

# Our Vision for the *Journal of Consumer Research*: It's All about the Consumer

Founded in 1974, the *Journal of Consumer Research* is a leading journal in the field of social science, with a rich history of publishing multidisciplinary research focused on the study of consumers. *JCR* has been fortunate to have had strong editorial leadership over the years, and has forged a prestigious reputation. We are honored and humbled by the *Journal of Consumer Research* Policy Board's decision to select us to shepherd *JCR* for the next three years.

During any editorial transition, there is a level of uncertainty regarding the direction in which the editors plan to take the journal. Authors, particularly junior authors, are wary of editorial changes that might affect the likelihood of their work being published in the journal. To alleviate this uncertainty, we present our ambitions for *JCR* under our editorship and our plans to realize those ambitions. As we do so, we gratefully acknowledge the excellent job done by the outgoing team of Darren Dahl, Eileen Fischer, Gita Johar, and Vicki Morwitz. This editorial team is passing the baton of a journal that is in great shape. Enabled by the careful, rigorous stewardship of the journal over many committed past editorships, we have high ambitions for our editorial term.

## OUR AMBITION FOR THE *JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH*

**Our basic ambition is to make the *Journal of Consumer Research* the first choice for submission of all high-quality, consumer-relevant research.** At its core, *JCR*'s mission is to increase the understanding of consumer behavior and its underpinnings. In order to achieve such understanding, we feel strongly that *JCR* needs to be receptive to a broad array of consumer research. Thus, we will adopt a "big tent" approach to all research that focuses on a consumer-relevant question.

The ambition to create a big tent for high-quality, consumer-relevant research does not originate with our editorial team. This philosophy is reflected in the *JCR* Policy Board's composition of 11 sponsoring organizations that run the gamut from base disciplines (Society for Personality and Social Psychology, American Sociological Association, American Anthropological Association) to quantitative (American Statistical Association, INFORMS) and applied fields (American Marketing Association, American Association for Public Opinion Research, International Communication Association, Association for Consumer Research, American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, Society for Consumer Psychology). From the beginning, the founders of *JCR* and the field of consumer research stressed interdisciplinary and broad relevance goals. Several past editors have made valiant efforts to realize those goals, incorporating new research paradigms and methods and promoting interdisciplinary consumer research (see Lutz 1989). Despite efforts by many committed editors and scholars, however, a thoughtful examination of the disciplinary status of consumer behavior concluded that consumer behavior is currently not an interdisciplinary field and perhaps not as multidisciplinary as it could or should be (MacInnis and Folkes 2010). In that same year, the editorial team of Deighton, MacInnis, McGill, and Shiv invited findings papers (heavy on effects, light on theory), and conceptual contributions (heavy on ideas, light on data) (2010, 895); but several years later there are still few published papers that map onto these goals. The editorial team of Peracchio, Luce, and McGill ended their term with an editorial calling on us to pursue "bridges rather than silos," noting that they view the "failure to transition to a more integrative approach to research" as the primary challenge for the healthy evolution of consumer research (2014, vi). In 2014, the most recent editorial team of Dahl, Fischer, Johar, and Morwitz summarized their vision for advancing the journal "with a single mantra: 'make it meaningful,'" suggesting that we begin with attention to how the research will inform the attitudes and behaviors of the intended audience (iii).

Despite long-standing and heartfelt ambitions to create a big tent for impactful, consumer-relevant research, we are still far from obtaining that goal. Many agree that "value placed on research rigor and sophistication exceeds the value placed on the importance of the research question and the substantive insights provided by that research," (Lynch et al. 2012, 474; Lehmann, McAlister, and Staelin 2011). Many express quietly, and some not so quietly, that too much of what appears in *JCR* and our other leading journals has narrow scope; uses narrow theoretical lenses; relies on easy, cheap, nonrepresentative samples; and puts too much emphasis on process rather than on detecting and describing generalizable, substantive phenomena (Campbell forthcoming; Lynch et al. 2012; Inman 2012; Pham 2013; Wertenbroch 2015). Previous editors and scholars have bemoaned a methodological orthodoxy that "includes mediation analysis even if meaningless. . . a threshold number of

experiments, a veneer of deductive logic” (Lynch et al. 2012, 481), creating a false sense that “every paper needs to mediate, then moderate, then moderate the mediation or mediate the moderation,” (Peracchio, Luce, and McGill 2014, vi). Moreover, arguably across both deductive and nondeductive approaches to research questions, too much emphasis has been placed on novel findings, new theories, or surprising contexts without reference to the importance or relevance underlying that novelty or how it contributes to existing knowledge (Campbell forthcoming; Shavitt 2011). This may discourage researchers from building programmatic work to answer important consumer problems, and instead encourages researchers to search for counterintuitive, surprising effects that few believe and fewer find useful. Useful knowledge creation relies not only on planting seedlings, but also on promoting collective efforts to grow trees of knowledge on important consumer problems, seeking to enhance and find nuance in what we know through programmatic research (Campbell forthcoming; Shavitt 2011).

In his cartoon promoting the inaugural Earth Day in 1970, cartoonist Walt Kelly’s character Pogo famously quips, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” This could also be applied to describe the situation at *JCR*. Over time, associate editors and reviewers at *JCR* seem to have adopted a process-first mindset that emphasizes deductive-conceptual contributions far more heavily and emphasizes consumer-problem insights less heavily than perhaps they would if they were reviewing the same manuscript at another journal. Lynch et al. (2012) discuss multiple routes by which consumer research can create knowledge. They present a  $2 \times 2$  typology of the research’s intended contribution (conceptual versus substantive) and focus (concepts first versus findings first). This leads to four general types of research: conceptual contributions via deduction, substantive contributions via deduction, conceptual contributions via nondeductive routes, and nondeductive substantive contributions. At this point, most articles published in *JCR* are focused on conceptual contributions via deduction. With some notable exceptions, findings-focused research tends to face a strong headwind in the review process and has been less likely to appear in *JCR*.

**A primary goal of our editorship is for *JCR* to include a broader range of manuscripts that expand knowledge about consumers.** We welcome expansive scholarship, from research that focuses on making conceptual contributions to our understanding of consumers, to research that explicates a meaningful consumer problem or issue. We will strive to expand beyond the process-first approach to welcome consumer-focused papers that adopt nondeductive approaches to appropriately document and measure *important* effects. We will also strive to encourage a broader range of quantitative and qualitative methods, including many that are just emerging, to explore consumer-relevant questions. Our team endorses a multiparadigmatic approach to methods. Because our understanding is often improved when informed by multiple types of data, we encourage combinations of techniques and data types to gain insight. We realize that expanding the mix and number of methods is an ambitious aspiration, and we urge our associate editors, editorial board members, ad hoc reviewers, and authors to champion rigorous research that provides consumer insight with the use of either standard or “nonstandard” methods and types of meaningful consumer data. Friedman (2017) poignantly argues that the world has dramatically changed and that what we knew before 2007 is increasingly obsolete. From platform-based business models to flexible, rapidly changing collaborative networks and increases in methods for personal creation, consumer life “is being dramatically reshaped” (Friedman 2017, 28; Price 2017; Rindfleisch and O’Hern 2015; Scaraboto 2015). This is an exciting inflection point for consumer researchers to consider how and what they research, and a critical time to expand the methodologies used to examine consumer problems.

Our main requirement is that papers have a clear consumer focus—the topic must be unambiguously consumer-relevant. Folkes (2002) asked, “Are we behavioral scientists who just happen to be using a consumer context to investigate general principles of human behavior?” She challenged us to consider how consumer behavior is different from other disciplines and how markets and consumption shape behavior and are shaped by various forces. We encourage research that focuses on phenomena of unique interest to consumer researchers, such as brands, exchange, sharing, or ownership, as well as research that examines human behaviors such as morality, persuasion, institutional structures, well-being, or interpersonal relationships, as they are uniquely shaped by market forces (cf. Grayson 2014; Kirmani 2015a). Our team believes that practical insights, conceptual insights, and methodological insights that focus on the consumer form the basis of impactful consumer research.

In pursuit of these goals, our field needs to be more tolerant of research that does not claim to offer the sole explanation for a given phenomenon. An overemphasis on a single explanation tends to force researchers to narrow their focus to small consumer issues or domains in order to rule out alternative accounts. As the focus broadens, the underlying process for a given consumer issue usually becomes fuzzier. Consumers are complex and messy; it is only to be expected that many, if not most, consumer-relevant issues are multiply determined (Kirmani 2015b). Thus, we must accept that a single paper is unlikely to identify all important variables or explanations. We need to seek an acceptable balance of conceptual rigor, methodological rigor, and meaningful insight.

We are delighted by the reception that our vision has received as we have invited leading consumer scholars to join the *JCR* team. Our associate editors, editorial review board members, and ad hoc reviewers are critical to success and will need to adopt a broader perspective when evaluating manuscripts submitted to *JCR*. Manuscripts will be evaluated based not only on their conceptual contribution but also on the meaningful, practical insights that they generate. Providing practical insight

that can be used by any of *JCR*'s stakeholders, such as consumers, academic researchers, public policy makers, or marketing managers, will be important in contributing to *JCR*. Most successful manuscripts will contain a balance of conceptual and practical contribution. Providing evidence of a plausible explanation for meaningful insights derived from rigorous research methods regarding an important consumer-related phenomenon can be a contribution, even if the explanation is somewhat speculative.

## HOW A GREATER FOCUS ON CONSUMER RELEVANCE WILL AFFECT MANUSCRIPTS

### Topic Selection

Many leading consumer scholars have lamented the lack of our work's contribution to actual problems faced by consumers, public policy makers, and firms. Over a period of many years, the articles published in *JCR* have trended toward a focus on research topics that are of interest primarily to the academic constituency—in reality, often only a small portion of like-minded academics—with lip service paid to the potential implications to external constituencies. Many times it appears that we are talking to a small set of likely reviewers rather than trying to impact consumer scholarship and practice with our insights. In consumer-relevant research, the consumer is not merely a convenient context. Rather, the research originates with a real problem that consumers face (Campbell forthcoming; Inman 2012; Price 2014).

Consumer-problem-focused research may also differ in terms of manuscript construction. These differences will be most notable in terms of the introduction and the discussion. The introduction lays out the importance of the consumer-related problem being addressed, along with the theory base brought to bear on it. The discussion then circles back to the theoretical takeaways and the actionable insights from the research. Many of the award-winning *JCR* articles provide a combination of conceptual contribution and meaningful, practical insights. If we consider how our research speaks to both theory and substance, we have the potential for greater impact and contribution. Nomologically focused research can generate useful insights, and substantively focused research can generate theoretical insights.

### Consequential Dependent Variables

One way to increase the consumer relevance of our research is to examine consumer-relevant dependent variables. Relying solely on participants' self-reports of how they predict they would react under imagined circumstances is unlikely to provide much insight into a consumer-relevant problem (Campbell forthcoming). It is important to put participants in situations in which they are themselves reacting to relevant stimuli. Of course, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes are appropriate variables when they are the actual beliefs, emotions, or attitudes consumers form in response to relevant stimuli.

Sometimes, the relevance of consumer reactions is in terms of behaviors; either the actual dependent variable of interest is a behavior, or the importance of the construct under study is based on its impact on downstream behaviors. A consequential dependent variable requires participants to (a) invest a resource, such as money, time, or effort; or (b) experience a real outcome, such as receiving their chosen option (Inman 2012). When the variable of interest is a behavior, we prefer the use of a consequential dependent variable rather than an intervening proxy. In the second case, when the importance of the variable of interest is derived from subsequent behaviors, we encourage examination of important downstream variables when possible. The strength of a consequential dependent variable is that it provides evidence of the generalizability of the findings across the package of studies; however, some research will focus on providing deeper understanding of a variable without necessitating examination of impact on a behavior.

One way to allow assessment of consequential dependent variables is the use of field experiments and quasi-experiments. A well-designed field study demonstrates generalizability of the lab-based studies, increasing external validity by showing that the focal effects persist in the noisy environment of the real world. Although field studies are useful, consequential dependent variables, such as caloric intake, time spent on an activity, amount paid or donated, visual focus, neurological activity, or product choice, can also be incorporated into lab studies. Examining such behaviors can add credibility to reported findings and buttress other studies that focus on psychological process. Additionally, there are a variety of ways to collect consequential dependent variables from the "real world," e.g., scraping and analyzing consumers' social media posts or product ratings. "Being there" is a cornerstone of ethnographic and other types of qualitative research," and as such, can also provide illuminating accounts of real-life problems and consequential consumer processes and behaviors (Reyes 2017; 17; Cayla and Arnould 2013).

### Reporting for Transparency and Weight of Evidence

In the wake of the replication crisis and a few high-profile academic integrity scandals, the field has become much more sensitive to questions of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Scholars are providing a variety of criticisms and proposed

improvements. At this time, the overall perspective of our team is that we need more transparency, accuracy, and completeness in reporting our samples, methods, analyses, and results. A goal of scientific research should be to enable the reader to fully understand the research process, outcomes, and likely importance. We believe that transparent and full reporting will enable others to understand the research and the weight of the evidence for the research findings. Such reporting will enable other researchers to replicate and build on those research findings, which is part of the scientific method. Of course, the specifics of such transparent, complete reporting and the weight of evidence will depend upon the methodology and analytical techniques used. Experiments will include copies of stimuli, complete sample statistics, sample size and power considerations, and effect sizes. Multistudy papers could often benefit from a single-paper meta-analysis (McShane and Böckenholt 2017). For qualitative research methods, transparency requires that researchers be able to supply an audit trail that outlines what they did, how they did it, and why they did it (including the reflexive position of the researcher). Although weight of evidence is not captured in the same way as with quantitative research, quality turns on whether the full range of participants' perspectives has been authentically represented in the research process and on whether interpretations are coherent and fit the context (Reyes 2017; Tuval-Mashiach 2017). Modeling research should provide complete sample statistics and a thorough description of the estimation procedure. All types of research will require complete reporting of any and all data exclusion. The *JCR* Policy Board is considering specific reporting requirements that will help meet the goal of providing reporting that builds trust and understanding of the evidence. Our view is that a reader should be able to understand what occurred and the extent to which evidence of an important finding is provided.

## CONCLUSION

By definition, *JCR* is a journal for consumer research. Thus, *JCR* articles should focus on research on consumers' interactions in contexts that involve the search, acquisition, consumption and experience, sharing (e.g., word of mouth), and disposal of goods and services. *JCR* will strive to publish high-quality, rigorous research addressing important consumer-relevant problems. We realize that achieving our vision will not be an easy task. The associate editors, the editorial review board, the ad hoc reviewers, and most importantly, submitting authors will play a critical role in broadening the field's perspective so that we can grapple with larger consumer-relevant issues that are inherently messier and unlikely to be completely addressed in a single article.

The 11 sponsoring organizations of *JCR* embody the need to form linkages: linkages with other disciplines and subdisciplines; linkages between these disciplines and practice; and linkages between nomological insights and meaningful, practical insights. Consumer researchers need to submit manuscripts that realize this potential. This is particularly true for authors in business schools. In the present environment of state budget cuts for higher education, concerns about research ethics, and calls by the AACSB for demonstration of faculty research impact, it is up to us to demonstrate the value of our research. Conceptually founded consumer-relevant research with meaningful insights and practical implications will go a long way in that regard. We look forward to working with the community of consumer research scholars to nurture and publish such research.

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