

CONSUMER RESEARCH: In Search of Identity

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■ **Abstract** Although the consumer research field has made great progress over the past 30 years with respect to the scope, quality, and quantity of research, there are still significant disagreements about what consumer research is, what its objectives are, and how it should differ from related disciplines. As a result, the field appears to be rather fragmented and even divided on some fundamental issues. In this review we first examine the original vision for the field and its limitations. In the second section we explore the consequences of the ambiguity about the domain and identity of consumer research and the multidisciplinary influences on the field. In particular, we review key trends and “camps” in consumer research, which represent complementary and, in some cases, conflicting views regarding the main topics of investigation and how research is conducted. This review is based in part on systematic analyses of articles that have been published in the leading consumer research journals over the past 30 years. Finally, in the third section we revisit the question of what might differentiate the field from related disciplines, as well as the role of theory testing, studies of substantive phenomena, and relevance in consumer research.

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INTRODUCTION

The first chapter on “Consumer Analysis” to appear in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Guest 1962) focused on survey techniques and other methodological aspects of consumer research, with a brief review of the hot topics of the 1950s—motivation research and subliminal advertising. The field of consumer research has made great progress since then, with a significant expansion of the range of topics studied and of the academic community of consumer researchers (for reviews, see e.g. Bettman 1986, Cohen & Chakravarti 1990, Jacoby 1976, Kassirjian 1982, Tybout & Artz 1994). The Association for Consumer Research (ACR) was founded in 1969, and the first consumer behavior textbooks and courses appeared in the late 1960s (e.g. Engel et al 1968, Kassirjian & Robertson 1968). Today, consumer researchers account for close to half of all (business school) marketing faculty, and the study of consumption is also a growing area in other disciplines, such as sociology, communication, and anthropology (e.g. Miller 1995). However, despite the rapid development of the field, there are still significant disagreements about what consumer research is, what its objectives are, and how it should differ from related disciplines. As a result, the field appears to be rather fragmented and even divided on some fundamental issues.

In this chapter, instead of following the format of providing a review of articles published in the previous 4 years, we take a broader perspective and examine the developments, the main influences, and the current state of consumer research. We also explore some of the ongoing debates regarding the identity and objectives of consumer research. Although we try to represent the different subfields and points of view, our own bias undoubtedly affects our interpretation of the developments and the alternative approaches to consumer research.

This review consists of three main sections. In the first we examine the original vision regarding the objectives of consumer research and the subjects of investigation, as well as the limitations of that research agenda. In the second section we explore the consequences of the ambiguity about the domain and identity of consumer research and the multidisciplinary influences on the field. In particular, we review the key trends and “camps” in consumer research, which represent complementary and, in some cases, conflicting views regarding the main topics

of investigation and how research is conducted. This review is based, in part, on systematic analyses we conducted of articles that have been published in the leading consumer research journals over the past 30 years.¹ Finally, in the third section we revisit the question of what might differentiate the consumer research field from related fields, as well as the role of theory testing, studies of substantive phenomena, and relevance in consumer research.

IN THE BEGINNING: Domain-Specific Topics and Grand Theories of Consumer Behavior

Ronald Frank, the first editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)*, expected research to be published in the journal to encompass such topics as family planning behavior, occupational choices, mobility, determinants of fertility rates, attitudes towards and use of social services, and determinants of educational attainment (Frank 1974, p. i). Although this is not representative of the types of consumer research conducted at that time (see e.g. Bettman 1971, Jacoby et al 1974, Monroe 1973, Wright 1973), one is struck by the emphasis on topics that are specific to particular consumption categories, such as occupations and social services, and the omission of more general issues, such as persuasion and choice. An apparent assumption underlying this vision for *JCR* was that consumer researchers and researchers from related disciplines would primarily adapt, apply, and possibly extend theories developed in the basic disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, economics, and communication, to specific consumption categories.

It is noteworthy that the most influential frameworks in the early days of the consumer research field were comprehensive models of buyer behavior (e.g. Engel et al 1968, Howard & Sheth 1969, Nicosia 1966). The implicit assumption was that buyer behavior can be captured in one comprehensive model or “grand theory.” The emphasis on comprehensive models of buyer behavior declined significantly during the 1980s, which appears to be a natural progression for the field. First, consumer behavior is too complex to be meaningfully captured in a single model. After all, consumer psychology involves most of the elements of human psychology, which cannot be meaningfully represented in any single model or theory. Second, although comprehensive models of buyer behavior served a purpose in integrating various components and, in some ways, defining the field, they could not be effectively tested, and the significance of the actual insights they provided may be debatable.

These models, as well as Frank’s (1974) vision for *JCR*, did not resolve the question of what differentiates the consumer research field. In particular, whereas studying topics such as attitudes towards educational services and contraceptives might be relevant and useful for those interested in these subjects, many researchers

¹Given space limitations, we report only the main findings from these analyses. Additional information regarding the method of analysis and findings can be obtained from the authors.

are likely to perceive as more important and interesting, more general issues, such as how attitudes are formed and choices made. However, focusing on more generic questions raises other “problems” relating to the unique identity and role of consumer research. As described in the next section, owing to this ambiguity and the overlap with more established fields, consumer research has been shaped to a large degree by developments and sometimes conflicting criteria and methods of related disciplines.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY INFLUENCES ON TRENDS AND CAMPS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

In this section we examine the current state of consumer research, focusing on the multidisciplinary influences on the field with respect to both topics of investigation and research methods. In particular:

1. Because most key aspects of buyer behavior are also central research topics in other disciplines, especially psychology, one would expect developments in consumer research to reflect approaches and developments in the related disciplines. In this review we examine the trends in consumer research with respect to (a) the share of “social” versus “cognitive” topics and (b) the share of research on “cold” (e.g. attitudes, multi-attribute models, decision rules) versus “hot” (e.g. emotions, arousal, conflict) aspects of consumer behavior.
2. Although psychology has had the greatest impact on consumer research, other fields, such as economics and anthropology, have also had significant influences. Many consumer researchers have tended to be associated with particular other disciplines, representing alternative approaches to research. Consequently, consumer research camps have correspondingly differed in their views regarding important research questions and acceptable research methods. In this review we examine two distinctions within the consumer research field that can be traced to multidisciplinary influences: (a) behavioral decision theory (BDT) compared with social cognition consumer research and (b) postmodern (or interpretive) compared to positivist consumer research (including both social cognition and BDT research).
3. To further explore the changes in disciplinary impact on consumer research, we analyze the trend in the share of articles representing applications of theories developed in other fields compared with work involving original theory development and/or identification of new phenomena and explanations.

The Correspondence Between Trends in Psychology and Consumer Research: Social Versus Cognitive and “Hot” Versus “Cold” Topics

Social Versus Cognitive Consumer Research Unlike researchers in psychology, consumer researchers are not identified as social or cognitive, and many researchers in the field have examined issues in both domains. However, following the common distinction in psychology between the social and cognitive domains and the increasing importance and sophistication of research on cognition, it is of interest to study whether there has been a corresponding increase in the share of cognitive relative to social topics studied by consumer researchers. To explore this question, two independent judges (doctoral students working in the area of consumer behavior) classified all consumer behavior articles that have appeared in the leading consumer research journals (*JCR* 1974–1999, *Journal of Marketing Research* 1969–1999, and *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 1990–1999) based on whether they dealt with issues that fall in the domain of social or cognitive psychology.

The exact results of this analysis depend on the manner in which articles in the general area of social cognition (e.g. attitude, persuasion, information processing), which is central to consumer research, are classified. However, regardless of whether social cognition topics are classified as social or cognitive, the qualitative conclusion made from this analysis is that the proportion of social topics has declined significantly, whereas the proportion of cognitive topics has correspondingly increased. Social areas of consumer research that have declined in importance include such topics as family and social influences, reference groups, attribution, and self-perception (e.g. Bearden & Etzel 1982; Folkes 1984, Scott & Yalch 1980). Some of the cognitive topics that have increased in importance include behavioral decision making (see Bettman et al 1998 for a review), memory and knowledge (e.g. Alba & Hutchinson 1987), language (e.g. Schmitt & Zhang 1998), variety seeking (e.g. McAlister 1982, Ratner et al 1999, Simonson 1990), and preconscious processing (e.g. Janiszewski 1988). It is noteworthy that some social topics have become more central, such as cross-cultural and ethnic influences on buyer behavior (e.g. Deshpande & Stayman 1994), the development of children as consumers (e.g. Gregan-Paxton & Roedder-John 1997), and gender differences (e.g. Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran 1991).

A major change has been the decline of attitudes as the central topic of research. In particular, the Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) multi-attribute attitude model and theory of reasoned action received a great deal of attention from consumer researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s, examining such questions as whether intentions mediate the effect of attitudes on behavior and the role of the normative component in the formation of attitudes (e.g. Lutz 1977, Miniard & Cohen 1983, Shimp & Kavas 1984; see also Bagozzi et al 1992).

Since the early 1980s, the elaboration likelihood model of Petty and Cacioppo (e.g. Petty et al 1983) and related dual process models (Chaiken 1980, Fiske &

Pavelchek 1986) have been accepted by most consumer researchers as the approach that can best account for the diverse findings on the formation of attitudes, persuasion, and related information processing issues (e.g. Aaker & Maheswaran 1997, Sujan 1985). In addition, consumer researchers have started to examine persuasion processes that relate specifically to marketing and were not derived from existing psychological theories, such as the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright 1994).

Another important development, which likely contributed to the decrease in the proportion of attitude and persuasion research, has been the growing interest in consumer decision making and the rise of BDT consumer research. In particular, Bettman's (1979) influential book, *An Information Processing Theory of Consumer Choice*, inspired by the work of Newell & Simon (1972), Payne (1976), and other decision-making researchers, presented a framework that describes how information inputs are processed to achieve a decision. It emphasized the role of short- and long-term memory, decision rules and heuristics, and other issues that have subsequently received much attention from consumer researchers.

Finally, memory and cognitive elaboration is another cognitive area that has received growing attention from consumer researchers, including the use of principles of memory operation to explain persuasive communication effects (e.g. Johar & Pham 1999, Keller 1987). For example, according to the resource-matching hypothesis (Norman & Borrow 1975; see Anand & Sternthal 1990 for a review), persuasion is enhanced or hindered depending on the match between the level of cognitive resources available for message processing and the level of cognitive resources that the message requires (e.g. Meyers-Levy & Tybout 1997, Unnava et al 1996).

Research on "Hot" Versus "Cold" Aspects of Consumer Behavior A great deal of attitude and decision-making research has examined what might be considered "cold" aspects of consumer behavior. "Cold" aspects include such topics as the role of beliefs in attitude formation, attention, perception, information acquisition, learning, expertise, attribution, and decision rules. Conversely, "hot" aspects include such topics as the role of affect and mood, arousal, regret, low-involvement peripheral persuasion, hedonic aspects of consumption, conflict, and self-expressive motives for brand preference. In psychology there has been growing emphasis on the role of emotions and other "hot" aspects of cognition (see, e.g. Zajonc 1998).

We examined the proportion over time of "cold" and "hot" topics in consumer research based on a classification of articles that have been published in the leading consumer research journals (*JCR* 1974–1999, *Journal of Marketing Research* 1969–1999, and *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 1990–1999). Counting only articles that the judges coded as "cold" or "hot" (excluding the "other" category), there has been a decline in the relative proportion of "cold" topic articles from about 85% in the 1970s, to 75% in the 1980s, and 64% in the 1990s. For example, until recently decision-making research was clearly a

“cold” domain, perhaps reflecting the cold economic benchmark often used by decision researchers. However, BDT consumer researchers have recently started to study the role of emotions in decision making (e.g. Bettman 1993). For example, Luce (1998) examined the effect of emotional tradeoff difficulty on the type and amount of information processing (see also Pham 1998, Shiv & Fedorikhin 1999). Other “hot” topics include, for example, affective responses to advertising (e.g. Baumgartner et al 1997, Edell & Chapman-Burke 1987), consumers’ fun and fantasies (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982), and measures of consumption emotions (Richins 1997).

In summary, a review of articles published in the leading consumer research journals reveals two trends, both reflecting similar trends in psychology. There has been a decline in the proportion of classic social topics and an increase in the proportion of cognitive topics. Further, the proportion of “hot” topics has increased relative to “cold” topics, though the latter category still accounts for the majority of consumer research articles.

Disciplinary Influence and Alternative Orientations in Consumer Research: Behavioral Decision Theory Versus Social Cognition and Positivist Versus Postmodern

As indicated, consumer researchers who have been influenced by particular fields have tended to work on different topics and employ different research methods. In this section we explore two contrasts: (a) BDT versus social cognition consumer research and (b) positivist versus postmodern consumer research.

The Behavioral Decision Theory and Social-Cognition Approaches to Consumer Research Whereas the distinction between social and cognitive research does not play nearly as significant a role in consumer research as it does in psychology, the somewhat loose distinction between social cognition-based research and so-called BDT is more prominent in consumer research. In psychology, BDT accounts for a relatively small segment of the literature, although leading BDT researchers such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have had great impact on both the cognitive and social psychological literatures. In the consumer behavior literature, research that follows the BDT research paradigm has accounted for a large and growing proportion of all nonpostmodern articles published in the leading journals. Indeed, the central BDT issues of judgment and choice are directly relevant to the most researched area in marketing and consumer behavior, namely, influences on purchase decisions. Furthermore, BDT research serves as a bridge between the “behavioral” and “quantitative” sides of marketing because both BDT and quantitative research share the link to economics and the focus on consumer choice. Conversely, quantitative research in marketing tends to have less in common with social cognition consumer research (and even less with postmodern research).

First, it should be emphasized that social cognition and BDT researchers in marketing share many of the same research values and methods. For example,

in the debate between the positivist and postmodern approaches to research, both social cognition and BDT researchers, by and large, are on the same (positivist) side. Furthermore, there are differences in emphasis among researchers within the consumer BDT and social cognition subfields, making it difficult to generalize regarding differences between the two camps. In particular, much BDT consumer research has investigated the processes underlying judgments and decisions (e.g. Coupey 1994, Dhar & Nowlis 1999, Sen & Johnson 1997). Conversely, other BDT research has focused more on judgment and decision-making phenomena, such as the manner in which consumers integrate the opinions of multiple critics (e.g. West & Broniarczyk 1998) or the impact of anticipating regret (e.g. Simonson 1992), where process measures are either not used at all or provide additional insights but are not the focus of the research. Similarly, there are large differences among social cognition consumer researchers with respect to both research methods and topics (see, e.g. Kisielius & Sternthal 1984 and Tybout et al 1983, compared with Alba et al 1999 and Lynch et al 1988).

With the caveat that there are exceptions to each of the following generalizations, there are several key differences between BDT and social cognition consumer research:

1. One obvious difference relates to the primary influences on each area. Social cognition consumer research has been influenced primarily by social cognition research in psychology (e.g. Chaiken 1980, Fiske & Taylor 1984). Conversely, the primary influence on BDT consumer research has been the BDT literature, including the work of Kahneman & Tversky (e.g. 1979), Thaler (1985), and other researchers. Furthermore, similar to BDT research published in nonmarketing journals, BDT consumer research has tended to use the normative benchmark of value maximization and time-consistent preferences for evaluating the significance of research findings. Thus, findings that demonstrate violations of the classical economic assumptions regarding buyer behavior have typically been regarded as interesting and important. For example, BDT consumer researchers have demonstrated that, (a) the framing of product attributes (e.g. ground beef that is "80% lean" or has "20% fat") influences product evaluation even after actual experience ("80% lean beef" tasted better than "20% fat beef;" Gaeth & Levin 1988); (b) when costs significantly precede benefits, the sunk cost effect is greatly diminished (Gourville & Soman 1998); (c) the interaction between the pleasure of consumption and the pain of paying has predictable impact on consumer behavior and hedonics (Prelec & Loewenstein 1998); and (d) preference elicitation tasks involving comparison of options (e.g. choice), judgments of individual options (e.g. ratings), and matching of two options varying in price and quality, produce systematically different preferences (e.g. Carmon & Simonson 1998, Hsee & Leclerc 1998, Nowlis & Simonson 1997). In recent years, the focus has shifted from demonstrations of value maximization violations

to studies that are designed to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the construction of preferences (e.g. Drolet et al 2000; for a review, see Bettman et al 1998).

2. Social cognition and BDT consumer research have tended to build on different underlying models of buyer behavior and the communication process. One often referenced response hierarchy model (e.g. McGuire 1969), which has its origin in the communications area, includes the following stages: exposure/attention → reception/encoding → cognitive response → attitude → intention → behavior. The other model, which focuses on consumer decision making (or buying process), includes the following stages (e.g. Peter & Olson 1993): problem recognition → information search → evaluation of alternatives → purchase decision/choice → postpurchase evaluation. Although these two models highlight somewhat different elements in the consumer response and decision-making process (e.g. attention and intention versus search and evaluation) and employ different terminology, the essential components are quite similar. Thus, for example, most studies that examine influences on attitudes and attitude change also effectively investigate the formation of preferences and alternative evaluation, and vice versa (e.g. Morwitz et al 1993). However, whereas social cognition consumer research has focused on the stages in the communications (or hierarchy-of-effects) model and on how judgments and attitudes are formed, BDT consumer research has tended to examine the decision-making model and particularly the determinants of choice.
3. Related to item 2, whereas BDT consumer researchers have studied primarily stimulus-based phenomena (e.g. Dhar 1997, Kahn & Louie 1990), social cognition research has focused more on memory-based tasks (e.g. Alba et al 1991; Biehal & Chakravarti 1982, 1983). For example, building on the influential accessibility-diagnostics model of Feldman & Lynch (1988), Lynch et al (1988) proposed that decisions arise from a process whereby inputs are sequentially retrieved from memory, with the consumer updating the implications of already considered evidence with each new input retrieved. The order of retrieval is a function of the accessibility of each input, but accessible information can be actively disregarded if it is perceived to be nondiagnostic.
4. Although there are certainly exceptions to this generalization, BDT research has tended to focus more on substantive phenomena, which are explained based on existing theories or lead to theoretical extensions. Conversely, a greater share of social cognition consumer research has involved theory testing and extensions that have implications for the consumer environment (e.g. Ratneshwar & Chaiken 1991).
5. There are also differences in the process measures that social cognition and BDT consumer researchers tend to use. Social cognition researchers often

employ measures such as cognitive response (e.g. Sternthal et al 1978) and recall to gain insights into cognitive processes. In the BDT area, researchers who have used process measures tended to rely primarily on measures of information acquisition, verbal protocols, and response time (e.g. Bettman & Park 1980, Brucks 1988, Johnson 1984, Sen & Johnson 1997). There is no obvious explanation for the different process measures employed. Finally, the use of mediation and path analysis is more common in social cognition than in BDT consumer research.

Despite the differences between the social cognition and BDT approaches to consumer research, the main topics of investigation are closely related and the research methods, by and large, are similar. Thus, decreasing the division between the two areas and increasing communication and collaboration can advance the consumer research field. Consider, for example, the currently dominant view of consumer persuasion based on the elaboration likelihood model (e.g. Petty et al 1983). Briefly, evaluation of arguments presented in an ad is a frequent example of processing through the central route, whereas the impact of background music represents an example of persuasion through the peripheral route. However, depending on the motivation and ability to process the information, the same cue (e.g. the product endorser) might influence persuasion through either the central or peripheral route (e.g. Petty et al 1991).

In the BDT literature researchers have made a related distinction between compensatory and heuristic-based decision rules (see, e.g. Bettman 1979). This distinction, however, refers typically to the manner in which consumers process attribute information, as opposed to different types of information. Interestingly, BDT researchers have not paid much attention to the manner in which typical peripheral cues, such as source characteristics and background music, impact consumer preferences. On the other hand, BDT consumer researchers have studied extensively the impact of various contextual factors, such as task characteristics (e.g. Fischer et al 1999) and the configuration of the option set under consideration (e.g. Huber et al 1982, Huber & Puto 1983, Wernerfelt 1995), on consumer preferences. These contextual moderators have not received much attention in social cognition research on attitude and persuasion, even though such factors appear quite relevant to our understanding of attitude and persuasion.

Another area that could potentially benefit from increased integration of BDT and social cognition research involves the BDT notion of construction of preferences and the related concepts in social cognition of attitude accessibility and diagnosticity (e.g. Fazio et al 1989, Feldman & Lynch 1988), as well as the notions of attitude strength and ambivalence (e.g. Priester & Petty 1996). For example, Krosnick & Shuman (1988) showed that, contrary to common assumptions, measured attitudes of individuals whose attitudes are intense, important, and held with certainty, are just as susceptible to response order effects as other respondents'. A related finding from BDT consumer research is that expertise and involvement (e.g. owing to accountability) often do not diminish and, in some cases, enhance

the susceptibility of consumers to judgment and decision errors such as overconfidence and the attraction effect (e.g. Mahajan 1992, Simonson 1989; but see Coupey et al 1998). Thus, by integrating findings from the social cognition and BDT areas, we are likely to gain a better understanding of the moderators of consumer susceptibility to various biases.

Another example of a finding in social cognition research that might have significant BDT implications is the observation that stronger, more accessible attitudes diminish sensitivity to changes in the attitude object (Fazio et al 2000). In particular, it suggests that, although well-formed, stable preferences might represent the ideal sovereign consumer, it might actually reduce consumer welfare and choice effectiveness. Finally, social cognition research on the measurement and construction of attitudes (e.g. Menon et al 1995; for a review, see Schwarz & Bohner 2000) can have significant implications for decision research, and vice versa. In sum, despite the differences in research traditions, issues, and methods, we believe there is a need and opportunity for greater interaction and collaboration between social cognition and BDT consumer researchers.

Postmodern and Positivist Consumer Research So-called postmodern consumer research emerged in the 1980s (see also Levy 1959) and offered an alternative perspective to the purpose of consumer research, the important topics of investigation, and the research methods. An analysis of articles published between 1980 and 1999 in the major journal in the field, *JCR*, reveals that the proportion of postmodern research increased during the 1980s and represented approximately 20% of the published articles since 1990 (with the majority of the remaining articles representing positivist research). Briefly, whereas positivist research attempts to uncover cause-and-effect relationships and focuses on explanations, the postmodern approach focuses more on interpretation than causation and believes in a more subjective view of data interpretation (for a contrast of the two approaches, see Hudson & Ozanne 1988).

Postmodern researchers have also emphasized the need to distinguish consumer research from other fields and to avoid using managerial relevance as a criterion for evaluating research. For example, Belk (1986, p. 423) writes, "My own vision is one of consumer behavior as a discipline unto itself, with a variety of constituent groups, but with no overriding loyalty to any existing discipline or interest group. That is, consumer behavior should not be a subdiscipline of marketing, advertising, psychology, sociology, or anthropology, nor the handmaiden of business, government, or consumers. It should instead be a viable field of study, just as these other disciplines are, with some potential relevance to each of these constituent groups." Holbrook (1987, p. 128) proposes that consumer research refers to the "study of consummation in all its many aspects." Indeed, whereas most positivist research has focused on issues related to purchase decisions, a main emphasis in postmodern consumer research has been on specific consumption experiences and aspects of consumer behavior that had not previously been considered important areas for consumer research. For example, Belk & Costa (1998) recently published

a paper regarding the mountain man myth, Thompson (1996) studied the juggling lifestyles of mothers, Arnould & Price (1993) studied the experience of river rafting, and Holbrook & Grayson (1986) provided a semiotic perspective of the movie *Out of Africa*. Also, in his 1998 presidential address to the Association of Consumer Research, John Sherry argued that traditional prose articles might be insufficient vessels for our understanding of consumer behavior and that other vehicles, such as poetry, can more effectively capture the subjective experience of inquiries about consumer behavior.

It should be noted that, in addition to what many positivist researchers regard as unusual topics, some postmodern consumer researchers have examined mainstream topics, such as customer satisfaction (Fournier & Mick 1999). However, by and large, postmodern researchers have introduced both new methods and new kinds of topics, inspired by research in anthropology, literature, and other fields that had previously had limited impact on consumer research. Similar to postmodern researchers in other disciplines such as anthropology, postmodern consumer researchers have employed different methodologies, including existential phenomenology (e.g. O'Guinn & Faber 1989, Thompson et al 1989), hermeneutics (Arnould & Fischer 1994), participant observation (Schouten & McAlexander 1995), in-depth interviews (Hirschman 1994), ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994), critical theory (Murray & Ozanne 1991), literary criticism (Stern 1989), and introspection (Gould 1991; but see Wallendorf & Brucks 1993).

The combination of what was perceived as a different kind of science, which deviates from traditional methods of analyzing and interpreting data, with what was perceived as unusual topics, has evoked strong opposition from many positivist researchers. For example, Cohen (1989) criticizes Belk's research on the role of consumer possessions (1988), arguing that it lacks meaning, empirical identification, and explanatory power. On the other hand, Firat & Venkatesh (1995, p. 260) appeal to positivist researchers to be more receptive to alternative paradigms, stating, "We therefore ask the consumer researchers who are steeped in the methods of cognitive psychology to come out of their protective shells, to set themselves free from unidimensional conceptions. ...It means that we must opt for multiple theories of consumer behavior rather than a single theory that silences all other theories."

At this stage, after the positions of proponents of the two convictions have been expressed in different forums, there is rather limited ongoing communication between them. Looking ahead, it is reasonable to expect that the intensity of the postmodern-positivist debate will diminish. Furthermore, because current marketing doctoral students in some schools are exposed to both positivist and postmodern professors, they are likely to be more receptive to both approaches. Most importantly, despite the current differences in methodology and topics, there are significant opportunities for collaboration. McQuarrie & Mick (1992) provided a fine example of the virtues of combining semiotics analysis and experiments in their research on advertising resonance. Indeed, with more openness and tolerance on both sides, there is significant room for collaboration and combining the advantages of both approaches. Although many positivist researchers are unlikely to

change their views regarding data collection and analysis, the limitations of the traditional experimental methodologies and measures may enhance their willingness to combine quantitative data with less structured, more qualitative methods. Also, although positivist and postmodern consumer researchers have so far focused on different kinds of topics, as indicated, the methods employed by postmodern researchers could also be applied to more traditional topics, such as decision making, persuasion, regret, and affect.

Types of Consumer Research: Theory Development Versus Theory Application

Consumer research can be classified along a continuum from basic research, involving new theories, concepts, and explanations, to applications and minor extensions of existing theories and concepts. One might expect that in the early development of a new applied field such as consumer research there would be greater emphasis on applications of existing theories and borrowing from other, more established fields. However, over time, consumer researchers may seek to go beyond mere applications and minor theoretical extensions and introduce significant theoretical extensions and concepts, and in some cases, new theories relating to buyer behavior.

To examine this question more systematically, two independent judges (doctoral students specializing in consumer behavior) coded consumer research articles (not including postmodern articles) that have appeared in the August issues of the *Journal of Marketing Research* between 1969 and 1999 and articles that appeared in the September issues of the *JCR* between 1974 (the journal's first year) and 1999. Specifically, the judges coded articles dealing with consumer behavior on 1–4 scale, where 1 represents applications or minor extensions of established theories and phenomena (e.g. an investigation of a particular moderator or boundary condition, or ruling out an alternative explanation), and 4 represents articles introducing new constructs, theories, and/or phenomena.

The results show a significant time trend (correlation = 0.15), with the linear regression model yielding a significant coefficient for year as a predictor ($p < 0.005$). Specifically, looking at 5-year periods from 1969 through 1998, the proportion of articles coded as applications of existing theories and minor extensions (i.e. articles coded 1 or 2 on the 1–4 scale) declined continuously, from 94% in 1969–1973 to 66% in 1994–1998. This trend is consistent with the notion that, as the field has evolved, the appreciation for research that merely applies theories developed elsewhere has declined. Although the consumer environment places some interesting constraints, and demonstrations that certain theories have implications for consumers and marketers can be important, such research is increasingly regarded as making limited (conceptual) contributions and not worthy of publication in the leading journals. Indeed, to the extent that the consumer environment is just another instance of the relevant constructs, there is no conceptual reason to expect the theories not to apply.

We also examined whether there has been a trend with respect to research topics that examine issues that are specific to and relevant primarily to consumer research

and marketing as opposed to topics of general interest that might have been published in psychology and other basic discipline journals. For example, whereas the topic of brand equity and extension is central to marketing (e.g. Aaker 1997, Aaker & Keller 1990, Broniarczyk & Alba 1994, Fournier 1998, Keller 1993, Gardner & Levy 1955, Park et al 1991), it has limited significance to other fields. Excluding postmodern articles from the analysis, there has not been a significant change on that dimension; during 1969–1973, 67% of the articles were classified as consumer/marketing specific (1 or 2 on the 1–4 scale), and since 1973 the two topic categories (consumer-specific versus general) have accounted for approximately the same share of consumer research articles.

In summary, our review of the state of consumer research and developments in the field over the past 30 years points to several key trends. First, research topics continue to be influenced by trends in other disciplines, especially psychology. Second, related to the multidisciplinary impact, the consumer research field is characterized by significant divisions between subareas, which not only tend to study different topics, but also differ in terms of their research orientation and methods. Finally, our analysis points to a growing emphasis on original topics and theories compared with applications of existing theories adopted from other fields.

IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY: The Role of Relevance, Theory Testing, and Substantive Phenomena

As the preceding review of developments in consumer research and multidisciplinary influence on the field suggests, despite the progress in terms of the quality and quantity of published articles, some of the fundamental debates regarding the objectives and the appropriate topics and methods have not been resolved. The view that consumer research “seeks to produce knowledge about consumer behavior” (Calder & Tybout 1987, p. 136) implies that the important consumer research topics are also main topics in other disciplines, creating ambiguity as to what distinguishes consumer research (other than being a “one-stop shop” for studies of relevance to consumer behavior). Another “constraint” that significantly affects the priorities of many consumer researchers is the fact that most of them are marketing professors in schools of business and might have (explicit and/or implicit) incentives to focus on research topics that are potentially relevant to managers and, to a lesser degree, other constituencies. In this concluding section we examine the different perspectives on the role of relevance and the emphasis on theory-testing versus substantive phenomena-driven research (which leads to theory development), as well as the implications of these approaches for the purpose and identity of the consumer research field.

The Objectives and (Ir)Relevance of Consumer Research One would expect any research field or discipline to have a unique identity and purpose that separate it from other fields. Earlier we cited the vision of the first editor of the *JCR*, Ronald Frank (1974), regarding the domain-specific aspects of consumer behavior that he expected researchers from multiple disciplines to examine. At about

the same time, the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) was founded with the goal of providing “a forum for exchange of ideas among those interested in consumer behavior research in academic disciplines, in government at all levels from local through national, in private business, and in other sectors such as non-profit organizations and foundations” (Pratt 1974, p. 4). In 1993, Wells argued that the original vision for the consumer research field has faded and the discipline “faces inward, toward a narrower range of issues, and away from the real world.”

Whether or not one shares this assessment of the state of the field, it appears that the original vision regarding the direction and objectives of the ACR and *JCR* has not materialized. With relatively few exceptions, *JCR* and the ACR have not become forums in which researchers from multiple fields exchange ideas about consumer behavior. Also, although some articles published in *JCR* and other journals have examined specific consumer issues, such as food and energy consumption and the provision of nutrition information (e.g. Reilly & Wallendorf 1987, Ritchie et al 1981, Russo et al 1986), most articles published in the leading journals have examined more generic topics such as choice and attitudes. Thus, it is sometimes unclear what differentiates consumer research from other disciplines, except for the experimental stimuli used (e.g. choice between cars versus choice between bets) and the research positioning.

It is also noteworthy that consumer research has not differed significantly from psychology with respect to the proportion of laboratory studies and the use of student subjects. Specifically, our analysis of articles published in the leading consumer research journals² indicates that (a) the proportion of laboratory studies (defined as studies in which participants were aware that they were participating in a study) climbed from about 80% to around 90% in the mid-1970s and has stayed at that level ever since and (b) whereas the proportion of studies using student subjects was only about 30% until the early 1980s, the use of student subjects has increased steadily since then, representing approximately 75% of (positivist) studies published during the 1995–1999 period (see McGrath & Brinberg 1983, Calder et al 1981, and Lynch 1982 for a discussion of the virtues of using homogeneous subject populations such as students).

A related question regarding the role and identity of consumer research is the issue of relevance (see Shimp 1994 for a comprehensive and insightful discussion of this question). Should consumer research be relevant and useful in a concrete way to particular constituencies, or should consumer research produce general knowledge about consumer behavior that could potentially be relevant to various constituencies? Shimp argues that, although consumer research may not be directly relevant to managers and other particular constituencies (other than fellow academics), the knowledge produced by consumer researchers is eventually diffused through teaching, books, consulting, and other channels.

²This analysis is based on an examination of consumer behavior articles published in the August issues of the *Journal of Marketing Research* between 1969 and 1999, and articles published in the September issues of the *JCR* from 1974 till 1999.

The (ir)relevance of consumer research to managers has received particular attention, and as business schools become more sensitive and responsive to criticism of companies, students, and the popular media, this issue has gained prominence. Although there is continuing disagreement among consumer researchers regarding the virtues of being relevant to managers (e.g. Holbrook 1985), there appears to be general consensus that (academic) consumer research has had rather limited actual impact on managerial practice [(e.g. Lutz 1991, Wells 1993; an exception to this generalization is some of the studies dealing with new research methodologies [e.g. Green & Srinivasan 1978])]. Interestingly, consumer research articles increasingly emphasize the managerial implications of the findings, and in some journals, having specific managerial implications is one of the conditions for publication. Yet, few managers (or consumers) read consumer research articles that are published in the major journals, and the issues investigated are typically not at a level that is of much use for them.

Also, the proportion of articles published in the major marketing journals that have public policy implications declined in the 1990s compared with the 1970s and 1980s (though this trend might be explained in part by the introduction of the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*). Our analysis³ indicates that, during the second half of the 1970s through the 1980s, approximately 20% of the consumer research articles published in major consumer research journals included public policy implications (e.g. Andreasen 1985, Beales et al 1981), but the proportion of public policy–relevant articles declined to approximately 3% in the 1990s (e.g. Block & Anand-Keller 1995, Pechmann & Ratneshwar 1994).

This situation, whereby a field of research has limited concrete relevance or immediate impact on particular constituencies, is certainly not unique to consumer research. Furthermore, it is easy to identify reasons for the limited relevance of consumer research, including (a) the emphasis on theoretical contribution, rigor, and statistical (rather than practical) significance tends to limit the practical relevance; (b) the research, review, and publication process typically takes several years; (c) unlike researchers in other departments (e.g. medical researchers), who depend on external funding, many consumer researchers require limited funds, and these funds are typically provided by the business schools; (d) the gatekeepers of the leading consumer research journals are almost exclusively academics (for example, in 1999, 88 of the 90 members of the *JCR* Editorial Board were university professors); and (e) many consumer researchers have limited institutional knowledge and may be removed from the concerns and problems faced by managers, public policy makers, and even consumers (e.g. Armstrong 1991, Hoch 1988).

³Two independent coders rated each consumer research article published in August issues of the *Journal of Marketing Research* (since 1969), September issues of the *JCR* (since 1974), and Summer issues of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (since 1991) in terms of the relevance of its findings and conclusions to public policy makers. The coders used a 0–3 scale where 0 = not at all relevant and 3 = very relevant.

Theory-Testing Versus Substantive Phenomena-Driven Consumer Research

Calder & Tybout (1999; see also Calder et al 1981) distinguish between (a) theory testing, which involves testing of explanations and relations among underlying constructs as well as “intervention testing” (i.e. theory applications) and (b) effect applications, in which the research question is whether previously observed effects derived from a particular theory extend to specific other settings. In the former a study is designed to provide the strongest test of the theory, with an emphasis on internal rather than external validity, whereas the latter requires that the experimental design represents most accurately the settings of interest. Importantly, both types of research are driven by existing theories—either theory testing or applications and extensions of theories to particular settings. The argument for emphasizing research that is designed to test and apply theories is that it generates universal principles that “explain any real-world situation within their domain” (Calder et al 1981). From that perspective, theoretical explanations are the most important product of research, whereas generalized empirical phenomena have a lower status and are primarily designed to test and potentially falsify the theory. However, the starting point and motivation for a research project might be either theory testing or a study of a particular substantive (or methodological) domain that yields a set of observations (see discussion of the validity network schema [McGrath & Brinberg 1983, Brinberg & McGrath 1985]). Such empirical observations are typically interpreted based on existing theories, and they often suggest extensions or modifications of existing theories.

Although both theory tests and research that begins with substantive issues and phenomena can contribute to theory building, there are important differences between them. First, with the latter approach, the substantive phenomena investigated are considered interesting in their own right, as opposed to being merely arenas for theory testing. For example, understanding whether and under what conditions consumers discount missing attribute values (e.g. Meyer 1981), draw spontaneous inferences when processing ads (e.g. Kardes 1988), tend to confirm hypotheses generated by ads (e.g. Deighton 1984, Hoch & Ha 1986), prefer pioneering brands (e.g. Carpenter & Nakamoto 1989, Kardes et al 1993), and prefer to co-consume items (e.g. a tasty, unhealthy appetizer and a healthier, less tasty entree) that “balance” each other (e.g. Dhar & Simonson 1999) are research-worthy questions in their own right. The findings of such investigations, in turn, often contribute to theory development.

A second implication of substantive issue-driven research is that identifying generalized empirical phenomena is an important step in the research process. For example, Huber et al (1982) made an interesting observation whereby the addition of an asymmetrically dominated option to a two-option set increases the (absolute) choice share of the dominating option, in violation of the economic assumption of value maximization. Although Huber et al offered several possible explanations, there was no clear theoretical account for this phenomenon when the article was published. However, this finding generated a great deal of interest, leading subsequently to the development of theoretical accounts for such “context

effects” (e.g. Ariely & Wallsten 1995, Simonson & Tversky 1992). In that respect, consumer researchers can learn from the “quantitative” researchers in marketing, who often begin with an examination of relevant empirical phenomena, leading to empirical generalizations and theory building (Bass & Wind 1995).⁴

Relatedly, Alba (1999) suggested that less emphasis on theory tests and greater emphasis on obtaining data points would help advance the consumer research field. He writes, “Despite its multidisciplinary positioning, consumer research has been influenced by a narrow set of scientific traditions. A characteristic trait of these traditions is an emphasis on ‘theory,’ which is loosely conceived but frequently embodied in structural models or process explanations of empirical phenomena. ...The irony for consumer research, however, is that it places premium on theory when in reality it is starved for reliable data points.” This point of view is consistent with the approach employed, for example, in medical research, where robust effects are regarded as interesting and important in and of themselves, with the theory often developed at a later time.

This does not mean that theory testing is not an important priority for consumer researchers (e.g. Petty & Cacioppo 1996). Indeed, theories such as the elaboration likelihood model (e.g. Petty et al 1983) and prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky 1979) have had tremendous impact on the field. However, a question that arises is whether the dominant emphasis on theory-tests as opposed to substantive domain-driven consumer research has indeed enhanced the contribution and the impact of consumer research on its various constituencies. Lutz (1991) argued that the likelihood that theory-tests will yield insights into substantive phenomena of interest is quite remote and that the most likely yield is with respect to the theory being tested. He further proposed that one way to ensure better representation of the substantive domain is to conduct research in naturally occurring consumer purchase, consumption, and communications situations (see also Winer 1999). This argument is related to the debate in the consumer research literature regarding the proper role and significance of external validity in theory tests (e.g. Calder et al 1981, Lynch 1982). Consistent with Lutz’s position, if in addition to theory testing, the goal of a research program is to gain a better understanding of particular substantive phenomena and the boundaries of relevant theories, then inclusion of field studies, even if they require some compromise with respect to internal validity, becomes important. As Taylor argued (1998, p. 84), “... to the extent that any program of research must ultimately address both what can happen and what does happen, making use of laboratory experiments to the exclusion of parallel field studies is unwise. Moreover, field studies ... provide valuable insights into the

⁴A possible limitation of substantive domain-driven research is that there are no clear criteria for determining which questions are interesting and worthy of research, whereas theory tests might offer clearer guidelines. However, the research community, in general, and journal reviewers, in particular, can help educate researchers as to the types of substantive issues considered interesting.

natural contexts in which phenomena occur; they provide information about the strength of the phenomena, given correlated environmental circumstances; they may be helpful in elucidating mediation; and they are extremely important for identifying variables both internal to the person and the environmental nature that moderate the phenomenon.”

Similarly, Shimp (1994; see also Lehmann 1996) proposed that consumer research needs to put far greater emphasis on “consumer behavior that occurs within the milieu of actual marketplace phenomena.” He suggested that theories taken from other disciplines should be used as instruments rather than as the primary objectives of empirical inquiry. The ultimate goal, he argues, is “the development of theory about actual consumer behavior that may serve the needs of all markets interested in consumer research: academics, students, businesspeople, public policy officials, and society at large”(p. 5).

CONCLUSION

We have examined the current state of consumer research, the multidisciplinary influences on the field and their consequences, as well as the question of what differentiates it from other fields. Multiple influences on an applied area and an identity problem are probably not unique to consumer research (see, e.g. Tetlock’s 1998 discussion of the “reductionist syllogism” in his review of research on world politics). However, because consumer behavior is such a broad area in which the central topics are shared with other fields and disciplines, it is particularly susceptible to division and disagreement regarding the key research topics and how research should be conducted. In this review we have explored the differences between three particular subfields—social cognition, BDT, and postmodern consumer research—and highlighted the opportunities for greater collaboration.

Importantly, although multiple and, in some cases, incompatible influences tend to generate disagreements, the exposure to multidisciplinary influences and the different approaches represented in consumer research are also a significant strength that contributes to the quality and diversity of scholarly work. Thus, some studies conducted by consumer researchers represent basic research, dealing with the same fundamental issues that researchers in the related disciplines investigate. In fact, in certain basic research areas that are particularly relevant to businesses and consumers, such as decision making, business schools, including consumer researchers, appear to have taken the lead from the relevant disciplines (e.g. psychology). In addition to basic research, consumer researchers will also continue to apply, test, and extend theories developed in other disciplines. Such research can have significant impact on the field and often contributes to theory development. In particular, the consumer environment imposes relevant constraints and the stimuli used are often richer and more complex than those employed by researchers in psychology. This, in turn, forces the researcher to evaluate the boundaries

of the theory, which can lead to theoretical extensions and improve our understanding of the moderating factors and the conditions under which the theory is applicable.

A third type of consumer research, which we believe deserves greater emphasis, focuses on substantive phenomena of interest and often leads to theory development (e.g. Alba 1999, Lutz 1991, Shimp 1994; see also Cialdini 1980). Because such research tends to be motivated by phenomena rather than by theory-testing, it is sometimes viewed as atheoretical and of lower status. However, rigorous studies of substantive phenomena build on the relative advantages and incentives of consumer researchers (and business school faculty more generally), and in many cases make significant contributions to theory development. Furthermore, compared to researchers in the basic disciplines, consumer researchers often have greater exposure to "real world" problems (e.g. of organizations and consumers) and easier access to data relating to substantive phenomena.

The saying that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" not withstanding, another advantage of substantive phenomena-driven research is that it is usually more relevant, particularly to the phenomena being investigated. Whether or not researchers believe it is good for consumer research (e.g. Holbrook 1985), the pressure on business school faculty to be relevant and the incentives to conduct research that is relevant in a reasonably concrete way to managers and/or other constituencies continue to play a significant role that many researchers are unlikely to ignore. Although ulterior motives have some negative associations, an emphasis on relevance should not come at the expense of rigor and, ultimately, theoretical contribution. Furthermore, in addition to tightly controlled lab studies that allow unconfounded tests of cause and effect, substantive domain-focused investigations will benefit from the inclusion of studies in more naturalistic settings, even if such tests involve a certain compromise in terms of internal validity. Also, when conducting lab studies, consumer research will benefit from greater attention to using stimuli and tasks that include the essential characteristics of the relevant substantive domains.

Consider, for example, a study of buyer behavior in online auctions, which examines various factors that influence bidding behavior and the willingness to pay for items being auctioned. In addition to improving our understanding of online auctions, such research might have significant theoretical implications regarding escalation, competitive behavior, inference making, perceived value, and other conceptually important issues. A researcher embarking on such a project may begin the investigation by observing actual online auctions, which might offer some tentative hypotheses regarding relevant influences. However, in all likelihood, the presence of confounding factors will limit the researcher's ability to establish unambiguously the generality of the observed phenomena and their causes. Accordingly, the researcher may conduct lab studies using simulated auctions, possibly providing incentives to participants, such as indicating that one or more of the auctions will actually be applied. This lab research, in turn, may lead to additional field experiments that might provide further insights.

In summary, the relative emphasis on theory-testing versus substantive domain-driven research and on external validity is relevant also to the question of the identity of the consumer research field. A greater emphasis on substantive phenomena and the combination of tightly controlled lab studies with investigations in more naturalistic settings, we believe, will differentiate the field and enhance its impact on both theory and practice. Indeed, buyer behavior offers an exceptionally rich domain for studying a wide range of real world phenomena that have potentially important theoretical implications. Furthermore, with the advancement of new technologies and the rise of the Internet, consumer researchers are in a much better position today to conduct investigations that deal with marketplace phenomena while maintaining experimental control. Finally, a greater emphasis on rigorous, systematic, substantive phenomena-driven research has the potential to produce major contributions to theory, precisely because the starting point is not an existing theory. Thus, such research can significantly enhance the impact of the consumer research field on researchers in the consumer and related fields, industry, and public policy makers.

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