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Cockayne, David

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# **Redefining B2B Relationship Marketing: Insight from postmodern Alibaba**

**David Cockayne**

## **Abstract**

The cultural and philosophical movement of modernism has defined contemporary marketing knowledge, constructing a powerful narrative that has conceptually bound, yet semantically separated business to consumer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) marketing knowledge. Perceived paradigm shifts towards relationships, and the birth of relationship marketing are argued to be no more than an evolution of modern marketing, yet at the heart of relational constructs sit the very features modernism seeks to marginalise in the search for truth and establishment of power structures. Indeed, while B2C marketing has embraced postmodern thinking in consumer culture theory recently, relationship marketing at the B2B level remains conceptually hinged to modern marketing. Using the lens of the postmodern marketing literature, this conceptual paper investigates the rise of China's Alibaba, and uses this case as a vehicle to argue for relationship marketing knowledge to embrace postmodern thinking and redefine how it should advance in the future.

## **Key Words**

Marketing knowledge, relationship marketing, postmodern marketing, modern marketing, postmodernism, modernism, B2B marketing; B2C, Alibaba

## **Introduction**

The exchange of resources for production, commercial transactions, and the existence of relationships between buyers and sellers is argued to have existed for as long as it has been possible to consume (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013). Subsequently it is perhaps not too grand a statement to suggest the same is true for Business-to-Business (B2B) marketing. Despite the probability that the practice of marketing is as old as civilization itself, this paper will restrict its definition of marketing to how the discipline evolved as both an academic discipline and as a business practice from the early 20th century. Furthermore, the subsequent consequences of this evolution will be discussed in terms of how we position the role of marketing in B2B relationships. This specific area of the marketing discipline has experienced heightened interest over the past thirty or so years, having previously sat in the shadows of its Business to Consumer (B2C) marketing counterpart (Grönroos, 2004).

The early development of marketing theory was derived largely from classical economics, with the basic requirement for industrial buying being to secure the lowest marginal purchasing price at acceptable quality and with delivery (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013). The growth and perceived superiority of behavioral science towards the end of the 1800s led to a proliferation of contributions to the development of marketing research, and most notably gave rise to the discipline of consumer behaviour. This literature has since been influential in the development of a scientifically defined field of relationship marketing in B2B marketing, inevitably dominated by positivist research contributions (e.g. Patterson, Johnson, & Spreng, 1996; Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Wilson & Woodside, 1999). Indeed it had taken

several centuries for business relationships to achieve the rigorous focus and respect of scientific inquiry (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Sheth, 2011), something Hadjickani & LaPlaca (2013, p.294) consider to be a 'significant development and impressive change'. From the perspective of this author, this paradigmatic alignment has cemented relationship marketing, and therefore much of the current B2B marketing literature, to the epistemologically limited frame similarly evidenced by modern marketing's *marketing concept*, which in turn could be responsible for the relatively barren environment for academic development in B2B marketing and relationship marketing cited by Hadjickani & LaPlaca (2013).

The purpose of the paper however is not to purely debate epistemological positions. While the narrow positivist stance which engulfs the current literature could be responsible for the discipline's lack of theoretical development, the role of positivism in marketing is only permitted to dominate due to the subject's modernist foundations. This paper suggests that by rejecting modern marketing's theoretical foundations and adopting a more postmodern inspired perspective, new epistemologies can be allowed to flourish and thus aid the subject's development. An example of China's Alibaba is used to show how B2B relationship marketing practice that has been allowed to evolve largely unaffected by modern marketing's positivist nature could serve as a signal for future marketing theorization and practice in the west.

### **Nature of Marketing Knowledge**

As mentioned, much of the early marketing literature was originally derived from economics inspired, exchange and transaction focused research heavily influenced by North American business schools (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). A large proportion of the early marketing literature is formed from the consumer based marketing school of thought. Some might argue that this is because Marketing scholars find it easier to relate to themselves as consumers and subsequent experiences, something which is reflected in the diverse and expanding range of consumer marketing literature.

Conversely, while behavioural and cognitive psychology ignited the B2C literature and academic research focus, B2B marketing knowledge grew alongside and reflectively of North America's industrial revolution and economic development (Hadjickani & LaPlaca, 2013; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009; Mark Tadajewski, 2008). At this time B2B researchers were not concerned with theorising and creating literature within the confinements the university environment, but rather wished to be out in industry studying the practice of marketing and mapping the logistical path of goods to distribution systems (Ellis, 2011). Resultantly, B2B marketing at this time was driven by profit and marginal gains in output, hinged to classical economics and the theory of profit maximization (LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). Short-term objectives and completion of transactions spawned a sales-driven approach to business marketing where the general idea was that providing one party could supply the other with what they needed, both parties would be happy, and the transaction was closed (Ellis, 2011). As a result B2B marketing research became entrenched in practical measurement and application at the industrial level, B2C marketing knowledge sought measureable truths inspired by science and psychology. Coupled with B2C's more relatable and visible presence, the evolution of marketing knowledge became quite unbalanced with B2C theory driving overall marketing knowledge.

Such an unbalanced contribution to marketing knowledge is a little disrespectful to an area of marketing such as B2B marketing given that most marketing activities, at some stage within the supply chain, take place between and within organisations for reaching the final consumer. Further, for the development of marketing knowledge is perhaps restricted to focus on the end user and recipients of products or services as part of the marketing supply chain without looking further upstream towards the interactions between firms involved in producing that end product or service. It is perhaps therefore feasible to argue that due to this less visible side of marketing is the reason for its relative neglect in terms of academic evaluation. It should be understood however that many of the product, policy and innovation developments in marketing have emerged from B2B environments which have then been translated or applied to B2C contexts.

### **Modern Marketing and a Relational Shift**

Although B2C and B2B marketing knowledge took different paths in their respective knowledge creation, their developments were both conceptually hinged to the same core economic, and philosophical base. Both the early nature of marketing knowledge, and the first significant challenge to the transaction-based approaches to marketing coincided with the early development of 'modernism' in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, as well as the later rise of 'modernism' in the second half of the twentieth century (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995a; Firat, 1997)

The term 'modernity' refers to the specific time period in Western history starting from the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century through to the present (Best & Kellner, 1997; Kellner, 2000) where the cultural movement of modernism is suggested to have started (Firat, Nikhilesh, & Alladi, 1995). The label 'modernism' is used to describe the philosophical and sociocultural ideology which defines and encapsulates this period (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). More commonly associated with views of realism and unity of purpose in the arts, modernism actually signifies several cultural conditions including; the emergence of industrial capitalism; the separation and distinguishing between production and consumption; the establishment of the cognitive subject; and the rise of science and the search for universal truth(s) (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995a). These conditions feed off a particular future-orientated, progressive ontological stance where the construction of socio-cultural grand narratives and universal truth govern almost all areas of society and draw largely on the work of Lyotard (Firat, 1997).

Perhaps most relevantly for the discipline of marketing, one of Modernism's most prominent grand narratives is the *marketing concept*. Inspired by the work of (Alderson, 1957, 1965) the introduction of the marketing concept, and the centrality of the consumer prompted a the start of a shift away from the classical economic marketing model based on transactional exchange, and more towards business exchange based on relationships (Ellis, 2011).

The marketing concept allowed the discipline of marketing to position and define itself within society's modern order. Through the cultural movement's initial roots in the search for universal truth and scientific validity one is able to see modernism's influence on the early development of marketing knowledge and its alignment with

economics and transaction based models. Yet as modernism grew and developed throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries a more mature, more defined and institutionally imbedded cultural order had gripped Western society. Still hinged to progression, development, and the pursuit of accepted grand narratives by which society could be governed, modernism in the mid twentieth century offered prescription of how relationships between institutions and their consumers and other stakeholders would be conducted. This resulted in the creation of a special type of relationship known commonly today as the market and customer orientation (Kotler & Levy, 1969; Kotler, 1972). Since this inception, the marketing concept and subsequent market orientation has been extended to institutions including, but not limited to, private firms, non-profit organisations, the public sector, the arts, religion, sport, and healthcare (Kotler, 1973). The marketing concept has evolved to become the governing principle of relationships and interactions and is not only confined that that of the marketing discipline. The modern marketing orientation blends political discourse, social values, and the very nature of personal relationships thus constituting what Firat & Dholakia, 2006 p.124) term as “a cultural cornerstone of contemporary modern social existence”.

Modern marketing has clearly been successful. The discipline is intrinsically linked with all aspects of modern life and the very nature of the marketing concept, and market orientation are the very principles by which almost all business has been conducted in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This success is not only due to modernism’s influence in helping marketing to construct a *meta-marketing-narrative* but rests in its ability personify one of modern culture’s most valued assets – democracy (Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995a). The marketing concept projects the ideal of the sovereign, empowered consumer whose needs, wants, and desires are to be facilitated by the market, in a similar fashion to how democratic governments propose they represent the sovereign citizen of their respective nation. For this author however, marketing goes much further. Where democratic governments may propose to serve the best interests of sovereign citizens, they do so retrospectively, and on a mass scale. Modern marketing’s power is in its ability to give the impression of not only meeting a multitude of consumer needs and wants through countless market provisions (products, services, and experiences), but also through the procurement and nurturing of those needs.

### **Historical Rise of Relationship Marketing**

This shift towards the provisioning of societal needs saw the marketing discipline move away from exchange based transactions and more towards the formation of relationships with the newly heralded, almost omnipotent being of the modern consumer. This change has led marketing scholars to proclaim a paradigm shift in their field one whereby the nature of marketing focuses less on facilitation of supply and demand, and more on the nurturing of relationships (Gummesson, 1994).

The term ‘relationship marketing’ seems to have been first used by Berry 1983 (M. Tadjewski & Saren, 2008) and was defined as an attempt to “identify and establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit so that the objectives of all parties involved are met...by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises” (Grönroos, 1994, p.4). Studies tasked with investigating the historical development of relationship marketing (e.g. Gronhaug, Henjesand, &

Koveland, 1999; Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1994; Möller & Halinen, 2000; O'Malley & Prothero, 2004; Palmer, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2005; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995) tend to agree that the evolution of the literature and conceptual development of relationship marketing stems from the pioneering work of authors such as (Arndt, 1979; Bagozzi, 1974, 1978; Day & Wensley, 1983; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; and Levitt, 1986). For Bagozzi (1978), exchange relationships are the essence of marketing, or at least they were at the time of contribution. Similarly, Arndt (1979) showcased long-term buyer–seller relationships, eventually arguing that such relationships are essential, if not the key to domestic economic growth and enhanced economic production capability. It is important to recognize however that while both of these contributions made valuable points, they are the result of the production-led era of marketing, hinged to economic thinking biased towards production and manufacturing – particularly in the US.

Although additional contributions exist, Day & Wensley (1983) potentiated the paradigm shift toward a relational focus for marketing, arguing that the single unit, transaction/exchange based marketing paradigm be replaced with buyer – seller relationships. A more holistic perspective on early relationship marketing thought by writers such as Dwyer, et al., (1987), and Theodore Levitt, (1986) noted that buyer-seller relationships do not end after the initial sale is made; rather it is just the beginning. These early contributions drew attention to the underlying, hidden lubricant of the market economy. While not explicitly heralding the birth of relationship marketing, they pointed to the fact that without relational determinants, marketing realized the potential of market economic theory in a quite limited fashion. Their contribution, though small, led other others to investigate the influence of relationships in organizational activity, and the development of marketing in practice. Importantly for marketing scholars however, this early work contributed to the understanding of marketing as an independent discipline worthy of theoretical critique, rather than as an unruly sub-discipline of the more scientific, academically rigorous school of economics.

The more explicit academic contribution to marketing at the relational level can first be found in the work of Berry (1983) (Berry, 2002; Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1994; M. Tadajewski & Saren, 2008; Mark Tadajewski, 2008). European researchers (e.g. Grönroos, 1994, 1995, 1996; Gummesson, 1994, 1996, 2002; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996) have also made impactful contributions in this area. Berry (1983, p.25) defined relationship marketing as “attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships.” Grönroos, (1991) took the concept further, attempting to generalize rather than discriminate between early definitions of consumers and customers. He argued that the goal of relationship marketing was “to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other parties at a profit so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises” (Gronroos 1991, p.8). These authors made a significant collective contribution to the establishment of relationship marketing knowledge. Propelled by the growing belief of a paradigm shift in marketing thought, and industry growth in the area of customer relationships, the subject of relationship marketing continued to grow and differentiate, breeding new areas of inquiry such as services marketing, and various components of sales management literature.

The services marketing literature was one of the first areas in which relationship marketing research began. The emergence and growth of the service economy in the western world is credited with the growth of relationship marketing research within the services literature (Gronroos, 1988). For example, from 1970 to 1985 consumer services such as finance, education, and healthcare (amongst many others) in the U.S. grew by almost 2.0% per year than that of product based markets (Allen & Faulhaber, 1989). The key contributing studies to relationship marketing mentioned thus far (Berry, 1983; Gronroos, 1991; Levitt, 1983) stressed that relationship marketing was essential in the creation and maintenance of competitive advantage. Although their respective research contributions span different contexts the overall consensus seemed to be that service organizations should develop long-term relationships with their customers. Other factors contributing to the growth of relationship marketing in the services marketing literature were the limitations of traditional marketing, such as the marketing concept, and its associated 4-P model of marketing. It was suggested that when it comes to services, traditional marketing may not apply.

Interestingly, although the very nature of services intimates a relationship between a producer and consumer, much of the early literature focused heavily on the producer and end-user in a B2C context. All customers form some kind of customer relationship with the seller whether that is broad or narrow in scope, continuous or discrete, short or long-lasting in nature, and this requires firms to develop strategies to at least maintain, and preferably develop such relationships (Grönroos, 1994). This argument is perhaps more significant earlier in the supply-chain, rather than simply focusing on the relationship between producer and end-user. Consumer goods, and services require the collaboration and resource exchange of multiple 'suppliers' for the final provision of an end product/service to be consumed. Much of the early RM literature, particularly in the services marketing literature, failed to take account of this.

The dominance of the B2C perspective on RM marketing prompted the development of an approach to marketing, and a body of marketing literature surrounding the concept of personal-selling. This literature played a significant role in the evolution of relationship marketing. Palmer & Bejou, (1994) were one of the first contributors, arguing that both the salesperson and the end customer find a long-term relationship beneficial. This is simply because for salespeople, long-term relationships mean possible future sales, recommendations, and endorsement, while for customers, the need to search for new information is reduced, as such is the potential risk of consuming an unknown product or service. Rises in the cost of personal-selling and the complexity of managing multiple relationships with different clients were perhaps the main reasons for the growth of relationship marketing research in personal selling.

The evolution of relationship marketing continued with the emergence of static buyer-seller models (e.g. Anderson & Weitz, 1989, 1992; Anderson & Narus, 1984, 1990; Wilson & Jantrania, 1994) which mostly examined the practice and role of relationships in marketing using limited, or 'static' variables. The adoption of logical positivism evident in many of these studies signifies this particular era of development in marketing knowledge. In the search for 'truth' and scientific authentication, these studies presented largely context-specific snapshots of relationships, rather than unpacking the relational constructs and determinants of this emerging area. From an industry perspective, Palmer & Bejou, (1994) drew further

attention to their limitations arguing that the models produced needed to be multistage, dynamic, and process oriented to be of benefit. These type of models investigate the buyer-seller relationship as a process of stages developed over time. Relational constructs such as trust, commitment, quality, ethics, communication, and relationship duration that are so important in the formation and activation of process stages (Palmer and Bejou, 1994) and are more visible in multistage, dynamic models of relationship marketing (Dwyer, et al., 1987; Palmer & Bejou, 1994; Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986).

When attempting to shed light on the historical evolution of relationship marketing, it is important to note that much of the literature mentioned thus far stemmed from western European, and Scandinavian literature. This particular body of knowledge postulates the work of Berry (1983) as the instigator of relationship marketing's emergence in marketing theory. It is important to note however that much of this work derives from relationship marketing in the B2C context, and that historical studies at the B2B level (e.g. Keep, Hollander, & Dickinson, (1998), Tadajewski & Saren, (2008) demonstrate the use of similar relational practices much earlier - from the 1880s onward. A historical investigation concerning pre-1970 literature in North America by Tadajewski & Saren (2009) concluded that although the concept of relationship marketing may be a relatively new development in marketing thought, in practice it is far from a new concept. Academics such as Brown (2008) go further, arguing that its evolution can be mapped against that of the marketing concept. Subsequently the development of relationship marketing as a body of marketing knowledge has been presented largely in an ahistorical account (Tadajewski & Saren 2009) mirroring the emergence, establishment and dominance of modern marketing thinking.

More recently, the American Marketing Association (2006, in Ellis, 2011, pp.120) define relationship marketing as 'marketing with the conscious aim to develop and manage long-term and/or trusting relationships with customers, distributors, suppliers, or other parties in the marketing environment'. This definition which stresses the importance of the relationship rather than the customer specifically would seem to support the perceived paradigm shift in marketing knowledge, although as noted by Hadjikhani & LaPlaca (2013), research into this particular element of relationship marketing is underdeveloped. One potential reason for this lack of investigation may reside in an imbalance between the epistemological stance that traditional B2B relationship marketing adopts as a result of its modernist heritage. This perspective narrows the very nature of how relationships are defined. Although marketing knowledge is perceived to have shifted towards a new paradigm, relationship marketing is still philosophically bound to modernism. Thus, the very emergence of relationship marketing in the first place could perhaps be argued to be more of an evolution of the modern marketing concept, rather than a new archetype of marketing knowledge. As such, it is natural for current research to focus on the customer, exchange and power aspects of the relationship in search of a particular truth, rather than stressing the relational constructs that actually form the relationship. Through modernism's search for truth, obsession with scientific measurement, and separation of consumption and production, relationship marketing has been restricted to a positivist research and creation of marketing knowledge. This culturally arranged marriage between marketing as a discipline, and positivism has yielded an obsession with quantification and measurement of B2B marketing in the name of scientific

validity and 'truth' through predominantly quantitative methods. Such positions are conducive to knowledge creation that neglects socially constricted constructs such as trust, and the construction of identities as part of the relationship process – constructs which sit at the heart of any form of relationship. This has cyclical effect, which ensures the development and refinement of research hinged to previous and pre-existing notions for past relationship marketing literature rather than the construction of new, more meaningful interpretive approaches to the marketing discipline.

Ironically, these limitations stem from modernist concerns about the supposed respectability and validity of marketing as a discipline and the belief that quantification in marketing research is synonymous with scientifically valid, academically rigorous contributions to knowledge. Unfortunately, in reality this limited approach stitches research not only to pre-existing ideas, but more dangerously to trivial details which are tested. The result of such knowledge creation is the exclusion and labelling of all that cannot be scientifically or quantitatively tested as non-existent. Measurement scales, assigning of specific numbers to specific values determined by previous research conclusions, derived from similar research approaches does not progress knowledge so much as it creates a *modern roundabout* where knowledge is not so much advanced as it is repeated, albeit via a slightly different journey. Given the very nature of relationships, such an approach to knowledge development fails to shed light on the sensitivity and complexity concepts relating to relational concepts. Relationship marketing and B2B marketing remains in the dark.

### **Postmodern inspiration and relational re-enchantment**

Postmodernism is a well-discussed concept, but difficult to define or explain. Postmodernism has yielded significant interest from both academic, artistic, and cultural literature in recent years and its coverage is not limited simply to the formal academic press (Brown, 2006, 2008). The way in which postmodernism is defined, and discussed varies from subject to subject, indeed the very term postmodernism and related terms such as postmodern, post-modernity, postmodernist etc. show that there is confusion both in terms of how the concept is defined, and used (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Semantic arguments aside, the very nature of postmodernism has emerged over time, initially as a critique of modernism's foundational domination over established societal constructs, and later as a new philosophical and cultural movement in its own right (Smith, 1995; Vattimo & Smith, 1995). It is important to note however that as Brown (2008) notes, to attempt to position postmodernism's emergence in a linear fashion would be to misinterpret the subject. Postmodern is not a time-specific, measureable phenomena (Vattimo, 1988) rather it is the ideological position against such obsession with definition, and ultimately segregation of thought that in doing so raises barriers and institutionalizes unbalanced positions of power in society. Postmodernism is at the simplest level a revolt against the omnipotent modern search for truth and dedication to what Lyotard (1984) called metanarratives.

At the crux of its original position, postmodernism challenged the way in which modernism sought to simplify and categorize the world into simple dichotomous groups (Dholakia, 2009; Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Modernism assigned labels to different construct components, for example male/female, producer/consumer, right/wrong etc. Interestingly, the effect of this pairing and thus separation of items

from their related nature creates distinguishing differences but through the very nature of what is presented first and second, bestows superior status over the first term in each pair over its counterpart (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995a). Interestingly, for B2B marketing the separation of the buyer/seller, or consumer/producer signifies the influence of modernism on business relationships and the early construction of relationship marketing. The effect of this has been the creation of relationships where one party sees itself as more significant than the other, thus engaging the relationship as a mechanical, almost robotic process for organizational rather than relational objectives. Postmodernism regards such dichotomies as failed attempts to legitimate partial truths. While different elements of a relationship may hold unequal amounts of power, the relationship itself should not be unnaturally bound to repressive partial truths, instead a new power dimension for the entire relationship should be created irrespective of individual capabilities or leverage points. Shaw (1992) argues that a postmodern approach has the power to permeate the modernist dogma by repositioning society's ontological construct.

In essence, the first challenge of postmodernism is to heal the divide created by the modern condition. The separation of societal constructs into unequal components is reflected in biased approaches to relationship marketing that has led to a narrowing of knowledge creation, interpretation, and impact. The nature and objectives of the respective buyers or sellers in B2B relationship marketing should not be the focal point of research and knowledge creation. Instead it is the linking value of collaboration, the formation of a new entity and subsequent new power dimension that should be of interest.

Much of the Postmodernism literature in marketing was populated by a small, but significant, cohort of interpretivist consumer-orientated marketing academics whom drove an exciting moment radically displacing previous assumptions, temporarily invigorating marketing theory and expressive alternative conceptualizations (Cova & Elliott, 2008). New perspectives and debates flooded academic circles across many disciplines in the social sciences, and humanities (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). These debates permeated marketing knowledge, mostly in the realm of consumer culture, in the early 1990s (Cova, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2013), and raised serious questions of how marketing knowledge was defined and conceptualized at the ontological, epistemological and axiological level (Brown 2006). As noted by Cova et al, (2013) these contributions had a profound effect of consumer culture theory and large parts of B2C marketing. These affects stemmed from the condemnation of modern marketing's misguided and largely contradictory perspective of the consumer (Firat & Dholakia 2006), and need for truth (Firat & Venkatesh 1995a).

For the purpose of this paper, this author has selected the two arguably most significant research contributions from the postmodern literature (Cova et al., 2013) for the purpose of presenting how these contributions add to the argued for redefining of B2B relationship marketing at the theoretical level. These contributions also act of the general framework used to investigate the contextual example presented later in the paper.

The emergence and sustained growth of the postmodern literature has not been a unified movement (Cova et al., 2013). Had it been, its ontology of fragmentation, multiple, holistic, socially constructed perspectives of reality (Tadajewski, 2006)

would have been in doubt, and may have constituted a form of metanarrative thus contradicting one of the postmodern literature's most influential figures in Jean-Francois Lyotard. As such it is necessary to see the postmodern contribution as a series of fragmented, inspirations that provoked critical redefinition of established practice and theory in marketing.

From the North American literature, Firat & Venkatesh (1995a, p.239) introduced the idea of "liberatory postmodernism" arguing that the tedious nature of modernism and its subsequent obsession with metanarratives and narrow conventionalism enslaved the modern consumer in a culture whereby consumer needs were manufactured through construction of social grand narratives which governed behaviour and consumption activity. In total they critiqued modernism from six perspectives, renouncing the ideological foundations of modernism and in the process presented , postmodern development as an alternate vision of consumption processes with emancipatory potential. At the heart of their argument, Firat & Venkatesh (1995a) rejected the modernist separation and prioritization of production over consumption. They argued that this misalignment of power betrayed the consumer, whom was being conditioned into believing the metanarrative of the marketing concept, tricking them into believing they were being served by the firm, when in fact they were being enslaved. This idea of a power imbalance created by modernist thinking is, in the opinion of this author, one of the key contributions of Firat & Venkatesh's (1995a) paper.

Although Firat & Venkatesh's work made a valuable contribution in showing how grand narratives such as the marketing concept separated consumption and production thus creating a power imbalance that actually favoured the producer, it presented an individualistic perspective of consumer culture theory. Conversely, inspired by Maffesoli's (1995) 'The Time of the Tribes' insight into neo-tribalism, and the growing interest in the role of 'community' in consumption and services (e.g. Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2004; Fischer, Bristor, & Gainer, 1996; Goodwin, 1994, 1996) Cova, (1997) published an article in the European Journal of Marketing emphasising the social linking value of consumption. His argument drew heavily on the emerging postmodern literature (e.g. Brown, 1993, 1994, 1995; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995) and calls for a more ethno-sociological approach to consumption culture (e.g. (Grafton-Small, 1987; Sherry, 1995; Venkatesh, 1995) as a means of changing how consumption, and the role of community in consumption was portrayed. Cova (1997) suggested that while modern society was undergoing a cultural shift towards the postmodern, the world of B2C marketing was still deeply obsessed with modernism and its developments in marketing knowledge such as the marketing concept. He argued that the focus on the consumer as an individual had assisted the collapse of traditional communities, creating self-obsessed, over empowered consumers. Marketing theory therefore needed to take a postmodern approach, focusing on the linking value of consumption and the creation of communities not based on geographical proximity, but by the shared value of consuming at the tribal level (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova, 1997)

Interestingly, one of the central components of Cova's (1997) argument is now perhaps relevant from the perspective of how we evaluate B2B marketing knowledge, and in particular, relationship marketing. The concept of a relationship as a two-part buyer/seller interaction is a presumption levied by modernist thinking. Therefore

perhaps it is time that marketing knowledge viewed relationship marketing from a similar community perspective, valuing not the respective positions of its components, but the value created from the alignment. As Cova (1997:301) suggested of postmodern consumer communities;

“The postmodern communities taken as a whole are referred to by the term “sociality” which is different from “social” as it stresses not the mechanical and instrumental function of an individual member of a contractual aggregation, but the symbolic and emotional role of persons within ephemeral tribes.

The key point of his argument is that the mutual experience of consumption leaves a residual value extractable by the consumer not because of exchange gratification, or because of individual power, but because of an emotional, symbolic relationship that is equally perceived. The functional, tangible exchange is essentially meaningless without the mutually shared experience of consumption visually reflected, and therefore accessible, through the actions of the community.

Both Cova (1997), and Firat & Venkatesh (1995) make similar arguments through their respective works. Firstly, the denouncement of power imbalances, and thus the realignment of consumption and production. Secondly, they point to the ultimate value of consumption as residing with the shared experience of the consumer, not in the individual sense but ultimately as part of an emancipated community of shared emotional and symbolic values. These two contributions evidence what Tadajewski (2006) refers to as a rise in interpretivist marketing contributions whose ontology center around socially constructed, holistic, multiple, fragmented and contextual perspectives of reality. Further, at the epistemological level they support Tadajewski’s (2006, p.430) assertion that ‘knowledge is not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the research co-participant’.

As can be evidenced from the two examples discussed, the 1990s and mid 2000s has seen postmodernism used by marketing theory to attempt to unravel and expose some of the sociocultural processes that govern consumption activity (Cova et al 2013). In the aftermath of a period of ontological and epistemological critique, the B2C marketing literature has come to embrace postmodern thinking; the same cannot be said however for the B2B literature, especially that surrounding relationship marketing. As noted earlier, much of the work on B2B relationship marketing explicitly differentiates and distinguishes between the buyer and seller, and in doing so stresses the power imbalance that suppressed consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Relational constructs such as trust are largely seen as an outcome, rather than component of relationship marketing, and the same emotional, symbolic, community-driven and co-created value evidenced by the postmodern inspired ‘cultural turn’ in consumer culture theory (Cova et al 2013) is scarcely evident at the B2B level.

The question of why this is the case has long haunted this author. Businesses engage with multiple suppliers both in creation and distribution of production, simultaneously consuming and producing. Customers can be domestic or international, or simultaneously transcend both in the case of service industries. Relationships required

constructs such as trust and sincerity simply to exist, and indeed if measured solely from temporal and monetary perspectives, power can appear imbalanced in B2B relationships. What if however these relationships focused on trust, sincerity and the creation of community? What if the ‘power’ of B2B relationships was perceived not relative to time, cost, or profit, but from the same emotional, symbolic perspectives that Cova (1997) proposes create the real value evident in consumer culture?

While working in China both as a B2B marketing practitioner, consultant, and as an academic lecturer, it became evident to this author that while the academic literature surrounding B2B relationship marketing may not yet have embraced postmodern insight, industry practice at the B2B relationship marketing level in some of the world’s emerging economies are evidencing postmodern traits.

### **Alibaba’s Communities of Friends: A postmodern model**

In 1999, Alibaba, a Chinese internet-based B2B firm surfaced with the aim of uniting China’s plethora of small, family owned and, at the time, largely isolated businesses (Economist, 2013a). At the heart of their business model was a ‘communities of friends’ concept, a business approach that personifies the traditional culture of business in China and Confucian influence. Rather than treating businesses as individual firms, or indeed, seeing the relationship between these firms as purely economic, Alibaba developed a B2B model based on the creation of friendships and community (Hu & Zhao, 2007). In this model, there is no modernist separation of production and consumption, no consumer centric ideology – all participants are equal and equally leveraged by an ecommerce platform for mutual benefit. This ecommerce platform brought buyers and sellers together through a social network community that predated the likes of Facebook and Twitter. Alibaba was able to form a community of Chinese Small to Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) which valued not the attributes of the individual members, but the accessibility and diversity of their community (Economist, 2007, 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

At Alibaba’s B2B inception, China was very much the developing economy. Inconsistent quality of transport infrastructure, regional and provisional differences in language, resources, and government support prevented small Chinese firms from interacting, or even knowing of each other’s existence (Economist, 2014; Hu & Zhao, 2007). Public sector dominance and only recent marketization of commercial activity was reflected in the absence of requisite management structure and basic communication (Griffiths, 2013). Of course, these perspectives are very much sketches of business practice through a western lens, however the key tool that all these small firms had was an almost blissful ignorance of modernism’s future focused doctrine marketing practice.

The establishment of Internet access and the subsequent Alibaba platform allowed small Chinese firms to become aware of the existence of others (Hu & Zhao, 2007). Members could connect, network, co-create, and trade through the formation of a business relationship network that was as large and interconnected as a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) platform (Li, Li, & Lin, 2008). The resultant entity sliced through commercial, governmental, geographic and economic barriers, bringing not just businesses together, but families, students, public officials, and later international trading partners (Economist, 2007, 2013b). Alibaba’s community members rarely met

face to face, and the business transactions recorded differed substantially from traditional B2B transactions. Businesses were able to expand the scope of their activities, diversify into new domestic and international markets, while many former family-owned ventures were able to merge and form new SMEs not restricted by geographical proximity.

This approach is strongly aligned with Cova's (1997) theory of consumption communities. As a disruption to modernism's grand narratives the Alibaba community emphasised the power of the social link created between individuals whom share common consumption practices. The value and power of the link between firms as evidenced through the Alibaba model offers a powerful insight into how small to medium size firms can benefit mutually from the link between their consumption practices, initiated firstly by the creation of friendships and nurturing of subsequent communities.

Further, the denouncement of power relationships and focus on the relational constructs of trust, sincerity, and cooperation as advocated by much of the covered postmodern literature is a clear suggestion of Alibaba's naturally evolved postmodern position – something which in this author's opinion sends a powerful signal to western SMEs, whom are arguably still preoccupied by the grand narratives of modern marketing, and failing to reap the rewards of a postmodern approach to B2B marketing.

### **Redefining Relationship Marketing: Signals for future Research**

The Alibaba model is reflective of a shift away from modern marketing. It is not to say that this shift is towards a postmodern framework, as to do so would lean towards a modernist analysis. Rather, the Alibaba model reflects an evolution towards an approach to relationship marketing that is inspired by postmodern beliefs rather than governed, and arguably repressed, by modernism. Through the alignment of social values and cultural ideology, Alibaba nurtured a 'community of friends' rather than traditional business relationships. At the crux of this framework is the understanding and appreciation of relationship partners and the mutual value bestowed via the awareness and accessibility to these partners, rather than the mechanical, instrumental attributes and benefits of their business entities. Such an approach to relationship marketing fosters a desire to understand, trust, and construct favourable, long-lasting identities amongst relationship partners, rather than an obsessive preoccupation with the sum value and outcome of the overall relationship transaction.

This position highlights a key criticism of relationship marketing in terms of its neglect to focus on, or explore organisational actors. Authors such as argued that in most research investigating business relationships the individual such as the marketing manager is seldom explored. This is argued to overlook the very construction of explanations and behaviour in business relationship research. If we are to develop our understanding of relationship marketing, we need to engage with the social actors that helped to construct it. This would allow us to view the network structure in terms of the relationship that binds the network together, rather than focusing surely on components such as buyers and sellers. In doing so we would be able to move towards a system of relationship marketing management that was able to

engage with and embrace sociological views such as the concepts of trust and thus enable the construction of identities amongst relationship partners.

## **Conclusion**

Marketing knowledge exists in liquid form. It seeps into the cracks, lining, and very foundations of business relationships and has the ability to change shape and form based on the world around it. The danger is that if this liquid solidifies, business relationships become unnaturally restricted, bound together by inelastic epistemology, and unnatural behaviour. On the other hand, if that liquid were to evaporate and/or diminish, marketing as a discipline would cease to exist.

The world around marketing knowledge has, for centuries, dictated and altered its substance and shape. There has however been no larger influence on the subject of marketing than the rise of modernism. This cultural movement was able to engulf early marketing knowledge, and flood the business environment with a consumer-centric logic and isolate consumption from production. Modern marketing was undoubtedly successful in its grand narrative of becoming the omnipotent centrepiece of business relationships in the second half of the twentieth century. Marketing knowledge however has become stagnant, and more significantly, the modern obsession with truth, science, isolation and customer-centrism has frozen the development of relationship marketing knowledge by overlooking the social construction of the relationship partners.

The ideals of postmodernism provide insight into how marketing knowledge can become fluid again. The emergence of new economies, business cultures, and the proliferation of technology have enabled relationship marketing to redefine itself. Alibaba's model of relationship marketing provides insight into how the nurturing of relationships at the socio-cultural level can develop trust between relationship partners, thus allowing them to construct the identity and subsequent value proposition of their arrangement rather than becoming frozen in a mechanical, unbalanced and untrusting relationship.

The development of the Alibaba approach has not been a revolutionary retaliation against modern relationship marketing, rather it is the natural evolution of an approach to managing relationships in a society that has long valued trust and social construction of identity more so than pure economic exchange. The rise and success of this organisation sends a powerful signal to both relationship marketing practitioners, and academics on how this area of our subject can be further researched and used. It is the opinion of this author that such an evolution represents the dawn of a paradigm shift in marketing knowledge, one influenced from an entirely different philosophical and cultural origin which has the potential to embed itself in the rhetoric of business, relationships and B2B marketing.

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