

Building Bridges for an Interconnected Field of Consumer Research

We finalize this editorial as the new team of editors has been announced and our editorial term is winding down. First and foremost, we extend our sincere congratulations to Darren Dahl, Eileen Fischer, Gita Johar, and Vicki Morwitz. Below, we share our observations on the consumer research field.

This is the last of a triptych of editorials authored by our team. The first described our desired compact with the field and was therefore forward looking. The second commented on integrity in the wider academic community. There, we took some time and space to reflect, but we were also addressing a specific set of concerns and events. In this final editorial, we provide reflections from the vantage point of having had the privilege to be stewards of *JCR*. These reflections result from our listening to the concerns of the consumer research community, as well as from our experiences while guiding *JCR*. They provide our sense of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for each one of us as consumer researchers.

Our core approach, both in our editorship more broadly and in this final editorial, is to consider consumer research as an interconnected field. *JCR* has an integral role in the field of consumer research, and we have worked to guide the journal such that it will set a healthy direction forward. We agree that “there are no problems we cannot solve together, and very few that we can solve by ourselves” (Lyndon Johnson). We advocate working together, where the working group is defined as consumer research rather than by subarea, paradigmatic approach, or research niche. Our field is at an interesting historical point, arguably a crossroads. Many building blocks are in place, from Consumer Culture Theory, to Information Processing, to Behavioral Decision Theory, with robust paradigms, methods, and concepts. Over the next several years, consumer research scholars can choose to use these blocks to build silos or bridges; *we argue for bridges*.

What do we mean by bridges? Intellectual bridges seem difficult to define. Yet, they also seem easy to identify when we have the privilege of finding them within our own scholarly travels. Below, we provide an overview of consumer research focused on our sense of a field at a crossroads. We then delineate the future we can construct as a field. Finally, we provide some concrete suggestions and examples of how consumer research scholars build bridges. One way to make sense of the arguments below is that we advocate for and then describe three types of interdisciplinarity, differing in degree, in consumer research. However, because the term seems to generate confusion as often as clarity, we seek to move beyond a general call for “interdisciplinarity” to more concrete examples and steps. In so doing, we hope to begin a conversation rather than to provide a single definition or prescription for research.

THE STATE OF CONSUMER RESEARCH

One unavoidable, but unhappy, aspect of being an editor is that we write a lot of rejection letters. Many of these decisions hinge on the concern that the insight is not new within the broader field of consumer research, in that authors are directly applying known concepts or describing already understood mechanisms. Often these applications seem newer from the perspective of an author team’s particular research silo than from the perspective of those in even closely aligned fields. We are continually asking for a bigger step forward in terms of advancement of an understanding of consumers and consumption. Given the current contours of the field, we contrast two ways to make the necessary forward step.

First, a researcher can drill down, adding detail and nuance to previous discoveries. This

can be an effective way to build knowledge, and it was a productive approach when our field was new. However, this approach can drive researchers to a formulaic approach to research. For instance, consider what has almost become a caricature of the field and journal on the experimental side—the sense that every paper needs to mediate, then moderate, then moderate the mediation or mediate the moderation. Nuance is nice and mediation is a useful tool, but within a clearly defined set of substantive, theoretical, and methodological boundaries, there become diminishing returns to a continued quest for more specific mechanism. Contrary to (some) popular opinion, we do not actually believe that the best path to a research win is continual drilling deeper into a particular process.

Second, a scholar can draw across substance, method, or theory to build new insights. We argue for more of these connections for the long-term health of the field and the quality of our insights. It is often more difficult to take this approach, at least in part because there is less of a formula (that we can discern) to putting together substance, theory, and method in new ways. There is, by corollary, less of a formula for describing such research. We provide some structure later, but for now we note the following characteristics of scholarly bridges. A bridge is built from the premise of where a scholar wants to travel in terms of, for instance, understanding a phenomenon or solving a problem. Consumption phenomena and problems are multifaceted and often cannot be fully addressed with only one theoretical base or methodology. A bridge-building approach takes the most useful concepts, insights, and methods from a wide variety of consumer research approaches and basic disciplines, weaving them together into a new narrative. This approach is challenging, but we contend that it will better deliver on the promise inherent in the field and journal labeled “consumer research.”

WHY BRIDGES?

We recognize that not all, and maybe not even most, consumer researchers worry that paradigms and subareas will become too well defined and separated. There is a certain amount of comfort in working within an area where the specific scholars, the rules of the publishing game, and many of the open questions are identified. We think, however, that the most promising knowledge development in consumer research deserves, and requires, integration or, as we state above, bridges rather than silos.

Consumer research emphasizes the behavior of people in their role as consumers and thus is inherently important. In contrast to a view that consumer research might be trivial—for example, the effortful study of laundry soap choices—or somehow ignoble—for example, development of a toolbox of tricks to help marketers separate unwitting consumers from their money—we see consumer research as essential to understanding how people deploy their resources of time and money and how these decisions affect individual consumers and the broader world, including social relations and stewardship of the world’s resources.

If you accept the above premise that consumer research is inherently important, then it is only a small step to believing that we must be integrative. Consumer behavior exists as a coherent set of actors, behaviors, and situations. While we might break the pieces down for individual study, a full and fully useful understanding will elude us until we (re)assemble our piecemeal knowledge into the whole. Hence, an integrative understanding of consumers is the next great challenge for our field. We also understand lamentations to the effect that the field has grown inconsequential because of its emphasis on theory. We feel though that the problem is not theory but is, rather, the occasional kinds of theoretical accounts that are too fussy or too small to matter except as intellectual curiosities. Rather, we would like to see our field assembling its hard-fought knowledge together.

OUR SUGGESTIONS

We are well aware, from our experience as authors as well as editors, that bridges are easy to admire and difficult to build. Below, we offer structure and definition on the idea of

bridges. The approaches below are not radical, or even particularly new. Rather, we delineate what we see as working well in the journal and field and suggest a trajectory for more integrative work.

Indicate

Consumer research is rich, and maturing, enough that almost any major topic has been considered from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. As an example, our Research Curations initiative assembles collections of articles highlighting a multitude of perspectives on specific topics. In individual manuscripts, there is no excuse to neglect clear and respectful acknowledgment of any relevant consumer research regardless of paradigmatic origin. We have often encouraged at least this level of conversation by adding “across the aisle” reviewers, that is, reviewers who themselves approach a submission’s broad topic from a different perspective. Ideally, papers will come to *JCR* with this work already done. We observe that doing this work up front pays dividends in terms of the review team’s reaction, and we expect that it will pay off in terms of later impact. However, a valid concern is that merely brushing past a list of citations in, say, a broad introductory paragraph can leave the reader with the impression that the cited work is worth mention but not engagement. Perhaps, in the end, it is preferable to engage other paradigms by using the more involved categories we delineate next.

Import

Consumer research encompasses tough problems and complicated phenomena. Hence, researchers commonly run across parts of problems they cannot solve, for example, a gap in a theory or an empirical question without an obvious method. We have noticed that researchers commonly address these concerns, many of which arise in the review process, by narrowing their inquiry and shifting the positioning to obscure the seemingly intractable issues. However, we believe that in such cases, it may be much more effective to bring a concept or a mechanism from one subarea to another. A finding or conclusion that looks like a puzzle from one perspective may be explainable by another. The richness of our current field means that there are plenty of theories, methods, and substantive findings within consumer research to draw on. And there are many notable successes in terms of integration. Research on culture continues to be transformed by knowledge accessibility principles and methods, neuroimaging techniques are beginning to present a new window onto drivers of consumer choice, and practice theory provides an opportunity to widen the scope of phenomena amenable to study in consumer research. We have as a field assembled the pieces, but we are missing opportunities to enhance and enrich our inquiries by not making use of them. However, seizing these opportunities may require a change in research scholarship and practice. Broad reading and a willingness to learn other theories and methods may be necessary to deliver a complete inquiry into the research questions at hand. The next challenge will be to ask different, bigger questions.

Integrate

There are opportunities within consumer research to combine processes and insights that speak to the same behavior—persuasion, multi-attribute choice, goal conflict, and so forth—but which we have studied piecewise through isolated theoretical investigations. The goal here is to go beyond borrowing a self-contained perspective or tool and instead to strive for some combination of theories, methods, or substantive findings that sheds new light on a problem. We therefore distinguish integrative research from research that merely lifts what one group already knows (or can do) and shows it to another. Integration might involve for instance a horse race to determine the explanatory power of one theory over another or the background conditions where one set of predictions predominate. It might also go further

to assemble pieces working together, rather than in competition—to combine cognitive models with cultural perspective, motivation with persuasion, nonconscious belief with ritual. This last form of integration, the gold standard, will be the most difficult to achieve but could yield the greatest insights. Scholars need to start somewhere, and a truly integrative approach might begin with important, focal phenomena of interest across consumer research, for example, building an identity, pursuing consumer well-being, achieving meaningful social relationships, using household and global resources (time, money, energy) effectively, ensuring long-term health care adherence, and so on. An integrative approach will require scholars with a broad perspective, deep knowledge of more than one discipline and, perhaps, a diverse network of colleagues who work in tandem to understand the important problems of our field.

CONCLUSION

We are at a pivotal place in the shared building of an understanding of consumer research. The early decades of the field have identified many interesting, sound, and useful research building blocks. As a field, we now have the privilege of deciding what to build with these blocks.

Our editorial delineates the challenge that we consider most focal in terms of the healthy evolution of consumer research. The primary challenge to our presently thriving field will be a failure to transition to a more integrative approach to research. True integration offers our greatest opportunity to illuminate consumers and consumption. We are doing a great job building an understanding of the isolated parts, the tight but narrow theories. As a field, we could attempt to move forward by drilling ever deeper into these isolated theories, but this would be a mistake that would halt our forward progress and belie our mission of revealing a complete picture of consumers and consumption. Instead, we propose that in our next steps, we pull these blocks together, bridging theories within paradigms, cross-pollinating across paradigms through broadly aware and connected multidisciplinary work, and ultimately rising to the challenge of fully integrative, interdisciplinary investigations.

We see intellectual benefits to integration, as discussed above. We also see pragmatic benefits. As scholars and members of society, we contribute more effectively if we all work together to solve the problems in our field of consumer research, rather than working in silos to develop applications of disparate fields to the same. We believe strongly that interconnection is necessary to fully deliver on the promise of understanding consumers and consumption and to best move our field forward.

We hope our suggestions are helpful. It has been a privilege to serve as *JCR* editors and to contribute to this vibrant, healthy, important field of consumer research. Most important, we thank the *JCR* community for making our editorial term an enjoyable and rewarding experience. We thank our thoughtful and dedicated Associate Editors from whom we learned each day. We thank our generous and expert Editorial Review Board, whose members so thoroughly embrace norms of dedicated service in the interest of making other scholars' work and the field better. We thank our ad hoc reviewers, a group of scholars with amazing breadth and depth who consistently provide devoted service to *JCR*. And, finally, we thank *JCR*'s managing editor, Mary-Ann Twist, whose dedication to the *JCR* community has been a resource for the editors of this journal and the field of consumer research. The editors' job would be impossible without the support of the entire *JCR* community, and we thank each and every member of it.

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