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**We Are All Improvisers! Jazz as an Alternative Lens to Explore the Strategic
Marketing Management of the Entrepreneurial Consumer**

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**Stepping out of the discourse to make sense of the discourse: an alternative lens to
explore the strategic marketing management of the
entrepreneurial consumer movement**

Abstract: We explore how the emerging entrepreneurial consumer movement can be understood using the jazz metaphor to communicate marketplace transformations in today's turbulent environment.

Keywords: Jazz, metaphor, improvisation, entrepreneurial consumers

**Stepping out of the discourse to make sense of the discourse:
an alternative lens to explore the strategic marketing management of the
entrepreneurial consumer movement**

Transformation and radical change through music:

Music as art can be capable of transforming the repetitive experiences of the everyday into a more enjoyable reality of meaningful experiences. The human energy behind this is capable of transforming the environment. In doing so, there are lower costs associated with the knowledge work involved, compared with physical work due to the former's ability to manipulate and transform ideas and symbols rather than physically changing something into another form. This is what Austin and Devin¹ refer to as artful making in being concerned with transformation, freedom from conformity and the belief in creativity. Monthoux² uses the notion of Schwung (or the swing between two poles) to explain how organisational energy can be created and managed. In marketing terms, this movement involves a schwung between creative and administrative approaches. From an improvisation perspective, or experimentation, Monthoux believes that art can use its intense energy levels to schwung abstract ideas into tangible notions. This can be extended to music and the improvisation process. Marketers need to understand this and the mechanisms behind the process. Leveraging the creative aesthetic energy generated as the result of the tensions within marketing theory versus practice gaps facilitates ideal conditions for producing creativity and subsequently, tangible innovations.

Setting the scene:

We offer an alternative pathway to understanding strategic marketing management perspectives relating to the entrepreneurial consumer movement. We begin by questioning the nature and role of marketing knowledge, through the personal narrative of one of the authors in identifying issues relating to relevance, context and criticality. We then consider the role of

metaphor in marketing management and its ability to transform thinking and inform visualisations of alternative pathways, before concentrating on the use of the jazz metaphor and its inherent jazzier/reader continuum and the role of improvisation. Our paper will also have a link to a podcast involving the authors and other experts where the themes of the paper are explored and debated. This dialogue is supported by performances by Noel Dennis and Pete Churchill in illustrating the discussion:

I thoroughly enjoyed my time studying marketing at Teesside University and was privileged to be taught by some wonderful people that later became my colleagues and good friends. I recall, though, during my time as an undergraduate questioning some of the content of my degree and its relevance to me at the time. I could understand the theory that was being taught, however, I felt that there was something missing and now as a management educator I realise what that was – context and criticality.

Although I did not fully grasp it at the time, I was subconsciously questioning knowledge in marketing and management more generally. Reflecting on this now, it was certainly the beginning of my quest to introduce a different perspective to marketing and management thought – to offer multiple perspectives and go beyond the banalistic paradigm in order to embrace the ludic paradigm³. Even then I would, where possible, contextualise my assessed work into the world of music. Indeed, my undergraduate dissertation was an investigation into enhancing the marketing practice of jazz in the UK – something which has since somewhat become a feature of my public works. My undergraduate dissertation introduced me to some influential figures in the jazz community – particularly at policy level (e.g. the Arts Council and Jazz Services) that has proved to be a major contributor to both my professional and academic careers, and a major inspiration for and contribution to my public works.

The role of the metaphor in marketing management:

The word ‘metaphor’, from the Greek ‘metapherein’, concerns the transferring of meaning from one domain to another.⁴ To date, the majority of metaphor application has tended to be literal and surface-level rather than theoretically grounded.^{5,6} Embedding theoretically grounded metaphors into marketing theory can contribute to the development of a form of marketing which addresses ambiguity, chaotic market conditions, and matches the creativity in marketing practice. The adoption of metaphor as a marketing lens is located within wider critical and artistic ways of knowing about organisations and consumers. The adoption of metaphor can be viewed as a creative way of dealing with theory versus practice tensions, while

simultaneously dealing with any uncertainty involved.⁷ Metaphor should be capable of transcending cultures and languages.⁸ Adoption of the jazz metaphor, then, is predicated on the belief that the language of jazz and its inherent metaphors can cut through communication barriers in being utilised as an analytical and problem solving tool.⁹

Authenticity and the jazz metaphor – Here we draw from the work of Noel Dennis¹⁰ and explore how his publications have been developed to be as authentic as possible, drawing upon on his practice as a professional jazz musician to sense of strategic marketing. His use of the jazz metaphor is a vehicle to embed critical thinking in marketing and management education. It translates a variety of the lessons from jazz performance into the business context. His papers and workshops encourage readers and participants to reflect on their professional practice in terms of their relationship with the development and implementation of the organisation's marketing strategy. Importantly, his research and teaching in the jazz metaphor space is a vehicle to demonstrate and promote the importance of reflection-in-action¹¹.

The Jazzer/Reader Continuum – We refer to the Jazzer/Reader model in this paper¹². Jazzers have the ability to both read from a predetermined score, whilst being able to use their improvisational skills to deviate away from the written material. Readers play the notes on the score, with *no* capacity for improvisation. We argue that smaller entrepreneurial organisations might lean more towards the pure jazz position, where there is less written down and more spontaneity involved, perhaps more akin to free improvisation. In contradistinction, we argue that the big band, for example, leans more to the reader end of the spectrum. We concur with Wilson¹³ that the big band is, in some cases, perhaps a better metaphorical fit for larger organisations, where there is often more structure and less room to improvise – although there are certain individuals (the jazzers) within who can and do improvise when required.

Improvisation - the term improvisation comes from the Latin *improvisus*, which translates to ‘unforeseen.’ Noel thinks of improvisation as the ability to compose and perform in the moment, reacting to internal and external cues. When he plays a gig he have a rough idea of the structure, but have no idea what he will play in his solos, for they are created in the moment. Paul Berliner examines definitions of improvisation in his seminal work that explored the infinite art of improvisation. He presents a couple of general definitions that we include here:

“To improvise is to compose, or simultaneously compose and perform, on the spur of the moment and without preparation¹⁴.”

“The art of performing music spontaneously without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory¹⁵.”

In assessing how we go about learning to improvise and consider the relevant language acquisition, we explore the process of learning to improvise; discuss bebop language and make reference to Clark Terry’s model – Imitate, Assimilate, Innovate¹⁶.

In developing insight into the jazz metaphor, we align this with our consideration of whether or not marketing has its own language. We believe that yes it does, although there are clear differences in terms of academic and practitioner language contexts. Increasingly too there is a misfit when we consider consumer behaviour. Consumers (innovators and early adopters) increasingly developing their own marketing language to promote brands via. TikTok and Instagram, for example. These entrepreneurial consumers¹⁷ are in fact improvisers and are disrupters. We need to consider here how marketing language needs to adapt in this new era of empowered consumers. More generally, marketing discourse needs improvisation at its core. Emergent consumer and consumption patterns will require companies to adapt more regularly and to be proactive and innovative in their practices. Sustainability, responsible production and

consumption, along with wider macro changes will force this. The jazzier mentality will play out here and we will see an increase in *improvisational marketing*.

We also include a recorded conversation between ourselves and Pete Churchill, Professor of Jazz Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London, which visualises the focus of our narrative. This is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=En5OkaIe6KI>

Notes

1. We use the example of Austin and Devin, *Artful making: What managers need to know about how artists work* in order to illustrate artistic, creative ways of thinking and communicating.
2. The notion of the art firm allows us to visualise the transdisciplinary movement between different domains in order to enhance understanding of a particular issue.
3. We draw on the work of Maurice Holbrook in order to help theorise our position. .
4. e.g. McWilliam and Dumas 1997.
5. International collaboration has been at the heart of Ian's work for some time; for example, with Australian colleagues such as Ruth Rentschler.
6. Ibid.
7. The use of metaphor is still underdeveloped in management research, although there are several marketing and consumption examples.
8. Metaphor operationalisation relies on its ability to transfer across different disciplines and domains in stimulating new understanding.
9. Effective metaphors succeed in communicating ideas, concepts, theories etc in ways which are understandable to all parties.
10. Noel Dennis has a longstanding interest in the intersection between the world of marketing theory and practice, and the arts, including the use of metaphor.
11. Ibid.
12. Noel Dennis has been working with Michael Macauley for some time now, even though Michael is now based in New Zealand.
13. This is a further supporting source for our use of metaphor within a managerial setting.
14. Webster's Dictionary.
15. See Berliner 1994.
16. The autobiography of Clark Terry.
17. Gaddefors discusses the connection between entrepreneurs and consumers.

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