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Long life to marketing research: a postmodern view

Michela Addis and Stefano Podestà

*Institute of Management, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy and Marketing
Department, SDA Bocconi Business School, Milan, Italy*

386

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims at interpreting the epistemology of marketing. The paper investigates several research questions, proposing some initial reflections concerning their impact on marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper addresses the research questions by conducting an analysis of the marketing literature. An analysis of philosophical postmodern literature is also carried out. The paper's attempt constantly to create links between the level of philosophical elaboration and that of marketing research leads to a proposal of new approach to marketing research: experiential research.

Findings – In the paper's review of the marketing literature the traditional pragmatic approach of marketing as a discipline is highlighted. Its strong managerial perspective has partly diverted researchers' attention from the theory, and focused it mainly on the method. This has created an increasingly marked distinction between the marketing literature aimed at management, and that aimed at the academic community. The postmodern perspective on marketing calls for a rethinking of the "scientific nature" of marketing as an investigative field.

Research limitations/implications – The main point is that marketing cannot be a scientific discipline only by adopting a scientific method. Marketing research is by definition different in nature: it cannot generate better but only different knowledge. This perspective shift has an impact on all research components. First, the field of research widens enormously, because researchers can deal with everything arousing their interest and to which their accumulated knowledge can be applied. Since the discipline does not become scientific, the researcher can use any method. All methods can originate scientific theories, and therefore incremental knowledge. Hence science is neither objective nor absolute.

Originality/value – This paper analyses the philosophical roots of postmodernism, in order to understand its impact on postmodern marketing better. It also focuses on the impact of postmodernism on marketing research, and proposes a new approach. This paper then explores the features of the experiential research in marketing, and its effect on the processes of generating knowledge.

Keywords Market research, Postmodernism, Sciences

Paper type Conceptual paper

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a system of thought that became well established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Postmodernism has been applied in a variety of disciplines, and, in all of them, it denies rationality and any kind of rationalisation, calling for fragmentation and multiplicity. Postmodernism can be defined as "a loss of faith in metanarratives", according to Lyotard's original idea. By metanarrative we mean any transcendental theory or a reference frame, which is used to evaluate and judge any other theory or reference frame (Lynch, 2001).



Introduction

Since “postmodernism” has begun to spread among academics as a new philosophical and scientific concept, management theory has also witnessed, although with different tones in some of its components, a debate concerning a new interpretation of issues as well as discipline. This debate offers new horizons to academics, and could bring about some interesting developments like those in other disciplinary fields.

In an extreme hypothesis, the impact of this debate could be so remarkable that not only the contents of management theory in their academic domain, but also the theory and research methods it is based on would have to be reconsidered. The adoption of a postmodern worldview, in fact, questions the concept of truth, as well as any other certainty that “modernism” has previously been based on, thus requiring a complex redefinition of the research process.

In this paper, we try to interpret the epistemology of marketing, a specific part of management theory, by conducting an analysis of the literature as it has developed so far, and constantly creating links between the level of philosophical elaboration and that of marketing research.

The review of marketing literature, and its evolution since its birth in the 1950s, highlights a clear “modern” approach – where the term modern refers to a specific vision of the world and lacks any positive meanings which are traditionally attributed to it – from which derive the principles and the concepts of marketing, commonly shared today (Brown, 1998). Although some authors have started to criticise the main concepts of marketing in the course of the years, and the first to do so were the academics of relationship marketing and those of experiential marketing, their observations are still mainly characterised by a “modern” vision of the world. The analysis of marketing epistemology, in fact, allows an in-depth reflection on the prevailing thought today, i.e. “modernism”, as well as the new “postmodern” thought. The critical digression from these issues allows a better insight into their epistemological basis, and makes it possible to suggest some initial reflections concerning their impact on marketing, in the light of the consideration that the adoption of a system of thought, no matter if modern or postmodern, implies the adoption of its correlated epistemology.

If postmodernism was to establish itself, marketing could no longer retain the current features and contents, nor defend its approach, which have been consolidating in the last 50 years. The development of the discipline is based on the attempt constantly to bring suitable contributions to companies in order to develop successful market approaches. The contents of marketing have been the object of a constant process of refining aimed, in particular, at providing support to management.

The analysis in the next pages will highlight how the extreme finalisation of marketing has partly diverted researchers’ attention from the theory, and focused it mainly on the method: a distorted mechanism was created which guaranteed the scientific nature of the discipline by using scientific methods considered universal and immutable. The focus on the method, derived from the need to make marketing a discipline with an academic status, has created an increasingly marked distinction between the marketing literature aimed at management, and that aimed at the academic community. While the former tends to stress the managerial implications of the contribution (they are, therefore, operative and tangible implications), the latter mainly insists on the adoption of a scientific method, which, in very complex contexts, is often coupled with excessive specialisation, although supported by sophisticated modelling.

In an extreme hypothesis, the adoption of postmodernism could therefore result in a considerably important criticism of the “scientific nature” of marketing as an investigative field, at least in the sense so far accepted (Brown, 1998). Such criticism, far from threatening the existence of marketing, could nevertheless give rise to a revolutionary rethinking of the discipline. As a matter of fact, the postmodern thought highlights the role of experience in the construction of theory. Once again, the method becomes a means of support for the theory, not the opposite. This reconsideration of roles means that researchers will lose many long-established criteria for evaluating and judging a theory, and implies the need to rethink the sense of their work and, last, but not least, to redefine their responsibilities. By changing its face, marketing loses the aura of science and becomes a body of knowledge created by the individual for the individual. Both the researcher and the discipline are now faced with a very risky and, at the same time, challenging task.

The removal of any reference to the method’s objectivity – or pseudo-objectivity – from the frame of reference that the researcher uses to evaluate any research, implies the removal of any kind of standardised and external support from the research activity. The researcher, thus deprived of any adherence to a standard, is faced with a risky challenge. As a matter of fact, adherence to a method, to its “scientific nature”, to its rigour, has traditionally constituted a safety net for the researcher: the respect for standardised channels, shared by the whole academic community, provided with a guarantee for the quality of its work and its acceptance. At the same time, such a safety net would also become the cage of the researcher who was not allowed to leave without being condemned to the deprivation of the academic status.

Instead, embracing postmodernism completely means leaving any net or cage, with much greater risks for the researcher, but also more freedom: freedom from every scheme, from every dichotomy, even from the choice between true or false and allows the researcher to make the experience he/she chooses, and how to make it.

There is, therefore, only one criterion to evaluate research. It is enrichment that the research experiences, and not only that, witnessed by the researcher, bring to the knowledge of the individual and of the community. It is clear that the process of creating knowledge is endless and unstoppable since the more the individual (and the community) is enriched, and therefore learns, the more he/she realises his/her lack of knowledge. Knowledge generates knowledge.

1. The body of marketing

The origins of marketing take their roots in American management literature in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, when some researchers started to investigate some management practices and, above all, the origin of market success. Those articles are now considered the landmark of marketing and have established the main concepts upon which this field of human knowledge has been developing for many decades, and is still accepted today. Felton (1959), for example, reported the lack of awareness of the processes that allow American companies to reach pre-defined market targets. In the light of the failures of companies to approach the market, the author gave some suggestions to create a successful marketing concept, defined as a mental approach, based on co-ordination as well as on integration among activities and functions, and aimed at obtaining long-term profits. Borden (1964) consequently operationalised this concept by transforming it from a mental approach into an ensemble of elements – tools – at the marketing manager’s disposal to create marketing strategies. It is a set of tools in which every marketing action program can be dismantled in the final analysis. The concept of marketing mix was then defined. This concept has since been

considered a pillar of this discipline[1] thanks to its simplicity and the possibility it offered of liaising the concept of economic value (which is crucial in marketing) to the actual managerial action.

Over the years, these approaches have been the object of a constant process of systematisation and refining. The activities that can be ascribed to the market domain have been evolving in the course of time, drawing frequently from other disciplines; let us think, for example, of the market segmentation which draws its technique from psychology and statistics, or of the study of purchaser and customer behaviour which availed itself on psychological, sociological, and economic principles and models, and so on[2]. Besides the specific cases, the whole body of the discipline has been the object of constant refining in order to define tools and technique to meet the needs of the market and, at the same time, those of the manager. This process has strongly contributed to the spreading of the discipline, thus creating a language universally shared and recognised as principles of marketing management by the academic community, the practitioners and, last but not least, by undergraduate and postgraduate students. The origins of these principles should obviously be traced in the “marketing concept”, which has been itself the object of a process of constant refining. From the first basic definitions of the 1960s, the concept of marketing has evolved and become an ensemble of fundamental principles, which can be summed up in the expression “customer orientation”. Customer orientation or market orientation makes the customer the main and fundamental point of reference for the company: the latter plans and realises its offer, which is aimed at satisfying the customer in the best possible way, only in relation to its needs. The way to the customer’s satisfaction is, in fact, successful in the long term, as it is able to lead the company in the uncertain future (Olivier, 1996; Reichheld, 1996). Customer orientation is thus the management philosophy, which legitimises marketing actions, and makes the whole coherent and harmonious. Within this philosophy the process of marketing acquires a sense, starting from the analysis of the environment and its components (competition and market included) to the adoption of strategic measures – segmentation and positioning – which become effective in operative decisions, the so-called “marketing mix”.

Since the 1970s, this definition of marketing has met a growing, rapid and general consensus, thus transforming it to an evergreen or, in a “marketing megalomania” or even in a “Kotlerite” (Brown, 2002) as defined by the critics. The considerable simplicity of use of marketing mix, which was initially created to translate the marketing concept into operative terms, has been one of the main reasons of the great diffusion and credibility of marketing as a discipline on a global scale[3].

However, this has caused a stagnation in research and studies concerning marketing. As a matter of fact, research projects have almost exclusively been conducted within the frame of reference, which has been described above, and theoretical models and operative references allowing businesses better economic performances have been developed only in that context. In the following decades, the frame of reference remained the same, unchanged; for so long such was the interpretation of marketing mix as a revealing and unquestionable reality that no criticism concerning its effectiveness has been put forward. A clue to this phenomenon of generalised uniformisation could certainly be that the principle of marketing management retains a high degree of clarity, simplicity, usefulness and applicability. Besides this explanation, however, there are others deriving from the sociological interpretation of knowledge (Bloor, 1976) known otherwise as social epistemology (Schmitt, F., 1999). In this sense, knowledge would be “what is collectively sanctioned as such” (Bloor, 1976, p. 9). Science would not therefore be really objective, but

inter-subjective (Torraldo di Francia, 1993). According to this perspective, the constant process of improvement in the discipline becomes a declaration of belonging to a social group, the international academy of marketing, and a process of social recognition of its members, which is, in the final analysis, nothing but an example of isomorphism.

The perceived need of improving the effect of marketing policies, in a context whose evolution is increasingly faster and less intelligible, have necessarily induced researchers to increase their specialisation, thus becoming great experts of single tools, and marketing aspects[4]. The evolutionary trend of marketing contributions has been fostered by the editorial choices of A journals which tend to publish very specialised papers, supported by solid empirical analysis, but which turn out to be scarcely comprehensive. For this reason, they have also been critically labelled as journals of marketing obscurity (Piercy, 2000; Baker, 2001).

If on the one hand this trend tends towards a specialisation of competencies and allows the discipline to progress in a “scientific”[5] way, on the other hand there is a considerable risk of losing sight of the conceptual frame of reference of the domain in which such competencies are applicable. Also owing to this tendency, marketing has been the object of strong criticism in the course of time, which nevertheless has not changed its initial general approach and has only affected the following phase of its evolution. This relatively simplistic approach to marketing has transformed both the general theory of marketing and the consumers themselves into victims. Consumers have been reduced to mere numbers (that is quantitative data) by marketing operators, not to mention university students who have been forced to learn the principles of marketing as a simple recipe book made of ingredients that can be mixed, and formulae (which most of the time are quite rigid) that can be applied according to the circumstance. In most businesses, many marketing activities are still today an exclusive task of some specialists who are considered the only persons responsible for the firm orientation, and who have only to apply formulae and recipes learned in their education and refined by practice (whose partial dynamic and heterogeneous matrix has been recognised)[6].

2. Criticism directed at marketing

2.1. Two important kinds of criticism directed at marketing

The scientific advancement proceeds in the domain of human knowledge through what is now a standard process: theory, criticism and new theory. Marketing follows this general approach as well. In practical terms, this means that every marketing contribution – as for every kind of discipline – starts with the analysis of literature, pinpoints a critical point due to a poor correspondence between theory and reality, and continues the reconstruction of knowledge for that specific area, thus contributing to the improvement of the knowledge of society.

In marketing literature, it is possible to trace some critical approaches that share common features and give rise to actual movements for the refounding of the discipline. In particular, the main trends, which have addressed marketing with strong criticism, are two: relationship marketing and experiential marketing. They both have accused the discipline of involution, and of being devoted only to the modelling of interpretation schemes of reality which have proved to be too far from it, and were therefore not suitable to provide an exhaustive and explanation, which can be generalised.

Chronologically, the first trend to cause a crisis within the discipline was later called relationship marketing. During the 1970s, a part of marketing literature started to question the object of the discipline and its extendibility to other realities. In particular,

the Swedish School of Industrial Marketing and the Nordic School of Services have contemporarily criticised marketing by maintaining that it adjusted well to the exchange relations of the mass consumption goods market, for which it was initially studied, but lost analytical and interpretative effectiveness when used exactly in the same way in other kinds of situations, especially in the industrial goods and service industry.

The mass consumption goods market is characterised by a strongly atomistic demand in which the personal features of the purchaser lose relevance, giving space to anonymous and homogenous expectations. In the most sophisticated cases these can be analysed, through segmentation techniques that are sometimes quite refined. According to this scheme, the consumer is clearly passive and subjected to the company policy without the possibility of affecting it in any way. The only possible action is the choice among predetermined supply alternatives. Exchanging power is therefore asymmetric and unbalanced; the single purchaser does not have decisional weight since his/her contractual force is proportional to the percentage of his/her purchase in relation to the total turnover of the company and is, therefore, almost nil.

According to the representatives of the “relationship” vision, the situation described above is considerably different in the industrial goods and service market. The peculiar features of this industry make it a different kind of market altogether in which the customer retains a particular and active participation and emerges as a consumer, producer and production resource. This calls for a reconsideration of marketing. As far as the market of mass consumption goods is concerned, the literature had put the exchange at the centre of the relation between demand and supply, and consequently at the centre of the analysis too, the new reflections. They had been developing between the 1970s and the 1980s, and they replaced the concept of exchange with that of relationship, which is established (in a more or less continuous way) between the purchaser and the seller; in analysis this is what really counts, not the single exchange act (which is often sporadic). Both the Swedish School of Industrial Marketing and the Nordic School of Services stressed how crucial the role played by the long-term perspective is in the management of these markets. From this common point, both schools have independently developed their line of thought: industrial markets researches have focused mainly on the relations among companies, in particular on the role of trust and on the concept of relationship network (Håkansson and Östberg, 1975; Håkansson, 1982; Jackson, 1985; Hallén and Sandström, 1991; Ganesan, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Smith and Barclay, 1997; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Services researchers have concentrated on the differences in services in relation to goods and, in particular, on the continuous and necessary interaction between producer and consumer (Berry, 1980; Normann, 1985; Turnbull and Valla, 1985; Grönroos, 1994; Vavra, 1995). Moreover, in the course of the time, the importance of the relationship approach has spread in the consumer markets as well, thus making it necessary to consider the consumer perspective in all marketing choices. In the light of the specificity of the new analysed contexts, these authors have highlighted the weak points of the traditional approach to marketing, and defined it “traditional marketing” or the “traditional paradigm” of marketing, which is not suitable in the contexts in which the firm can pinpoint the counterpart and treat it individually.

The second and important criticism to “universal” marketing was put forward by the trend of experiential marketing, some years later. The experiential interpretation of consumer behaviour started at the beginning of the 1980s in contrast with the traditional and prevailing view of studies on consumer behaviour, whose first contributions date back to the 1960s, and constitute what the experiential authors

consider an utilitarian view (which is still today the major research trend in consumer behaviour).

Since the middle of the 1980s, some researchers have started to suggest an extension of the consumer behaviour interpretation, highlighting some limits of the utilitarian view of thought, such as the thesis of univocal rationality of the individual (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). By focusing on the mere act of purchasing, the utilitarian view has highlighted the rational component that leads the purchaser toward the resolution of the decisional problem he/she is faced with – a problem of choice among product alternatives. Resolution of the decisional problem is, in fact, an area, which can easily be the object of a rationalistic interpretation of consumption, especially of a sophisticated modelling which becomes sometimes exasperated. Therefore, if on the one hand consumer behaviour researchers have acquired a considerable store of knowledge concerning the issue, on the other they have almost completely neglected all the other aspects of consumption which do not have a rationalistic component, especially the interaction between consumer – and non-purchaser – and product. This is the real experience of consumption whose definition is, by nature, elusive and difficult. The necessity of combining different disciplines, which, in the course of time, have been consolidating as incompatible, in order to come to a more comprehensive idea of the individual and of its choices, has recently been recognised with the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics being awarded to Daniel Kahneman for having introduced elements of psychology research in economics sciences.

Although the experiential view openly criticised traditional marketing only in 1999 (Schmitt, B., 1999), the first critical attacks could actually be dated back to 1982 when Hirschman and Holbrook carried out an initial comparison between the traditional and the experiential approach to the study of consumer behaviour. The two researchers, who are the pioneers of this trend of study, which has slowly gained agreement and support in the course of time, have ascribed the differences of the two approaches to the mental construction used, the categories of the analysed products, the use of product and finally the consideration of individual differences among individuals. They have carried on this comparison by defining the essential features of the experiential interpretation of consumer behaviour. Criticism of the traditional approach concerns, in particular, the thesis of customer rationality and utilitarianism. According to the traditional theorists of consumer behaviour, founders of the traditional approach (Nicosia, 1966; Engel *et al.*, 1968; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Holloway *et al.*, 1971; Walters and Paul, 1970), the behaviour of the consumer is regulated by a general rationality which allows every decisional problem to be resolved easily, in particular, the purchasing decision, in order to pinpoint the supply which maximises the utility for the consumer. In this sense, the object of these researchers is the decisional process, which leads an individual to make a specific purchasing choice, with the final objective of creating, with the same process, a universal model of reference (Zaltman and Wallendorf, 1979). It is clear that the origins of such interpretation of consumer behaviour could be traced to the utilitarian view of the general economics theory (Sherry, 1991).

Bernd Schmitt (1999) resumes the same process of comparison analysis by slightly modifying the categories compared and, especially, by highlighting once more the contrast between the traditional and the emerging experiential view[7]. In Schmitt's contribution, however, the comparison analysis regards traditional marketing, an expression that seems to define the ensemble of principles, models and marketing management tools. In any case, the experiential view develops initially in an

antithetical way in relation to the prevailing trend, thus constituting a real reaction to the traditional consumer behaviour model, and aimed at a revision of models and tools in order to improve adherence to reality. It is, in fact, with the objective of studying the consumption behaviour of hedonistic products (considered as not strictly “rational”) that the concept of experience is defined, giving rise to the importance of individual emotions (Carù and Cova, 2003).

2.2. Criticism to marketing: an analysis

At first sight, the two main critical ideas that have been described do not seem to have anything in common. As a matter of fact, their differences are undoubtedly quite consistent: first of all, the cultures in which they were born are different – if relationship marketing comes from Northern Europe, the experiential marketing comes from North America. Second, the object of their criticism, and therefore of separation from the traditional approach, is different. Relationship marketing criticises the extensibility of traditional marketing to all industries. On the other hand, experiential marketing’s attack regards the issue of the consumer’s rationality on which the development of consumer behaviour has traditionally been based. Finally, their terminology is different, and it is clearly the case of the traditional marketing concept that we have mentioned.

Despite these clear differences, relationship marketing and experiential marketing share some common elements. Both trends of study have attacked marketing by following very similar lines of reasoning. Relationship marketing has developed from the analysis of the applicability of traditional marketing models in new realities, such as service and industrial goods sectors. Similarly, the first studies that can be attributed to experiential marketing have noted that long-established models of analysis of consumer behaviour could not be suitably applied to the study of particular situations, especially as far as hedonistic products – which are characterised by a strong emotive component – were concerned. In the course of time, the attention of researchers has grown and included a wide range of products, even those that were not typically hedonistic (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). In any case, services, industrial goods and hedonistic products (and not only these) account for specific realities, which cannot be analysed by using long-established models and tools (which had universalistic vocation and rationalistic applicability). In other words, these realities behave differently compared to what is coded, described and prescribed by the “general” models of marketing. The scientist, therefore, cannot neglect this lack of correspondence between reality and theory, and should intervene to fill the gap since “specific realities”, unusual, are now clearly more consistent than those that have been so far considered in literature.

This first common element can be added to a second one, which is no less important: the scheme of reasoning. As a matter of fact, both trends start by reporting the heterogeneous nature of reality and consequently suggest the enlargement of models and principles, therefore theory, as the only possible way of allowing marketing to be sufficiently adherent to the different situations studied. Only by intervening on the theory can we fill the gap: only with a rethinking of theory is it possible to widen the range of models and tools to make theory a valid means of understanding and interpreting reality. In this perspective, reality is considered a fact, which is external to science and on which science cannot intervene. The task of science is only to analyse reality in order to interpret it and to know it. The process of knowledge in this case can be related to the process of appropriation: knowing something means taking possession of it and therefore “owning” it. Through the scientific process, theory takes

possession of the surrounding reality and dominates it, which means that science owns reality through knowledge.

These first common elements do not refer to the contents of the discipline, but to the scientific process of discovery. As a matter of fact both currents of thought adopt, similarly to traditional marketing which is the object of their attacks, the process of the traditional scientific discovery.

A third and last common element of the two trends is given by the kind of criticism addressed to the discipline. Both of them, in fact, criticise specific and particular aspects of the discipline: relationship marketing attacks the use of the model of marketing mix, which is uncritical, lacks any logic, and has become a simplistic recipe to manage a reality which is far more complex than what is assumed by theory. Experiential marketing attacks the development of the traditional model of marketing in general and of consumer behaviour in particular by reporting different weaknesses and especially some unrealistic theses[8].

They both have criticised the implementation and development of the discipline – in the first case the implementation of the marketing concept has been attacked, whereas in the case of experiential marketing the implementation of consumer behaviour study was criticised. However, neither of them has questioned the element that actually creates a difference in the approach: the underlying system of thought. Traditional marketing originates from a neopositivist view of the world, whereas relationship and experiential marketing are, more or less emphasised, postmodern (perhaps without being aware of it). Indeed, relationship marketing deprived the company of the immeasurable power that mass marketing had attributed to it. The rebalancing of the power between company and consumer agrees in fact with the postmodern interpretation, which states the absence of any hierarchy. Experiential marketing is even more postmodern since, besides considering consumer and companies as equal counterparts of an interaction, it strongly attacks the thesis of consumer rationality and univocity.

Both relationship marketing and experiential marketing are, therefore, in clear contrast with the prevailing trend as their general approach is postmodern. At the same time, however, despite the basic differences, they all follow a similar scientific method. At this point, one should question the role played by the research method in marketing, and its contribution to the “scientific nature” of the discipline, and find out if it is possible to claim that the body of knowledge of marketing is scientific. The question that the marketing researcher is faced with can have destructive effects on his/her identity (Piercy, 2002) but, at the same time, offers freedom of thought and action. To try to give an answer to this question, we need to analyse what postmodernism and modernism are and what postmodern marketing can be.

3. Modernism and postmodernism

3.1. Modernism

Although the term modernism refers to a system of thought that has developed in the course of the last four centuries, its actual definition can be traced to the last decades, when postmodernism emerged, thus contrasting with the previous one[9]. In order to understand the postmodern system of thought, whose unsettling effects are having an impact on every aspect of human knowledge, it is necessary to start with analysing modernism.

Modernism is the view of the world, which made its mark on human action in the modern era. The latter is conventionally said to have started with the Industrial Revolution and experienced its highest moment between the nineteenth and the

twentieth centuries. In Europe, the first Industrial Revolution, and even more the second one, gave rise to a process of well-being and improvement in general living standards, which seemed unstoppable. This process was led by reason. Human thought was obviously affected by this advent, which resulted in “modernism”, gathering together the philosophical currents of Neo-positivism, Logical Empiricism, Logical Positivism and Neo-empiricism thinking; dating back to Descartes and Kant, Smith, Locke and Hume, the members of the Positivism movement are generally considered the pioneers of modernism which received a considerable contribution from Newton’s research (Cobb, 1990; Abbagnano, 1995). In the modern perspective, the recognised ability of the individual to understand nature, reality and its truths, allowed him to intervene on the state of things and to guide and improve them. Thinkers and researchers therefore aimed at defining the laws regulating economic and scientific phenomena in order to understand their applications, allowing, above all, their replication and improvement (Chiurazzi, 1999). A finalised pragmatism dominated scientific analysis and its disciplines. Knowledge advanced toward reality and truth. Knowledge was aimed at the “good” as it was fostered by the certain truth of the real. The will to reach increasingly higher levels of well-being necessarily extended the concept of science to every discipline of knowledge: the mere application of the “scientific” method transformed every discipline into science. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in fact, with the birth of psychology, sociology and psychoanalysis, the rationality of the individual was further valued and emphasised.

In the light of the breakthrough obtained by mankind, the modern term has acquired strongly positive meanings, thus coinciding with the term “advanced”. Today, instead, the term modern indicates a past era that has ended, at least for those who are more sensitive to social change (Cobb, 1990).

3.2. From modernism to postmodernism

In the second half of the nineteenth century, some philosophers – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger above all – started to doubt the inflexible faith of their contemporaries in rationality, and in the ability of defining, circumscribing and knowing the truth (Jackson, 1996; Best and Kellner, 1997). Their thought emerged and were developed by a group of French philosophers connected with Poststructuralism – Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard to mention the most famous ones – who are today known to have been the first postmodernism theorists (Williams, 1998; Chiurazzi, 1999). It was only during the 1980s, however, that their thought began to spread all over the world.

In Kierkegaard’s thought there was already strong criticism regarding the faith in human rationality, as well as every reflection aimed at knowing what is real and what is true. These concepts, according to Kierkegaard, imprison mankind and trick it into possessing certainties, thus destroying feelings, inspiration and spontaneity. Those make up the essential part of human beings and their inclination toward God.

Nietzsche’s criticism concerning modern thought is even stronger as it lacks any religious reference. Nietzsche extols individuality, its power and autonomy in strong contrast with any form of aprioristic, immanent, rational, definitive, and in any case salvific, ideology. According to the philosopher, true knowledge is the simultaneous existence of a multiplicity of interpretations, each of which is the result of a particular perspective that is essential, and should therefore be valued; this manifold knowledge leads the individual to appreciate difference. However, it is also the result of a long process requiring considerable effort and a will to learn, an unappeasable and humble desire to know, where the knowable is endless as all knowledge is the

source of other consequent researches and knowledge. Knowledge generates knowledge. Through the knowledge of the new, the individual, who is free and not afraid of not possessing a truth, questions him/herself, and encounters risks, but can find fulfilment.

The third father of postmodernism is Heidegger. In his opinion, truth is not what corresponds to reality but it is freedom. And freedom is, first of all, freedom in language, which is a privileged manifestation of being. As a consequence, Heidegger gave to art and poetry, neglected by modern view, a particular meaning as he considered them an alternative way of learning, and therefore of knowing. During modern times, truth and knowledge are searched for at the expense of the individual attributes, which are, instead, his/her expression and richness.

3.3. Postmodernism

The thoughts of those philosophers, sometimes fragmented, that constituted an opposing trend during the nineteenth century, became an actual system of thought during the following century, when historical events highlighted the frailty of human certainties. They have started to revise the idea of progress, according to the evidence that the objective of a minimal level of wellbeing, common to all social classes, cannot be achieved, which is, on the contrary, the result of a concept that can be relatively historicised and questionable, certainly not absolute.

During the 1960s, the voice of Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Julia Kristeva, rose in unison against the certainties of rationality. A few years later, the poststructuralists' thought became part of postmodernism. The word "postmodernism" does not contain a precise meaning, and refers to many fragmented cultural phenomena, to the extent that some have suggested the need of using the plural and therefore of referring to "postmodernisms" in line with the postmodern spirit (Featherstone, 1991; Brown, 1994, 1995, 1997; Chiurazzi, 1999)[10]. In spite of that, it is possible to recognise in this complexity, fragmentation and even unknowability of reality, which was so far defied by modernism, the central element of the new philosophy. The very same concept of reality is then questioned together with that of truth and any other certainty of modernism (Cobb, 1990). As a matter of fact, each philosopher has developed his/her own thought in a specific way. Deconstructionists, in particular Derrida and Lyotard, emphasised the concept of difference, and highlighted its link with language (Chiurazzi, 1999; Best and Kellner, 1997). Vattimo and Rovatti focused their attention on the critique of rationality, and opted for a celebration of difference and tolerance that was a "weak thought", in fact. Bocchi, Ceruti, Morin and others developed the theory of complexity that is the celebration of multiformity as the basis of the world. Foucault concentrated on the subject and denounced its submission to society and to its false constructions. Rorty analysed western philosophy and defied its role in the political life of society, which results as lacking in its own critical interpretative conscience.

All these trends of thought, although with their own peculiarities, claimed the validity of the differences between historic periods, geographic places and single individuals. There is no core, no structure to be known. Every single thing cohabits with the other, without a precise aprioristic and absolutist meaning. They are consequently the object of interpretations that are sometimes opposing, but opposition and therefore diversity is the real richness of the individual.

If on the one hand, modernism gave some answers to the important issues of mankind, on the other, not only did postmodernism fail to offer any explanation but it also created new questions. Questioning leads to knowledge. Knowledge is the richness

that generates more richness through creating new questions. This upgrades new research, and therefore new knowledge. As the knowable is endless, the possibility of enrichment does not have any limits apart from the ability and will to know. There is no beginning since there is no end. The concept of the end is a limit that the individual cannot afford to define. The context in which these reflections are present is uncertain, but is also productive as far as knowledge results are concerned and therefore offers real richness.

The implications of postmodernism over the disciplines are different and unsettling (Featherstone, 1991), but those concerning the concept of science account for the most interesting and relevant issues.

4. What possibility is there for a postmodern science?

4.1. *From the scientific nature of method to the scientific nature of discipline*

The philosophical thought that modernism refers to is mainly that of logical empiricism, which has its foundations in positivism and in the support given to scientific research as the method to be used. As a matter of fact, according to thinkers who expressed these positions better (*in primis* Carnap and Hempel), logical analysis and method are the foundations on which knowledge is built, while physics is the science *par excellence*. Two main consequences derive from this concept. First, all other sciences, even the social ones – marketing included – can and must adopt the physics method because it enhances them (Rosenberg, 2000; Salmon, 2000). The slogan associated to logical positivism called Principle of Verification is revealing: “The meaning of a statement is its method of verification” (Ray, 2000). Second, all sciences share a method, which seems enough to state the unity of science (Hooker, 2000).

The principle of linear and progressive evolution and the advance of science imply that knowledge develops by subsequent achievements and stratifications. New knowledge combines with the previous one, it improves it and makes it truer but not different. No different knowledge referring to the same reality can exist. As a matter of fact, a good researcher observes reality – namely all phenomena – and compares it with the interpretative models already codified in knowledge in order to verify if they are valid to understand the phenomenon he/she is analysing. Infringement of those patterns allows the researcher to look for new ones, which, after having been verified, are seen to be hypothetically more suitable in analysing reality. This is called the Correspondence Theory of Truth, which dates back to Aristotle and has now become the common theory in modern epistemology (Lynch, 2001). Thus, a scientific discovery is the product of human desire to know and dominate his/her environment, and “to go beyond” him/herself in order to achieve an unrestrainable – but hypothetic – progress in knowledge, which is based on approximations to the Truth. This is the principle of Verisimilitude, well defined by Popper (Brink, 2000; Shapere, 2000).

Two consequences derive from the acceptance of the method described above:

- (1) The employment of the scientific method draws the difference between science and non-science.
- (2) New theories are by their nature better than the old ones, in that they go beyond the old ones by denying them.

The first implication has its origin in the rationality category, which is the foundation for the development of modernism. The use of reason, and the use of the scientific method, draws the line between science and non-science; in other words it is able to transform any discipline – even marketing – into science.

The second implication deriving from the scientific method is related to the linear interpretation of the development of knowledge. If the development of new knowledge must start from the one that has already been codified in order to go beyond it, it goes without saying that the new knowledge will be better since it can explain something more, even if just a little bit more, about reality, and thus it can explain it in a “better way”. What is new is by definition more advanced, and therefore goes beyond the quality of what had already been acquired.

4.2. The deconstruction of the concept of scientific nature

In the postmodern interpretation of epistemology, both the concept of scientific method and its two connections are attacked. Obviously, the criticism of modern epistemology expressed by postmodern philosophers is related to their worldviews. Among the main concepts of postmodernism there is the criticism of the modern outlook on the world, which is considered an objective reality, something that is “out there”, patiently and passively waiting for individuals to get to know and consequently possess it. Postmodern reality is something else; it is nothing but a context in which individuals, together with millions of other creatures, act. Furthermore, by acting and using both their rationality and intuition, and at the same time exploiting chance events, they actively contribute creating and changing the so-called reality, namely to change the way they look at it. Therefore, modern attempt to identify absolute and ideal truths and values, which are effective no matter when and where, is considered absurd as everything is part of a given context. And since knowledge belongs to the world, the world is changed by knowing the world. Consequently, the modern system of thought needs to be “deconstructed”, that is to say, that its dangerous incongruities and false contradictions have to be exposed in order to create new concepts. If there is no absolute truth to be understood and uncovered, science cannot aim at objectivity, nor at the complete understanding of phenomena, but it has to proceed through experiments and attempts and be content with partial and transitory knowledge.

The concept of the stratification of knowledge loses meaning; past knowledge is not strictly necessary for future knowledge and, indeed, it could hinder it. Therefore, the concept of truth cannot have a transcendental origin. On the contrary it is necessarily related to contingency. The kind of contingency that can be referred to changes from observer to observer, from analyst to analyst, from “scientist” to “scientist”. Foucault considers contingency as the socio-political group in which knowledge has developed. When an individual judges a phenomenon to be true or false s/he simply expresses his/her belonging to a social group, therefore his/her political interest. On the contrary, Lyotard considers language as the context in which knowledge develops. Different languages are indeed preserved through dissent, difference and contradictions, while the continuous process of innovation creates new knowledge that add to the previous one and does not replace it *tout court*. Finally, according to Rorty, knowledge must be contextualised to place and time: truths are valid in their places and at their times. Rorty criticises any theory that claims the right to use a language affirming that it describes reality better than others. If language performs the most important role, literature becomes the favourite field for this experimentation[11].

By seriously attacking the concept of absolute truth, postmodernists attack Popper’s epistemology too, which today is common ground for all sciences. According to Popper, the absolute truth exists but cannot be known completely by the individual who must accept a continuous and ameliorative process that brings him/her closer to an asymptote of knowledge. On the contrary, according to postmodernists the absolute truth does not exist and cannot exist because it would constrain knowledge to a limited

dimension, which is the most evident contradiction of the concept of knowledge itself, and of learning. Implications for “modern” sciences arising from all this are destructive. First of all, the modern criterion to evaluate and assess theories can no longer be used. The complexity of reality is so paradoxical and controversial – but true and authentic too – that a hierarchy in the validity of scientific theories cannot be determined[12]. Each scientific theory aims at knowing only one part, or one moment of reality, which anyway is highly dynamic, complex and furthermore built by the researcher’s actions and, thus, the knowledge of that part or moment is in any case always limited. Namely, the idea of scientific progress is denied in the “modernist” meaning of the term.

The consequences following the denial of the process of stratification add to those deriving from the criticism of rationality. As a matter of fact, the concept of rationality loses all absolutism and priority, and consequently the definition of science must be revised. No verifiable predominance of human rationality on emotionality exists, let alone on the dark side of mankind, and on chaos. The rationality of modern thought has been put in the foreground only because of its relatively easy intelligibility, and because the individual aims at going beyond his/her limits and getting closer to the transcendent, which is supposed to be “perfect”.

In any case, the postmodern individual has no interest in understanding which tool, or method, makes it possible for him/her to acquire knowledge, because he/she sets a totally different value on knowledge compared to the modern individual anyway. Since the human being is one of many creatures living on the Earth, he/she has no right, and probably, no possibility and no interest, to dominate nature. In the same way he/she has no right, and no possibility, to dominate reality. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge is not a dominion but a relationship (Zagzebski, 1999), and in this relationship the researcher is not the only active subject. He/she is an active subject together with reality itself, of which the researcher is an integral and irreplaceable part, because reality “is born” with the researcher’s essence. That is to say, that a postmodern science can exist, but with a different meaning than a modern one. First of all, science is not only led by rationality. Furthermore, since rationality is a limited cognitive tool, science deriving from it cannot have absolute value but can only refer to a certain context, which is in any case relative. Consequently, postmodernism does not lead to the feared death of science or the “disaster of hope” as someone called (Petitot, 1993). On the contrary, postmodernism allows individuals to be potentially free. However, it also places all the responsibility of their freedom on them, and for the first time, only on them.

5. The modern past of marketing

The modern and postmodern outlook on reality, whose main features have been defined above, can also be applied to marketing. As a matter of fact, an analysis of the existing marketing literature allows the “modern” features of this discipline to be highlighted, features deriving from its deep finalism. In fact, the current development of marketing is based on settled and highly modern foundations. The debate on the opposition between modern and postmodern marketing becomes part of the previous debate on the nature of marketing – between art and science (Hunt, 1976; Anderson, 1983; Brown, 1997). In this work, however, that debate has a secondary role because the main aim is the analysis of the impact of the postmodern outlook on marketing, with particular care given to the implications for marketing.

Although, for about ten years, renowned researchers have been calling for a complete rethinking of the assumptions of marketing from a postmodern point of view

(Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat and Shultz, 1997; Brown, 1999), the whole marketing system of thought is still clearly modern, where modern refers to the historical and philosophical assumptions widely explained above – in opposition to modern too.

In its managerial function, marketing helps companies to define and implement their approach to the market by offering tools to manage the value of their offer for their clients, and the value of their clients for themselves. In other words, at the core of this discipline there are companies and their actions and contacts, regardless of their kind, with a market characterised by demand and competitors. Therefore, since its general foundation marketing has been characterised by a clear opposition between a main subject – the company – that must act in a certain way in the market, and an object of context – the market itself – to whose dynamics the company must react by trying to anticipate, determine and finally dominate its evolution.

All marketing topics studied in literature – namely the buying behaviour of the consumer, the analysis of competitors, the product or distribution policies, and others – are based on the binomial company-market[13]. In fact this binomial is evidently dual and modern, and its first term, the company, has an individual role and a positive value, while its second term, the market, has a complex role, which is often negative. The aim of marketing is to help the company's "marketing" function in particular, and the whole company in general, to interact with the market by supplying concepts from which operative tools can be derived. The knowledge produced by marketing researchers aims at enhancing the dominion of the company on the market: even in modern marketing knowledge and supremacy are highly interrelated concepts. The assumption is the identity between supremacy, market power and profit. As a result, marketing becomes an economic discipline, and this feature can be "forced" on the company, but it becomes extremely restrictive for the consumer whose multi-dimensionality is essential to understand his/her behaviour.

If both pure research and applied research are generally considered two correlated research categories, marketing seems to lack the phase of "pure" research[14]. At the most, seeing the concept of finalisation with a sense of proportion, without eliminating it, in the managerial sciences a distinction can be made between research aiming at generating knowledge regardless of its application to the managerial world, and research clearly aiming at the development of managerial implications.

In any case, if the finalisation of the discipline is too extreme, to the extent that the discipline ends up justifying its own existence, from a postmodern point of view its "scientific nature" could therefore be questioned. In order to avoid a contradiction in terms – a discipline claiming to be a science and in the meantime existing only as a tool for companies; large investments have traditionally been made to refine research methods by making them as sophisticated as possible and similar to those of natural sciences (the problem of the uniqueness of science remains in the background, unsolved and generally untackled). The attention of marketing researchers gradually shifted toward the method itself, in an attempt to make this discipline "scientific", thus acquiring that academic and social legitimacy that its mere content does not confer. In literature, on the contrary, there are some suggestions that marketing is a science that can produce "knowledge for the sake of knowledge", and therefore, that it has no practical and useful implications (Hunt, 2002, p. 306). Such suggestions come from the supporters of the scientific nature of marketing, those who have frequently defended this thesis with the attempt of deleting the finalisation of marketing by simply hiding it. One can say that the reason for this defence is to be found in the identification between marketing and the researcher; elevating the former means criticising the latter.

The basic assumption is that the adoption of a rigorous and scientific method, like those of experimental sciences, would automatically make the contribution scientific. In other words, attention has been shifted from the contents to the method in a likely unconscious way. The scientific nature of a rational and “aseptic” method has been used to try to make up for the difficulty of labelling marketing as scientific in relation to the contents discussed. A research of a distinctive identity, that Levy (2002) states is common to other disciplines, is being carried out, and in marketing has become a distorted mechanism subduing the subject of the research and its features to methodological choices, when on the contrary, the opposite should happen (Piercy, 2002).

The attention devoted to the research method has been so stimulated by the finalisation of marketing that it has been transformed into excessive modelling. In fact, the need to provide a constant support to companies in defining and implementing their approach to the market has forced marketing to be well ingrained into reality and, therefore, to cope with an environmental complexity which is constantly growing (knowledge generates knowledge, but also questions). As a matter of fact, in order to face the growing complexity of the company-market relations, which can be seen both at competitor and demand levels, marketing researchers have drawn from other disciplines trying, at least, to consider the basic elements of the dynamism of markets. It is in this way that marketing, in different ways and measures, has traditionally referred to political economy, psychology, statistics, anthropology, mathematics and so on. Obviously, however, the widening of the market's borders and the introduction of many different complex phenomena in marketing have hardly proved coherent with the need for concrete and immediate support to companies: answering questions or preparing hurried recipes? With such strong contradiction, the direction chosen has been to try to analyse complexity, necessarily searching for some logic and breaking it into pieces that, if considered individually, were easier to manage. In other words, there has been an attempt to rationalise the complexity by reducing it to its essential terms. As a result, there has been a gain in terms of management possibility – the theme of knowledge being supreme emerges again – and a loss in terms of richness of the context considered. The advantage obtained for companies was clearly considered to be greater than the impoverishment of the research for the researcher. Obviously it is a short-term policy aiming at bringing up good managers and obsequious researchers, rather than developing the critical ability of reasoning and thinking (Burton, 2001). The attempt to reduce complexity to identified and, therefore, manageable, elements has turned into a project of sophisticated mathematical and statistical models so that the marketing researcher will remain useful to companies, notwithstanding the intensification of the complexity of the context. Therefore, being forced to analyse a more and more complex and dynamic reality with the aim of supplying useful practices to companies, marketing has little by little got closer to abstract models which, paradoxically, turn out to be more suitable for an academic exercise than for a study on reality. In this way, even if researchers want to study complex phenomena, they solve complexity in a set of variables of which they study correlations and impacts. This is the case, for example, when emotions are introduced in consumption (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999), which has provided a sophisticated rationalisation of their role in consumption through *ad hoc* statistical models: paradoxically emotions have been rationalised by classifying them like objects. The possibility to apply models and therefore manage their variables is anyway obtained at the cost of an extreme focalisation of the research field, and often unrealistic assumptions. Since the possibility of managing variables relates to patterns, which are so deterministic as to be unrealistic, the aim pursued to

serve companies turned into a truly paradoxical abstraction from reality. In other words, the pattern seems to have lost its role as a tool serving the representation of concepts in order to become itself a concept, pleased with itself. That is to say, that a distorted mechanism has been put on which has forced marketing researchers to create more and more rigorous patterns, from the statistical and mathematical aspects, which are in the meantime more and more abstract and theoretical, transforming researchers into “measurement technicians”, to use Gummesson’s (2001, p. 44) terminology.

International business schools, marketing reviews and journals, spurred by a paradoxical competitive battle aimed at verifying hypotheses more than understanding the nature and meaning of those hypotheses, have evolved coherently towards these new marketing trends, thus making them grow. Therefore, during the development of marketing, quantitative methods have been preferred to qualitative ones, which gained a supporting role, typically in a phase preceding the actual test of every theory. The level of abstraction reached by this evolution – or, rather, involution – of marketing does not fit with the purely instrumental purpose of “modern” marketing. Some even think that, the separation between theory and practice has consequently widened, and researchers have reached an extreme specialisation “knowing everything about nothing” (Wensley, 2002, p. 392), thus closing themselves even further inside their ivory tower. Therefore, in marketing a narrow-minded approach has become common, which not only fails to relate to the other fields of human knowledge, as was feared for all specialised disciplines (Geymonat, 1972), but also implies a non-acceptance of other positions within the same discipline.

The need for studies to become again applicable to the managerial practices of companies has stimulated a process of “translation” of those concepts with difficult mathematical formulae in academic literature into easier and, therefore, more approachable managerial implications that can be used by company managers. From this process, therefore, a duplication of this discipline and its language seems to be derived: on the one hand, the mathematical and statistical language created for and in the international community of researchers, and on the other a managerial language expressively developed for managers and their companies. As a result, there is a duplication of language due to the need for combining two different objectives:

- (1) The acquisition of the academic and social legitimation of marketing as a science.
- (2) The development of proposals that support companies in their approach to the market.

The double soul of marketing can be also found in the diversity among marketing reviews. On the one hand, there is “A journal” (scientific reviews expressively dealing with research in marketing), on the other, there are more managerial reviews for a larger public that is more interested in practical implications. This duplicity can also be found often with little success among published articles which appeal to both researchers and managers by dealing with matters that could interest the two groups (for researchers a wide analysis of the literature and a clear research project; for managers practical managerial implications at the end of the article).

It has to be pointed out that the evolution of the discipline described above has reached extreme positions both in the method, where sophisticated models and software have been created to try desperately to reach a phase of pure research through method, which cannot be reached by contents, and in its implications, by offering lists of “ingredients” to be mixed according to the instructions of a simple perceptive “recipe”. However, both results create the same dilemma: is it a theory? As a matter of

fact, it seems that in both cases no new theory is developed, but only some knowledge which can be valued according to its functioning. In fact, it is not a question whether the knowledge produced is true or false, but only if it works according to the model created (is the model well developed and coherent in itself?) or according to reality (are the managerial implications applicable to reality with positive results?).

Enjoying research for the sake of research, stimulated by the capacity of critical reasoning, is therefore overshadowed by an extreme technicality, almost engineering, or by a research aiming at company interests. If this is the current marketing situation, then one must wonder what the scientific nature of marketing and its future will be. And it is to answer this question that one can address to postmodernism.

6. Considerations on the postmodern future of marketing

The vicious circle in which marketing has fallen into seems to lead it towards an involution with no a way out. If it is true, as Brown (1997) states, that with postmodernism we entered the era of anti-science, the future of marketing is obscure and difficult to see. Only if marketing researchers acquire responsible awareness will be possible to have a brave re-directing of the discipline.

Researchers who tried to deal with postmodern marketing (among whom Sherry, 1991; Brown, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999; Holbrook, 1993; Thompson, 1993; Bouchet, 1994; Elliott, 1994; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Uusitalo, 1998; Cova and Cova, 2001) concluded their works by inviting marketing researchers to consider the limits of the modern marketing philosophy, thus joining the “marketing-is-not-working manifesto” (Brown, 2002). Furthermore, they recommended paying attention to the new marketing issues related to the postmodern vision of the world. The most radical among them announced the death of Kotler (Smithee, 1997) and his marketing model, which was declared to have failed (Brown, 2002). A postmodern version of reality is needed to put the individual, both as a consumer and as a researcher, at the centre of marketing, and to give space to imagination in all its forms (Brown, 2002). Perhaps, this is the more likely direction for the future development of marketing. Nevertheless, the individual is no longer the typical individual of modern marketing: their new perspective has radically changed the roles of consumers and researchers. On the one hand, the consumer does not end his/her relations with the company, with the simple purchasing act, nor with the product when it is consumed. On the other, the marketing researcher does not give up his/her study of reality after his/her observations, nor after the knowledge generated with models and implications. Both relate to the context by experiencing it; knowledge becomes relation, not supremacy. “Interactive research” (Gummesson, 2002) is also mentioned to underline the interaction between the researcher and the object of his/her and others’ studies, and all the other components of the research. Anyway, in this work the concept of experience is preferred to the concept of interaction, not because its validity is denied, but because its meaning is widened. In fact, the concept of interaction seems to be related with a temporary, almost static, idea of research. On the contrary, research is a continuous learning process starting from interaction but not ending with it. In the same way, interaction has at least two interacting entities. Instead, even if the concept of experience is more vague, it draws better to multiple shades of knowledge. In fact, the perspective of experience is focused on the single individual and is related to him/her as a parameter to evaluate experience. This is clearly in contrast with the modern interpretation, which considers the group, as the most important referent, a concept that often degenerates into the concept of mass. This does not mean that the social context in which the experience develops is

not important. That context is a component influencing the present and future individual's experience according to the concept of learning.

In fact, experience is the core of consumption, and at the same time the core of marketing for one simple reason: experience is the decomposition of the individual's life. In other words, the experiential perspective is totalising that cannot be applied to everything. For example, the experiential perspective is used in pedagogy, too, where the current of experiential learning theory has developed. The latter has its origin in Dewey, Lewin and Piaget (Walter and Marks, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Frontczak and Kelley, 2000). As consumption is the research field of marketing, the experiential has been studied referring to this moment, but only because the research field is relatively limited. Experience is also important in all other fields of life because the individual's many experiences, and in each one of them he/she tells his/her history, made up of previous experiences, and thus what he/she has learned.

Limiting the analysis to marketing, the value of consumption comes from the consumer's experience, both for the company and the consumer. And the value of marketing as a discipline also originates from experience, both for the single researcher and for society. The experience of the individual as a consumer conveys to consumption certain symbols and individual meanings which are also created by society and the context in which the experience is lived. Such an interpretation allows the consumer to express his/her personality and mood, which are partly products of his/her past, and partly products of his/her personal creativity and mood at that moment.

The diversity and heterogeneity of consumption experiences come potentially out of the studies on postmodern marketing not only because the researcher attaches importance to the diversity of the individual, and therefore to consumption experience, but also because at the same time s/he attaches importance to his/her own individuality. It is therefore a twofold source of diversity: the consumption and the researcher him/herself. Both are products of single individualities created by social interactions, and both are involved in deep experiences: the consumer experiences consumptions, the researcher experiences research. The study of marketing and research are also experiences. Postmodernism allows the researcher to be aware of the human nature of his/her research. And by recognising that, research is experience, and the need to reconsider the "scientific nature" of marketing emerges. As a matter of fact, the experiential nature of research seems to suggest a new way to consider what is scientific. In fact, if one assumes that there is no reality to be discovered "out there" by subsequent approximations, then it is not possible to use the "true/false" principle to judge the scientific nature of a theory, because the reference parameter of this evaluation – reality – has disappeared and is anyway constantly changing, not only for itself but also for the observer. In the meantime, the principle of "usefulness/un-usefulness" cannot be applied to the evaluation of the scientific nature of a theory either, because its use would seem to consider all that is pragmatic as "scientific" and all that does not have immediate implications as "non-scientific". And even the opposition between true/false is not scientific. What does true mean? What does false mean? How should the partially true be considered? The world has many shades, like the human mind. The adoption of a particular method is the product of the researcher's choice and it always generates only one part of the possible knowledge. The frailty of every dichotomy becomes clear, which is by definition very easy to apply, but at the same time it does not capture the diversity (Baker, 2002).

On the contrary, by interpreting marketing research according to the postmodern logic of experience, it is possible to evaluate the scientific nature of a theory according

to the richness produced by this experience: if the research experience enriches, even in a small quantity, the body of knowledge already codified, the research can be considered scientific. Now the problem is to understand the meaning of enrichment. In order to try to give an answer, one can say that a research enriches the previous codified knowledge when it adds something different or something new, in any case, when it modifies it and makes it more articulate. The comparison between two theories (usually the old and the new) in order to establish which is the best has no longer value: the only evaluation criterion of a theory is the enrichment of the knowledge already codified. The difference between two sciences, therefore, is not in the method, but again in the ability of enriching knowledge.

At this point it is clear that every reference to the strictness of research as opposed to its practical importance is no longer valid. As a matter of fact, it is very dangerous to use the strictness of a theory to evaluate its quality, and above all its scientific nature. Again, in fact, in this way the scientific nature depends on the method used, in this case on the method's strictness, while the real subject which is potentially "scientific", theory, is left aside. Piercy (2002) describes the wrong use of this reference well, stating that there is no compatibility between the concept of strictness and the importance of research.

Focusing on the strictness of research means focusing on the cohesion between the work and the scheme recommended for the employment of the method used. And again, these considerations block any possibility for the researcher to give space to his/her humanity, experience and knowledge, which are essential for generating knowledge. Strictness can contribute to generate knowledge only if it is based on three features of the researcher: intellectual integrity, curiosity and humility.

The enrichment of experience celebrates the difference, the heterogeneity, the multi-facets of theories and thus it is the opposite of the impoverishment of knowledge, typical of modernism, which means reduction of the variety of reality and experience to a set of constants and variables to which everything must be reduced. The postmodern perspective of marketing plays down the crucial importance of every research to generalise and create patterns, since specifics and contingencies are more varied and valid than any abstraction. Generalisation is useful but it is never "the whole". Consequences for marketing could be disruptive: if on the one hand the creation of patterns would lose all value, on the other marketing could lose any perceptive possibility because reality is so heterogeneous that it is not possible to suggest easy univocal recipes, which are good for all occasions and table-companion. This highly increases the professional responsibility both of the researcher and manager.

The experiential interpretation of consumption and research redirects the attention of researchers on theory, and therefore on the real essence of marketing, by moving it from method (which is only a tool of theory) and from managerial implications (namely, the operative consequences of theory itself). In this way, postmodernism restores the importance of theory, and therefore of knowledge, by rebalancing the roles of the components. It is now clear that the celebration of differences characterising every vision of the world is the source of the scientific nature of marketing, whilst according to modern perspective rules and repetitiveness originate science. This perspective shift has an impact on all research components. First of all, the field of research widens enormously. In the modern vision, the researcher can enquire into any field where s/he envisages something new or uncovered – either because reality has changed or because new tools allow him/her to see a new reality. On the contrary, in postmodern vision the marketing researcher can deal with everything arousing his/her interest, and to which his/her accumulated knowledge can be applied. As a matter of

fact, a new theory is not originated, at least potentially, by the choice of the research field but by the product of the research itself, which must be considered in order to evaluate its scientific nature. This means that a researcher can also study fields, which had already previously been studied. If the researcher adopts a different perspective, or anyway draws different or more in-depth conclusions, then he/she has produced new scientific knowledge. This is a revolutionary interpretation: modernism urged researchers to investigate only what was not already known; on the contrary, postmodernism does not care for research but only for the theory generated. It is a matter of choice between an order without knowledge or chaos full of creative hints. Postmodernism accepts this dichotomy as a challenge, but with humility: truth belongs to nobody, reality cannot be known at a collective level.

This implication relating to the field of research is closely related to the effects of postmodernism on the various methods adopted to investigate. Since the discipline does not become scientific thanks to the employment of a particular method, but to the theory generated, the researcher can use any method. Obviously, quantitative methods remain valid, but qualitative methods also can be employed, from ethnography to fiction, discourse analysis and so on, including the most instinctive and restructured and the least rational ones. Science is not necessarily rational (rational referred to what?). In fact, a theory does not become scientific thanks to the employment of a method itself but to the enrichment obtained with the new knowledge. No method is more scientific than others (including Popper's "scientific" method). On the contrary, all methods can originate scientific theories, and therefore incremental knowledge. Therefore, it is clear that the concept of scientific nature is relative and not absolute. In fact, if the label "scientific" is given to knowledge originating in a research experience, it is clear that knowledge considered scientific is the parameter used to evaluate, and that knowledge itself had enriched a previous knowledge. Hence science is neither objective nor absolute.

Every absolute certainty is lost in this conception that does not turn into nihilism of science (the so-called "disaster of hope" highly feared by those rejecting postmodernism), but enormously increases the possibilities of generating theory, in a never-ending learning process. The theory created will never be absolutely scientific, but only in relation to the context in which it is considered and gains value, and in relation to those who get to know it. The peculiarities of every research experience are also expressed in the impossibility to define scientific nature once and for all, since this concept depends on a particular situation of knowledge, on a context, on a society, on time and space. In fact, if the conditions of this evaluation change, the label "scientific" would not be applicable. In order to face the issue of the scientific nature of theory correctly, the conditions defining contingency must be made clear. Despite physical sciences, in social sciences this condition of relativity is emphasised: in social sciences the context conditions in which knowledge develops are subject to continuous changes, whilst in physical sciences the (relative) stability of the context makes the idea of a principle of a (anyway conventional) scientific nature with absolute value more acceptable.

The considerations about the generation of theory and its scientific nature are only a first, temporary and relatively imprecise, meditation on the implications of postmodernism in science. Nevertheless, they are enough to reject the accusation of postmodernism as nihilism. Nature is not order, and nobody can create it. In the meantime everybody should cast light on its complexity: perhaps chaos is not accidental. Brown (1999) had already wondered about the possibility for postmodernism to represent the end of marketing and concluded his analysis

pointing out the need to consider the meaning of knowledge of marketing and to reconsider marketing. On the contrary, this paper wants to look further. In fact, even though we know that these considerations have many limits and that it is necessary to study the issues in-depth, nevertheless they are alternative considerations trying to adopt a constructive approach.

In fact, one has to remember that the use of postmodernism in marketing is a very difficult exercise, which is neither simple nor automatic, because it attacks any apriorism of marketing. In particular, the researcher assumes more responsibility that can only be tackled with both a curious and humble attitude. Only if research is led by curiosity and is moderated by humbleness, can the experience be enrichment. In this way postmodernism could kill the machine and give freedom – and responsibility – to individuals again.

Notes

1. The term, originally suggested by J.W. Culliton, has been further expanded and introduced in literature for the first time by Borden and Marshall (1959).
2. Burton (2001) has denounced that the interdisciplinarity is more a letter of intents than an actual behaviour of marketing researchers. This is due to both the difficulty of penetrating a vast and varied literature with undefined boundaries and to the absence of incentives.
3. According to Brown (2002), the success of the marketing concept is given to the necessity perceived by marketing individuals to believe in something regardless of its contents.
4. The tendency toward specialisation of the sciences started to spread in France at the beginning of the eighteenth century and later extended to the advanced economies (Geymonat, 1972).
5. Let us accept for the moment the traditional meaning of science; the matter will be tackled more in-depth in the next pages.
6. This phenomenon is clear also from the analysis of text books suggesting lengthy checklist (Gummeson, 2002) of a generally prescriptive nature (Burton, 2001).
7. The considerable timing distance between the above mentioned articles (17 years) and the strong similarities of their contents (comparison between the two trends) show the difficulties encountered by the experiential thought in the process of establishing within the international academic world.
8. For a more in-depth analysis of the comparison between traditional and experiential approach, we refer once more to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and Bernd Schmitt (1999).
9. The reader should take into consideration that there is no consistency in the meanings of the terms of modernism and postmodernism and its features. Sometimes they refer to historical periods and sometimes to the system of thought they are correlated with.
10. Some other authors, instead, have disagreed with the clamour surrounding postmodernism, and considered it only a rediscovery of some aspects of modernism (Bouchet, 1994).
11. The social constructionist theory, which interprets the role of language as a creator of the historically determined world and not as a descriptor of reality, derives from Rorty.
12. In particular, first embryonic observations on this matter can already be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger (Vattimo, 1991).
13. It is clear that many researches have tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice, or according to another point of view, the gap between the producer and the consumer (for further in-depth analysis see the special issue of *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36

No. 3, dedicated to "Bridging the divide"). It is, anyway, a marginal debate of the problem here discussed.

14. The traditionally and commonly accepted definition of pure and applied research is used here: Pure research "aims at discovering nature's secrets", while applied, or technical, research "uses such discoveries to solve everyday problems" (Geymonat, 1971, p. 9).

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