

# Transformative Consumer Research and Public Policy and Marketing Research: Distinct, Yet Complementary, Approaches

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Research on marketing in society has become increasingly prevalent, as evident in many subgroups such as public policy and marketing (PPM), macromarketing, consumer economics, social marketing, marketing ethics, international consumer policy, Transformative Consumer Research (TCR), and the Subsistence Marketplaces Initiative (Wilkie and Moore 2012). PPM and TCR represent significant communities, with over 2,500 conference registrations over the past decade between them.

The PPM and TCR communities have significant overlap in conference participants, research identity, and aspiration to make the world a better place, leaving many researchers confused about differences between the two communities. Given their cooperation, size, and publication history in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (*JPP&M*) we explore helpful distinctions in the approaches of these partner organizations while also demonstrating their complementarity. We start with a brief history of both communities and explain the key differences between them (for an overview, see Table 1). We then discuss two substantive current issues in “marketing in society”—vaccination and marijuana legalization—suggesting future research questions based on each perspective.

## Brief History of Public Policy and Marketing and Transformative Consumer Research

PPM emanates from the American Marketing Association (AMA) and is informally defined as the community associated with several “marketing and society” AMA activities such as the annual Marketing & Public Policy Conference (MPPC) and *JPP&M* (Wilkie and Moore 2012). MPPC held its first annual conference in 1992, and the AMA began publishing *JPP&M* articles in 1991. PPM has strong connections with government organizations such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

TCR emanates from the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) and is informally defined as the community associated with several “consumer and society well-being” activities

initiated by ACR, such as the annual TCR conference and its “Societal Impact: Engagements with Practitioners” webinars (Davis, Ozanne, and Hill 2016). In addition, TCR has published several special issues in *JPP&M*, and many of ACR’s *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research* issues are devoted to TCR topics. TCR has strong connections with nonprofit organizations such as Hunger Task Force, Ashoka, and the Aspen Institute. TCR has attracted significant participation from international scholars and doctoral students.

## Key Distinctions and Synergies of PPM and TCR

The main distinction between PPM and TCR is that TCR emanates from ACR and PPM from AMA. AMA focuses on the marketing/marketer side of the relationship between marketing and consumption, whereas ACR focuses on the consumption/consumer side of this relationship. Marketer perspectives highlight the actions an organization can take in the marketplace, and thus, PPM focuses naturally on the courses of action adopted by government, parties, and businesses. Overall, PPM research emphasizes problems, processes, policies, procedures, and/or protocols (Andrews et al. 2021).

In contrast, TCR focuses on the perspectives of consumers (individuals and collectives) through transformation, or a dynamic change in form. Thus, TCR (while supportive of policy solutions) focuses more on consumer perspectives, whereas PPM focuses on the actions of policy makers (while supportive of consumer perspectives). In other words, TCR aims to impact localized consumer states in its research

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**Table 1.** A Brief Overview and Comparison of TCR and PPM Research Approaches.

Key Characteristics	PPM	TCR
Founding organizations	AMA	ACR
Primary research focus	Marketing	Consumption
Primary research perspective	Marketers	Consumers
Primary research goals	Inform and encourage policy actions at more macro, centralized levels	Positively transform consumer quality of life at more micro, local levels
Typical external partnerships	Governmental organizations (e.g., FTC, FDA, CDC)	Consumer advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations (e.g., Hunger Task Force, Ashoka, the Aspen Institute)

implications, while PPM encourages centralized policy actions in its research implications. Both groups aim to impact society with regard to the ways they can help each other toward common goals.

Consider the most common words that appear in the proceedings of each conference in 2015 (the most recent conference scheduled to occur in the same week in nearby locations, one following the other, and attended by many of the same participants). Even with significant participant overlap, MPPC proceedings more frequently contained words that were concretely focused on marketing actions (e.g., policy, health, food, water, energy, tobacco). TCR conference proceedings more often featured words that were abstractly focused on consumer states (e.g., well-being, engagement, intersectionality, mindfulness, understanding, cross-cultural) (Davis 2015).

Few initiatives in our field integrate marketer and consumer perspectives, especially in ways that promote the goals of well-being. TCR–PPM distinctions benefit society because they are so complementary, not only because their characteristics balance one another but also because TCR and PPM communities mutually contribute to each other so well. For example, MPP and TCR held a joint preconference in 2015, *JPP&M* regularly publishes special issues on TCR, and TCR often funds grant proposals from the PPM community. We further illustrate these synergies with a discussion of two timely societal issues of interest to both PPM and TCR scholars: vaccinations and marijuana. For an overview and comparison of PPM and TCR perspectives, see Table 1.

## Vaccination Hesitancy and Acceptance

As we write this piece, the world is grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, with many countries coming in and out of lockdowns. Society's ability to control the spread of COVID-19 depends on several factors, including communal compliance with mask wearing and social distancing, as well as acceptance of available COVID-19 vaccines.

A TCR approach to understanding consumer behavior might focus on uncovering roots of vaccine hesitancy, how different messaging appeals might boost mask wearing and social distancing compliance among various populations, and messaging tactics that might increase vaccine acceptance. For example, prior work has explored the role of psychological

reactance in vaccination priority and perceptions of the patient–provider service experience and relationship (Finkelstein et al. 2020).

Current popular press coverage alludes to a few current sources for COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. These include low trust in the pharmaceutical industry and the FDA approval process for the vaccine, along with doubts about the pace of vaccine development and the quality of the vaccine in terms of potential side effects and its long-term physiological impact. In addition, structural inequalities and social disparities in the medical field can also play a role. A TCR approach can explore ways to build and reestablish trust in the medical community, which might involve a communal engagement approach that partners with local organizations that are trusted and established in minority communities. TCR is especially well-suited to help in this way because of its strong international diversity, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons of effective and ineffective actions.

A PPM approach might explore how variance in governmental policy impacts vaccine acceptance and compliance with mask wearing and social distancing recommendations. In the United States, in the absence of a cohesive federal policy, states enacted various policies based on legislative and gubernatorial priorities. States such as California enacted more severe regulations on social and economic activities and policies focused on boosting mask wearing and social distancing compliance. In contrast, states such as Florida and Texas enacted less restrictive policies, prioritizing, in their view, economic activity. The relationship between more (vs. less) restrictive policies and the spread of COVID is not as predictable as one might expect, as many areas of California, for example, still struggle with exponential growth of the virus.

As vaccine distribution rolls out across the country, it might also be left to states to determine what, if any, restrictions to place on engagement in social behavior in the absence of accessing the vaccine. It is possible that states with more restrictive policies might require the vaccine for participation in public education or public activities, such as attendance of large sporting events. Might this also have a downstream effect on disease outbreak and economic activity? In support of this idea, research attests that variance in childhood immunization laws is related to disease outbreaks in the United States, with states that allow for high exemption rates (i.e., they allow for parents

to opt out of childhood immunizations) showing the highest spread of preventable childhood diseases (Bradford and Mandich 2015). Together, TCR and PPM researchers could explore the effect of variance in vaccination policy on consumer behavior and economic activity including attendance of large public events. They could also work together to explore how policy regarding hygienic practice (e.g., capacity limits, regulations around air circulation systems) impact shopper comfort. Finally, TCR and PPM researchers could explore attitudes toward vaccination policies and how these attitudes impact trust in governmental agencies and compliance with public health initiatives to control the spread of this and future pandemics.

## Marijuana Legalization

Marijuana (i.e., cannabis) legalization represents another timely societal issue of interest to the PPM and TCR communities. Once completely illegal in the United States, marijuana has gained considerable public acceptance; by the end of 2020, 36 U.S. states and 5 territories had approved legalization of cannabis for medical use, while 15 states and 2 territories legalized it for recreational use (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020). Very little research has addressed the benefits and risks of cannabis for individuals or society at large, however, and heated debates about its legalization persist among the media, academic researchers, and policy makers (Newman, Mason, and Langenderfer 2021). Thus, we briefly discuss a key element of cannabis legalization and regulation that is vital to maximizing well-being and consumer education within the context of *medical* marijuana, specifically (given its greater legal accessibility relative to recreational marijuana and the more complex debates surrounding it).

TCR can help inform consumer product education efforts about medical marijuana by uncovering which potential benefits and risks are most and least widely known and understood by consumers. Because awareness of a given benefit or risk does not necessarily equate to comprehension of it, it is critical that TCR scholars make this distinction accordingly. Doing so can help determine what types of appeals (e.g., informative or persuasive) are most appropriate at local levels and for which benefits/risks. Perhaps more importantly, TCR could be used to further determine which existing consumer beliefs about the *perceived* benefits/risks of medical marijuana are misaligned with the *actual* benefits/risks. Such insight would help identify issues that are in most need of consumer (re)education and help tailor marketing responses.

Other issues warranting exploration by the TCR community include consumers' knowledge (or lack thereof) about which type of marijuana products to purchase (e.g., strain type; CBD vs. THC), the methods available to consume them (e.g., flower, oil, edible), and how much to consume. TCR should also examine consumer knowledge about how to initially acquire a medical marijuana ID card (e.g., necessary qualifications, types of medical providers) and how to subsequently gain access to the

product (e.g., online vs. in store, types of retailers). Indeed, while some consumers may have relatively high product knowledge, they may still require assistance to access it (a process that can vary greatly in complexity from state to state). Particular attention should be paid to potential physical disparities in medical provider and/or product access (e.g., too much product access, leading to cannabis "swamps"; not enough product access, resulting in cannabis "deserts"). Lastly, it is imperative that TCR be used to identify which consumer segments most prevalently experience the aforementioned issues to fine-tune education efforts at local levels for both content and delivery.

PPM researchers typically approach issues such as marijuana legalization from a different perspective. For example, PPM researchers may aim to determine what product information restrictions or mandates, if any, should be placed on the content and/or delivery of direct-to-consumer marijuana advertising. They may also identify issues in need of potential corrective advertising by governmental organizations (such as the FTC) as cannabis marketing evolves. This can help reduce potential product risks to consumers, especially among the most vulnerable populations (e.g., youth, pregnant women, heavy users). Given that prior work has shown relationships between consumer health and the "built environment" (Newman, Howlett, and Burton 2014), PPM researchers should also consider whether land use and zoning laws can be effective policy interventions to further protect vulnerable populations (e.g., setting minimum distance requirements between cannabis retailers and schools).

PPM research can also be used to manipulate and assess key marijuana product packaging aspects such as serving sizes, potency levels, and anticipated effects, among others. The impact of different types of package claims (e.g., health, structural/functional) should also be explored across different in-store contexts (e.g., product packaging, point-of-purchase signage such as shelf talkers). Such information could inform policy makers about the type, quantity, and placement of information that should be restricted or mandated on cannabis packaging and/or in cannabis retail stores. PPM researchers could draw on established nutrition labeling theoretical frameworks for future work in many of these areas.

Together, TCR and PPM researchers can more holistically address consumer and societal issues surrounding marijuana legalization. These joint collaborations can first identify topics in most need of cannabis-related education and then propose and test specific policy actions to help clarify them accordingly. For example, a joint project might take a TCR approach to uncover and disentangle consumer confusion about the risks and benefits of different cannabis product types and then examine alternative package labels from a PPM perspective to propose actionable insight that policy makers could take to remedy the identified issues. Similarly, TCR and PPM researchers could cooperatively identify the consumer segments (and topics) that would benefit the most from corrective advertising to help policy makers select the most effective and efficient

approaches to doing so. In short, TCR and MPP researchers could jointly assess and promote consumer education about cannabis for the purpose of enhancing policy.

### Conclusion

TCR and PPM research represent distinct philosophies and approaches to informing “marketing in society” issues (see Table 1). However, as we have illustrated, TCR and PPM can have a greater overall positive impact on individual and societal well-being when integrated by more holistically informing consumer decisions and public policies. In other words, TCR and PPM research can better inform, and enhance, the relationship between marketing and society *together* than either can by itself.

Federal agencies, such as the FDA, FTC, and CDC, could use combined insights from these complementary perspectives to improve the efficacy of policies and promote societal well-being at broader levels. Integrated TCR and PPM research findings could similarly be used at the state, regional, and local levels to improve consumer well-being from the ground up. Likewise, individual consumers and consumer advocacy organizations, such as Hunger Task Force, Ashoka, and the Aspen Institute, benefit from integrated PPM and TCR perspectives as well. We posit that this complementary approach could ultimately have the greatest positive net impact on outcomes that are important to both TCR and PPM researchers.

Moving forward, we call for TCR and MPP researchers to form joint collaborations for journal articles, have joint special sessions at MPPC and TCR and conferences, create special journal issues at top marketing and consumer journals, publish joint articles, infuse their mutual insights into doctoral seminars, attract doctoral students interested in these fields, and attract a new generation of young scholars to cross theoretical and methodological boundaries. We encourage MPPC and TCR conference doctoral consortiums where scholars from each raise a new generation of students to seek combined insights. Specifically, we call for researchers of all experience levels to invest in the annual doctoral preconference at MPPC and to lead and participate in the TCR conferences, where teams of 8–12 researchers of diverse backgrounds join together to develop research related to well-being. We believe this early interest and participation among doctoral students is critical for growing the MPP and TCR communities.

The MPP and TCR communities celebrate the work of all researchers doing impactful work, regardless of whether they have a formal affiliation with our communities. We also recognize the unique value of MPP and TCR as places for community building, where scholars find like-minded colleagues to multiply their passions. Therefore, we also call on respected senior scholars to participate in the TCR and MPP communities to collaborate with young scholars to encourage them to break the mold and do more impactful research. It is true that experienced researchers do not necessarily rely on TCR or MPP to publish high-quality work on topics such as “marketing for a better world” or consumer well-being. However, TCR and MPP do offer unique opportunities to connect more with less

experienced researchers, encourage productive interactions, increase dialogue about pressing world problems, create safe communities around common interests, be part of a movement toward critical research mass on societal impact, and connect researchers with nonacademic stakeholders such as policy makers, advocacy groups, and nonprofit organizations. More to the point, less experienced scholars need these communities to find the support and training from more experienced scholars. Given that many scholars do not find common support in their home universities, the TCR and PPM communities offer places, connections, networks, and productive interactions that are otherwise difficult to find.

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### Authors' Contribution

Christopher L. Newman, Stacey R. Finkelstein, and Brennan Davis all contributed equally and are listed in reverse alphabetical order.

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