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Research Article

Knowledge creation in consumer research: Multiple routes, multiple criteria

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Abstract

The modal scientific approach in consumer research is to deduce hypotheses from existing theory about relationships between theoretic constructs, test those relationships experimentally, and then show "process" evidence via moderation and mediation. This approach has its advantages, but other styles of research also have much to offer. We distinguish among alternative research styles in terms of their philosophical orientation (theory-driven vs. phenomenon-driven) and their intended contribution (understanding a substantive phenomenon vs. building or expanding theory). Our basic premise is that authors who deviate from the dominant paradigm are hindered by reviewers who apply an unvarying set of evaluative criteria. We discuss the merits of different styles of research and suggest appropriate evaluative criteria for each.
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Keywords: Knowledge creation; Review process; Research quality; Research importance

Introduction

For nearly as long as its existence, consumer research has wrestled with questions about its mission, direction, boundaries, and relevance (Belk, 1984; Deighton, 2007; Folkes, 2002; Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook, 1985; Jacoby, 1976; MacInnis & Folkes, 2010; Sheth, 1982; Shimp, 1994; Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet, & Nowlis, 2001; Wells, 1993). More recently we have also witnessed particular concern over the perceived dearth of novel, far-reaching consumer insights (Lehmann, McAlister, & Staelin, 2011; MacInnis, 2011; Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009). We do not hope to resolve this dilemma. We do however wish to address a perceived malaise stemming from questions about the nature of knowledge discovery. Such an objective inevitably invokes a philosophical discussion about the rules of science, but we are primarily concerned with the more mundane rules of journals.

Our fundamental premise is that our discipline, although nominally pluralistic about avenues to knowledge discovery, is insensitive to the demands of different styles of inquiry and inflexibly applies evaluative criteria relevant to the dominant mode of inquiry to other legitimate approaches that are more appropriately judged by different criteria. As a result, individual researchers grow frustrated with the review process and, moreover, scientific progress is inhibited. Our objective, then,

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is to highlight the multiple paths to knowledge discovery and recommend corresponding evaluative criteria.

Deduction and its discontents

The preponderance of empirical investigation in consumer psychology can be characterized by the hypothetico-deductive approach, a scientific approach that involves using theory to formulate hypotheses that can be falsified with observable data (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981; Lynch, 1982; Sternthal, 2010). We contend that the dominant style has become dominant because it is perceived to be more "rigorous" than other approaches. However, analytic imperatives become counterproductive when the value placed on research rigor and sophistication exceeds the value placed on the importance of the research question and the substantive insights provided by that research, or, where "complexity is valued at the expense of relevance" (Lehmann et al., 2011). As the problem pertains to journal policy and the review process, both demands are captured by Ellison's (2002; see also Rozin, 2009) distinction between q-quality and r-quality, the former "reflecting the importance of a paper's main contribution" and the latter "reflecting other aspects of quality (generality, robustness checks, extensions, discussions of related literature, etc." (p. 995). Ellison's gloomy contention is that, for many years and across a variety of academic disciplines, improvements in r-quality have not been matched by increases in q-quality; indeed, the perceived (and real) importance of r-quality has resulted in a misallocation of researchers' efforts and, therefore, the improvements in r-quality have come at the expense of q-quality.

We agree, but argue further that the perceived importance of r-quality has not only influenced authors' efforts, but has had an unfortunate negative impact on the journal review process. As pointed out by Ellison (2002) and Lehmann et al. (2011), reviewers are inclined to focus on technical rigor (the r-quality) at the expense of "importance" or relevance (the q-quality). This tendency is not surprising, inasmuch as it is much easier to obtain inter-reviewer agreement about technical issues, such as the existence of a confound, than about the "importance" of the findings. Assessments of q-quality require subjective judgments of the magnitude of belief shift produced by the research and the importance of that belief shift—judgments that can be idiosyncratic due to differences across reviewers in terms of their prior knowledge of the domain, appreciation of the implications of the research, or beliefs about the discipline's priorities. Although we discuss possible remedies to the loss of q-quality, we further argue that assessments of r-quality or "rigor" can be biased by methodological orthodoxy and that reviewers can suffer from certain misconceptions even in these assessments.

Our goal therefore is to provide guidance to reviewers for how to evaluate research so that q-quality is not neglected, and r-quality is properly upheld but not overemphasized. Although we provide guidance for traditional hypothetico-deductive research, our main goal is to offer guidance for other paths to knowledge creation, that we think might even offer more promise for higher levels of q-quality, and where we think over-emphasis of and misperceptions concerning r-quality are more problematic. In the next section, we discuss different domains to knowledge creation, and offer guidance for reviewers.

Domains and routes

Our discussion is organized around two fundamental dimensions: the domain to which research is intended to contribute (to building or expanding theory or to understanding a substantive phenomenon) and the approach by which the contribution is made (by starting with theory—a deductive approach, or starting with phenomenon driven observations—a non-deductive approach). The former is well-known to consumer researchers but is formalized in Brinberg and McGrath's (1985) validity network model, which claims that all research involves elements and relations from the conceptual, substantive, and methodological domains. We restrict our discussion to research intended to contribute to either the conceptual or substantive domains, and we focus exclusively on empirical research.[5] Such efforts comprise the large majority of consumer research and are the source of much consternation in the review process. The second dimension, the researcher's approach to inquiry, has less of a history but has recently become a topic of conversation. For present purposes, it is sufficient to make a basic distinction between deductive and non-deductive approaches. The combinations of researcher intentions and researcher approaches to inquiry produce four paths to knowledge, as shown in Fig. 1.

A key motivation for the present paper is our perception that the community of reviewers within consumer research adheres to the view that research should primarily make a "theoretical" contribution, narrowly defined in terms of construct-to-construct links. Research that illuminates links from constructs to phenomena is viewed as merely applied (a view to which we take exception). It is ironic that Brinberg and McGrath associated "theory" with statements about relationships between concepts and important substantive phenomena. Although we may look askance at research that has no greater ambition than to "demonstrate" that a psychological effect is relevant to consumer behavior, "theoretical" contributions can be obtained from testing one or more explanations of real-world consumer decisions, and important contributions can be made by conceptualizing some substantive consumer system in terms of constructs that have been investigated in connection with very different phenomena.

In the remainder of this paper, we separately consider the cells of Fig. 1, providing examples from the literature and recommending evaluative criteria appropriate for each. Our overriding assertion with regard to evaluation follows

[5] In so doing, we acknowledge the important but relatively infrequent methodological contributions made via the development of new procedural paradigms (e.g., Mouselab) or novel statistical methods which require quite different evaluative criteria. We also acknowledge the importance of non-empirical papers, both conceptual and substantive, whose infrequent appearance in the literature has been lamented and whose evaluative criteria have been addressed (MacInnis, 2011; Yadav, 2010).