

# Boosting the impact of consumer research in the world

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Researchers from the University of Southern California, Columbia, London Business School, George Washington University, University of Colorado-Boulder, and University of California Irvine published a

provocative new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the relatively narrow impact of consumer research and suggests ways to change that situation.

The study, forthcoming in the March 2020 issue of the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Creating Boundary-Breaking Marketing-Relevant Consumer Research" and is authored by Deborah J. MacInnis, Vicki G. Morwitz, Simona Botti, Donna Hoffman, Robert V. Kozinets, Donald R. Lehmann, John G. Lynch, Jr., and Cornelia Pechmann.

Consumption and [consumer behavior](#) are interwoven into contemporary society. Therefore, marketers, journalists, policymakers, and members of the public all have a stake in the topics that consumer researchers study. So why is it that most consumer research has a relatively narrow impact on these marketplace stakeholders as well as on academics in other disciplines? Specifically, consumer researchers tend to cite scholars in other fields (e.g., psychology, anthropology, sociology) far more than scholars in other fields cite scholarly consumer research. Similarly, most business practitioners turn to accessible, business-related popular writers before they seek the advice of consumer researchers. In the policy realm, consumer researchers' influence is often dwarfed by that of economists, psychologists, and legal professionals.

The relatively narrow impact of consumer research is not due to a lack of talent or commitment of individual researchers, the quality or rigor of the work, or its potential to offer insights. Rather, a new article in the *Journal of Marketing* argues that consumer researchers handicap themselves by adhering to implicit boundaries or defaults about what they study, why they study it, and how they communicate their findings. Adhering to such defaults can limit their thinking, the knowledge they produce, how they execute research, and the range of stakeholders they reach with their findings.

As a consequence of these implicit boundaries, and despite its interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder potential, consumer research is often perceived to lack significance. This practically means that instead of research contributing to business or society at large, impact is often limited to other closely related academics who study the same topics. This research team urges consumer researchers to break these boundaries in order to broaden their impact, lest they become irrelevant to non-academic marketing stakeholders and cede influence to non-marketing academic disciplines.

Why should and how does one engage in boundary-breaking marketing-relevant consumer research? This article offers answers to this question. It begins by presenting a conceptual framework that distinguishes the implicit boundaries that characterize most researchers' choices about marketing-relevant consumer research from boundary-breaking alternatives. The researchers then provide guidance to the ambitious consumer researcher seeking to contribute in this way. The authors note that a key way consumer researchers limit their influence has to do with why the research is done in the first place. Rather than attempting to influence like-minded academics in marketing and consumer research, the authors make the case for why and how to influence academics in other disciplines, as well as industry, government and nongovernmental organizations trying to help protect [consumers](#), and society more broadly. Rather than relying so heavily on other academic articles for idea generation, the authors argue for looking outward for generating the ideas to be tested, and looking to emerging real-world phenomena. The authors argue that an important way that consumer researchers can contribute new and general theory is by explaining observations from these emerging real-world phenomena in terms of very general and basic concepts that have not yet been recognized by academic and practitioner experts.

The authors describe five published articles that exemplify boundary-

breaking marketing-relevant consumer research. These articles have offered fresh and novel insights for academics in marketing and related disciplines. They also have had tangible and significant effects on other relevant marketplace stakeholders, including business, government, and society. Concrete lessons from these cases are provided to guide authors. Additional strategies designed to help researchers, faculty members who train Ph.D. students, and other gatekeepers identify actions that can facilitate and accelerate boundary-breaking consumer research are also described. This guidance is intended to both facilitate boundary-breaking consumer research and reduce the perception that the field's disciplinary norms and instructional practices make it too risky to have broader impact on stakeholders outside of academic marketing and consumer research.

**More information:** Deborah J. MacInnis et al, Creating Boundary-Breaking, Marketing-Relevant Consumer Research, *Journal of Marketing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242919889876](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919889876)

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