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Introduction to the Special Issue on Transformative Consumer Research for the Journal of Research for Consumers

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ABSTRACT

The third biennial Transformative Consumer Research Conference at Baylor University in June 2011 encouraged consumer researchers from around the world to address some of the world's most pressing social and economic problems. Researchers applied conceptual rigor to nine substantive tracks: Addiction; Food for Thought; Innovative Research Methods; Materialism; Youth, Risk and Consumption; Multicultural Marketplaces; Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces; Sustainable Products; and Transformative Services Research. This introductory paper summarizes the contributions of the nine tracks whose post-conference articles are this special issue, and it highlights the importance of conducting consumer research to obtain theoretical findings that offer practical solutions to problems like those addressed here.

ARTICLE

The third biennial Transformative Consumer Research Conference at Baylor University in June 2011 brought consumer researchers together from around the world to discuss how to help alleviate the most pressing social and economic problems through scholarship. Transformative consumer research (TCR) is a movement within the Association for Consumer Research to “encourage, support, and publicize research that benefits the quality of life for all beings engaged in or affected by consumption trends and practices across the world” (Mick et al. 2011). The movement has six core qualities: to improve well-being, to emanate from the Association for Consumer Research and encourage paradigm diversity, to employ rigorous theory and methods, to highlight sociocultural and situational contexts, to partner with consumers, and to disseminate findings to relevant stakeholders. The conference promoted these qualities by inviting consumer researchers to apply conceptual rigor to nine substantive tracks: Addiction; Food for Thought; Innovative Research Methods; Materialism; Youth, Risk and Consumption; Multicultural Marketplaces; Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces; Sustainable Products; and Transformative Services Research. This special issue summarizes the progress made at the conference to help solve important consumption problems related to each of these topics.

The TCR conference itself was transformative by its nature because it was dialogical rather than traditional. While a traditional conference invites scholars to present past work to conference attendees who consume that knowledge by listening to research presentations, the current approach was to invite scholars to gather together as a group and engage in

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intensive discussions about their topic areas. This transformative approach has been used at the last two TCR conferences. The transformative process began when the conference co-chairs, instead of naming track chairs, put out an open, global call for track chairs that would propose substantive topics for the conference and serve as discussion leaders during the conference. Then there was a similar call for participants and the track chairs selected a maximum of twelve participants per track based on their research vision and their evidence of past investment in the track's substantive area. The track chairs tried to achieve a balance of senior and junior researchers, including doctoral students who were considered full and equal partners at the conference and beyond.

The TCR conference was attended by 102 participants from 92 universities and 16 countries, and 26% of participants were international while 22% were doctoral students. At the conference, the track members engaged in day-long, in-depth discussions of their topics and made major strides forward conceptually, substantively, and methodologically in terms of identifying important problems in their areas, actionable solutions that respect and empower consumers, and viable and innovative research approaches. At the end of the conference, each track presented their key insights to the participants and sponsors. Then the scholars in each track jointly wrote the papers that appear in this special issue.

The theme of the conference was "mobilizing scholarship," which we meant to encourage two results. First, the conference and track co-chairs emphasized that the work produced by each track should have relevance to real people struggling with real problems around the world. Each paper here represents the efforts of the track participants to integrate their vast, collective, and conceptual knowledge that is rooted in theory and to develop it in ways that provide maximum insights and actionable steps for people struggling with poverty, environmental sustainability, materialism, addiction, obesity, youth risks, and service and multicultural challenges. Second, we intended the conference theme to promote post-conference publications so that the progress we made at the conference could be disseminated to people and organizations that need it. We believe that the papers in this special issue have the potential to greatly impact people across the world in positive and enduring ways.

The "Sustainability" paper offers new ideas about the consumption cycle, that is, about how consumers buy or acquire, use, and dispose of products in ways that benefit themselves as well as future generations. These scholars insightfully point out that a sustainability goal has actually expanded consumers' options throughout the consumption cycle. There are now many options to buying new, including buying used, renting, and borrowing, that can be more economical and community oriented. There are many more options to standard use including more efficient use through maintenance and continued use through refurbishing. Finally there are many disposal options beyond recycling including donating, giving, and exchanging. Thus a sustainability goal can actually increase consumers' options and well-being rather than depriving or burdening them.

The "Materialism" paper presents a broad conceptualization of materialism that goes beyond viewing it as a trait or value that produces negative consequences. This paper focuses on why consumers pursue materialistic consumption as a goal, and proposes that consumers largely do this to help construct and maintain the self. This may cause consumers to focus on extrinsic motivations (e.g., having friends for social status) rather than intrinsic ones (e.g., having friends for supportive relationships), and to perceive positive consequences from materialistic consumption (e.g., realized social status). These scholars then discuss how their expanded view of materialism can encourage new research such as the identification of optimal consumption levels that balance the positive and negative outcomes of materialistic consumption.

The “Poverty and Subsistence Marketplaces” paper discusses how extensive poverty is in the world, and yet how difficult it is to define. Nearly 50% of the world’s population lives on less than \$2 a day, but in many countries the poverty line is defined even lower at \$1.25 per day. Also, poverty goes beyond economic factors to include general deprivation, insecurity and exclusion. Hence, this paper argues that researchers should focus less on economic factors alone and more on the everyday lived experiences of impoverished consumers, and they should seek to obtain textured accounts of how these consumers subsist day to day. These scholars then offer a list of specific research questions about impoverished consumers’ daily lives, experiences, and tradeoffs. They review the extant findings in these areas, and they discuss where further work is needed.

The “Multicultural Marketplaces” paper discusses why multicultural consumers often feel vulnerable in marketplace settings. These scholars point out that when consumers and marketers come from different cultures, they often have different expectations; and when consumers have not learned what these expectations are, they experience anxiety and marginalization. Also, engagement in a multicultural marketplace may not be sought out as an aesthetic experience and may instead be forced upon consumers or become a condition of their survival, and language barriers may impede their successful navigation. This paper recommends that marketers seek to understand why multicultural consumers experience vulnerability in specific contexts. For example, is it lack of language skills and/or lack of marketplace understanding or something else? Then marketers should try to address and resolve these problems so that they can better serve the growing number of multicultural consumers.

The “Food for Thought” paper discusses five core factors that influence how people relate to food: they relate socially, economically, emotionally, and in terms of their food literacy and physical and psychological traits. The paper then proposes a mechanism by which people can assess themselves on these five factors and identify where they are on the food well-being continuum. These scholars point out that assessment is just the first step; consumers must also be motivated and ready to change, and must understand both the both deliberative and automatic processes that affect their food choices. Policy officials in turn must understand where the target consumers are on the food well-being continuum and then determine how to get them to the next step. Researchers can assist in this by developing a food well-being continuum assessment tool and then identifying processes and interventions that move people along the continuum.

The “Addiction” paper offers a framework for a deeper understanding of how consumers become addicted, focusing on the everyday benign behaviors that morph into addiction and the variety of behaviors to which consumers can become addicted. The paper’s conceptual framework is designed to help explain the progression from normal consumption behavior to addiction, and it includes two dimensions: behavioral commitment (low to high) and behavioral outcomes (innocuous to severely negative). It also proposes that numerous behaviors fit into this framework beyond drug addiction including obsession with technology and cosmetic surgery, and that many of these behaviors manifest co-morbidity. Finally, the scholars discuss factors that can cause consumers to move from benign consumption to addiction, the public policies, and interventions that can help to prevent this, and the additional research that is needed.

The “Youth and Risky Consumption” paper points out the extent to which U.S. youths are at risk due to their risky consumption. For instance, in one month, 30% of high school students have driven in a car with a driver who consumed alcohol; also, 40% of sexually active students did not use a condom during their last sexual encounter. Nonetheless, this paper argues for more participatory, youth-involved approaches to addressing these problems, and fewer paternalistic approaches. This paper defines paternalism as interfering with people against their will due to the belief that they will be better off. This paper then challenges the

need for paternalism and argues that youth are not people in the making but people in their own right, that this is how youth see themselves, and so to see them otherwise is counterproductive. Finally, a series of research questions are posed that seek to see risk from youths' perspective, because obtaining their perspective is the first step to possibly changing their perspective.

The "Transformative Services Research" topic is perhaps the most novel in this set of TCR topics, because services research has traditionally focused on managerial and marketing issues and profits. This paper, however, discusses how services can promote the long-term well-being of the consumers they serve and thus societal well-being. It calls for transformative services research that examines both positive and negative outcomes, and both intended and unintended outcomes, of services including but not limited to health care and education. It calls for collaborative research among consumer researchers, public health researchers, and sociologists. It also calls for both macro and micro level analyses of services.

Finally, the "Innovative Research Methods" paper proposes new ways to conduct research to achieve TCR objectives, so that progress is not impeded by methodological limitations or barriers. Specifically, this paper recommends transdisciplinary research teams that are diverse in terms of researcher experience, nationality, and culture. It also recommends that concerted efforts be made to disseminate research including identifying a target audience and considering their needs and wants, using artistic expression to communicate research findings, and using social media to disseminate information to and from community groups and citizen-scientists. Finally, this paper recommends directing more attention to big problems and actionable solutions, in contrast to the current focus on process explanations and in-depth understandings.

We hope this set of papers will offer several benefits to readers in mobilizing transformative consumer scholarship in their respective areas. First, we hope that these papers offer immediate insights and tools that will directly help people to increase their well-being. This can happen by telling people directly about the findings or by disseminating the findings to organizations that can inform and assist people. Second, we hope that this set of papers proliferates future transformative consumer research. We hope that newer TCR research areas develop into major foci, and that established research areas are enlivened by new offshoots of discovery. We also hope that TCR researchers are inspired to launch other new areas of inquiry that previously have been unrepresented in consumer research like work in the arts, music, and religion. Lastly, we hope that consumer researchers around the world and at all stages of their career will begin to integrate transformative goals into their work. For some, this may mean an entire research stream focused on a particular TCR topic. For others, it may mean adding a study or two whose substance is relevant to TCR, so that the broader implications of their theoretical work can be ascertained and used to help and enlighten people. The papers in this special issue show that it is possible to conduct consumer research that obtains important theoretical findings and that also identifies practical solutions to some of the world's most pressing problems. If consumer researchers do not address consumption problems, who will?

Reference

Mick, David, Simone Pettigrew, Cornelia Pechmann, and Julie L. Ozanne (2012), *Transformative Consumer Research: For Personal and Collective Well-Being*, NY, NY: Routledge Publishing.