

**Online Consumer Behavior:  
Theory and Research in Social Media, Advertising, and E-Tail**

**FOREWORD**

**The Beginnings of a New Research Domain**

In many respects, the study of consumer behavior is relatively new in the scheme of things. Prior to the 1960s, the topic of consumption was primarily an area of inquiry and interest in the economics discipline. With the emphasis on consumption, the area of analysis was the household and how households managed their budgets as well as how they expended their incomes. In the fall of 1963, I was in my first semester of the doctoral program at the University of Illinois. In one course, the term requirement was to develop and write a marketing paper that featured a model of a marketing phenomenon. (As an aside, this was a time when business schools were trying to add quantitative methods to their curricula.) I thought that I would develop a model of consumer behavior. When I approached the course professor with this idea, he was somewhat perplexed as he did not know of any previous model of consumer behavior. He nonetheless directed me to go to the library and ask the librarian to order a recent dissertation by Franco Nicosia who had completed his doctoral dissertation in 1962 at the University of California, Berkeley. Franco had developed a conceptual model of individual consumer behavior which was later published in a landmark book, **Consumer Decision Processes: Marketing and Advertising Implications** (Prentice Hall, 1966). Also in 1966, Alan Andreasen published an essay on “Attitudes and Customer Behavior: A Decision Model,” in Lee E. Preston (ed.) **New Research in Marketing**.

In 1968, James Engel, David Kollat and Roger Blackwell published the first **Consumer Behavior** text book in which they developed a comprehensive model of consumer behavior. At the same time, John Howard was developing his ideas about individual buyer behavior and in 1969, published a book with Jagdish Sheth titled **The Theory of Buyer Behavior**. These two books sparked considerable interest and led to many attempts to study consumer behavior from a more comprehensive perspective. New courses were being developed in marketing to describe and explain how individual consumers made purchase decisions and how they might be influenced by multiple factors. In the same year, Engel organized a symposium at Ohio State

University on consumer behavior research and that meeting led to the decision to form the Association for Consumer Research (ACR). The initial ACR conference was held at the University of Massachusetts in August 1970. It was my privilege to attend that conference and meet scholars with interests in doing consumer research.

### **The New Research Domain Established**

During the next several years, consumer research rapidly developed as a legitimate area of research. Sparked by developments in psychology, it grew rapidly. New courses were added to the marketing curricula of business schools and considerable research was produced and submitted to the two marketing journals of the American Marketing Association: *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research*. Unfortunately, there was limited space in these two journals to publish many articles on consumer research. Frustrated by the limited space available to address consumer research, a move was made to start a new journal. The first issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* was published in June of 1974. The Journal was labeled as a new interdisciplinary quarterly and was co-sponsored by 10 scholarly associations: American Association for Public Opinion Research, American Council on Consumer Interests, American Economic Association, American Home Economics Association, American Marketing Association, American Psychological Association (Div. 23), American Sociological Association, American Statistical Association, Association for Consumer Research, and The Institute of Management Sciences.

In his introductory editorial, the first *JCR* editor Ronald Frank indicated that the Journal's objective was to be the first journal in which professionals with an interest in consumer behavior across disciplines send their research papers. Further, he stated that consumer behavior was to be broadly construed to consider a wide range of behaviors and decisions including family planning, occupational choices, attitudes towards products and services, the purchase, consumption and uses of products and services such as financial services, medical care as well as other responses to marketing variables.

During these first years in the 1970s, ACR became firmly established as a scholarly, professional association and its annual conferences rapidly grew in attendance surpassing 400 in 1980. (Today, the attendance at the annual ACR conferences each fall numbers over 1000!)

Beginning with the 1973 fall conference proceedings entitled **Advances in Consumer Research**, this annual quickly gained acceptance and recognition for the quality of the papers presented at the conferences and published in the proceedings.

### **Turmoil in Consumer Research**

During the 1980s, considerable concern arose over the philosophical foundations of studies in consumer research. Debates arose in journal pages and in conferences over the merits of logical positivism, critical realism and interpretive consumer research. Unfortunately, some of this debate was reduced to quantitative versus qualitative research methods. At times, the debates were bitter and there was a feeling that journal space for traditional consumer research might be limited by this newer approach to studying consumer behavior. Indeed, soon after I assumed the editorship of *JCR* in 1990, I was queried about the composition of the editorial review board. The question put to me concerned the composition of the editorial review board of seven consumer researchers known to favor qualitative research methods. I quietly responded that the board that appeared at that time on the *JCR* masthead was from the previous editor Richard Lutz. I did not inform the questioner that the next issue which would list my editorial review board would have 15 qualitative researchers as I expanded the editorial review board by an additional 20+ people. Eventually, the controversy abated in the early 1990s and acceptance of multiple philosophical and methodological approaches to consumer research has occurred.

### **Recent Shifts in Consumer Behavior Research**

Since the early 1990s, interest in consumer behavior research has expanded and has become truly a global research interest. The Association for Consumer Research began to hold conferences in late spring or early summer in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region. These conferences led to a growing roster of consumer researchers in these areas of the world. An important consequence of these conferences is that even the so-called national ACR conference saw researchers from Europe, Asia, and Australia attending and presenting their research. Also, in 1990 the Society for Consumer Psychology (Division 23 of the American Psychological Association) began publishing the *Journal of Consumer Psychology (JCP)*.

The content of consumer research as exemplified by the articles now appearing in *JCR*, *JCP* and other research journals has shifted to put more emphasis on psychological factors such

as cognitive processes and goals as motivation, cross-cultural issues, and behavioral decision theory including judgment and decision making. Issues of public policy, consumer welfare and family decision-making do not seem to attract many consumer researchers. Experimentation has become the dominant research methodology and less attention is placed on studying the more “traditional” marketing influences on consumer behavior such as advertising and promotions. Triggered by the development of the world-wide-web, the globalization of consumer research mentioned above, and the increasing rate of consumers shopping on the Internet, there is growing attention on the Internet as an area needing careful study. Research relative to e-commerce, computing and the Internet now appear in the journals and in presentations at the conferences.

### **Online Consumer Behavior Research**

Today, consumers purchase products and services in brick and mortar stores, through online websites as well as other venues. They share information readily and instantaneously via multiple social media outlets. Consequently, in many respects, researchers have had to rethink how to study consumer behavior. Indeed, one of the effects of the world-wide-web is to make available to consumers throughout the world products and services any time of the day or night. Initially, it was thought that online access would return the economies to that approaching the economic model of perfect competition. Alas, we have not witnessed such a result as individuals are not able to process all of the information that is available from the many sources online. Moreover, the social media has made it possible for consumers and buyers to provide information to others on a world-wide basis about how the products and services they have acquired meet their expectations and needs. Consequently, it behooves researchers to think carefully through the assumptions that were made about how consumers would search, buy online and to communicate with other consumers and with sellers as well.

Buying and selling online also introduces a number of stimulating questions some of which will require that researchers think about issues related to public policy, consumer welfare and family decision making. Foremost are the concerns of security and privacy. Can consumers be protected from unscrupulous sellers and hackers? Will the threat of security breaches make consumers hesitant to shop and purchase online? Can they trust the online sellers to protect their private information and not provide access to that information to others without the knowledge and consent of consumers? Can public policy be framed to protect consumers and, therefore the

marketplace? Why do consumers abandon their shopping carts before completing a transaction? Are the online reviews ostensibly by other consumers believable and reliable? What is the future of online selling and will it replace the traditional retail store? There is also a need for consumer research to become more multi-method as well as more multi-disciplinary. While it is convenient to conduct experiments using college students, nevertheless relying primarily on this approach raises strong concerns of validity.

These and other relevant research issues concerning online consumer behavior are addressed in this book. It is important that we now have such a volume not only to raise critical research questions but also to begin suggesting solutions and to gain understanding of this phenomenon. This timely book of essays is an essential reference for helping us understand the implications of online consumer behavior.

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