

# Editorial

## APPRECIATION, ADVICE, AND SOME ASPIRATIONS FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

I have arrived at the end of my editing duties for the *Journal of Consumer Research* with disheveled emotions—from relief and celebration to an ambivalent lament. In this final editorial I would like to thank those who supported me, advise authors based on my experience, and express some hopes for future consumer research.<sup>1</sup>

### APPRECIATION

No one completes the journey of editing *JCR* without the help of numerous other bright and dedicated people. I thank the journal's policy board for its trust in appointing me to this position. I am especially grateful for its endorsement of the changes I sought to make—from the new cover design, Web site, and fully electronic operations to inaugurating the two sections titled *Reflections and Reviews* and *Re-Inquiries*. I thank also the 12 associate editors who served most directly with me in making over 1,000 editorial decisions on submitted manuscripts. Each worked devotedly to assist authors in recognizing the most crucial issues within the reviews, to adjudicate between conflicting opinions, and to recommend revision strategies that would maximize knowledge contribution. I am also greatly indebted to the editorial review board and the hundreds of ad hoc reviewers who, next to the authors themselves, most truly create and preserve *JCR*'s excellence. While the reviewers were recurrently rigorous, they were also constructive on multiple dimensions and protective of the authors' dignity.

On a day-to-day basis, no person played a more sizable role through our Wisconsin editorial office than Mary-Ann Twist, our managing editor. She was solely responsible for implementing and maintaining our extensive Web site, and for evolving the journal's numerous operations into a twenty-first century mode of continuous and instantaneous worldwide interactions. She facilitated many other enhancements to the efficiency and value of journal operations for all our constituents. She has been a stellar managing editor for *JCR*, and now a cherished friend to me.

On a more local level, at the University of Virginia I owe thanks to my colleagues at the McIntire School of Commerce, and most notably its dean, Carl Zeithaml, for their wholehearted support over the two and one-half years that I edited the journal from Charlottesville. And last, but not most, I am profoundly appreciative of the patience given and sacrifices made by my wife, Cindy, and our sons, Owen and Neal. They permitted me to shift volumes of time and energy from the family to the journal, so I could carry out the editing obligations to the best of my abilities.

### ADVICE

Past editors of *JCR* have written farewell editorials providing outstanding guidance to authors on how to improve the chances of publishing their works (see, e.g., Lutz 1990). The imperatives mentioned usually include working on topics of widespread and timeless significance; circulating presubmission drafts for comments from demanding and frank colleagues; and making certain that the version to be submitted is as reader friendly as it can possibly be, both in its writing and exhibits, and conforms to the journal's style sheet (on

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<sup>1</sup>Several friends and colleagues provided me with generous feedback on an earlier draft of this editorial, including Russ Belk, Jim Burroughs, John Deighton, Doug Holt, Punam Anand Keller, Rich Lutz, Ed McQuarrie, Kent Monroe, Rick Netemeyer, and Terry Shimp.

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our Web site). Unfortunately, too many authors ignore these commonsense suggestions, and the reactions they receive on their work are constant testaments to the worth of such advice. Perhaps, as Voltaire wryly noted, common sense is not so common.

My editing experience leads me to offer a few more recommendations, some of which may be just as consequential. First, it is remarkable how much authors struggle to pinpoint in comprehensible fashion what exactly is their distinctive knowledge contribution. To achieve this aim, authors must review relevant literature in a focused and concise manner that identifies the gaps, inconsistencies, conundrums, and so forth, of prior knowledge that their paper will specifically address and, at least partly, solve. If the research is empirical, they must also rationalize the design of their studies in terms of the choices for procedures and operationalizations that are the most appropriate for delivering their original contribution. Data analyses, interpretations, and discussion must then stay concentrated on the primary research objectives, that is, the distinctive contribution.<sup>2</sup> Many papers submitted to *JCR* simply did not have at their very outset a surety and intelligibility of intended contribution (relative to prior literature) that was then tightly threaded throughout the remainder of the paper, with all else left aside. These fundamental issues apply in adapted ways to both quantitative and qualitative works, and to empirical as well as conceptual papers. In sum, the more that reviewers strain to grasp the author's intended knowledge advance and see a concerted effort to stay focused on it, the less likely they will support further revision effort or publishability.

Second, when authors are invited to submit a revised manuscript, they should obviously read the reviews, associate editor's report, and editor's letter in a meticulous manner. Scrutinizing the meanings and implications for revising is unavoidable. Yet in doing so, authors may sometimes forget that it is also crucial to read each commentary with more overarching questions in mind, such as, "What are the macro themes of this review?" Alternatively, imagine a role reversal, as when authors ask themselves, "If I were this commentator, what are the general concerns I am striving to say to this author?" Asking such questions may be particularly beneficial when different commentators seem to have opposing critiques or suggestions, because a thematic-level analysis can sometimes reveal more agreement than is initially apparent, leading to new solutions that could be acceptable across the commentators. In general, when authors avoid fixating solely on the minutiae of reviewers' and editors' remarks, they are better able to appreciate the crux of what must be improved.

Third, when revising a manuscript, it is always valuable for authors to do *more* than what the commentators expect. This strategy can apply to literature review, data collection, data analyses, exhibits, supplementary materials to accompany the revision, and so forth. By adopting this attitude and behavior, authors show genuine respect for the review process. They also demonstrate an eagerness to make the paper as effective as it can be, according to the values and standards of the journal that have been entrusted in the editorial team.

Finally, less experienced scholars are reluctant to contact editors for advice on submitting and revising. Perhaps they think editors are too busy for such interactions, or they fear saying something wrong. However, most individuals who seek the role of editor do so because they sincerely want to foster knowledge development and, particularly, to mentor young authors. Setting an appointment time for a well-planned phone call with the editor—usually preceded by an e-mail to indicate the topics for discussion—can often lead to additional insights that elucidate what exactly is required and what the major criteria will be for judging a manuscript once submitted, especially if it is a revision.

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<sup>2</sup>My emphasis here on distinctiveness or originality in contribution assumes that the manuscript submitted is being considered for publication as a regular article. In comparison, submissions to the *Re-Inquiries* section are judged less on novelty of contribution and more on the importance of the topic and the need for checking the robustness of key knowledge claims or methods. For more information, see my *JCR* editorial announcing *Re-Inquiries* (Mick 2001).

## ASPIRATIONS FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Recent chapters by Belk (2002) and Simonson et al. (2001) have identified important trends, strengths, weaknesses, and directions for consumer research. As a complement to them, and in seeking collegial assistance in preparing this editorial, I polled a small and varied sample of established and rising leaders in consumer research ( $n = 30$ ). I asked them what they thought the goals of consumer research should be during the next 25 years and what research skills will be necessary to achieve those goals.<sup>3</sup> Several motifs emerged that overlap with issues raised in Belk (2002) or Simonson et al. (2001), while others are new and divergent. In the subsections that follow, I interweave the polling responses, the aforementioned chapters, and other sources of insights with my own convictions drawn from editing *JCR*.

### Research Goals

*Consumption Ideology and Existence in the Market World.* Most of us, I suspect, would agree with Borgmann's pithy observation, "To live is to consume" (2000, p. 418). And most would also concur that capitalism, marketing, and consumer behavior in recent decades have spread farther and burrowed deeper throughout the world. Some praise this development, while others decry it. But few would say it is reversible, short of calamitous events. As a result, this is an era in human evolution in which a complex and generally nonconscious ideology of consumption has become the epicenter of life, adapted in dynamic ways by cultures and individuals.

Ideology per se is a core component of day-to-day living. It is a socialization process in which culturally conventional principles, categories, and behaviors are reproduced within each individual (Thompson and Haytko 1997, n. 1). Consumption ideology espouses in its barest terms that consumption is good and that more consumption is better. "Vigorous and growing consumption," it presumes, "is the chief indicator of a prosperous and self-confident community" (Borgmann 2000, p. 418). Today, this ideology is the foundation for a panoply of institutions, discourses, capacities, actions, and other influences that permeate all levels of life—nations, societies, organizations, households, and persons.

The study of consumption ideology can be traced back at least to Simmel ([1900] 1978); it was energized by such scholars as Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1996) and expanded further in recent years by a cadre of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, among others (e.g., Baudrillard 1981; Campbell 1987; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Ewen 1988; Ritzer 1995). In our own immediate field, research on consumption ideology has begun to take hold as well (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Hirschman 1990; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Mick and Fournier 1998; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Richins and Dawson 1992; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Some of these works directly address the makeup of consumption ideology, while others assume it and then explore its ramifications.

I believe that it is paramount that we become even more serious and more focused in studying the nature, role, processes, and consequences of consumption ideology and existence in the market world. There are many and varied topics of relevance. Some we have minimally examined in any detail, while others have received attention, but not recognizably as a function of consumption ideology. A partial list would include

- self-esteem and self-actualization
- (dis)contentment in life
- desires, dreams, fetishes, hopes, and other deep-rooted motivations
- longevity, obesity, stress, diseases, and other health conditions
- self-control, addictions, and compulsions
- crimes by and against consumers

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<sup>3</sup>I thank the anonymous respondents for their thought-provoking answers.

- financial investing, saving, retirement, debt, and bankruptcy
- trade-offs among work, leisure, cultural, and idle time
- interpersonal relations, including social bonds and social etiquette, family life, child rearing, care for the elderly, and the end of life
- poverty and social (in)justice
- technology
- pornography
- ecology
- Third World economics

It was not by design, and I do not think it is coincidence, that when I initiated the *Reflections and Reviews* essays by offering full reign to several forward-thinking scholars for expressing their perspectives on the uppermost topics for future consumer research, they often underscored several of those listed above (see, e.g., Bargh 2002; Baumeister 2002; Bazerman 2001; Borgmann 2000; Cross 2002; Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Denzin 2001; Dickson 2000; Moorman 2002; Wallendorf 2001). I also do not think it is happenstance that these essays are specifically among the most read of all the material in the journal in recent years (based on click-stream data at the University of Chicago Press Web site where the electronic version of *JCR* resides: <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/JCR/home.html>). And, I might add, if one goes back and reads the past 25 years of presidential addresses to the Association for Consumer Research, it is plainly evident that about every third year, one of our foremost thinkers goes to the podium and exhorts the audience toward more research on topics of the kind listed above.

Lest anyone think I am effectively de-prioritizing useful and long-standing research foci, it should be noted that the topics available for study under the rubric of consumption ideology and existence in the market world include many that have been partly examined before (e.g., social comparison, identity, and self-esteem; materialism; and compulsive buying). Consider also a popular topic like consumer knowledge. Consumption ideology directly underlies and ferments the marketplace expertise and related social intelligence that, according to one of our pioneering consumer psychologists, has never before been so developed and so necessary as it is now (Wright 2002). Individuals must be ever skillful in the myriad and mercurial contexts of marketing and consumer behavior in daily life. Wright (2002) raises a host of incisive questions on theoretical, substantive, and normative fronts, including, How do consumers think about and manage their own mental states as related to marketplace phenomena and activities—across cultures, generations, and life spans? How best can education about the marketplace serve the needs of the maturing and matured consumer?

Consider, too, consumer choice, perhaps the most extensively studied topic in the history of our field. When buying is strongly mandated, as it is so often in the market world (based, e.g., on technology breakdowns and obsolescence, gift-giving contexts, and educational and career situations), how is the choice process influenced and what are the attendant affective and cognitive states, including feelings of frustration, powerlessness, or resentment? When the choice options are many, when the attributes are several, similar, and sometimes irrelevant, and when the time to search, evaluate, and select is compressed—all ordinary conditions in present lives—what are the effects on consumers' arousal systems, on emotions such as anger and impatience, and on their confidence in themselves and their purchases, and what are the spillover influences to subsequent and seemingly unrelated contexts in which persistence, tolerance, conviviality, civility, nonjudgment, or open-mindedness are called for? We have recently seen stimulating new research on emotional consumer decisions (Luce, Bettman, and Payne 2001), but these questions above have a different spin. In a sense, they are less psychological and more spiritual, as related to the character and quality of community and individual life. Our field has vastly overlooked these questions (Mick 1997).

Consumption ideology and existence in the market world represent an urgent and unprecedented opportunity for our field to coalesce around a unified identity of research focus for which we continue to search (Simonson et al. 2001; Wright 2002) and may never have

again. No field is as poised and capable at this singular moment in history as we are for interrelating, examining, and advising on these complex issues. It is also possibly one of the utmost opportunities for researchers from across the paradigmatic divides in our field to work directly together in ways that up to now have been sadly elusive.

*Relevance, Credibility, and Influence.* Calls for consumer research to be more relevant and credible, or what Shimp (1994) perceptively expands to a concept of representation, have been made periodically over the years, and they appear again in Simonson et al. (2001) and among several responses in my restricted poll. We continue to feel marginalized. Frankly speaking, although there are systemic factors in academia that impede counterefforts, it is largely our own fault for insufficient ambitions and initiatives by both newcomers and seasoned researchers (Wells 1993). The opportunity for greater relevance, credibility, and influence is a central motivation to my prior comments on consumption ideology and existence in the market world, but that opportunity relates to most other topics and research directions as well.

The policy board of *JCR* has recently begun to tackle one facet of these concerns by strategizing how it can help to make the media and public more aware of our best and potentially most impactful work among that which appears in the journal. Our professional associations and academic homes could do better in this regard also. More pivotal than that, however, we researchers ourselves need to focus much harder on problems that are both theoretically and normatively significant for consumers, public policy administrators, educators, and management. There are many other tactics to assist in attaining greater representation and influence that are beyond my scope here, such as networking better with associations, agencies, and foundations that can support this work; designing doctoral seminars to foster it; and appointing journal editors who will call for and publish it (for further recommendations, see also Andreasen 1993; Denzin 2001; Hirschman 1991; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Shimp 1994; and Wells 1993).

*Interdisciplinary Research.* Since its inception, *JCR*'s mission has been to promote and publish interdisciplinary consumer research. We need to realize that this is a valiant but very difficult goal, one that few other fields have similarly centered on, let alone accomplished. There have been new successes on this front over the past 15 years, but we still need more researchers from disparate areas to join together over shared interests in consumer behavior. This congregating must include more than the obvious participants from economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology and must also embrace other fields from the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities, with whom we have had little interaction (e.g., architecture, folklore, zoology, biology, linguistics, medicine, performing arts, political science, and religious studies). Through stronger efforts at our own institutions (e.g., seminars, new Ph.D. courses), special sessions at conferences (including in fields such as those just listed), and special sections or issues of journals, we can catapult the field into more cross-fertilized, interdisciplinary work that will facilitate major breakthroughs via new and unforeseen synergies.

*Actual Behavior.* As a field we continue to concentrate on mental phenomena (e.g., beliefs, inferences, attitudes, preferences, intentions, memories, and verbalized meanings). This tendency exists across every paradigm of consumer research. Of course, it will always be important to understand mental phenomena, even if it varies from what the consumer explicitly does, because thoughts and feelings are often more consequential than what factually goes on (e.g., interpretations, rationalizations, and reconstructions). And, combining mental phenomena with actual behavior has special research benefits for comparing and contrasting them—of which our field has done little. In any case, if we continue to call our field consumer behavior, then we need to increase our attention to objective practices, performances, customs, and the like, particularly in natural environments over time.

*Inductive versus Deductive Research.* It has been regularly opined that we need to develop

our own theories on consumer behavior rather than pirate and apply those available in the social sciences (e.g., Wells 1993), and there is evidence of progress on this front as well (Simonson et al. 2001). More tolerance for and initiatives toward descriptive and inductive research will multiply our chances of developing original theories, concepts, and insights that maximize representation and influence. Such a movement will rely heavily on senior researchers in the field who edit and review for journals, advise on dissertations, and participate in committees for faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure.

*Re-Inquiry Research.* I have advocated more acceptance of replication-oriented research in its widest sense, as applied to qualitative and quantitative research, empirical or conceptual (see Mick [2001], in addition to corresponding articles and essays by Hunter [2001], Raman [1994], Thompson [2002], Wells [2001], and Wilk [2001]). One respondent in the poll I conducted vented frustration about the trend to produce gradually more sophisticated data patterns and subtle interpretations that, while appearing to refine knowledge in laudable ways, may also be very difficult to reproduce—and often never are. The most persuasive, striking, and unique accounts for a given data set (quantitative or qualitative) are certainly worth continuing to admire. But that does not mean that novelty should be the quintessential criterion for judging all research or that replications are trivial because they are uninteresting. We must also cultivate our many tentative insights on consumer behavior into a wide and enduring knowledge base, as so many other fields do, through re-inquiries of various kinds. Otherwise, the intellectual equity of our field—passed on each year through textbooks, lectures, and seminars—will remain much flimsier than we may be honest enough to admit.

## Research Skills

Several skills are indispensable for realizing the goals emphasized above. Perhaps foremost is the need for researchers to think independently and creatively about consumer behavior. Reading extremely broadly and learning to use both quantitative and qualitative data (including the newest methods such as models for data mining and the uses of videography) can promote descriptive and inductive insights that are elemental to autonomous and innovative scholarship.

It is also critical that our next generations of consumer researchers be better trained in composing papers for optimal clarity and consequence. Since so many journal submissions fail to be published because of severe communication problems (Lutz 1990), it is imperative that more doctoral programs offer specific training in the art and science of crafting academic papers. This would include not only foundational stylistics such as grammar and the organization of paragraphs and sections but also the varieties of argumentation and the role of logic and rhetoric. The influences of such courses on young scholars and the field overall could be far-reaching.

Finally, few of us seem to have received sound preparation in our doctoral programs for conducting quality reviews of manuscripts in our areas of expertise. Yet, one of the most vital ways in which a field nurtures its youngest scholars and matures as a discipline is through the review process (Lynch 1998). The *Journal of Consumer Research* promotes superior reviews through a “philosophy of review” statement and other related documents on its Web site. Our field can further improve the role and value of being a reviewer through intensified training in doctoral programs, education and discussion sessions at conferences, and efforts by editors to provide feedback to their newest reviewers on how to upgrade the quality of their commentaries (for further suggestions, see Lynch 1998). These steps would be an investment on behalf of the next generations of consumer researchers that will elevate both knowledge contribution and comradery in the field for many years to come.

## CLOSING

We are adolescent, still struggling to figure out who we are and whether what we do will ever matter to anyone else. There is a converging viewpoint among many leaders in our field that we have an historical opportunity to make the nexus of consumption ideology and existence in the market world our encompassing substantive focus because of its wide scale and profound effects across the entire natural environment, hundreds of societies, and millions of individual lives. For those who are compelled by this agenda, there is a need to move quickly to address the momentous questions of consumer behavior in our time. Drawing from several sources, I have tried to offer some guidance for undertaking this agenda. If we do so in the most rigorous and representative manner possible, the future and fortune of our field will be a legacy that we will be proud to have borne.

David Glen Mick  
March 2003

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