

ESSAY

Invited article

Translated version

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020190506>

MARKETING TEACHING AND RESEARCH: THE RED PILL ALTERNATIVE

The first article I presented in a conference was a theoretical essay, although I had been warned that only empirical works would be selected. I do not know who the reviewers were, but they were certainly professors that appreciated and understood my concerns as regards teaching and thinking about marketing (Casotti, 1995). Here again, I have the opportunity to reflect on how challenging and motivating teaching marketing and developing research continue to be. The discipline has enhanced its important role, which was already perceived as being predominantly instrumental in decision making processes. The consumption of goods, services, ideas, and everything else involves not only the organization of corporations of diverse nature but also complex market relations and a number of social agreements.

From a macromarketing perspective, Mittelstaed, Kilborune, and Schultz (2015) address two perspectives that accompany the discipline of marketing. The negative perspective visualizes marketing as a source of human suffering. That is, it is a consequence of technological, political, economic, organizational, and competitive aspects that may hinder the creation of value for consumers, businesses, and society. On the other hand, the positive perspective looks at marketing as part of the solution for the human condition and a tool for the betterment of human life and economic development. The perspective I wish to consider for the discipline is the positive one, despite the fact that the following text deals with content more associated with negative aspects of the discipline. My belief is that valuable and instrumental reflections are derived from critiques that may contribute to the achievement of a more positive and optimistic future for marketing.

The expanding scope of marketing has led the discipline to become more reflective. It has also caused it to be studied more frequently as part of a sociocultural process that is integral to the very definition of a society. To reflect upon the perspectives, or upon what I expect for the discipline of marketing and marketing research, I choose to return to the past and present a bit of the recent history of this field of knowledge. In the text, I also share my own path as someone who works in marketing. Marketing and I have already taken the blue pill—the one of illusions and dreams—as portrayed in the movie *The Matrix* (Warner Bros Entertainment, 1999). Yet, some perspectives from the discipline of marketing and I have arrived at a certain moment wherein we need to face the red pill—which, in the movie, takes the character *Neo* out of the world of illusion. At the end of this paper, I will offer a better explanation for this analogy of *The Matrix* (1999) and the colored pills. I hope the reader will follow me up to this point.

PAST: “THERE’S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING THE PATH AND WALKING THE PATH” (*MORPHEUS – THE MATRIX, 1999*)

Does marketing create needs and desires? This question was so recurrent in the marketing management classes that instead of answering it, I simply started to throw the question back

LETÍCIA MOREIRA CASOTTI¹

leticia@coppead.ufrj.br

ORCID: 0000-0001-7718-5072

¹Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto Coppead de Administração, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

to students, thus inspiring debates. During such interactions, I clarified that I was not there to praise marketing but to debate the beauty of the concept despite it being used in ways I recognized as unethical. This strategically disarmed beforehand those who were already prepared for a confrontation. During the course, I looked to move beyond the materiality that permeates the concept of marketing and discuss the cultural and social nature of desires and needs. Questions raised in the classroom aroused my suspicions regarding what I had read in marketing strategy textbooks or about the possibility of integrating marketing decisions with the intent of achieving more profitable results. Marketing textbooks had changed very little over the decades, while questions in the classroom were increasing. This is because students are also consumers: they know marketing and constantly challenge us. The adoption of active learning methods has been helpful for classroom dynamics.

In the history of marketing research, in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, it was common for marketing professors to publish in the field's main journals. At the same time, they continued their activities in market research companies or consulting firms, as was the case with *Sidney Levy*, *Philip Kotler*, and *Gerald Zaltman*. In the 1990s, this scenario started to change, and conversations about distancing academic marketing research from the practice of marketing began taking place. In marketing research, there is a prevalence of studies with a positivist bias, with the predominance of surveys and experiments that focus on the purchase decision processes. The justification for this epistemological track in this nascent field was the desire to become recognized as a science. At this time, some thinkers considered marketing to be in a "middle-life crisis" (Brown, 1995), while others emphasized that the success of the field of knowledge, both within the academic and corporate areas, inhibited the innovation engine of marketing (Doyle, 1995).

It is also at this time that my crisis with marketing starts, after 10 years of enchantment, having abandoned economics. Looking for new directions in a time with no databases, in the middle of a dusty library, I found *Elizabeth Hirschman*, *Morris Holbrook*, *Russell Belk*, *Melanie Wallendorf*, *Lisa Penalosa*, and *Véronique and Bernard Cova*, and others. I am fascinated by the research interpretative approach and sociocultural perspective in consumer studies. This perspective comes closest to the construction of meanings, the history of consumers and corporations, and the formation of new social groups, which involve generational aspects, families' new configurations, and new urban communities. The diversity of contexts and qualitative research methods suggests a more inquisitive and human path for marketing.

The subfield of consumer behavior had become most relevant within marketing research. Nevertheless, at first, I did

not grasp that the researchers I had started to follow were isolated from the establishment and power, as *Bode and Ostergaard (2013)* explain later. The authors claimed this distance as a necessary and important precondition for the development of a new way of thinking within marketing. Although it was not a premeditated choice, I read and shared with my students publications that were related to marketing dissident movements, such as the *Consumer Odyssey* led by *Russell Belk*. This movement contributes to shaping a new positioning and status for interpretative methods, as it brings together a group of researchers with rich and diverse backgrounds. These researchers produce valuable articles published in journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of Marketing*. Qualitative studies, still counting with little acceptance, began to be defended by other researchers such as *Evert Gummesson*, an important thinker from the Nordic school of service marketing. He argues in favor of moving marketing closer to qualitative methods. He explains how quantitative methods with a positivist bias are "overused" and "overrated" in the discipline and contribute to distancing marketing from the "real reality" and humankind, something that takes the opposite direction of the soul of marketing concept (Gummesson, 2002, p. 344).

Other movements or claims have emerged in the discipline of marketing, as the ones arguing for the need to focus on the society's limited resources and environmental and social pressures (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). This movement also advocates the inclusion of commonly neglected groups in marketing research, such as the poor, elderly, and disabled. These issues have started to gain space in marketing research and consumer behavior, as they did in my own research pathways (Hemais, Casotti and Rocha, 2013; Rocha and Casotti, 2018; Faria and Casotti, in press).

PERSPECTIVES: "DON'T THINK YOU ARE; KNOW YOU ARE" (*MORPHEUS – THE MATRIX*, 1999)

What is marketing? The first uncertainties are regarding the concept of marketing itself. Marketing is about the people inside and outside corporations. However, in a number of conceptualizations I have examined, people are not included in a clear way. Marketing is about the "how" and "why" of not only desires, feelings, fantasies, hedonism, and people's identities but also educational issues, prejudice, stigma, racism, vulnerabilities related to gender, and socioeconomic inequalities among people. There is no doubt that

marketing is a complex and vulnerable concept facing diverse mass media texts that present recurrent associations between marketing and unethical sales and misleading advertising. Moreover, this discipline deals with negative associations when consumption is under criticism for obvious inequalities as regards access to products and services, among other negative attributes. The suspicions that have always surrounded the identity of marketing have also been fomented by proven criminal and unethical management practices. We have observed this in recent events in Brazil, where complaints, imprisonment, environmental disasters, and death paint an unfavorable scenario for business management in general and marketing in particular.

To deal with this negative perspective, this discipline needs courage and justice to face some “inconvenient truths,” such as marketing practices that reproduce inhumane values. These include the construction of individual and collective identities related to aesthetics and racial and gender stigmas. We may also find examples within important market segments wherein marketing contributes to practices that are detrimental to people’s health. This occurs in cases of, for example, consumption of cigarettes and other food categories and negligence regarding sustainability when it involves water consumption and generation of waste. These are some examples of practices that strengthen the arguments in favor of the need to reposition marketing within the social sciences (Layton, 2016; Löbler, 2016). How to make marketing concepts, principles, and practices a source of positive values such as altruism, empathy, respect, honesty, truth, integrity, justice, virtue, intelligence, and beauty?

The marketing discipline and research have been facing an impasse between the tracked pathways based on the recognition of the scientificism and search for new directions. This can bring more creativity to the field, allowing for more distance from the mainstream, which still obdurately follows the structure of harder areas of knowledge. Reciprocity does not come from different established fields of knowledge. Marketing uses inspirational theoretical, and analytical frameworks that have been established by research in these fields, such as economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, but such research rarely cites marketing studies in turn. Perspectives for the marketing discipline and research may emerge from a macro level or gradually and microcosmically. However, marketing strategies and consumption patterns should be adequate for a large population and less harmful to the environment.

Some recent research perspectives point to a direction indicating that marketing should accept its inconvenient truths, while challenging concepts that position the discipline as ideologically neutral without questioning aspects naturalized

by the field. Researchers for macromarketing (Shapiro, Tadjewski, & Schultz, 2009) and critical marketing (Saren et al., 2007; Tadjewski & Maclaran, 2009) make relevant contributions to the field, helping to understand the structural consequences of marketing practices for the society. Martin and Schouten (2012) defend sustainable marketing when they acknowledge that marketing is the main agent promoting unsustainable practices among companies and consumers. The authors believe in marketing’s ability to build a culture wherein sustainability becomes the main force. Other researchers also claim that sustainability is central to marketing transformation and supports the need for changing the discipline’s core logics (Varey, 2011). Gopaldas (2015) proposes positive marketing as a subfield capable of creating value for companies, customers, and societies using its innovation process, which should involve both sustainable materials and clients’ new competences.

Another research path is transformative consumer research (TCR; Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2012), which has emerged from debates regarding the social impact and promotion of well-being in this research area. TCR investigates varied topics, such as injustices and consumer marketing discrimination, giving special attention to consumers targeted less by marketing research (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005). TCR embraces the promise of offering social benefits that contemplate the development of both academic and non-academic works, so that both sides may benefit through interaction and collaboration.

All these new research paths consider consumption as a process comprising learning, transformation, and human development. They also consider the existence of two sides in the consumption of goods, services, ideas, and technologies. They may please or frustrate, enrich or impoverish, empower or alienate, and nourish or destroy social relations. They may worsen social, cultural, environmental, and health problems. On other hand, they may bring alternative solutions capable of structuring processes that maximize improvements for individuals, groups, and social networks.

Another aspect affecting diversity in terms of research pathways concerns the means to evaluate academic production. The increase in the number of field journals and varied subject matters suggests that the area of knowledge is experiencing a boom. There is an agreement as regards the quality, scope, and contribution of academic production to the field of knowledge. Critical thinkers such as Tadjewski (2018) question research works that are planned strategically to fit the rankings. Although recognizing that rankings are necessary, Tadjewski (2018) notes that they reflect preferences and decisions of a certain group and not of the broader academic community.

The evaluation of such studies' impact has followed a tradition that focuses on the diffusion of knowledge, including the number of publications in renowned journals and number of citations. This field of marketing research has made a great effort to bring clear theoretical contributions, a practice that is undoubtedly desirable and that must be stimulated continually. Nonetheless, the marketing discipline also allows for consideration of relevant and original contributions to the field and practice, originating, for example, in new theoretical lenses, adapted methods, new contexts, and generation of ideas. While marketing research requires organization, evaluation, and classification, it also needs intellectual flexibility and space to be creative, adaptable, and real. It is necessary to recognize the diverse nature of this discipline, which, since its origin, looks for similarities to challenge the differences.

Here, after almost 10 years, I find a space to return to the call made by Bradshaw and Brown (2008) who claimed the need for more collaboration among marketing researchers. The authors highlight the importance of collaborative cycles for bringing more creativity to marketing research. They also present an uncommon reflection about academic researchers' social dynamics, wherein collaboration is capable of generating high productivity of quality research works. Brazilian business schools may incentivize more co-creation in academic research, despite the fact that the institutional evaluation of the quality and the relevance of paper publishing seems to incentive competition among schools. We take little advantage of the potential of exchange and collaboration, not only of knowledge but also as a means for obtaining research resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce.

The diversity of knowledge developed through marketing research allows to find connections with corporations, a characteristic few areas enjoy. However, along with politicians, companies practices also go through a complex scrutiny process. Universities can become a valuable partner for them to face this challenging time when there are heightened concerns about ethical issues. This time is also marked by the creation of markets that transform rapidly, faster than marketing teaching and learning could ever imagine. As Farrell (2001) states, periods of intellectual turbulence produce conditions for the beginning of a creative cycle.

In which direction should our studies move toward? Have you asked yourself how your project may contribute to economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, organizational studies, or any other discipline, along with marketing? A more paradigmatically pluralist attitude, in combination with a

community that embraces difference, continues to be the way to promote dialogue inside and outside our discipline.

THE RED PILL AND DOORS TO BE OPENED

I finish this congenial reflection exercise on my experiences and thoughts using the fictional scenario of *The Matrix* film. The marketing of harmonic and integrated decisions that aim to fulfill consumers' needs and desires is very similar to the blue pill, which makes it possible to return to the world of dreams. Nonetheless, marketing cannot make use of the blue pill as an alternative anymore and must deal with the red pill, which breaks up the illusion. There is nothing wrong with dreaming, as illusions and desires bring pleasant feelings. Belk, Ger, and Askergaard (2003) outline the cycle of desire and highlight the importance of having desires, even when they are unachievable. On the other hand, for marketing professors and researchers, taking the red pill means confronting unpleasant feelings, such as dissatisfaction, anxiety, and frustration, which have triggered various types of anti-consumption movements and anti-consumerism activism.

Taking the red pill means having clarity about the mistakes and distress that comprise the field of knowledge, something that may end up unveiling obfuscated marketing benefits. Then, how should we pass marketing to the next generation? What genes should we pass on, and which ones should we leave behind along the way? As stated in the dialogue of *The Matrix* (1999), my intention was to present some doors I have opened. There are other doors, but all individuals are free to choose doors they want to open for the future of marketing teaching and research. Behind the doors I have chosen lies the human side of marketing.

Pirson and Lawrence (2009) note that a humanistic perspective considers that human nature is built by the learning and educational processes for which ethics is the main pillar. For the field of business, the authors propose a paradigm shift from economics to humanistics. They suggest that for this change to occur, we must be the starting point as individuals. How do we see ourselves as human beings? After reflecting upon this first question, we must become ready to start the second stage. Gopaldas (2015) suggests getting inspiration from consumption theories derived from anthropology to create a more humanistic future for marketing, because anthropology, a human-centered science, contemplates universal human topics. As an intriguing example, I recommend the "Special Issue: Consuming the Spiritual," published by the *Journal of Marketing Management*.

REFERENCES

- Baker, S. M., Gentry J. W., & Rittenburg T. L. (2005). Building understanding of the domain of consumer vulnerability. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 25(2), 128-139. doi:10.1177/0276146705280622
- Belk, R. W., Ger, G., & Askergaard, S. (2003). The fire of desire: A multisited inquiry into consumer passion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 326-351. doi:10.1086/378613
- Bode, M., & Østergaard, P. (2013). The wild and wacky worlds of consumer oddballs: Analyzing the manifestary context of consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, 13(2), 175-192. doi:10.1177/1470593113478605
- Bradshaw, A., & Brown, S. (2008). Scholars who stare at goats: The collaborative circle cycle in creative consumer research. *European Journal of Marketing*, 42(11/12), 1396-1414. doi:10.1108/03090560810903727
- Brown, S. (1995). Life begins at 40? Further thoughts on marketing's "mid-life crisis". *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 13(1), 4-17. doi:10.1108/02634509510079333
- Casotti, L. (1995). *O desafio de pensar e ensinar marketing*. Encontro Anual da Anpad, 19, João Pessoa, PB.
- Doyle, P. (1995). Marketing in the new millennium. *European Journal of Marketing*, 29(13), 23-41. doi:10.1108/03090569510147712
- Faria, M. D., & Casotti, L. M. (2019). Welcome to Holland! people with down syndrome as vulnerable consumers. *European Journal of Marketing*. Advanced online publication. doi:10.1108/EJM-02-2017-0164.
- Farrell, M. P. (2001). *Colaborative circles: Friendship dynamics and creative works*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gopaldas, A. (2015). Creating firm, customer, and societal value: Toward a theory of positive marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(12), 2446-2451. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.06.031
- Gummesson, E. (2002). Relationship marketing in the new economy. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 1(1), 37-57. doi:10.1300/J366v01n01_04
- Hemais, M. W., Casotti, L. M., & Rocha, E. P. G. (2013). Hedonismo e moralismo: Consumo na base da pirâmide. *RAE-Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 53(2), 199-207. doi:10.1590/S0034-75902013000200007
- Husemann, K. C., & Eckhardt, G. M. (Eds.). (2019). Consumer spirituality (Special issue). *Journal of Marketing Management*, 35(5-6).
- Laczniak, G. R., & Murphy, P. E. (2012). Stakeholder theory and marketing: Moving from a firm-centric to a societal perspective. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 31(2), 284-292. doi:10.1509/jppm.10.106
- Layton, R. A. (2016). There could be more to marketing than you might have thought! An invited paper, by Professor Roger Layton. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 24(1), 2-7. doi:10.1016/j.ausmj.2016.02.001
- Löbler, H. (2016). Marketing as a social science – Comments to Roger Layton's article: "There could be more than marketing you might have thought!". *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 24(3), 244-246. doi:10.1016/j.ausmj.2016.08.004
- Martin, D., & Schouten, J. (2012). *Sustainable marketing*. New Jersey, USA: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Mick, D. G., Pettigrew S., Pechmann C., & Ozanne J. L. (2012). *Transformative consumer research for personal and collective well-being*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Mittelstaedt, J., Kilborune, W. E., & Schultz, C. J. (2015). Macromarketing approaches to thought development in positive marketing: Two perspectives on a research agenda for positive marketing scholars. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(12), 2513-2516. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.06.038
- Pirson, M. A., & Lawrence, P. R. (2009). Humanism in business: Towards a paradigm shift? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93(4), 553-565. doi:10.1007/s10551-009-0239-1
- Rocha, A. R., & Casotti, L. M. (2018). Selective and veiled demarketing from the perspective of black female consumers. *Organizações & Sociedade*, 25(87), 610-631. doi:10.1590/1984-9250874.
- Saren, M., Maclaran, P., Goulding P. C., Elliott, R., Shankar, A., & Catterall M. (2007). *Critical marketing: Defining the field*. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Shapiro, S., Tadjewski M., & Schultz C. J. (2009). *Macromarketing*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Tadjewski, M. (2018). Impact factors, journal rankings, interdisciplinary research and 'the state of the art' in marketing theory and practice. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(1-2), 1-15. doi:10.1080/0267257X.2018.1453695
- Tadjewski, M., & Maclaran P. (2009). *Critical marketing studies*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Varey, W. (2011). Viability of psychological panarchy: Thought as an ecology. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 28(5), 509-525. doi:10.1002/sres.1112
- Warner Bros Entertainment. (Producer). (1999). *Matrix movie*. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tuPsLakiqg>