

JCR Statement of Review Philosophy

It is a special honor to be asked to conduct a manuscript review for a premier journal such as the *Journal of Consumer Research*. It is also a substantial gift of goodwill to the field of consumer behavior, and to the authors especially, when an individual conducts a quality review for JCR.

The professional responsibilities attendant to the review task are numerous, demanding, and interconnected. They include a sincere effort to read the paper carefully; to withhold immediate biases against the basic premise or purpose of the work; to apply evaluation criteria that are appropriate to the philosophy, paradigm, and goals inherent to the work; to express the evaluation to the authors in a clear, detailed, and humane manner that benefits the authors as much as possible and does not belittle them or their work; and to complete and return the review to the JCR office expeditiously.

The remainder of this statement outlines and expands upon the philosophy underlying the editorial review process at the *Journal of Consumer Research*. Its purpose is to communicate to JCR's reviewers and contributing authors the editor's expectations regarding the nature, intent, and result of the review process.¹

EDITORIAL OBJECTIVES

The mission of JCR is to publish the highest-quality empirical, theoretical, and methodological articles available in consumer research. The predominant criterion for publication in JCR is the degree to which knowledge of important consumer behavior issues has been advanced. As an interdisciplinary journal that fosters research insights from a variety of perspec-

tives, JCR encourages a wide range of conceptual orientations, methods, and substantive problem areas within the domain of consumer behavior, broadly construed.²

JCR welcomes all types of research relevant to consumer behavior. Over the years the modal category has been theoretically oriented empirical papers. Of particular merit are new theories and findings that improve the explanation of consumer behavior phenomena and are not mere translations of extant theories into a consumer behavior context. In addition to empirical work, JCR welcomes innovative conceptual papers and integrative literature reviews that offer analysis and synthesis of previous knowledge in a research area. These papers must go beyond a mere chronicling of prior research and provide new insights on that knowledge as well as compelling directions for future research. JCR also welcomes methodologically oriented papers that contribute new techniques of data collection or analysis—qualitative or quantitative—that have demonstrable advantages over existing methods of consumer research.

JCR is a scholarly journal, and papers need not incorporate normative implications. However, authors who do consider the practical applications of their work should consider the implications for public policy makers and consumers as well as for managers.

To progress as a learned journal, JCR must constantly aim to enhance the quality of the research and knowledge disseminated in its pages. Overall, JCR must be an open-minded and valued showcase for the

¹ Many of the ideas here are based on a similar statement by Kent B. Monroe in the September 1990 issue of JCR, which built on earlier statements by Richard J. Lutz and William D. Perrault, Jr. Accordingly, I am indebted to each of them. However, due to the changes I made, I bear sole responsibility for this particular document. For additional guidance on the submission of reviews, please consult the JCR Style Sheet, which is published in each June issue of the journal. It can also be found at www.journals.uchicago.edu/jcr in the subsection titled Instructions to Authors.

² JCR is sponsored by 12 organizations: the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (American Psychological Association [APA] Division 8), the American Statistical Association, the American Association of Family and Consumer Science, the Association for Consumer Research, the Society for Consumer Psychology (APA Division 23), the International Communication Association, the American Sociological Association, the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, the American Anthropological Association, the American Marketing Association, the American Association for Public Opinion Research, and the American Economic Association. In addition to all of the social sciences, other disciplinary perspectives for research in JCR include the full range of the humanities (e.g., philosophy, history, literature) and the professional areas (e.g., business, law).

finest consumer research, regardless of disciplinary origin, philosophy, theory, method, or topic. The editorial review process is the mechanism through which this mission is achieved.

OVERVIEW OF THE JCR EDITORIAL REVIEW PROCESS

The primary objective of the JCR editorial review process is to ensure that each submitted manuscript is evaluated not only rigorously, but also equitably and in accordance with criteria that are appropriate for its source discipline, perspective, or methodology. A paper should not be rejected, for example, because of a failure to understand a research paradigm or related terminology that is well accepted in the researcher's chosen discipline. However, authors do carry an additional burden in seeking to publish in JCR because they must communicate with an audience that is multidisciplinary and multiperspectival. In general, the nature and content of published articles in JCR must be commensurate with the quality of research published in the core journals of these other disciplines.

The variance of philosophies and methodologies in consumer research has widened considerably over the last 15 years. The increased diversity of papers submitted for review at JCR poses a sizable challenge insofar as the evaluation criteria often differ depending on the perspective and nature of the research. To address this challenge, JCR strives to maintain an editorial review board and a large group of ad hoc reviewers whose mind-sets and expertise match the mission of JCR and the eclecticism of its authors and readership. Reviewers are expected not only to assess papers in a timely, meticulous, fair, and criteria-appropriate manner, but also to assist authors as mutual colleagues in attaining the highest knowledge advances with their research and in maximizing the potential for publication in JCR, either through the current paper under review or in future papers. The reputation of JCR and the future of the consumer behavior field depend on reviewers who are respectful, helpful, and inspiring. Thus, a quality review requires a positive and scholarly attitude by reviewers and a rigorous and punctual evaluation of the manuscript. The next section expands on these aspects of a quality review.

CONDUCTING A QUALITY REVIEW

A quality review is one that benefits the authors and assists the editor in making a just decision about the manuscript. The following guidelines on conducting a quality review are organized according to the attitude of the reviewers and the central characteristics of the review itself.

Attitude of the Reviewers

The key to an exemplary review process is the reviewers and the attitude they bring to the task. Essentially, reviewers must be (a) impartial, (b) tactful and diplomatic, and (c) constructive.

Impartiality. Reviewers must attempt to be impartial when evaluating a manuscript. Although it is difficult to be completely objective when assessing a paper that may not cohere with one's own beliefs or values, nevertheless, a reviewer must always strive for that goal. If a reviewer cannot separate the evaluation process from a desire to advocate a preferred theory or to reject the manuscript out of hand on philosophical grounds, then the reviewer should disqualify himself or herself from that review. The review process must be characterized by fairness to the greatest extent that is humanly possible.

Tactfulness and Diplomacy. Comments on a manuscript must be delivered tactfully and diplomatically. Arrogance and paternalism have no place in the review process. In all cases, comments should be directed only at the manuscript, and never at the authors. When a reviewer critiques different aspects of a paper, he or she should keep in mind that there are many ways to do this without denigrating the authors or their research. Criticism can be delivered in a kind and valuable fashion rather than through the use of loaded, condescending, or inflammatory language. Even phrases such as "fatal flaws" and "serious mistakes," for example, can just as readily appear as "substantial concerns" or "major issues." By the same token, reviewers should avoid humor, irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, satire, parody, and the like, because these styles and tones are often insulting or patronizing. Taken together, such language not only damages JCR's reputation, it defaults on the responsibility to communicate clearly and humanely with the authors. Two good rules of thumb for engendering tactfulness and diplomacy are (1) to treat the authors in a manner that the reviewers themselves would want to be treated and (2) to write the review as though it is not blind, as though the reviewers are known to the authors.

Constructiveness. In many cases the process of evaluating a manuscript is a highly creative one. The reviewer can often improve a manuscript by helping authors to reposition their work, retheorize or reanalyze their data, reorganize the presentation of their findings, clarify their contribution to knowledge, and so on. However, the reviewer must keep in mind that the research is the property of the authors and that any temptation to persuade the authors to rewrite the paper more strictly from the reviewer's perspective should be avoided. In general, helping authors to craft their research article so that it achieves the highest

contribution to knowledge is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer. Although this process is largely a private one, it is greatly appreciated by the authors, the editor, and the field at large.

Key Characteristics of a Quality Review

A quality review has several pivotal features. It is rigorous, thorough, specific, anonymous and confidential, and prompt.

Rigor and Thoroughness. The sine qua non of a quality review is a rigorous and thorough evaluation of the manuscript. The title and the abstract as well as all assumptions, assertions, analyses, and implications should be considered in detail for clarity, correctness, and conciseness. In some cases, a reviewer may be competent to evaluate either the conceptual or methodological aspects of a paper, but not both. In such instances, the reviewer should indicate that in the cover letter to the editor that accompanies the Comments to the Authors.

A quality review should note the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the manuscript. Authors need to know what they have done well and not just what they have done poorly. In terms of weaknesses, a scholarly evaluation also carefully delineates between correctable and uncorrectable problems and between major and minor concerns. And, it must be emphasized, the first round of reviews is the time for reviewers to highlight uncorrectable problems or other major concerns. It is generally inappropriate to raise them in later review rounds if they already existed in the first draft submitted.

Specificity. A quality evaluation must be communicated in sufficient detail to support the reviewer's recommendation to the editor. The reviewer must endeavor to convince the editor and the authors of the principal critical points raised in the review. For instance, when alluding to previous research to uphold an assertion about some conceptual, methodological, or substantive weakness, it is imperative to provide a complete citation (author, source, year) so the editor and authors can locate it. As another example, if the reviewer alleges that there is more than one reasonable interpretation of the empirical findings, then the reviewer must point specifically to a pattern in the data—and not just a small subset—in which an alternative explanation resides. Altogether, a quality review includes precision and specificity in support of dissenting judgments about the manuscript.

Anonymity and Confidentiality. JCR uses a double-blind anonymous review process. That is, authors and reviewers are not informed of each other's identities. If a reviewer knows or strongly suspects the identity of the authors, the reviewer should contact the JCR office immediately. Similarly, reviewers should never reveal their identities in their reviews.

As a matter of confidentiality, it is also a violation of professional ethics and the authors' right to privacy to discuss a JCR manuscript with anyone else. Occasions will arise when a reviewer may wish to consult with a colleague who is more proficient in a particular area; such consultation is acceptable and laudable, but should be limited. Of greater concern is the need for reviewers to avoid gossiping about their JCR reviews. It is unfair to the authors, the editor, and other JCR reviewers to discuss what JCR has promised will remain confidential.

Promptness. A quality review assists the editor in arriving at a decision in an expeditious manner. To improve the overall turnaround time in the review process, all reviewers are now strongly encouraged to submit their reviews to the JCR editorial office by e-mail or by fax. As discussed below, this includes the Comments to the Authors, the Reviewer Report Form, and the Summary Letter to the Editor.

A goal of JCR is to reach editorial decisions on manuscripts within 70 days of the date of submission. This includes the reviewers' task, followed by a report prepared by an associate editor, and then the decision by the editor as expressed in a letter to the authors. Thus, it is imperative that reviewers complete their portion of the task as soon as possible, preferably in 25 days, and no more than 30 days. Agreeing to take on a JCR review assignment is to pledge that the review will be given high priority and then completed and transmitted in the allotted time frame. A review that arrives late is detrimental to the review process. It may also be superfluous, if an editorial decision has already been made.

COMPONENTS OF A JCR REVIEW

A review has three components that should be sent as a complete set directly to the JCR office. These include the Comments to the Authors, the confidential Reviewer Report Form, and a confidential Summary Letter to the Editor.

Comments to the Authors

As emphasized above, the Comments to the Authors represent the most important component of the JCR review, for they provide the rationale for the reviewer's evaluation of the manuscript, as well as suggestions for the improvement of the paper. The title of the manuscript, the manuscript identification number, and the reviewer's identification letter (usually A, B, C, or D, as indicated on the Reviewer Report Form) should be typed at the top of the first page of the Comments to the Authors. The pages of the author comments should also be numbered, starting with page 1. As stressed earlier, reviewers should not reveal their identities anywhere in the Comments to the Authors.

The Comments to the Authors should also not contain any semblance of a recommended rejection or acceptance of the manuscript. Any such recommendation may prove to be embarrassing to the reviewer and the editor and a source of frustration to the authors. Such recommendations should be made only in the confidential Summary Letter to the Editor. It is the editor's responsibility to make the final decision and also to decide on the best way to communicate that decision to the authors.

Comments to the Authors are generally most useful to the authors and the editor when they begin with an overall or gestalt assessment of the reviewer's reaction to the manuscript, including prominent strengths and weaknesses. This big picture is invaluable in providing a context for the more detailed comments that follow. The summary is especially important in identifying the reviewer's major concerns. When one considers that many JCR authors are submitting a manuscript to a professional journal for the first time, it is clear that they are inexperienced relative to the reviewer. For the authors to attempt to wade through several pages of detailed comments without any indication of relative importance can lead to frustration. Thus, in the interest of the partnership between authors and reviewers to further knowledge, the gestalt assessment is extremely helpful. After the gestalt assessment, the detailed comments are then provided that tactfully justify the evaluation and offer constructive, specific guidance for a revision or for future research efforts.

Confidential Reviewer Report Form

The Reviewer Report Form (RRF), which appears at the end of this statement, is the focal point for a JCR review. The RRF contains basic record-keeping information essential to efficient management of each review. The information recorded there is never revealed to authors. The intent of the series of close-ended rating scales that appear on the RRF is to remind the reviewer of key considerations in the evaluation of the manuscript. The responses to these scales also serve a diagnostic purpose for the editor in the search for areas of reviewer consensus. Few, if any, decisions to accept or reject a manuscript are made on the basis of these scales, but they are worthwhile in explaining to an author the reason for a rejection or the top deficiencies to correct in a possible revision.

Because the overall recommendation is the most crucial piece of information the reviewer provides on the RRF, each of the five response categories will be described in detail.

Accept Unconditionally. This rarely used category should be reserved for manuscripts that are virtually flawless in their content. Selection of this recommendation should be accompanied by comments to the editor that support such a positive evaluation. In gen-

eral, when a reviewer makes this recommendation, he or she will be regarded as having signed off on the manuscript. Any revisions requested by other reviewers will not be sent back to the reviewer who has advocated unconditional acceptance of a manuscript, unless the revision changes the paper dramatically.

Accept Conditionally, Subject to Minor Revisions, according to Accompanying Comments. This recommendation should be made when the manuscript is judged to be quite strong and in need of only minor additions, deletions, or corrections. For instance, a recommendation to shorten a manuscript by two pages would probably be considered a minor revision, whereas a recommendation to shorten it by 10 pages would not. The exact nature of the desired revision must be detailed in the Comments to the Authors, so that the editor can evaluate the revised manuscript without returning the new version to the reviewer. Since the types of revision implied here are straightforward, this recommendation is tantamount to accepting the appropriately revised manuscript for publication.

Encourage Revision, according to Accompanying Comments. This recommendation should be used for manuscripts that have a high degree of potential for eventual publication, in addition to significant deficiencies that must be corrected. For instance, the research addresses a vital topic but is not presented in a logical or lucid fashion. Alternatively, questions may exist about some aspects of its method. This recommendation should be used when the reviewer believes that satisfactory resolution to his or her concerns is possible and that the achievement of successful resolution will result in an acceptable manuscript. This recommendation should not be used when there is reason to believe that even satisfactory responses to the concerns raised would result in only a marginal contribution. Detailed Comments to the Authors are extremely important in support of this recommendation. The comments should be explicit so that the authors can conceivably answer all the concerns in a single attentive revision. However, it must be noted that a recommendation in this category should not be construed as a guarantee of eventual publication. In some cases, a seemingly promising manuscript will not be adequately revised to attain the quality and level of knowledge contribution required for publication in JCR.

Reject in Current Form, but Allow Resubmission of a Substantially Different Version, according to Accompanying Comments. The essential difference between this recommendation (reject in current form) and the option above (encourage revision) is that the current version of the manuscript is not publishable in anything approximating its present form. It is through this recommendation that reviewer creativity plays its greatest role and the concept of collegial partner-

ship in the review process comes most into play. Instead of simply rejecting a manuscript as completely unsalvageable, this recommendation includes thoughtful advice for producing a potentially publishable, but thoroughly different, manuscript. This recommendation may be appropriate for (1) altering the conceptual foundations to cohere better with the methods and findings; (2) reanalyzing the data with more suitable techniques; (3) conducting additional empirical work to complement the conceptual development or to replace or supplement a flawed study in the present manuscript; or (4) repositioning the research in a more appropriate fashion, given its content, method, and apparent contribution.

Obviously, this recommendation must be accompanied by very carefully prepared Comments to the Authors that clearly specify the nature and scope of the required revision. Papers receiving this recommendation are unlikely to achieve publishable status with a single revision, given the magnitude of the revision required. In view of the amount of effort implied for reviewers, the editor, and authors, this recommendation should be used sparingly.

Reject Unconditionally, because the Likelihood of Successful Revision Is Remote. A paper that receives a recommendation according to one of the two preceding categories may be judged to have major problems on two or three dimensions listed on the scales of the RRF. However, a paper given a recommendation of this final category is likely to be judged to have major problems on multiple dimensions. It is viewed as having virtually no chance of ever making a contribution, even after revision. For example, the topic may be of trivial importance to the domain of consumer behavior; the basic conceptual development may be extremely weak or incorrect; or the empirical work may have uncorrectable defects. Hence, this last category of recommendation is quite unlike the immediately preceding category that assumes a reasonable probability of an eventual contribution if the authors can successfully revise. It is expected that this last recommendation category will be the modal category for JCR submissions, based on the overall historical rejection rate of 85–90 percent.

When reviewers make a recommendation reflecting this disappointing and definitive category, the Comments to the Authors should be especially polite in

explaining the nature of the concerns. In such instances, however, the Comments to the Authors need not be as lengthy as in the previous categories. It is permissible and efficient to articulate only the most serious concerns, and to conserve reviewing energy for other manuscripts that stand to gain from more detailed reviewer input.

Confidential Summary Letter to the Editor

A confidential Summary Letter intended only for the eyes of the editor (and an associate editor) should also accompany the Reviewer Report Form and the Comments to the Authors. It is the forum where the reviewer can be brutally frank regarding the manuscript. Rather than convey frustrations or strongly negative judgments directly to the authors, the reviewers should reserve these feelings and assessments for their Summary Letter to the Editor.

The Summary Letter to the Editor should be more general than specific since it will be read as a guide and as a supplement to the detailed Comments to the Authors. In it the reviewer's recommended disposition for the paper should be openly indicated, along with any needed amplification of central issues appearing in the Comments to the Authors.

CONCLUSION

The role of the JCR reviewer requires diligence and sacrifice. Discretionary time and creative energy are expended, and those precious commodities are most often donated directly from the reservoirs from which the reviewer's own research is drawn. Hence, writing a quality JCR review is truly a labor of love—for the betterment of the intellectual life and value of consumer research.

Without the dedicated efforts of reviewers, JCR could not exist in its present form. Although it is inarguable that any journal is only as good as the authors who contribute their research, it is less acknowledged, but equally true, that a good journal is made excellent by the reviewers who serve voluntarily on its behalf. In pursuit of the mission, goals, and guidelines spelled out in this document, the review process significantly enhances the knowledge contributions published through the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

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