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THE DISCIPLINARY STATUS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: A SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE ON KEY CONTROVERSIES

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The disciplinary issue of Consumer Behavior has been a provocative one since the beginning of research in this area. However, the issue was not officially addressed until the 1970s, with the establishment of the Journal of Consumer Research (JCR) and the Association for Consumer Research (ACR). Forty years later, the paper entitled "The Disciplinary Status of Consumer Behaviour: A Sociology of Science Perspective on Key Controversies", published in Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 36 (6), pp. 899-913 in 2010, offers a distinct perspective on the actual issue of the disciplinary status of Consumer Behavior. The paper questions everything known to date about consumers, the Consumer Behavior discipline, scholars in this discipline and the methods used for its research.

The great advantage of this paper lies in its writing style. The paper is written in a comprehensive and logical order, which facilitates a better understanding of its interesting content. The text is coherent and easy to follow while the structure of the article is very good. In view of the fact that writing well-structured and comprehensive problem-oriented articles could be extremely difficult, this point should be stressed especially as

an advantage of this particular paper. Its authors, Macinnis and Folkes, use precise and interesting examples to describe their propositions, making the paper a good example of a difficult topic presented in a simple and comprehensible manner.¹

Since 1974, JCR has published scholarly research aimed at describing and explaining Consumer Behavior. Based on a list of the relative hierarchical positioning of marketing journals, using the Popularity/Familiarity and Importance/Prestige Indices, JCR ranked among the top three journals between 1987 and 1997, as well as in 2007.² This interdisciplinary journal has featured empirical, theoretical and methodology articles, spanning such fields as psychology, marketing, sociology, economics, communications and anthropology. The term "interdisciplinary" may be observed in the explanation offered by JCR itself but it has been brought into question in the very article that is the subject of this critical review.

The authors, Macinnis and Folkes, presented the following main questions in their paper:

- 1) Should Consumer Behavior be an independent discipline?

- 2) What is and what is not Consumer Behavior?
- 3) Should the field of Consumer Behavior be interdisciplinary?

Although that fact is not mentioned in this paper, it was not the first time that these three questions have been examined through academic research. The authors did not mention Ford et al.,³ who provided empirical insights into the same three provocative issues concerning Consumer Behavior: its interdisciplinary heritage, the development and use of its research and possible future directions in Consumer Behavior research. The difference between the two papers mentioned above is that the one written by Macinnis and Folkes is purely conceptual, unsupported by empirical work, while the paper written by Ford et al. uses the empirical analysis obtained on a sample of ACR members. Interestingly, their findings are diametrically opposed.

WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR?

Macinnis and Folkes present not only their own point of view but also a fruitful literature review, which describes the subject of their analysis. The answers to the abovementioned questions have often been very subjective throughout the history of Consumer Behavior. Departing from a perspective of the sociology of science, the authors supported their arguments and lines of thought further. Additionally, the perspective of the sociology of science also served to explain the essence of particular parts of the article better. And here are their answers:

- 1) Consumer Behavior is not an independent discipline;
- 2) Consumer Behavior is distinguished from other fields by its focus on the consumer role;
- 3) Consumer Behavior is not an interdisciplinary field.

The explanations offered by the authors of this article for each of these issues are presented separately, together with some reflections on the addressed sub-topics.

They claim that Consumer Behavior should not be considered an independent discipline but, instead, a sub-discipline within marketing from which it basically stems. The authors state that, even if Consumer Behavior were an independent discipline, most people researching it would eventually be marketers, as this specific kind of know-how is taught in marketing programs at universities. This could be confirmed by the fact that the authors of the article, Macinnis and Folkes, are a business administration and a marketing professor, respectively, who are obviously interested in the Consumer Behavior field. Also, the situation described above is possible thanks to the consistency of the research style that assists the evaluation and integration of research findings from other disciplines that utilize similar analytical modes.⁴ Since Consumer Behavior research is a discipline that borrows philosophical assumptions from many other disciplines⁵ in addition to marketing, this is conducive to achieving valuable insights into the field of consumption. Keeping that in mind, is Consumer Behavior really a sub-discipline of Marketing? The authors offered their explanation that we can not agree with completely. Therefore, we are putting two additional questions that the authors of the article failed to consider: what is Marketing without Consumer Behavior? What is Consumer Behavior without Marketing?

The second issue presented in the article concerns defining the scope of Consumer Behavior and the need to undoubtedly draw boundaries around it, so it would be clear what Consumer Behavior research is about and what does not fall within its scope. Personally, we found this part of the Paper to be the most interesting. In consumer research the research objectives vary greatly, ranging from trying to understand on what occasions consumers consume different products to how people think, feel and love throughout their lives, sometimes seemingly regardless of

their consumption practices. However, whether some topics belong to the field of Consumer Behavior or not is doubtful. Interestingly, whenever this question occurs, some logical argument can be found to allow us to connect certain topics to Consumer Behavior. That is the reason political marketing and voter behavior, higher education and student behavior, soccer fans and their behavior, wine consumption and online behavior have been studied; all of these topics could be logically argued to be related to the field of Consumer Behavior. Authors claimed that the topic of Consumer Behavior should be one that focuses on the acquisition, consumption and disposal of marketed products and services by people in their role as consumers. Following this definition, the Consumer Behavior focus should be on the consumer in the consumption process. By accepting it, all of our researched topics mentioned above fall outside Consumer Behavior. Although this definition seems too rigid for such a broad field, if we allow the scholars studying the people in various disciplines outside consumer behavior (medicine, political science, education, religion) and who can at times assume the consumer role (patients' decisions about their doctors, voters' decisions about voting) to name themselves Consumer Behavior scholars, it is understandable that the field will suffer tremendous negative consequences. We agree that consumption should be the main distinguishing element of Consumer Behavior from similar sciences; however, its scope still remains somewhat unclear and leaves room for different interpretations. One possibility could be to include a more holistic view of customer experience into customer research, and to adopt a multi-method approach that encompasses different methods of enquiry.⁶ Obviously, it is difficult to define the exact boundaries around consumer research but are boundaries truly necessary? Does not the beauty of Consumer Behavior lie precisely in its unlimited boundaries? Do we really need to destroy that beauty?

Finally, the authors claim that Consumer Behavior is multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Adhering to the definitions of the terms 'interdis-

ciplinary' and 'multidisciplinary' presented and practiced by Macinnis and Folkes in Consumer Behavior research, it is evident that Consumer Behavior is more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. The question is, how did the issue of its interdisciplinarity arise? This requires going back through history and exploring the leading research authorities of particular periods. The openness to multiple disciplines was institutionalized at JCR (1975) by the establishment of a policy board run by members of 11 sponsoring organizations, each of which represented a different disciplinary perspective. ACR presidents and the first editor of JCR, Ronald Frankin, in his inaugural editorial highly encouraged openness to other disciplines. In his first editorial preface he wrote, "The primary objective of the journal is to serve as an interdisciplinary communications vehicle for theory, empirical research, and the methodology of the study of Consumer Behavior".⁷ No doubt, the receptivity of this field to a number of disciplines was fostered by an attempt to differentiate Consumer Behavior from Marketing while still leveraging the intellectual and monetary resources that Marketing had to offer. If we go back to recent history, Deighton said during his editorship of JCR (from 2005 to 2011) that he would like to question the issues concerning the interdisciplinary nature of the journal: "It would be an overstatement to say that 12 different disciplines are represented, and hard to miss the fact that almost every member of the board now and over the past 30 years has been employed in the marketing department of a business school, but for all that, and indeed probably because of that...".⁸ If we try to analyze the interdisciplinarity in the contemporary practice of Consumer Behavior, it is evident that it would hardly be possible to gather teams of experts from various interest fields to run joint research projects with Consumer Behavior as an overarching topic.

In conclusion, we believe that Consumer Behavior should stay on marketing grounds, even though our findings are sometimes relevant even beyond Marketing borders. On top of that, Consumer Behavior should be understood as a

discipline creating knowledge on different types of human behavior that are ultimately related to the consumption of products and services. Un-

derstanding consumer behavior as a multidisciplinary approach is sometimes more fruitful and energizes the field.

LITERATURE

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