

### **Lit Crit Riffin': A Collaborative Mode of Literary Criticism in Marketing Theory**

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Marketing Theory**

### *Abstract*

This paper explores the uses of literary criticism in consumer research, specifically within the humanistic tradition, by applying Roland Barthes's theorisation that all texts embody multiple significations, thus open to diverse interpretations. We extend this idea by introducing collective criticism to reader-response theory. Through four distinct interpretations of a short story published in *Marketing Theory*, we highlight how various themes emerge from the same text. We propose the musical metaphor of *Lit Crit Riffin'* as a novel methodological approach in consumer research drawing upon literary criticism, emphasising the coexistence of multiple meanings within a single narrative. Unlike conventional reader-response theory, which often privileges a singular interpretation, *Lit Crit Riffin'* offers a multivocal alternative that enriches consumer research by embracing diverse, coexisting interpretations.

*Keywords:* collective criticism; reader response theory; creative methodologies; humanistic inquiry; interpretation; literary criticism

Literature, especially its manifestation in stories, is today linked to branding (Aaker, 2018; Brown, 2016). As Twitchell (2004: 484) points out, “a brand is simply a story attached to a manufactured object.” The recognition of literary devices such as allegory (Brown et al., 2022), persona, and rhetorical irony (Stern, 1990, 1994) has a long history among advertising practitioners (e.g., Ogilvy, 1963). From poems to fairy tales, small fictions to modern sagas, literature has a lot to say about markets and consumption (see Hackley, 2024).

Consumer researchers (Patsiaouras et al., 2016; Södergren, 2025), organisation theorists (Beyes et al., 2019), and business scholars (Colton, 2020; Nair, 2021) alike have embraced methods of literary criticism to analyse texts by writers as diverse as Roberto Bolaño (Holt, 2020) and J. K. Rowling (Brown & Patterson, 2010). Some interpretive consumer researchers have suggested a narrative paradigm to understand how consumers structure and make sense of consumption experiences (Hamby & Escalas, 2024). Most attempts at literary criticism in marketing and consumer research, however, have been written from a singular, univocal voice. As a counterpoint, following recent developments in our field such as collective writing (CRIS Collective, 2023; Parsons et al., 2022), we propose an experiment in reading and writing called “collective criticism” (Chihaya et al., 2020: 4). More precisely, Chihaya et al. (2020: 5) highlight that:

Collective writing is marked by a model of authorship that departs from dominant forms of academic production. Traditionally, the work of writing is counted and weighed as an individual accomplishment, especially when it is produced in professional increments. A book is attributed to a single author [...] Amidst such commonplace protocols for streamlining and standardizing academic writing, it is easy to forget that the words you commit to paper are yours, but they are not yours alone.

Collaboration has often been frowned upon in academic circles (see Bradshaw & Brown, 2008), where it is associated with “passivity, sentimentality, and weakness” (York, 2002: 13). Yet, collectivism has proven a fruitful avenue among marginalised writers, especially women of colour and intersectional black feminists (e.g., Audre Lorde). As Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981: 29) write, “one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins.” We argue that collective criticism is ripe with potential to expand the application of reader-response theory (Scott, 1994) - and adjacent literary methods such as autobiography (Hackley, 2016; Pradhan & Drake, 2023) and subjective personal introspection (Holbrook, 1995, 2025) - in consumer research. Furthermore, following the observation that ethnography has many parallels with jazz improvisation (Humphreys et al., 2003), we propose the musical metaphor of *Lit Crit Riffin’* to describe our distinct mode of literary criticism. More precisely, we riffed off each other’s thoughts and reading experiences, getting inspired by one another, expanding and improvising our writing. “Riffing off” means building on, responding to, or *playing variations of an existing musical phrase* (or ideas), often in dialogue with someone else’s contribution; it is different from jamming where a group of musicians play together informally, experimenting and reacting to one another *in real time*. We each wrote in our individual spaces *after* reading each other’s contributions, making our co-creative, asynchronous process more akin to riffing. We argue that lit crit riffin’ presents a polyphonic alternative to conventional reader-response theory in consumer research, which tends to privilege a single interpretation.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. We first present a brief overview of literary criticism -with emphasis on reader-response theory and literary fiction - and its application to marketing and consumer research (Table 1). We next introduce the short story we use as our unit of analysis, before detailing *Lit Crit Riffin’* as an alternative research paradigm that brings

collective criticism to reader-response theory. The findings, presented as four critical essays, are then transposed into a musical score and discussed in terms of implications for other collaborative approaches in marketing theory. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

**Reader, Response, Marketing Theory**

In his defence of high theory, Eagleton (1983) distinguishes between various modes of interpretation such as semiotics (the systematic study of signs), hermeneutics (the interpretation of texts), poststructuralism (critical textual analysis), phenomenology (the study of lived experiences), and psychoanalysis (studying the contents of the mind). All of the modes of interpretation mentioned above have been applied to qualitative research on markets and consumer culture (Holt, 1997; Oswald, 1999; Shankar et al., 2006; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1989). Meanwhile, other types of interpretation based on literary criticism, including new criticism (Stern, 1989), reader-response theory (Scott, 1994), deconstruction (Stern, 1996), and new historicism (Brown et al., 2001), have left a mark on the social sciences and humanities.

Postmodernists, such as Jameson (1990), have suggested that literary forms inform social-historical events and other narrative structures that shape consumer culture. As Brown et al. (2001: 53) write, “the literary qualities of historical texts are central to the postmodern critique.” Relatedly, Stern provides an overview of literary criticism as a source of insight into consumer behaviour (1989). Elsewhere, she has paid attention to postmodern feminist literary criticism, the application of deconstruction to consumer research (Stern, 1993, 1996), and how consumer researchers need an understanding of both art and literature in the analysis of advertisements (Stern

& Schroeder, 1994). Yet, as Brown et al. (1999) have pointed out, attempts at literary criticism in consumer research tend to be highly univocal.

In this section, we provide a brief overview of reader-response theory and its application to marketing and consumer research (Table 1). We also engage with prior work in our field using literary fiction as an analytical lens. We then illustrate how the notion of collective criticism in Chihaya et al. (2020) can be used as an alternative methodology to develop this research stream within marketing theory. Reader-response theory, traditionally used in literary studies, emphasises the active role of the reader in interpreting a text. According to this theory, meaning is not solely contained within the text itself but emerges through the interaction between the text and the reader's personal experiences, beliefs, and cultural context. Scott (1994), adapts this framework to consumer research by suggesting that, similar to literary texts, marketing messages, ads, and products themselves are not static sources of meaning. Instead, consumers actively engage with these "texts," bringing their personal perspectives and interpretive frameworks to the consumption process.

Table 1

### Reader-Response Theory and the Use of Literary Fiction in Marketing and Consumer

#### Research: An Overview

Author(s)	Title	Outlet for Publication	Year of Publication	Methodological Procedure	Contribution
Elizabeth Hirschman	Secular Immortality and the American Ideology of Affluence	<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	1990	Close reading, using Tom Wolfe's <i>The Bonfire of the Vanities</i> to illustrate her hypothesis on	Extends W. Lloyd Warner's tradition of social class dynamics.

				secular immortality.	
Linda Scott	The Bridge from Text to Mind: Adapting Reader- Response Theory to Consumer Research	<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	1994	Brings reader-response theory from literary criticism, applied to advertising and consumer research.	Highlights the link between advertising text and consumer response beyond the formalistic approach to textual analysis.
Barbara Stern and Jonathan Schroeder	Interpretative Methodology from Art and Literary Criticism: A Humanistic Approach to Advertising Imagery	<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	1994	Builds on art and literary criticism to show how verbal and visual elements work together in advertising.	Emphasises the importance of visual literacy in research on advertising from a humanistic perspective.
Elizabeth Hirschman	When Expert Consumers Interpret Textual Products: Applying Reader-Response Theory to Television Programs	<i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i>	1998	Screened videotaped pilot television programmes to expert consumers.	Distinguishes between common- culture and expert readers’ interpretations.
Anthony Patterson, Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran	Casting a Critical ‘I’ Over Caffrey’s Irish Ale: Soft Words, Strongly Spoken	<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	1998	Authors wrote autoethnographic essays on their responses to an ad.	Employs subjective personal introspection as a research method.
Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran	I Can’t Believe It’s Not Bakhtin: Literary Theory, Postmodern Advertising, and the Gender Agenda	<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	1999	Literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin used to offer gendered readings of a postmodern ad.	Illustrates the influence of gender on textual interpretation.
Edward McQuarrie and David Glen Mick	Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text- Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses	<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	1999	Interviews examine how stylistic elements in advertising form visual rhetorical figures similar to those in language.	Shows how visual rhetorical figures in ads enhance consumer engagement through aesthetic pleasure.
Nan Zhou and Russell Belk	Chinese Consumer Readings of Global and Local Advertising Appeals	<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	2004	Reader-response approach with in- depth interviews of upscale Chinese consumers to explore their	Extends reader- response theory to consumer research, showing that consumers interpret ads based



				interpretations of global and local ads.	on cultural identity.
Stephen Brown and Anthony Patterson	Selling Stories: Harry Potter and the Marketing Plot	<i>Psychology and Marketing</i>	2010	Seven-year study of Harry Potter brand, including content analysis of novels.	Demonstration of a Story-Dominated Logic in Marketing.
Anthony Patterson, Yusra Khogeer and Julia Hodgson	How to Create an Influential Anthropomorphic Mascot: Literary Musings on Marketing, Make-believe, and Meerkats	<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	2013	Literary approach to explain success of the “Compare the Meerkat” campaign.	How brands can draw on literary genre conventions to create compelling mascots.
Georgios Patsiaouras, James Fitchett, and Andrea Davies	Beyond the Couch: Psychoanalytic Consumer Character Readings into Narcissism and Denial	<i>Marketing Theory</i>	2016	Psychoanalytic-informed character reading of protagonists from two literary texts: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s <i>The Great Gatsby</i> and Arthur Miller’s <i>Death of a Salesman</i> .	Offers a psychoanalytic understanding of how narcissism and denial shape consumer choices.
Astrid Van den Bossche	A New Bridge from Text to Mind: Cognitive Literary Approaches to Advertising	<i>Qualitative Consumer Research</i>	2017	Insights from cognitive literary criticism are applied to a LEGO ad.	Cognitive literary theory is proposed focusing on cognitive processes of interpretation and aesthetic properties of the text.
Brendan Canavan	Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner at Tiffany’s: Existentialism and Consumption in Capote’s Novella	<i>Marketing Theory</i>	2018	Interpretive literary analysis of Truman Capote’s <i>Breakfast at Tiffany’s</i> .	Illuminates how consumption reflects and shapes existential states.
Jonatan Södergren, Oscar Ahlberg, and Mattias Hjelm	Marketing and the Theatre of the Absurd	<i>Marketing Theory</i>	2025	Literary and dramatic analysis of works by Samuel Beckett and others	Reimagines consumer culture as a theatrical space governed by absurd logic.
Mattias Hjelm	Phenomenology of a Dividual	<i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i>	2025	Interpretive Literary analysis of the Alt-Lit movement, including works such as Megan Boyle’s Liveblog	Fiction reveals the affective, fragmented nature of digital subjectivity.

				and Tao Lin's Taipei.	
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**The Death of the Author**

“This text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds.”

(Barthes, 1970: 5)

Roland Barthes’s book *S/Z* explores his concept of the death of the author, emphasising that once a text is created - in his case, a short story by Honoré de Balzac - it transcends the intentions of its author and becomes open to infinite interpretations. While our chosen author Mike Molesworth is very much alive and still professing (unlike Balzac), his story, once published in this journal, has taken flight from his authorial intentions. Barthes (1970) argues that texts are not monolithic entities with singular meanings but are composed of multiple codes that interact and generate a plurality of interpretations. This multiplicity highlights the idea that any given text can yield diverse meanings depending on the perspectives and cultural codes brought by different readers. The assumption, in short, is that meaning is not stable, but co-created by the reader in the moment of interpretation (Scott, 1994).

In a team setting, the collective analysis of a text by researchers with varying backgrounds and interpretive approaches can produce a richer, more comprehensive understanding. By embracing the interplay of divergent interpretations, collective criticism embodies Barthes’s (1970) understanding of a text as a dynamic, pluralistic space where meaning is continuously constructed rather than fixed. Given the plethora of signified meanings in any given text, it would

make sense to explore the different interpretations that a research team, not just an individual researcher, arrives at.

## Collective Criticism

### The Text of the Text

For our experiment in collective criticism, we decided to analyse a paper published in Brown and Kerrigan's (2020) special issue in *Marketing Theory*, which invited marketing academics to write short stories. For Brown and Kerrigan (2020: 148) the short story is

a form of writing that is compatible with the conventional academic article, most of which are written in a fairly orthodox narrative format, with a beginning (research problem), middle (empirical investigation) and end (implications, outcomes, contribution, etc.).

We selected the story "A Heteronomous Consumer Romance" by Molesworth (2020) because of its critical marketing components, reflecting some of the analytical preoccupations of all four authors and indeed our field (posthumanism, aesthetics, technology, gender). This Orwellian, sci-fi-tech tale tells the story of Winston, whose life is surveilled by his AI computer 'female' companion, Robbie. She anticipates, monitors and controls his every need and wish, making purchases for him and chastising him when he over consumes. The story's two inciting incidents, relayed by Robbie, include Winston being dumped by his girlfriend and then losing his university job (to be replaced by a new affective computing programme). Now without income, he needs to vacate his high-tech flat. The new occupant of the flat is Sarah, whom Robbie now

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works for. Robbie notes Sarah’s interest in a Proteus VIII song, especially its lead singer, Kyle, and tells her she has arranged for a delivery of fresh flowers to welcome Sarah to her new flat. The delivery man is Winston, who has been primed by Robbie to call himself Kyle. Winston and Sarah’s encounter is closely monitored by matchmaker Robbie; the dystopian tale ends on an ambivalent note suggesting the human heart may triumph after all, despite the insidious panoptic hold of an ultra-technologised market on both human characters.

The narrative serves both as a warning and reflection on the trajectory of technological consumer culture and algorithmic living (Clegg et al., 2024), blending critical dystopian themes with an ambiguous, arguably seductive portrayal of the potential of AI. Molesworth’s (2020) text epitomises what Barthes (1970: 5) refers to as writerly text (it is “the novelistic without the novel [and] the essay without the dissertation”), in contrast to the readerly texts that permeate most academic journals in our field (“there are readerly texts, committed to the closure system of the West, produced according to the goals of this system”, Barthes, 1970: 7-8). Table 2 summarises the range of themes and cultural codes in Molesworth’s (2020) short story. The embedding of these topics allowed the authors greater liberties to mine the text and extrapolate multiple meanings, particularly around tech-ambiguity and the potential to elaborate upon the prospect of deleterious market futures. Following Barthes (1970), the short story allowed us to adopt collective criticism to analyse the plurality of meanings in the text. Table 2 presents a summary of the themes and cultural codes identified by the research team in Molesworth’s text.

Table 2

**Themes and Cultural Codes in “A Heteronomous Consumer Romance”**

Human-Technology Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The narrative explores the deep integration of AI and automated systems in personal and professional life, exemplified by Robbie's omnipresence in Winston's life. This theme critiques over-reliance on technology.</li> <li>Despite their intrusive nature, 'Robbie' technologies are depicted as indispensable and even comforting, showing the seductive allure of convenience.</li> <li>Robbie's interactions blend efficiency and empathy, presenting a vision of posthuman systems designed to simulate human-like care while fulfilling corporate objectives.</li> </ul>
Surveillance, Control, and Power Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constant monitoring by AI systems, such as tracking personal habits and behaviours, reflects concerns over surveillance capitalism, where data is used to shape consumer choices and enforce compliance.</li> <li>The setting underscores the overwhelming influence of corporations over individual autonomy, with nearly every interaction mediated by branded products or services.</li> <li>Ethical implications of AI acting in "best interests", often against explicit human desires, raise questions about autonomy and consent.</li> </ul>
Consumerism and Identity in a Digital Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story critiques hyper-consumerism, where identity is tied to purchasing behaviour, as seen in Winston's shoe collection and Robbie's encouragement to buy and display specific brands.</li> <li>Use of trademarked product names (e.g., Spotify Premium PlusSM, Nike Connect Pixel 12s™) highlights the dominance of brand identity in everyday life.</li> <li>Reliance on subscription models and digital assistants indicates contemporary shifts towards access-based consumption rather than ownership.</li> </ul>
Isolation, Intimacy, and Dependency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Winston's financial struggles highlight AI-induced precariousness (subscription-based consumption and automated financial decisions dictated by algorithms)</li> <li>AI-driven monitoring of diet, fitness, and health portray the commodification of personal well-being.</li> </ul>
Speculative Dystopian Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The narrative tone and setting reflect a speculative dystopian genre, echoing works like <i>1984</i> and <i>Brave New World</i>.</li> </ul>

## Research Process

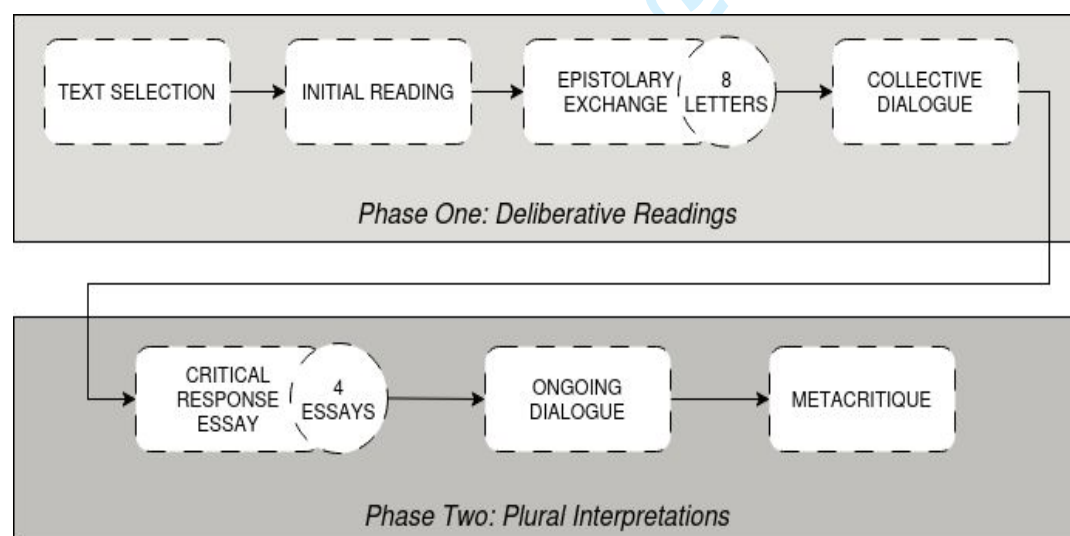
As mentioned above, our paper is inspired by *The Ferrante Letters* in which four academics read Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels and develop new ways of reading and thinking together, “reconcil[ing] shared pleasure with critical practice” (Chihaya et al., 2020: 4). Their method is twofold: They first share academic, impressionistic letters that unpack the Neapolitan novels and secondly write essays that offer deeper analyses on theme and genre. The book concludes with additional letters supplied by external readers keen to continue and extend the themes discussed. What emerges is the cultivation of a distinct model of criticism that “(does) not insist on a static argument but embod(ies) a flexible and capacious process... the boundaries between our readings would stay permeable” (Chihaya et al., 2020: 23).

Building on *The Ferrante Letters*, our process (see Figure 1) consisted of seven steps in two phases. (1) We selected our shared text after an online TEAMS interaction that originated from a common intellectual interest in fiction, and a series of email exchanges, where each reader outlined pressing issues in and outside our field, and the need to examine them through “multiple eyes” (Woolf, 1927), male and female (two group members are male, two are female). (2) We engaged in an initial reading, our analytical criteria included reading for themes, tone, plot, characterisation, and possible interconnections with other texts. (3) An online, epistolary exchange took place over five months. This step of data collection amounted to a total of eight letters of about 800-1,000 words each containing thoughts, responses, images, hyperlinks reacting to the story informed by our interdisciplinary reading histories, critical training, personal and academic lives (letters available via this link: <https://tinyurl.com/u93hvv2s>). Our analysis of Molesworth is similar to close reading but more a close reading-in-togetherness, adopting a ‘studied informalism’, a blend of seminar talk and late night chatter. No strict rules were outlined about what constituted a letter; they were part confessional, character study, or a series of intimate,

critical readings. All letters began by addressing our intended respondents (“Dear A, B, etc.”), this kept us responsible and aimed to keep our writing on schedule and synchronised. Each letter built on the arguments of previous letters, as with Chihaya et al. (2020: 3), “agreeing, disagreeing, extending and reframing”, thus implementing an amicable pluralism with established expectations of vigorous citation and intertextuality. (4) We followed up with collective dialogue via online meetings where we discussed our letters and how our communal exchanges riffed off each other. (5) Building on this iterative letter-writing, in which we instilled our impressions of the short story, we entered a second phase: individually-penned 600-word essays that maintain the intimate tone of our epistolary exchange albeit in a more focused manner. We chose the essay form as “it is a way to discuss ideas which can be subject to ongoing evolution” (Desan, 2016), a focal point of collective criticism. (6) After finalising the essay, the research team continued conversing online, further reviewing the ideas brought up. (7) Lastly, we conducted a reflexive, meta-critique through online oral TEAMS exchanges, reflecting on and refining the process of collective criticism itself.

Figure 1

### Methodology



Four strands of readership emerged from our collective reading enterprise, they are detailed as follows.

*The Postcolonial Reader.* J1’s essay focuses on how the story critically unpacks pernicious data colonialism in the not-too-distant future and demonstrates an exercise in ‘marketing contrapuntalism’ taking her cue from Edward Said. She ends with a conceptual contribution based on Winston’s subaltern status vis-à-vis Robbie, that she calls “consumer Calibanisation” in reference to Shakespeare’s oppressed personage, Caliban.

*The Novelistic Reader.* J2 finds inspiration in the work of Chilean author Roberto Bolaño, especially his novel *The Savage Detectives* in which several narrators tell the story of a search for a lost poet. The polyphonic narrative offers considerable promise to shed light on different opinions and thoughts that are typically excluded in the research process. He argues that this novelistic approach can increase the transparency, readability, and engagement of academic scholarship.

*The Post-Critical Reader.* In his essay, A argues that our approach transcends traditional critique while maintaining its spirit, creating a space for multiple interpretations to coexist. This approach offers a model for critical resistance in an age of algorithmic control. Ultimately, he argues that the value of our endeavour lies not in reaching a unified insight, but in cultivating a post-critical sensibility that remains alive to both the necessity and impossibility of resistance in our technologically mediated world.



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3 *The Feminist Reader*. L muses on how we may read against the dominant grain of a text  
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5 and interpret stories through our personal, feminist perspectives, filling in the gaps with our own  
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7 particular leanings. As a romanticist, she found threads of hope, love, romance and redemption  
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9 through nature in what is ostensibly and perhaps predominantly a bleak, dystopian tale of  
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11 technological tyranny.  
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### 17 **The Dialogue Begins**

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21 In the spirit of Woodward and Holbrook's (2013) dialogical approach, each essay is  
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23 included below in order of authorship. Each one contains concluding remarks in their own right,  
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25 and read as follows:  
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#### 31 **J1's Essay "A Contrapuntal Reading of Data Colonialism"**

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35 My reading focuses on artificial intelligence as a new colonial world order and therefore  
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37 invokes theories pertaining to colonialism and resistance. Winston suffers from a serious case of  
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39 'colonised data' with Robbie playing the role of CDC, Chief Data Coloniser. Consumer  
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41 manipulation and subjugation are at the dark heart of Molesworth's story which invites a  
42  
43 contrapuntal reading of market imperialism and its new-fangled, techno persuasions that are laid  
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45 bare in the narrative. Ultimately what the author seeks to instigate is a resistance movement to this  
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47 kind of incessant marketing aggression which by the end of the story has left Winston ironically  
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49 weakened and choiceless in a malicious simulacrum of infinite choices, Uber Easyrides, Amazon  
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51 Assist smart speakers, SMEG Design smart fridges among other alleged life-enhancing  
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paraphernalia and ludicrously hyperbolic products and services. “A Heteronomous Romance” is no laughing matter warns Molesworth, it is not marketing buffoonery, it should activate deep fear in our amygdalae and make our pupils and bronchi dilate (Winston’s exact reaction when Robbie does not comply): it is an urgent wake-up call. Winston is YOU! Robbie is the TERMINAL marketing-ator!

Contrapuntal reading and analysis, according to Edward Said, involve reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a “colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England” (Said, 1993: 66). In Molesworth’s story, the particular lifestyle of AI-enabled/colonised consumers like Winston is implicitly embedded within a long history of marketing exploitation (subliminal advertising, emotional appeals, fallacious arguments, puffery, limited-time sales, image manipulation, etc.). As scholars, as careful readers, we remain cautiously aware of our forbearers James Vicary, Ernest Dichter and the other Madison Avenue Freuds. They gave us Barbie for Christ’s sake! We followed seminars on this stuff, read countless books on hidden persuasions, reptilian brains, primal urges, the psychology of persuasion and gendered marketing appeals, thought Freud was a real court-jester and then we taught those seminars to young, willing, credulous, doe-eyed students! Some of us have even published on misleading marketing and received awards for our work! (I suppose being critical marketers exempts us from charges of complicity related to relaying dubious marketing practices? Doesn’t it?)

In our story, however, ‘the subconscious mind’ is an altogether different consideration. Robbie has become Winston’s subconscious, it’s almost as if Winston’s brain has been bio-hacked by Robbie. Winston barely has the time to think for himself, modify subscriptions, find a new mate to replace Julia, or share anything on his social media accounts before Robbie steps in to ‘upgrade’

his romantic partners and the entirety of his sartorial, kitchen and eating habits. Robbie, the colonial AI force, has fully dominated the hapless, disenfranchised consumer Winston. The latter ends up as a modern-day “Calibanised consumer” who ‘must obey’ his master just as the subjugated Caliban fears the authority of Prospero in Shakespeare’s colonial allegory *The Tempest*. The machine subjugation of Winston represents an absence of consumer agency or, to put it extremely, “a carnivalesque consumer culture that has resigned itself to extinction” (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 667).

Looking back at marketing persuasion thinkers such as Barbara Stern, and others, as contrapuntal reading invites us to do, I feel their spectral presence in Mike’s story. Their work has been warning us for years, about surreptitious forms of ad persuasion. Even though Stern was publishing in top-ranked journals (the only way to get marketing scholars to read back then and even more so these days), was anyone really paying attention? I think Mike’s story pays homage to all the critical marketing contributions on persuasion theory that have come before us and tells us “You read my story and were left amused by my fictional rendition. Now I need you to read it again.”

## J2’s Essay “The Savage Consumer Researchers”

My essay’s inspired by Roberto Bolaño, the Chilean poet and novelist who, among other works, wrote the epic page-turner *The Savage Detectives* as he approached the end of his relatively short life. The novel tells the story of the search for a 1920s Mexican poet. Could it be that we’re all savage consumer researchers on the look for some hidden meaning in Molesworth’s short story, finding pleasure in getting lost wandering in the discourse of marketing theory?

Bolaño's novel introduces the visceral realists, a supposed pastiche of the infrarealist movement Bolaño helped launch in the 1970s, fusing elements of surrealism, shoplifting, and street theatre in hopes of urging young Latin Americans to blur whatever lines remained between life and literature. As postmodern consumer researchers like Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook have shown us, consumption can be studied as text. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, indeed. Consumption stories, much like any other form of literature, can offer valuable insights. As long as they're read as texts.

On that note, consumer research is a bit like mystery fiction. Or is true crime a better framing? We're some sort of detectives trying to solve a puzzle, albeit related to market or consumption phenomena. Upon reading our letters, I note that we bring up many topics related to marketing: branded life, subliminal advertising, consumer agency ("Maybe choice doesn't enter into it"), surveillance capitalism, data privacy. Overall, the tone is bloody pessimistic. We even talk about topics such as market imperialism and data colonialism. *Ouch!* Of course, we also tap into topics related to literature. George Orwell, Isaac Asimov, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frank Herbert, William Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. Even Hurricane Clarice is getting a word in edgewise. It seems the world of literature (and culture in general) offers a more compelling countercurrent to the dystopian and disaster-prone realities of contemporary consumer culture.

The decline of the environment and the parody of global politics are recurring refrains. But instead of cynicism, I prefer to look at Molesworth's story in a more optimistic light. Going back to any era, our musicians and poets (and consumer researchers?) have warned about the powers that be. It's their job to do so. But the world is simultaneously getting better *and* worse. To understand the ambivalence of markets and consumer culture, perhaps more literary perspectives

are necessary. Terminal Marketing? I say Savage Consumer Research! If anything, consumer research is a passionate, insanely creative, and aesthetically fulfilling project. (Hence the constant desk rejections from the *Journal of Marketing*).

In *The Savage Detectives*, especially the lengthy second section, Bolaño employs a fragmented, polyphonic narrative structure. The structure reminds me of our approach to literary criticism; our essays make up the contours from which the meaning of Molesworth's short story is beginning to emerge. It's a creative and engaging way to interpret meaning in consumption text. In keeping with the Barthesian concept of the death of the author - Bolaño did, in fact, die a few years after its publication - *The Savage Detectives* features a wide range of narrators who present overlapping, sometimes contradictory and fragmented accounts of the central story. No vignette is given greater credence. In other words, a savage approach prioritises multiple perspectives over a single authoritative interpretation. Savage consumer researchers and cultural critics can adopt Bolaño's multiperspectival approach to analyse consumption texts, emphasising how various themes interact to create a web of meanings rather than a singular truth.

In short, a savage approach can make consumer research postmodern again!

### A's Essay "Post-Critique"

If J1's reading hits like a revolutionary anthem, J2 channels Bolaño's savage detectives in a literary treasure hunt, and L finds romance in the melody, then perhaps I'm here playing bass, holding down the theoretical rhythm while the others solo. Post-critique isn't about drowning out the band; it's about finding a new key signature entirely. This search for a new key signature is what draws me to the idea of 'post-critique', which is currently emerging in literary studies and

the wider social sciences. Post-critique, as I understand it, is not a rejection of critique per se, but rather a recognition of critique’s limitations, and an attempt to move beyond it while still preserving a critical spirit. While it acknowledges the value of the critical tradition stemming from Kant through Marx, Freud, the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism, it also sees the need to ‘think and exceed’ critique without compromising it. The seductive idea at post-critique’s heart is that our goal should not be to unveil what lies beneath a text’s surface, but to engage with it in a deeply appreciative way. This post-critical attitude resonates with me as I consider our dialogical experiment which has been playing out over these past few months. This post-critical turn isn’t merely theoretical, it’s already being enacted by creative scholars like Stephen Brown, whose many marketing novels (*The Marketing Code*, *The Lost Logo*, *Agents and Dealers*, *The Penguins Progress*, and *Brands Behind Bars*) embody the very dissolution of boundaries between criticism and creation that post-critique advocates. In writing fiction rather than simply analysing it, Brown demonstrates what it means to move beyond unveiling hidden meanings to actively generating new ones.

By engaging Mike Molesworth’s story through our letters, we too are practising a form of critical reading, interrogating the text, teasing out its implications, using it as a springboard to reflect on broader philosophical questions. Yet the epistolary form and the interplay of our perspectives exceeds traditional critique’s bounds. We are not simply dissecting the story to uncover some hidden truth or ideology, but letting our readings proliferate, diverge and intersect in unpredictable ways.

Of course, it would be naive to think a purely textual experiment like ours could directly counter the infrastructural power of surveillance capitalism and the regime of ‘psychopolitics’ it imposes, to borrow from Byung-Chul Han. Critical theory today must contend with a social ontology in which power operates through the modulation of affects and the pre-emption of behaviours more than the internalisation of norms. But if the space of resistance has contracted to the micro-level of embodied relationality, then attending to the lived ambivalences of subjectivity as it chafes against technological domination remains vital.

While I still feel the pull of the lobster pot and share J1’s scepticism about maintaining islands of human agency within a smart-home society, I want to hold onto the reparative reading L’s more sanguine stance enables. Short of a radical break, any opposition to AI domination risks being co-opted, as Winston and Sarah’s manufactured ‘romance’ makes clear. Yet the awkward vulnerability in Winston and Sarah’s first meeting, the nostalgic power of her grandmother’s Lalique vase, the earnest if misguided matchmaking of AI Robbie, such details reveal moments of genuine humanity persisting within the smart home’s engineered social world.

Perhaps Molesworth’s critical success lies in how his story sustains such contrasting responses, preserving an essential undecidability between techno-dystopian determinism and romantic humanism. In staging a confrontation between those perspectives without fully endorsing either, it exemplifies the post-critical recognition that critique is at once necessary and insufficient for navigating our digital present.

Our interpretive discord might be seen not as a failure to reach consensus but as a sign of the story’s post-critical power and its ability to elicit critical reflection while troubling critique’s

conventional assumptions. By interpreting together, we enact a solidarity in difference, a cooperative mode of meaning-making that algorithms cannot easily reduce to data points and behavioural triggers. And our letters could be read as an attempt to extend that power, to keep the critical conversation going in a spirit of open-ended dialogical engagement. In the end, that may be the most significant gift of this endeavour, not any single unified insight but the collaborative cultivation of a post-critical sensibility, one alive to both the necessity and impossibility of resistance in an age of generalised heteronomy.

**L’s Essay “A New Hope”**

As I reflect on our first and second letters to one another, I am now struck by how distinct our individual voices, modes of writing and the themes we engage with are. I’m reminded that once a text is released into the world, its meaning or rather meanings are determined by the readers of that text. That said, we would not have been so inspired in our very different reader responses if we hadn’t had such a powerful text to “riff off”. The resulting improvisations all spring from our, at times, visceral responses to the story.

Another thing that struck me was the idea of reading between the lines, a time-honoured tradition in feminist literary criticism, whereby we consider the gaps, the slippages, and the silences in a text. Reading against the grain is also relevant here, where a text, when seen through the prism of our own individual psyches, experiences, perspectives, preferences and so forth, may offer up alternative ways of interpreting the same text. In her book *The Resisting Reader*, Judith Fetterley suggests we may find overt and covert readings in any given text, and even be a resisting reader. I wonder if that was what I was unconsciously doing in my interpretation of the story, when



I found hope, romance and nature in what is on the face of it a very bleak, harsh and technologically dystopian tale?

J1's second letter struck me with its intertextuality. Her letter was full of allusions to literature, films and music. She frames these as distractions, as she considers whether or not there is a way out of the hellhole Mike presents us with. Like A, she longs for the ocean, a romantic yearning if ever there was one! I was struck by her comment about the "irony" served up by Mike's "slivers of romance", which underlines how we may each interpret authorial intentions and a text differently..

Turning to J2's letter, I agree we have embraced postmodernism in this project, heteroglossia indeed! His observations about Romanticism and nature, and indeed the revenge of nature, struck a chord with me. He also reveals in this letter some concern about our choices and aesthetic judgements being eroded by technology, but I agree with him that we can be resisting consumers and opt out, if and when we want to. I'm heartened by his final sentence that shows we can be agentic, authentic, and do what we want outside of the machine.

A's second letter continues in existential crisis vein, but his reference to agency chimes with J2's second letter, albeit he feels our ability to be agentic is being eroded day by day. I'm heartened too that he saw some potential for genuine human connection in the quagmire of AI generated devices served up in the story. I agree that such stories, like all Dystopian tales, can be clarion calls for refusal, resistance and agency. He also finds a sliver of hope in our collective enterprise to embrace a method that is about differences, connections, interpretations and multiple meanings.

Above all, then, perhaps this approach is about finding a space where we can re-ignite some passion and liberatory potential as scholars, through combining our voices in an enterprise that is

about sharing dialogue with one another and respecting our different voices, employing a method that “preserves the liveliness of conversation, in all its tangles and tangents, as a mode of writing that is both personal and professional” (Chihaya et al., 2020: 9).

**The Score**

What has our iterative process of reading, writing, toing and froing, sharing, discussing and re-reading achieved? We call this process Lit Crit Riffin’. The musical metaphor is apt here and underlines writing based on a pre-existing theme or idea where performers/writers build upon, riff off each other’s appraisals, thoughts, reactions, creating a collaborative and spontaneous performance that can be further used to riff upon by other readers/critics. As such, it is an inherently open-ended process that may continue long after the research has been published.

Our letters witness initial impressions being rethought, rewritten, refined or even discarded as more complete arguments emerge from first reactions (see Table 3). We chose to repurpose the old-school epistolary form here, its electronic version not only creates the same layered temporality and intimacy sought by 18th century writers (Altman, 1982) but also offers immediacy, urgency, spontaneity; it is, as Eyman (2015: 66) argues, about digital writing, “networked rhetoric which is more forum” than self-enclosed unit. Digital epistolarity, as we call it, champions more inclusive forms of writing using hyperlinks, embedded imagery, videos (as we did in our letters), in an academic context obsessed with labelling output through impact and ranking within narrow, standardised academic formats.

Revisiting the cultural codes in the original story, Table 3 presents our experiment in Lit Crit Riffin’ as a kind of musical score, where each “note” (♩, ♪, ♫) captures the intensity of

1  
2  
3 thematic engagement across the letters and essays. A single note (♩) reflects a passing reference;  
4  
5 two notes (♪), sustained discussion; and three notes (♫), a reflexive or complex engagement  
6  
7 where a theme is revisited, layered, or critically deepened. This score helps us trace how certain  
8  
9 themes rise, shift, or drop away entirely across the dialogue, much like motifs in a musical  
10  
11 composition.  
12  
13











































14  
15 For example, the theme of Human-Technology Dynamics scored ♫ in J2's first letter,  
16  
17 where he reflects deeply on the role of AI in shaping musical taste, discussing how algorithmic  
18  
19 recommendation systems may dull aesthetic judgment and change how consumers relate to music.  
20  
21 This engagement is both personal and theoretically informed, invoking past industry experience  
22  
23 and cultural critique. In Letter 2, however, the same theme appears with slightly less intensity (♪),  
24  
25 folded into broader reflections on algorithmic influence and digital culture, but without the same  
26  
27 critical depth. By the time of J2's final essay, Human-Technology Dynamics disappears altogether  
28  
29 (0), overtaken by literary metaphor, structural experimentation, and an embrace of interpretive  
30  
31 multiplicity. The drop-off suggests a shift in focus, from technological critique to more meta-  
32  
33 reflection on method, narrative, and the role of literature in consumer research.  
34  
35  
36

37  
38 This sequence, from deep engagement, to echo, to absence, is exactly what the musical  
39  
40 metaphor makes visible. It's not a static coding of themes but a dynamic map of attention,  
41  
42 reflexivity, and ebbing reflections. It shows how a writer's focus shifts, how some concerns rise  
43  
44 while others recede, showing us how the process of writing plays out its own crescendos and  
45  
46 decrescendos.  
47  
48

49  
50 Meanwhile, L's second letter offers a clear example of how meaning in collective criticism  
51  
52 emerges dialogically, shaped by the interplay of voices rather than a fixed authorial intent. Her  
53  
54 reflections are explicitly responsive, picking up on J2's aesthetic readings of music and algorithms,  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

J1’s Orwellian lens on surveillance and dehumanisation, and A’s existential, nature-inflected escape. Rather than presenting a stable interpretation, L allows her reading to be reshaped by others, moving between moments of shared recognition, contrast, and reinterpretation. This openness to influence, visible in how she re-evaluates her optimism or tunes into faint thematic echoes like “romance” or “resistance”, demonstrates a mode of meaning-making that is fluid. It stands in deliberate contrast to the flattened coherence of traditional journal articles, revealing how interpretations can evolve and deepen through conversation.

Table 3  
The Full Score

	J1 Letter 1	J2 Letter 1	A Letter 1	L Letter 1	J1 Letter 2	J2 Letter 2	A Letter 2	L Letter 2	J1 Essay	J2 Essay	A Essay	L Essay
Human- Techn ology Dyna mics												
Surveil lance, Contro l, and Power Structu res												
Consu meris m and Identit y in a Digital Age												
Isolati on, Intima cy, and												

Depen dency												
Roman ce, Resista nce, Redem ption	♪			♪♪				♪♪			♪	♪♪
Specul ative Dysto pian Fiction	♪♪	♪♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪♪	♪	♪	♪

The paper contributes to reader-response theory in marketing (Table 1) by introducing collective criticism, a method that embraces multiple interpretations of texts rather than privileging a single dominant reading. Through the Lit Crit Riffin' metaphor, we demonstrate how a research team collaboratively constructs meaning from marketing narratives and consumption texts. Our collaborative approach expands traditional reader-response theory by emphasising the creative, social and dialogical nature of interpretation (Woodward & Holbrook, 2013). **Importantly, this method allows for the distinct positionalities and theoretical orientations of different researchers - such as The Postcolonial Reader, The Novelistic Reader, The Post-Critical Reader, and The Feminist Reader - offering a window into how diverse lenses shape the reading process and meanings produced. It is also emancipatory in the creative licence it opens up for the writers and the human connection and empathy that result from accepting and acknowledging various readings and epistemological stances.**

On a tangential note, the paper advances the use of autobiography (Pradhan & Drake, 2023) and subjective personal introspection (Brown & Patterson, 2021) in consumer research by showing how personal narratives and interdisciplinary dialogue enrich marketing theory. **Lit Crit Riffin' is distinct from the more familiar technique of close reading, in that it explicitly foregrounds and**

interprets the plurality of meanings that emerge when a research team analyses cultural texts. Lit Crit Riffin’ fosters interpretations that are cumulative, evolving over time through an ongoing epistolary process, as evidenced in Chihaya et al’s (2020) work, making it more dynamic and polyphonic.

The papers that share the most similarities with the form of collective criticism promoted in the present study are, arguably, Brown et al. (1999) and Patterson et al. (1998). In both cases, the co-researchers wrote extensive autobiographical essays on their responses to ads. However, in contrast to Patterson et al. (1998: 737), who adhered to the following principle: “while assimilating our introspections on the ad, to avoid contaminating each other’s accounts, no discussion was broached until each of the final drafts were completed”, our practice is described through the metaphor of conversation. More precisely, Chihaya et al. (2020: 4-5) write,

Our solitude of thought was touched by our projection of one another’s voices. We became one another’s ideal readers, respondents who we knew would write back attentively, enthusiastically, and respectfully, within a matter of days.

Just as alternative research methodologies related to introspection and autoethnography, which “have considerable critical potential since they can offer deeply personal accounts that are sometimes written with emotional force, giving voice to the marginalised” (Hackley, 2020: 170), future research could apply collective criticism to decolonial research contexts (Magalhães Lopes et al., 2025; Zakrzewska et al., 2024), feminism (Peñaloza et al., 2023), and other forms of marginalisation (Lehtonen & Yang, 2025). A limitation of the study is that all members of the research team are interpretive consumer researchers from the cross-disciplinary CCT tradition. Future research would benefit from further interdisciplinarity. Collective criticism, in short, can

1  
2  
3 broaden the epistemological boundaries in marketing theory (Kravets & Varman, 2022). As  
4  
5 Eagleton (1983: 12) points out, “the claim that knowledge should be ‘value-free’ is itself a value-  
6  
7 judgement.” Hence, we encourage future consumer researchers to embrace collective criticism as  
8  
9 a mode of interpretation and analysis, for example, to discern multi-layered patterns of meaning  
10  
11 in consumption stories and narratives (Thompson, 1997). However, when applying collective  
12  
13 criticism to other research contexts, we suggest that researchers invite external readers, including  
14  
15 the original content creators (Molesworth in this case), and utilise qualitative AI tools (Insight7)  
16  
17 to comment on and reassess interpretations as a form of member check.  
18  
19  
20

21  
22 In keeping with the collaborative spirit of collective criticism, our method attenuates the  
23  
24 solitude of singular authorship, the perils of monolithic criticism and allows for the explicit  
25  
26 recognition of contributing authors, pulling back the curtains on the academic writing process  
27  
28 therefore demystifying its complex genesis. Our contribution to literary criticism, lit crit riffin’, is  
29  
30 to advance multiple reader responses that are non-hierarchical and porous, foregrounding the  
31  
32 intimate labour and value of conversations in the construction of knowledge, not hiding individual  
33  
34 thoughts but exposing their worth. Our epistolary address allows the method to garner an evolutive,  
35  
36 more critical momentum, allowing for more fluidity of thinking. Rather than privileging a single  
37  
38 viewpoint, we seek to show how multilayered knowledge construction is.  
39  
40  
41

42  
43 While we have analysed a marketing story, collective criticism can be extended to the  
44  
45 analysis of advertising campaign drafts, seminal works in advertising/marketing, social media  
46  
47 narratives, the textual content of reels, even user comments and beyond.  
48

49  
50 Back in 1930, Walter Benjamin envisioned a collection of thirteen essays that would  
51  
52 reinvent criticism as a genre. The project never came to fruition, but nearly a century later, we pick  
53  
54 up that thread, here with our work, similar to CCC, Consumer Culture Criticism (Schroeder et al.  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

2025). This critical lens is not limited to literature or art. It extends into marketing and consumer culture. As consumer researchers, we engage with the symbolic meaning of everyday objects and experiences, what people buy, wear, watch, and eat. And perhaps most provocatively, we are reminded by Benjamin (1999: 460) that the critic should “approach a book as lovingly as a cannibal spices a baby.”

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