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Why a Journal of Research for Consumers?

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the rationale behind the introduction of the Journal of Research for Consumers. The potential benefits to be gained from educating consumers are discussed, and arguments are made for the contribution of consumer researchers to the consumer education process. In particular, the deficiencies of the current dependence on research that produces managerial outcomes are discussed in terms of the limitations they place on understanding the relevance of consumption in consumers' lives. The structure of the Journal of Consumer Research is described in terms of the access provided to both academic and consumer audiences.

ARTICLE

Introduction

There are several academic journals that currently publish articles relating to consumer research. In addition, there are other publications that seek to provide consumption-related information to consumers, such as Choice Magazine in Australia and Consumer Reports Magazine and Consumers' Research Magazine in the US. At this point in time, the target audiences of these two types of publications are highly polarised, with little if any intersection. The journals are directed at a primarily academic audience and tend to deal with consumption at a more macro level, while the magazines typically target end-consumers and focus on the advantages and disadvantages of particular products relative to others. There exists an opportunity to bridge the gap between these two types of publications and their corresponding audiences, offering consumer researchers a means by which to communicate directly with consumers as well as with the academic community. The Journal of Research for Consumers (JRC) aims to go some way towards bridging this gap, providing a publication outlet for research that

directly furthers consumers' interests by providing them with information about the consumption process.

While there are numerous journals that publish research that has been conducted to facilitate the effectiveness of marketers, JRC seeks to provide a small counterbalance by publishing research that assists consumers in satisfactorily achieving their consumption projects. The mission of JRC is to provide information to individuals to enable them to better understand and perform their roles as consumers - "better" in this sense referring to consumers' perceptions as opposed to those of other parties. This information includes both consumption-general and product-specific information that will enhance consumers' abilities to orient their consumption practices in such a way as to improve their consumption outcomes. Existing journals typically have an emphasis on the inclusion of either managerial or public policy implications, a requirement that has direct consequences for the nature of the research that is conducted and reported. JRC aims to encourage consumer researchers to use their skills for the direct benefit of consumers, without the need to produce research outcomes of managerial relevance.

The Consumer Researcher's Mission to Date

The managerial relevance philosophy of business research has long had a stronghold over the consumer behaviour sub-discipline of marketing. An emphasis on the needs of marketers has resulted in a research focus on consumption variables that can predict specific behavioural outcomes of interest to marketers (Hill 1992a; Nevett and Fullerton 1988). Over the years, a few notable consumer researchers have argued that research into the consumption process should be undertaken for the purpose of furthering knowledge about this process for its own sake, not just for providing managerial guidance to marketers (e.g., Belk 1987; Bristol 1995; Firat 1985; Hirschman 1991; Holbrook 1995; Jacoby 1976). However, published consumer research remains a predominantly marketing-oriented area, albeit with some change occurring at the margins of the field.

A review of the mission statements of leading marketing and consumer research journals leaves no doubt that the primary intended audiences of such journals are academics and practicing marketers. The prioritising of these audiences indicates that there is a perceived primacy of the needs of marketers for purchase theories over the needs of consumers for research that can assist them in their consumption projects (Holbrook 1995). The marketing concept has been offered up as evidence that consumer research conducted to increase the effectiveness of marketing efforts is

simultaneously research that is conducted in consumers' best interests. The philosophy behind the marketing concept is that in order to be successful, marketers need to make themselves aware of consumers' needs and then meet these needs where profit requirements can be met (Cahill and Warshawsky 1993; Webster 1994). The marketing concept is thus thought to justify a managerial orientation in consumer research, as by assisting marketers adhere to the marketing concept, consumers are perceived to be well served through the satisfaction of their needs and wants (Levitt 1975). Many introductory consumer behaviour texts discuss how looking after consumers' interests constitutes good marketing practice (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1995; Lawson, Tidwell, Rainbird, Loudon, and Della Bitta 1996; Mowen 1993; Solomon 1999). The conclusion appears to be that consumer research undertaken from a managerial stance is fully justifiable to the academic, business, and general communities to which consumer researchers must answer.

An Alternative Perspective

Despite the apparently consumer-oriented nature of the marketing concept, it has been argued that it is increasingly inadequate as a marketing philosophy (Benton 1996; Brown 1995a; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). Although there is a general commitment to the marketing concept amongst marketing academics, Robson and Rowe (1997) suggest that the usage of the concept in industry is less uniform. According to Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh (1995), this can be evidenced by the tendency for marketing strategies to continue to be product- as opposed to consumer-driven. Rather than consumers dictating the nature of the products offered, organisations exist to produce products of a certain kind, and any market research tends to gravitate around the organisation's area of product expertise (Applbaum 1998; Jacobson and Mazur 1995; Miller 1998). The role of the consumer in the production process is thus limited to that of assisting in product refinement, rather than being instrumental in new product development (McDonagh and Prothero 1996). Another suggested explanation for the failure of the marketing concept to achieve full compliance in the marketplace is that organisations that merely respond to (as opposed to create) consumer demands may find it difficult to remain competitive (Brown 1995a; McDonagh and Prothero 1996). There is a growing body of literature that recognises that the theoretical ideal of products being designed around consumers' needs has been superseded by a situation where seductive advertising campaigns and a general culture of consumption combine to create a "hyperreality" that is highly attractive to consumers (Anderson and Wadkins 1991; Benton 1996; Droge et al. 1993; Firat et al. 1995; Firat and Venkatesh

1995; Holbrook 1995). In such an interpretation, the argument that marketers cannot influence consumers' needs holds little credibility, with the opposite point of view being increasingly posed (Belk 1998; Etzioni 1998; Pollay 1997).

Others contest the marketing concept in the name of consumer interest, noting that it fails to assure the long-term welfare of consumers (Karpatkin 1999). In particular, the argument is that the prices of many goods and services do not adequately reflect the social and environmental costs of producing and distributing these products (Durning 1991, 1993; Ger 1997; Kilbourne et al. 1997). The long-term interests of consumers are thus not being met even though markets exist for the available products at the prices set (Gordon and Lee 1972; McDonagh and Prothero 1996). In addition, the marketing concept is seen to only offer protection for those individuals who can afford to be represented in the marketplace (Firat 1987; Karpatkin 1999), and only to the degree that desirable alternatives exist (Baudrillard 1988; Firat and Dholakia 1982, 1998). The inability of the invisible hand of the market to assure optimal functioning of an economy without appropriate intervention to address issues such as resource depletion and pollution means that at some stage someone has to make decisions about how these market failings will be managed. Both governments and consumers have a role to play in ensuring that organisations produce in a manner that is socially acceptable (Kilbourne et al. 1997), and for these intervention roles to be performed effectively, consumer education is imperative (Karpatkin 1999).

Some suggest that implicit in the marketing concept is the assumption that the quality of a consumer's life is proportional to the number of possessions owned (Cushman 1990; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). However, those who have explored the relationship between product ownership levels and happiness have failed to find evidence of a linear relationship between consumption and the emotional well-being of consumers (Belk 1984; Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Cushman 1990). The possibility is also raised that consumers' preoccupation with the employment of goods and services to satisfy personal and social needs can prevent them from finding more productive ways of achieving these ends (Kilbourne 1996, et al. 1997; Droge et al. 1993). Benton (1996) argues that the increasing dependence on consumption to provide individuals with a means of communicating their worth to others has resulted in a situation where marketers' efforts to maximise consumption can only reduce consumers' quality of life levels. He therefore recommends that marketers re-think their traditional emphasis on encouraging consumption, and instead align themselves with groups that advocate consuming less

to live better. This, he says, will assure marketing a place in the future, a place that may otherwise be lacking.

A Broader Definition of Consumer Research

Holbrook (1995, p 16) has argued strongly that "...consumer research is and should be conducted for the sake of studying consumer behaviour where that type of knowledge serves as an end in itself." His argument is that instead of being beholden to marketing managers, the consumer researcher should be free to explore consumption in its many shapes and forms. Without the constraint of having to justify consumer research in terms of managerial relevance, the scope of the subject area becomes significantly greater. This broader view of consumer research has gathered a degree of momentum in current research efforts, with a wide range of consumption behaviours now being studied in an effort to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the consumption process in its many forms. For example, recent studies have explored sky diving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), white water river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), breastfeeding (Gengler, Mulvey, and Oglethorpe 1999), poverty (Hill and Adrangi 1999; Hill and Dhanda 1999), homelessness (Hill 1991, 1992b), and prostitution (Belk, Ostergaard, and Groves 1998).

The suggestion that consumer research should be broader than merely facilitating marketing efforts is extended here to suggest that there exists an opportunity to engage in research that is of direct interest to consumers. Specifically, there exists the potential for the empowerment of consumers through the provision of information concerning their own consumption behaviours. While there has been some interest in consumer education in the (American) literature in the past (Royer 1980; Wallendorf and Zaltman 1977), the forecast increase in consumer education programs, and thus in consumer awareness, has not been forthcoming. Almost twenty-five years ago, Bloom (1976) optimistically anticipated a significant increase in government, industry, and school efforts at consumer education in the US that would see consumers taking a more "rational" approach to consumption. Given the failure of this outcome to eventuate, perhaps it is time for consumer researchers to make some contribution to increasing consumers' awareness of their consumption-related motivations and mental processes; if not to encourage rational consumption as such, then to make consumption a more satisfying and fulfilling process.

An important justification for the need for consumer-oriented research that is not reliant on the production of managerial recommendations is that a focus on consumption from a managerial

perspective fails to capture the significance of consumption in human life (Belk 1987; Holbrook 1995). In particular, an emphasis on consumption behaviours that generate profits for marketers ignores the possibility that these forms of consumption are not the only or even the primary means by which consumers achieve fulfilment and happiness (Benton 1996; Durning 1993). According to Dichter (1964, p 422), it is the educator's responsibility to show the consumer the way to "real happiness". However, consumer researchers tend not to address the issue of possible forms of self-actualisation other than consumption, and only a small number of researchers in the field have explicitly examined possibilities for consumers to achieve happiness through a reduced emphasis on consumption. Ger (1997) sees potential in consumer associations and consumer policy that can represent consumers' interests to increase their position relative to resource-rich organisations. Another function of these associations is suggested by Ger to be the representation of those too poor to vote with their consumption choices. Firat and Dholakia (1998) raise the possibility of the evolution of multitudes of lifestyle communities that will enable consumers to experience a variety of life modes, reducing the dependence on the market as the primary source of self-determination. Alternatively, Etzioni (1998) pins hope on voluntary simplicity in consumption to reduce total consumption levels and provide ecological relief. There remains the opportunity to continue to explore and debate these suggestions and others that propose alternative perspectives on consumption.

The Potential to Educate Consumers

The lack of attention received by consumers as a research audience to date begs the question: What is the benefit to be gained from educating consumers about consumption? Atherton and Wells (1998) suggest numerous positive outcomes that they believe can result from creating a society of informed consumers. These include individual-level outcomes, such as a closer fit between consumers' wants and the products purchased, and societal level outcomes, such as a greater appreciation of the implications of consumption on our physical and social environments.

To explore the benefits to be gained from consumer education, albeit in a limited way, 22 consumer researchers from around the world were requested by email to provide an account of any influence they felt their heightened understanding of the consumption process has had on their own consumption behaviours. In total, eight useable responses were obtained, a response rate of 36% (it is interesting to note this relatively low level of cooperation from those whose own research activities entail collecting data from others!). Respondents were asked to note any changes they had

detected in their own consumption attitudes and behaviours over the years they have been involved in consumer research. While it was difficult for many respondents to separate their changes in consciousness relating to consumption that have resulted from the normal processes of aging and maturing from those introduced through exposure to theories of consumer behaviour, there were some notable consistencies in responses. The most dominant theme was the sharpened dichotomy between rational and emotional consumption, with most respondents noting their greater efforts to adopt a rational stance in their consumption activities. Several respondents noted that they are much more cynical of marketers' communications, now consciously aware of the motivations and techniques behind the messages to which they are continually exposed. This has made them more cautious and even reluctant shoppers, thinking twice before engaging in acts of consumption that were previously relatively automatic or "mindless" (Alba 2000). Amongst those consumer researchers noting an attempted move to a more rational stance, there was also a greater intolerance of poor customer service, poor marketing execution, and towards advertising in general.

Some respondents noted that they have also adopted a somewhat more emotional stance towards aspects of their own consumption behaviours, discussing their heightened awareness of the joys of the consumption experience that can be accessed when one acknowledges the role of consumption in a fulfilled life. They typically nominated specific forms of consumption for which an emotional approach has proven most rewarding, particularly travel and other experiential forms of consumption. These respondents referred to emotional consumption as being more "irrational" in nature, although irrationality in this sense was depicted as a legitimate human tendency, and therefore one that was not categorised as a necessarily negative aspect of the consumption process. Instead, irrationality was discussed almost as a form of consumer resistance, with some respondents actively defying many of the motivation theories taught in consumer behaviour texts and courses.

While this study was very confined in scope and by no means settles the issue of the potential benefits that may accrue from educating consumers about consumption, it provides a small indication of the changes in awareness and behaviours that can accompany a growing understanding of the consumption process. In particular, it suggests that individuals may alter their consumption behaviours as they come to appreciate the extent of the impact the marketing environment has on their choices and behaviours. Educating consumers about consumption has the potential to

empower them in their consumption endeavours, allowing them to choose their approaches to specific consumption scenarios. Whether this be the choice of a more rational or emotional response or to maintain previous behavioural patterns, it can be argued that informed consumers are in a position to better appreciate their consumption motivations and to select the courses of action best suited to the achievement of their consumption objectives.

Communicating with research audiences

Marketer-oriented (and to a lesser extent, public policy maker-oriented) information generated by academics has been primarily disseminated through publication in scholarly journals. This process of information dissemination is necessarily piecemeal in nature, although textbooks do integrate some of the information published in these journals and provide a summary of current marketing knowledge to marketing students (Tellis, Chandy, and Ackerman 1999). While there may be a lack of evidence to demonstrate that students employ the concepts they have been taught at university when they become established in the workplace, there is no doubt that graduates are hired for the knowledge that they are perceived to have accumulated throughout their education (O'Brien and Deans 1995). Through the process of journal articles being converted to textbook and course content, academic research is gradually filtered into the marketplace. Currently, however, there is little if any emphasis on conveying the findings of academic research directly to consumers. This then begs the question that if traditional forms of information dissemination do not currently target consumers as a research audience, how can future academic research conducted in the interests of consumers be disseminated to the public at large?

The advent of the Internet poses interesting possibilities for information dissemination on the scale required for consumer education. The low costs of establishing an Internet presence have been widely discussed (Aranoff 1996; Leong, Huang, and Stanners, 1998; Takacs and Freiden 1998). In particular, the incremental costs for additional information posting are recognised as being much lower than in the traditional mass media (Breitenbach and Van Doren 1998). When these low costs are combined with a rapidly growing audience (Bell and Tang 1998; Taylor 2000), the Internet represents a means by which consumer researchers can communicate their findings directly to consumers. While current Internet users typically constitute the wealthier proportion of society (Hoffman, Kalsbeek, and Novak, 1996; Taylor 2000), forecasts suggest that the Internet user base will come to more evenly reflect national demographic profiles (Breitenbach and Van Doren 1998; Takacs and Freiden 1998), making it a useful medium for contacting a wide range of consumers on an international scale.

Web journals in the area of marketing already exist, including both Web-only (e.g., the Journal of Empirical Generalisations in Marketing Science and The Academy of Marketing Science Review) and combination hard copy/Web (e.g., the Journal of Macromarketing and the Journal of Marketing Education) publications. Web journals enjoy several advantages over their hard-copy counterparts, including reduced publishing costs and the ability to extend the length of accepted articles (Fletcher and Fletcher 1998). To date, however, the Web journals to which academics contribute continue to target academic, and to a lesser extent managerial, audiences. There is thus the opportunity to establish a Web journal that can provide a forum for academic research to be communicated to both academic and layman audiences. Such a journal would need to achieve the two objectives of communicating research findings to consumers and satisfying the legitimacy requirements of those determining the quality of academic publications through such processes as the double-blind peer review. The Journal of Research for Consumers is structured to attend to both of these objectives. It has two streams of articles, catering to the two different audiences to which it is directed. One stream contains articles that report consumer-oriented research findings with the academic rigour associated with traditional journals. A second stream is comprised of articles that convey the same research findings communicated in layman's terms. Stripped of their jargon and extensive citations, these articles are targeted directly at consumers. The objective of the second stream of articles is to provide insight into the consumption process in such a way as to arm consumers with information that could assist them in becoming the types of consumers they wish to be. Contributors to the journal are thus required to produce two versions of their papers - one to be directed at academic audiences and one to be directed at the general public. It is anticipated that a Web journal structured in this way will provide consumer researchers with a means by which to satisfy the publication requirements of their employers while communicating with consumers at a level that meets their information needs. The choice of the Internet as the distribution method for the journal provides access to an international audience, thus enhancing the potential for consumer education to occur on a large scale.

Conclusion

In recent years marketing academics have noted worsening environmental degradation (Dhandra 1999; Ger 1997; Kilbourne et al. 1997), polarising wealth (Brown 1995b), and increasing materialism (Droge et al. 1993). In addition, there are growing concerns regarding the sustainability of current consumption levels and the implications for future generations (Borgmann 2000;

Durning 1991; Etzioni 1998; Jacobson and Mazur 1995; Jones 1997; Kilbourne et al. 1997). Perhaps in an era of such negative consumer outcomes and as we enter a new century we, as consumer researchers, should take a step back to look at what we actually do and why. Given that the producing organisations in society have access to significantly more resources than the average consumer, is it appropriate that we largely confine our research efforts to assist those who are already resource-rich? Consumer researchers have readily accepted the charter of lighting the pathway to growing consumption and increasing profits, but have largely failed to explicitly promote the quality of life of consumers. Consumer research that is conducted in the direct interests of consumers, rather than indirectly through marketers and public policy makers, remains an area of enormous potential. The Journal of Research for Consumers provides a publication outlet for consumer-oriented research, thus serving the dual role of encouraging such research in the first instance, and facilitating the dissemination of research findings to two diverse audiences in the second. Brown (1999) notes that the worth of a publication can be determined by its difference in content to what exists in the current literature. By focusing on the furthering of consumer interest through research, debate, and direct communication with consumers, JRC seeks to offer a point of difference from existing journals, thus establishing a worthwhile place in the both the academic and consumer literature.

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