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What Is Consumer Research?

MORRIS B. HOLBROOK*

I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
Of this great consummation.

—William Wordsworth (1814)
The Recluse, lines 56–58

The field of consumer research in general and the *Journal of Consumer Research* in particular currently find themselves in a crisis of identity. Whatever the historical basis for its editorial policy, *JCR* has lately come to embrace a variety of topics once thought too arcane or abstruse for a scholarly publication devoted to the study of consumer behavior. Recent examples of this trend would include articles on ritual, materialism, mood, styles of research, primitive aspects of consumption, language in popular American novels, the good life in advertising, spousal conflict, play as a consumption experience, product meanings, and consumption symbolism. In short, it appears that in the last few years the perspectives of an increasingly diverse range of disciplines have stealthily crept into the field of consumer research.

These realities can scarcely be denied. They just are. They exist for everyone to behold and for many, including me, to admire and applaud. However, this proliferation of disciplinary perspectives in our field raises some interesting conceptual issues. One of the most important is ontological in nature and concerns the question, “What is consumer research?”

In attempting to answer this question, I shall pursue an argument influenced by various efforts to broaden our concept of consumer behavior to include not only acquisition but also usage and disposition activities (Jacoby 1978) and to extend our view of products to embrace not only traditional durable and nondurable goods but also other more intangible services, ideas, and events (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Specifically, I propose a definition of consumer research based on the following key points: (1) consumer research

studies consumer behavior; (2) consumer behavior entails consumption; (3) consumption involves the acquisition, usage, and disposition of products; (4) products are goods, services, ideas, events, or any other entities that can be acquired, used, or disposed of in ways that potentially provide value; (5) value is a type of experience that occurs for some living organism when a goal is achieved, a need is fulfilled, or a want is satisfied; (6) such an achievement, fulfillment, or satisfaction attains consummation; conversely, a failure to achieve goals, fulfill needs, or satisfy wants thwarts consummation; (7) the process of consummation (including its possible breakdowns) is therefore the fundamental subject for consumer research.

From this argument, it follows that *consumer research studies consummation* (in all its various facets, including its potential breakdowns). Many will agree with this conclusion. Yet most will also acknowledge that the study of consummation is not the meaning that usually leaps to mind when one hears the term “consumer research” in the common parlance. Indeed, it appears to me that, in its general usage, the term “consumer research” lacks a clear meaning. It has grown so encrusted with connotations arising from its association with other disciplines that, by now, it stands for everything, which in this case is tantamount to nothing. I therefore propose a definition intended to provide a core meaning for our field of inquiry.

Specifically, I propose that we use the term *consumer research* to refer to the *study of consummation* in all its many aspects. Consummation thereby designates the core of the concept of consumer research. From this perspective, consumer research stands on its own as a separate discipline and borrows from other established disciplines no more or less than they in turn borrow from each other. Here, I endorse the position recently articulated by Belk (1986, p. 423):

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 sub-discipline 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.

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THE ROLE OF OTHER DISCIPLINES

I shall briefly review what I regard as the primary contributions made by various disciplines to the study of value in acquisition, usage, and disposition, paying particular attention to apparent gaps left by each field of inquiry to be filled by others.

Macroeconomics

The field of macroeconomics makes its major contribution to our understanding of acquisition, as represented by a nation's aggregate spending behavior. Consumption spending is what remains after subtracting government purchases, gross private domestic investment, and net exports from the Gross National Product; it equals disposable personal income less savings. This macroeconomic definition of consumption obviously provides a very incomplete account of consumer behavior. It tells us little about usage or disposition and remains silent on nonmarket acquisition. It focuses on the quantitative, easily measured aspects of market exchanges while ignoring their more qualitative psychic or social aspects. Finally, it says little about the process of choice among individual product categories. However, the latter issue provides the major topic for the treatment of consumption in microeconomics.

Microeconomics

In its classic formulations via marginal utility theory, indifference curves, or revealed preference, microeconomics achieves increasingly parsimonious explanations of the downward sloping demand curve and various income effects on purchases in a particular product class. This approach accounts for product purchases only by virtue of taking the tastes that determine the shapes of indifference curves as given and relegating the investigation of such tastes to other disciplines. Moreover, with rare exceptions such as those found in the "new home economics," microeconomics says little about the investment of time, energy, and other resources that occurs in a household's usage and disposition of various product classes. Further, with the partial exception of studies that have focused on the underlying characteristics of goods, microeconomics neglects choices at the level of the brand rather than the product. This problem of brand choice has, however, received illumination from the work of psychologists.

Psychology

Of particular value in handling the phenomenon of choice among brands have been the multiattribute attitude models and multidimensional joint spaces used by consumer researchers to account for the formation

of brand preferences via (compositional) linear compensatory models, (decompositional) conjoint analysis and ideal point formulations, or some (integrative) combination of the two. For all of its merits, this work illuminates acquisition via brand choice far more than it does usage or disposition behavior. Further, with the partial exception of the attitude modeler's normative component, the typical psychological treatment does relatively little to place brand preferences into the social context that includes ongoing interpersonal activities and shared symbolic meanings. However, these more social concerns have been addressed by contributions from sociology and anthropology focused on various aspects of product usage and disposition.

Sociology

The sociological perspective in consumer research has considered the social context in which consumption activities are embedded and has proven especially fruitful in addressing problems raised by product usage. For example, concepts of conspicuous consumption and role performance have helped to elucidate the use of products as dramaturgical props that define and display the consumer's self-image. However, these usage-related concepts do suggest the need for a complementary focus on product disposition. Such issues have concerned studies that adopt the perspective of anthropology.

Anthropology

Anthropological approaches have made valuable contributions to our understanding of product disposition. For example, several researchers have studied gift giving, a process wherein one person's disposition simultaneously becomes another's acquisition. At a more mundane level of product disposal, garbological research examines people's discardings to reach conclusions about their product acquisition and usage behavior. Further contributions from anthropology to our understanding of product usage concern the study of those artifacts that consumers do not discard but that instead become part of consumption rituals, ancestral traditions, and consumer mythology. Indeed, most products carry symbolic meanings in the social system and can be addressed from the viewpoint of semiotics. However, questions of ritual, ancestral, mythological, symbolic, or semiotic meaning imply a context of social conformity and therefore tend to neglect the departures from ethical codes that are generally viewed as problems of morality. Interest in such moral questions might encourage us to look for potential contributions from philosophy.

Philosophy

As yet, the general philosophical tradition has contributed relatively little to the study of consumer be-

havior. One possible avenue of rapprochement might borrow from praxeology to construct a consumer theory of reasoned action. However, such a rational approach would hardly cope with the aforementioned problems of deviance. To address the latter, we might profitably borrow from ethics to construct a conceptualization of consumption morality and thereby to address the phenomena of consumer *misbehavior*. Without plunging into the niceties involved in defining “misbehavior,” it appears clear that many widespread consumer activities involve actual or supposed violations of societal value norms or self-disapproved breaches of ethical codes. Among these, I would include irregularity (transexuality or psychotic hallucinations), irrationality (superstitious dressing or compulsive gambling), illegality (taking drugs or highway speeding), and immorality (adultery or polluting the environment). As widespread (if regrettable) consumption phenomena, these deserve full exploration in our literature. More generally, the infusion into consumer research of broadened perspectives borrowed from the philosophy of science has opened the way to approaches that depart from the prevailing tendency toward logical empiricism. Such post-positivistic outlooks have included movements toward encompassing the humanities.

Humanities

Recently, the humanities have begun to sneak into consumer research in a variety of ways that may help deepen our understanding of value in acquisition, usage, and disposition. To illustrate briefly, I would cite: (1) the broadening of *acquisition* to include the consumption of “free” goods that primarily involve the investment of time expenditures on products such as entertainment and the arts, (2) the extension of *usage* to encompass wider spheres of appreciative reactions, and (3) the deepening of *disposition* to address neglected issues concerning the nature of durability in consumption. Further, some researchers have suggested that art objects may themselves provide direct insights into consumer behavior and, conversely, that consumption symbolism may guide our interpretation of artworks. Meanwhile, more systematic content analyses have addressed themes relevant to consumption found in comic strips, novels, and advertising. More generally, the humanities may play a role in consumer research by supplying stories that help clarify our sense of who we are and our vision of where we are going. This humanistic impulse appears in the metaphorical character of such recent titles as “Theory Development Is a Jazz Solo: Bird Lives,” “Casey at the Conference,” “The Consumer Researcher Visits Radio City: Dancing in the Dark,” and “Whither ACR? Some Pastoral Reflections on Bears, Baltimore, Baseball, and Resurrecting Consumer Research.” The last paper, for example, ties together its argument by means of conventions drawn

from the poetic tradition of pastoral elegy as exemplified by Milton’s *Lycidas* (Holbrook 1986).

TOWARD CONSUMER RESEARCH

My account of the primary contributions from various disciplines to the study of consumer behavior has necessarily been quite selective. Nevertheless, it appears that several disciplines have contributed to the development of our field, each filling in gaps left by the others. In this sense, historically, consumer research has adopted a multidisciplinary stance. Indeed, the great landmark syntheses—such as those by Howard, Nicosia, Engel, and their various colleagues—have been emphatically eclectic and integrative in nature, drawing on a number of different disciplinary perspectives. I applaud this ecumenicalism even while, with Belk (1986), I wonder if we might not move ahead faster if we were to seek our own independent status as a unique discipline.

In this light, I find it instructive to contrast consumer research with marketing research. Much debate has recently focused on the similarities and differences between the two. For example, sessions at the 1984 and 1985 ACR conferences (“The Vices and Virtues of Being Relevant” and “Whither ACR?”) addressed this topic and produced a variety of opinions. My own position is that consumer research involves the study of consumption (acquiring, using, and disposing) as the central focus pursued for its own sake whereas marketing research, among other things, involves the study of customers in a manner intended to be managerially relevant (Holbrook 1985, 1986).

However valid my own opinion, this conclusion and its surrounding controversy highlight two important facts of life for consumer researchers. First, the debate itself suggests that, as a field, we show little agreement concerning what we mean by “consumer research.” In a sense, we share no consensus about what we study. At least, we do not agree about what we denote by the term that defines our field of inquiry. Second, my own conclusion—reinforced by other participants in the debate such as Anderson, Belk, Hirschman, and Wallendorf—suggests the need to ground consumer research in a central preoccupation with consumption, independent of any relevance that subject might carry for marketing managers or, indeed, for any other external interests. These two considerations combine to argue for a redefinition of our field.

I therefore urge my fellow consumer researchers to regard our discipline as a field of inquiry that takes consumption as its central focus and that therefore examines all facets of the value potentially provided when some living organism acquires, uses, or disposes of any product that might achieve a goal, fulfill a need, or satisfy a want. In short, thus conceived, consumer research

studies all aspects of consummation (including its breakdowns). Hence, consumer research embraces most forms of human, animal, and perhaps even vegetative consummatory behavior. In a sense, even if we ignore animals and plants, consumer research encompasses almost all human activities, regarded from the viewpoint of consummation.

I see this inclusiveness as a strength rather than a liability. From my perspective, almost everything we do involves consumption (Holbrook 1985, p. 146):

People get up in the morning, start consuming the moment their toes touch the carpet, allocate their time to various consumption activities throughout the day, and continue consuming until they finally drift off to sleep at night, after which they confine their consumption mostly to dreams, pajamas, and bed linens.

In other words, our lives comprise one constant and continual (though not always successful) quest for consummation.

What does or should distinguish consumer research from other fields such as those previously mentioned is its conscious focus on consummatory behavior. Consummatory behavior involves activities aimed at achieving goals, fulfilling needs, or satisfying wants. In short, it entails processes wherein consumers seek, reach, and surpass consummation. One might therefore expect that consumer researchers would take consummation as their central focus.

Yet, recall the quote from Wordsworth's *Recluse* that served as a preface to this article. In the present context, its surrounding passage proves quite instructive:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.
—I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
Of this great consummation.

As suggested by these poetic lines, the focus on consummation has died away in at least two senses.

First, figuratively, the world has fallen from the State of Paradise in which Adam and Eve's sole task was to enjoy pleasant forms of consumption:

Under a tuft of shade that on a green
Stood whispering soft, by a fresh Fountain side
They sat them down and after no more toil
Of thir sweet Gard'ning labor than suffic'd
To recommend cool *Zephyr*, and made ease
More easy, wholesome thirst and appetite
More grateful, to thir Supper Fruits they fell,

Nectarine Fruits which the compliant boughs
Yielded them, side-long as they sat recline
On the soft downy Bank damask't with flow'rs:
The savory pulp they chew, and in the rind
Still as they thirsted scoop the brimming stream. . . .

—John Milton (1674)
Paradise Lost, Book IV, lines 325–336

In contrast to this sweet life in Paradise, modern consumers face pains and difficulties imposed by prices and budget constraints, by scarcities of time and materials, by questions of propriety and morality, and by an existential anguish in choosing among products, none of which is perfect.

Second, as consumer researchers, we face a lonely battle if we elect to sing about the remaining tarnished vestiges of the perfect consummation that characterized our lost innocence. Those departed and maybe fictitious pleasures involved pure and blissful consummation. What remains in the human condition is an imperfect and tainted world in which consumers can only strive to surmount their constant barriers to fulfillment. To focus on this neglected quest—to deal single-mindedly with the nature of value in acquiring, using, and disposing—takes courage worthy of Wordsworth's brave Romantic cry:

I sing:—"fit audience let me find though few!"
So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the bard—
In holiest mood. . . .
—I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
Of this great consummation.

Notice that the word "spousal" operates here in two senses. Literally, it means "nuptial" and suggests the nearly sexual energy with which the poet is married to his consummatory vision of paradisaic fulfillment. Further, it suggests the cognate "espouse" whose associations convey the sense of supporting a cause. As implied by Wordsworth's reference to a "lonely" peace, this cause might require running against the grain of conventional thinking in relative isolation—at least for a while.

Yet Wordsworth's message is one of hope based on "the heroic dimensions of common life, and the grandeur of the ordinary" (Abrams 1963, p. 69). Only a tiny fragment remains as what Frye calls "the one great flash of vision" in Wordsworth's *Recluse* (1963, p. 18). Let us take this indeed reclusive but hopeful snatch of poetry as a bright omen. Let us interpret its sole, stubborn survival as a sign that speaks to us through the centuries and that signals a need to ground our work in its true foundation (consumption) and to anchor our efforts in a discipline that honors their relevance to human lives (consumer research). Let us dedicate ourselves to the study of processes wherein the acquisition, usage, and disposition of all kinds of products potentially provide value by fulfilling human wants. In short, let us join

with Wordsworth to chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse of this great consummation.

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