

**Introduction to the Special Issue on Transformative Consumer Research: Developing
Theory to Mobilize Efforts that Improve Consumer and Societal Well-Being**

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Abstract

The third biennial Transformative Consumer Research Conference at Baylor University in June 2011 encouraged consumer researchers from around the world to address some of the world's most pressing social and economic problems. Researchers discussed with conceptual rigor nine substantive areas: Addiction; Food for Thought; Innovative Research Methods; Materialism; Youth, Risk and Consumption; Multicultural Marketplaces; Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces; Sustainable Products; and Transformative Services Research. This introductory paper summarizes the contributions of the post-conference articles on these nine areas that appear in this special issue, and it highlights the importance of conducting consumer research to obtain theoretically-grounded findings that offer practical solutions to serious human problems.

Keywords: transformative consumer research, addiction; food; research methods; materialism; youth risk; multicultural marketplaces; poverty and subsistence marketplaces; sustainable consumption; services research

The third biennial Transformative Consumer Research Conference at Baylor University in June 2011 brought consumer researchers together from around the world to discuss how to help address the most pressing social and economic problems through scholarship.

Transformative consumer research (TCR) is a movement within the Association for Consumer Research to “encourage, support, and publicize research that benefits the quality of life for all beings engaged in or affected by consumption trends and practices across the world” (Mick et al. 2011). The movement has six core qualities: to improve well-being, to emanate from the Association for Consumer Research and encourage paradigm diversity, to employ rigorous theory and methods, to highlight sociocultural and situational contexts, to partner with consumers, and to disseminate findings to relevant stakeholders. The conference promoted these qualities by inviting consumer researchers to discuss with conceptual rigor nine substantive research areas: Addiction; Food for Thought; Innovative Research Methods; Materialism; Youth, Risk and Consumption; Multicultural Marketplaces; Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces; Sustainable Products; and Transformative Services Research. This special issue summarizes the progress made during and after the conference to help address important consumption problems related to each of these topics.

The TCR conference itself was transformative by its nature because it was dialogical rather than traditional. While a traditional conference invites scholars to present past work to conference attendees who consume that knowledge by listening to research presentations, the current approach was to invite scholars to gather together as subgroups and engage in intensive discussions about their topic areas. As one participant said, “This is what research is supposed to be about: walking in with ideas and coming out with product, not walking in with product and coming out with ideas.” This transformative approach has been used at the last two TCR

conferences (Davis and Pechmann 2011a; Ozanne 2011). In a post-conference survey, the dialogical versus traditional approach was preferred by 97% of participants for future TCR conferences (Davis and Pechmann 2011b). The transformative process began when the conference co-chairs, instead of naming topics and track chairs, put out an open, global call for track chairs that would propose substantive topics for the conference and serve as discussion leaders during the conference. Then there was a similar call for participants and the track chairs selected a maximum of twelve participants per topic area based on their research vision and their evidence of past investment in the area. The track chairs also tried to achieve a balance of senior and junior researchers, including doctoral students who were considered full and equal partners at the conference and beyond. As a doctoral student said afterwards, “the level of accessibility and the collegial nature of this conference was ideal for a doctoral student to come away having a positive outlook on research -- both the process in all its forms and the outcomes” (Davis and Pechmann 2011b).

The TCR conference was attended by 102 participants from 92 universities and 16 countries, and 26% of participants were international while 22% were doctoral students. At the conference, the participants engaged in day-long, in-depth discussions of their topics and made major strides forward conceptually, substantively, and methodologically in terms of identifying important challenges in their areas, actionable solutions that respect and empower consumers, and viable and innovative research approaches. At the end of the conference, each area presented their key insights to the participants and sponsors. Then the scholars in each area jointly wrote papers summarizing the initial conference dialog (Blocker et al. 2011; Broderick et al. 2011; Bublitz et al. 2011; Davis and Pechman 2011a; Grover et al. 2011; Luchs et al. 2011; Mason et al. 2011; Ozanne et al. 2011; Rosenbaum et al. 2011; Wong et al. 2011). While these summary

papers were important for disseminating the immediate dialog from the conference, much of the theory required more time to develop. Over the next year, the same scholars further discussed and advanced their theories and ideas and then jointly wrote the papers that appear in this special issue. A post-conference survey using a standard disagree (1) - agree (5) scale revealed high levels of satisfaction with conference outcomes ($M = 4.75$) and overall conference experience ($M = 4.81$), with many agreeing they would apply to the next TCR conference ($M = 4.75$) and recommend it to others ($M = 4.87$; Davis and Pechman 2011b).

The theme of the conference was “mobilizing scholarship,” which was meant to encourage two results. First, the work produced should have relevance to real people struggling with real problems around the world. Each paper here represents the efforts of the participants to integrate their vast, collective, and conceptual knowledge that is rooted in theory, and to develop theory in ways that provide maximum insights and actionable steps for people struggling with poverty, environmental sustainability, materialism, addiction, obesity, youth risks, and service and multicultural challenges. A second aim was to promote post-conference publications so that the progress made at the conference could be disseminated to the people and organizations that need it. We believe that the papers in this special issue have the potential to greatly impact people across the world in positive and enduring ways.

The paper on “Innovative Research Methods” is important to TCR because it contributes to a breadth of current and future research efforts. It proposes approaches that are best tailored for transformative consumer research including problem identification, research team formation, participant sampling and recruitment, data gathering techniques, analytical processes, and research translation and dissemination. Specifically, it posits that transformative research should identify problems that embrace the complexity of social problems, use longitudinal and multi-

perspective approaches, and emphasize relevance not just rigor. The research team should consist of many scholars from various disciplines and cultures. The participant sample may need to be flexible and include successful outliers and/or intersecting research settings. Participant recruitment should emphasize consequential benefits to them, and data gathering techniques should consider studying phenomenon in context and using novel data collection modalities. Further, participants should be invited to join researchers in the analytical process whenever this is viable. Last, research translation and dissemination should be more than an afterthought but essential steps impacting a wide range of consumers.

The “Materialism” paper is also foundational, proposing a broader and yet simpler transformative consumer conceptualization of materialism. It simplifies and clarifies the current state of research on materialism that uses conflicting conceptualizations of materialism and is limited by a priori assumptions that materialism is negative. The new definition of materialism explains what materialism is, including how it is manifested, and toward what end. It emphasizes that materialism includes buying and using; that it involves products, services and experiences; and that it consists of symbolic consumption that can bolster the self and thus have positive aspects. The paper explains how the new definition promotes a broader understanding of materialism’s functions, processes, and consequences.

The “Multicultural Marketplaces” paper shows how a traditional theory of branding that has not been connected to TCR can be re-focused to address consumer well-being. A framework is presented that identifies three multicultural marketplaces, where there is assimilation, separation, or mutual integration. The framework also identifies three types of culture-based brand appeals and makes predictions about their likely effects on consumer identity and well-being in each marketplace. The three culture-based appeals are: (1) branding ignorance or

naiveté about cultural cues relevant to the non-dominant group, (2) branding tolerance or incorporation of some cultural cues, and (3) branding engagement or incorporating multiple cultural cues in one ad to engage all groups. The researchers argue that different cultural appeals may have different effects on consumer identity depending on the marketplace environment (e.g., assimilation combined with branding ignorance may be problematic).

The paper on “Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces” is also seminal in that it introduces a new framework for alleviating poverty, a topic hitherto lacking a formal consumer behavior approach. It identifies two foundational concepts for understanding poverty: felt deprivation and power. It describes felt deprivation as arising when poor consumers are unable to fulfill basic consumption needs, and it discusses how poor consumers individually and collectively resist power to lower felt deprivation. The paper also calls for new research streams focusing on how to improve the lived experience of consumption in poverty by attenuating stress, productively engaging institutions, fulfilling aspirations, leveraging social and trust capital, and facilitating creativity and adaptation. The paper discusses how this can help lead to better consumption choices, product and service experiences, and consumption capabilities and capacity.

The paper on “Transformative Services Research” is perhaps the most novel in this set of TCR topics because services research has traditionally focused on managerial and marketing issues and profits rather than consumer well-being. In contrast, this paper points out that because services are ubiquitous and consumers often seek services when vulnerable, services can dramatically affect well-being either positively or negatively. This paper proposes a framework to examine micro- and macro-level services and how they interact with consumers and influence consumer and employee well-being. The paper points out that well-being depends on delivering and designing services, implementing policies, and affecting sector structures so that both

consumers and service entities benefit. It also argues that service entities will be helped by broadening definitions of the customer to include individuals; collectives like families, communities, and groups; and the ecosystem or natural environment in which people live.

The “Food for Thought” paper builds on the researchers’ previous TCR conference paper on food well-being, which they define as a positive relationship with food (Block et al., 2011). The researchers’ premise is that consumers can often benefit from improving their food well-being, but that consumers’ preparedness to do this depends on their food goal awareness, motivation to change, and change readiness. In addition, the researchers’ model posits that consumers can advance their food well-being by identifying the thoughts and emotions that have either automated or deliberative influences on their food consumption. Finally, the researchers connect food goal awareness to a variety of areas of interest to consumer researchers: food literacy, emotional knowledge, self-reevaluation, social liberation, counter-conditioning, helping relationships, reinforcement, will power, and stimulus control.

The “Addiction” paper is one of the more trailblazing papers of the set, proposing a consumption continuum for addiction that starts with three pre-addiction phases: non-use, non-addictive use, and near-addictive use. Importantly, the paper posits that in the pre-addiction phases, consumers may still be vulnerable to marketing cues and that such cues may trigger progress to the addiction phase. While careful not to imply that consumption in the pre-addiction phase leads to addiction for all consumers, it discusses how environmental triggers like marketing cues may either facilitate or prevent progress to the addiction phase. This paper is an important starting place for further debate about addiction because it argues that research is needed on both nonuse and non-addicted use and the effects of marketing cues at these early

phases. The typical assumption is that consumer vulnerability to environmental triggers is low until the addiction phase, but this paper challenges that assumption.

The “Sustainable Consumption” paper is important because it identifies a theory that may best support future research on consumers and sustainable consumption: Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2004). Social Cognitive Theory discusses the interdependency of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors, and on reciprocal determinism or the notion that behavior can influence personal and/or environmental factors recursively. For instance, an improved economic environment may result in norms favoring conspicuous consumption to convey status, but it may be possible to change these norms so that thrifty habits and sustainable goods are the new indicators of status. This paper also reviews competing theories of sustainable consumption, highlights the importance of reciprocal determinism for research on sustainable consumption, and discusses several real world examples.

Finally, the paper on “Youth and Risky Consumption” is important because it introduces a unifying conceptual framework for understanding youth risk including youth cigarette smoking, obesity, and pregnancy. It conceptualizes youth risk as more than a series of volitional choices between safe and risky actions, because youth often have different perceptions of risk than adults and thus may not even recognize an action as risky. Hence, this paper proposes a participatory approach to understanding youth and risky consumption by including the voices of youth themselves in the research process. This paper also cites many diverse fields of research including biological, political-legal, and socio-cultural; and it identifies focal concepts, key theories, unique insights, novel research methods, and innovative interventions and legislation that are aimed at reducing highly risky youth behaviors.

We hope that this set of papers will offer several benefits to readers in mobilizing transformative consumer scholarship in their respective areas. First, we believe that these papers offer immediate insights and tools for research projects that can help to improve consumer and societal well-being. This can happen by telling people directly about the findings or by disseminating the findings to organizations that can inform and assist people. Second, we hope that this set of papers facilitates future transformative consumer research. We anticipate that the newer TCR research areas identified here develop into major foci, and that the established research areas are enlivened by new offshoots of discovery. We also hope that TCR researchers are inspired to launch other new areas of inquiry that previously are unrepresented in consumer research like work in the arts, music, and religion. Lastly, we anticipate that consumer researchers around the world and at all stages of their career will begin to integrate transformative research goals into their work. For some, this may mean an entire research stream focused on a particular TCR topic. For others, it may mean adding a study or two whose substance is relevant to TCR, so that the broader implications of their theoretical work can be ascertained and used to help and enlighten people. The papers in this special issue show that it is possible to conduct consumer research that advances theory and that also identifies practical solutions to some of the world's most pressing problems.

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