AGAITS THINKING
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Is Consumer Behavior Today Where Social Psychology Was 12 years Ago?

Since Rich Lutz introduced this session via McGuire's "Seven Koen" (1973), that will also be the point of departure for these comments. For it is important to realize the ways in which the field of social psychology that McGuire addressed in 1972 is similar to and different from the field of consumer behavior in 1984. Just as these similarities point to some common needs, the differences were against too wholesale an application of McGuire's recommendations.

Similarities

The major similarity that suggests McGuire's comments have some relevance to us is that like social psychology 12 years ago, consumer research has devoted its efforts and training to only half of the process needed for meaningful research. We have devoted our efforts to methods for hypothesis testing, but have virtually ignored the process of hypothesis generation that must precede such tests. Perhaps this explains why we produce such competent technicians and such incompetent theoreticians and why we have become so adept at borrowing hypotheses and so incapable of creating good hypotheses of our own. This is what calls our attention to McGuire's article and what makes his suggestions for better idea generation compelling.

A second way in which we share the position of social psychology at the time of McGuire's comments is that our content and substance is under attack. For social psychology in the early Seventies the attack was against the sterility of social psychological theory and the cry was for greater relevance to real and important phenomena. This is not unlike the situation in consumer behavior today. Our (borrowed) dominant paradigm of the consumer as information processor is under a sustained and multifaceted siege. Glucksman and Grambo's (1979) question whether consumer choices involve decision-making. Krugman (1956) and Houston and Rothschild (1978) have asked whether much of consumer behavior isn't low in involvement and considerably different from the dominant information processing view. Belk (1974) and Sheft and Raju (1975) suggest that many consumer behaviors may be situationally induced. Venkatesan (1973) and Raju (1979) suggest that curiosity and novelty-seeking supplant decision-making in many instances. Zajonc (1980) proposes that primary affect often takes the supposed place of cognitions in consumer choice. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) suggest we have ignored the considerably different realms of experiential consumption in our focus on product buying. And Levy (1959) long ago told us that symbolic and non-verbal behaviors are the real consumption phenomena of interest. In one way or another, all of these perspectives challenge the cognitive, rational, decision-making view that has dominated consumer behavior since before McGuire made his comments.

Besides attacks on their substance, consumer behavior today and social psychology 12 years ago share attacks on their methods. For social psychology, the attack was on the method biases, procedural biases, and sample design biases of laboratory experiments. For consumer behavior the method attacks began with Bass's (1974) questioning of whether the processes under study were really stochastic rather than deterministic in nature. More recently Paul Anderson (1983) and others have begun to take to heart Feyersabend's criticisms of the objectivity and truth-finding ability of traditional scientific method, and suggest that more open relativistic procedures be accepted instead. Thus, at least superficially, there are some similarities between the shortcomings of social psychology 12 years ago and those of consumer behavior today. But it is important to realize that there are also some differences.

Differences

One important difference involves the nature of the substantive attacks facing the two disciplines. Social psychology was attacked during the era of student revolt as being too devoted to theory and too lacking in any devotion to the pragmatic relevance of its efforts. Consumer behavior, on the other hand, is all pragmatic relevance with no devotion to original theory generation. In fact, our problem is even more fundamental since we don't know how to develop theory.

A second significant difference between McGuire's comments and the problems facing consumer behavior concerns method more than substance. McGuire called for a multivariate revolution involving more complex models and analyses to recognize the complexities of behavioral causation. Consumer behavior, as well as all of marketing, has already suffered from such a revolution. One reason that suffered in the appropriate word here is that our revolution drove out the old guard who wrote non-empirical papers in the Journal of Marketing. These pieces were, if not theoretical, at least creative and thoughtful. We have also suffered in that our multivariate revolution drove out (or publishing) qualitative researchers and qualitative research. Those left publishing have either forgotten or never learned how to have a good and important idea. This means that in order to progress we have to learn to be weird enough to have ideas.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

New Paradigms

The first sense in which these comments are against thinking is in terms of our paradigms. There is growing demand that we throw out our tired old cognitive/rational/decis- tion-making consumer as an inadequate hybrid of economic man and cognitive psychology. In concentrating on this view of the consumer we have focused exclusively on what Lewis Hyde (1983) termed the masculine aspects of behavior—rational, cognitive, functional, utilitarian choices. We've ignored the feminine aspects of consumer behavior—aesthetics, experiential consumption, symbolic consumption, non-materialism, and feeling.

New Methods for Hypothesis and Theory Generation

The first step required for useful idea generation concerning consumer behavior is a shift in focus. Consumer behavior is a human process rather than merely a marketing phenomenon and a way to make money. It is of interest for its own sake. From this perspective we are forced to admit that we know nothing about consumer behavior. This can be an advantage since we have a tabula rasa with no preconceptions to impede us.

We must now consider how to get ideas. It is useful to begin with an explanation of the second part of the polemic against thinking intended in this paper. You may know
how consumer behavior works, but do you feel it? Do you
see it when you look at consumers? Freud (1921) said that creativity is a two-stage process composed of
primary process thinking involving creating and feeling
ideas and secondary process thinking composed of explaining,
refining, and using these ideas suitable for communication
to others (Suler 1980). This is not really a new idea
and goes back to Greek distinctions between Eros and Logos.

Since we are much better at secondary process thinking,
these comments will concentrate exclusively on primary
process thinking.

Jerry Olson once noted that you can't purposely get or
teach getting a creative breakthrough. What we can do is
be prepared for such breakthroughs when they are ready to
occur. As Koestler (1964) notes, it is after
intensely about something and then relaxing and forgetting
about it that we are most likely to have the volial experience
that often accompanies creative recognition of an idea.

Several activities can facilitate this process:

1. Read Voraciously—It should be added that little of
this reading should be in marketing since there is little
worth reading in marketing. Certainly we should do our
own primary research with an open eye to serendipity that
may emerge from curiosity about these broad yet specific
topics. This is one of Wicker's (1981) suggestions for
"getting out of conceptual ruts". Talking to others can
serve the same idea-stimulating purpose as reading, and
again these others should be non-marketers as much as
possible.

2. Record Everything—Perhaps the best example of this
is Fritz Heider whose thousands of pages of ideas-laden
journals I have just now been
published (Beneke and Weiner 1982). Whether they come
to you while sleeping, running, or driving, record your
dreams, vague ideas, musings, and hunches. While I am
not nearly as organized as Fritz Heider, I continually find ideas in my old scribblings and notes of which
thinking ideas and bits and pieces that I have recorded for future
reference. Of course they're not all good, but enough are that I've found it worthwhile to get out of bed or
do whatever it requires to record them. It may also be
worthwhile to organize and formalize these thoughts.
I have just begun to keep a computerized annotated bibliography to aid my current work on materialism. I've found that
the process of coding things in terms of keywords for
this bibliography may have little impact at the time, but
when I search my keywords any thoughts are brought together that I did not formerly regard as
related to one another. Serendipity is often the result.

3. Be Macro—This goes back to the suggestion that we
broaden our focus in thinking about consumer behavior
as a part of life rather than as a part of marketing.
Wicker (1981) also notes that placing the problem in a
larger domain can produce insight. Stepping back and
re-examining a phenomenon is often the first step in reframing
the problem in a new way capable of a more innovative
solution.

4. Question Existing Wisdom—Together with stepping back
from existing knowledge and views, it is helpful to shake
our complacency by rejecting what is "known" (e.g., that
consumers process information) and by seeking alternatives.
Together with the attempt to be macro, this is a good way
of avoiding the ruts into which our thinking all too readily falls.

5. Become Passionate.—The surest way to develop good
ideas and at the same time have fun doing it, is to become
so passionately about some topic that thinking about it
becomes your obsessive interest. Regardless of how
these efforts are, by definition, fun. Becoming passionate
about a topic means eating, breathing, and sleeping it
(and then waking to record your dreams about it). It
is becoming as passionate as Charlie Parker was about
jazz or as passionate as Morris Berman is about jazz
musicians or aesthetically meaningful stimuli (see his
accompanying paper).

6. Get Weird—If getting weird seems no problem for you,
I would remind you of Hunter Thompson's (1970) words that,
"When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro." That
is, take as different an approach as you possibly can
to pursuing a phenomenon that interests you. For instance,
if seeking ideas about materialism, I have found all of the
following to be valuable sources: lay think of victims, primitive tribes, comic books, prehistoric artifacts,
Marsden, religions, cross-cultural comparisons, geography,
and architecture. Wicker (1981) makes several useful
Suggestions for gaining new perspectives. For instance,
looking for different ways of thinking and seeking
assumptions that are opposite of those traditionally made can be rewarding.

But the preceding are only means of being ready for creative
insights. While the muse cannot always be counted upon
to be there when needed, there are ways in which
one can attempt to actively cultivate insights or at least
precipitate them if the preparations are in order. McGuire
lists many of these. A number of others have also offered
ideas for developing useful such as stimulating creativity
(e.g., Banks and Perry 1983; we refer to Henggeler, and Cuellar 1984, Zaltman, Lomax, and Heffring 1982).
I shall only list a few methods that I have found anecdotally
useful.

1. Paradox—As McGuire notes, confronting apparent paradoxes
and attempting to resolve them can be a useful creative
exercise. One such paradox is gift-giving. Anthropologists,
economists, and sociobiologists have all been perplexed
by this seemingly irrational phenomenon. Wouldn't it make
much more sense to more perfectly recognize the
value of gift-giving by diverting the funds applied to the imperfect process
of gift-exchange to the more perfect process of personal
purchasing? It was the poet Lewis Hyde (1983) who recognized
that this false self places gift-exchange in the economic
sphere when it instead belongs in the social sphere.
That is why giving your mother money for Mother's day
is seen as so glaringly inappropriate (Weblin, Lea, and
Portalska 1983). It is also, Hyde contends, why selling
your ideas in consulting as if creativity were an economic commodity,
can cause creativity to die.

2. Confronting Disturbing Hypotheses—For me, one such
disturbing hypothesis is sociobiology's (Trivers 1971)
explanation of gift-giving in terms of reciprocation.
Under this doctrine a gift is a credit in the view of economics, psychology, anthropology, and
sociology as well, the only reason that we help others
is so that they may one day reciprocate by helping us.
Somewhat I cannot bring myself to believe that the thrill
I get in seeing my daughter's eyes light up at the receipt
of a gift can be anything quite so calculated. Two alter-
natives suggest themselves. One posit that rather than
a quid pro quo view of gifts we have a "balance sheet"
view of the world in which we view the good things we
do for others as gaining us "credits" that will eventually
come back to us in creating good things for us, but from
some unspecified and unrelated source. This could explain
why Caplow's (1965) study of gift giving at Christmas
found that when children become parents they do by
shift former balances of gift exchange by attempting to "pay
back" their parents. Another possible alternative to
reciprocation involves William James' (1899) concept
of the "extended self." Since our kin (especially our
spouse and children) are seen as part of this extended
self, giving to them should be self-gratifying since they
are a part of our identity. Thus their pleasure is our
pleasure. While this view takes some liberty with James' notion, it forms a competing hypothesis that challenges

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the original disturbing hypothesis and can be used to set up competing predictions for testing.

3. Analogy—Some care must be taken with this procedure, but analogies can also be useful in generating hypotheses. For instance, with regard to territoriality, wolves have been observed to mark the boundaries of the territory with urine that keeps out competitors (e.g., Mowat 1963). In a master’s thesis at the University of Utah, Barbara Brown (1980) found that burglarized houses differed from their non-burglarized neighbors by having fewer territorial markers such as flower beds, hedges, and name signs. These markers proved no physical protection against burglaries, but certainly served as just enough warning of the territoriality of the inhabitants to deter burglars.

4. Fantasyland—Another way to force insight may be to seek it in the unexpected realm of fantasy. Bettelheim (1977) has done this with fairytales. Levi-Strauss (1968), Levy (1981), and Sherry (forthcoming) have done so with myths. Kassarjian (1983) and Barcus (1961) have investigated comics for the truths they provide about consumer behavior. And Nick Polley and I are investigating advertising for similar purposes. Each method may be used as a complement, an acceptable forum for ideas that we may have difficulty expressing directly.

5. Synthesis—Another stimulant to creative insight may be attempting to synthesize diverse and seemingly unrelated points of view. The real thrill and creativity come in seeing what Krugman (1966) calls “connections” between such diverse sources. More than summaries, these connections represent fresh and fundamental perspectives on consumption that are basic and new. Hyde’s (1983) recent book is a good example of this, drawing together perspectives on gift-giving from poetry, creativity research, academia, primitive exchange, social exchange theory, and sociology’s reciprocal altruism doctrine. The connections may take a while to emerge, but attempts at synthesis, especially of seemingly unrelated views, can be a great stimulus to creativity.

6. Participant Observation—Consumer behavior, to a greater extent than almost any other field, has an opportunity to learn via participant observation. However, it is probably easiest to get fresh insights at the fringes of unfamiliar territory rather than in the consumption we know best. For me, three such contexts have been Utah, with its youngest population in the U.S. and unique Mormon religious concentration, Florida with its oldest population in the U.S. and retirement communities, and Las Vegas with its unique architecture and naked hedonism. The latter consumer environment, for example, has also been studied by essayist Tom Wolfe (1968), iconoclast architect Robert Venturi (Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1972), and gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson (1971). I find this a particularly interesting area in which to study consumer behavior and have thus far observed several striking phenomena. One is the merchandise arcade attached to all large casino-hotels. It seems to act to provide a more tangible reason to gamble than does the mere abstraction of money. It acts as a candy store for adults although the merchandise is more costly and more likely to be purely class-oriented. For example, the Las Vegas Hilton, the MGM Grand Hotel, and Caesar’s Palace compared to that at lower class arcades like that at Circus Circus. Circus Circus provides an interesting arena in which to study attempts at adolescent consumer socialization in its plan to lead young customers to an upper level carnival arcade through the gaming tables of the main casino. In fact, aside from non-monetary prizes and an arguable modicum of skill in the upper arcade games, there is little to differentiate the games for children and those for adults in this casino/circus/training ground. Besides the games themselves (e.g., baccarat vs. craps), another social class phenomenon that is distinguishable in Las Vegas is that upperclass casinos use the abstract lure of large jackpots to attract gamblers while lowerclass casinos use more concrete lures by offering automobiles, motorcycles, snowmobiles, and all-terrain vehicles as prizes—presumably parts of the image of the good life held by the lower middle class. If there is wisdom behind this pattern, it suggests that there are social class differences in need for tangible consumption goals and rewards.

These illustrations are only a few of the possible examples of how we might encourage new theory and hypotheses. The major point of these comments is that we need less thinking and more feeling both in our paradigms of consumer behavior and in our efforts to develop new ideas. In this we share the dilemma of social psychology 12 years ago. However, unlike social psychology we do not have a set of theories to critique. The most significant thing we can do to encourage the formation of our own theories is to recognize that consumer behavior is a field unto itself and is not a mere subdiscipline of marketing.

REFERENCES


