

PARADIGM SHIFTS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: A META ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Despite its adolescence, consumer behavior as a discipline has attained a crowning position in marketing. Many professionals and academics characterize consumer behavior as the key to contemporary marketing success. Over the years, various approaches based on social sciences have been proposed and applied to teaching and researching the consumer. Prompted by their ever-increasing complexities, recently the interest in social sciences seemed to have waned. Although there have not been seismic changes in the field, there have been some shifts in paradigms. As the discipline develops, one important question is to ask as to what approach to adopt for teaching and researching consumer behavior. To broaden the underpinning theories of consumer behavior, paradigms outside the social sciences could very well be tapped for additional understanding the complex nature of the consumer. Several frontiers of other sciences seem promising for the understanding the consumer including the new field of Evolutionary Psychology. As is explained in this paper, the prospects for an interdisciplinary approach outside the family of social sciences appears brighter than ever for thinking outside the “black box” (i.e., mind) and for contributing to its dynamism.

INTRODUCTION

That human behavior is complex, replete with controversies and contradictions, comes as no surprise to marketing academicians as well as practitioners. Consumer behavior is no exception. Against the backdrop of widespread recognition of consumer behavior as being the key to contemporary marketing success (Hawkins et al. 2003), the fundamental question has been as to what approach to use in the study and teaching of this fascinating academic field? Eisend (2005) argues that despite the importance of consumer behavior, the implications of the implementation of meta-analysis for future research efforts in marketing and consumer behavior research are seldom discussed.

Demirdjian, et al. (2007), nevertheless, discussed the status of consumer behavior field in a book and proposed an anthropological approach to its study and teaching.

As Spiggle and Goodwin (1988), Tan and Sheth (1985), and van Raaij and Bamossy (1993) have presented articles in their readings books, consumer behavior over the years, has been the subject of many models and intellectual arguments. Greenwald and Poehlman in 2009 and Lipsey and Wilson in 2001 have proposed the use of the Implicit Association Test in studies of brands, consumer attitudes and behavior. Others like Sheppard, et al. (1988) proposed Reasoned Action Theory for determining as to why consumers buy. Saeed, et. al. (2003) introduced a framework that integrates research findings across studies to develop a coherent and comprehensive picture of the online consumer behavior research conducted in the IS field

There have been a number of debates between positivistic and interpretive consumer researchers (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Being a dynamic field, such a condition is normal. As Kernan (1995) indicates, compared to most academic fields, consumer behavior is relatively very young. Therefore, the field is still going through growing pains and development. All but several of the pioneers are still living.

Many imponderables enter into the discussion of the methods applied to teaching consumer behavior. Various assumptions provide different approaches. Early in the history of consumer behavior, Berber (1977) edited a book devoted to various aspects of consumer behavior from the perspective of different disciplines. In the same vein, but from European perspectives, Kassarian (1994) has shown us the rich and varied scholarly European roots of American consumer behavior. For instance, if behavior is propelled by psychological variables, then the study relies heavily on human motivation, perception, learning, etc. The result would be a psychological model like the one proposed by Howard and Sheth in 1969. The approach to teaching consumer behavior would, then, depend heavily on concepts drawn from research studies undertaken in marketing and psychology.

At first glance this paper may look overdrawn, but considering the rich heritage of the literature of consumer behavior as Kassarian (1995) reported in his commemorative article titled "Some recollections from a Quarter Century Ago," we would be hardly scratching the surface. With that disclaimer in mind, we first plan to touch upon how this exciting area of scientific inquiry, as an academic discipline and as a field of research, has made use of a blend of economics, psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other related social science disciplines.

Secondly, an attempt will be made to answer the question whether the use of social sciences have run their course in building a viable framework of essential principles, concepts, and variables. Finally, we plan to present some frontiers in other sciences as new paradigms, which seem promising to provide additional knowledge for thinking outside the "black box" for teaching and for researching consumer behavior.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE FABRICS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The marketing concept, which enthrones the consumer at the center of marketing strategy, has served as the gravitational force for entrenching the field of consumer behavior in marketing. Consumer behavior has been legitimized in marketing for it provides the conceptual framework and strategic thinking for carrying out successful segmentation of markets (Schiffman and Kanuk 2000). Since the underlying forces and influences that propel the consumer into action are variously numerous, each social science discipline has played a vital role in providing explanations. In this way, the field of consumer behavior has been characterized by diversity of viewpoints; as a result, the entire field now is based on an interdisciplinary science (Kassarjian 1994).

Marketing has borrowed most heavily from a number of social science disciplines (Witkowski 1993). Economics has always been the Adam and Eve of marketing. Traditionally, economics has been more concerned with the operation and dynamics of the economic system of society rather than with the behavior of individual consumers or buyers. The focus has been on how the system operates in the aggregate, not on why individual consumers behave as they do. Furthermore, the economists' assumptions regarding the functioning of the market were purely theoretical in nature. Most marketers found these assumptions hard to accept.

From economics, marketing has adopted many concepts, though, which include supply and demand, pricing theory, utility, marginal analysis, and the role of income as a critical factor in purchasing behavior. For many years, the economic man theory permeated marketing thought and practice predicated on the assumption that consumers are rational decision makers who actively seek information, objectively evaluate alternatives available to them, and make rational selections of products or services to maximize their benefits. The emotional side of the consumer, on the other hand, was neglected until marketers began to explore it seriously.

The field of economics has provided an underlying foundation for marketing, but it failed to provide marketing with all of the concepts needed to understand the complexities of consumer motivation. For example, many years ago, Katona's work in *Economic Psychology* (1951) basically indicated that economic theory was insufficient in explaining market fluctuations. By emphasizing lopsidedly the objectivity and rationality of the consumer as a decision maker, the emotional side of the consumer was relegated. Limited in providing viable explanations, marketing scholars began to seek understanding of consumer behavior from other social sciences, notably from psychology, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Psychology as the study of individual behavior has been one of the earliest and most extensively used field from which concepts have been borrowed. Motivation, perception, learning, beliefs, attitudes, etc. all have been used in explaining why the consumer behaves the way he or she does. Models used for teaching consumer behavior, thus, have mainly relied on the internal variables of the consumer in explaining how he or

she processes incoming information and makes purchase decisions (Howard 1963; Howard and Sheth 1969).

Social psychology is still another source from which many concepts have been borrowed because this field is concerned with the behavior of individuals in the presence of other individuals or groups. Concepts such as social perceptions, social influence, social rewards, peer pressure, social cues, social sanctions, etc. all shed light on the mysteries of consumer behavior. Approaches to teaching consumer behavior have emphasized external influences on consumption-related acts. The whole idea behind this reasoning is that consumer behavior takes place within the context of groups and other individuals' presence which influences consumer's processing of information and decision making (Engel et al. 1967).

Sociology is the study of human social behavior particularly in terms of the origins, organizations, institutions, and development of human society. Although sociology does not deal with consumer behavior specifically, it does deal with the social context within which consumer behavior takes place. While psychology focuses on the individual as a unit of analysis, sociology centers on groups and social institutions. Concepts such as role theory, social class, family life cycle, the diffusion of innovation process, and population groups also have great implications for the marketing practitioner and consumer researcher. The pedagogical stance taken in this area has stressed consumer behavior from specific groups' standpoint. For example, by presenting the consumption-related acts of African Americans and Mexican Americans, the focus here has been on the comparison and contrasting of subcultures in their preference of products, services, and marketing communications.

Throughout the relative young age of consumer behavior as a discipline, attempts have also been made to understanding it holistically. Holbrook (1987), for instance, advocated that consumer researchers examine "...all facets of the value potentially provided when some living organism acquires, uses, or disposes of any product...". The result has been a multidimensional approach to teaching consumer behavior. Such approaches have proved to be cumbersome for pedagogical purposes. Too many potpourri variables of social sciences to mention and to cover in teaching consumer behavior, complicated the scientific explanation of the subject. Being rather too encompassing, the results usually would make students see the trees and not the forest.

Occasionally, one of the social science disciplines may take to the center stage, but it is the coalescing of these sciences that end up explaining and to some extent predicting consumer behavior. It would be apt to say that social sciences have served as the breadbasket for the study of consumer behavior. One of the few common denominators among all of these fields, despite their differences, is that consumer behavior stems from perceived need of some sort; the assumption is that behavior is teleological (goal-directed).

As students of human behavior, we are interested in understanding consumer behavior, especially as to why individuals act in certain consumption-related ways and

with learning what internal and external influences impel them to act. Much of marketing theory has its taproot in social sciences. It is likely that, in the future, social sciences will make an even greater contribution to our understanding of marketing and consumer behavior until there is a paradigmatic quantum leap in the current perspectives.

Collectively, social sciences have been a source of progress as well as hindrance. For example, borrowing psychological concepts indiscriminately has complicated rather than simplified the work in understanding the consumer. For example, models of consumer behavior, predicated on many variables, were difficult to validate empirically. Moreover, these models proved to be pedagogically a bear. Thus, the interest in psychology and sociology waned and cultural anthropology became the vogue, giving rise to a new approach to studying and teaching consumer behavior.

Anthropology at the Helm

Anthropology, the first cousin of sociology, is another area of social science, which has concepts of relatively great relevance to understanding consumer behavior. The first readings book on the application of anthropology to the study of consumer behavior was written by Demirdjian, Senguder, and Tian in 2007. Unlike sociology, general anthropology usually studies societies other than our present ones. It primarily explores past patterns of behavior that may have an influence on our behavior today. Folklore, cultural myths, gift giving, holiday observance, rituals, superstitions, etc., that persist as behavioral influences, are a part of anthropological studies. Many techniques used by anthropologists in comparing different cultures have been borrowed by marketers in making comparative studies of marketing practices within different countries. Intercultural or cross-cultural studies in consumer behavior have increased exponentially in the last ten years.

The vast interest in cultural anthropology recently has moved consumer research to postmodernism era. The period in which consumer research initially developed is known as the modernist era. Positivists are researchers who subscribe to the assumptions upon which modernism is based; like the classical economists, they operate from the belief that the consumer makes rational consumptive decisions after weighing alternatives. The goal of the positivist is to predict consumer behavior (Sherry 1991). The research methods of positivists were borrowed mainly from the natural sciences and range from experiments, survey techniques, and observation. The findings of these studies are either descriptive, empirical, and if based on probability samples, are generalizable to larger populations. The data collected are quantitative in nature and lend themselves to many parametric and nonparametric statistical analyses.

Postmodernistic Era of Consumer Behavior

While the period in which the field of consumer research developed is called the modernist era, methods borrowed from cultural anthropology ushered in the postmodernistic era (Calder and Tybout (1989). Social science academicians interested in the act of consumption rather than in the act of cognitively deciding a purchase,

applied ethnography, semiotics, and depth interviews as employed in motivational research popularized by Ernest Dichter (1960) in 1950s. The nature of postmodernism is comprehensively presented in Belk's (1991) "Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey," edition of Association for Consumer Research publication. The research paradigm shift to anthropological methods galvanized some researchers to produce a stream of qualitative research studies. Kassarian (1994) commented on postmodern research by stating whether it would be accepted as good anthropology, sound ethnography, or objective semiotic research had yet to be seen.

In terms of usage, ethnography has been most frequently used method in consumer research. Essentially, ethnography is the technique in which the researcher places himself or herself in the social setting to study the consumer's various cultural practices. Consequently, the validity of the data gathered would depend on the interpretation of the researcher. As such, the interpretivist researcher engages in subjective, qualitative research based on the assumption that there is no objective truth, but that reality is subjective. The goal of the interpretivist is to gain understanding of consumer behavior in different situations rather than predicting his or her consumption-related acts.

Left to their own devices, marketing academicians have reconciled the differences of the positivists and interpretivists' approaches to the study of consumer behavior. While the dichotomy of these two research perspectives indicate that they are different, but, in fact, they are complimentary in nature. Both orientations and approaches to research will produce a body of knowledge necessary for describing, understanding, and predicting consumer behavior. Naturally, the anticipated results of the positivists and interpretivists will benefit marketing management in providing much-needed consumer-based information for formulating marketing strategies.

The Status of the Social Science Odyssey

At this juncture in the life cycle of the field of consumer behavior, one may very well ask: Is anthropology the end of our destination? Is the social science odyssey over? It would be safe to say that the odyssey will continue, but it may very well take us also to realms other than our traditional social sciences. Here is a brief set of examples to clarify as to why the odyssey may very well take us to other sciences in the quest to find positivistic ways to teach consumer behavior.

Let us assume that the consumer orders a hamburger for personal consumption. We can offer plausible reasons behind that purchase from the following viewpoints as shown in Table 1:

Table 1
Possible Social Science Explanations for the Consumer
Ordering a Hamburger

- Economic perspective (e.g., the price of the hamburger was reduced),
- Psychological perspective (e.g., the consumer was hungry and since it was weekend he or she wanted to enjoy eating out),
- Social psychological perspective (e.g., all of the consumer's friends ordered hamburgers so he or she did the same),
- Sociological perspective (e.g., now that the consumer is an empty nester, he or she can afford to eat out), and
- Anthropological perspective (e.g., the consumer's American ancestors ate hamburgers so it was an American tradition to relish the food).

All of the foregoing acts are explained from a social science standpoint. How can we explain, if the same consumer had ordered another hamburger after having eaten the first one –and assuming further that it was not due to economic, psychological, social-psychological, sociological, and anthropological reasons?

Frontiers of Other Sciences for Understanding the Consumer

Well, it leaves us one big and upcoming area to borrow concepts and these are physio-psychological variables. Physiological psychology is the study of the interaction of the body with the mind. It is the study of the extent to which behavior is caused by physical and chemical phenomena in the body (Morris 1996). Kroeber-Riel (1979, 1980) pointed out that cognitive and psychological processes originate from physiological ones. This field holds many promises for explaining consumer behavior. For instance, the hypothalamus is that center of the brain which mainly controls consumption (Zimbardo and Gerrig 1996). The chemical changes due to the eating of the first hamburger results in a blood borne input (i.e., efferent stimulus) to the brain to activate further consumption. Thus, the individual would order one more hamburger to eat. Such a behavior is explained based on the research findings on the functions of the hypothalamus and other related areas of the brain (Valenstein, Cox, & Kakolewski 1970; Zhang et al. 1994). Physio-psychology provides fascinating ways to help us understand consumer behavior without looking into the consumer's "black box" for hypothetically based variable explanations.

Another frontier for gathering concepts to explain consumer behavior would be the field of biochemistry in the area of food sciences. The focus here would be on the external variables such as the makeup of the products we consume. Why do most consumers drink Coca Cola? Is it because of the caffeine it contains? Many product ingredients have been found to be addictive such as nicotine. For example, during the

1990s, evidence emerged that the tobacco industry had manipulated the content of cigarettes to enhance their addictive nature. In 1998, the industry reached a settlement agreement with 46 American state governments to the tune of \$206 billion.. According to Matthews' (2003) report "Multinational food companies have known for years of research that suggests many of their products trigger chemical reactions in the brain which lead people to overeat." Scientists working for Nestle and Unilever have been unobtrusively investigating the chemical composition of certain foods, such as chocolate biscuits, burgers and snacks which make people binge on and thus become obese. Research in biochemistry, especially in the area of food, is capable of explaining and even predicting consumer behavior with high level of certainty.

The scientific buzzword nowadays is genetics. Still another possible area to borrow concepts would be in purely physiological research of human genetics (Feder 1998). It would be enthralling to see how our genes direct our consumption behavior. Perhaps humans are all programmed to act in certain ways in their consumptive and consumer-related behavior. Is the presence of certain genes compel us to consume certain kinds of food, say "hot" dishes (which appeal to most Mexicans?) Genetic science may very well come up with definite findings to explain consumer behavior and thus we may strike a vein of truth in finding explanations and laws of consumer behavior. Hopefully, these hard sciences will enable us to push the frontiers of knowledge in consumer behavior. Obviously, these new frontiers for the study of consumer behavior will cause the return of the positivistic approach to research.

The latest new field is the evolutionary psychology. Essentially, the foundational paradigm of evolutionary psychology rests on the idea that the human mind is shaped by natural selection. The process in nature by which, according to Darwin's theory of evolution, only the organisms best adapted to their environment tend to survive and transmit their genetic characters in increasing numbers to succeeding generations while those less adapted tend to be eliminated.

Many psychologists agree with what John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (who have pioneered the new field of evolutionary psychology). What they postulated in 1992 is, basically, that many psychologists hold to a general set of beliefs called the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM).

This model has had a pervasive influence on their research and theories. Center to the concept of SSSM is the notion that this model emphasizes the dominant influence of experience and culture in shaping human behavior.

The SSSM points out that human infants have the same behavior characteristics (traits) the world over. On the other hand, adults are much less uniform. For instance, they speak and behave somewhat differently in different parts of the globe.

The SSSM assumes particular relationships between these two facts: As babies grow up, the differences between them increase because they are shaped by different experiences and cultures. Thus, a belief in the profound influence of culture and experience on behavior lies at the center of the SSSM. The consumer is not only

genetically driven, but also because of the influences of experience and culture within which he or she lives.

Table 2 summarizes the explanations given for the consumer ordering a second hamburger after having eaten the first one based on new scientific areas other than social sciences:

Table 2
Physio-Psychological-, Biochemistry-, and Genetic-Based
Explanations
For the Consumer's Ordering of a Second Hamburger

- Physio-Psychological Perspective (e.g., The consumption of the first hamburger stimulated the excitatory center of the hypothalamus of the consumer to order another hamburger to eat),
- Biochemistry Perspective (e.g., the beef patty contains certain chemicals in it such as fatty substances which stimulates craving for further consumption of hamburgers),
- Genetic Perspective (e.g., Certain consumers are genetically programmed to want to eat more hamburgers or meat products than others).
- Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., As a child grows up, his or her mind is shaped by experience and culture which promotes eating of hamburgers).

Although these new frontiers of knowledge would benefit the field of consumer behavior, conducting research in these areas of specialization would seem beyond the capabilities of consumer researchers for lack of formal training. However, if one were to look at the turn of the century, most marketing academicians were trained in classical economics. Today, we have marketing academicians who hold doctorates in psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. Once concepts are borrowed from these new areas, it would entice new students to enter these various fields and later do research in consumer behavior. In the future, these exotic areas for the marketing academician may become the focus of research efforts since the promises of these fields are profoundly compelling.

The Journey of Discovery

Our journey for the search of new approaches to explain consumer behavior may never end. We shall always find novel ways to explain consumer behavior from a certain perspective based on a certain assumption or discipline. Thinking out of the consumer's "black box" and getting into his or her physical body constitutes a sharp paradigm shift. As De Montaigne pointed out "...the most universal quality is diversity" in the world when it comes to opinions, the same is also true with the study of consumer behavior.

The basic nature of consumer behavior is diversity, diversity in perspectives (theories) and diversity in research (methods). In fact, our journey has just begun with many “doubts” in the way of all sciences, considering the youthful age of the discipline which dates back merely to 1960s. We face a long trek before we end up in “certainties” about our understanding and prediction of consumer behavior.

To explain consumer behavior further, several new frontiers in science were introduced in this paper, such as physiological psychology, biochemistry, and genetics. We have been borrowing freely from the social sciences, and now it is perhaps timely to borrow from the physical sciences. These fields may define the future direction of consumer behavior. As we have seen, paradigm shifts in consumer behavior theory and research would enrich the field further by expanding its scope of investigation. After all, a paradigm is a conceptual framework within which research is conducted. These changes are consonant with the interdisciplinary nature of consumer behavior. A shot of new blood would countervail inbreeding which would stunt the growth of the young discipline.

“Sir, there is no royal road to geometry” Euclid gently rebuked King Ptolemy I who once complained about the difficulty of the theorems that Euclid expected him to grasp, wondering whether there was not an easier way, or short cuts for him, to approach the subject. By the same token, there are definitely no easy ways or short cuts to deciphering the consumer. Therefore, let us range far and wide as we search for new ways to describe, understand, and predict consumer behavior. Meanwhile, let anthropology reign as the recent popular paradigm to studying and teaching consumer behavior until another queen of a discipline ascends the throne and captures the attention of marketing scholars intent on finding effective approaches to teaching and researching consumer behavior. The quest for generalizable explanations and accurate predictions of consumer behavior will continue because a truly scientific odyssey has no set destinations on its long, if not infinite, journey of discovery.

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