

## 32 — The Surpluses and Shortages in Consumer Behavior Theory and Research

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### INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this paper is to take an inventory of consumer behavior theory and research as we end the decade of the seventies. There is no question that consumer behavior as a discipline has displayed a spectacular growth in borrowing concepts from the behavioral and quantitative sciences, in broadening its horizons from traditional marketing problems to social problems, and in generating a body of knowledge about consumers as buyers, users and decision makers (Sheth, 1972; Jacoby, 1975). It is simply a matter of time before consumer behavior will divorce itself from marketing and stand on its own as a distinct discipline relevant to many other constituents besides marketers and many other disciplines beside marketing. Thus, it appears to be an opportune time to take stock of consumer behavior theory and research and assess its surpluses and shortages.

Perhaps the most difficult part of taking an inventory of a growing discipline is to decide on where to begin and how to plan assessing the surpluses and shortages in consumer behavior. After some thinking, I have come up with the following three aspects which seem to provide a simple yet comprehensive approach:

1. *What* has been the focus of understanding in consumer behavior and what should be the future focus?
2. *How* have we researched the consumer behavior phenomenon in the past, and where should we go from here?
3. *Why*, in the past, did we choose to study consumer behavior and what should be the future motivation for our continued interest in the area?

Each of the above three aspects will be examined in some depth which hopefully will reveal what we have sufficiently done and where the deficiencies exist in consumer behavior theory and research.

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FOCUS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR  
THEORY AND RESEARCH

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While consumer behavior theory and research may look very eclectic at first glance, two aspects stand out as the common underlying dimensions with which most research efforts seem to be bonded together. The first aspect is the dominance of focus on the *individual consumer* in many of his roles such as shopper, buyer, decision maker and the user. The second aspect is the dominance of decision making process and the consequent implicit, if not explicit presumption that the buying behavior is a rational problem-solving process (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Sheth, 1976). Accordingly, we seem to have abundance of research studies about the individual consumer and about theories of consumer behavior which are based on decision making processes. This is particularly evident in the recent proliferation of multiattribute attitudes, information processing and brand choice models.

By the same token, research studies on dyads and small groups such as families and organizations are limited. Even larger groups such as market segments, social classes and ethnic groups have been studied more in terms of *aggregates* of individual consumers rather than as distinct group entities.

The situations seems to be decidedly worse with respect to analyzing and understanding those consumers and areas of consumer behavior which do not lend themselves to decision making process approaches. For example, the deviant consumer behavior such as shoplifting, the obsessive consumer behavior such as obesity, alcoholism and drug addiction, and the fads and fashion patronage behavior have not been very successfully understood by the rational problem-solving approaches of the decision making tradition.

It is fairly obvious even to a naive observer that not all consumers or all consumer behavior phenomena can be fully explained or understood by a single perspective especially as elegant and rational as the decision making perspective. I believe that we need to bring at least three additional perspectives to fully comprehend the consumer behavior phenomenon. These are (1) habit and conditioning; (2) situationalism; and the (3) novelty-curiosity or epistemic perspective. Hopefully, the three mutually exclusive perspectives will be exhaustive enough to encompass the diversity of consumers and consumer behavior phenomena. It would be most fascinating to generate hard measures of consumer behavior realities with respect to the frequency and magnitude of prevalence of each perspective. My *a priori* hunch is that the decision making perspective may account for a relatively smaller proportion of total consumer behavior phenomena.

Table 1 represents an attempt to summarizing the surpluses and deficiencies with respect to what we have versus what we should focus on in consumer behavior theory and research. What seems to be enough is the decision making framework applied to explain and predict individual consumer

**TABLE 1. Surpluses and Shortages of Focus in Consumer Behavior Theory**

	FRAMEWORK	
	DECISION MAKING	NON DECISION MAKING
INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR ↑ FOCUS ON ↓ GROUP BEHAVIOR	ENOUGH	NEED MORE
	1. Attitude modeling 2. Multiattribute judgments 3. Brand choice models	1. Habit & conditioning 2. Situational effects 3. Epistemic behavior 4. Motivation research
	NEED MORE	TOO LITTLE
	1. Household decision making 2. Organizational buying behavior 3. Sociology of consumption 4. Cross-national buying behavior	1. Deviant consumption 2. Crowd consumption 3. Values and taboos 4. Fads and fashions 5. Consumer protection 6. Leisure consumption

behavior. Two classes of research in this interactive combination are the multiattribute judgments and brand choice models. My own view is what these models now need is more usage and applications by the marketing practitioners and policy makers rather than further theoretical development. Perhaps the applications in real world may provide us insights about the robustness of these models better than deductive reasoning given that the world of social science is more contingent and less absolute to be reduced to some invariant laws of social, economic or consumer behavior.

What we need most because too little consumer research or theory effort has been devoted so far is the opposite interactive combination: understanding group behavior which are likely to be based on non-problem solving processes. Examples of such areas of focus for consumer research include crowd consumption, deviant consumption, fads and fashions and understanding values, taboos, and similar clinical mass motivations. This research should be directed at the *macro* (group) rather than at the *micro* (individual) level.

Of course, the above statements do not imply that there is no further need to study the individual consumers or that the decision making framework has outlived its utility. As the Table indicates, we still need more research and theory about the individual consumer but in the non-decision making domains of his epistemic behavior, impact of situational effects on his choice behavior, the formation, endurance and utilization of habits

(affective predispositions to behave) which may or may not have any underlying cognitive structure, and the whole area of motivation research which was disreputed prematurely in the early days of consumer behavior.

Similarly, there are many areas of group behavior which can be understood by the decision making framework, and where more research and theory are clearly needed. These include the more traditional areas of household decision making, organizational buying behavior, and the newer areas of sociology of consumption and cross-national buying behavior. The important point to come in mind is that we need to develop or borrow more *macro* decision making frameworks rather than simply extend the micro decision making frameworks used in understanding individual consumers. For example, recent literature on cultural aggregates, game theory, jury decision processes, and interorganizational conflict, power and coalitions may prove more relevant than the tenets of social psychology.

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#### PROCESS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

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The process of theorizing and researching consumer behavior seems to be at least two dimensional. The first dimension reflects the heavy reliance on, and the consequent dominance of descriptive as opposed to normative processes. This is understandable and seems to be due to two reasons. First, we are dealing with very pervasive human or social issues in consumer behavior where it is difficult to impose a common set of normative value-laden judgments or perspectives without being criticized or at least questioned by others. In other words, the descriptive process of finding out how and why consumers behave the way they do and making policy or practice decisions based on these findings seems most reasonable, humanistic, less subject to criticism, and compatible with our belief in the democratic processes. Second, social behavior is too complex and contingent to reduce down to an exact science. It is, therefore, more difficult to generate normative or axiomatic propositions to which all agree and subscribe as they seem to do in biological and physical sciences. While these two factors explain why we might have leaned toward the descriptive processes in consumer behavior, they cannot justify it.

The second dimension related to how we have gone about researching and theorizing the consumer behavior area is the dominance of borrowed concepts and constructs as opposed to generating our own concepts and constructs unique to consumer behavior. The dominance of borrowed versus self-generated constructs can be attributed to several factors. First, the early pioneers in the discipline of consumer behavior made a fundamental presumption that consumer behavior is not unique but part of a larger syndrome of human and social behavior. It is interesting to note that economics did not make a similar presumption and consequently ended up developing

its own constructs and axioms. Second, when a discipline begins to emerge without a formally defined boundary or at best an ill-defined boundary, it is easier to borrow constructs than create them. This seems very much true of consumer behavior; we still do not precisely know what to include and what to exclude from consumer behavior to make it a distinct discipline. Third, pervasiveness of the phenomenon itself may have been a contributing factor: It attracted many scholars from a variety of disciplines such as economics, behavioral sciences, social sciences, marketing, and the quantitative sciences. Consequently, there was no single thrust or driving force comparable to what has been true in the pioneering days of economics and psychology. Multitudes of viewpoints and processes were simultaneously applied to understanding consumer behavior as evidenced from reviews of earlier literature (Sheth, 1967). While this was great for the discipline to get off the ground faster and mature quickly, it ended up in the dominance of using borrowed constructs at the expense of self-generating constructs uniquely suited to the discipline.

Having identified the two process dimensions (descriptive vs. normative and borrowed vs. self-generated constructs), the task of taking inventory of how we developed consumer behavior theory and research is made much easier: There is a clear surplus of borrowed constructs and a critical shortage of self-generating constructs in consumer behavior. Similarly, there is a surplus of descriptive constructs and a shortage of normative constructs. In Table 2, I have provided some examples of the types of research and theory processes in consumer behavior which we must discourage and other types which we must encourage to create a balance of processes of researching in consumer behavior.

First of all, I think we have borrowed enough constructs from several descriptive disciplines. This includes social psychology, personality research, diffusion of innovations, econometric models as well as stochastic models. On the other hand, we badly need to generate our own constructs related to several normative aspects of consumer behavior. These include developing normative theories of market segmentation, what should be the strategy mix to impact on the consumers without generating negative side effects, how should we protect the consumer *and* which types of consumers, designing anti-consuming policies for certain goods and services, and developing an audit system for measuring consumption indicators which go beyond the recently popular economic and social indicators. The most radical of the proposed areas of future research and theory is the development of marketing policy which would outline rights and obligations of the marketers.

Again, the above analysis does not mean that we should discard descriptive processes altogether or that we should totally stop borrowing constructs from other disciplines. As Table 2 indicates, there are a number of exciting areas of research and theory in consumer behavior which can and should rely upon the descriptive processes. These include self-generating a unique

**TABLE 2. Surpluses and Shortages in the Process of Consumer Behavior Theory & Research**

		PROCESS	
		DESCRIPTIVE	NORMATIVE
BORROWED CONSTRUCTS ↑ CONSTRUCTS ↓ SELF-GENERATED CONSTRUCTS	ENOUGH	1. Social psychology 2. Personality research 3. Diffusion theories 4. Demographics 5. Reference Groups 6. Stochastic models 7. Econometric models	NEED MORE
	NEED MORE	1. Typology of consumption needs 2. Consumption styles 3. Consumption life style 4. Theory of search behavior 5. Stimulus-as-coded 6. Product life cycle 7. Brand/supplier loyalty 8. Consumer satisfaction	TOO LITTLE

typology of consumption needs/wants, a typology of consumption life styles as opposed to general life styles, and consumption life cycle based on the time dependent covariances of preselected and representative goods and services. It also includes more research on self-generated constructs of brand/supplier loyalty, product life cycle theory, and consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction research. Finally, we badly need self-generated constructs for the phenomena of information search and the process by which marketing stimuli get internalized in the consumer's mind both in the short and in the long-term memory functions. In this last category of research areas, I am more and more convinced that we need to generate our own constructs rather than borrow from cognitive, perceptual and/or neuropsychology. My conviction is based more on the strong differences in definition, size and character of information units between borrowed constructs and what is relevant in consumer behavior.

Lastly, there are several normative disciplines from which we have neglected to borrow in the past, even though they appear to be useful to consumer behavior. These include the policy literature in sociology related to strategies of planned social change, game theory and normative decision theory, mathematical modeling such as queing theory, inventory control theory and critical path analysis for educating and upgrading the household

styles and psychographics as well as his media and shopping habits especially since the start of the age of electronic computers and other electronic devices. It would appear to me that the next progressive step is data analysis. For it is a sad commentary that probably eighty to ninety percent of the information about the consumer goes unanalyzed or at least underanalyzed. In short, data analysis and not data collection should be the further direction in the area of generating empirical knowledge for managerial purposes.

On the other side of the equation, what seems to be in most acute shortage are the theoretical foundations of the discipline itself. While we do have several nice and rich hypotheses (e.g., perceived risk, buyer attitudes, and stochastic preferences) and some good comprehensive theories in consumer behavior, unfortunately most of them are developed for the managerial perspective. We need discipline-oriented theoretical foundation, especially in the areas of concept formation, symbolic communication and a good theory of consumer needs/wants.

Above all, it would be superb if we can evolve toward some commonly agreed upon and scientifically validated laws of consumer behavior. I might add that in my search for such laws of consumer behavior, I have so far discovered two laws: (1) Those who don't need a product or information, consume or use it; and (2) Those who need a product or information, do not consume or use it! Seriously, there is some validation to these two laws of consumer behavior as one scans the literature of why consumer protection efforts have failed as well as examines the vast amount of consumption behavior data in conjunction with the socioeconomic-demographic profiles of the consuming populations. If this is true, we might provide a far better explanation for imperfect competition and social welfare disequilibrium than what has been proposed in the theory of firms in microeconomics.

This analysis does not mean that we should ignore or even discard the managerial purpose in consumer behavior. However, what the manager needs much more critically are the theoretical foundations of how the marketing mix does or does not work. For example, it would be nice if scholars in consumer behavior can provide him with a single agreed upon explanation as to how advertising works; or provide rich theoretical foundations for the price-demand relationship; or offer a good theory of new product failures. So far as I am concerned, I think it would be not only nice but seems also possible to offer a good theory of product class choice behavior with which the manager can understand who competes and complements with his products in the market place.

Finally, the discipline itself needs further empirical knowledge on a number of substantive issues. These include the degree and character of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction; prevalence of problem solving versus other methods of making product, brand or store choices; and cross-cultural parallels and contrasts in magnitudes and types of products and services consumed on our planet.

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**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

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This paper is an attempt to take an inventory of consumer behavior theory and research in order to identify surpluses and shortages of concepts, information and body knowledge we face today as we say goodbye to the decade of the seventies.

The inventory was taken with respect to the three areas of focus, process and purpose in generating the body of knowledge we call consumer behavior theory and research. The following conclusions were derived in the process:

1. We have focused too much on the individual consumer as opposed to group behavior and similarly too much on the rational models of problem solving (decision making) as opposed to other non-problem solving models of choice behavior. The interaction of these two focus factors has resulted in abundance of attitude models, multi-attribute judgments, and brand choice models. What we need most is understanding of group phenomena such as crowd consumption, fads and fashions, deviant consumption behavior, and obsessive consumer behavior with the use of more macro and non-problem solving hypotheses and theories of choice behavior.
2. The process of theorizing and researching consumer behavior has been dominated by descriptive as opposed to normative constructs, and by constructs borrowed from other disciplines rather than self-generated constructs unique to consumer behavior. In the process, we seem to have surplus of social psychology, diffusion theory, reference groups, as well as econometric and stochastic modeling of consumer behavior. What we need now are more normative and self-generated hypotheses and theories related to market segmentation strategy mix models, consumerism and consumer welfare theories, anti-consuming models and a normative marketing policy which defines the rights and obligations of the marketers.
3. Most of the consumer behavior research and theory has been for managerial purposes in contrast to the disciplinary (metatheory) purposes. Similarly, it has been more empirical rather than theoretical. This has resulted in generating lots of facts and figures about the consumer himself, how much does he buy, his media and shopping habits and his demographics, life styles and psychographics. In the process, market research and consumer research have become almost synonymous. What we need, however, are rich theoretical foundations of the discipline itself with respect to many areas such as concept formation, symbolic communication and a theory of consumer needs/wants.



It would be simply exhilarating if we can evolve some agreed upon and properly validated laws of consumer behavior. So far, it seems that we have discovered only two obvious laws of consumer behavior: those who don't need the product, consume it, and secondly those who need it, do not consume it! While these laws may go a long way in explaining the phenomena of imperfect competition and social welfare disequilibrium as compared to the traditional micro-economic theory of the firm, we can do much better if we decide to change our focus, process and purpose in understanding consumer behavior.

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