

## Editorial

## The seven sins of consumer psychology ☆

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## Abstract

Consumer psychology faces serious issues of internal and external relevance. Most of these issues originate in seven fundamental problems with the way consumer psychologists plan and conduct their research—problems that could be called “the seven sins of consumer psychology.” These seven “sins” are (1) a narrow conception of the scope of consumer behavior research; (2) adoption of a narrow set of theoretical lenses; (3) adherence to a narrow epistemology of consumer research; (4) an almost exclusive emphasis on psychological *processes* as opposed to psychological *content*; (5) a strong tendency to overgeneralize from finite empirical results, both as authors and as reviewers; (6) a predisposition to design studies based on methodological convenience rather than on substantive considerations; and (7) a pervasive confusion between “theories of studies” and studies of theories. Addressing these problems (“atoning for these sins”) would greatly enhance the relevance of the field. However, this may require a substantial rebalancing of the field’s incentives to reward actual research impact rather than sheer number of publications in major journals.

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## Introduction

In a number of respects, the field of consumer psychology is doing very well. It is growing very rapidly, as is reflected by (a) the size of our main professional organizations, the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) and the Society for Consumer Psychology (SCP), (b) the number of manuscripts submitted to our main journals, (c) the high attendance at our major conferences, and (d) the number of conferences and outlets now open to consumer researchers. In addition, in some respects, our research has become more rigorous and sophisticated over the years, both theoretically and methodologically. Whereas single studies and simple ANOVAs used to be the norm in our top journals, nowadays typical articles contain three or more studies, painstakingly rule out most alternative explanations, and report

increasingly complex analyses. Finally, the field has become more inclusive. Whereas publications in the most prestigious journals used to be confined to a fairly limited set of scholars from a limited number of academic institutions, today articles in our top journals are authored by a much larger community of researchers from a much broader range of institutions, including many outside North America.

Still, there is one major aspect in which consumer psychology is consistently falling short: 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). In this article, I suggest that most of the field’s relevance issues emanate from seven fundamental problems in the way consumer psychologists plan and conduct their research—problems that could be called “the seven sins of consumer psychology.” Recognizing and correcting each of these seven problems creates a collective roadmap for improving the overall relevance and impact of the field.

## The relevance of consumer psychology (or lack thereof)

Over the years, a number of prominent figures in the field—including several past presidents of ACR and SCP—have repeatedly argued that the research that we collectively produce is

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not as relevant as it should be for our key external constituents. Calls for greater relevance in consumer research were made as early as the early-1980s (Sheth, 1982) and early 1990s (Lutz, 1991), if not earlier. Yet it does not appear that the field has made much progress in this respect. More than 20 years after Sheth's (1982) early call for greater relevance, David Mick (2006) observed as ACR president that consumer research was not as "transformational" as it should be, urging the field to tackle major issues of consumer welfare such as obesity, tobacco consumption, and television violence. Even more recently, in his 2012 presidential address to ACR, Jeff Inman (2012) took up the call, urging us as consumer researchers to be more "useful" to our external constituents.<sup>1</sup>

Note that concerns about the relevance of consumer research have mostly focused on the field's *external* constituents, which are primarily members of the business community and, to a lesser extent, the public policy community and consumers at large. I realize that a number of thought leaders in the field—including some whom I greatly respect intellectually—believe that consumer research should be a stand-alone academic discipline that is not subservient to the world of business and marketing (see, e.g., Holbrook, 1985). According to their view, research findings about consumer behavior do not need be managerially relevant to be scientifically worthwhile. As long as these findings contribute to our *theoretical* understanding of the consumer, this is sufficient. And if certain findings were to have substantive implications, such implications do not have to be for business only: they may instead be relevant for policy making and for consumers at large. I have to disagree.

First, the vast majority of academic consumer psychologists work in business schools rather than in social science departments. To the extent that it is ultimately the world of business that ostensibly motivates and supports our academic enterprise, it seems somewhat disingenuous to argue that the study of consumer behavior does not have to be, at least partially, accountable to the knowledge needs of the business community. Second, it is a little too easy to claim that a particular research finding has implications for public policy or consumer welfare. All too often, claims that a piece of research "is relevant for public policy or for consumer welfare" actually mask a fundamental lack of substantive relevance. Finally, even if it were sufficient that our findings have theoretical implications only—which would be a more *internal* conception of relevance—it is not clear that most of our research meets this criterion either.

How relevant is our research *internally*? How much intellectual influence and scientific impact does it really have on other consumer researchers and social scientists? Not that much, either. Fig. 1 shows the relative performance of *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) articles published from 2004 to 2008 in terms of

citations on the Social Science Citation Index. (More recent articles were not considered in order to give the articles a fair chance to be cited in the literature.) The chart is based on average number of citations *per year* rather than on total number of citations over the years in order to mitigate the sheer effect of age of the paper on number of citations. The articles are rank-ordered by average number of citations per year. As can be seen, some articles—but very few—are very well-cited, receiving 10 or more citations per year. The vast majority of articles, however—70% or so—hardly get cited at all, receiving four citations or less in a given year. Therefore, a small number of articles account for a disproportionate share of all citations, and a very "long tail" of articles garners very few citations overall. The top 10% of the articles published between 2004 and 2008 account for 35% of all citations, whereas the bottom 50% account for less than 19% of the citations. This is not a recent phenomenon. A similar analysis of JCR articles published in the 10-year period preceding the one captured in Fig. 1 (1994–2003) reveals an identical pattern of results. Again, very few articles—less than 10%—get very well cited, and the vast majority—roughly 70%—hardly ever get cited. In other words, the vast majority of the research that gets published, even in our top journals—perhaps 70% of it—hardly has any measurable scholarly impact in terms of citations. To put it bluntly: the bulk of our research isn't even interesting to ourselves and to other social scientists!<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the field of consumer psychology faces serious issues of relevance. These issues are not only external, as long decried by several thought leaders in the field; they are also internal, as evidenced by the large proportion of our top journal articles that do not have any appreciable scientific impact. If the bulk of our research is not relevant to our external constituents, nor to ourselves, our entire scholarly enterprise is at risk. Fortunately, however, it is possible to substantially increase the relevance of our research, both with respect to our external constituents and with respect to our internal constituents. This would require addressing what I see as the roots of our relevance shortcomings. Although these root causes are not independent of one another, they can be organized into discrete categories that each deserves to be discussed separately. I focus on the top seven—"the seven sins of consumer psychology"—in obvious reference to the eponymous biblical sins. Before I discuss these seven sins, I should point out that I have committed

<sup>1</sup> The closely related field of marketing faces similar issues. In 2011, seventy thought leaders in marketing, consumer researchers, marketing strategy researchers, and marketing modelers—a virtual "who is who" of marketing academia—attended the inaugural "Theory + Practice in Marketing" (TPM) conference at Columbia University. The overwhelming sentiment of attendance was that academic marketing research, including consumer research, has become much too technical or theoretical and lacks genuine managerial relevance.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, any journal is bound to have a long tail of relatively low-cited articles. However, compared to other major journals, JCR's tail is particularly long and flat. Whereas 56% of 2004–2008 JCR articles had an average of 3 citations or less per year as of August 2013, only 33% of *Journal of Experimental Psychology-General* articles, 27% of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* articles, and 27% of *Journal of Marketing* articles of the same period had 3 citations or less per year. (The *Journal of Marketing Research* has a citation profile very similar to JCR's.) The lack of interest elicited by the vast majority of articles in our top journals also transpires from the results of a recent survey conducted by the *Journal of Consumer Research* Policy Board among subscribers to JCR. According to this survey, on average, JCR subscribers reported having read only 15% of the articles published between 2007 and 2009 (John Lynch, personal communication, February 7, 2013)—a number that if anything was likely inflated (John Deighton, personal communication, February 7, 2013). Therefore, 85%, if not more, of the articles published in JCR are not even read by other consumer researchers.

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