

Response construction in consumer behavior research[☆]

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Abstract

To date, researchers have been relatively unsuccessful in accounting for a substantial proportion of the variance in the measures of consumer behavior that have been investigated. It is posited here that one of the primary reasons for this lack of success is that most studies of consumer behavior use self-reports—answers or responses to research questions—that are often very labile. It is further posited that responses to research questions are not generally revealed (retrieved directly from memory) but rather are constructed at the time a question is asked and answered. Because they are derived from processes that are inherently constructive, self-reports are susceptible to a variety of contaminating influences that collectively constrain the ability of researchers to explain or predict consumer behavior. Several suggestions are offered for addressing response construction processes and their effects.

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1. Introduction

More than two decades ago, [Jacoby \(1978\)](#) authored a scathing “state-of-the-art review” of consumer behavior research. Jacoby began his review, which coincidentally received the prestigious Harold H. Maynard Award from the American Marketing Association for its contribution to marketing theory, by stating that “too large a proportion of the consumer (including marketing) research literature is not worth the paper it is printed on or the time it takes to read” (p. 87). A major theme throughout his review was that researchers had produced relatively little substantive knowledge of consumer behavior.

If “substantive knowledge” can be equated with “variance accounted for,” it would appear that [Jacoby \(1978\)](#) was correct in his assessment of consumer behavior knowledge produced. Following an analysis of 70 different behavioral data sets (including but not limited to consumer behavior data sets), [Cote and Buckley \(1987\)](#) found that, of the variance accounted for in a variety of construct measures, less than 42% was due to the traits studied; the

remainder was accounted for by the methods employed and by error.

Although [Peterson and Jolibert’s \(1995\)](#) meta-analysis of 1520 country-of-origin effects revealed that, on average, the presence of a country-of-origin cue accounted for 26% of the variance in perceptions and purchase intentions, their results appear to be somewhat of an anomaly. In a general meta-analysis of the variance accounted for in consumer behavior experiments over the time period 1970–1982 (which included the publication of [Jacoby’s 1978](#) review), [Peterson et al. \(1985\)](#) found that, across 118 independent experiments containing 1036 effects, on average, 5% of the variance in the dependent variables was accounted for by experimental manipulations. An identical percentage was obtained by [Wilson and Sherrell \(1993\)](#) in their meta-analysis of the effect of message source manipulation on persuasibility. More recently, a meta-analysis of 580 survey-based regression analyses (a majority of which were carried out in consumer behavior studies) conducted by the author covering the period 1964–1994 revealed that, on average, the variance accounted for in a dependent variable by an independent variable was slightly less than 1% (the average zero-order correlation coefficient was .08).

Thus, in general, the amount of variance accounted for in measures of consumer behavior would seem to be relatively minor. A question then arises as to why this is so. The amount of variance accounted for is a function of many factors, including the theory employed (or the lack of

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theory), the research procedures and techniques utilized, the individuals and populations studied, and even the phenomena and constructs investigated. However, there is another plausible explanation for the minimal variance typically accounted for in consumer behavior research. This explanation is based on the data collected and analyzed in consumer behavior research.

1.1. Reliance on self-report data

Much of what is known about consumer behavior, and, indeed, human behavior in general, is based on self-reports or, more generally, answers or responses to questions (e.g., Peterson and Kerin, 1981). While the theories, research procedures and techniques, individuals and populations studied, and phenomena and constructs investigated vary greatly in consumer behavior research, a common thread is the use of self-report data.

To illustrate, examination of the articles contained in the *Journal of Consumer Research* since its inception reveals that fully 73% have relied on self-report data for their conclusions. Self-report data are usually accepted at “face value,” regardless of their source (oftentimes college students) and despite the fact that there is virtual consensus as to their fallibility. One need only peruse such classic articles as “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes” (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977) or “Verbal Reports as Data” (Ericsson and Simon, 1980) to appreciate the difficulties that can arise when using self-report data in consumer behavior research. A possible reason for the fallibility of self-report data relates to the notion that answers to research questions are constructed as they are elicited. This notion is the subject of this article.

2. Responses are constructed

The fundamental premise of this article is that the self-report data employed in consumer behavior research consist of answers that have been constructed as responses to questions. Although answers to certain questions (“Are you male or female?”) may almost be reflexive, it is proposed that, in general, even the answers to factual questions, such those asking about age and income, are constructed “on-line,” “on-the-fly,” or in “real time” when the questions are asked. Rather than simply retrieving a response from memory—merely recalling information from memory or revealing a psychological characteristic and reporting that information or characteristic in response to a question, it is hypothesized that consumers generally construct their response when answering a question.

The notion that responses are subject to inherently constructive cognitive processes is neither new nor novel. For example, more than 30 years ago, Bogart (1967, p. 335) wrote that sometimes asking a question “forces the crystallization and expression of opinions where [previously] there

were no more than chaotic swirls of thought.” More recently, in the context of attitude measurement, Wilson and Hodges (1992) concluded that attitudes are “temporary constructs” formed at the moment a question is asked and answered. This opinion is consistent with that of Zaller and Feldman (1992, p. 582), who wrote that “people do not merely reveal preexisting attitudes on surveys; to some considerable extent, people are using the questionnaire to decide what their ‘attitudes’ are” (i.e., they construct their attitudes and question answers simultaneously).

Even more recently, Schwarz et al. (1998, p. 150) observed that participants in a survey answering an attitude question

...may either retrieve a previously formed attitude judgment from memory, or they may “compute” [emphasis added] a judgment [response] on the spot...[To do so] they will also need to retrieve or construct [emphasis added] some standard against which the target is evaluated.

In brief, although the “traditional view [of the attitude response process] holds that evaluative responses are cognitively represented in memory and may be directly (and automatically) activated” (Lavine et al., 1998, p. 359), there is an increasing belief among researchers that many attitudes are temporary constructions. Consequently, to the extent that attitudes are constructed, as seems to be the case for a variety of attitudes, answers to questions reporting attitudes must also be constructed (e.g., Lavine et al., 1998; Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). There is no logical alternative to response construction in such a case.

2.1. Response construction is pervasive

This article goes beyond responses to attitude questions in that it argues that responses to most questions are constructed, not only those to attitude questions. As such, the present position is consistent with that of Schwarz et al. (1998, p. 150), who observed that if study participants are answering a question about behavior, they “need to recall or reconstruct [emphasis added] relevant instances of this behavior from memory.” Even questions that intuitively would be expected to be answered through direct recall, such as questions about past behaviors, generally require that responses be constructed (e.g., Blair and Burton, 1987; Menon, 1997). Note, however, that no argument is being put forth here as to the specific psychological processes underlying response construction. Such an argument is beyond the purpose and scope of this article (and any attempt at exposition would greatly exceed the current page constraint).

Although it is argued that responses to questions are constructed, construction is perhaps best construed as existing as a continuous phenomenon that can take several different forms and occur at various stages of the question-and-answer process. Semantics aside, the extent to

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