CHOICE AND CHOICES IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Partially a product of paradigmatic shifts in marketing, consumer research is also experiencing paradigmatic turbulence within. In this paper, I review these paradigmatic changes and critically discuss the ongoing paradigmatic pluralism in consumer research. I also caution about the potential detrimental effects that might be caused by overt immersion in paradigmatic disputes and stereotypes.

Paradigmatic shifts sometimes bring and nurture new disciplines. Consumer research can be considered as one of such new discipline. Amid the confusions and disputes between the positivist and interpretivist paradigms within marketing, consumer research became a distinctive sub-field and kept growing and expanding in the past few decades. Young disciplines often experience identity crisis. So does consumer research in its adolescence (Belk, 1986; Holbrook, 1987; Simonson et al, 2001). Debates on what consumer research should encompass and how should various paradigms compete or cooperate is still on-going.

Belk asked this question about two decades ago: “What should ACR [Association of Consumer Research] want to be when it grows up?” (1986, p. 423) Answers had been provided by both positivists and interpretivists through discussing the guiding philosophy of science in consumer research directly and more importantly, through presenting their concrete research in the form of journal publications and conference presentations. Since the 1980s until today, consumer research has experienced and embraced great changes in research scope and paradigmatic diversity. This paper presents a curious inquiry of where consumer research is now and what it is growing to be by revisiting where it had been in the past two decades, with the emphasis on philosophies of science. What will be the paradigmatic future for the growing consumer research?

When I was just a little girl
I asked my mother
What will I be?
Will I be pretty?
Will I be rich?
...
-(Lyrics by Ray Evans and music by Jay Livingston from the movie The Man Who Knew Too Much directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1956)

Evolution of Consumer Research and Its Identity Crisis

Rooted in economics, marketing was first considered as an area of academic enquiry at the beginning of the 20th century (Belk, 1995). Although consumers had gradually received more attention in marketing research as consumption became increasingly important, with relevance to production (which also paralleled the shift from modernity to postmodernity), consumer behavior was studied not as the end
itself till 1950s. The rise and dominance of scientific methods represented by experiments in 1960s further lead to the depiction of consumers as emotionless information processors (Belk, 1995). However, the foundation of the Association of Consumer Research (ACR) in 1969 and the subsequent establishment of the Journal of Consumer Research in 1974 marked a turn in that ongoing trend. A group of researchers shifted their focus from managerial marketing strategy and information processing to (new) consumer behaviors and consumption experiences.

Consumer research was not formally considered as a distinctive (sub)discipline until the sudden breakout of the paradigm war between the positivist and interpretivist camps in 1980s. Journal papers especially those published in the Journal of Consumer Research and the Journal of Marketing documented voices from the two major camps. Presidential addresses (e.g. Belk, 1987; Lutz, 1989) in the annual conferences of the Association of Consumer Research also reflected the tension at that moment. Consumer research was for the first time distinguished from marketing research in general in 1980s (Holbrook, 1987). Some researchers even went as far as proposing the separation of consumer research from marketing as a distinct discipline, freeing consumer researchers from managerial constraints and directing researchers’ contribution to humanity (e.g. Belk, 1986; Holbrook, 1987).

“My own vision is one of consumer behavior as a discipline unto itself, with a variety of constituent groups, but with no overriding loyalty to any (originally underlined) existing discipline or interest group. That is, consumer behavior should not be a subdiscipline of marketing, advertising, psychology, sociology or anthropology, nor the handmaiden of business, government or consumers. It should instead be a viable field of study, just as these other disciplines are, with some potential relevance to each (originally underlined) of these constituent groups.” (Belk, 1986, p. 423)

Consumer research was characterized as multidisciplinary in nature, absorbing influences from many other more established fields including but not limited to economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, semiotics, and literature criticism (Belk, 1986; Holbrook, 1987; Simonson et al, 2001). Diverging from the narrow focus on purchasing behavior, consumer researchers were encouraged to look into every process of consumption including acquisition, consumption, and disposition (Belk, 1987; Holbrook, 1987). The expanding scope and emergence of new types of research questions were accompanied by introductions of more interpretive-orientated research paradigms. The expeditious prosperity in consumer research both in scope and research paradigm diversity triggered a series of debates on the identity of consumer research. Philosophy of science is one of the prominent approaches taken to resolve this identity crisis. In other words, consumer researchers tried to define what consumer research is partially by examining what research questions were raised and how they were addressed.

**Time of Turbulence - 1980s to Early 1990s**

The paradigmatic shifts in the 1980s smelled of gun powder. Positivists and interpretivists defended their own positions under a peaceful disguise peppered with sarcasm. Researchers from each camp showed polite gestures by acknowledging each other’s contribution to gaining more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior; yet seldom did they imply any intention to cross the dividing line between the two grand paradigms and to explore the possibility for cooperation. The notion of incommensurability was surely at its peak.

Most positivist consumer researchers came from the background of or were greatly influenced by psychology. Consumers information processing and decision making were their research focus. Guided by the positivist ontology of the objective existence of reality that is independent from our perceptions, positivist researchers aim to obtain nomothetic knowledge that reflects the truth. Experiments were often used to empirically test causal relationships among variables in lab settings. Hirschman (1985),
characterizing these consumer researchers as analytical scientists (originally termed by Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978), driven towards certainty (also see Morgan, 1983) and high levels of abstraction. The positivist paradigm had not been greatly challenged before the early 1980s. The dominance was equated to its raison d'etre or superiority by some fervent supporters.

Calder and Tybout (1987) differentiated three types of knowledge that could be generated by applying different research methodologies associated with positivist and interpretivist paradigms. They recognized that the everyday and interpretive knowledge generated by using qualitative and critical relativistic methodologies have value, but only knowledge obtained by applying “sophisticated (emphasis added by the author) falsificationist methodology” (p. 137) was crowned as being “scientific”. The positivist pride was self-evident. Their arguments center on the role of data in knowledge generation. Only the data in the falsification methodology were considered as self-correcting in the sense of providing opportunities to refute existing theories. For the other two types of knowledge, data are either too descriptive or selective and cannot be used to test existing theories. Thus, they concluded that “only scientific knowledge rests on a methodology that offers the possibility of scientific progress” (p. 140).

Many other positivists demonstrated their self-assurance by simply ignoring the paradigmatic debate of the time and continuing conducting empirical tests. Some others like Hunt (1991) defended positivism by claiming that it had been misunderstood by the rising interpretivists. There were three major messages sent by Hunt to those residents alien through two journal papers (i.e. Hunt 1990, 1991): 1) positivists are not the monster as interpretivists described them. It’s merely their wild imagination and naivety about the history of positivist philosophy; 2) there was never such a thing as the hegemony of positivist paradigm. Neither paradigmatic dominance nor victims were real; 3) interpretivists could join positivists in the critical journey of scientific discoveries, only if they could be critical of themselves. Of course, the messages were much more tactically presented and dressed in lengthy discussions on truth, causality, and determinism.

Hunt (1991) criticized interpretivists’ “misunderstandings” (referring to Hirschman, 1986; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Lutz, 1989; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). He denied causality as one of the major assumptions of positivist paradigm by showing that there were several positivists who had cautiously differentiated causality from “regularity” (i.e. happening simultaneously, similar to the concept of correlation, originally argued by Hume). In a similar fashion, the notion of determinism was rejected based on the doubt of a few (i.e. He cited Suppe (1977), Carnap (1966), Strong (1990), and himself). Hunt’s argument about reality is more problematic. He claimed that abstract concepts such as attitude, intentions, and beliefs are “real” (italics original, p. 35) because they had been “successful in explaining, predicting, and solving pragmatic problems” (p. 35). His pragmatic take in evaluating research was confused with the principle of measuring the value of research by examining to what extent the truth had been reflected in positivistic research. Hunt’s arguments favoring positivism are quibbles in other two perspectives. He simply forgot that the guiding philosophy of science is more implied by concrete research done by researchers than their explicitly stated beliefs. Another caveat is even more straightforward: the voice of a few does not necessarily represent that of all.

Consumer researchers embracing various interpretivist paradigms were considered as atypical anomalies back then, when most if not all, PhD training was dominantly positivist. Nevertheless, alternative ways of doing research grew. Not only some ignored consumer behaviors such as gift giving (Sherry, 1983), swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988), and collecting behavior (Belk, 1988) were studied, but also relatively novel qualitative methodologies were employed, such as naturalistic (e.g. Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988) and humanistic (Hirschman, 1986) methods espousing “relativist” ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Consumer behavior was put back into social and historical contexts; consumers were treated as entities with emotions, or, human beings (Belk, 1987). Interviews, direct observations, and other qualitative methods were heavily used. Nevertheless, due to the early stage
of the development of interpretive paradigms then, in consumer research, sometimes relativist ontology was matched with realist epistemology and methodology (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). That was the period when there lived a positive-interpretive Frankenstein. For instance, Holbrook and Hirschman called consumer researchers’ attention to the experimental perspective of consumer’s experiences. They are pioneers in contributing to the stretching of consumer research scope, but their encouragement in doing positivistic experiments can be at conflicts with their relativist epistemology. Can consumption experience be possibly understood by reducing it to testable variables and empirically tested? I will discuss more on this point later in this paper.

The condition of the rise of alternative research paradigms in addition to the long-standing positivist paradigm did facilitate consumer research establishing itself as a distinctive sub-field in marketing. However, paradigmatic war between positive and interpretive paradigms in marketing research also resulted to the division of the two paradigms within consumer research. Most traditional positivist consumer researchers focused on information processing and decision making process and defended their scientific status. Interpretivists started to build their own enterprise outside of the positivist research paradigm. There was no dialog but declaration, no cooperation but purposeful ignorance. The departure of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms characterized consumer research in the 1980s.

**Blossom within the Interpretive Paradigm – Mid 1990s to Early 2000s**

In the presidential address of the 1989 ACR conference, Lutz initiated a call for the union of the positivist and interpretivist camps for “a giant leap toward achieving full fledged, intellectually pluralistic, and, disciplinary status” (p. 6) of consumer research. In the years that followed, pluralism indeed emerged, but mostly inside the broad interpretivist paradigm. It echoed the blooming of postmodernism in marketing and in social science in general. Diverse philosophical streams started to exert their influences on consumer research. Mick and Buhl (1992) combined phenomenological interviews and semiotics to analyze consumers’ meaning-based advertising experiences. Stern (1992) elaborated on personal and historical nostalgia in advertising by employing literary criticism. Arnould and Price (1993) participated in river-rafting and contributed to redefining the concept of customer satisfaction. Holt (1995) studied baseball spectators through observation and interviews to classify consumption practices from a structuralist point of view. Holt (1997) also proposed poststructuralist lifestyle analysis in a study using depth interviews as the major research method. Using phenomenological interviews, Thompson and Haytko (1997) studied the process through which consumers appropriate fashion discourse to their identity projects. Belk and Costa (1998) investigated the mountain man myth in a five-year ethnographic research aiming at examining consumer fantasy. The above-listed researches are just some representative works during the period between mid-1990s and 2005. The pluralism of interpretive research paradigms is apparent.

These different micro-paradigms under the grand umbrella of the interpretive paradigm are similar in their ontological assumptions. Their common recognition of the socially constructed nature of reality also distanced them from positivist research methodology such as experiments and statistical data analysis. The embeddedness of the social context in consumption challenges the positivists’ practice of operationalizing an abstract concept as a measurable variable. These interpretive research paradigms developed and/or flourished in the postmodern era (e.g. phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, mythology, semiotics, feminism, literature criticism) have more similarities with each other than with positivist paradigms that were fruits of modernity, but they are not mirror images of each other. The elevation of ambiguity (as opposed to order), heterogeneity (as opposed to homogeneity),

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1 Calder and Tybout (1987) would disagree on this notion, because they suggested that “unless subjected to the rules of empirical science, everyday and interpretive knowledge must stand apart from science.” (p. 140)
participation (as opposed to contemplation), and incongruity (as opposed to congruity) distinguished these interpretive research paradigms from positivist ones (Brown, 1993). In consumer research, the rise of postmodernism does not signal any preference for any particular interpretive research paradigms, or the interpretive research paradigm as a whole, in contrast to positive research paradigm. “[P]ostmodernism suggests that it is not a question of either/or but of both/and, or, as one postmodernist aptly puts it, either/either (Adair, 1992)” (Brown, 1993, p. 26). Pluralism is encouraged.

The Birth of CCT – 2005 to Present

Arnould and Thompson published a reflection paper in the Journal of Consumer Research in 2005, branding diversified consumer research “addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption” (p. 868) as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). It is not a specific theory of consumption, but a collective name for a body of theories on “the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (p. 868). This paper denotes a monumental moment, not in terms of proposing a brand-new consumer culture theory (since no specific theory was proposed), but in integrating the gradually diversified interpretive research paradigms under one banner. An annual conference on Consumer Culture Theory also commenced in 2006. The embrace of this new identity of consumer culture research helped resolving consumer research’s identity crisis, even though some consumer researchers might hold the opposite opinions, considering the declared independence of CCT as a further fraction within consumer research. CCT researchers are often equated to qualitative researchers; and the annual CCT conference is thought to be a patent playground for those outliers rebelling from the marketing research tradition.

Yet, CCT researchers are not necessarily qualitative researchers, even though qualitative research methods were predominantly used in the existing research that could be labeled as CCT research. Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasized that the demarcation of CCT research from other consumer research is theoretical rather than methodological. Country to the ascribed stereotype of CCT researchers as qualitative researchers, they encouraged methodological pluralism in natural settings. For instance, Arnold and Price’s (1993) study of the river-rafting set a good example. They used participant and direct observation, interviews, and surveys in studying the same consumption activity. The data collected were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

From my point of view, CCT researchers’ encouragement of methodological pluralism direct the paradigmatic dispute in marketing in general and in consumer research in specific to a much healthier direction. The notorious mis-equivalence of qualitative research methods with the interpretive research paradigm (e.g. Calder and Tybout, 1987; Hunt, 1990) and quantitative methods with the positivist research paradigm were cautioned and highlighted. This clarification between methodology and method is important to Kuhnian notion of incommensurability. It also helps maximize the possibility of dialogue or even potential cooperation between positivist and interpretivist paradigms, given their differences in ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Cautions Regarding Developing Paradigmatic Pluralism in Consumer Research

Reconciling Micro-Interpretive Paradigms

Consumer research is moving toward paradigmatic pluralism under the influences of different disciplines and philosophic streams. Heated debate on the paradigmatic incommensurability between positivist and interpretivist paradigms and beyond is still ongoing. Yet, little attention has been directed to the problem of the potential incommensurability of various interpretivist research paradigms in consumer
research. Arnould and Thompson (2005) voiced their concern on the diversity within the interpretivist paradigm and the resulting confusions:

“Over the years, many nebulous epithets characterizing this research tradition have come into play (i.e., relativist, postpositivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic, postmodern), all more obfuscating than clarifying. Each fails to signify the theoretical commonalities and linkages within this research tradition. They either place too much emphasis on methodological distinctions or they invoke overly coarse and increasingly irrelevant contrasts to a presumed dominant consumer research paradigm.” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 868)

Arnould and Thompson’s (2005) efforts in defining Consumer Culture Theory did not help clarify the abovementioned confusion that they sensed. They classified existing CCT research thematically without offering more detailed comparisons of the paradigmatic differences among the micro-paradigms within the grand interpretivist paradigm. For instance, how does poststructuralist consumer research differ from postmodern consumer research? Are the differences mainly ontological, epistemological, or methodological? How should research from these micro-paradigms be effectively combined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the foci phenomenon? In other words, it remains unclear that how different streams of interpretive consumer research could be effectively combined and compared. Despite of pluralism advocated by postmodernism (as Feyerabend’s claim of “anything goes”), certain guidelines are needed to organize the paradigmatic diversity within the broad interpretivist paradigm. This demand should not be translated to an initiation of paradigm war within the big family of interpretivism, but a benign request aiming at clarifying the paradigmatic diversity and confusions in consumer research.

Towards More Integrated Pluralism

Paradigmatic pluralism could manifest at different levels, echoing the discussions on incommensurability at various planes. This is related to the fundamental question of what constitute a paradigm and what leads to incommensurability among paradigms. Kuhn introduced the concept of paradigm to the scientific community through the classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962. Since then the notion of paradigm has been wildly used, if not abused. From rejection, to acceptance, then to misuse, the process seems to be common to many important concepts in social science. Foucault’s “discourse” is another case in point. The general adoption of the concept of “paradigm” coupled with possible misinterpretations render it with an ambiguous conceptual boundary. One “paradigm” can be differentiated from another based on research topic (e.g. consumer research paradigm), specific philosophical influence (e.g. postmodern paradigm), or method (e.g. quantitative or qualitative paradigms). The loose usage of “paradigm” is problematic, not only in terms of conceptual confusions. The aforementioned problem of commensurability of different interpretive paradigms is also related to the ambiguous definition of “paradigm”. At a more general level, the concept of incommensurability among paradigms and the essence or degree of paradigmatic pluralism can also be perplexing due to the conceptual ambiguity.

The most frequently used notion of paradigm comprises ontological, epistemological, axiological assumptions, and the related methodology. Paradigmatic difference could be caused by variations in any one or several of the four major components of a paradigm. Paradigmatic pluralism should not only be limited to applying different paradigms in parallel or sequential fashion (Lewis and Grimes, 1999) in order to integrate or compare different types of knowledge generated about the focal phenomena. Pluralism might also be possible at a more fundamental level so as to fully explore other alternative ways of gaining knowledge, for instance, hypothesis testing in interpretive paradigm.
Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Propositions for combining qualitative and quantitative research methods are in their heyday. Some consumer researchers choose to reconcile the incommensurability of paradigms at a more micro level. Efforts have been exerted to explore how qualitative and quantitative research methods could be combined effectively in studying a specific phenomenon. Yet strictly speaking, seeking cooperation between qualitative and quantitative research methods does not fall into the realm of reconciling incommensurability of different research paradigms, because the two types of methods should not be mistaken as methodologies bounded with particular ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of interpretive or quantitative research paradigms. Tadajewski (2008) criticized Davies and Fitchett’s (2005) study aiming at examining paradigmatic incommensurability in methodological level. They carried out both quantitative and qualitative studies of the same phenomenon and compared the findings of the two studies. They concluded that it was that methodological differences lead to incommensurability of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Tadajewski (2008) pointed out that

“Specific methodologies (italic added by the author) are not (italic original) necessarily connected with a particular paradigmatic perspective, but there will be philosophical assumptions operating under any research project that will, as a matter of course, influence how compelling the theoretical and empirical arguments proffered will be to an intellectual gatekeeper.” (p. 281)

It is interesting to note that even Tadajewski (2008) referred qualitative and quantitative methods as two methodologies but are separated them from paradigmatic assumptions. It helps to illustrate my point in questioning whether qualitative and quantitative differ as two methods or methodologies? If they are not associated with paradigmatic assumptions, could we use both methods/ methodologies in both positivist and interpretivist research without any limitations? The answer to the first question probably depends on individual researcher’s definition of method and methodology, and meaningful conclusions might not be drawn by surveying variations in these definitions among researchers. The second question, in my opinion, is very important for us to advance paradigmatic pluralism in an informative and less erroneous manner. I propose that even though both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used for positivist and interpretivist studies, two major limitations should be kept in researcher’s mind, especially that both methods are used in studies that are predominantly interpretive or ascribe equivalent credit to both qualitative and quantitative methods.

When qualitative methods are used in predominantly positivist studies, qualitative exploration is usually for theory development purpose. The qualitative exploration in the early stage of a research project is mainly to help identify major variables that will be tested in subsequent quantitative study. Research conclusions will be mainly generated from positivist tests. In other words, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will not introduce any metaphysical conflicts leading to ambiguity in generating research findings. However, this might not be case for studies that are dominantly interpretive or equally crediting both qualitative and quantitative elements in a study.

In predominantly interpretivist research, if quantitative methods are mainly used only in a descriptive manner to suggest a potential existence of a phenomenon, no conflicts will result from combining the two types of methods. Bourdieu’s (1984) employment of quantitative descriptive data is a good example. For this type of research, data analysis and research findings are dominantly qualitative. Instead of using empirical tests to examine the significance of relationships among the major variables underlying the focal phenomena, the major variables in the quantitative account and the phenomenon as a whole will be put back to the social context for theoretical analysis. A considerable amount of this type of research used secondary or publicized data as the start point to identify or frame a phenomenon of interest.
A convenient example is to use data published by Statistics Canada to describe fast food consumption and its potential influence on obesity rates among Canadian teenagers.

Effective combination of qualitative and quantitative methods might be most problematic in studies where findings relying on both methods are equally important for the overall research output. I would like to draw attention to two potential caveats related to the conceptualization of the phenomenon of interest and the embeddedness of phenomena in a social context.

Some concepts cannot be easily operationalized and empirically tested even in natural settings. These concepts could have one or more of the following characteristics: abstract, multifaceted, dynamic, idiosyncratic, and socially discrete. Think about concepts such as self-identity, culture, consumption, and nostalgia, where it will it be difficult, if at all possible, to develop scales that could accurately measure them and to empirically test their relationships with other variables in experiments. I will use the example of cross-cultural studies to elucidate this point. “Culture” is probably most often mentioned in so-called cross-cultural (comparison) studies. However, paradoxically, cross-cultural studies seldom provide any insights into the cultural groups under investigation. Culture could always manage to slip away. Take Aaker et al.’s (2008) recent publication on mixed emotion where for example, they compared Asian American and American participants’ ability to recall mixed emotions and their preference of advertisements featuring mixed emotions. They concluded that Asian Americans are more prone to accept mixed emotions because they are culturally more cultivated to accept dualism. In this study and studies of similar nature, culture is reduced to a variable and examined either as an independent variable and moderator. Culture is abstracted as orthogonal dimensions (e.g. Hofstede’s scale mapping culture on five major dimensions) or coded as dummy variables. The concept of culture is folded rather than unfolded in this type of studies. If culture is studied in a more interpretive manner, the research question is probably how dualism was formed culturally in American and an Asian culture. The two approaches imbue different meanings in culture incongruent with simplistic assumptions. For Aaker et al, culture is the shared values of a particular cultural group, and they assume that the homogeneity of cultural meanings far outweigh the diversity within a particular cultural group. Interpretivists such as Arnould and Thompson (2005) would not agree with Aaker et al.’s (2008) conceptualization of culture:

“Rather than viewing culture as a fairly homogenous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society (e.g. Americans share this kind of culture; Japanese share that kind of culture), CCT explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groups that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and marketing capitalism.” (p. 868-869)

Thus, it is difficult to envision using both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the same research question on culture and integrate the findings of the two, due to the conflicts in conceptualization. However, this discussion also reveals the opportunity to use both methods to study cross-cultural differences with a broader scope and more depth.

A second potential caveat related to simultaneous use of qualitative and quantitative research methods is related to the embeddedness of phenomena in sociohistorical contexts. Different from information processing researchers, consumer behaviour researchers, especially CCT researchers, defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) are more interested in contextualized consumer behaviours. Their research questions are often framed as “how this consumer group experiences this particular consumption activity during that particular historical period of time”. In other words, localized meanings are of interest. On one hand, creating a unified code for localized meaning is extremely difficult if not impossible. On the other hand, quantitatively testing relationships among variables might lose insight into the interactive
process where a phenomenon is formed and refined in a particular social and historical context. For this type of interpretive study, quantitative data might be better used for descriptive purpose.

This problem might be a hindrance especially for researchers of the style of “particular humanist” characterized by Hirschman (1985). Using Sidney Levy as an example, Hirschman (1985) described that “to the particular humanist, knowledge derives from personal contact and must be interpreted within the subjective context both and observer and the observed” (p. 235). This particular epistemology and emphasis on the individuality of each consumer make nomothetic quantification of concepts among a group futile.

Therefore, it is fair to say that even though qualitative and quantitative research methods are not naturally tied to any specific research paradigm and its ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions, there is no guarantee that both methods could be effectively used in investigating different consumer topics. Surely, almost all the qualitative data could be quantified in the sense of being coded in quantitative categories (Blumer, 1956). The problem might lie in the difficulty in defining the conceptual boundaries and ensuring the perceptual difference of the same concept can be readily reflected by the numerical differences.

**Philosophy of Science and Consumer Research**

**The Value of Paradigms**

Knowledge on the philosophy of science in general and research paradigms in particular is valuable in helping researchers identify their own assumptions. Especially in the time of paradigmatic pluralism, it became necessary to examine one’s own assumptions and paradigmatic preferences before conducting research. As Morgan (1983) puts it, “the social researcher can gain much by reflecting on the nature and merits of different approaches before engaging in a particular mode of research practice” (p. 369). At a grand level, discussions on paradigms are critical in defining what knowledge can be classified as scientific, as can be found in Calder and Tybout’s (1987) discussions on data collecting and analyzing methods and types of knowledge generated.

Paradigmatic shifts defined and are still redefining consumer research, as the literature review shows. More importantly, current paradigms are mirrors reflecting our understandings of ourselves, the society in which we are living, and our relationships with others. For example, research on brand community reveals new relationship structures organized by commercialized commodities rather than geographical vicinity or kinships (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Research on consumer’s preference for particular brands that were once popular during the field’s late adolescence or early adulthood explores our nostalgic inclination, an interesting emotional characteristic of human beings (Holbrook, 1993).

**Take It Seriously Yet Lightly**

Nevertheless, the paradigm war seems to be overheated and futile. If there is any purpose for this war, it should be seeking opportunities to stimulate dialogues among different paradigms. Or to adopt a more liberal attitude, we should encourage the emergence of alternative paradigms or even permit the possibility of overthrowing the concept of paradigm for better systems to classify the scientific community and the guidelines of doing scientific research. This is not a purposeful proposal of anarchism, but more of a reminder of the potential confining effects of stereotyped ideas of particular paradigms. Paradigmatic pluralism might be more integrated and effective when our already-held assumptions and opinions pertaining to particular paradigms are at least temporarily absent. Low et al.’s (2004) effort to
“paradigmap” existing marketing theories is a good try to identify “spaces” that have not yet been touched. Researchers should be aware of the potential constrains placed by their choice of research paradigm(s).

Equally important, more efforts should be directed to carry out concrete and meaningful consumer research. Ultimately, research paradigms will not be defined or changed by abstract debates over the merits and shortcomings of particular paradigms, but by accumulations and evaluations of down-to-earth studies. Thus, periodic reflection on paradigmatic evolution is beneficial, if one is not lost in an abstract paradigmatic war detached from concrete research characterizing his/her own academic field. To sum up, I suggest that it might be more beneficial to take the issue of research paradigm seriously yet lightly.

References


