

Handbook of Developments in Consumer Behaviour

Edited by **Victoria Wells** and **Gordon Foxall**



Handbook in Consumption



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1 Developments in consumer behaviour

Gordon R. Foxall and Victoria K. Wells

1.1 SOME WORDS OF EXPLANATION

Research on consumer behaviour provides a focus of theorisation and empirical investigation for a wide range of social and natural sciences and as a result often reflects the aspirations and ideologies of its authors and sponsors. So much consumer research appears nowadays to regard consumer behaviour as no more than an application area or testing ground for theories and methodologies, speculations and vested interests, that arise elsewhere. To the extent that consumer behaviour proves amenable to these broader perspectives, its validity as a field of investigation is safeguarded, but there are numerous alternative foci for empirical research should it disappoint. Whether these interests are managerial or scholarly, they do little to advance genuine understanding of consumer behaviour as a defining characteristic of much of humankind.

We have sought as far as possible in editing this volume to make disinterested curiosity the central motivation for an examination not of 'current trends' in consumer research but of perspectives which promise to develop into new directions for the discipline, and new opportunities to comprehend the nature of consumer choice *per se*. We have sought, therefore, to embody work that reflects a passion to understand consumer choice as a phenomenon in its own right. We have been inspired to some degree by the development of the scientific study of animal behaviour as a science that has several parallels with that of consumer research. Both are comparatively recent as social sciences, both are multi-disciplinary studies striving to be interdisciplinary, both are capable of revolutionising how humans regard themselves. Each has an applied aspect, each is amenable to technological development, each can serve interests beyond those of the academy.

Like ethology, the analysis of consumer behaviour is now a well-established discipline with its own journals and learned societies. Like ethology, consumer research incorporates perspectives from a spectrum of long-established sciences: psychology, economics and sociology amongst the most common in consumer research; biology and especially ecology more to the fore in the case of ethology. The chapters that comprise this handbook similarly strive to incorporate a multitude of sources of

thought and learning, adding geography, neuroscience, ethics and behavioural ecology, among others, to this list. There is an interesting tension within consumer research between the pursuit of scholarship in and of itself and the pursuit of managerial concerns. Ken Peattie notes in his chapter that consumer behaviour research can tend towards myopia by over-emphasising those aspects of the behaviour that marketers find most interesting. The research utilised for his own chapter comes largely from non-consumer behaviour journals or researchers whose primary focus is not consumer behaviour. This is a tendency found in all of the chapters we have included. All seek, albeit in varying degrees, to encompass multiple perspectives, en route to the interdisciplinarity without which our understanding of consumer choice is impoverished.

Two other points about our general orientation deserve to be briefly made. First, despite what we have said about the pursuit of narrow instrumental concerns, we recognise that consumer behaviour, in all economies that operate beyond the level of subsistence, influences and is influenced by the behaviour of producers, suppliers and marketers. These interactions are part of the subject matter of marketing and consumer research. Such subjects as new product development, marketing communication and retail response to consumer preferences are not only essential to understanding the nature of consumer behaviour, they present intriguing intellectual challenges in their own right. We have sought therefore to present developments in consumer behaviour from the perspective they afford. Second – and this is the major thrust of our observations on ethology – we have striven to encompass the deep feeling for our subject matter that we mentioned earlier by inviting scholars with a passion for knowing about consumers. Reading the live histories of those biologists who established ethology during the middle and later decade of the last century, one is struck by the abiding excitement, even obsession, with animal behaviour, what animals do, how it can be explained. Many students of animal behaviour began as amateur ornithologists in their teens, for example, and despite the eminence of their later contributions to science never lost their passion for bird watching (Dewsbury, 1985). Without patronising them or aggrandising our own efforts, we maintain that consumer researchers forget their original motivations only at some cost to the development of their discipline.

We took the view at an early stage that we wanted authors to provide a deeper understanding of the subjects on which they are experts than they might otherwise have the opportunity to do. This has led inevitably to fewer, longer chapters; moreover, it has not been possible to include every theme that is currently promising and which may well turn out to be important. But it has the advantage of permitting the authors to enlarge