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# Doctoral Education and Transformative Consumer Research

Carlo Mari

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*This article examines why and how transformative consumer research (TCR) can become a relevant perspective in doctoral programs. The article draws selectively from studies published in consumer behavior, marketing, and marketing education that theoretically or empirically address this topic. It discusses the meaning and background of TCR together with reasons for its adoption within doctoral programs. It then briefly outlines current practices in doctoral programs in marketing and their main limitations. Finally, a proposal for integrating TCR in doctoral programs is presented, highlighting specific actions to implement it.*

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**Keywords:** *doctoral program; consumer behavior; transformative consumer research; consumer culture; social issues; marketing education*

Consumer research is still searching for its own identity, and as a result, the field cyclically asks itself what its meaning is and what its objectives are (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet, & Nowlis, 2001). The ongoing debate has given birth to a new initiative labeled *transformative consumer research* (TCR) developed within the Association for Consumer Research (ACR). TCR has its roots in the repeated calls emanating from scholars for research aimed at helping consumers. Its advocates hope to bring about a turning point in consumer research through the creation of an infrastructure that should help develop and disseminate the proposed research. A task force was designed to implement this idea, and a first report summarized its opinions and recommendations (Mick, 2005). One of the suggestions included in this report embraces doctoral education and specifically, the development of doctoral seminars that can encourage and train new scholars in TCR (Mick, 2005).

Why should TCR be adopted? How can this strategy be put into effect? The purpose of this article is to provide an initial understanding about why doctoral programs should introduce a TCR perspective and how to change them to accommodate this perspective.

The article draws, selectively, from research published in consumer behavior, marketing, and marketing education. It

is organized into four sections—the first describes the meaning and background of TCR; moreover, it explains why it should be adopted. The second examines current practices of PhD programs in marketing as well as the main weaknesses that may hinder a TCR orientation. The third section focuses on how to integrate a TCR perspective into doctoral programs through specific actions, and the last section proposes some final suggestions on the relationship between TCR and doctoral programs.

## THE CASE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH

What does TCR mean? TCR applies to the research that expects to enhance the welfare of individuals and society. Its mission is “to make a positive difference in the lives of consumers, both present and future generations, through the chosen focus and conduct of specific research, and in the communicating of its implications and usefulness” (Mick, 2004, p. 2). The word *transformative* “signifies important and constructive influence, including the potential for uplifting change, for both consumers as well as ACR and its members who find the call to the TCR mission appealing” (Mick, 2004, p. 2). TCR is not intended to become the predominant orientation for both ACR and consumer research but is simply one possible stream of research within a large variety of topics and approaches (Mick, 2006). According to its advocates, TCR has an immediate practical orientation that addresses the effects of consumption on consumer welfare. This perspective does not represent a completely new avenue for consumer scholars since academic journals have already published articles regarding specific topics that fit the TCR scope (Mick, 2006). However, these articles are not

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the result of a systematic effort within the context of an infrastructure, but rather they reflect individual attempts to tackle the topic of consumer welfare.

This state of affairs is described in the repeated calls that many scholars have delivered during a 30-year-long debate. Their views can be summarized around three key words: *asymmetry*, *relevance*, and *controversies*. The asymmetry issue refers to the unbalanced focus of marketing research that favors a managerial perspective at the expense of other constituencies of marketing knowledge. This position was expressed by several scholars who called for a broader approach in consumer research that emphasized the importance of customer perspective.

- Olson (1982): "I think that we should expand our beginning efforts to develop concepts and theories of consumer behavior from different perspectives than that of the marketing manager" (p. X).
- Anderson (1983): "Marketing theorists have tended to focus on the implications of their knowledge for the marketer, rather than the consumer or the larger society" (p. 27).
- Holbrook (1985): "By focusing most of our attention on managers at the expense of consumers, we in business schools misconstrue the central topic that we purport to study. When we scrutinize the behavior of managers while ignoring consumers, we see only half the picture" (p. 2). "The managerial perspective channels our attention toward only those aspects of consumer behavior that affect the firm's market share" (p. 3).
- Bazeman (2001): "Consumer research has developed some insights more likely to benefit marketers rather than consumers" (p. 503).
- Sheth and Sisodia (2005): "Marketing should be less about representing the company to the customer and more about representing the customer to the company" (p. 161). "We believe that the primary aspect of marketing academics should be to serve the interests of customers first and managers second" (p. 161).

The managerial perspective on marketing is still predominant as Wilkie and Moore (2006) explained in reviewing the limitations of the American Marketing Association's latest definition of marketing released in 2004. This is not to say that managerially oriented research has to be discharged, but a more balanced view is needed. The asymmetry into the study of the phenomenon should be removed because the customer perspective deserves the same regard as other perspectives.

The relevance issue refers to what is worth studying and for whom. The debate called for addressing important social issues that affect consumers (Jacoby, 1976) and life-altering consumer decisions (Wells, 1993). Criticisms highlight that academic marketing and consumer behavior research is more concerned with trivial topics relevant for practitioners. This does not mean that all managerial research is irrelevant, but it simply highlights the prevailing perspective. Managerially oriented research can be very relevant for its constituency even if it is not focused on socially significant problems. This issue was

examined by some scholars who outlined consumers' expectations and the practical impact of research.

- Kernan (1979): "What is the public purpose? While we might disagree on emphasis, I suspect most of us could accept consumers as the focal point of this question and the maintenance of their 'rights' as reasonable criteria for consumer research's contribution. In other words, whatever is the ultimate public purpose, some part of it having to do with consumers is measured by the extent to which their legitimate expectations are satisfied by the research establishment" (p. 1).
- Olson (1982): "Usually we tackle marketing problems. Occasionally we address public policy problems. Seldom do we directly concern ourselves with consumer welfare problems" (p. VI).
- Lutz (1989): "A discipline achieves scientific respectability only when it is widely perceived as addressing questions of social significance" (p. 8).
- Bazeman (2001): "Consumer research can best help society by encouraging citizens to purchase products that will improve their own welfare" (p. 499). "Research should address the most important and challenging consumer decisions" (p. 501). "New research directions that would allow consumer researchers to play a more beneficial role in improving individual and societal welfare" (p. 503).

Relevance needs a broader meaning that includes a focus on both consumers and what is significant for them. Marketing and consumer research cannot measure relevance from a perspective that asks solely for managerial implications.

The controversies issue refers to marketing's contribution to society. Marketing seeps into almost every human activity, and its impact is not always entirely positive. There are several examples of irresponsible and unethical behaviors implemented by marketers in pursuing their company's goals (Wilkie & Moore, 1999). This is not to say that marketing activities have solely produced disadvantages for society, but too often its positive contribution is taken for granted by the academic community without any thorough scrutiny. It is increasingly hard to justify that managerial research is useful for society as Firat (2001) explained:

While in business disciplines, especially in marketing, there is the assumption that helping organizations have success will, in the end, work to the benefit of all society, the many inconsistencies recognized between the goals and interests of organizations and the good of the public or the society in general make it difficult to keep arguing for the validity of this assumption. (p. 1)

A consumer perspective can help to alleviate this issue. Controversies, criticisms, and problems surrounding the role of marketing within society suggest that scholars should turn their attention to consumers to provide a better understanding of this role.

The previous debate lasted for a long time until its turning point in 2004 when ACR decided to take some concrete steps to address these issues and move from thoughts and aspirations to actions (Mick, 2006). Specifically, several steps were implemented. First, the ACR Web site was completely redesigned and two new subsections, titled, respectively, *For Consumers* and *Transformative Consumer Research*, were included. These sections provide relevant resources that can aid consumers and updates regarding TCR activities. Second, the 2005 ACR North American Conference was organized around the theme of consumer welfare. "The purpose of the theme is to concentrate and maximize new discussion on a set of issues that the conference organizers believe is significant and underprioritized at ACR" (Mick, 2004, p. 1). Third, a task force was designed to begin addressing relevant issues regarding TCR. This task force was based on a purposeful sample of 60 scholars (46 of them agreed to participate) that answered open-ended questions through a two-stage Delphi-type technique (Mick, 2005). The issues covered were identifying and prioritizing substantive topics for TCR, identifying how ACR can best communicate and disseminate TCR, identifying organizations and other consumer interest groups that ACR can partner with to support TCR, identifying potential sources from which ACR can raise funds for TCR, and identifying challenges and pitfalls to TCR (Mick, 2005). The task force also suggested exploring how doctoral programs can encourage and train new scholars in conducting TCR. Fourth, an advisory committee on TCR was formed to help and guide further developments of this initiative. Fifth, a call for research proposals was launched in 2006 and financed through a donation specifically devoted to TCR. Sixth, a special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* on TCR was announced, and seventh, the first conference on TCR in conjunction with the Marketing Science Institute and the ACR was announced. These steps intend to build an infrastructure for TCR so that it can be employed as an alternative research approach by those scholars that wish to emphasize the consumer perspective. Within this strategy, it might be focal to revise doctoral programs to educate new researchers interested in TCR.

## CURRENT PRACTICES AND LIMITATIONS

This section provides an overview of both the main characteristics and limitations of doctoral programs in marketing. Doctoral programs are a formal vehicle for the education of consumer researchers and play a major role in shaping the culture of new scholars (Murray & Ozanne, 1997). Doctoral education helps to develop the mindset of consumer academics (Firat, 2001). The prevailing mindset, as explained in the previous section, is oriented toward managerial research, and to bring about a change in this orientation, it is necessary to act on the PhD program structure. Doctoral programs have a long-term perspective and are the R&D division of universities

(Leavitt, 1993). The TCR orientation needs a significant investment in this division to train a new cadre of scholars, which in turn will contribute to achieving the goals of this initiative. Unfortunately, doctoral programs are a strong example of faculty resistance to change (Lutz, 1997). Faculty try to reproduce themselves through PhD education and are opposed to any proposal to alter the program. Lutz (1997) explicitly stated that doctoral programs are "bastions of the status quo" (p. 191).

The organization of a PhD program can be viewed as a basic input-transformation-output model from systems theory (Bearden, Scholder, & Netemeyer, 2000; Lutz, 1997). This article focuses on the throughput element of the doctoral system because it proposes changing the program structure to integrate the TCR orientation. This structure has a direct impact on what and how a student learns during doctoral training. The current program structure is quite different across business schools because of faculty interests, areas of expertise, and faculty size (American Marketing Association, 1988; Bauerly & Johnson, 2005; Danneels & Lilien, 1997). Some doctoral programs are more inclined to a positivist approach based on psychology and quantitative research methods, whereas other schools prefer a more balanced perspective that combines positivism with qualitative research methods. These different approaches are sometimes formalized through distinct tracks within the program. For example, the School of Business at Columbia University offers a doctoral program in marketing with two tracks: behavioral and quantitative. The Fuqua School of Business at Duke University organizes three tracks: consumer behavior, marketing models, and marketing strategy. The Warrington College of Business at the University of Florida has three areas of study for its PhD in marketing: consumer behavior, managerial topics, and quantitative modeling.

The course work component of PhD programs in marketing usually includes three typologies of doctoral-level seminars, and each has a set of courses most commonly offered in these programs (Bauerly & Johnson, 2005; Danneels & Lilien, 1997). The first relates to substantive courses in marketing, the second area provides training in research methodology, and the third typology of seminars is alternatively labeled *foundation disciplines*, *minor field*, or *supporting field*, and it requires a mix of courses in other areas consistent with a student's research interest.

The current features of doctoral programs in marketing highlight some limitations that may block the development of a TCR orientation. First, the managerial emphasis that pervades most doctoral programs prevents students from understanding an alternative perspective such as the consumer view, or at least it postpones opportunities to engage students in research for the welfare of individuals and society.

Second, PhD programs seem more concerned with developing conceptual and methodological skills at the expense of substantive areas (i.e., real-world phenomena and problems),

as Danneels and Lilien claimed (1997). The point here is not to establish the supremacy of one domain over another but to find a better balance that helps new scholars interpret a research problem from the three interrelated domains. A focus on substantive topics may reduce the distance between scholars and consumers and contribute to the relevance issue.

Third, despite some exceptions, doctoral programs in marketing regard consumer behavior from a prevailing psychological approach, and specifically from a cognitivist perspective. TCR would benefit from a broader set of approaches not restricted to a narrow cognitivist view. For example, a post-modern or interpretive perspective (Simonson et al., 2001) inspired by other fields (i.e., anthropology, history, and sociology) might enrich TCR and complement the contribution of economics and psychology to the understanding of consumer behavior.

Fourth, most doctoral programs are based on a positivistic philosophy that favors quantitative research methods in conducting research. Some PhD programs are trying to expose their students to qualitative methodology. It is again a matter of balance among philosophies and methods that have to be included in the researcher toolbox, and TCR may help to improve the dialogue between different research traditions because it does not prefer a specific approach at the expense of others.

Fifth, doctoral education does not instill an historical perspective into students. Very seldom do seminars provide an historical background to the topics, and most of the time it means a review of main marketing ideas and schools of thought (Kurtz, Velliquette, Garretson, Dhodapkar, & Olson, 1997). Consequently, students lack an understanding of historical context that surrounds substantive issues. Consumer behavior and consumption activities are deeply interrelated with social and historical facts, and TCR needs to emphasize these linkages to produce sound research outcomes.

Sixth, the pedagogical framework of most PhD programs emphasizes traditional learning activities based on seminars and exams, whereas experiential learning is occasional and usually conducted in laboratory settings. The need for more realistic and naturalistic contexts, where doctoral students can learn from direct experiences, no longer can be ignored. This is especially true for TCR that focuses on understanding real problems embedded in consumption activities.

## INTEGRATING TCR IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

This section suggests a possible framework to introduce the TCR orientation within doctoral programs as an alternative approach to conduct consumer behavior research. These observations might be used as a starting point to develop better strategies for linking TCR and PhD programs. The proposed framework is based on the track system already mentioned in this article. The idea is to develop a specific track for TCR to produce a twofold benefit. First, it provides

a systematic way to train doctoral students in TCR topics without increasing the standard workload of a PhD program. Second, it is a practical way to overcome the faculty resistance to change because this track should not interfere with other orientations already available within doctoral programs. Moreover, the feasibility might also be explored of offering this track through a consortium by pooling resources across institutions, as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business International (2003) advocated, to foster innovation in doctoral education. The proposed track includes two categories of actions—the first addresses the coursework, and the second is focused on further experiences different from seminars. The coursework is based on four seminars: history of consumption, marketing and society, field methods, and academic marketing career.

The first seminar helps students understand the historical context that has shaped consumers and consumption activities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Johnson, 1998). The study of history highlights how culture and consumption have become mutually interdependent (McCracken, 1987), and it focuses on changes that have characterized this social process (Strasser, 2003). McCracken (1987) regarded “the history of consumption as a workshop for the application and refinement of ideas useful to the study of consumption in the present day” (p. 140). History is a research tool for analyzing complex consumer phenomena (Smith & Lux, 1993). The comprehension of history and consumer culture provides significant insights for designing and conducting research aimed at helping consumers. A variety of sources can be used in this seminar and are exemplified by three valuable books written by European scholars: Fernand Braudel (1992), Daniel Roche (2000), and Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1992).

The second seminar, marketing and society, covers a very broad area that represents the focal problem of interest within a TCR orientation. The main goal of this seminar is to develop the consumer perspective in analyzing the relationship between marketing and society. This seminar is not completely new; however, Wilkie and Moore-Shay (1997) provided some evidence regarding its insufficient diffusion within doctoral programs despite the interest reported by the majority of PhD students interviewed. The seminar should foster knowledge and understanding of individuals, families, and communities in their sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts on the grounds of human diversity principles. Current heterogeneous society requires a better understanding of culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged populations. A tentative structure of this seminar might include three clusters of topics (Mick, 2005): specific target populations (i.e., vulnerable consumer groups such as the poor, the elderly, etc.), specific negative consumer behaviors (i.e., tobacco consumption, overeating, compulsive buying, etc.), and specific positive consumer behaviors (i.e., environmentally conscious behaviors, organ donations, etc.). These clusters might be enriched by adding further topics,

such as consumerism, macromarketing, marketing ethics, public policy, and social marketing, that can contribute to accomplish the TCR mission. The instructor has to decide both breadth and depth of the seminar, but it is desirable that students are exposed to a broad variety of issues.

The third seminar has a research methodology focus and specifically covers field methods, that is, “methods for the collection or the analysis of data about human thought or human behavior in the natural world” (Bernard, 1999, p. 3). This broad definition is not synonymous with participant observation but includes a large set of methods that shares the same emphasis on natural settings. These methods belong to both positivist and interpretive traditions, and they deal with quantitative data (e.g., survey data, coded texts, counts of behaviors) and qualitative data (e.g., text, images, sounds, artifacts). This kind of doctoral seminar is consistent with a TCR orientation for two reasons. First, consumer behavior and consumption activities are more and more analyzed on the grounds of experiences resulting from them (Holbrook, 1985). Consequently, consumption experiences should become the key topic studied by consumer researchers. To gain a better comprehension of these experiences, it is necessary to be involved in the context where they occur. This means conducting research through field methods in natural settings. The other reason in favor of a seminar completely devoted to field methodology is the insufficient attention that it receives in current doctoral courses. This seminar should be an example of methodological pluralism (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) to avoid any further exacerbation of the never-ending debate regarding quantitative versus qualitative methods.

The fourth seminar facilitates the transition from doctoral student to assistant professor. It is widely accepted that a successful academic career is not solely focused on research activity, but it requires attention to the teaching and service domains of the profession as well (American Marketing Association, 1988). Most doctoral programs have already included a seminar to acknowledge the relevance of building teaching skills in their students. Yet what it is proposed to do is a broader seminar similar to the one developed by Berry (1989). He described his course as “a bridge from the realities of being a marketing doctoral student to the realities of being a marketing professor” (p. 3). The seminar is divided into three sections corresponding to the elements of an academic career, that is, research, teaching, and service (Berry, 1989). The research component examines practical issues such as how to attract funding, write grant applications, get research results published, reach different audiences, and other problems involved in the process of knowledge creation, dissemination, and use. The teaching section of this course analyzes adult learning and course design issues (e.g., selection of subject content, materials, pedagogical approaches, and facilities). The service component focuses on understanding and evaluating opportunities to provide

support at the department, school, university, profession, and community levels. TCR aspires to become an alternative research approach, and this intertwines with teaching and service components of an academic career. In addition, TCR can benefit from being carried out by scholars trained in a broader set of skills for two further reasons. First, it needs to overcome the skepticism and bias that usually surround a new initiative. Second, it needs funds to sustain its research projects. Both issues require scholars able to manage the interdependence existing among research, teaching, and service activities.

The second group of actions, to move current doctoral programs toward a TCR orientation, is based on pedagogical experiences that seek to bring some practical training in PhD programs. Three specific avenues are separately outlined though they are interrelated and form a unique strategy. Many scholars advocate that doctoral programs should train their students in understanding real problems through immersion in the context where phenomena occur. For example, Arnould and Thompson (2005), Leavitt (1993), Wells (1993), and Wicker (1985) pointed at, from different perspectives, the relevance of doing research in natural settings. Others suggest using more observation in the field (Murray & Ozanne, 1997; Richins, 2000) or talking with consumers (Cornwell, 1998). These suggestions and previous arguments point out that consumer research and TCR should prefer studying their phenomena in the field. This appears to be a distinguishing feature that requires adequate training on the job during the doctoral program. To accomplish this goal, students might spend the summer of the first and second year conducting fieldwork. This can include different short research projects or a broader research idea that progressively evolves and becomes the dissertation. In any case, the dissertation should be based on extensive fieldwork that shows student proficiency with field methods.

A further way to enrich the experience of students is to establish a service learning component into doctoral programs. Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students participate in activities that address human needs and enhance their learning (Petkus, 2000). It is usually implemented through internships that provide mutual benefits to students, organizations served, instructors, educational institutions, and the community. The idea to include an apprenticeship component into doctoral programs is not new. For example, Leavitt (1993) suggested a summer job that involves students in maintaining a diary and writing a field report, whereas Danneels and Lilien (1997) recommended industry internships. Service learning is partially different from traditional summer internships because it takes place in nonprofit organizations where students are exposed to alternative business orientations and are engaged in projects that can have a personal impact. It seems more consistent with TCR to hypothesize that service learning internships should be designed together with government

agencies that play an important role in consumer welfare and other consumer advocate organizations. For example, the previous relationship between academics and the Federal Trade Commission (Murphy, 1990) might be revamped. Further partnerships might be hypothesized with other federal, state, and local agencies that are interested in consumer issues. Another valuable opportunity is the graduate summer internship program of the Consumers Union. The focus of these experiences has to be a research problem of mutual interest that is real, workable, and open to becoming a dissertation topic.

The last action to bring a TCR orientation in doctoral programs is to promote programmatic studies (Wells, 1993). The prevailing approach is to conduct single-shot or scattered research, whereas it would be more useful to engage in sequential investigations to provide incremental knowledge regarding the same topic (Anderson, 1983; Jacoby, 1976). This programmatic approach has a long-term perspective and can be viewed as a framework in which both fieldwork and service learning are embedded. Programmatic research may become a landmark for managing relationships with public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other constituents interested in consumer matters. It can serve different goals because it contributes to focus research on consumer welfare topics, provides a broader training for doctoral students, facilitates access to relevant data, and generates opportunities for funding research.

## CONCLUSION

TCR is a promising initiative that aspires to change the prevailing approach in conducting consumer research. Its goals are challenging and require a broad strategy to increase the likelihood of success. Most of this outcome derives from the characteristics of scholars engaged in consumer research, and in turn, this means the need to examine how they have been educated. Doctoral training is going to play a key role in this process of change. Current practices in PhD programs have limitations that weaken both the education of new students and the possibility of adopting the TCR orientation. Nevertheless, there are viable remedies for lessening these problems. A specific track for TCR based on new doctoral seminars and more practical experiences is an attempt to overcome them. The difficulty in altering doctoral programs due to faculty resistance is a strong argument to postpone or give up any proposal of change. However, the impact of these changes is likely to be more lasting and effective rather than other measures that may produce short-term and ephemeral results.

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