

The Consumer Experience

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Over the years, I have participated in a number of consortia, symposia, and meetings with graduate students. One of the most common questions has been, “What is hot?” My stock answer has always been, “Whatever is ‘hot’ today will be cold by the time you complete a research project in the area, so don’t chase current trends.” I then follow up with, “Find something interesting and make it ‘hot’.” This advice often results in a glazed look that I used to interpret as appreciation. Now that I am older, and less vain, I understand my advice contained little information. The graduate students could have gained as much information from a conversation with Sarah Palin.

My uninformative answer to the question, “What is hot?” was a consequence of my failure to understand the intent of the question. The real question was, “Can you explain the market place of academic ideas?” The graduate students knew they were entering a business where their job was to market ideas, but their current marketing plan lacked a customer and a competitive analysis. The students knew that if they could understand the needs of the target market, and the strengths and weaknesses of their competition, they could identify marketable projects. They could then make personal tradeoffs between pursuing these marketable projects versus projects that might be less marketable, but more intrinsically interesting.

Over the next twenty minutes, I hope to provide some insight into this issue. I will organize my comments around the broader issue of how academics typically identify interesting ideas, the competition you will face as you attempt to market ideas, and the types of research that are likely to allow you, and by extension the discipline of consumer behavior, to experience success. I will provide examples of promising areas of research, with the understanding that I intend to illustrate as opposed to advocate.

Making a Contribution

There are two common approaches to identifying potentially interesting consumer research ideas. The first is to be an active participant in a basic social science discipline. Whether one is a disciple of anthropology, economics, psychology, or sociology, the prescription is the same. Try to reach a level of excellence and insight that allows you to understand and apply state-of-the-art theory. Use this knowledge to (1) extend theory and make a contribution to the core discipline, (2) gain insight into how and why consumers behave the way they do, or (3) both. This is an effective strategy that has been executed by consumer behavior researchers over the past 40 years. Yet, I perceive two problems with the core discipline approach. First, many of us do not have the resources to compete. For example, a successful psychology professor has post-docs, many Ph.D. students, and a cadre of undergraduate research assistants in his or her lab.

Academic progress is quicker in this environment. Second, consumer behavior research is by definition, an interdisciplinary endeavor. We make progress through shared interdisciplinary insights. Thus, as a consumer researcher becomes more expert in a core area, the person's ideas are likely to become less interesting to the consumer research community as a whole. To put it plainly, enhancing discipline-specific expertise leads to an increased appreciation for one's ideas in the core area, but less appreciation for one's ideas among the consumer research audience.

The second approach to identifying potentially interesting research ideas is to focus on a substantive domain. There is a long history of this type of research in consumer behavior. For example, advertising response, branding, collecting, gift giving, health behavior, impulsive buying, new product adoption, and nutritional labeling are some of the substantive areas that have received research attention over the past four decades. Again, a subset of consumer behavior researchers have executed this strategy successfully. Yet, a substantive focus does not guarantee that research is marketable. A substantive focus often involves an application of an existing theory that has been "borrowed" from a base social science discipline. When insight into a substantive domain is based on "borrowed" theory, there is always the danger that the insight will be perceived as redundant. This makes the publication of the idea more difficult.

So, we are faced with two approaches to making a contribution: (1) make a theoretical advance in a core discipline, using a consumer behavior context as a setting for the research, or (2) provide insight into a substantive domain. And, as I have argued, each of these approaches has potential disadvantages. The question is how to mitigate these disadvantages. The answer is not simple. My solution? I propose that you select substantive domains where existing social science theory is not easily applied or where social scientists from the core disciplines are reluctant to go. To put it another way, we need to work in areas where there is limited competition from the core social sciences, but where our insights are likely to capture market share somewhere down the road.

Can an Applied Discipline Lead?

My advice that our discipline should focus on research topics that are somewhat removed from the mainstream of social science research implies isolationism and the potential of irrelevance. To allay these criticisms, I would like you to consider three areas in which consumer researchers were the driving force behind theory development.

1. 1970's: Consumer satisfaction / dissatisfaction. Consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction are consequences of consumption or service experiences. Consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction research began during the 1970's as a response to the concerns of government regulators and consumer advocates. The initial research focused on the measurement of consumer satisfaction (Pfaff 1972) and the role of expectation disconfirmation in dissatisfaction (Anderson 1973; Olshavsky and Miller 1972). Subsequently, research identified the antecedents and consequences of consumer

satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Antecedents include performance expectations and the pleasantness of prior consumption experiences. Consequences include changes in price sensitivity, brand loyalty, and changes in the frequency of purchase. These findings led to expectation-confirmation theory of customer satisfaction (Oliver 1980) and to a discussion of the role satisfaction plays in a consumer's life (Fournier and Mick 1999). To date, there have been over 3000 publications on consumer satisfaction, many of them motivated by the original research conducted in the consumer behavior domain.

2. 1980's: Attitude toward the Advertisement. Attitude toward the advertisement refers to the "pleasant or unpleasant feelings evoked by advertising" (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986, p. 131). Although the A_{ad} concept has a long history (see Lutz 1985; Silk and Vavra 1974), research began in earnest in the 1980's. The initial research focused on documenting that the feelings evoked by an advertisement could influence feelings toward the advertised product (Mitchell and Olson 1981), brand consideration (Moore and Hutchinson 1983), brand choice (Shimp 1981; Shimp and Yokum 1982), and the rate at which an advertisement lost its effectiveness owing to repeated use (Calder and Sternthal 1980). Subsequently, A_{ad} research focused on the factors that influenced the attitude toward the ad and the likelihood that these feelings would impact relevant downstream behaviors including choice and purchase execution (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). The A_{ad} construct is interesting because it encouraged consumer behavior researchers to focus on how the feelings evoked by an advertisement interacted with the more cognitively-based beliefs the ad was designed to communicate (e.g., Brown and Stayman 1992; Madden, Allen, and Twible 1988).
3. 1990's: Brand relationships. In her 1998 JCR article, Susan Fournier proposed that consumers form relationships with their brands. Her analysis was based on relationship theory. Her insights were threefold. First, brand relationships come in many forms, including buddies, friendships, committed partnerships, and marriages of convenience. Second, these relationships evolve over time. Third, marketing actions can influence the quality and stability of these consumer-brand relationships. The key insight was that product usage not only provides a benefit experience, but also an experience related to the brand and the meanings it has come to represent. To my knowledge, this is the most cited piece of research in consumer behavior over the past ten years.

What is common across these three examples? These are examples of substantive domains that were initially of special interest to consumer researchers and of lesser interest to social scientists that seek to generate knowledge in their core areas. As a consequence, our discipline took a leadership position among social scientists in developing these areas of thought. In fact, I would argue that there was a collective recognition, by the intellectual producers and the gatekeepers of consumer behavior research, that these topics were interesting consumer behavior experiences that were worthy of investigation.

Our Opportunity: Consumer Experience

So, what is our opportunity? In what substantive areas do we, as a discipline have a special interest and a competitive advantage? The answer is “consumer experience.” CCT researchers have a long history of calling for, and focusing on, consumer experiences (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; cf. Holt 1995). There has also been growing interest in consumer experience among information processing and decision science researchers. In the past few years, I have seen papers on aesthetic experience (Joy and Sherry 2003; Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998), authenticity (e.g., Rose and Wood 2005), consumer socialization (John 1999), emotional responses (e.g., Andrade and Cohen 1997; Ramanathan and Williams 2007), excitement (Ding et al. 2005), extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993), hedonic experience (e.g., Nelson and Meyvis 2008; Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999), prestige and status (e.g., Ivanic and Nunes 2009; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2009), processing fluency (e.g., Allen 2002), retail experience (Verhoef et al. 2009), self-identity (e.g., Wood, Chaplin, and Solomon 2009), tactile experience (e.g., Peck and Wiggins 2006), taste experience (e.g., Elder and Krishna 2009; Hoegg and Alba 2007), and visceral experience (e.g., Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Chang and Pham 2009).

Although consumer researchers may not have been the initiators of many of these research streams, our discipline certainly has the potential to develop innovative insights into these consumption experiences. Yet, in order to do this, we will have to focus on the richness of the consumer experience and the consumer’s role in the management of this experience (e.g., Fournier and Mick 1999). In doing this, we must focus on the mental and physiological states that accompany information acquisition, product choice, consumption, and post-consumption activities. In the next part of my talk, I would like to illustrate what a discipline wide program on consumer experience might entail. I will focus on consumption utility because it is a concept that is relevant to researchers that represent the breadth of approaches to consumer research.

Consumption Utility

The utility of any object . . . pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote.

Adam Smith

Two foundational social sciences have informed the study of utility in consumer behavior (cf. Hsee and Tsai 2008). The economic approach to utility assumes that consumers have an underlying set of preference functions that allow them to anticipate the value of any product or experience. These preference functions are assumed to be relatively stable and enduring. Psychologists and decision making theorists accept that some portion of utility is stable, but add that context can alter the relative preferences for choice options. The literatures on preference reversals, constructed preferences, and local and global context effects all provide testimony to the malleability of utility. Economists and psychologists have shown that preferences are not

time consistent, frame consistent, or context consistent. More importantly, we are not the dominant players in these literatures. We certainly have superstars that contribute to the research on utility, but I would argue that utility is studied in economics first, psychology second, and consumer behavior third.

So the question becomes, “What utility-based research could we own?” Where do we have a differential advantage with respect to our interest, our expertise, and our areas of application? I contend that it is not in the “utility of choice” (expected utility), but the “utility of consumption” (experienced utility or *subjective value*) (see Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Although this change in emphasis sounds subtle, it is not. Our current focus in the “utility of choice” makes choice the seminal event. The antecedent and consequences of choice all must be understood through the investigative frame we have adopted. If our focus were to shift to the utility of consumption, then we would worry more about how people experience utility than how they anticipate utility. We would put less emphasis on the events that are external to the individual, such as product features and contextual events, and more emphasis on the consumption experiences and, by extension, events that are internal to the individual such as a consumer’s mood (e.g., happiness, eagerness, calmness, relief, anger, sadness, embarrassment, anxiety) or mental state (e.g., pleasure, pain, confidence, uncertainty, desire, contentment). Even more importantly, we would look at how the external and internal factors interact to determine the consumer’s experienced utility (e.g., Chen 2009). This leads to the following research issues:

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1. Where does experienced utility come from? A typical approach to answering this question comes from the information processing perspective. Utility is a function of the features of a product. This viewpoint is predicated on the assumption that there is a one-to-one mapping between the level of a product’s features and the benefits of consumption. Yet, we know this is not true. Benefits are not in the products. Benefits are in the consumer experience. Experienced benefits not only vary significantly across consumers, but across time for the same consumer, because internal factors such as emotional states, psychological states, and physiological states vary over time. Give the same person the same food or beverage on five different occasions and the experienced utility will vary by occasion. In fact, it can vary quite dramatically. A similar claim about the inconsistency of experience has been made with respect to time perception, pain perception, hedonic experiences, etc. Thus, internal states matter for experienced utility.
2. What events are responsible for experienced utility? One could posit that experienced utility is a consequence of direct and indirect sources. For example, baseball fans are prone to say that hot dogs taste better at the ball park. Many people also believe that beer taste better when it is consumed with friends. These examples are meant to illustrate that utility is derived from the consumption of the product itself (a direct source) and the social situations in which it is consumed (an indirect source). More interesting is what

happens the next time the person consumes a hot dog or beer. Does the indirect utility from the prior social consumption episode influence the utility derived in the next consumption episode, even though the social cues are absent? If this is so, one might wonder about the conditions that are favorable to this form of utility expansion and/or contraction?

3. What are consumers trying to achieve with experienced utility? Do consumers simply seek to maintain a mood or are there other objectives? To illustrate, consider the consumption of a meal that consists of a single course with multiple food items. We could assess the utility associated with each individual bite, with a series of bites, with a series of bites interspersed with beverage consumption, or with bites, beverages, and conversation. Does the consumer manage this sequence of utility? This is not an issue of expectations (e.g., von Neumann and Morgenstern) or retrospective evaluations (e.g., Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999), but an issue of managed experiences. Rather than thinking about utility experiences as temporally distinct, we can of them as inter-temporally managed. Thus, if we were to extrapolate from the food example to a day's worth of events, we could research how consumers manage experienced utility throughout the day. We might even discover that there are different types of experienced utility that are being managed.
4. If consumers are trying to string together a set of experiences that provide utility, how does this process work? An obvious starting point for this conversation is the literature on adaptation. The literature on adaptation shows that an experience becomes less intense with repetition (Nelson and Meyvis 2008). Yet, at some level, this process explanation is much too simplistic. Most adaptation level findings are local, not global. For example, I can quickly adapt to repeatedly listening to my favorite song, but not to repeated listening to a favorite collection of songs and even less to a mix of songs, conversation, and food (e.g., a party). The interesting question is why people satiate to a series of hedonic experiences when they come from the same source but not when they come from different sources? After all, utility is utility, right? Similarly, how do different types of intervening experiences influence adaptation and experienced utility? In effect, this is a question of variety seeking on a grand level, but with the emphasis on experience as opposed to prospective evaluation or retrospection assessment.
5. Has the focus on expectations about product performance led us ignore experiences that accompany the act of purchasing? The traditional focus on the "utility of choice", as opposed to the "utility of consumption", leads to the implicit assumption that expectations are focal and experiences are secondary. It's all about the choice. Yet, we could argue the opposite. Purchases do nothing more that create opportunities for experiences. In fact, it could be argued that the act of purchasing is sufficient to create the desired experience. To illustrate, consider food acquisition and consumption. In the U.S., 13% of income is spent on food. The average American consumer eats 1750 pounds of

food per year and discards about 250 pounds of it. What is even crazier is that 20 percent of the food U.S. consumers discard food that hasn't even been removed from the package! This fact can lead to two very different research questions. First, we could adopt a traditional expected utility choice paradigm and wonder why consumers are being suboptimal. Why can't consumers learn to purchase and consume food properly? Alternatively we could adopt an experience perspective and seek to understand how utility is derived from the purchase, storage, and failure to consume the food. Maybe wilting one's lettuce in the refrigerator creates more utility than consuming it. This example illustrates the importance of understanding how consumers derive utility from a wide range of consumption-related experiences.

I have just made a case for investigating utility as an experience. If we can unlock the door into consideration, acquisition, and consumption experiences, we can gain insight into what people buy, when they buy, how much they buy, and why all of this buying influences, or fails to influence, their happiness. This is an area of inquiry that is closely aligned with consumer researcher interests, provides an opportunity for theory development, and can benefit from interdisciplinary study.

Narratives, Beliefs, and Utility

Thus far, I have argued that consumers derive utility from experience. Yet, I have failed to discuss what makes an experience pleasurable or painful. For the marketing faculty in the audience, this is akin to asking, "Where do benefit segments come from?" Why do some people derive utility from a product whereas others do not? My contention is that utility is a function of an individual's beliefs, and by extension, the meanings that support these beliefs. Beliefs create utility during the acquisition of a product, the consumption of a product, and the communication about these experiences. Thus, insight can be gained by understanding the events that lead to belief structures that allow a person to extract utility from an experience.

The idea that belief structures support utility extraction from experiences should sound like Marketing 101 because, in many ways, it is. Yet, what is interesting is the variability in the effectiveness of belief structures. For example, consider the belief structure that supports the use of dental floss. Everyone knows that flossing is important. It promotes healthy teeth and gums. In the U.S., we are taught this from our very first visit to the dentist. Yet, the American Dental Association reports that only 12% of Americans floss daily. Contrast this with another health behavior. Over the past 30 years, the U.S. market share of world pharmaceutical consumption has increased from 20% to 50%. A significant portion of this increased consumption is non-essential drug use. One could use observations about drug consumption and the use of dental floss to conclude that pharmaceutical manufacturers are much better marketers than dental hygiene product manufacturers. Alternatively, one could conclude that marketers are generally effective and that there must be something about how beliefs are organized or supported that creates differences in the utility for these two types of behavior.

There are two potential solutions to this problem of belief – behavior inconsistency. First it may be that consumption beliefs have to be supported by the appropriate foundational beliefs or values in order for utility to accrue from an experience. For example, Western cultures believe that man can control nature, that science can solve problems, and that life is sacred. Given these core beliefs, the promise of a pill is more believable and valuable than the promise of a piece of waxed string. Second, the narratives that accompany or organize beliefs lead to utility (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Troester 2002). Certainly, the magic potion narrative associated with pill popping is more valuable than the manual labor narrative associated with plaque removal. This view of how belief structures contribute to utility lends itself to an interdisciplinary research effort. Relevant research questions include:

1. First, is there an optimal procedure for communicating information to consumers so that beliefs are perceived as consistent with an existing consumption utility narrative? Alternatively, why do certain people resist adopting certain beliefs about consumption experiences? In other words, to what extent do the characteristics of an existing utility narrative, the characteristics of proposed beliefs, or a combination of the two contribute to the formation of a belief structure that supports the creation of utility in a consumption experience?
2. Second, if consumption utility narratives are organizational schemes that structure beliefs and determine their influence on consumption utility, then there must be a process by which these narratives are adopted, used, and updated. I say this because narratives are largely culturally determined. We need research that identifies how a specific consumption utility narrative is chosen for a particular situation and the extent to which the narrative or the accompanying beliefs are updated as a consequence of the experience. Insight into this issue will help us understand the intensity, frequency, and persistence of consuming specific types of products.
3. Third, how are consumption utility narratives diffused (e.g., Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1995)? One possibility is that narrative acceptance happens in accordance with economic market principles (Glaeser 2004; 2005). If this is so, three conditions should support acceptance of the consumption utility narrative. First, business or government must be able to extract value when consumers accept a consumption narrative. This encourages a supply of narratives that can be “marketed” to the public. Second, the consumer must experience value from adopting the narrative. Third, there must be limited negative personal consequences to adopting the narrative. In effect, this third condition limits the cost of adoption for the individual. If these conditions are met, businesses can peddle consumption utility narratives, consumers can adopt them, and social networks can reinforce them (e.g., Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002).

Thus far, I have treated consumption utility narratives and their accompanying belief systems as a frame that influences the utility derived from a product acquisition or consumption experience. This is an appropriate framework given our field's focus on consumerism. Yet, my remarks would not be complete if we did not consider two other major sources of utility: thought and social interaction (Ariely and Norton 2009). Thought clearly creates utility (e.g., Zauberan, Ratner, and Kim 2009). One simply has to think of one's parents, spouse, or children to appreciate the power of thought. Relationships also have utility (Saffer 2008). We would not interact with others if there was no utility associated with the experience. What intrigues me is how consumers coordinate thought utility and social interaction utility with utility from consumption. If thought itself can generate utility, why do we acquire and consume so many products? And if John Lennon was right, isn't the world filled with enough love to put some limits on excessive consumption?

Insight into how consumers might coordinate alternative sources of utility over time may be traced to the relative availability of utility producing narratives. The truth is that consumption utility narratives are much more available than narratives that allow us to derive utility from interpersonal interaction or thought (e.g., anticipation, recollection, creative ideas, etc.). To appreciate this fact, consider the consumption maturation of most children (cf. Chaplin and Roedder John 2007). Babies derive the most utility from interactions with their family. Toddlers derive utility from play and the thoughts that accompany it. Yet, as children mature, consumption utility narratives are learned and practiced. Growing up in Western culture teaches children many more consumption utility narratives than interpersonal interaction or thought utility narratives. Moreover, advertising and culture makes the consumption utility narratives much more salient than the competing narratives. Thus, altering the way humans consume the earth will never be accomplished by telling people to conserve, to be less superficial, or to live within their means. Instead, the mix of narratives must be changed. Someone has to market interpersonal interaction or thought narratives that can generate utility. Unfortunately, this is not something that capitalist cultures have been designed to do.

In the end, maybe insight can be gained by understanding how to increase the utility associated with any one narrative or how to create variations of interpersonal or thought utility narratives so that they can become more prevalent. Alternatively, we need to understand how to squeeze more utility out of an experience, or to create more utility experiences, per unit of consumption. Increasing the amount of utility derived from savoring, remembering, and interacting should allow people to live more satisfying lives. Of course, understanding how people coordinate these experiences, adapt to these experiences, and come to appreciate new experiences is one of the great mysteries of consumption (Hsee et al. 2009; Wilson and Gilbert 2008).

Conclusion

In summary, I have tried to make the case that we have a competitive advantage when it comes to the study of consumer experience. I expect we have competitive advantages in other substantive domains as well. I hope you will consider a research strategy that focuses on developing theory in these areas. Who knows, this research strategy might help you become famous.

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