

# Consumer Behaviour Research: Jacquard Weaving in the Social Sciences

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**Abstract:** *In the context of globalization, neither the study of consumption, nor the study of consumer buying behaviour, can be explained as the mere interaction between a limited number of personal and impersonal (or external factors), but as an utterly complex and undoubtedly progressive process. Moreover, what today is often referred to as consumer behaviour research, represents the result of interweaving various and prolonged efforts coming from a wide spanning array of heterogeneous disciplines. Analysing consumers and their purchase decisions/ consumption patterns/ post-consumption attitudes etc. only from an economic or psychological perspective will lead to an over-constrained problem, for which the solution will be at the same time academically unsound, and practically infeasible. Sallying forth on the wings of this realisation, the present essay sheds some light on the significance of consumer behaviour research from a historical and multidisciplinary perspective, arguing against the isolation of the field within the narrow confines of a single discipline. The main objectives underpinning this work are the following: (1) to provide a straightforward conceptualization for consumer behaviour as a research domain; (2) to provide an extensive review of the main paradigms in the study of consumer behaviour; (3) to underline the importance of multidisciplinary approaches for a correct understanding of consumer behaviour. Even though this research represents a theoretical inquiry of previous literature, exhaustiveness is not one of its goals. Moreover, whilst they present evidence coming from previous works, the authors do not shy away from stating their own beliefs and ideas, thus imbuing the present work with an unmistakable subjective perspective.*

**Keywords:** *consumer behaviour research, the positivist-traditionalist paradigm, the interpretative paradigm.*

## An introduction to consumer behaviour research

The field of consumer behaviour emerged at the beginning of the 1960s, drawing substance from different scientific paradigms. Jacoby (1976, pp.331-358)

defines consumer behaviour as “the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, time, and ideas by decision making units”, whilst Engel et al. (1986, p.5) place more emphasis on the internal cohesion of the decision process when defining the same concept: “consumer behaviour represents the acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts”. More recent writings usually build on the above mentioned seminar work. For example, Solomon et al. (2006, p.7) defines consumer behaviour as “the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires”, whilst Hawkins and Mothersbaugh (2010, pp.6-7) consider that the field of consumer behaviour focuses on “the study of individuals, groups or organizations, and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society”. The American Marketing Association (Bennett, 1995) explains the same concept through “the dynamic interaction of affect and cognition, behaviour, and the environment by which human beings conduct the exchange aspects of their lives”; the gist of this definition is reiterated by Keller and Kotler (2011, pp.14-16) when they refer to the same term in their most recent volume, with an emphasis on the main phases of consumption – searching for information, decision making, usage and disposal.

Through the process of comparison, one can conclude that the definitions that we briefly presented accrue depth as time ebbs and flows. Therefore, each definition is representative for the interval in which it was developed; thus, the evolutionary morphing of these definitions under the influence of knowledge expansion illustrates the progress of consumer behaviour as a research domain. If between the 1970s and the 1980s, consumer behaviour was perceived as a closed set of predetermined facts, recent perspectives place the process of deciding upon the acquisition and consumption of goods beyond the explicit act of purchase. Moreover, less obvious, embedded processes, such as causality, environmental influence, social determination etc. are included in the actual analysis of consumer behaviour, rather than being treated as external factors that only create the outset for purchases.

Overall, there are two major aspects that are common for all these definitions. First of all, the consumer is perceived as the main actor performing on the market scene. However, the consumer interacts with other types of agents during the decision process, actors that might influence his buying behaviour. For example, the prospective consumer of a given purchase and the person making

the purchase are often two different people. Therefore, it is not uncommon to observe that what the first definitions that we presented (e.g. Engel et al., 1968) call “the study of consumer behaviour” is in reality not the study of consumption, but of consumer buying. This is in fact one of the confusions that recent literature clarifies by firmly drawing the line the distinction between what we call “buying behaviour” and “consumption behaviour” under the umbrella of “consumer behaviour”. A second commonality of the definitions is represented by the acknowledgement of the dynamic and multidimensional nature of the decisions and judgments that precede and follow the act of buying a particular good. The process begins once an individual identifies a need as a result of his exposure to internal or external stimuli (Hawkins & Coney, 1998), which might determine him to go on a quest for information about the means to satisfy that need, in an active/ passive conscious/ unconscious manner (Wyer Jr., 2008). The next natural step is the evaluation of alternatives and information processing, which may lead to an act of purchase; however, the outcome of the associations between the evaluations and the stimuli that determined the search in the first place does not lend itself to straightforward prediction (Jones & Fazio, 2008). Acquisition and consumption generates new stimuli and attitudes that might, in turn, serve as seeds for other purchases made by the same individual or might determine him to influence other people’s perception and behaviour. It is worth mentioning that there are times when this transfer of experience between individuals or the processes that take place in one person’s memory lie beyond the reach of what can be observed or what can be controlled (Perkins et al., 2008). The consumer passes through all five stages with every purchase, but in the case of some acquisitions, such as, for example, the routine purchases, consumers often show no qualms about skipping or reversing some of these stages (Hawkins et al., 1998).

The complexity of the internal/ external factors, as well as controlled/ uncontrolled processes involved in the process of decision making and purchase/ post purchase behaviour makes direct observation woefully inadequate as a means to understand and predict consumers’ behaviour. By way of consequence, researchers were hard pressed to identify more complex investigative instruments; more often than not, these instruments were “borrowed” from a number of different disciplines. The study of consumer behaviour relies heavily upon research from the fields of economics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, having a very applied dimension. This interdisciplinary nature contributed to the development of the marketing framework for the study of consumer behaviour whilst the domain was singled out as a well-defined topic of intensive research. Another catalyst factor that generated this outcome was the establishment of

research associations, research centres and the emergence of journals and publications specialized on the study of consumer behaviour. In 1962, the American Psychological Association formed the Society of Consumer Psychology (SCP) [1], aiming to leverage the research in the field. The year 1969 marked the formation of the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) [2] at the University of Minesota, USA, association that counts thousands of members and hosts the most prestigious annual conference in the field of consumer behaviour. Around the same period of time, in 1974, a group of American professors established the Journal of Consumer Research (JCR) [3], one of the main reference publications, if not the most important one, in the field of consumer research. In 1984 the first edition of the Journal of Consumer Marketing [4] rode out to join the elite of the academic literature and a few years later, in 1992, the Journal of Consumer Psychology was first edited. Journal of Research in Consumer Behavior [5] (1995) and Journal of Consumer Behaviour (2002) are other two prestigious publications that leverage the importance of consumer behaviour as a research domain, dedicated first and foremost to academics. The papers published in these journals focus on unearthing the peculiarities of consumer behaviour from different angles and perspectives; when they try to understand how men and society choose to employ scarce resources, scientists turn towards economics; when consumers are analysed as organic components of the society in which they live, the theoretical work of social psychology is used; anthropology and even linguistics are often utilized in order to explore different groups and segments of a population. The figure presented bellow synthesizes the role of different disciplines in the study of consumer behaviour.

Micro-behaviour, with a focus of individual behaviour

Discipline	Applicability in consumer behaviour research
Experimental psychology	The role of perception, learning, memory in the process of products/services selection;
Clinic psychology	Psychological adjustment in rapport with different goods;
Microeconomics	The allocation of resources at an individual level and at the level of households;
Social psychology	The impact of social groups on the process of individual selection/consumption/disposal processes;
Sociology	The impact of social institutions and group interactions on consumers;
Macroeconomics	The relation between the consumers and the market and/or the other consumers;
Semiotics	The impact of verbal and visual communication of products/services on consumers;
Demographics	The impact that the characteristics of different demographics have un consumers' decisions;
History	The importance of the evolution and the structural changes at the level of nations and societies;
Cultural anthropology	The role of beliefs and cultural customs in consumers analysis.

Macro-behaviour, with a focus of social behaviour

**Figure 1. Consumer behaviour, an interdisciplinary field**

**Source: Solomon et al. (2010, pp. 22-24).**

The study of consumer behaviour as a central theme in the marketing framework leads to the development of a more efficient usage of marketing resources and more effective solutions to marketing problems (Engel et al., 1968, p.9). In order to understand and predict behaviours, marketers have to take on the challenge of using a variety of instruments in order to analyse both the external influences (Pachauri, 2002, p.321) and the potential responses to such stimuli. The management oriented towards the consumer (Kotler, 1972) employed a posteriori analysis of behaviours or, at most, diagnosis of consumers reactions tested in laboratories. More recently, researchers argued that the comprehension of consumers shouldn't be directed only towards the development of efficient strategies for companies, but rather towards explaining to the very consumers how people decide to purchase goods and allocate their resources for (Solomon et al., 2010, p.23). This perspective emerged as a reaction to the increasing number of negative effects of marketing strategies – such as addiction, overconsumption and overspending, shop lifting etc. (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, p.154) – on individual consumers. However, this new perspective also made room for the development of two other sub-fields of marketing research, namely social marketing and deviant consumer behaviour research. There is no clear-cut dichotomy between the strategic and rather social interests in consumer behaviour; irrespective of the approach, the study of consumers and their purchase attitudes and decisions leads to a greater efficiency that can be achieved in the production and distribution of economic goods.

### **Paradigms in consumer behaviour analysis**

In order to undertake a historical survey of previous literature in consumer behaviour, we will distinguish between two points of view: the traditional view of buyer motivation and behaviour – commonly known as the traditional-positivist paradigm, and the interdisciplinary contributions in marketing thoughts and consumer research – often grouped under the umbrella of the interpretive paradigm. The positivist perspective mainly implies an objective view of the world and utilizes quantitative research techniques, whilst the interpretative paradigm admits the merits of subjectivism and often employs qualitative methods, thus making it a somewhat better fit for those that choose to dabble with philosophical aspects. Moreover, traditional researchers are interested in decoding the causes that generate certain behaviours in order to postulate generalisations, whereas the proponents of the interpretive paradigm tend to treat each consumer and each consumption act as unique. In-

terestingly enough, the latter perspective seems to question some of the main premises advanced by the former which might be translated as a change in consumer research paradigms (Kuhn, 1962) around the 1970s and the 1980s.

### The positivist-traditionalist paradigm

Positivism had a significant influence on science and arts for several decades, around the 1900-1970s. The main premise underlining this school of thought is that human reasoning is the driving force behind all human acts; moreover, positivists postulate the existence of a supreme truth, which is both unique and objective and can only be revealed through the relentless pursuit of science. Positivists generally perceive the natural world as a rationally ordered space, with a past, a present and a future, all of them unambiguously defined.

The evolution of the traditional-positivist paradigm can be traced along two distinct components. On one hand, one can identify a pure traditionalist stage, dominated by three main perspectives, namely the rationalist view, the behavioural one and the cognitive view. On the other hand, the neo-positivist perspective adds value to the conservative paradigm through the development of mathematical models and through the acknowledgement of society as an important determinant of consumers' decisions and behaviour. The following table offers a synthetic view of the main perspectives of the positivist-traditionalist paradigm.

*Table 2. The positivist-traditionalist perspective*

Time period	Dominant perspective	Theoreticians
1900 – 1930	The rationalist perspective	A. Smith (1776); A. Marshall (1890)
1930 – 1950	The behavioural perspective	B. F. Skinner (1953); J. A. Howard (1963)
1950 – 1960	The cognitive perspective	E. J. Langer (1983); C.T Allen, T. J. Madden (1985)

#### *The rationalist perspective (the economic theory)*

According to the rational perspective, also known in the literature as the economic theory, consumer behaviour refers to unique acquisitions and the reactions that they generate. The main assumptions of this paradigm are the following: (1) individuals have complete knowledge of their wants and needs; (2) individuals are perfectly aware of all the available means to satisfy their needs. Therefore, consumers are supposed to allocate their income in order to satisfy those needs that have a higher utility and, therefore, yield a higher satisfaction (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007); to this end, individuals will engage in purchasing the items whose costs they can afford. Purchase decision is the

equivalent of a careful allocation of resources in order to maximize utility within the constraints imposed by a fixed financial budget (Smith, 1776; Marshall 1890). The consumer presumably evaluates each alternative and thereby behaves rationally. Maximization of utility is hypothesized to be the only motive for behaviour, and the result is a precise and elegant theory which leads itself to manipulation using tools of the calculus (Engel et al., 1964, p.24).

The seminal work which serves as a base for the rational theory was developed by Adam Smith (1776) and Alfred Marshall (1890) through the theory of marginal economy. The latter explores the effects that price has upon consumers' decisions when all the variables – except for the price – are kept at the same value. Marshall's method advances the idea that human needs, attitudes and motivations can be measured just by analysing the allocation of resources. Pragmatically speaking, Marshall's model underlines the importance of income, revenue and budgetary constraints on consumers' choices, in the conditions in which these variables remain constant or they fluctuate (Balaure, 2003, pp.189-190).

While economic models are useful to the extent that they provide behavioural hypotheses (e.g. the higher the revenue, the higher the spending), the validity of these hypotheses hinges on whether or not all individuals act as calculating machines in making their decisions (Pachauri, 2002, pp.322-323). The theorized relationship between income and spending was probably not completely devoid of merit 300 years ago when work in this area began; however, *homo economicus* (Persky, 1995) is no longer coherent with today's affluent society. Consumers rarely have adequate information, motivation or time to make perfect rational decisions, not to consider the social and cultural influences that batter them throughout each day of their lives (Simon, 1997). Therefore, the economic theory seems to explain effects, rather than causes and even when describing effects, it assumes that the only determinant factor that generates decisions is individuals' desire to perfectly divide and allocate their money. Even though traditional economic models came under intense scrutiny for being “disappointing in terms of implications for empirical research” (Muth, 1966, p.699), their premises served as starting points for future developments, as we will see in the following sections.

### ***The behavioural perspective (learning models)***

If the rational perspective only underlines the importance of costs and resource availability as main factors in determining consumers' decisions, the behavioural perspective emphasizes the role that several external and uncon-



trollable factors have upon individual learning processes and consumption decisions. The premise supporting these theories is that the study of individuals' behaviour is made up of inferences about how people act when they are exposed to certain stimuli. Therefore, the consumer himself acts as a black box which responds to external factors that he encounters (Peter & Nord, 1982). Pragmatically speaking, the behavioural perspective tries to define the complete set of external sources of influence that determine consumers to act in a certain manner. The main theoretical approaches developed within the behavioural paradigm are the classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1927; Watson, 1920) and the operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953), both resulting in learning, but through different processes. Each of these developments relies heavily on logical positivism and argues that the objective and empirical methods used in the physical science can and should be applied to the study of consumer behaviour (Eysenck & Keane, 2000).

Classical conditioning can trace its roots back to the input-output psychological theory developed by Ivan Pavlov in the nineteenth century. According to Pavlov, the individual's mental processes stand between inputs and outputs. Whilst the inputs can be observed and even controlled, the outputs can be analysed and translated as effects of the inputs. However, any statement regarding something that happens inside of the "black box" as a result of a certain input will only represent an inference and should be treated with caution. The learning process, adapted to the economic theory, includes for fundamental factors: inputs or stimuli, suggestions, reactions and relapses (Kotler et al., 2002). The stimuli represent the personal motives and needs that determine individuals to consider certain purchases. The suggestions represent the result of the influence of external factors on individuals' reactions towards certain stimuli. When stimuli and suggestions overlap, the configuration of a reaction is set in motion. According to the theory of classical conditioning, consumers will have similar reactions whenever they are facing the same external inputs or stimuli, irrespective of the context. The relapses refer to the repetition of a specific behaviour in similar conditions (when consumers are exposed to the same stimuli) or, in other words, the assumption that there will be a relapse is equivalent with generalizing the effects of similar stimuli on individual consumers. Empirically speaking, classical behaviourism tries to identify the complete set of external factors that influence consumer behaviour whilst assuming that no mental life or internal states really exist (Bray, 2008). Therefore, the premise of behaviour generalization ignores the role of personal experiences in interpreting external stimuli, as well as the possibility that several external inputs may overlap.



Radical behaviourism, also known as operant conditioning, acknowledges the presence of personal experience and feelings but it considers them derivative (Nye, 1979). Moreover, the consumer responding to operant conditioning is an individual who only responds to those stimuli that yield personal benefits, while avoiding those situations that might prove to be deleterious. Such behaviour develops through a long term learning process. Starting from the premises of operant conditioning, Schelling (1979) and Kahneman and Tversky (1971) developed the prospects theory which explores the lack of rationality in consumer behaviour and the influence of less salient factors on consumers' decision making. Behavioural research still contributes to the understanding of human behaviour; however, nowadays scholars reached the conclusion that behaviourism can only explain mere bits of the complexity of human behaviours and decisions (Stewart, 1994). One the most scathing critiques that behaviourism received in the literature refers to its lack of interest for the connections between the external outputs and the internal psychological processes, as well as for the inferences that consumers make along the acquisition process. (Pachauri, 2002, p.325). However, more often than not, even nowadays, advertising and other promotion techniques successfully use the principles developed by behaviourist researchers (e.g. Stuart et all, 1987; Lai and Huang, 2011).

### ***The cognitive perspective (information processing theory)***

Contrasting with the behavioural theory, the cognitive perspective underlines the central role that information procession has in decision making processes. In this context, consumers are treated as problem solvers who actively use the information that they have in order to control the external environment. In addition, several studies (Langer, 1983; Allen & Madden, 1985) prove the existence of unconscious cognitive processes whose interweaving ultimately segues into to the final purchase decisions (Solomon, 1995). An important input brought by the cognitive paradigm is the understanding of the decision that consumers make as processes that include a series of subsequent stages: cognition or understanding, affects or feelings, followed by cognition or behaviour (Marsden & Littler, 1998, p.7).

The cognitive perspective acknowledges that internal factors and processes (cognition, feelings etc.) may lead to actions in the absence of external stimuli. From an empirical perspective, the cognitive theory represents the result of the developments in the operant conditioning theory, with a focus on internal processes. However, even though the cognition perspective has a certain complexity, it analyses consumers as if they were identical, fully congruent and symmetrical entities, who process internal information in the same way.

The numerous models that scholars developed under the umbrella of cognitive theory represent a proof of these directions. A model represents a replica of the phenomena that it is intended to reproduce; therefore, a model specifies the elements and represents the nature of the relationships among these elements, providing a testable map of the reality (Engel et al., 1968, pp.34-35). Cognitive models try to represent reality and to predict behaviours through models that can be generalized amongst all the consumers that are considered. The main cognitive models were developed by Howard and Sheth (1969), Nicosia (1976) and, respectively, Engel et al. (1968) and represent efforts to capture all the processes that an individual traverses from the moment in which he identifies a particular need till the one in which he or she evaluates the acquisition that (s)he made.

### **The interpretative paradigm**

Some researchers have argued that positivism places too much emphasis on material welfare and that its ideology generalizes cultural homogeneity and the predominantly masculine view held by western societies (Solomon et al., 2010, pp.25-27). Moreover, critics maintain that this paradigm is exclusively focused on the merits of science and technology, with the positivist view of the consumer denying the social complexity of the world we live in. The interpretative paradigm, developed at the end of the 80's in tandem with the development of critical thinking in marketing (Kassarjian, 1994), casts light on the importance of subjective experiences, symbols and cognitive differences between individuals. In accordance with this paradigm, consumers build up their own frameworks for interpreting reality, based on culturally and perceptively different experiences. Therefore, in contrast with traditionalist views, the interpretative and post-modern ones argue in favour of the consumers' role in representing and understanding reality, in shaping a private set of expectations that lead to an individual consumption experience (Hirschman, 1986; Calder & Tybout, 1987; O'Shaughnessy & Holbrook, 1988).

If the positivist paradigm aims to forecast behaviours based on direct observation, the interpretative one seeks to understand them thoroughly. On the other hand, traditionalist researchers pursue the identification of concrete causes for consumers' behaviour, whereas interpretative ones analyse multiple events that individuals take part in directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously. Moreover, the interpretative paradigm accepts that there is no separation between the researcher and his object of study. Therefore, the scientist

becomes a constitutive part of the research he is undertaking, the latter being influenced by the former's perceptual maps (Solomon et al., 2010, pp.25-26). Furthermore, there are authors (e.g. Usunier, 2005) who identify differences even at the level of understanding the interpretative approach between European and American researchers. According to this perspective, European researchers give more weight to cultural differences existing between consumers, aspect which is explained by their personal experiences.

It is therefore obvious that the post-modern or interpretative paradigm commences with a critique of traditional perspectives. The main assumptions lying at the core of this paradigm, according to Firat et al. (1995) are the following: (1) scepticism in what regards models and techniques used to analyse consumer behaviour (mathematical modelling, quantitative and qualitative techniques); (2) the rejection of the idea that consumers can be understood and known in an objective fashion. The legitimacy of the interpretative paradigm has been strengthened in 1988 when the American Marketing Association (AMA) stated in an article published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* that "the role of consumers in producing marketing knowledge is, sadly, that of lab-rats in performing experiments: they are observed, interviewed and counted. Perhaps marketing would have more to gain if consumers would have...a less passive role." (Cote et al., 1991, p.402).

### **At the end of the tale: the holistic approach**

Certain authors (Morgan 1992; Marsen & Littler 1998) maintain that there is a need to integrate traditionalist and post-modern approaches into a holistic one. They argue that it is important to understand the paradigms of consumer behaviour so as to reflexively adapt them to particular cases. Such a holistic view suggests that a complete understanding of consumer behaviour can be achieved only by adapting more perspectives in order to investigate a single phenomenon. Although Kuhn (1962) postulates the lack of dimensionality and incomparability of paradigms, the holistic approach could lead to the birth of a space for dialogue, which would allow for multiple representations of consumption experiences. The main principles of this approach are the following: (1) no part of a consumption experience can be truly understood if it is separated from the whole; (2) combining results generated by the application of various methodologies, theories and mathematical approaches will generate more information about consumer behaviour by comparison with the application of a single approach. Therefore, the holistic approach entails

using methods and research techniques capable to identify consumption customs and their recurrence across time (O'Shaughnessy 1992). Consumer behaviour thus ends up being understood as a continuous process, made up from purchase and consumption episodes.

In spite of the complexity and the theoretical merits of the holistic approach in analysing consumer behaviour, there exist few concrete uses. The analysis put forward by Hassard (1987) dealing with organisational behaviour does constitute proof of the applicability of the holistic approach. One cannot be mistaken by saying that the holistic approach tends to be the smelting pot that bends the heat of the researcher's passion to its will in order to turn the inferior ore of the previous, rather narrow approaches, into a stronger, nobler alloy.

## Conclusions

In the era of hyper specialization, the desire to narrow the scope and methods of each research domain comes as little surprize. However, the study of consumer behaviour is indeed a holistic application of findings and instruments from different disciplines and applied fields of inquiry (Engel et al, 1968, p. 17), but it is also a foundation for the disciplines involved with marketing strategy, financial planning, organizational behaviour and applied economic analysis. Overall, the paradigms of consumer behaviour analysis and the associated perspectives build up the framework for the evolution or research in this field. It is therefore essential to understand the importance of using different research instruments to investigate consumers, for there are subsequent disciplines that contributed to the rise of this field of inquiry.

Only after having gone through a journey spanning the fascinating history of the field are we finally well poised to explain the metaphor that took residence within this paper's title. Let us consider the mechanism of Jacquard weaving and its role: it ubiquitously enables the independent, programmed raising of warps threads in almost any loom, thus making intricate weaves possible. At the end of our trek, it is rather clear that successful consumer behaviour research is an utterly fascinating, unbelievably complex weave that can only be brought into existence by masterful manipulation of the many threads making up the warp of academic research. No more can a scholar hope to understand that which makes consumers "tick" by perusing a uni-dimensional approach, than can a weaver hope to deliver linen damask napery through sew and needle mastery.

## Endnotes

- [1] <http://www.myscp.org>  
 [2] <http://www.acrwebsite.org>  
 [3] <http://ejcr.org>  
 [4] <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=jcm>  
 [5] <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/products/books/series.htm?id=0885-2111>

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