

# What does marketing have to do with ill-advised consumer behavior?

13 January 2021, by Matt Weingarden



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Researchers from University of Hawaii and University of Florida published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that argues that a biological account of human behavior, especially undesirable behavior, will benefit human welfare. This biological perspective can complement traditional psychological, anthropological, and economic perspectives on consumption, particularly with respect to the vital topic of self-control.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Consumer Self-Control and the Biological Sciences: Implications for Marketing Stakeholders" and is authored by Yanmei Zheng and Joe Alba.

Society's understanding of human ills is constantly evolving. Many ill-advised consumer behaviors are conventionally viewed through a non-biological lens, with the underlying biological causation of such behaviors often neglected. This research considers two biological domains that have produced a tsunami of findings in very recent years: neuroscience and genetics. A review of the biological literature shows that many undesirable consumer behaviors are biologically rooted in the

brain and the genes. These biological insights bear important implications for [public policy](#), marketing practice, and consumer well-being.

The researchers argue, however, that biological insights will not translate directly into improved welfare if those insights fail to make an impression on marketing's many stakeholders. They further argue that the road to welfare-enhancing policies will be rocky if the lay public is resistant to the implications of biology. They sought to understand laypeople's existing beliefs about biological causation and gauge how those beliefs can be shaped by findings from the [biological sciences](#).

To do so, the researchers conducted 10 studies to examine lay beliefs about—and lay reactions to—biological causation. Zheng explains that "Overall, we find a sizable amount of resistance to biological causation, in part due to the entrenched lay belief in mind-body dualism. Moreover, the studies show that acceptance of biology as a causal explanation of human [behavior](#) varies as a function of the portrayal of biological causation, the nature of the behavior, the amount of deliberation by the actor, and individual differences of the external observer. On an optimistic note, the studies also suggest that acceptance of biological causation can be influenced by marketing scholarship and marketing practice."

Biological causation has multiple implications. First, if biological causation becomes more widely accepted by the general public, policymakers' effort to regulate certain products and protect certain consumers will garner more public support. Moreover, policies that focus on prevention (e.g., investment in high-quality childhood education, social and family support programs, etc.) will gain more traction. Second, biological causation may raise more public scrutiny for some firms (e.g., unhealthy food and weight-loss programs) and alter the business models for others (e.g., healthcare and insurance industries). Biological causation may

also open new opportunities for companies that provide welfare services and self-enhancement offerings. Third, biological causation will enhance consumers' self-understanding, which can translate into an improved state of well-being; it will also enhance understanding of others, which can translate into greater empathy and mutual respect.

Alba says "We believe that a biological account of human behavior can benefit [human welfare](#). In addition, we believe marketing can play a critical role in facilitating public understanding and acceptance of biological causation. A truer understanding of the biological underpinnings of behavior should reduce moral scolding and enhance empathy toward those who exhibit poor self-control and other "failings"—including depression, irresoluteness, social awkwardness, infidelity, and even a lack of empathy—for which the biological and psychological causes are mistakenly dissociated. As the understanding of biological causation increases, so too should comity, mutual understanding, and societal well-being."

**More information:** Yanmei Zheng et al, EXPRESS: Consumer Self-Control and the Biological Sciences: Implications for Marketing Stakeholders, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). DOI: [10.1177/0022242920983271](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920983271)

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