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READING TED LEVITT: MYOPIA OR MISOGYNY?

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Ten years ago, Linda Scott (1994) reviewed Reader-Response Theory, a leading school of literary criticism, and argued that it should be adapted to consumer research. Although “consumer response theory” has made much progress since Scott’s call to arms, studies of consumer response to the consumer research literature are conspicuous by their absence. This paper considers consumer responses to a much-cited article, “Marketing Myopia,” noting gender differences in their interpretation of Ted Levitt’s customer-centric classic. Whereas male readers are partial to Ted’s purplish prose, female readers find his efflorescent style overbearing and obnoxious. As Levitt’s writing is arguably closer to the “feminine” end of the stylistic spectrum, this unexpected response raises interesting questions about literary best practice in marketing and consumer research.
READING TED LEVITT: MYOPIA OR MISOGYNY?

It is fifteen years since Barbara Stern (1989) brought literary criticism into consumer research, and in that time “lit-crit” has made many significant strides. Although it is less high profile than, say, ethnography, grounded theory or phenomenology, literary criticism is one of the driving forces of the “postmodern turn” in marketing and consumer research (Sherry 1991). Every conceivable school of literary theory has been applied to marketing phenomena, from new criticism to new historicism (e.g. Scott 1993, 1994; Stern 1993, 1995, 1996), and every conceivable marketing phenomenon has been given the lit-crit treatment – ads, brands, shopping malls and service encounters, to name but a few (Maclaran and Stevens 1998; Stern 1994, 1995).

Lit-crit, clearly, has made much progress. But when the consumer research corpus is considered, there is a striking omission. Namely, the lack of literary analyses of the marketing literature. Metaphorical marketing “texts,” like advertisements and servicescapes, have been studied many times over. However, literal marketing texts, such as the writings of prominent consumer researchers, have attracted much less attention.

There are, no doubt, many meaningful reasons for this neglect (Aherne 1997), and there are, of course, a number of noteworthy exceptions to the rule (Stern 1990; Thompson 1993). Yet, despite the ready availability of the lit-crit toolkit, literary analyses of the marketing literature remain few and far between. What’s more, gendered readings of the marketing literature are almost non-existent, notwithstanding ample empirical evidence that men and women read texts differently (Eagleton 1986; Mills and Pearce...
In an attempt to explore these issues, the present paper examines reader responses to one of the most famous articles of the last fifty years, “Marketing Myopia” by Theodore Levitt (1960). It begins with an introduction to Ted’s much-cited classic and then offers a brief overview of Reader-Response theory. This is followed by a summary of the methodology – 208 critical essays penned by part- and full-time research students – before the paper moves on to the unexpected findings, noting gender differences in reader response. It concludes with a call for further literary analyses of the marketing and consumer research literature.

**IN TED WE TRUST**

When the marketing roll is called up yonder, it is highly likely that Ted Levitt will be there. Alongside Philip Kotler, he is one of the few marketing and consumer researchers regularly included in “Great Management Guru” guidebooks and primers (Clutterbuck and Crainer 1990; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996). He has had more papers published in *HBR* than any management thinker, winning four best paper awards along the way. He has penned eleven best-selling books, most notably *The Marketing Mode*, *Thinking About Management*, and *The Marketing Imagination*, which was translated into eleven languages. What’s more, he has written some of the discipline’s seminal articles, including “Exploit the Product Life Cycle,” “Marketing Intangible
Products and Product Intangibles,” and, not least, “The Globalization of Markets” (see Levitt 1986)

Levitt, most would agree, is one of the foremost – arguably the foremost – marketing scholars of the century just past. He is also one of the most literary. He has a wonderful way with words. He is a great writer. His prose, like Nietzsche’s, literally leaps off the page. Although marketing is blessed with many superb literary stylists – Russell Belk, Morris Holbrook, Linda Scott, John Sherry, Craig Thompson, et al – Ted Levitt is in a league of his own. Almost every commentator on the guru’s guru, refers to his prodigious literary gifts, his seemingly effortless ability to craft a well-turned phrase (Bartels 1988; Crainer 1998; Kennedy 1991).

If anything, in fact, Ted Levitt is too well endowed. In his tireless attempts to provoke and unsettle, he sometimes produces turns of phrase that aren’t so much near the knuckle as beyond the pale. While it is easy to dismiss the old rascal as an androcentric throwback, and while all sorts of convenient excuses can be advanced for his patriarchal prose, the reality is that, from first to last, Ted’s writing has trod a very thin line between racy and reprehensible. When HBSP reissued a greatest hits collection in the early 1990s (Levitt 1992), they prefaced the anthology with an apology for the author’s non-gender-neutral language, which is a polite way of putting it!

For all his faults, foibles and what can only be described as femalefaction, Levitt is a lustrous literary stylist, nowhere more so than in his breakthrough article, “Marketing Myopia.” Published in 1960, and republished many times since, “Marketing Myopia” is the best-selling HBR reprint of all time. It has sold some 500,000 copies and, all things considered, it is perhaps the single most influential article in the entire marketing
literature. Writing at a time when marketing was being lambasted by assorted do-gooders – Vance Packard, J.K. Galbraith, David Riesman and so on – Levitt denied that marketing was a nefarious way of “separating consumers from their loose change” and argued instead that customers come first, last, and always. Marketers are customer-huggers at heart.

More famously, the article argued that top management suffers from marketing myopia. They focus on the products their company produces, not the customer needs they serve, and consequently tend to define the business too narrowly – railroads instead of transport, movies instead of entertainment, oil instead of energy, buggy whips instead of sex toys. Such short-sightedness, he went on, begat blindness, and blindness begat extinction. Failure is unavoidable. Only customer orientation can save the day. The rest, as they say, is history.

**READER WRITERS**

According to Terry Eagleton (1996), the aging enfant terrible of latter-day lit-crit, the history of western literary theory can be divided into three broad phases, each focused on a different constituent of the literary triumvirate. The first, dating from the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century, concentrated on the *author*. The second, comprising the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century, attended primarily to the *text*. The third, which emerged in the late-1960s and still holds sway, is preoccupied with the *reader.*
Reader-Response Criticism comes in all manner of hybrids, offshoots and miscigenations, as do most major schools of literary theory (Davis and Womack 2002). By and large, however, the diverse variants focus on readers’ subjective experiences, the fact that poems, essays or novels are essentially inert until readers read them and breathe life into them. They don’t exist, as such, in bookstores or libraries, let alone Amazon.com’s central warehouse. They only exist in the act of reading. Books happen. And what happens while books happen is the primary concern of reader-response criticism. In place of narrative, plot, character, style and so forth – the textual features that preoccupy traditional literary theorists of formalist, structural or new critical persuasion – reader-response affiliates attend to the expectations, understandings, hesitations, alterations, conjectures, self-corrections and suchlike that accompany the flow of individual readers’ reading experience, their response to the words on the page (Abrams 1993). Most reader-response critics, moreover, concede that as the “meaning” of any text is co-created by its author and reader, then there is no single correct, definitive, final, or ultimate meaning, message, lesson or take-away that can be extracted from a work of literature. This does not mean that every single reading is idiosyncratic or, indeed, that all readings are created equal. Some readings are more equal than others (Eagleton 1996).

These points of commonality, important though they are, are overshadowed by the differences between reader-response critics (Tompkins 1980). Drawing upon Freudian psychology, for example, Norman Holland (1968) maintains that readers respond to texts in accordance with a limited number of personal identity “themes” which are activated by their encounters with the work in question. David Bleich (1978) contends that
“classroom consensus” determines the meanings, or acceptable range of meanings, that are ordinarily permissible. Stanley Fish (1980) suggests that the relevant “interpretive community” of scholars – professors, students, researchers, critics, etc. – not only shapes the repertoire of responses to literary texts but also their very status as texts that are suitable for literary study in the first place.

Wolfgang Iser (1974), what is more, posits that meanings are co-created (“concretized”) between writers and readers. Readers’ responses are constrained and in part controlled by the author’s intentional acts – the words on the page – but all texts, especially “modernist” texts, contain gaps, aphoria, indeterminacies and spaces that are filled in by the reader’s creative participation. This participation, in turn, is affected by the reader’s background, experience, personality, education, social class, ethnicity and, as many feminist critics rightly note, gender (Davis and Womack 2002).

According to Elaine Showalter (1977), canonical literary texts are not only androcentric in and of themselves but they also teach readers to identify with masculine points of view and to accept male value and meaning systems, including misogyny, as normal. To be sure, this alleged double bind – termed “immasculation” by Schweickart (1986) – dates from the early days of gynocriticism, before the latter-day “explosion of feminist writings” (Abrams 1993, p.234). Women writers, women’s writing and women’s reading of literary works, has moved far beyond Fetterley’s (1978) “resisting reader” to a “rejoicing reader”, one who luxuriates in female/feminist/feminine styles of writing, reading and meaning making. As Dimock (1997, p. 635) observes, “For feminist critics…the figure of the reader has served as a crucial organizing center: a site of contestation, a site of celebration, and a site from which to construct an alternative
canon.” It remains to be seen whether celebration or contestation characterizes female/feminist/feminine readers of the consumer research canon (cf. Fischer and Bristor 1993).

THE WRITE STUFF

In order to find out, 208 marketing research students were asked to read Levitt’s “Marketing Myopia” and write extended introspective essays on their reactions to the immortal article. Approximately half the “sample” were in employment and the remainder were full-time students. Most were Irish; ages ranged from early-20’s to mid-50’s; none had previously read anything by Father Ted (though some had heard of the great man); and 57% were female. No restrictions were placed on essay length or what was considered an “acceptable” response. The researchers were simply asked to read, record, reflect on and write up their reactions – as readers – to Levitt’s much-loved marketing classic. They were required, in effect, to interview themselves about their reading experience and set out their considered response in extended essay format.

Clearly, this approach is subject to all sorts of criticism. Subjective Personal Introspection has proved to be perhaps the most contentious interpretive method in marketing and consumer research (Gould 2003). There has been much discussion on whether people are capable of introspecting successfully, on how much reliance can be placed on the narcissistic ruminations of a single informant, and on the rationale for using introspection when less controversial methods are available (Holbrook 1995). Admittedly, this occasionally rancorous debate has served to raise the profile of the
research procedure – the method is more widely used than ever, despite the strictures of Wallendorf and Brooks (1993) – but it has also served to cloud the issue somewhat.

The term “introspection”, for instance, touches upon topics that have long been controversial within psychology and, indeed, continue to dog contemporary debates about the character of human consciousness (Block, Flanagan and Güzeldere 1997). At the same time, however, the “subjective personal introspections” in marketing and consumer research are not unmediated representations of human introspection, a means of tapping into the Jamesian “flow of consciousness,” so to speak. They are, rather, reflective essays on the author’s personal experiences of marketing- and consumption-related phenomena. They are works of autobiographical literature, by and large, works that are closer to James Joyce than William James (Brown 1998).

Be that as it may, if we accept that “subjective personal introspections” are in fact interpretive essays – literary output instead of cognitive input – then the relationship to lit-crit is clear. Literary criticism, after all, largely consists of interpretive essays and, while the writers of these essays may be more knowledgeable than the average reader, it is the interpretation of average readers than is central to reader response criticism in general and the present study of “Marketing Myopia” in particular.

Convoluted and contentious though the above process sounds when baldly described, it’s much less onerous in practice than in principle. Enjoyable even. In the event, the “introspective” readings of Levitt’s article averaged 2,500 words, with a maximum of 6,000 and a minimum of 1,200. More importantly perhaps, the richness of the responses accords with Flynn’s (1986) contention that, as written reactions to literary
works tend to be more considered than classroom discussions, they typically reveal
deeper understandings of, and interpretive insights into, the work in question.

**FINDING THEO**

So, what do they think? “So what?” in the main. The overwhelming reaction to
“Marketing Myopia” is one of “we covered this already,” “tell us something we don’t
know,” “been there, done that, bought the Ted-shirt,” as it were. As marketing
researchers, with several years of study behind them, the contents of Levitt’s article tell
the readers nothing new. They’ve been hearing about customer-orientation for some time
now – almost to the point of interminability – and, interesting as it is to go back to the
forefather of customer focus, most readers are unmoved, unenlightened, unimpressed,
unenthusiastic.

From reading the article I cannot say that I have taken a great deal from it. As it was written 42
years ago, most of the marketing theory which was suggested then is now seen as basic marketing
theory which has been drilled into my head over the past 8 years. Therefore, I did not gain any
intellectual experience from reading Marketing Myopia.

(Sinead, female, 20s)

After finishing reading this article I have to admit my overwhelming impression was “Is that It?”

(Ciaran, male, 20s)

What’s worse, it isn’t exactly fun reading either. Levitt may be regarded as the
discipline’s foremost literary stylist, but our ample sample thinks otherwise. Tedium,
tiresome, repetitious, rambling, interminable and, as often as not, “a sure-fire cure for
insomnia” are just some of the less than enthusiastic expressions employed by the
essayists.
To begin with, I could safely say that Mr Levitt’s article is far too long-winded. It seems to go on forever, taking ages to get the point across, bringing in too many issues and companies, and comparing each of them. He also seems to refer back to things a lot, maybe to a point he made six pages back, which I would have forgotten about. I felt that when I eventually reached the end of the article, which felt like a lifetime, that I still hadn’t got the point.

(Catherine, female, 30s)

My initial reaction was extreme boredom…not helped by having to read the article several times because of its length. I would recommend it to anyone suffering from insomnia.

(Donna, female, 30s)

Readers’ adverse reactions to Ted’s Old Testament is not only unexpected, it is intriguing. Is it a manifestation of the “dumbing down” that allegedly afflicts today’s debased society? Certainly, the fact that so many had to look up “myopia” suggests that average vocabularies are not what they were.

Being one of those very intelligent students, I had to reach for my Collins dictionary to look up the meaning of “myopia”. Finding out that it meant “an inability to see clearly things that are far away” made me both more confused and intrigued as to what the article might be about and encouraged me to read on.

(Lisa, female, 20s)

Is it a side-effect of our so-called “soundbite culture,” where 17 pages of purple prose – even Ted Levitt’s peerless purple prose – is way, way too much? Certainly, the oft-quoted quips and widespread belief that the paper’s message could’ve been boiled down to five pages max, may intimate that attention spans are diminishing.

Throughout this essay I have been rather harsh on Mr Levitt and his article. It’s not that I disagree entirely with what he says. However, I don’t think it was necessary for him to spend 17 pages getting his message across.

(Andrew, male, 50s)

Is it a reflection of rising visual literacy, the article’s very lack of four-color figures, flashy sidebars, and boxes and arrows diagrams, that readers increasingly expect in texts, journals and even HBR these days? Certainly, lots were put off by the all-text-no-illustrations look of the piece, long before they started reading it.
It seemed that the fates were against me, the article was seventeen sides long, there were no diagrams and the writing was a tiny size eight font. Reading this would be no mean feat for the truly myopic amongst us! Wondering if Levitt’s goal was in fact to create myopic marketers with this optical assault, I bravely began to read…

(Caroline, female, 20s)

Is it due to the latter-day triumph of marketing, our happy-clappy 21st century state, where every organization is customer-led, or claims to be? Certainly, many feel that the hyperbolic, customer-orientated histrionics are totally uncalled for, not to say utterly unnecessary, in this day and age.

Ted to me is a genius. He’s light years ahead of his time. However, he could be a bit repetitive – customer orientated, customer orientated, customer orientated, that’s all he goes on about. I actually felt a bit pissed off he went on about it so much, but if you look at today’s marketplace it’s full of companies being customer orientated for Christ’s sake. When’s it all going to end?

(William, male, 20s)

Or is it simply due to the fact that Ted’s case studies – railroads, petrochemicals, electricity – are redolent of the fast disappearing smokestack epoch, with little appeal for today’s post-industrial populace? Certainly, several readers wished he’d elaborated on the Hollywood exemplar and wondered, moreover, what on earth buggy whips are.

The examples used in the article are very sound if somewhat old-fashioned and fusty. I find it very hard to relate to them and I would have been more interested had the products been a bit more glamorous, say, clothes, beauty products etc. That just shows my level of interest, I get very easily bored, but hey come on, dry cleaning and grocery stores, it’s hardly gripping stuff unless you are into it.

(Denise, female, 30s)

Not everyone, of course, is antagonistic to Theo’s Opus. Some are smitten by the icon’s recondite writing, and others find themselves agreeing with the guru, despite themselves. Yet others concede that the article is slowly growing on them with each successive reading. And yet others, the vast majority, seem to have been struck by a particularly vivid sentence or two, which they quote with relish.
When I set out to read this article while lying in bed my intention was to read half the article and then read the other half the next day. Instead I read the article in its entirety and went to bed feeling I had received a lesson from the master of marketing.

(Paul, male, 20s)

On my first few readings of the article I had to force myself to stay awake (and that wasn’t because I’d been out partying the night before). I found the article extremely boring and difficult to understand, at times having to use a dictionary to translate many of the words. After reading the article for the 5th, 6th, 7th…time I began to realize that Levitt was making some very good points. The article was highlighting things that I as a business studies student have never given much thought to.

(Sabrina, female, 20s)

His use of the English language is fantastic when he refers to a leader having to have a “vision of grandeur”. Indeed, Levitt’s main weapon is the way that he can communicate with the reader to coerce them into believing his viewpoint. He should have been a politician!

(Adele, female, 40s)

These variations in reader response are striking in themselves – Ted, remember, is renowned for his literary style, which should, in principle, be universally admired – and they are affected by all sorts of factors including the essayist’s age, nationality, work experience and prior expectations. Perhaps the most remarkable factor, however, is gender. There are several noteworthy differences in male and female responses to Professor Levitt’s consumer research classic, though these are completely contrary to expectation.

It might reasonably be expected, for example, that female essayists would find Ted’s occasional outbreaks of “non-gender neutral” language offensive or demeaning. Yet this is not the case. To the contrary, it is mainly the male readers who draw attention to Levitt’s androcentric turns of phrase. These days, it seems, men are more attuned to un-PC expressions and self-censor assiduously, whereas women are so well used to them that they pass largely unremarked.

Speaking of being PC, Ted doesn’t mention women anywhere in his text, he mentions businessmen. I guess this must be because women weren’t at the top, or anywhere, or even thought of, or listened to, back then. This made me think, was the reason we are now in a more customer-orientated situation due to the increase of female input into business?
If the female essayists are untroubled by Ted’s patriarchal phraseology, they are most upset by his condescending references to “backward nations” and, frankly, infuriated by his (in)famous claim concerning marketing’s “stepchild” status. The latter is widely regarded as crass, cruel and well-nigh criminal. But not by male introspectors, curiously enough, a number of whom note the stepchild allusion with approval (or, more often than not, don’t consider it worthy of comment).

I thought Levitt was quite cruel and blunt when it came to his choice of words on certain topics. He makes three references to “step-child treatment” when he spoke about the oil industry. He came across as heartless as he described marketing as a step-child as – “recognized as existing, having to be taken care of, but not worth very much real thought or of dedicated attention”. This is quite a controversial thing to say and indeed quite hurtful if you were actually a stepchild.

(Catherine, female, 30s).

What men do consider worthy of comment – as indeed do many female readers – is Levitt’s disparaging remark about consumers (“fickle, stupid, shortsighted” etc.). This comment, it must be stressed, was meant as a joke, an ironic representation of how product-oriented organizations think. Almost without exception, however, today’s readers infer that this is the author’s personal opinion and an unspeakably offensive one to boot. It thus seems that insulting the consumer cuts no ice in today’s marketing-saturated society. It is even more gratuitous than stepchild baiting or good old-fashioned sexism.

He also refers to the customer as “unpredictable, varied, fickle, stupid, shortsighted, stubborn and generally bothersome”. How can someone with this opinion of customers be looking out for the customer’s best interest? He spends 17 pages telling us to be customer-orientated; surely how he describes customers is not a customer-orientated approach to marketing, more like a let’s insult the customer approach?

(Sabrina, female, 20s)
Occasional linguistic infelicities are one thing, the basic ethos of the article is something else again. As previously noted, readers’ overall reaction to “Marketing Myopia” is, well, dismissive at best and disparaging at worst. Within that context, nevertheless, there is a significant gender divide. Generally speaking, female readers dislike Levitt’s style of writing and abhor his forceful textual persona. They find him an arrogant, self-important, overbearing, boastful, bombastic blowhard. An alpha male know it all, in short, who likes the sound of his own voice and refuses to listen to others. As a consequence, they find the article very difficult to read. It is boring, baffling, biased, boorish and bunged with big braggadocio words.

LEVITT WANTS YOU…THE COMPANY, TO FOLLOW HIS WORD. HIS DICTATORSHIP WILL BULLY YOU INTO SUBMISSION; SO DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE HIS SCORN. YOU ARE WRONG AND HE IS RIGHT.

(Michelle, female, 20s)

I have been pondering over the whole issue of Theodore Levitt’s Marketing Myopia for some time now, and to be honest, my feeling about it amount to a reasonable amount of boredom. I think that this has come about due to the way the document has been written…I feel that Theodore Levitt has managed to turn profound thinking on the marketing issue into a long winded tedious piece of literature. Some might say that I’m being lazy for not wanting to read the article but quite frankly I can’t help it if Theodore Levitt hasn’t been able to capture my attention to get his message across. Surely that is what good written work is about!

(Ciara, female, 20s)

That said, once they get past the grotesque chest-beating, numerous female readers reluctantly acknowledge that perhaps Ted has a point. The style of the article is undeniably diabolical, but the content contains much of merit. True, the piece is full of wild assertions and sweeping generalizations. It lacks empirical support and hard facts to back up its ambitious claims. It is mistaken, moreover, since Levitt’s loudmouthed predictions signal failed to come to pass. Nevertheless, the basic message, that customer-orientation is vital and strategic shortsightedness can be fatal, is as relevant today as when Ted first let rip.
Given that Theodore Levitt’s article on Marketing Myopia was written in the 1960s his words in my opinion can still ring true in today’s culture. Organisations are in many respects still not responding to the changing needs of customers and are letting their organizations go down the pan due to the short-sightedness of their managers.

(Jacqueline, female, 30s)

Male readers, on the other hand, are very, very taken with Levitt’s literary abilities. The sheer élan of Marketing Myopia completely bowled them over. They consider it brilliantly written. They regard it as an easy read. They deem it a blessed relief from tedious academese and wishy-washy scholarly prevarication. They often compare it to a novel or analogous work of literature. They revel, what is more, in Ted’s irreverent textual persona and are, on occasion, dumbstruck by the author’s brass-necked, balls-to-the-wall chutzpah. What a guy!

The first paragraph that Ted opens with is brief and to the point. It is almost cheeky in that it is so self-assured and bold. Furthermore it is interesting and intriguing, it is urging the reader to carry on, almost like a good book when the opening chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book. “Every major industry was once a growth industry”. How does he account for or justify this, it is easily understood but you find yourself absorbed and wanting to find out more, who, what and why?

(Jonathan, male, 20s)

Set against this adoration of the marketing magus’s incomparable style, the majority of male readers disagree with the content. Again and again, they are critical of the maestro’s analysis and advice. Too much customer orientation is unhealthy. Excessive diversification can be dangerous. What about core competencies? Ted got it wrong about Hollywood. And the oil industry. And automobiles. And dry cleaning. And railroads. And supermarkets. And just about everything else!

Broadly speaking, then, reader responses to Marketing Myopia can be summarized as follows: females dislike the style but concur with the content, whereas males admire the style and denigrate the content. The fascinating thing about these admittedly caricatured reactions is that they are again contrary to expectation. It is often
said that masculine modes of writing are linear, logical, direct, unadorned, antiseptic and straight to the point. Short sentences, adjectivelessness and adverbectomies are par for the course. Feminine writing, on the other hand, is circular, corporeal, digressive, holistic, synoptic and so on. Long sentences, adjectival efflorescence and adverbial abundance are the order of the day.

Overstated perhaps, oversimplified undoubtedly, but if these characteristics are applied to Ted Levitt, his writing style falls into the feminine camp. It is circular, digressive, adjectival, indirect and anything but antiseptic. So why do female readers dislike his style so much? Is it simply because the macho content – “All industries are doomed to fail,” “Top managers are incorrigibly myopic,” “I alone have the answer and its called customer orientation” – completely overwhelms the feminine manner in which his arguments are couched? Or is it a manifestation of “immasculination,” whereby women have absorbed the patriarchal propensities of management research and, in textual terms at least, have become more masculine than men? Certainly, their demand for hard facts and solid empirical evidence suggests that this is true to some extent.

The credibility and accuracy of his examples is far from favourable. What research had Levitt himself carried out to back up the information that he was presenting? All the research he used for the article seemed to originate from secondary sources. From places such as Barzun’s work on the railroads and the American Petroleum Institute Quarterly. The examples he gave all originated from the findings of others. How accurate can we view this information?

(Sabrina, female, 20s)

What, conversely, are we to make of male readers’ unconditional love of Levitt’s literary style, notwithstanding his article’s apparent errors of fact? Maybe the masculine mode of most marketing writing – the linear, logical, unembellished literary style that dominates the academic journals – is not what readers really want. They seem to like a bit of flash, an adverbial outbreak, a modicum of exuberance, a passage or two of
purplish prose. If this is indeed the case, then it is no wonder that today’s managers rarely turn to the academic literature and increasingly look to the femininesque writings of Tom Peters, Christopher Locke and Ridderstrale and Nordstrom.

From reading the opening sentence my interest was immediately kindled and the desire to read on in anticipation of something great kept driving me from paragraph to paragraph in awe of the genius I had before me. My immediate thoughts from reading “Every major industry was once a growth industry” was that Theodore Levitt spoke with authority, he knew the past and was informed about the present, this set the context for which I would view the article, through the prism of infallibility created by Levitt himself.

(Paul, male, 20s)

Naturally, these findings can be dismissed as an aberration, a consequence of the atypical author under consideration or, possibly, our quirky Irish essayists, who are perhaps more attuned to matters literary than other nationalities. However, the curious thing about the 200-plus introspections is that the writing closely adheres to gender stereotypes. As a rule, the essays written by men are shorter than those by women. They consist of short paragraphs and short sentences. They contain numerous headings, and sub-headings and lists. What’s more, they typically respond to Ted’s article in accordance with the original sequence. That is to say, they go through Marketing Myopia section by section, heading by heading, point by point and comment on each in turn. “Methodical” is the only word to describe it.

The way that I am going to approach this task is to go through Levitt’s article giving my own opinions and analysis of how it fits into modern society.

(Stephen, male, 40s)

Female essayists, by contrast, are rather more holistic in their response. They tend to pass judgment on the article as a whole and then turn to several especially salient issues, the sequencing of which bears little or no relation to the arrangement of the source.
material. Their essays are not only longer, on average, than those of their male counterparts, but so too are the individual paragraphs and sentences. Headings, subheadings and bullet-points are conspicuous by their absence, furthermore. “Discursive” is a good way to describe them, though “free-flowing” is better, and “oceanic” is arguably best of all.

The more I stewed over this paper whilst ironing, driving, watching TV, drinking, eating and attempting umpteen different tasks at once the more I felt that I did not like Mr Levitt’s way of looking at this topic. I have never met, nor am I ever likely to meet Mr Levitt, but he came across to me as a man who expects to be right, and that his way was the best and only way to behave, act, think or whatever…Does Mr Levitt have a very high opinion of himself or just a low opinion of others?

(Julie, female, 40s)

In addition to the overall shape of the essays, the content complies with the purported norms of gendered writing. Whereas male writers are inclined to make declarative statements of the “Ted is wrong” variety, female essayists are wont to preface their critiques with extravagant apologia – “who am I, a humble student, to criticize the world’s greatest marketing guru?” – before putting the knife in…and twisting it! They are much more corporeal in their responses, moreover, insofar as bodily matters are referred to quite frequently (mainly the physical act of reading the article).

Well to be honest, the first couple of times I read Marketing Myopia thoughts of boredom, confusion and “this man needs to get a life,” crept into my head. I had a box of matches beside my bed to keep my eyes open and I found I was tending to pick it up late at night to put me to sleep. Who needs hot cocoa and a sleeping tablet – just read Marketing Myopia and it will have the same effect but at half the price. Ted Levitt could market this as a revolutionary new insomnia cure – “Marketing Myopia – makes you sleep in minutes”

(Nicola, female, 20s).

Women, it should also be recorded, are rather more irreverent, subversive and imaginative in their writing than men. They refuse to take Ted seriously. Their essays often include flippant remarks and fantasy elements, or adopt off-beat forms such as
poems, plays, diaries, movie treatments, sales brochures, talk-show transcripts etc. Some of these are quite brilliantly written. Anything Theo can do, we can do better!

Marketing Myopia! Is your firm a sufferer?? Take the Marketing Myopia health check below and see if your firm suffers from any of the following symptoms…If your firm displays any or all of the above symptoms, read on, but do not despair, marketing Myopia is TREATABLE

(Lisa, female, 20s)

Everyone’s “first time” can be a daunting experience. Some enjoy it, others hate it, whilst others are left mystified and feel the need to experience it another time. Well, my “first time” was baffling, yet it left me wanting more. I am of course referring to Marketing Myopia and reading its contents for what was my first time, my initial reaction was one of confusion. Having read and reread the article, I remained bewildered as to how this particular article and its contents, along with its author, Theodore Levitt, was awarded the 1960 McKenzie Award.

(Leanne, female, 20s).

LEVITT ALL HANG OUT

The foregoing findings, needless to say, are not clear-cut. With more than 200 essays, and over 60,000 words of prose all told, it is only to be expected that counter examples exist for every distinguishing feature. Thus, there are copious examples of digressive, subversive, free flowing responses written by male essayists, responses that are devoid of headings, strewn with long paragraphs and contain a poetic couplet or two. Conversely, there are female introspectors who interrogate “Marketing Myopia” section by section, point by point, in succinct sentences, short paragraphed prose and brook-no-opposition arguments. Several female writers wax lyrical about the great guru’s way with words, meanwhile many males contend that Levitt is more of a literary sinner than a stylistic saint. There are even some who admire the “stepchild” remark and others who agree with the “consumers are ignorant” allegation.

The results, in short, represent gendered trends rather than clearly defined categories. Indeed, the variations and ambiguities are such that the gender tendencies
should really be regarded, not as “male” and “female” modes of writing, but as “masculine” and “feminine” respectively. That said, and notwithstanding the difficulties of steering a course between barbaric essentialism and crude evolutionary psychology, there is no doubt that men are inclined to write in a masculine manner, while women follow a feminine style.

But, what of the future? Obviously, there is a wealth of publications out there that are ready for the reader response treatment. Marketing is blessed with many excellent writers, or allegedly excellent writers, yet it remains to be seen whether real readers agree. The very fact that so many find Levitt heavy sledding is sufficient to give pause, since the great guru is widely regarded as marketing’s foremost literary stylist. Maybe he still is and reader responses to lesser lights will be even more damning! If Ted is tedious, what hope is there for the rest of us?

In addition to extending this approach to other academicians – reader responses to Shelby Hunt’s outpourings would be an eye-opener, I suspect – there is ample scope for studying a wider range of reader types. Nationalities, ethnicities, age groups, social classes, marketing executives, non-marketing managers and those with different levels of educational attainment or cultural capital, are just some of the literary possibilities. There are, furthermore, numerous schools of reader response theory that can be applied to these putative essayists. The Levitt study, for instance, intimates that readers’ prior expectations have a significant influence on subsequent responses. This suggests that Hans Robert Jauss’s (1982) Rezeptionsästhetik, an offshoot of reader response criticism that concentrates on individuals’ “horizon of expectations,” has much to offer marketing and consumer research. Time, and additional research, will doubtless tell.
Ten years ago, Linda Scott (1994, p.462) called for “consumer response theory,” the adaptation of reader response criticism to consumer research. This paper has attempted to act on Scott’s recommendation, by means of an empirical study of consumer responses to a classic article, “Marketing Myopia.” Over 200 reader responses to the marketing masterpiece were gathered and the results revealed a sharp gender divide. Female essayists, in the main, disliked Levitt’s overbearing style, but found the content inarguable. Many male essayists, on the other hand, were critical of the content even as some were seduced by the superlative scholar’s stylistic éclat. As Theo’s literary style can reasonably be described as “feminine,” this suggests that the masculine mode of marketing discourse, which dominates the academic journals, is not only unappealing to many male readers, but compounds the “immasculation” of female consumer researchers.
REFERENCES


Fish, Stanley (1980), *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.


