CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: STILL NORMATIVE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

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ABSTRACT

The authors examine historical shifts in the way that marketers define consumer behavior and note how their definitions have remained normative while expanding the domain of consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

As each social science evolves, its domain of study, as revealed by how scholars within the discipline define it, evolves. The discipline of consumer behavior is no exception; since the 1940s, consumer behavior research has followed the dominant model of consumer decision-making. Zaichowsky makes this point in her 1991 Business Horizons article, in which she traced the dominant model assumed by consumer behavior scholars during each decade since the 1940s. Under the economic man model of the 1940s, scholars related demand equations to product sales; under the irrational man model of the 1950s, scholars used projective research techniques to search for the subconscious meaning of goods; under the consumer-as-information-processor model that dominated the 1960s and 1970s, scholars built hierarchy-of-effects models and studied pre-purchase information seeking and processing; under the cognitive miser model of the 1980s, attention to the high cost of thinking led scholars to study low-involvement learning and decision-making; and under the current collective decision-maker model, scholars are encouraged to study joint decision making.

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TABLE 1
HISTORICAL PERIODS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
Although interesting, Zaichowsky (1991) only traces the historical forces that influenced thought about the proper domain of consumer behavior; she and other marketing historians (e.g., Mittelstaedt 1990; Sheth, Gardner and Garrett 1988) have overlooked the relationship between these forces and the evolutionary changes in the definition of consumer behavior. The goal of this paper is to fill this knowledge gap.

To examine this relationship for consumer behavior, one must review both academic journals and textbooks. Through their journal articles, consumer behavior scholars offer concepts that many of their colleagues believe should be included in the scope of consumer behavior. However, because the task of defining the scope of consumer behavior has been relegated to textbook authors (except one notable counterexample), textbooks provide the one best source for the history of such definitions.

The historical perspective taken here extends recent works that have focused on the development of marketing and consumer behavior; much of the following discussion is organized around Zaichowsky (1991). One key finding: the various definitions reveal the historically-dominant normative orientation of consumer behavior.

THE ORIGINS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The behaviors of consumers have concerned marketers since the inception of marketing. During the 1930s and 1940s, marketing scholars often focused on the consumption process and how consumers spent their incomes, with the concept of economic man dominating their writings (Zaichowsky 1991). Under this traditional view of consumer decision-making, the only rational decision was one that maximized economic well-being.

Scholars eventually found this view lacking for two reasons. First, it fails to differentiate between the reasons for a decision or action and the decisions or actions themselves. Second, it implies that physical and emotional motives are different entities, yet neither can be measured separately (Walters and Bergiel 1989). Despite these shortcomings, economic man was a mainstay of the consumer behavior literature for many years.

THE FIFTIES: THE END OF ECONOMIC MAN

Economic man dominated the marketing literature into the 1950s. For instance, the economist James Duesenberry’s 1949 book, entitled Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behavior, was one of the first books with the term consumer behavior in the title. A purely economic analysis of the relationship between income growth and savings rate, this book contained little discussion of the relationship between savings and psychological factors. Beginning in the 1950s, some Journal of Marketing articles began to stress the value of vector analysis and individual utilities as a way to understand consumer behavior. Predominantly economic in focus, such articles tried to explain "individual distribution patterns," or the spending patterns of each consumer (Bilkey 1951, 1953).

Despite the preeminence of economic man during the 1930s and 1940s, a few marketing scholars looked to nonrational explanations of consumer behavior. For example, Pitkin, in his 1932 book entitled The Consumer: His Nature and His Changing Habits, presented a variety of case studies and anecdotes about consumers and the consumption process. Rare for the time was Pitkin’s call for the study of “consumer psychology” (p.8) and his claim that man, in all of his attitudes, interest, and capacities, is an integral personality. Whatever he does is a joint product of his intelligence, his energy, his age, his training, and his emotions (pp.32-33, italics in original). Although he focused on the buying process, Pitkin argued that noneconomic factors also influenced consumer behavior. Eventually, other writers began to explore these noneconomic factors. For example, in his 1950 Journal of Marketing article, Britt addressed the strategy of consumer motivation, and Alderson, in a subsequent 1952 Journal of Marketing article, suggested that marketers use psychological concepts to solve marketing problems.

Then, in 1952, marketers founded the Committee for Research on Consumer Attitudes and Behavior. Two years later, the Committee
published Consumer Behavior — The Dynamics of Consumer Reaction, a collection of case studies, forecasts, and measurement papers. This book, one of a few pre-1960 books that focused on consumer buying processes, suggested that noneconomic factors also affected these processes. Surprising, none of the collected papers offered a formal definition of consumer behavior.

In the late 1950s, the study of consumer behavior almost escaped its normative confines. The dominant study of the time was a field study — often a positively-oriented case study or an analysis of aggregate consumption patterns (Hyman, Skipper and Tansey 1991, p. 421) — designed to describe and explain the factors that influenced buying processes. Because the scholars of the time lacked both formal models and a formal definition of consumer behavior, they were forced to set their own limits for the proper scope of consumer behavior; as a result, they often pursued "knowledge for knowledge's sake" (Clark 1954, p.vii). Without a mandate to relate their scholarly work to marketing practice, their efforts took a decidedly positive turn. Yet, consumer behavior retained its normative orientation; although these scholars recognized the influence of noneconomic factors on buying behavior, they were unable to develop the positive measures requisite for a positive science of consumer behavior.

THE SIXTIES: A FORMAL DEFINITION OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

With the emergence of the marketing management orientation in the early 1960s (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988), we see the first acceptance of consumer behavior as a distinct discipline. For example, marketing management textbooks began to include chapters about consumer behavior (Mittelstaedt 1990); the end of the decade saw the first textbooks strictly about consumer behavior.

Rather than present a formal definition of consumer behavior, some early textbooks about consumer behavior merely delineated its' boundaries. The stated objective of one such textbook, Myers and Reynolds' (1967) Consumer Behavior and Marketing Management, was to "review what we know about human behavior as it relates to the buying situation" (p.2, italics in original). Other early books contained definitions of consumer behavior that continued to focus on the buying process. For example, Walters and Paul (1970) stated Consumer behavior is the process whereby individuals decide whether, what, when, where, how, and from whom to purchase goods and services. Consumer behavior includes both the mental and physical activity necessary for making decisions in the marketplace (p.7, italics in original). These examples show that marketers began to realize that consumer behavior was more than economics-driven, utility maximizing behavior, with mental processes and psychological concepts as purchase antecedents. However, most attention remained on buying processes and purchase antecedents.

With more formal definitions and the appearance of dedicated textbooks, consumer behavior became decidedly normative. Researcher attention shifted to purchase antecedents and how to motivate consumers through knowledge of these antecedents. The emerging models of consumer behavior now guided the study of the consumption process.


The scope of marketing expanded in the seventies. Kotler (1972) led the way toward a broader scope of marketing. Consumer behavior scholars quickly followed suit; they began to borrow many theories from other social sciences, especially psychology and sociology.

In 1970, the formation of the Association for Consumer Research provided consumer behavior scholars with new publication outlets. With new journals and proceedings now available, the number of articles on consumer behavior grew quickly (Mittelstaedt 1990; Helgeson, et al. 1984). However, none of these articles focused on a formal definition of consumer behavior; textbooks continued as the major source of such definitions.

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Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat, in the third edition of their textbook *Consumer Behavior* (1978), defined the subject matter of consumer behavior — 

*those acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts* (p.3, italics in the original).

Walters, in the third edition of *Consumer Behavior: Theory and Practice* (1978), defined consumer behavior as 

*those decisions and related activities of persons involved specifically in buying and using economic goods and services (products)* (p.8).

Both definitions are similar to the ones that appeared in the first editions of each textbook. Though marketing was expanding beyond its traditional scope of economic exchange to include nonprofit organizations and service providers, these major textbooks retained their focus on economic goods.

Some new first editions did reflect the broadened domain of marketing. For example, Wasson (1975) stated that 

*by definition consumer behavior is the behavior of people in a market type situation. Any study of consumer behavior would therefore have to be a study of all those aspects of our knowledge of human behavior in any situation containing some elements of marketing or exchange* (p.1).

Yet, most mid-seventies textbook definitions of *consumer behavior* failed to reflect Kotler's (1972) expanded concept of marketing. While researchers continued their efforts to develop and test new theories of *consumer behavior*, they exerted little effort to redefine *consumer behavior*.

Only Jacoby addressed the definition of *consumer behavior* in two *Journal of Marketing* articles. In 1977, Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst restated Jacoby's earlier definition of *consumer behavior*: "the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, time and ideas by decision making units" (p.22). These authors argued that the omission of product disposition was a failure of past definitions and ideas about consumer behavior. The next year, Jacoby again used the pages of the *Journal of Marketing* to bemoan the state of *consumer behavior* research; he argued against what he called the "theory of the month club" (1978, p.89) type of research, and recommended his earlier definition of *consumer behavior* as a starting point for subsequent research.

As the seventies closed, some textbook authors, through their formal definitions, tried to expand the domain of *consumer behavior* from economic goods, services, and a focus on purchasing, to the total purchase and consumption process. Except for Jacoby's efforts, these represent the only formal efforts to redefine the scope of *consumer behavior*.

**THE EIGHTIES: A RENEWED INTEREST IN THEORY**

As the eighties began, the efforts to define the scope of *consumer behavior* remained with textbook authors; however, emerging formats and venues began to offer *consumer behavior* scholars a new opportunity to redefine this scope. Several *consumer behavior* scholars used these new outlets to forward the debate about the proper scope of *consumer behavior*.

For example, Leigh and Martin (1982) argued for the need to study collective *consumer behavior*. In their review of the current study of collective *consumer behavior* and its role in society, they concluded that the scope of *consumer behavior* should include collective behavior. Belk (1982) questioned the means by which consumers acquire goods and services. Although most definitions of *consumer behavior* reflected the notion of acquisition by purchasing, Belk (1982) posited that consumers do more than buy and consume; they also possess and collect. Belk stated it is time that marketing and consumer theory and research begin to consider the proper domain of study to be broader than simply buying and consuming (p.188). Olshavsky (1985, 1987) stressed the need for a more comprehensive definition of consumer behavior, one that includes behaviors relating both to 'goal formation,' 'acquisition,' 'consumption,' and 'disposition' of both goods and information (p.281, underlined in original).
In Social Cognition and Consumer Behavior, Sirgy (1983) related different definitions of consumer behavior to the maturation of consumer behavior. Although Sirgy identified seven levels transcended by consumer behavior, as well as the domain and definition of the discipline within each level, he never mapped the levels onto any time line.

These examples suggest the variety of issues, introduced during the 1980s, that pertained to the domain of consumer behavior. With the outlets provided by the Journal of Consumer Research, book publishers, and the proceedings of the annual American Marketing Association theory and Association for Consumer Research conferences, more works explored the proper domain for consumer behavior (Brammer, Strutton and True 1991) and the need for a definition that properly reflected the broadened scope of the discipline.

Yet, some scholars formally and informally questioned the wisdom of a broader domain for consumer behavior. Holbrook (1987) tried to answer those scholars who worried about this ever-broadening scope by presenting his thoughts about the proper domain of consumer behavior. Holbrook stated:

(1) consumer research studies consumer behavior; (2) consumer behavior entails consumption; (3) consumption involves the acquisition, usage and disposition of products; (4) products are goods, services, ideas, events, or any other entities that can be acquired, used, or disposed of in ways that provide value; (5) value is a type of experience that occurs for some living organism when a goal is achieved, a need is fulfilled, or a want is satisfied; (6) such an achievement, fulfillment, or satisfaction attains consummation; conversely, a failure to achieve goals, fulfill needs, or satisfy wants thwarts consummation; (7) the process of consummation (including its possible breakdowns) is therefore the fundamental subject for consumer research (p.128).

Holbrook then presented a new definition of consumer behavior that entailed the study of consumption and consummation; he argued that this enlarged view was necessary if consumer behavior was to be seen as a separate and distinct discipline.

In the last few years, the definitions of consumer behavior found in many new textbooks and new editions of older textbooks reflect a broadened domain for consumer behavior. For example, Peter and Olson (1990) rely on the broadened definition of consumer behavior set by the American Marketing Association:

the dynamic interaction of cognition, behavior, and environmental events by which human beings conduct the exchange aspects of their lives (p.5).

Schiffman and Kanuk (1991) first introduces the reader to the notion of consumer behavior as an interdisciplinary science that investigates the decision-making activities of individuals in their consumption roles (p.4), then define consumer behavior as the behavior consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs (p.5).

With these definitions, textbook authors implicitly accepted a broadened scope for consumer behavior, one that recognized the science of consumer behavior and its buying-process rather than exchange-process focus.

STILL NORMATIVE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

As revealed by current textbooks and their definitions of consumer behavior, the efforts of consumer behavior scholars to develop a distinct science of consumer behavior have not affected the fundamentally normative nature of the discipline. Hyman, Skipper, and Tansey (1991) argued that words such as exchange and purchase are normative terms.

Exchange can only occur within a framework that sanctions ownership and legitimizes the transfer of a title from one owner to another (p.420).

Because (1) a positive definition cannot contain normative terms, (2) a positive science cannot contain any normative terms, and (3) the current definitions of consumer behavior contain normative terms, then consumer behavior, as
currently defined, is a normative discipline. This normative orientation is reflected by the content of consumer behavior textbooks; these textbooks, which often stress ethical and moral methods for conducting and applying consumer research, provide only limited coverage of positive consumer behaviors (Grove, Vitell and Strutton 1989; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). In textbooks where the focus has remained on the purchasing process, the normative aspects are clear when we see marketing defined as 

"those policies managing an exchange between the firm and its environment to provide products that are profitable, wanted by consumers, legal, competitive, socially justified, and efficient in resource use" (Walters and Bergiel 1989, p.14, italics in original).

Consumer behavior has retained its normative vantage since the irrational man model dominated the scholarly thought of the 1950s. Whether focused strictly on the purchasing process or widened to include the exchange process, the definitions of consumer behavior and material covered in the consumer behavior textbooks remains normative. Holbrook (1987) even suggested the need to borrow from philosophy and ethics a "conceptualization of consumption morality and thereby to address the phenomena of consumer misbehavior" (p.130).

REFERENCES


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