# Transformative consumer research in the new era of marketing: An introduction to the special issue

**Transformative Consumer Research in the New Era of Marketing: An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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This special issue follows from the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) conference that took place in June of 2023 at the Royal Holloway University of London, just over 15 years after the inaugural TCR conference in 2007 at Dartmouth College. TCR reached this milestone having re-invigorated and consolidated consumer research scholarship in the drive to foreground the study of how consumption intersects with complex and pressing social problems and well-being when framing our research questions and hoped-for contributions (Mick 2006). In so doing, TCR advanced in lockstep with the rising consciousness within wider marketing discipline "to address questions of relevance to the field *and* [emphasis added] the world" (Coulter 2016 p.136) As such, this shift is envisaged as the 'new era' of scholarship transcending epistemological and disciplinary boundaries to determine dimensions and determinants of societal impact as one of marketing outcomes (Chandy et al. 2021; MacInnis et al. 2020; Scott and Mende 2022; Vargo 2022).

The thrice-increased size of TCR conferences (from 100 in 2007 – Mick 2008, to over 300 in 2023), several special issues (for some examples, see Davis and Pechmann 2013; Mende and Scott 2019; Mick and Netemeyer 2021; Özçağlar-Toulouse and Burroughs 2014), and a stream of publications tackling a wide range of problems including – to name a few – hunger (Bublitz et al. 2019); poverty (Blocker et al. 2013); forced displacement (Boenigk et al. 2021) and discrimination (Williams and Henderson 2012) – stand in testament of TCR's

contribution to the marketing discipline's positive societal impact. By centering how marketing, as a force generating and facilitating experiences, practices and processes of consumption, can impact well-being at individual and/or group levels, the TCR paradigm has stimulated ambitious theoretical innovations which have been successfully applied and tested empirically, generating impact in and beyond academe. For more detailed summaries of this progress, see Mende and Mick (this issue ref); Davis et al. (2016); Davis and Ozanne (2019); Davis and Pechmann (2020); Ozanne et al. (2024); and Zeng and Botella-Carrubi (2023).

Yet, challenges to well-being are persisting, growing and multiplying. For example, the UN World Social Report (United Nations 2025) highlights staggering inequalities, declining social trust and rising insecurity and fragmentation to threaten sustainable development worldwide at an unprecedented scale. The World Economic Forum Global Risks Report (Elsner et al. 2025) identifies extreme weather events, pollution, natural resource shortages, misinformation and disinformation, adverse outcomes of AI technologies, involuntary displacement and warfare among top 10 short- and long-term risks of the future.

While the state of societal challenges above is a discouraging read, in conceiving this special issue we chose to interpret them as impetus for identifying directions for new explorations. We were particularly motivated to encourage the development of theoretical perspectives that recognize and balance interdependencies between natural, human (social, economic, political) and technological ecologies and consider short- and long-term impacts across these ecologies when proposing solutions for enhancing consumer and societal well-being. This focus draws inspiration from studies advancing sustainability integration frameworks (Khlif et al. 2022; Montesano et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2017) which argue that reductionist foci and lacking recognition of time effects "can overlook critical interactions across system components" and either impede sustainable development or produce negative effects in overlooked ecologies (Liu et al. 2015). The following example contextualizes the

potential implications of a reductionist perspective overtime. Climate change, natural resource scarcity and conflicts are intertwined factors impacting involuntary displacement, with internal displacement forecast to become more widespread (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2024; Warziniack 2013). While the development of effective refugee support services is vital in the current time horizon, tackling displacement long-term also entails addressing the root causes, such as overconsumption and sociopolitical polarization. The importance of moving to integrative perspectives is also emphasized by the recent UN evaluations identifying several of its Sustainable Development Goals as inter-related drivers addressing the most persisting societal challenges and advocate for the development of multifaceted solutions (United Nations 2025).

The core tenets of TCR – purposeful ontological and epistemological diversity, emphasis on inclusion of perspectives beyond western hemisphere and focus on impacts on well-being through interactions between consumer (individuals, communities) and institutional (brands, organizations, governments) actors, and sociocultural and situational forces (Mick et al. 2012) – offer a particularly fitting foundation for advancing integrative, systemic sustainability-informed marketing theorizing. In this spirit, the papers presented in this special issue explore a variety of newly-emerged and underrecognized dimensions, enablers of and threats to consumer well-being in the present and the future within multiple interdependent ecologies. Although each draws on distinctly different concepts and unique frameworks, these papers are united by demonstrating how leaning into interdependencies can uncover new paths for advancing and sustaining positive transformations and support foreseeing and mitigating the potential negative unintended outcomes.

Mende and Mick (this issue) examine the facilitating conditions for sustaining TCR itself. This is a timely theorization: while TCR's history so far evidences its contribution to

creating and improving well-being, it is necessary to reflect upon possibilities for advancement of TCR's scope and scale long-term. Adopting the perspective of science of science, they examine TCR's emergence and progress through interrelationships between scientific ideas, individual scholars, and institutions. Through this exploration, authors identify the need to improve the balance between the moral, academic and regulatory legitimacy of TCR and actional directions for this improvement, including identifying hidden structures and mechanisms of different legitimacies, methodological integration of new technologies, and learning from and establishing presence within other disciplines.

In theorizing sustainable consumer well-being as a longitudinal equilibrium between prosperity of people and ecological stewardship, Machin et al. (this issue) illuminate coordination of transformations between different levels of marketplace activities as a critical condition for achieving this equilibrium. Authors develop a novel triple helix model, each strand representing a different ecology, that, when performing optimally, encapsulates the interrelationships between micro-level consumer decision making transformations (from egocentric to ecocentric), meso-level organizational transformations (from pursuing consumer satisfaction to well-being via integration of marketing and sustainability strategies), and macro-level policy-making transformations (from regulating to incentivizing high impact sustainability behaviors).

A complementary perspective is offered by Komarova et al.'s (this issue) conceptualization of curiosity as a motivational factor igniting and driving well-being enhancing transformations from human to other ecologies. Examining the role of epistemic curiosity in transformative consumer journeys, the authors delineate its' social, organizational and systemic facilitators to show how fostering consumer curiosity can stimulate positive transformations in organizational cultures and fabrics of marketplaces. In deriving a holistic theorizing of curiosity, authors articulate its significance as s sustainable catalyst for future

transformation and demonstrate how supporting transformations at micro level of societal organization can powerfully galvanize transformations at other levels.

In contrast, Roy et al. (this issue) examine the impact of macro-level modes of governance (democratic/autocratic) and of exogenous shocks, such as pandemics, financial crises, and wars, on the capacity of nonprofit organizations to sustain philanthropy as a well-being facilitating meso-level mechanism. Philanthropic activities increase accessibility of marketplace offerings; thus, macro-pressures on nonprofit organizations have an immediate negative spillovers on the well-being of the most disadvantaged consumers and communities. Highlighting that, in the current volatile environment, these pressures occur in fast succession, authors identify marketing activities as a mechanism mitigating macro-level pressures and enhancing well-being via sustaining nonprofit organizations.

Onel et al. (this issue) examine short- and long-term implications of integrating technologies (specifically, Artificial Intelligence – AI) to encourage well-being enhancing transformations in human and natural ecologies, focusing particularly on AI's potential to enable and enhance pro-environmental consumption. They demonstrate how distributed (human + AI) cognition can bridge environmental attitude-behavior gap and examine systemic, normative and psychological determinants of sustainability-enabling AI assimilation, as well as potential unintended barriers a dependency on AI can pose to progress of pro-environmental consumption in the future.

The emergence of unintended consequences is central to Arias et al.'s (this issue) conceptual typology of negative boomerang effects unintentionally generated by efforts seeking to curb poverty. The typology categorizes tangible livelihood and consumption effects, and intangible cognitive and emotional effects extending across both livelihood and

consumption. By unpacking the drivers of these effects, authors demonstrate the counter-effective nature of approaches "responsibilizing" people living in poverty.

Combined, this curation of papers aptly addresses the vision of this special issue and presents novel theories that consider the interdependence of intersecting ecologies and well-being, while honoring TCR's heritage of scholarship with impact. In closing, we are sincerely grateful to the Academy of Marketing Science Review for providing its platform for these theoretical forays, as well as authors and reviewers. We are hopeful that the papers included in this issue inspire and inform many more years of socially impactful research by TCR community and beyond.

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