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Trends in Consumer Behavior Literature: A Content Analysis

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While a comprehensive review and classification of consumer behavior literature has been called for periodically, none has been forthcoming. This paper attempts partially to rectify this situation. It classifies by several key variables 32 years of consumer behavior literature from selected journals and proceedings.

Literature that can be considered to be in the domain of consumer behavior has appeared in journals for several decades. Trends in the literature have been informally discussed (e.g., Kollat, Blackwell, and Engel 1972), but an empirical analysis has not been carried out. The purposes of this paper are to examine the growth of consumer behavior as a topic from 1950 through 1981, to examine shifts in topics studied, and to note the methodological and statistical approaches used in consumer behavior.

Our objective was not to evaluate the product of the research, but merely to categorize and evaluate trends as found in the following publications:

1. *Journal of Consumer Research*
2. *Journal of Marketing*
3. *Journal of Marketing Research*
4. *Journal of Advertising*
5. *Journal of Advertising Research*
6. *Harvard Business Review*
7. *Journal of Business*

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8. *Journal of Applied Psychology*
9. *Proceedings of the Association for Consumer Research*
10. *Proceedings of the American Marketing Association*

Obviously, the examination is limited by the journals and proceedings selected as the data base. These particular publications were selected because of their inclusion in prior reviews (Jacoby 1976, Kassarian 1982), and because we believed them to be the most important in the field. However, notable contributions to consumer behavior have come from other sources, particularly books and monographs, which we did not examine. In total, approximately 15,000 articles were included in our review.

CLASSIFICATION OF ARTICLES

Each article was examined by one judge. While using multiple judges would have been preferable, a double review of 15,000 articles was beyond the resources of this study. Annotated indices for publications were used, where available, to validate the classification by the individual judges.¹

The first decision made by each reviewer was whether or not the article dealt with consumer behavior. Using the

¹In discussing the classification of articles for an index compiled covering the 1970-1979 *Association for Consumer Research Proceedings*, Kassarian and Orsini (1980) note the numerous judgment calls that had to be made: "We only can hope that we are within the five percent level of statistical significance . . ." (p. iii). That hope is echoed by the authors of this paper.

TABLE
37 MAJOR TOPICS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

| |
|---------------------------------|
| Internal |
| Attitudes (8.2) ^a |
| Attribution (1.3) |
| Belief-Expectancy Models (1.9) |
| Cognitive Dissonance (.6) |
| Information Processing (4.6) |
| Involvement (.7) |
| Learning (.7) |
| Life Style (3.2) |
| Motivation (1.8) |
| Perception (8.0) |
| Personality (2.2) |
| Physiological (1.5) |
| Values/Beliefs (.8) |
| Purchase Process |
| Brand Awareness/Loyalty (2.2) |
| Choice (4.9) |
| Evaluation (2.9) |
| Post-Purchase (2.3) |
| Purchase Decision Process (3.6) |
| Search for Information (3.2) |
| External |
| Communications (2.9) |
| Consumer Socialization (2.0) |
| Culture (1.9) |
| Demographics (4.4) |
| Family Decision Process (3.4) |
| Group Influences (1.4) |
| Innovators/ Innovations (3.3) |
| Opinion Leaders (1.1) |
| Persuasion (1.5) |
| Segmentation (1.7) |
| Situation (2.7) |
| Social Stratification (.8) |
| Miscellaneous |
| Consumerism (4.7) |
| General (.8) |
| Models (3.4) |
| Preference (3.5) |
| Public Policy (4.1) |
| Store Patronage (1.8) |

^aNumbers represent the percent of consumer behavior articles found for each topic, 1950–1981.

Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1973) definition of consumer behavior—i.e., “acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts”—the reviewer then classified each consumer behavior article as follows.

Topics and Subtopics

Based on the literature search, 37 major topics were selected that were then grouped into four major areas, as presented in the Table.² Using these categories, each article

²The criteria utilized to classify articles according to a particular topic is possibly unclear in some cases. We therefore have briefly described below the criteria we used in classifying articles according to some selected

was classified under one topic that best described its content. In those situations where an article could be classified under more than one topic, the article was presented to all four judges and a consensus was obtained, thus ensuring consistent classification of multi-topic articles.

Empirical Nature of Study

Articles were classified as being either empirical or non-empirical. An empirical study was required to include the use of numerical data to support the hypotheses, theories, or discussion presented.

Methodology

Papers were further classified as utilizing one of four major categories of research methodology:

1. *Survey*—a study involving direct contact to determine individuals’ characteristics or behaviors.
2. *Experiment*—deliberate manipulation of variables by the experimenter so that the effect upon other variables can be measured.
3. *Discussion*—literature reviews and other articles not supported by data analysis.
4. *Other*—use of secondary data, study replications, and so forth.

Statistical Technique

Next, each empirical article was categorized according to statistical technique utilized: (1) descriptive, (2) *t*-test or chi-square, (3) nonparametric (other than χ^2), (4) correlation, (5) analysis of variance, (6) bivariate and multiple regression, or (7) multivariate analysis. Each article was classified according to the most complex level of statistical technique used.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR TRENDS

The number of consumer behavior articles during the time period studied ranged from about ten per year in the 1950s to about 175 per year in the 1970s (see Figure A).

Only those topics where we thought the greatest ambiguity might exist are described.

Perception—the internalization of marketing stimuli, such as price, quality, risk, and image.

Physiological—physiological and neurological responses to stimuli.

Post-purchase—product use, satisfaction, and disposition. (Cognitive dissonance is placed under a separate heading.)

Purchase decision process—examinations of the overall sequence in purchase decision making, rather than examinations of only a single stage in the process.

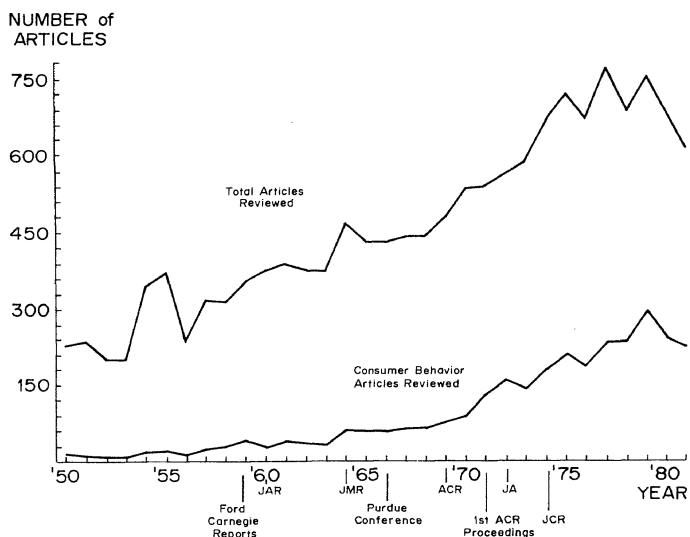
Innovators/Innovations—identification of innovators, diffusion of innovations, etc.

Opinion leaders—identification of opinion leaders and the flow of communication from opinion leaders.

Models—theoretical and mathematical overall models of consumer behavior.

Preference—brand preference (e.g., conjoint studies) and influences on preference.

FIGURE A
NUMBER OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ARTICLES
AND TOTAL ARTICLES



The number of consumer behavior articles as a percent of total articles appearing in the literature grew steadily through the year 1970, and then began exhibiting an accelerated growth rate.

A significant amount of growth can probably be attributed to the introduction of *Advances in Consumer Research* in 1971 and the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1974. Prior to 1970 and the introduction of these publications, about eight percent of the articles reviewed were consumer behavior articles; from 1971 to 1981, about 30 percent of the articles reviewed were classified as dealing with consumer behavior.

In the early 1950s, only five different topics appeared in the literature (based on our classification scheme). This number increased steadily over the years, reaching a total of 37 topics by 1981. Generally, "old" topics did not die off; rather, new areas of interest were explored, resulting in an ever-expanding array of new independent variables. This is illustrated in Figure B.

When plotting the percentage of consumer behavior articles devoted to each topic over time, at least three characteristic life cycle patterns seemed to emerge (see Figure C). The first pattern is exemplified by topics such as preference, attitudes, and perception, which have appeared consistently in the literature since the 1950s. The pattern for these topics is positively skewed with periodic peaks through time. The height of these peaks has declined over time, but the topics remain an important part of the literature. A second pattern is demonstrated by topics which are still in a growth stage, such as information processing and involvement. These topics have been introduced more recently, with interest in them growing gradually and continuing to grow through 1981. A third pattern—evident in topics such as learning, store patronage, and public policy—is much more sporadic than the first two patterns. The

pattern for these topics is one of periodic peaks of interest followed by periods of little or no interest in the topic.

SCOPE, CONTENT, AND COMPLEXITY

In the 1950s, motivation studies using projective techniques were predominant. As other topic areas became more important, data that were less subjective became more prominent. Reports funded by the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation (Gordon and Howell 1959; Pierson et al. 1959), other research funding, and scholars entering the field with better training in the social sciences may have been the impetus for consumer behavior articles that began to deal more with scientific testing of hypotheses generated from a theory base. With the advent of emphasis on theoretical foundations and multivariate statistics—linked to advances in computer manipulation of data—came a concomitant increase in the complexity of the articles written. Thus it became a requirement for readers to have a greater knowledge of the theoretical roots of articles and more statistical sophistication than had been necessary with earlier articles.

As discussed earlier, the present study classified articles either as using one of seven statistical techniques or as nonempirical. Figure D presents the frequency of use over time of two of these techniques and the nonempirical classification.

The use of purely descriptive statistics in consumer research has declined steadily since 1950, when it was the major technique of almost 50 percent of all articles, to its current position of less than 5 percent. While the use of descriptive statistics has declined, the use of more sophisticated techniques (such as multivariate analysis) has increased. In the 1950s, about 30 percent of all consumer behavior articles were nonempirical in nature; during the early 1960s, the percentage increased dramatically, and since the 1960s it has leveled off at about 30 percent of all articles.

Our analysis revealed that the percentage of articles using experimentation peaked between 1964 and 1968, at which time experimentation accounted for up to 45 percent of the consumer behavior literature reviewed. Survey techniques have continued to be the most widely used methodology in consumer behavior research, consistently accounting for over 40 percent of all consumer behavior articles reviewed (except during the mid-1960s, when experimentation was dominant). Use of discussion-type articles peaked in the early 1960s, leveling off to about 20 percent from the mid-1960s through 1981.

CONCLUSIONS

The fact that the study of consumer behavior is occurring within an ever-changing environment is an important consideration. Societal, technological, economic, public policy, and other environmental changes have all affected the study of consumer behavior by affecting which, when, why, and how topics are studied.

FIGURE B
 OCCURRENCE OF SPECIFIC MAJOR TOPICS OVER TIME

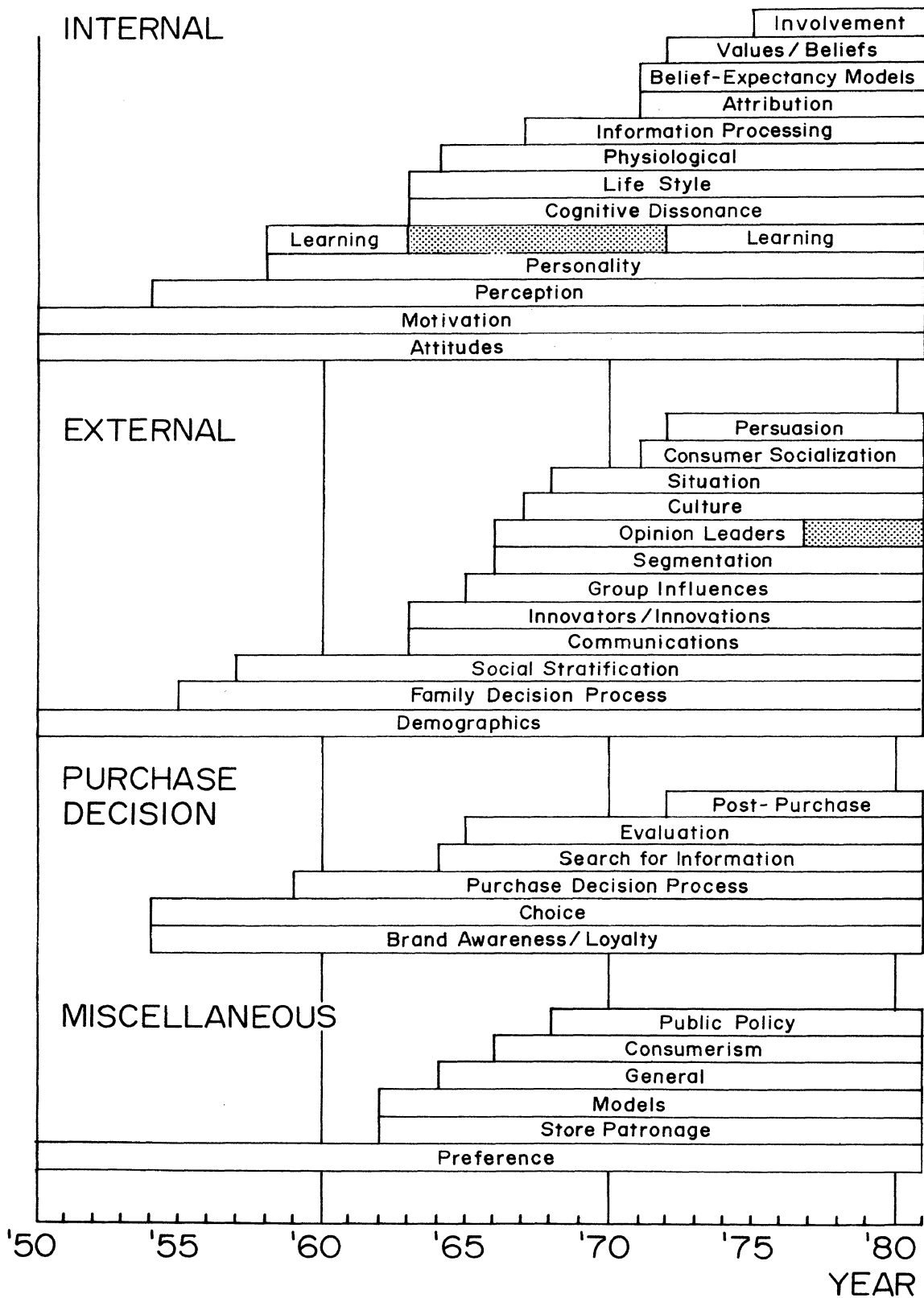


FIGURE C

EXAMPLES OF LIFE CYCLE PATTERNS

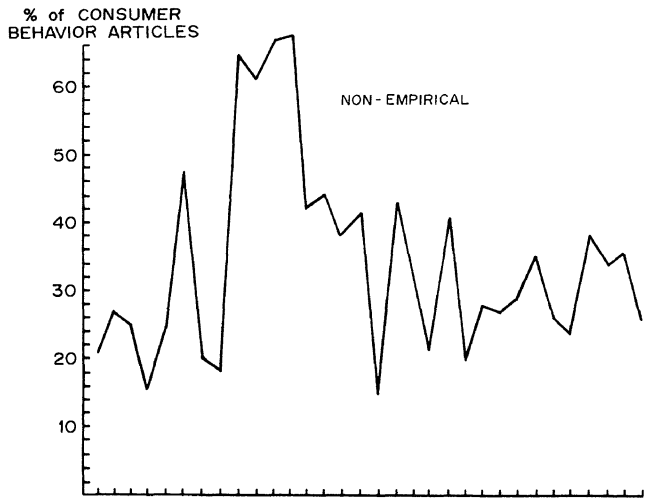
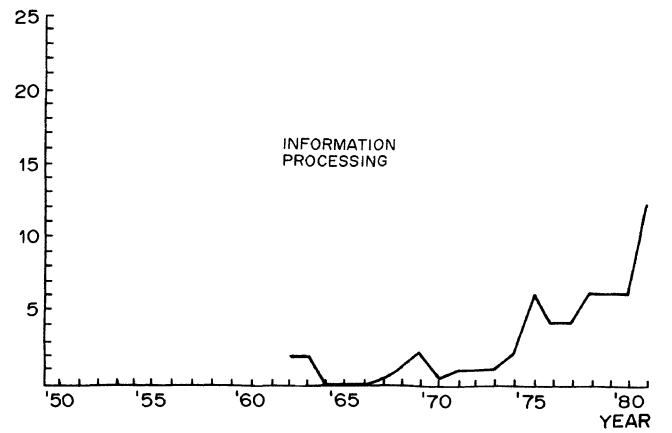
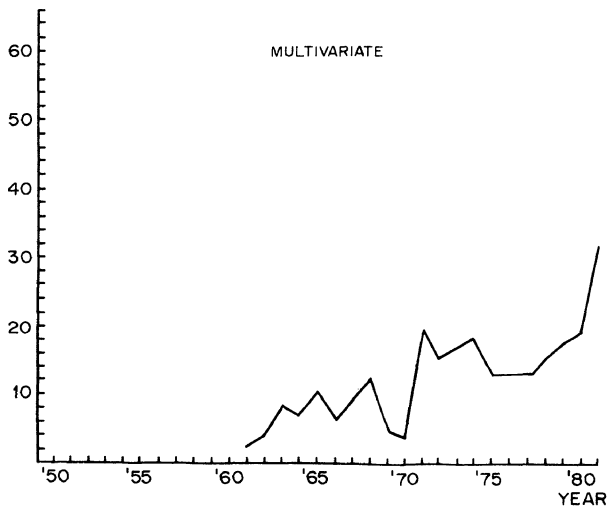
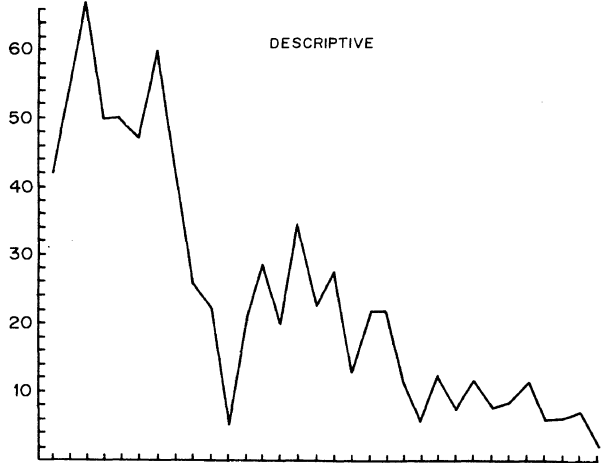
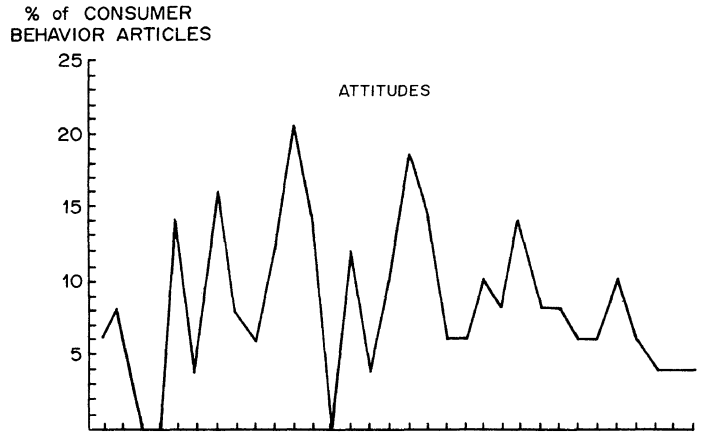


FIGURE D

EXAMPLES OF STATISTICAL TECHNIQUES USED



The number of topics studied in consumer behavior has grown dramatically during the past 32 years. Examining the life cycle of these topics reveals some general patterns. However, consumer behavior topics studied in recent years display a more fragmented, inconsistent pattern. The examination of the literature conducted for the present study produced just a few examples of a programmatic approach to research on an individual level or on a discipline-wide basis.

Editors and reviewers of journals and proceedings may have some responsibility for perpetuating the fragmented approach to the discipline. There may be a tendency to publish new ideas rather than to publish replications or extensions of previously researched topics. This promotes a one-shot approach to research. It might be said that the probability of getting an article published is at times inverse to the number of articles published on a topic. It would appear that the fragmented nature of the discipline and the apparent lack of consistent direction could be partially corrected by the proper application of influence that leaders in the discipline are able to exert.

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