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The Practice of Transformative Consumer Research – Some Issues and Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

Transformative consumer research (TCR) is a new academic initiative among researchers committed to studying the role consumption plays in the major social problems of our day. These problems may involve the over consumption of products among the obese, the addicted, and the materialistic, or the under consumption of products among the hungry, the homeless, and the poor. The goal of transformative research is to do practical research that can be used by consumers, activists, policy makers, and businesses to improve consumer well-being. In this article, we propose rethinking the way that research is traditionally conducted in consumer research to make it more conducive to achieving TCR objectives. We start with the conventional approaches to consumer research and then offer alternative approaches to increase the likelihood that research will deliver useful and useable results.

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Introduction

Substantial advances in research aimed at improving consumer well-being have occurred since the birth of the Journal of Research for Consumers in 2001 (Pettigrew 2001). Over the past decade, more consumer researchers have become increasingly concerned with the many adverse consequences of individual- and society-level consumption patterns. These consequences include climate change (Varey 2010), exacerbated income disparity (Scott et al. 2011; Shapiro and Shultz 2009), and a range of health problems (Block et al. 2011; Scammon et al. 2011; Scott et al. 2008). A growing proportion of journal space in the consumer behaviour discipline is dedicated to studies concerned with these pressing social issues.

In 2005, Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) emerged to unite consumer behaviourists and those researchers in related fields who engage in studies “that are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strive to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands, potentialities, and effects of consumption” (Mick 2006, p.2). Under the banner of TCR, significant work materialized including numerous

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publications (e.g., Crockett et al. 2011; Mari 2008; Mick et al. 2012b; Pechmann et al. 2011; Petkus 2010), conferences (dedicated TCR conferences in 2007, 2009, and 2011) and special sessions at conferences (e.g., Arnould 2009; Ozanne 2009). While interest continues to grow in TCR-related issues, this new area of academic research is not considered mainstream: that is, most consumer researchers continue to focus on generating knowledge that is of managerial relevance for commercial organisations. Transformative researchers seek to study problems that are meaningful to consumers and generate findings that can be translated for their benefit. However, little guidance exists for researchers seeking to adopt a more consumer-focused orientation in their work and deliver practical results. These gaps are especially problematic for novice researchers who wish to tackle social issues but lack the expertise, mentorship, and funding required to undertake the often herculean tasks involved in addressing the complex and multi-factorial consumption-related problems facing humankind.

Current methods of initiating, performing, and reporting on consumer research are unlikely to be sufficient for the challenges of TCR. Our typical research approach is to work individually or in small groups to investigate well-defined and carefully demarcated elements of human behaviour at a single point in time, and then to report our results to our colleagues through the peer-reviewed journal system. This approach does not adequately equip us to address those consumption-related phenomena that are most problematic for consumers. The TCR goal to positively transform consumers and consumption practices requires an alternative orientation that involves conceptualising research problems more broadly and acknowledging the influence of a wide range of factors over extended periods of time. It will often involve more creative sampling and data collection activities, along with more iterative and integrated approaches to data analysis. Finally, a new model of research dissemination is required for research outcomes to be articulated into organisational and individual practices and public policy (Mick et al. 2012a). While this may sound overwhelming and discouraging, examples exist in other disciplines to guide our attempts. Public health researchers, for example, are long accustomed to wrestling with the difficulties currently facing consumer researchers in their attempts to achieve transformational outcomes (Woolf 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to provide concrete suggestions about the way the TCR sub-discipline could evolve over time to facilitate researchers of all levels becoming actively involved in consumer-oriented research and achieving meaningful outcomes. ‘Meaningful’ in this sense relates to both the theoretical advancements that build our collective body of knowledge and the practical results that make a substantive difference in consumers’ lives. Specifically, we commence a dialogue about the formulation of research teams and the process of disseminating results to realise the potential of TCR.

Research teams

TCR needs to be transdisciplinary in nature in order to address the complex social phenomena that are its grist. Confining our studies to single research paradigms is unlikely to generate the new insights necessary to tackle well-established and persistently ‘sticky’ problems that resist resolution despite focused attention from researchers within many fields. Transdisciplinary research is defined as “cutting across disciplines through use of a common conceptual framework to address a particular problem, blending together commonly accepted concepts and theories” (Rosenfield 1992, p. 1350). It also typically involves a greater number of stakeholders relative to more traditional, single-discipline research (Klein 2008). Such an approach is generally beyond the abilities and resources of individuals or small groups, especially when they belong to the same discipline.

The transdisciplinary approach represents a useful model for TCR. While Sherry (2006) offers some useful practical advice for building and managing research teams, our focus here is on the benefits of this collaborative form. Research teams comprised of individuals

representing different disciplines can be more innovative and effective than single-discipline teams because of the varying perspectives and expertise that are brought to the research problem and the resulting stimulation experienced by team members (Barjak and Robinson 2007; Smith 1971; Upham and Small 2010). This approach can be especially productive in the study of complex phenomena that are difficult to define and that resist theoretical compartmentalisation because of the number of interrelationships that are not yet fully understood (Birnbaum 1981). For example, consider the sky-rocketing rates of diabetes among indigenous peoples (Ferreira and Lang 2006). Medical researchers provide essential insights about the physical manifestations and causes of diabetes. Cultural anthropologists can help identify the familial and kinship patterns that provide both opportunities and obstacles to well-being. Consumer researchers, who seek to understand consumption from the perspective of the consumers, can provide deeper insight into the meaning of these consumption practices. Indigenous researchers can expose the historical patterns of exploitation and marginalization that create communities under stress (Smith 1999).

Being part of a research team with diverse membership can be particularly useful and stimulating for younger team members (Smith 1971; Webber 1974) and can enhance doctoral student training by increasing completion rates (Rey-Rocha, Garzon-Garcia, and Martin-Sempere 2006). However, care needs to be taken to ensure that younger group members are not discouraged when their ideas and contributions are amended or rejected by more experienced group members (Bartell 1984). Including younger researchers in teams can facilitate the longevity of the project, and it inducts a new generation of researchers into the focal area of research, thereby increasing the potential for the research area to constitute a lasting 'research front' (Upham and Small 2010).

Another aspect of team diversity is nationality. Many TCR projects would benefit from international collaboration to enable identification of cross-cultural similarities and differences and to facilitate social improvements in countries with the lowest standards of living. In addition, the availability of research funding in other countries can be an important motivator for international collaboration (Vincent-Lancrin 2006). While international collaboration brings a range of difficulties that complicate the research process, the very heterogeneity of the research team can stimulate creativity and achieve paradigmatic breakthroughs (Bouncken 2009; Nason and Pillutla 1998). Working in different time zones presents challenges, although it also offers opportunities for enhanced productivity by allowing continual progress to be made on the project over a 24-hour period (Stokols et al. 2008).

Research dissemination

We advance that TCR will benefit from the use of transdisciplinary teams who can conceptualize complex social problems more broadly and engage in sustained research. But how do these transformative researchers get their findings to the people whose lives they hope to improve? Traditional researchers are content to publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals, optimistically hoping that their findings will find a way into the hands of the people who can use them. Transformative researchers are sobered by the challenges of disseminating research findings and assume that researchers will have to play a more active role in the diffusion of research results (Mick et al. 2012a).

We offer three suggestions. First, as any successful marketer knows, researchers must have a target audience whom they hope to influence and a good understanding of the needs of this audience. So researchers need to identify the person or organization that is in the best position to use their findings. Ideally, researchers will have considered their target audiences early in the design and planning of their research. Consider the Smarter Lunchrooms initiative that disseminates applicable research findings directly to parents and food service directors in public schools (www.smarterlunchrooms.org: Wansink 2006). This initiative is based on a firm understanding of the constraints faced by public school officials who lack

significant financial and human resources. As such, guided by research findings, food service directors are given easy and inexpensive suggestions to make healthy food more attractive to children so they will voluntarily make healthy food selections.

Second, various forms of artistic expression can be used to communicate research findings in interesting and engaging ways to both consumers and other relevant stakeholders. Effective uses of art to inspire social change are far ranging and include theatre (Boal 1979), soap operas (Nariman 1993), songs (Lewis 2001), poetry (Downey 2010, 2011; Gallardo, Furman, and Kulkarni 2009; Sherry and Schouten 2002), photography (Ewald 1985), film (Kozinets and Belk 2006), and murals (Ozanne and Anderson 2010), to name but a few. Art can focus public attention, provide an expressive and healing release, and break through the clutter to communicate effectively (McDonald, Sarche, and Wang 2006). For instance, teenagers within an indigenous community with high rates of diabetes expressed their understanding of the disease in a community mural that inspired discussion of the issue within the community (Ozanne and Anderson 2010). Art can offer a therapeutic release for communities in crises, such as the NAMES Project that memorialized in a quilt those people who have died from the AIDS epidemic; it is believed to be the largest community art project ever created (McDonald et al. 2006). Sometimes art can be used to communicate across geographical and cultural distances that divide people. For example, Wang, Buruss, and Ping (1996) publically displayed photographs taken by poor Chinese women to express the problems they faced, such as inadequate childcare. Public policy makers, who were far removed from the harsh realities of these women's daily lives where children accompanied their mothers into the fields, were inspired by the vivid display and allocated additional funding for a day care centre.

Third, social media offer a broad array of tools that are providing unprecedented opportunities for disseminating information and community organizing (Kozinets, Belz, and McDonagh 2012). Jayanti and Singh (2010) found that online communities can collectively help consumers make sense of their own experiences of an illness and learn new opportunities for action that are potentially empowering. Kozinets et al. (2012) suggest three uses for online communities that include local communities that use these tools to coordinate activities, virtual support groups who may span distances but use social media to communicate and provide social support, and groups that organize around specific issues and seek to exchange information and inspire action. Far less attention is paid on how these tools could be used to foster two-way exchanges among researchers and consumers. One interesting exception is the Lost Ladybug Project, where entomologists at Cornell University partner with ordinary people across North America to become citizen-scientists. Researchers were at a loss to explain the decline in native species so they enlisted the help of citizen-scientist across the country to collect and photograph ladybugs in their area and then upload this information. Over 3000 people have sent in photos. Researchers gained invaluable data that would have been impossible to gather and citizens, many of whom were school age children, got first-hand exposure to scientific research in their local environs (www.ladybugproject.org).

Conclusions

In summary, we highlight two important changes that are needed in the way that we do research that aims to have a social impact. We advance the need for more transdisciplinary and diverse teams to study the daunting social problems that we currently face. In addition, we emphasize the need for more creative ways to effectively communicate our research findings to the people who can utilize them.

The challenges facing transformative consumer researchers are great. This type of engaged scholarship is hard to do and we will have to continue to innovate and refine as we learn from

our successes and failures. But we have an opportunity to do research that can alleviate suffering and improve well-being. We believe that the risks are worth the reward.

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