

# On Relevance

Richard J. Lutz\*  
JCPenney Professor of Marketing  
University of Florida

2018 ACR Fellows Address

I am truly both honored and humbled to be deemed a Fellow of the Association for Consumer Research. I honestly thought that my time had passed for being considered for this award, so it came as quite a shock to me when it was announced at last year's conference. In fact, similar to Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving, I found myself going through the five stages of ACR Fellowship: Shock, Elation, Unworthiness, Bargaining, and Acceptance.

In selecting a theme for my remarks today, I considered and rejected a number of topics. One of those topics that I originally rejected kept nagging at me. Eventually, it won out. The focus of my talk is relevance. Hopefully, it will also be relevant!

The concern about research relevance is hardly a new one for our field. It has been lamented since at least the 1980s, by ACR and SCP presidents, by *JCR* and *JCP* editors, by previous ACR Fellows, and by other leading scholars. Relevance – or more specifically, the lack thereof – has been identified, and diagnosed. Remedies have been proposed. Journals have been launched with relevance in mind (*JACR* and *JMB*). And yet, about a month ago I received a phone call from Jeff Inman, the current editor-in-chief of *JCR*. Would I consider writing a guest editorial for *JCR* on the topic of “What is Relevance?” Say what!?! Being a firm believer that “there are no coincidences,” I took great comfort in Jeff's request that the topic I had chosen is one that is far from settled.

\*I thank Jeff Inman, David Mick, Ron Hill, Valarie Zeithaml, and Joe Alba for comments on earlier versions of these remarks.

In my remaining time, I shall attempt, first, to answer Jeff's question. Second, I will briefly trace the history of calls for relevance in consumer research, including some very insightful analyses and proposed remedies. Third, I will provide some informed speculation as to why our perceived relevance problem has persisted and what, if anything, can be done about it.

### Relevance Defined

Merriam-Webster defines relevance as: "(1a) relation to the matter at hand; (1b) practical and especially social applicability." From this simple definition, it is relatively easy to extrapolate to the notion of consumer research relevance. Consumer research should relate to the matter at hand (i.e., consumer behavior) and should have practical applicability (i.e., implications).

However straightforward these extrapolations may appear, neither is without controversy. For instance, with regard to the matter at hand, many have argued for a very broad construal of consumer behavior. Thus, we have seen consumer research on time usage, voting, and even fertility. It seems that the "matter at hand" is quite a handful. At the very least, the matter-at-hand definition permits a very liberal interpretation of relevance.

The practical applicability definition appears to offer more promise in elucidating consumer research relevance. At ACR's inception in 1970, in addition to the obvious academic constituency, consumer research was construed to be of service to marketing practitioners and public policy makers. It was customary for authors to include a "marketing implications" or "public policy implications" section at the end of their papers.

In the mid-1980s things changed. Early pioneers in what was to become the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) movement challenged the assumption that consumer research should be "industry's handmaiden." In the words of Tom Tucker (1967), consumer researchers were admonished to study consumers the way a marine biologist studies fish, not the way a fisherman

studies fish. While I firmly endorse that “science *qua* science” philosophy, the unintended consequence of adopting it was that it seemingly devalued consumer research’s external constituents. No longer were implications sections a necessity. The only constituents that truly mattered were other consumer researchers (especially editors and reviewers). Ironically, as the “matter at hand” became broader, the audience for consumer research became narrower.

By the early 1990s, concerns about the relevance of consumer research began to surface. In my last *JCR* editorial (Lutz 1991), I identified the need for “greater attention to substantive consumer behavior issues.” In order to achieve this, I recommended initiating research by identifying a substantive consumer behavior problem (rather than beginning with a theory to be tested); interacting with “systems experts” (e.g., marketing practitioners) to identify meaningful problems; and conducting research in natural settings.

In 1993 Bill Wells, one of ACR’s founding fathers, as well as a past president and Fellow, wrote a brilliant treatise, “Discovery-Oriented Consumer Research” (Wells 1993), in which he challenged the field to conduct more meaningful, relevant research. He asserted that since the birth of ACR, the field had strayed from its original sense of purpose and had moved “...away from the real world.” He offered five guidelines for making consumer research more relevant: (1) Leave Home; (2) Forsake Mythology; (3) Reach Out, (4) Start Small and Stay Real; and (5) Research Backward. Time does not permit elaboration of Wells’ guidelines here, but I strongly encourage you to go back and read his paper. His perspective is as useful now as it was then.

Terry Shimp, in his 1994 ACR Presidential Address, echoed many of Wells’ criticisms of the field, concluding, “The call for greater relevance is now an inescapable element of the consumer research landscape” (p.2). He further identified five constituents for whom consumer research is

potentially relevant: (1) other academics; (2) students; (3) businesspeople; (4) public policy officials; and (5) society at large (p.3). In other words, relevance is with respect to a target audience; a consumer researcher who aspires to conduct relevant research is wise to begin with an audience in mind. Of course, this is commensurate with the suggestion that consumer researchers should have a close relationship with practitioners and consumers themselves, or what Brinberg and McGrath (1985) denoted “systems experts.”

A final point that Shimp made pertained to the need for “representation-based” research that places greater emphasis on consumer behavior occurring in the actual marketplace. This viewpoint essentially privileges the study of real-world consumer behavior phenomena over the testing of theories that are typically borrowed from other disciplines. Shimp’s notion was that greater attention to real-world consumer behavior phenomena would more or less ensure greater research relevance.

Thus, by 1994, the case was closed. The need for greater research relevance was identified, and several useful avenues for achieving it were specified. Relevant research ensued.

Not so fast.

In 2001, Itamar Simonson et al. titled their *Annual Review of Psychology* chapter, “Consumer Research: In Search of Identity.” In it, they noted some troublesome trends. (Non-CCT) consumer research in *JMR* and *JCP* was largely conducted on student samples ( $\approx 75\%$ ) in laboratory settings ( $\approx 90\%$ ), hardly the real-world settings envisioned by Lutz, Wells, and Shimp. Furthermore, Simonson et al. identified another disturbing aspect:

“... consumer research articles increasingly emphasize the managerial implications of the findings... Yet, few managers (or consumers) read consumer research articles that are published

in major journals, and the issues investigated are typically not at a level that is of much use for them” (p.264).

They also observed that, with a few exceptions, “...most articles published in the leading journals have examined more generic topics such as choice and attitudes. *Thus it is sometimes unclear what differentiates consumer research from other disciplines*” (p.263, emphasis added). Ultimately, Simonson et al. argue for more attention to the substantive domain (i.e., real-world consumer behavior) as well as research that identifies “generalized empirical phenomena” (i.e., descriptive research) as a starting point for theory building.

In 2003, at the end of his term as *JCR* editor, David Mick raised similar concerns. In addition to delineating a number of pressing real-world consumer problems worthy of the field’s research attention (that presaged his subsequent founding of the Transformative Consumer Research movement), he echoed previous calls for greater research relevance. He also noted the imbalance between theory-testing research focused on mental phenomena and research on actual consumer behavior in natural environments.

In his 2006 ACR Presidential Address, “Meaning and Mattering Through Transformative Consumer Research,” David threw down the gauntlet by calling for Transformative Consumer Research (TCR), i.e., research “... framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strives to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to .... consumption” (p.2). He went on to argue that ACR had done little to bring its considerable talents to bear on those sorts of topics and laid out a game plan for making TCR a reality. Twelve years later, TCR has enjoyed considerable success (Davis, Ozanne, and Hill 2016). I point you to the TCR tab on the ACR website to learn more about this exciting movement. Similar to a new product launch, it has taken some time for TCR to gain widespread awareness and appreciation. Despite the fact that

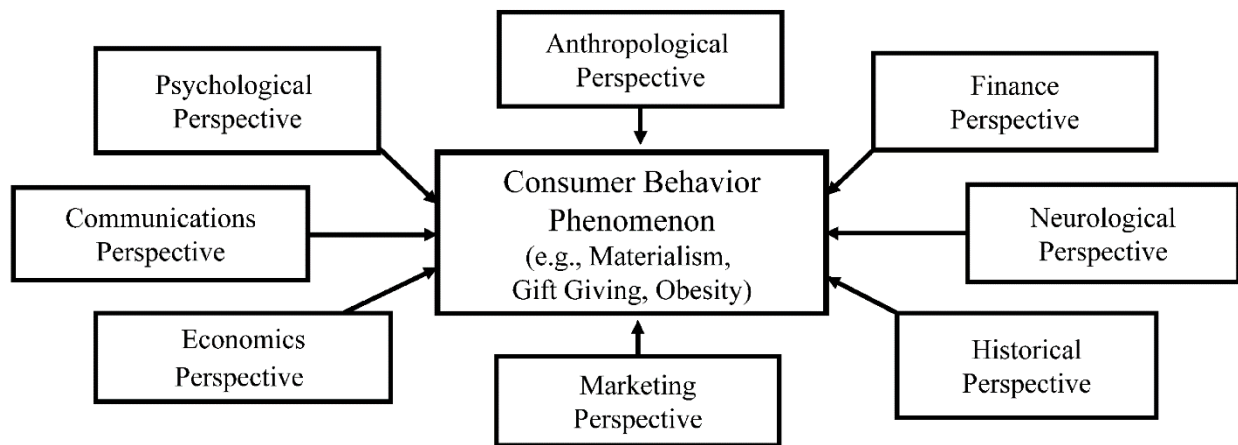
TCR offers a clear pathway to greater consumer research relevance, only a minority of ACR members are active TCR participants, and the overall field has continued its soul-searching.

In 2007 *JCR* editor John Deighton expressed concern in an editorial that consumer research was not sufficiently differentiating itself from other social sciences and thereby was foregoing the opportunity to make unique contributions to knowledge. He made a plea for more “concreteness” and less abstraction, with the thought in mind that more concreteness would imply a strong focus on unique consumer behavior phenomena. Ultimately, consumer research should be “valued by others.” Of course, who those “others” are is a key question.

In his introduction to the 2008 *JCR* special issue on TCR, David Mick noted that, “over the years, unfortunately, the field of consumer research has generally under-prioritized scholarship for alleviating problems and advancing opportunities of well-being” (p.377). He also recounted the early success of the TCR movement in fostering more broadly meaningful consumer research. The thirteen papers appearing in that special issue have garnered nearly 4,000 Google Scholar citations in the past decade.

My colleague Chris Janiszewski, in his 2009 ACR Presidential Address, addressed the need for consumer researchers to make a unique contribution to knowledge. Utilizing a marketing perspective, Chris analyzed the “market” for consumer behavior knowledge and concluded that a substantive domain focus was essential. Specifically, consumer research should address consumption-specific issues that the more general social sciences overlook. He included examples: consumer satisfaction, attitudes toward advertising, and brand relationships. In Chris’ remarks we once again see the importance of research on substantive consumer behavior phenomena.

Debbie MacInnis and Valerie Folkes, in their 2010 examination of the disciplinary status of ACR, noted that ACR has, since its inception, aspired to be interdisciplinary. Debbie and Valerie cashed out what “interdisciplinary” would really look like. I especially like their diagram depicting the interdisciplinary model. Note the centroid of the diagram: Consumer Behavior Phenomenon. The examples they offer--materialism, gift giving, and obesity--make it clear that substantive consumer behavior phenomena need not be narrowly defined.



Source: MacInnis & Folkes (2010)

At this juncture, it appeared that some progress was being made in the quest for more consumption-relevant research, particularly in the TCR arena. Recall that TCR is avowedly oriented toward research that is beneficial to consumers themselves. In some instances, a spillover effect might be felt on public policy makers, as they seek to promulgate regulations that inform, protect, or otherwise benefit consumers.

But what about ACR’s other constituent--industry? What has been the track record with respect to producing consumer research of relevance to marketing practitioners? Although this question may not be of direct importance to all ACR members, the majority of us are employed in the marketing departments of business schools. It is not too much of a stretch to assert that at least some of us aspire to produce research that is relevant to marketing managers. Indeed, the

Consumer Behavior Special Interest Group (CB-SIG) of the American Marketing Association has recently repositioned itself as operating at the interface of consumer research and marketing practice. Last year the CB-SIG initiated the Consumer Research in Practice Award for the best consumer research paper making a managerial contribution, and next summer is hosting its first conference (in Switzerland): “Managerially Relevant Consumer Insights: Crossing Boundaries,” with the same emphasis.

Addressing the managerial relevance question head on, Lutz (2011) noted that much academic marketing research intended to address substantive marketing problems appears to fall short of the mark. Others had preceded him with that criticism. As Scott Armstrong (2003) observed, “Few papers in marketing journals would fall into the category of having findings that are useful” (p.71). Daniel (2009) offered an even harsher criticism: “...business journals consist almost wholly of articles written by professors for other professors” (p.3). Although it is certainly a worthy enterprise to conduct research that is primarily aimed at advancing science rather than practice by targeting other scholars, as we will soon see, that defense of our research relevance may be self-delusional.

At the 2010 ACR conference, we were treated to two powerful Fellows’ addresses by my former colleague John Lynch and current colleague Joe Alba. Both of them addressed the need for more attention to substantive problems. John counseled:

“... if we would more often look to the substantive domain  
as inspiration for our research, three good things would happen.  
Our work will be of interest to a wider public, we will have more  
vibrant mutual influence with adjacent social disciplines, and....



benefit more richly from each other's work" (Lynch, 2011, p.15)

However, it was John's observation that our best researchers (and review teams) appear to think that every paper must make a theoretical contribution. As Brinberg and McGrath's (1985) Validity Network Schema (VNS) illuminates, the likelihood of making a meaningful substantive contribution when one sets out to make a theoretical contribution is severely constrained.

Joe's remarks, subsequently published in *JCR* (2012) as "In Defense of Bumbling," made a strong case for describing the "what" of consumer behavior before tackling the "why." He argues for the use of "abduction" (i.e., "informed curiosity") as a research approach. Note that this is very much in concert with Bill Wells' call for discovery-oriented consumer research. As Joe points out, consumer researchers' penchant for elaborate theories with higher-order interactions militates against communicating with marketing practitioners, whose burning questions more closely approximate main effects. In sum, neither Lynch nor Alba was enthusiastic about the "state of the art" in consumer research with respect to its relevance to practitioners.

In his 2012 ACR Presidential Address, Jeff Inman asserted that "useful, actionable" consumer research was "the elephant not in the room." He cited a recent survey finding that 40% of ACR's membership agreed that more substantive research is necessary and mentioned the TCR initiative as a move in that direction. Critically, Jeff advocated that our research "... should pass the 'So what?' or 'Who cares?' test and offer useful insights to other constituencies: public policy makers, industry, and yes, consumers as well. Importantly, *relevance to other constituencies should not be a stretch*" (Inman, 2012, p. 2, emphasis added).

In order to generate truly relevant research, Jeff argued, consumer research needs to incorporate "consequential dependent variables" that entail participants' actual resources (e.g.,

time, money) as opposed to scale responses to a hypothetical scenario. Note that this recommendation tends to favor field research over lab studies or MTurk. Jeff also suggested turning to the substantive domain as a source of research topics, rather than exclusively pursuing theoretically-driven questions.

Jeff concluded his remarks with an important disclaimer, with which I agree wholeheartedly: “Am I saying that we should shift all our focus to research that generates useful insights? Absolutely not. I AM saying that we need to achieve a sustainable equilibrium between research that builds theory and research that applies theory to substantive issues to generate useful insights. Through this, we can form touchpoints beyond our academic colleagues and truly make a difference to practice and to society” (p. 4).

John Lynch and colleagues (2012) echoed Inman’s basic thesis and offered some insightful approaches for addressing the perceived imbalance between theory-driven and substantively-driven research. Drawing on Ellison’s (2002) analysis, they distinguish *r-quality* (in a nutshell, the rigor of the research in technical terms) and *q-quality* (i.e., “the importance of the paper’s main contribution”) (p. 474). They argue that it is much more difficult for reviewers to assess *q-quality* than *r-quality* and, consequently, *q-quality* tends to receive short shrift. This has the effect of squeezing out potentially relevant, if not as precise, contributions.

Lynch et al. further argue for greater use of inductive theory-building that originates with a substantive problem. Consequential dependent variables and field studies are suggested as useful mechanisms for pursuing *q-quality*. Recognizing that judgments of *q-quality* are inherently subjective and even idiosyncratic, Lynch et al. advocate a “champion” philosophy in the review process: i.e., at least one member of the review team should be very enthusiastic about the contribution of the research. Assessing the perceived importance of a research topic is

thus a central challenge not only for editors but even more significantly for researchers faced with the decision of where to allocate their time and intellectual effort. We shall return to this point.

In his sobering 2013 SCP Presidential Address (and subsequent guest editorial in *JCP*), Michel Pham identified “The Seven Sins of Consumer Psychology.” He thoroughly documented those sins as well as potential corrective actions because:

“Our research findings lack relevance and impact for both our external constituents (i.e., businesses, policy makers, and consumers) *and our internal constituents (other consumer researchers and social scientists)*” (Pham, 2013, p. 411, emphasis added).

Excuse me!? What?! The latter charge leveled by Michel sticks a pin (or perhaps a harpoon) into the protective bubble of those of us who have been contenting ourselves to be “relevant” only to academe and eschewing managerial or policy significance.

In support of this perhaps surprising assertion, Michel conducted an exhaustive citation analysis of *JCR* spanning 1994-2008. His findings? A small slice of articles (less than 10%) are “well-cited,” averaging over 10 citations per year. But, “the vast majority – roughly 70% - hardly ever get cited ... [and hence] hardly [have] any measurable scholarly impact” (p. 412). These data points should be a wakeup call for all of us! Time does not permit a full recounting of the seven sins Michel identified or his proposed remedies, but his paper is a must-read for any serious consumer researcher who wants to have an impact, either inside academe or outside.

While Michel’s recommendations echo those of several previous scholars, e.g., the need for inductive theory-building, more attention to content rather than process, and more use of field studies, one recommendation in particular stands out: consumer researchers should “...increase

their physical exposure to businesses, policy agencies, and actual consumers in the marketplace” (p.422). He proposes a “field-theory validation path” wherein academic researchers turn to industry consultants or other practitioners as a source of testable hypotheses. Michel’s suggestion is reminiscent of Argyris and Schon’s (1974) “Theory-in-Practice” approach and would have the desirable effect of grounding our research firmly in the substantive domain.

As we have seen thus far, the decade of the ‘teens has witnessed a rash of soul-searching, breast-beating cries for greater relevance in consumer research. But we are not quite through yet. In their introductory *JCR* editorial, “Meaningful Consumer Research,” Dahl et al. (2014) pleaded for more meaningful (i.e., “relevant”) research. Relying on Wells (1993), they advocated a research approach that begins with a consideration of how useful the findings will be to the audience it addresses. They specifically encouraged considering audiences beyond other academics. Would that exhortation be sufficient to turn the tide?

*JCR* editors were not the only ones encouraging more relevance. In 2015 the *Journal of Marketing Behavior* launched. In his introductory editorial, Klaus Wertenbroch proclaimed “an opportunity for more relevance,” with an emphasis on research “...that has relevant and interesting practical implications for decision makers, be they managers, policy makers, or consumers” (p. 1). Klaus drew inspiration from Pham’s (2013) “seven sins” and noted that more established journals may have too much cultural inertia in the review process to readily implement an increased focus on q-quality rather than r-quality (in Lynch et al.’s terms).

In her 2017 ACR Presidential Address, Meg Campbell, one of *JCR*’s current editors, made an impassioned plea for greater research contribution, by which she meant “contribute to the understanding of consumer-relevant issues” (p. 1). To do this, she counseled that the research must “...start with a consumer-relevant problem.” Being a good marketer, she also emphasized

that researchers must actively consider the audience for their research. Meg worries that, as a field, we are not having enough impact, but proposes that a clear focus on understanding consumers is the path to greater research relevance.

Last but not least, earlier this year Meg and Jeff Inman were joined by their fellow editors Amna Kirmani and Linda Price in stating their editorial vision for *JCR*: “It’s All about the Consumer.” It is evident that they are trying to be change agents, which is certainly within their purview as editors. What are they seeking to accomplish? Among other worthy goals, they “...welcome consumer-focused papers that adopt non-deductive approaches to appropriately document and measure *important* effects... Manuscripts will be evaluated based not only on their conceptual contribution but also on the meaningful, practical insights they generate” (p.956). Thus, we see yet another call for more substantively-driven research.

Inman et al. further note that *JCR* articles “...have trended toward a focus on research topics that are of interest primarily to the academic community – in reality, often only a small portion of the like-minded academics” (p. 957). This observation squares with Pham’s disturbing findings about the paucity of citations to much of our work. The *JCR* editorial team recommends careful attention to the choice of research topic, keeping a firm focus on the consumer. In addition, they advise using “consequential” dependent variables that “...require participants to (a) invest a resource, such as money, time, or effort; or (b) experience a real outcome” (p. 957). Finally, they point to the virtues of field experiments, quasi-experiments, and ethnographic research.

#### What is “Relevant” Consumer Research?

Synthesizing the many calls for research relevance, as well as various proposed remedies, I suggest that relevant consumer research has the following properties:

1. A clearly-specified target audience; and
2. A focus on a legitimate consumer behavior phenomenon that is ...
  - a) Interesting (to the audience)
  - b) Important (i.e., not trivial)
  - c) Actionable (i.e., by the audience)
  - d) Potentially generalizable/transferable

Point 1 underscores the basic notion that relevance must be understood in relation to someone other than the researcher him or herself. *Someone* else has to care (Shimp 1994, Deighton 2007, Lynch et al. 2011, Inman 2012, Pham 2013, among others). Point 2 asserts that consumer research must concern itself with *consumer* behavior, not human behavior more generally (Lutz 1991, Wells 1993, Janiszewski 2009, Campbell 2017, among others).

Points 2(a) and 2(b) are self-evident and have been echoed by many, most recently Inman et al. (2018). Point 2(c) deals specifically with the implications of the research. How do the findings alter a marketing manager's decision-making or a public policy official's proposed regulation? Alternatively, how does the research change the way other scholars understand a phenomenon and conduct their own research on it? Ultimately, to be truly relevant, research has to change the target audience's beliefs and/or behavior (Simonson et al. 2001, Mick 2006, Wertebroch 2015, among others).

Point 2(d) is a necessary recognition that our focus is on scholarly research that advances scientific knowledge. Points 2(a-c) could apply to a consulting project conducted for a firm or government agency. Relevant consumer research must be at least potentially transferable to other consumer contexts.

Two more qualities are not essential, in my view, but nonetheless could contribute favorably to consumer research relevance:

3. Natural settings
4. Effective communication to target audience

Both of those factors may be more applicable with respect to research aimed at influencing external constituents. Point 3 reflects the calls for discovering and/or demonstrating consumer behavior in the real world (Cialdini 1980, Lutz 1991, Wells 1993, Mick 2003, Alba 2012, Inman et al 2018, among others). Point 4 is inspired by the TCR movement's approach wherein research is "taken to the streets" to try to effect desired change. This suggests that the individual scholar should think beyond merely publishing in a top journal if s/he wishes to impact an external constituency. As many have noted, practitioners and consumers do not read *JCR* or *JCP*.

#### Where Do Things Stand – and Why?

The foregoing selective review of presidential addresses, fellows' speeches, and journal articles serves to underscore the field's desire for greater research relevance. From early attention to the concern dating back to the 1980s to the recent crescendo of voices (at least a dozen pieces in the past decade), the drumbeat has been steady, if not accelerating. By my rough count, the treatises I have cited herein represent the views of 18 ACR and SCP presidents, seven ACR Fellows, and seven JCR editors. Yet, judging from the most recent editorial pleas, we are no more relevant in 2018 than we were in 1988!

Why has the perceived deficit in our research relevance persisted in spite of highly-respected scholars calling for corrective action? Are we tone deaf? Incompetent? Misguided? Many factors contribute to the lack of progress, some individual and some systemic. As individual

scholars, most of us have been trained to value theory and conduct theory-driven research. (Note: this point does not apply to our CCT colleagues, who ground their research in observed phenomena.) We are naturally drawn to theoretical research; it is what we, and our colleagues, know best. Systemically, the review process at our major journals is ill-equipped to evaluate and nurture research that departs from the norm, as Lynch et al. (2012) persuasively argued. Publishing a substantively-driven piece of research in a major journal is a daunting prospect. The risks have far outweighed the rewards. Unfortunately, our obsession with theory has contributed heavily to our relevance deficit.

In a sense, when the field more or less embraced the “marine biologist” perspective over the “fisherman” perspective and placed little or no weight on actionable implications, it precipitated an unfortunate inward turn. This is rather ironic: that broadening the concept of consumer behavior should lead to a more inward orientation. How so?

Essentially, removing external constituents, whether industry or public policy makers, from the research enterprise has left us talking only to each other (and even that not very pervasively, according to Pham). We have lost a sense of checks and balances on our work. We were able to tell ourselves that we were addressing other academics or, perhaps, consumers themselves, but the real driving force was the review team at our targeted journal. Not unlike the physician who decides on and prescribes various pharmaceuticals to her patients, these four- or five-person review teams are the gatekeepers that determine the fate of our research. And we all know how unbiased, error-free, and uplifting the review process is! (Except for that damn Reviewer B!)

However, for those of us who work in business schools, the traditional reward structure for published research is beginning to evolve toward more attention to .... wait for it ... relevance. The specific term in the 2018 revised AACSB accreditation guidelines is “impact of intellectual



contributions” (p. 18). The guidelines further specify that the school “...clearly articulate the contributions to society and are transparent to the public” (p. 19). While citation counts have assumed greater significance of late, citations rest firmly within the academic milieu and are not necessarily indicative of societal impact. The implication of the AACSB standard may be a higher bar for judging the quality of b-schools’ intellectual contributions. It behooves us to stay ahead of the curve. As a field, we may be approaching a true relevance crisis!

### How to be (More) Relevant

Let’s suppose for a moment that you are an enterprising young consumer researcher who embraces the need to conduct more relevant research, especially with respect to external constituents. First, I strongly encourage you to read at least three key papers among those I have cited: Wells (1993), Lynch et al. (2012) and Pham (2013). These papers provide an excellent overview of the relevance issue as well as astute guidance on how to address it effectively. From there, how would you proceed? One recommendation that we have seen repeatedly is to initiate your research in the substantive domain. Identify a phenomenon of interest, and apply theoretical and observational tools to address it. However, this seemingly straightforward advice addresses only the *necessary* condition for attaining relevance, not the *sufficient* condition. As Wells so aptly put it, “all kidding aside, what does this really mean?” (Wells 1993, p. 498). Not all substantive domain phenomena are of inherent interest or importance. If one is serious about making a relevant contribution to an external constituent (industry, public policy), the most plausible place to begin is by understanding the needs of the audience. How many of us interact with marketing managers or public officials as we decide what to research? How much more productive might our entire research enterprise be if we were to take that step?

As I recommended in my 1989 *JCR* editorial, it would make sense for consumer researchers to “test market” our intended contributions with the audience we hope to influence *before* conducting the research. Furthermore, as advocated by Brinberg and McGrath (1985) and elaborated by Pham (2013), consumer researchers seeking to be relevant should consult with “systems experts” as a fertile source of research ideas. Following this sort of approach would greatly enhance the likelihood that a research project, successfully executed, would make a relevant contribution to its intended audience (Andreasen 1985, Wells 1993). Working “backward” from the audience (i.e., the market) is the mantra that those of us who are marketing professors drill into our students incessantly. We would do well to practice what we preach. Ideally, fostering a collaborative research relationship with marketing practitioners may have the added value of permitting consumer researchers to persuade practitioners of the value of seeking “win-win-win” solutions wherein the firm, the consumer, and society benefit from the firm’s actions.

Of course, as scholars it is incumbent on us to attempt to explain marketplace phenomena, not merely describe them. In that vein, Cialdini’s (1980) “full-cycle social psychology” is instructive. Deftly combining field observations (to establish that a phenomenon is “real”) and laboratory experimentation to elucidate underlying processes is an excellent mechanism for ensuring substantive relevance.

In sum, several action strategies are available that can help an individual consumer researcher achieve greater relevance:

1. Read (at least) these key papers—Wells (1993), Lynch et al. (2012), Pham (2013)
2. Determine the target audience to be influenced by the research
3. Consult with systems experts (i.e., target audience members)

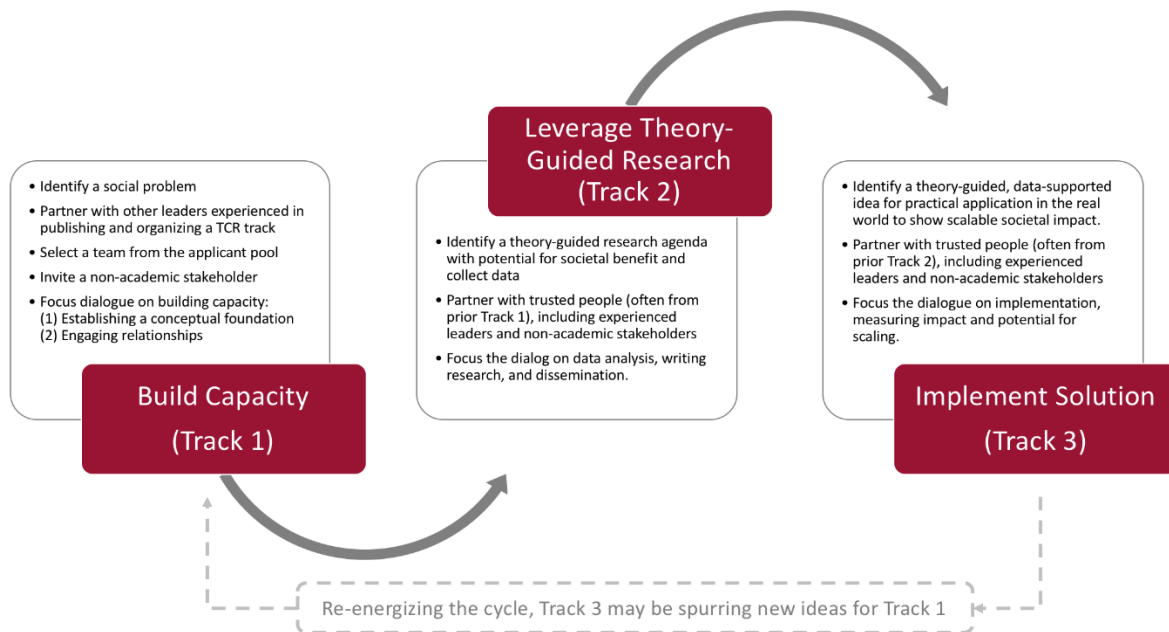
- a) Source of “theories-in-practice”
  - b) “Test markets” for proposed projects
4. Aim to discover new, important phenomena
  5. Use a combination of field and laboratory research (Cialdini 1980)
  6. Engage in inductive theory-building
  7. Proactively communicate insights to target audience

### What Is ACR Doing to Help?

As the primary international association dedicated to furthering consumer research, ACR has a responsibility to assist individual researchers in pursuit of more relevant research. Happily, two terrific examples of this sort of institutional support exist: the Transformative Consumer Research movement and the recently-established *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research (JACR)*.

Founded in 2005, TCR “... seeks to encourage, support, and publicize research that benefits consumer welfare and quality of life for beings affected by consumption across the world” (TCR tab on ACR website). Since its inception, TCR has held six biennial conferences, has awarded thousands of dollars in research grants, and has been featured in numerous special issues of *JCR* and other journals. Significantly, TCR has attracted more than 500 consumer researchers globally, including some of our most productive scholars, such as one of today’s new ACR Fellows, Punam Keller.

TCR exemplifies many desirable qualities of externally relevant research that I have been espousing today. Consider this graphic from the call for proposals for the 2019 conference.



Source: <https://tcr.business.fsu.edu/>

Note how the process is ultimately solution-oriented, i.e., aimed at making a real-world substantive contribution. The initial step of identifying a significant problem explicitly draws on both internal (to ACR) and external (non-academic stakeholders) expertise. Dialogue and relationships are established that feed directly into theory-guided research. The final step envisions academic-practitioner partnering to implement recommendations. In other words, an entire ecosystem is in place to foster real-world impact of scholarly research. For consumer researchers seeking to make a positive difference in the world through their research, TCR offers a promising community of like-minded scholars.

*JACR* was launched in 2016 with much the same mission as TCR. As stated in the inaugural issue (p. 1, *JACR*'s "... vision [is] that consumer researchers should be conducting research that has significant relevance to consumers, managers, and policy makers." The explicit aims are to focus scholars on research that is "high in relevance." *JACR* uses a "special issue" format to attract a critical mass of research on a particular topic, thereby drawing more attention to it, and all ACR members receive *JACR* as part of their membership benefits. A quick perusal of the

first few years of issues is enough to easily recognize the more substantive consumer behavior focus. From the initial issue on the science of eating through ownership and sharing, to the evolving retail landscape, *JACR* is strongly focused on real-world phenomena.

These two relatively recent initiatives, both aimed at fostering greater research relevance, are noteworthy and underscore ACR's global leadership as a consumer research organization. These efforts are to be applauded. However, are they enough? If so, why have we continued to witness so many exhortations for greater relevance in the past few years? Is it possible that TCR and *JACR* are a bit too balkanized in their impact? In other words, does their admirable consumer relevance character "spill over" to other sectors in the more general consumer research arena?

#### What Else Can ACR Do?

In considering potential mechanisms whereby ACR might encourage more consumption-relevant research, two possibilities come to mind. One is basically an extension of TCR's annual call for research proposals, while the other derives from an idea I proposed for marketing scholarship back in 2011 and is a bit more radical. Both ideas are aimed at providing consumer researchers with some guidance in selecting research topics that are interesting, important and relevant.

*Expanding the TCR model.* Since its inception, TCR has been focused on research that has implications for consumer well-being. The 2018-2019 TCR Research Funding Call for Proposals lists more than 20 potential topic areas as examples of the sorts of investigations the TCR community views as relevant. This list represents a terrific starting point for potential TCR researchers. However, since TCR is explicitly aimed at consumer welfare, the topic listing does

not include many other legitimate lines of inquiry within the consumer research domain, for example, public policy or marketing practice.

Therefore, I propose that ACR commission a task force to identify and publicize important substantive consumer research priorities. These priorities could be organized by constituency: practitioners, policy makers, consumers themselves, and other academic scholars. In order to fulfill its mission, the task force should include ample representation from each constituency. Similar to the Marketing Science Institute, ACR should revisit and revise the research priorities biannually. Care must be given to having representation of ACR's base disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics) represented on the task force to ensure consideration of a broad range of potential topics and perspectives.

*Collaborative problem definition.* My more radical proposal draws on an earlier proposal put forth in Lutz (2011, pp. 231-232). ACR should consider establishing a mechanism whereby an author could submit a prospectus for a potential research project and receive feedback from a panel of seasoned consumer researchers and systems experts. The prospectus would specify the intended audience and the nature of the intended contribution. An editor would select a small group of relevant experts and ask them to address this basic question: "If a research study successfully addressed the proposed problem, how important of a contribution would it represent?" Suggestions for improvement would also be solicited. Assuming a prospectus passed this basic test, the author(s) could then pursue the project with some degree of assurance that it is a worthy endeavor. Note that it would be important to establish this prospectus review independent of any particular journal in order to avoid any implication of eventual publication. Having reviewed more than a thousand manuscripts for possible publication during the course of my career, it is my strong impression that many of the unsuccessful ones would have failed the

initial screening of problem significance I am proposing. Thus, the proposed system would not only have a positive impact on the relevance of consumer research, it would also result in greater system efficiency, as less time would be spent by authors, editors, and reviewers on ill-conceived research problems.

### What Can the Journals Do?

I have discussed potential mechanisms whereby individual researchers and ACR can move consumer research toward greater relevance. From a systemic perspective, the third key component is comprised of consumer research journals. In the interest of time, I will focus my remarks on the field's flagship, the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

As I discussed earlier, the current editorial team has explicitly prioritized relevant, substantive consumer research. Their openness to publishing more substantively-driven research is crucial. However, additional steps need to be undertaken to bring their vision to fruition. As noted earlier, most consumer researchers are trained to conduct hypothetico-deductive research (Lynch, et al. 2012). Relatively few non-CCT consumer researchers (and reviewers) are expert at conducting (and evaluating) inductive research (i.e., research that begins by observing substantive phenomena).

In their *JCR* editorial, Inman et al. (2018) cite the Lynch et al. (2012) paper in support of multiple routes to generating consumer behavior knowledge and note the “strong headwind” that non-deductive, findings-focused research has faced at *JCR*. They continue “.... We urge that our associate editors, editorial board members, ad hoc reviewers, and authors...champion rigorous research that provides consumer insight with the use of either standard or ‘nonstandard’ methods and types of meaningful consumer data.” Presumably, this exhortation includes tolerance for an inductive approach.

This may not be enough to steer the *JCR* ship in a more inductive direction. A tremendous amount of inertia is present in the system. Little guidance exists for those who wish to pursue an inductive approach. Lynch et al. (2012) included a brief section, “Criteria for reviewing” non-deductive substantive contributions. Likewise, Pham (2013) devoted a paragraph to criteria for judging descriptive consumer research. However, *JCR* has not yet provided sufficient guidance. For example, the *JCR* website’s “Instructions for Reviewers” is silent with respect to the paradigmatic approach represented in the manuscript. In the “Tutorials” section, we find “A Field Guide for the Review Process,” (Bagchi et al. 2017) that includes a single paragraph on the substantive domain. They state that “... different goals should be judged by different standards,” but do not elaborate. Janiszewski et al. (2016) have an excellent tutorial on “Knowledge Creation and Knowledge Appreciation in Deductive-Conceptual Consumer Research” and note that “...it is the most popular approach.” Morales et al. (2017) present an insightful tutorial on experimental realism that is implicitly embedded in a hypothetico-deductive paradigm. Surely, a companion tutorial on substantive-inductive consumer research is essential if the current editorial vision is to be realized. Authors and reviewers alike need more guidance. *JCR* and *ACR* should collaborate on more special sessions at *ACR* conferences, such as the workshop on consumer relevance scheduled for Saturday afternoon. Another possibility is a special issue or special section of *JCR* devoted to relevant consumer research, similar to the special issue on *TCR* in 2008. (To be fair, I should note that *JCP* encourages inductive theory-building by welcoming effects-based papers in its Research Reports section.)

In sum, following the lead of the *TCR* movement, a systemic effort is needed to instill a sustainable stream of substantive, relevant consumer research. It is incumbent not only on authors but also on *ACR* and *JCR* to effect this welcome change.



## We Are Not Alone

Lest you feel that my assessment of consumer research relevance is too harsh, or you are left with the impression that ours is a particularly irrelevant collection of scholars, I draw your attention to the Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM). (Again, these remarks are of most direct relevance to those of us employed by business schools.) RRBM was formed by a diverse set of 28 scholars from ten countries on three continents, representing all business disciplines (Glick, Tsui, and David 2018). To date, its principles have been endorsed by nearly a thousand other scholars.

In the initial RRBM position paper, “A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for Useful and Credible Knowledge,” the committee states, “...both the relevance and quality of research in business schools has been under attack for more than two decades” (p.3). They further elaborate what they call the “crisis of relevance” by identifying three pressing issues: “(1) Current research does not produce knowledge relevant for business purposes. (2) A strong orientation toward A-ranked journals distorts incentives towards a narrow focus ... (3) An over-emphasis on theory ... leads to a focus on form more than substance...” (p.11).

Furthermore, they observe, “...research primarily benefits the researchers who conduct it (for career advancement) and those who read it, which consists primarily of other scholars... There is low priority given to how research could benefit business and broader society” (p.12).

All of this sounds painfully familiar. RRBM has as its core mission furthering the collective goal of creating a better society through scholarly research in business. They have promulgated seven fundamental principles of responsible research ([www.rrbm.network//position-paper](http://www.rrbm.network//position-paper)). I

invite you to visit the RRBM website and consider joining other leading consumer researchers who have endorsed these ideals.

### Paying it Backward ... and Forward

A year ago, as I began thinking about my remarks for this occasion, my first thoughts were ones of gratitude. The ACR Fellow Award means a great deal to me, as ACR has been my primary professional identity for nearly 50 years. Yet I am here today, not due just to my own efforts, but also due to the inspiration and support of so many others. I wish I could have devoted my entire time to thanking them.

I begin by remembering the late Paul Winn, who was my principles of marketing instructor at the University of Illinois and later my Ph.D. colleague, who set me on this path by encouraging me to pursue my Ph.D. At that point, I was planning to be a market researcher at the *Peoria Journal Star*, so you might say his suggestion made just a bit of a difference in my life! I also wish to acknowledge Jag Sheth, who gave me my first RA position in the Ph.D. program, taught me more than I ever wanted to know about multivariate data analysis, and has entrusted me for the last ten years with membership on the Sheth Foundation Board of Directors. Joel Cohen was a magnificent mentor and dissertation chair who was not only instrumental in launching my scholarly career but also lured me to the University of Florida nine years later. I also benefitted greatly from my other Illinois colleagues Peter Wright, Bobby Calder, Kent Monroe, Bob Burnkrant, Mike Munson, and especially my good friends Mike Houston, Bill Locander, and C.W. Park.

Hal Kassarjian at UCLA is my academic grandfather and set the tone in the department by epitomizing servant leadership. Jim Bettman embodied a scholarly standard of the highest caliber, and still managed to be a “wild and crazy guy.” Noel Capon, Carol Scott, Bart Weitz

and a youngster by the name of Debbie Roedder were incredible colleagues. What ever became of Debbie? UCLA was also the home to my first doctoral students – Jack Swasy, Joe Belch, and Scott MacKenzie. Channeling my inner Paul Winn, I literally plucked Scott out of our MBA program and nudged him into our Ph.D. program.

In my 36 years at Florida, I have been blessed with an amazing group of colleagues. In addition to Joel Cohen, who hired me, Bill Wilkie, Dipankar Chakravarti, John Lynch, Joe Alba, and Wes Hutchinson welcomed me in 1982. We were joined over the years by Alan Sawyer, Chris Janiszewski, John Sherry, David Mick, Barb Bickart, Robyn LeBoeuf, David Wooten, and Ratti Ratneshwar. Alan Cooke, Lyle Brenner, Aner Sela, Yang Yang, and Yanping Tu round out the current consumer behavior complement. It has been a true privilege to serve with so many talented scholars over the years.

I have also been fortunate to work with several gifted Ph.D. students at Florida: Doug Hausknecht, Bill Baker, Steve Holden, Chuck Areni, Susan Fournier, Betsy Moore, John Pracejus, Andrew Kuo, and Gia Nardini. In addition to these Florida Ph.D. graduates, there is another group of Florida alums who are near and dear to my academic heart. I met these young people when they were students in my undergraduate principles of marketing course. Most of them subsequently served as undergraduate teaching assistants for me and wrote their undergraduate honors theses under my direction. All of them went on to earn their Ph.D.s, some at Florida, others elsewhere. I am pretty sure that they would say that they would not have considered a Ph.D. in marketing and a career in consumer research without my initial encouragement. More than my scholarly contributions, they represent my legacy to the field, and I am very proud of each of them. Who are these people? Stacy Wood, Chuck Areni,

Andrew Kuo, Katie Kelting, Stefanie Robinson, Leigh Anne Novak Donovan, Gia Nardini, Cammy Cronic, Emily Goldsmith, and Irina Toteva. You guys mean the world to me!

In closing, I thank my parents, Willis and Mary Kay Lutz, who encouraged a young farm boy to pursue his academic dream. My wife Rachel has been an unwavering supporter and has balanced my academic focus by nurturing a warm and loving family that has enriched my life immeasurably. Our sons Matt and Jon have blossomed into amazing young men. A contractor and a chef, they ensure a roof over our heads and food on our table! And Matt, in collaboration with his wife Amanda, has filled our lives with the joy and wonder of two precious grandchildren – Claire and Jacob. Sometimes life seems just too good to be true!

Thanks once again to my ACR family for making my ACR Fellows dream come true!

## REFERENCES

- AACSB International (2018), *2013 Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation*, <https://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/standards/business>.
- Alba, Joseph W. (2012), “In Defense of Bumbling,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(6), 981–87.
- Andreasen, Alan R. (1985), “‘Backward’ Market Research,” *Harvard Business Review*, 63(3), 176–82.
- Argyris, Chris and Donald A. Schon (1974), *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, Oxford, England: Jossey-Bass.
- Armstrong, J. Scott (2003), “Discovery and Communication of Important Marketing Findings: Evidence and Proposals,” *Journal of Business Research*, 56(1), 69–84.
- Bagchi, Rajesh, Lauren Block, Rebecca W Hamilton, and Julie L Ozanne (2017), “A Field Guide for the Review Process: Writing and Responding to Peer Reviews,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(5), 860–72.
- Brinberg, David and Joseph E. McGrath (1985), *Validity and the Research Process*, Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

- Campbell, Margaret C. (2017), "Presidential Address: Consumer Research Contribution: Love It or Leave It," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 45*, ed. Ayelet Gneezy, Vladas Griskevicius, and Patti Williams, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 1–5.
- Cialdini, Robert B (1980), "Full-Cycle Social Psychology," *Applied Social Psychology Annual*, 1, 21–47.
- Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (2017), "A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for Useful and Credible Knowledge," <https://www.rrbm.network/position-paper/>.
- Dahl, Darren, Eileen Fischer, Gita Johar, and Vicki Morwitz (2014), "From the Editors-Elect: Meaningful Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(1), iii–v.
- Daniel, Carter A. (2009), "How Two National Reports Ruined Business Schools," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Two-National-Reports/49055/>.
- Davis, Brennan, Julie L. Ozanne, and Ronald Paul Hill (2016), "The Transformative Consumer Research Movement," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 35(2), 159–69.
- Deighton, John (2007), "From the Editor: The Territory of Consumer Research: Walking the Fences," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(3), 279–82.
- Ellison, Glenn (2002), "Evolving Standards for Academic Publishing: A Q-R Theory," *Journal of Political Economy*, 110(5), 994–1034.
- Glick, William H., Anne Tsui, and Gerald F. Davis (2018), "The Moral Dilemma to Business Research," *BizEd*, 17(3), 32–38.
- Inman, J. Jeffrey (2012), "Presidential Address: The Elephant Not in The Room: The Need for Useful, Actionable Insights in Behavioral Research," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 40*, ed. Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, Cele Otnes, and Rui (Juliet) Zhu, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 1–4.
- Inman, J. Jeffrey, Margaret C. Campbell, Amna Kirmani, and Linda L. Price (2018), "Our Vision for the Journal of Consumer Research: It's All about the Consumer," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(5), 955–59.
- JACR Policy Board (2016), "Welcome to the Inaugural Issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research!," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 1(1), 1.
- Janiszewski, Chris (2009), "Presidential Address: The Consumer Experience," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 36*, ed. Ann L. McGill and Sharon Shavitt, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, no page number.

- Janiszewski, Chris, Aparna A. Labroo, and Derek D. Rucker (2016), "A Tutorial in Consumer Research: Knowledge Creation and Knowledge Appreciation in Deductive-Conceptual Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43, 200–209.
- Lutz, Richard J. (1989), "Editorial," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(4), front matter.
- Lutz, Richard J. (1991), "Editorial," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(4), front matter.
- Lutz, Richard J. (2011), "Marketing Scholarship 2.0," *Journal of Marketing*, 75(4), 225–34.
- Lynch, John G. Jr. (2011), "ACR Fellow's Address: Substantive Consumer Research," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 38*, ed. Darren W. Dahl, Gita V. Johar, and Stijn M. J. van Osselaer, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 15–18.
- Lynch, John G., Joseph W. Alba, Aradhna Krishna, Vicki G. Morwitz, and Zeynep Gürhan-Canli (2012), "Knowledge Creation in Consumer Research: Multiple Routes, Multiple Criteria," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(4), 473–85.
- MacInnis, Deborah J. and Valerie S. Folkes (2010), "The Disciplinary Status of Consumer Behavior: A Sociology of Science Perspective on Key Controversies," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(6), 899–914.
- Mick, David Glen (2003), "Editorial: Appreciation, Advice, and Some Aspirations for Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(4), 455–62.
- Mick, David Glen (2006), "Presidential Address: Meaning and Mattering through Transformative Consumer Research," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 33*, ed. Connie Pechmann and Linda Price, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 1–4.
- Mick, David Glen (2008), "Introduction: The Moment and Place for a Special Issue," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(3), 377–79.
- Morales, Andrea C., On Amir, and Leonard Lee (2017), "Keeping It Real in Experimental Research-Understanding When, Where, and How to Enhance Realism and Measure Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(2), 465–76.
- Pham, Michel Tuan (2013), "The Seven Sins of Consumer Psychology," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 23(4), 411–23.
- Shimp, Terence A. (1994), "Presidential Address: Academic Appalachia and the Discipline of Consumer Research," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 21*, ed. Chris T. Allen and Deborah Roedder John, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1–7.

- Simonson, Itamar, Ziv Carmon, Ravi Dhar, Aimee Drolet, and Stephen M. Nowlis (2001), "Consumer Research: In Search of Identity," in *Annual Review of Psychology*, ed. Susan T. Fiske, Daniel L. Schacter, and Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 249–75.
- Transformative Consumer Research Conference Committee (2018) "2019 Transformative Consumer Research Conference," <https://tcr.business.fsu.edu/>.
- Tucker, William Thomas (1967), *Foundations for a Theory of Consumer Behavior*, New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Wells, William D. (1993), "Discovery-Oriented Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19(4), 489–504.
- Wertenbroch, Klaus (2015), "From the Editor: An Opportunity for More Relevance from Broadening Behavioral Research in Marketing," *Journal of Marketing Behavior*, 1(1), 1–7.