

Relevance—Reloaded and Recoded

Strange things happen to incoming editors. First a vague uneasiness about the state of our field. Then a suspicion that there might be something to the jibes about the navel-gazing nature of consumer research. We sometimes struggle to translate *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)* findings to practitioners or to explain manuscript titles and abstracts that are esoteric to the point of academic parody. We see pressing problems in the world that have their root in consumption practices, and yet much of our work meanders through a burdensome review process without any urgency because, frankly, it's not clear how the research offers any novel insight or practical solution. There seems no reason to rush. And through an interminable review process, ironically, the takeaways become more simplistic—something that doesn't surprise anybody—while the vocabulary and diagrams become so complex that it's hard to see how they relate to any real-world situation. The mantle of editorship wraps us in these niggling doubts and, after a year on the job, we can't help but speak out.

“Relevance” is the label that seems to encapsulate these doubts. Or at least that is what has been said in the past; editors have consistently categorized it as such, or similarly, throughout *JCR*'s history—Mick (2003), then Deighton (2007), then Dahl, Fischer, Johar, and Morwitz (2014), and most recently Inman, Campbell, Kirmani, and Price (2018). And now us. To be fair, the need to write about relevance is not just an editorial affliction but has struck down many of our fellow researchers (Kohli and Haenlein 2021; Pham 2013; Winer 1999). Apparently, relevance is a classic that must be revisited every few years. However, the mere fact that it is revisited with such frequency makes us wonder if speaking about the need for consumer research to be relevant has not been enough. What more can be said?

In past discussions of relevance, editors have tried to articulate what makes some papers more publication-worthy than others, by using words like interesting, novel, insightful, useful, impactful, or important. It's true that these are excellent characteristics for a research manuscript, yet, they aren't fully satisfying. It's easy to push back and say that these words are not consistent enough to be meaningful metrics for research publication; that they are a matter of preference or taste (e.g., for a particular theory, method, or substantive domain), or a matter of timing (e.g., world events make a particular topic important), or a matter of hindsight (e.g., a “small” finding now may provide a critical future piece of a larger puzzle).

Rather than search for more palatable synonyms, perhaps there is value in considering how our field's constant struggle toward *consumer* relevance is systemic in nature. Thus, we offer a few ideas for re-coding relevance so that *JCR* can increasingly publish the kinds of papers that will suggest new plans to marketers of all kinds, be shared enthusiastically on social media, be covered by journalists, and give consumer researchers the confident assurance of purpose fulfilled.

1. **Consumer research provides insights about consumers and consumption in the marketplace.** Oddly, some members of our community cringe or sneer at the word *consumer*. We must examine that tendency and do more to happily embrace the consumer focus of our domain. People, when they are acting as “consumers,” consider their choices (or lack of choices) about how to spend their varying resources (such as money and time) on goods, services, and experiences, and what they do has short- and long-term outcomes on their experience, well-being, and identity as consumers and, most importantly, future marketplace choices. Most *JCR* authors and readers are academics based in business schools, which implies a distinct domain when we say “choice.” Political scientists may study similar phenomena in persuasion and voting choices. Developmental psychologists may study very similar phenomena in looking at how children choose marshmallows in self-control paradigms. Historians may look at related phenomena in studying patterns of trade routes and colonialism. Demographers may use similar choice paradigms yet focus on decisions to migrate across international borders. Consumer researchers often draw on basic disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics, statistics and, increasingly nowadays, computer science) to conduct their research. But, since its emergence in the early 1970s, consumer research has come of age as an independent discipline, and now it is increasingly important to focus on unique questions and approaches aimed at generating novel insights into *consumer* behavior and consumption in *marketplace* settings. Articles can use the word “person” instead of “consumer” in *JCR*—as long the research itself is about how those people behave with respect to their consumption of products, services, or

experiences in a marketplace. But simply calling people who are busy going about other aspects of their life (whether as voters or parents or athletes) “consumers” is not sufficient to change a paper from another field into a consumer research paper.

2. **Not all research done by consumer researchers is consumer research.** Just because work is done by scholars who call themselves “consumer researchers” doesn’t necessarily mean it is consumer research. While we mostly work in business schools, many consumer researchers have the privilege of research flexibility. We find ourselves interested in questions that pop up in core disciplines, and we can easily get drawn into projects with colleagues in other fields. Additionally, there is great value in research that partners with marketing practitioners or policy makers and that is more applied and “action oriented” than primary research. We have noticed that many well-known consumer scholars write papers that are very useful and visionary but that are *not* appropriate for *JCR*. They may be published in incredible journals like *Science*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Psychological Review*, or *American Economic Review*, but they are not suitable for *JCR*. So, while we have an instinct to send all of our work—especially the work we are most proud of—to *JCR*, even good work from good consumer behavior scholars has the possibility to not be sufficiently consumer-relevant to be a good fit for *JCR*.
3. **Consumer research has many theoretical roots but must have a common focus.** When does a paper move from one of our core disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, or economics) and become consumer research? Honestly, there is a debatable line and, as Editors, we often must talk through different borderline examples as a team. There is an old joke that a manuscript rejected from a psychology journal can be submitted to *JCR* by doing a quick “search and replace” to change every instance of “person” to “consumer.” This should not be possible, and as Editors we are trying to be clear about what work has *meaningfully* extended from a core discipline to consumer research. Consider a simple example: imagine that a fictional paper examines the impact of positive emotional cues on a person’s self-esteem. This is not a consumer research paper even if the authors, in the “practical implications” section, describe ways in which the emotional cues *could* be contained in ads. We would hope to see a consumer-oriented construct specifically tested as either an independent variable (e.g., emotions in ads) or as a dependent variable (e.g., self-esteem as a consumer) or even as a moderating variable (e.g., emotional cues aren’t as effective at changing self-esteem when people are less materialistic). But, with our fictional psychology paper, even if a “Study 6” is added to have 100 MTurkers respond to the positive emotional cues in an ad, this feels like a fairly thin example of *consumer* research. Why? Because you could easily find any number of specific marketplace examples of how the presence of emotional cues in ads is really important *and* really complicated. Risky consumption like vaping, drinking, or eating fast food. Endemic stress (like from a pandemic or political strife) and credit card debt. The “last mile” race to same-day delivery and consumer demands for immediate fulfillment. To study the basic process of emotion-esteem within these marketplace domains suggests important independent variables, moderators, boundaries, dependent variables, and consequences—and when they are considered, the work has richness and a real capacity for consumer insight. To be relevant to, and important for, our understanding of people in a marketplace, research cannot strip away meaningful contextual factors associated with the real-world domain authors claim their research speaks to. “Tacking on” the word “consumer” merely for the sake of having a shot at being considered at *JCR* is a practice we should abandon.
4. **We need more research that looks at important issues.** Consumption is such a broad part of the human experience that it is relatively easy to write a research paper that is “interesting” or “intriguing” but not at all important. For example, take a paper on dishwashing practices. It’s possible to imagine how a thorough observation would uncover interesting and provocative details about when dishwashing occurs, how a high-tech dishwasher makes the activity enjoyable through music, whether dishwashing reminds us of family traditions or relates to labor practices within families. But, in this form, how important is it for this paper to be read, shared, and discussed as consumer research? How important would the findings be outside of academia (e.g., to marketing practitioners)? Unfortunately, sometimes what we as consumer researchers might think is interesting and worth studying just is not that important. It isn’t enough of a big deal. As a field, we must push ourselves to see how the areas we find personally fascinating link to real-world problems or serious, important decisions that people have to make in marketplace contexts. We should challenge ourselves to be much more honest with ourselves (and our colleagues) when answering the “So what?” question about our research. And if the honest truth is that whatever it is that we are studying is, by and large, unimportant then we should seriously question the investment of our time and university resources (in many cases public money) in that research. Back to our dishwashing example; in this case, one path to greater importance may be to look at how this practice impacts the consumption of water and whether there are hidden barriers (e.g., myths, traditions, habits) that are likely to impede consumers choosing dish-washing practices or dishwashers that conserve water. How can we take our papers from “an interesting read” to “an important read”? We should also consider for

whom our papers are “an important read”—is it just ourselves or also other academic disciplines or, given our typical business school home, business/marketing practitioners? On all of these fronts, it is helpful to ask ourselves: What is the breadth of phenomena covered by this consumer theory? How many stakeholders are really affected by the recommendations emerging from findings? What is the timeliness/urgency of solving the problem? We have been lucky as a field that we have been able to indulge our own interests but now there is a growing call for consumer research to get out of the ivory tower and address a growing list of important managerial and societal concerns to which we can speak as consumer researchers.

5. **We (and this means editors, associate editors, and reviewers as much as authors) must continue becoming more comfortable with new data collection methods, sources of data, and analysis methods.** In some cases, this has happened successfully (e.g., the growing use of natural language processing algorithms to analyze unstructured text data). Yet in other cases, new kinds of data and methods have struggled to gain traction despite good-faith efforts from editors, reviewers, and authors (e.g., neuroscience methods and fMRI data). New methods, data sources, and statistical tools are becoming available at a pace that is hard to keep up with; nevertheless, we strongly believe that, for our field to be relevant, we must continue to embrace new approaches. For example, sophisticated field studies are increasingly possible; new tools for mobile qualitative work are available; and we can access more companies who amass very large consumer tracking datasets across digital platforms. As we move to gather new kinds of empirical evidence, it may be necessary at first to partner with scholars with specific analytical skills. It may be necessary to hold workshops that help educate researchers and readers about the potential and best practices of new methods. It may be necessary to struggle a bit to resolve conflicting ideas among reviewers. If we look at the market environments that we study (and are all part of ourselves as consumers), we easily can see how important and interesting new phenomena will require us to employ new empirical approaches. Consider the rise in image and video content from brands. If one wanted to understand how different visual properties of brands' images and videos in social media apps affect consumer behavior and wanted to do this at scale, one would likely need to use machine learning for computer vision and then use sophisticated statistical models to understand the data. Or if someone wanted to study how sustainability-related messaging changes a household's water consumption they would need to find ways to reliably measure, again at scale, household water consumption using smart sensors or meters. And if a scholar wished to explore the exciting new world of the “metaverse” to understand how consumers interact with brands in immersive, multisensory virtual environments, they would need to find technologies that allowed for the measurement and analysis of these behaviors over time. Yes, all of this does sound like much more effort than running simple experiments on MTurk, accompanied by mediation and moderation! But we think that it's worthwhile to invest in new empirical approaches and that it will be very good for consumer research and lead to our field having a greater impact.

Ultimately, we are all privileged to explore the many facets of consumer behavior and consumption in a marketplace. As our field grows and develops, we must move beyond our comfort zone and shift away from the “typical *JCR* paper” mindset. This is not easy, but it is toward something bigger and better.

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