) carried a different and altogether greater meaning from its individual components (radio, paper, television, respectively). In viewing the 'whole' a culturally and socially constitutive process takes place – as individuals make a leap from comprehending the parts to realising the whole.