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The Characteristics of Transformative Consumer Research and How it Can Contribute to and Enhance Consumer Psychology

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Transformative Consumer Research is a relatively new academic movement whose overall mission is to encourage, support, and disseminate research that contributes to the well-being of consumers, environments, and societies around the world (Mick, 2006). Researchers seek to examine real-world phenomena experienced by people in specific contexts, to identify feasible courses of action that can either improve or detract from well-being, considering not only the individual, but also larger social groups including families, communities, regions, countries, and the world and environment at large, with a special emphasis on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Davis, Ozanne and Hill, 2016; Mick, 2006). Transformative Consumer Research has a tradition of using a broad theoretical lens and a wide array of epistemological approaches that stem from psychology, economics, sociology, anthropology, strategy, marketing, and other disciplines (Davis and Pechmann, 2013; Davis, Ozanne and Hill, 2016).

A diversity of topics is studied related to well-being, considering both problems to be solved and opportunities to be utilized, and consumption issues are considered that extend beyond purchase behavior including use, reuse, sharing, repurposing and disposal (Mick et al. 2012). Transformative Consumer Research is especially interested in supporting a “relational engagement approach,” in which academics co-create and co-disseminate knowledge with partners who are non-academic stakeholders including consumer groups, company and industry representatives, and government policy-makers and regulators (Davis and Ozanne, 2017). Overall, Transformative Consumer Research seeks to combat what Pham (2013) calls the “seven sins of consumer psychology.” It does this by (1) broadening the scope of consumer behavior research; (2) adopting a broader set of theoretical lenses; (3) adhering to a broader epistemology of consumer research; (4)
emphasizing psychological content in addition to psychological processes; (5) considering contextual nuances; (6) designing studies with substantive considerations in mind; and (7) modeling real-world consumer behavior phenomena. There is evidence that Transformative Consumer Research has high scholarly and societal impact, based on both traditional metrics like citation rates and newer metrics like press coverage and social media posts (Davis and Ozanne, 2019).

The papers in this special section were part of the 2017 Transformative Consumer Research dialogical conference at Cornell University, in which teams of researchers were afforded the opportunity to work together to build conceptual frameworks and analyze any data they had collected to test and refine their frameworks. In other words, at the dialogical conference, rather than attending traditional sessions in which researchers passively listen to others presenting their work, the researchers spent days actively collaborating with others who shared their passion for theory-based research about a particular substantive topic (Ozanne, 2011). The research process was ongoing in that it commenced well prior to the conference, often years prior, and continued long after the conference had ended. This current special section represents the conference’s best work that was positioned for consumer psychology.

Three papers are published in this special section of Journal of Consumer Psychology on Transformative Consumer Research. Each paper offers simple and compelling insights about consumption and well-being based on solid empirical research and theory. The Mende, Nenkov, Salisbury and Scott paper on “Financial Inclusion” determines that disadvantaged consumers who live in banking deserts – which are not serviced by traditional banks – have relatively negative perceptions of...
traditional banks; but these consumers can be turned around if a bank adopts a communal financial orientation. The Haws, Dallas, Roberto, Liu and Cawley paper on “Any-Size-Same-Price” concludes that consumers are often induced by any-size-same-price offerings to buy oversized beverages, even when calories are posted; but these consumers can be deterred by stoplight warnings. In other words, much more powerful health cues than calories are needed to dampen enthusiasm for oversized beverages when offered at the same price as the smaller sizes. The Stornelli, Pereira and Vann paper on “Visual Perspectives” determines that motivating consumers to pursue health goals with third-person messages – which ask consumers to imagine watching themselves engaged in goal pursuit – can shift focus away from implementation (how will I do it?) toward deliberation (should I do it?), and reduce health goal pursuit if consumers do not strongly self-identify with the health goal.

In multiple ways, all three papers exemplify Transformative Consumer Research, and more fundamentally research that breaks disciplinary boundaries and seeks to have a broader impact by reaching stakeholders beyond marketing academia (MacInnis, Morwitz, Botti, Hoffman et al., 2019). Rather than being constrained by the topics that academics in consumer psychology traditionally study, the researchers studied real-world phenomena which they observed and concluded were important, based on valuable input from consumers, practitioners, the government, and the media. The “Financial Inclusion” paper was conducted in collaboration with a credit union which was trying to expand into a banking desert, the “Any-Size-Same-Price” paper was prompted by McDonalds’ decision to charge $1 for any size fountain drink, and the “Visual Perspectives” paper resulted from concerns about Weight Watchers’ use of third-person health messages.
In all three papers, the researchers sought to influence stakeholders beyond marketing academics including banks, restaurants, weight loss facilities, and government regulators. Furthermore, the researchers sought findings that were evaluative in nature, looking for winning versus losing scenarios. The “Financial Inclusion” paper found that if a traditional bank in a banking desert adopted a communal financial orientation, this benefited the bank, consumers, and community; it was a win-win. The “Any-Size-Same-Price” paper found that offering all beverages for the same price increased choice of oversized beverages, despite calorie postings, which was a loss for consumer health, but this could be stopped by stoplight warnings. The “Visual Perspectives” paper determined that third-person messages to motivate goal pursuit were not effective if the goals were peripheral to the self, and even caused consumers to feel shame; so it was a lose-lose situation.

The papers’ transformative orientations are also apparent in the broad and expansive literatures they cite, which go well beyond citing consumer and marketing journals, and include citing the popular press and government statistics. The “Financial Inclusion” paper cites works on poverty, economics, politics, law, policy, social work, regional science, and psychology. The “Any-Size-Same-Price” paper cites articles on economics, medicine, clinical nutrition, obesity, policy, psychology, dietary and food science, and public and community health. The “Visual Perspectives” paper references work in health psychology, social psychology, general psychology, neuroscience, and policy.

Methodologically, these papers exhibit important characteristics of Transformative Consumer Research as well. When non-traditional methods were more suitable for addressing the research questions, they were used, rather than using the default method of controlled lab experiments with generic participants.
The “Financial Inclusion” researchers surveyed bank customers from different communities, created a measure of communal financial orientation, and correlated the bank’s perceived financial orientation with intent to patronize, by community. The “Any-Size-Same-Price” researchers used a real vending machine with three soda sizes crossed with three soda types including diet, and restaurant menus that included diet and regular sodas and water, adding major complexity to the analyses. The “Visual Perspectives” researchers screened for customers who were pursuing the health goal of weight loss.

The adoption of Transformative Consumer Research approaches, like all other approaches, involves some tradeoffs. The focus on real-world phenomena requires phenomenon-to-construct mapping which can be messy and imperfect. For example, the “Financial Inclusion” paper employed as a key construct “banking desert consumers” and these individuals were described as generally low income, disadvantaged, non-White consumers who historically had been serviced by non-traditional financial service providers such as payday loan services. As a construct, “banking desert customers” is messy. In addition, “banking-desert consumer” cannot be manipulated to permit random assignment to condition and rule out potential confounds, much like smoking status and gender cannot be manipulated; priming related constructs is not a suitable substitute. While “Any-Size-Same-Price” can be manipulated, it is also a messy construct that does not neatly map onto well-studied psychological or economic constructs.

By focusing on real-world phenomena, the researchers also deviated from the default approach of linearly extending past research in novel directions, but the papers make important contributions nonetheless. Past research already tells us that companies should promote important product attributes; but the “Financial
Inclusion” paper contributes by telling us there is a banking attribute called communal financial orientation, and disadvantaged consumers in a banking desert care about it while traditional consumers less so. Prior literature already tells us that calorie information is often ignored; and yet the “Any-Size-Same-Price” research contributes by telling us this popular pricing approach is a major reason why calorie information is ignored, and a stoplight warning is a remedy. Previous work informs us that an implementation mindset increases goal pursuit; but the “Visual Perspectives” paper contributes by showing that third-person messages inadvertently move consumers away from an implementation mindset, hurting those who do not self-identify with the goal. It is difficult to assess any one paper’s lasting contribution because, in the end, this will be based on the collective judgment of a large number of people. Hence, we appreciate the willingness of the Journal of Consumer Psychology and its reviewers to support these Transformative Consumer Research papers and let the work speak for itself.

References


