**Developing Conceptual Articles for JCR**

**Research Curation**

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Undoubtedly, some of the most highly cited and most enduringly valuable articles are conceptual in nature (Yadov, 2010; MacInnis 2011), and JCR has had a history of publishing such articles. However, despite JCR editors’ efforts to promote such papers, the prevalence of peer-reviewed conceptual papers has declined over time (Mick 1999; Deighton et al. 2010; McGill et al. 2011; Dahl et al. 2014). While there is emerging evidence that authors are submitting more conceptual papers than before, the publication success of these papers remains limited. One reason why may be that we, as researchers and reviewers, have little guidance on how to develop and evaluate such articles. For this reason, I use this JCR Research Curation to provide one perspective on factors that enhance the publication success of conceptual articles.

There is no one formula for writing successful conceptual articles. However, successful conceptual papers seem to do several things well:

1. ***They bring a new “big idea” or “provocative perspective” to bear on consumer research.*** Powerful conceptual papers provide new lenses for seeing things we haven’t seen before, or for seeing familiar things differently, more clearly, more simply, or more deeply. The “big idea” could relate to a specific construct, a theory, a domain of knowledge, research procedures, the discipline, or science itself (MacInnis 2011). Good conceptual papers give readers an “ah-ha” experience. In addition to learning something new, such papers *shift* our thoughts about a topic. What makes the “big idea” powerful is not just its novelty, but also its meaningfulness (see Dahl et al 2014); its elegance (i.e., its parsimony or ability to explain a lot with as few terms as possible); its insight (i.e., its ability to organize our thinking in new ways); and, finally, its generativity (i.e., its power to generate future research and additional novel ideas). These are criteria that writers and reviewers should use to evaluate conceptual papers.
2. ***They raise (and address) a set of questions that are foundational to their idea***. Powerful conceptual papers don’t just raise a big idea; they also *unpack* their idea clearly, persuasively, and broadly. Such unpacking allows others to see the logic behind the big idea, the scope of what it involves, and the generative power it entails. Often, such papers unpack a big idea by asking foundational questions about their topics, leading the reader through a natural sequence of questions. Examples include, “What is X”? “Why should we care about X?” “What purpose does X serve in the lives of consumers or in the work of researchers?” “How and why is X induced?” “Does X change over time as a function of Y, and if so, why?” “Under what conditions should X be higher or lower, and why?” When writing or evaluating conceptual papers, one should ask whether the paper has given us an expansive understanding of the big idea by addressing foundational questions pertinent to the topic at hand.
3. ***They are conceptually clear and logically coherent.*** Successful conceptual papers clearly bound the scope of their ideas from the outset. They do not leave the reader to wonder what the paper is about. Authors of strong conceptual papers provide clear definitions of their constructs. They make their assumptions explicit, and they organize their ideas such that each part of the paper fits together in a way that logically supports the big idea. Combined, the various elements of the paper tell a coherent and internally consistent story. Not only is the “big idea” addressed, but readers can see how the foundational questions that emanate from the big idea individually and collectively contribute to our understanding of that idea. When writing or evaluating conceptual papers, the clarity and coherence of the ideas are critical criteria.
4. ***They use a range of conceptual thinking skills when unpacking their ideas.*** Finally, when developing their big idea, writers of good conceptual articles demonstrate a diverse array of conceptual thinking skills (see Table 2). Conceptual thinkers are good at “envisioning”. They can *identify* new and interesting issues that others don’t yet see, and they can also see what others have identified in a *new or revised way*. They show facility in “explicating” their ideas, either by *delineating* (detailing, charting, or depicting their ideas in greater detail) or by *summarizing* ideas in a way that helps readers see the forest beyond the trees. Good conceptual thinkers are good at “relating” things to each other, either by *differentiating* things that others might see as similar or by *integrating* things that others might see as dissimilar. They use critical reasoning skills to *debate* issues, by *advocating* for their ideas using prior literature or persuasive logic or by *refuting* others’ ideas that aim to dispute their way of thinking. When writing or reviewing a conceptual paper, one might judge whether and to what extent the author uses these conceptual thinking skills to develop and unpack their big idea (see MacInnis 2011 for more detail on these thinking skills).

I use this Research Curation to illustrate these four points using examples of several conceptual papers that have been published in JCR. Whereas JCR has published a number of excellent conceptual papers (see Table 1; see also MacInnis 2011 for papers published in other marketing journals), I focus here on a few papers that (a) have had a significant impact by virtue of their citation count, (b) represent the diversity of our field, and (c) differ in terms of whether their big idea focuses on a theory, a domain, or a research paradigm.

**Hoch and Loewenstein (1991)** *identify* a *domain* called “time inconsistent preferences”. The big idea of this study is that consumers sometimes lose sight of their long-term goals (e.g., weight loss) in favor of short-term rewards (e.g., chocolate cake). This notion is something we can all relate to, though limited consumer research had focused on the topic prior to this paper. Thus, this paper contributes to consumer research by identifying *what time inconsistent preferences are*. The authors used research in economics and psychology to develop an *integrated theory* in regard to this question. The theory is integrated because it relies on a parsimonious set of constructs, and it shows how, and why, these constructs are essential to understanding time-inconsistent preferences. In answering the question of what time inconsistent preferences are, the authors address another important question: *why do we have time inconsistent preferences?* The theory that explains the answer to this question uses constructs identified earlier, and shows how they hang together in a coherent way. The theory helps to makes sense of an otherwise complex and challenging subject. Beyond showing skills in *envisioning* (i.e., identifying the relatively understudied phenomenon of time inconsistent preferences) and providing an *integrated* perspective, the authors show other conceptual thinking skills that help to build their case. They *delineate* a reference point model of desire. They *delineate* the drivers of impatience (e.g., physical proximity, temporal proximity and social comparisons). Moreover, they develop the construct of self-control and *delineate* two distinctly different (differentiation) paths by which self-control can be enhanced—specifically, strategies that reduce desire (avoidance, postponement, distraction, substitution) and a different set of strategies that increase willpower (pre-commitment, economic cost assessment, time binding, bundling of costs). The strategies within each path are common because they operate on either the desire or willpower component of self-control. By delineating these factors and showing how they are related, the authors address another set of important questions: *when are time inconsistent preferences strongest*, and *how can time inconsistent preferences be minimized* (i.e., how can self-control be maximized)? Throughout, the authors *advocate* for various aspects of their theory by using prior research that supports their ideas. The impact of this paper is extremely high. It has been cited 1,100 times by researchers in consumer behavior, economics, and psychology, and it has stimulated a substantial research base on self-control, considerations of the future, conceptions of time, views of desire, and more.

**McCracken (1986)** *identifies* the novel and “big” idea that the meaning of goods and services throughout a culture involves the movement of meaning across different levels of the cultural system. In so doing, McCracken provides the beginnings of a novel *theory* of meaning movement with a culture. He begins by *differentiating* and *delineating* three levels at which meaning is derived: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer. He describes *why the study of the movement of meaning through the cultural system is important*, and his description *advocates* for the notion that the study of meaning movement allows us to take into account the dynamic nature of meaning and how it relates to cultural institutions. He also suggests that marketing institutions (e.g., fashion, advertising systems) and consumer behaviors (e.g., possession, exchange, grooming and divestment rituals) are *similar* because all are instruments of meaning making. McCracken addresses the questions of *how meaning moves through* cultures and *from where meaning derives* by *delineating* the concepts ofcultural categories and cultural principles. He also *relates* these concepts to prior ethnographic literature in anthropology and marketing. He then *delineates* how two institutions (advertising and fashion) transfer meaning to goods. Creative directors (in advertising), designers, opinion leaders like journalists and social observers (in fashion) play a particularly powerful role in the transfer to meaning from the culturally constituted world to the good. “Groups on the margin” can be powerful forces in instituting radical changes in the meaning of goods. Literature related to these ideas is used to *advocate* for the proposed perspective. Finally, McCracken *delineates* the fascinating role of exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment rituals as processes by which meaning is transferred from the good to the consumer. In his conclusion, McCracken uses *differentiation* skills to suggest that the person-object relationships may be more complex and varied than that described by Veblen. Having been cited nearly 2,400 times, McCracken’s conceptual article is essential for any researcher interested in the meaning of goods, brands, and possessions.

**Friestadt and Wright (1994)** also show the conceptual skill of *identifying* a new idea. However, rather than identifying a new construct or theory, this paper considers a novel and understudied *domain*—that of “persuasion knowledge”. While consumer research had a rich and broad literature base on the topics of “persuasion” and “consumer knowledge”, Friestadt and Wright (1994) identified an entirely new way of thinking about these concepts. Their big idea is that consumers can develop knowledge *about how marketers attempt to persuade them*. A second big idea they propose is that the activation of persuasion knowledge can fundamentally change the nature of a persuasion encounter. The authors unpack their ideas by addressing foundational questions related to persuasion knowledge. In particular, they address the questions of (1) *what persuasion knowledge is* and (2) *what persuasion knowledge entails (i.e., what constructs and issues should be considered in developing a model of persuasion knowledge)*. In addressing these questions, the authors *delineate* the *factors that* *represent* the domain of persuasion knowledge, and they make the fundamental *underlying assumptions* of the model explicit. They also *delineate* the *types of beliefs* that targets and agents have about marketers’ goals and persuasion tactics, their effectiveness and their appropriateness, and how the target will cope with them. By delineating these factors, the authors clarify the scope of the persuasion knowledge domain. Having bound the domain of persuasion knowledge, the authors ask additional questions that are logical in light of our new insight on persuasion knowledge. For example, they ask, “*How does persuasion knowledge develop?*”Here, the authors *delineate* factors that cause persuasion knowledge to change over time, as agents and targets gain experience. The model further *delineates when* and *why* *agents are motivated to hold valid topic and agent attitudes*. The authors then ask, “*When is persuasion knowledge accessed?*” A critical element is the “change in meaning” principle, which holds that certain factors make targets aware that the agent is attempting to persuade the consumer. The authors *delineate* a variety of effects that may accrue from this realization. Having developed a model of persuasion knowledge, the authors then provide an *integrated perspective* on the model, describing how it *relates to (is different from and similar to*) prior research on attitude toward the ad, forewarning, inoculation and education, the elaboration likelihood model, the heuristic systematic model, attribution theory, and interpersonal compliance. As part of this integrated perspective, the authors *delineate* predictions from their model that are similar to the results of prior research (even though prior research has not had the goal of testing the persuasion knowledge model). They *summarize* their integrated theory and *advocate* for additional research on persuasion knowledge. Finally, they *delineate* research considerations for researchers studying persuasion knowledge. This paper has been widely cited and has made a substantial contribution to research in persuasion, marketing, consumer socialization, WOM, corporate social responsibility tactics and more.

**Belk (1988)** offers a *revised* perspective on our ideas about “the self”. He does so by *identifying* a new *domain* called the “extended self.” The big idea is that the “self” includes our possessions: We are what we have. Belk *advocates* for this idea by using research in myriad academic domains. For example, he uses literature to support the idea that the loss of possessions involves a diminished sense of self and that we seem to invest ourselves in objects through ownership and possession rituals. Beyond this basic notion, Belk raises a number of foundational questions about the extended self, using prior research in myriad academic disciplines to support (i.e., advocate for) his thinking. He asks, “*Why do we have an extended self?*” Here, Belk *delineates* the ways in which possessions are instrumental to our lives—we use them to have, to do and to be. He also *delineates* the importance of certain functions over different stages of the life course. They are instrumental to our mastery over the environment, to our relationships with others and to our connections to our past and where we come from. He asks, “*How do we use possessions to extend the self?*”Here*,* Belk marshals support to *delineate* three ways through which we learn to regard a possession as part of the extended self: through ownership and control, through creation, and through contamination. He also asks, “*At what identity level are possessions, as part of the extended self, relevant?”* Here, Belk *delineates* four levels of the self—the individual, the family, the community and the group, and he uses evidence from prior scholars to suggest that possessions are important to our sense of self at each of these levels. He asks, “*What are some special cases of possessions as part of the extended self?*”Here too, Belk *delineates* collections, money, pets, other people, and body parts as under-researched aspects of the extended self. Finally, he asks, “*Why should we care about the notion of an extended self?*” What implications does it have for consumer research? By unpacking each of the above questions, Belk convincingly demonstrates the relevance of the extended-self idea to domains that include vicarious consumption, gift giving, the care of possessions, organ donation, product disposition and disuse, and the role of the extended self in the meaning of life. As one of the most highly cited articles in JCR, this paper has had a strong impact on thinking about brands, possessions, meaning, attachments, collections, symbolic consumer behavior, and more.

**Bettman, Luce and Payne (1998**) develop a *revised and integrated* perspective on the domain of consumer choice. Their big idea is that in answering the broad questions of *how* choices are made and *why* they are made as they are, there is value in the idea that choices are constructed. That is, choices are contingent on a variety of factors such as the decision maker’s prior knowledge, the nature of the decision task, the decision maker’s goals, and contextual factors in the decision-making environment (e.g., how options are framed). The authors *summarize* different types of decision strategies identified in prior research. They also *identify* four distinct types of goals that can guide decision-making: accuracy goals, effort goals, goals of reducing negative emotions, and self-justification goals. *Differentiating* these goals is important because (a) these goals can vary in salience in the decision-making environment, and (b) they can strongly influence *how* and *why* certain choices are made. These ideas are laid out logically and coherently in the manuscript. The authors *advocate* in favor of the framework by *summarizing* prior literature in terms of its relationship to these goals. Thinking about decision making in terms of these meta-goals adds elegance and parsimony to a huge and overwhelming body of literature on consumer choice. The authors also use their framework to *delineate* novel constructs, relationships/theories and domains that can guide future work on constructed choice. Organizing the framework around the goals provides a clearer and more coherent account of decision making; moreover, such a framework is also generative due to its ability to *identify* novel areas in which future research is needed. Interestingly, while Bettman et al. *advocate* for their framework by showing its consistency with prior research, the authors also *debate* aspects of the own framework by articulating some findings that their framework cannot fully accommodate (i.e., framing effects and choice dynamics). They also stimulate research by noting that their framework has not fully addressed the question of *when* choices are adaptive. The generativity of this revised and integrated perspective is apparent in the fact that it has been cited over 2,300 times by researchers in a variety of fields relevant to decision making, both in the consumer behavior field and in other fields.

**Arnould and Thompson (2005)** reflect on the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research *paradigm.* The overarching goals of the paper are to address two foundational questions; “*What is Consumer Culture Theory?*” and “*What have we learned about consumers over the past 20 years from a CCT perspective?*”The authors *delineate* what CCT is, describing it as a “family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings”. While acknowledging these diverse perspectives, the authors also identify essential *similarities* that these perspectives have in common: They all address questions of consumers’ personal and collective identities as experienced in the cultural groups and dynamics in which these identities operate. Hence, CCT researchers are interested in *how* consumers make sense of and derive meaning from their lives and experiences as a function of the culture(s) in which they are embedded, particularly as cultures and cultural groups evolve over time. To further clarify the meaning of CCT research, the authors raise a number of points to *refute* common misperceptions related to *what CCT is not.* Specifically, it is *not* a study of contexts as ends in themselves, it is not a methodology, and it is not a renunciation of managerial relevance. In addressing the second question, the authors provide a retrospective *summary* of CCT studies and their theoretical contributions*.* They also *differentiate* four types of research programs in the area of CCT: (1) those that focus on consumer identity projects, (2) those that emphasize the study of marketplace cultures, (3) those that focus on how institutions and social structures influence consumption, and (4) those that emphasize mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and how consumers interpret, defy, or embrace these ideologies. Although they can be *differentiated*, these perspectives are *similar* in their focus on the study of acquisition, consumption and the disposition behavior of consumers as experienced in the cultures and subcultures to which consumers belong. Finally, the authors *advocate* that the CCT perspective complements and adds to our understanding of consumer behavior. Having been cited more than 2,300 times, the paper is essential for anyone interested in consumer research and its evolution. It has been heavily cited by CCT researchers, as well as researchers that study value, service-dominant logic, branding, consumer identity and myriad other topics.

A key conclusion from this Research Curation is that developing a good conceptual paper involves developing a big idea that asks profound and interesting questions related to concepts, theories, domains, and paradigms. In addition, authors raise and address a number of questions related to this big idea in a thoughtful, coherent and internally consistent manuscript. They unpack their ideas fully and clearly, define key terms and assumptions explicitly, and ensure that that the various parts of their paper build on one another to form a coherent whole. Finally, they use a range of conceptual thinking skills that have to do with envisioning (identifying and revising), explicating (delineating and summarizing), relating (differentiating and integrating), and debating (advocating and refuting) when conveying their ideas.

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**Table 1: Sample Conceptual Papers Published in JCR**

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**Table 2:**

**Conceptual Thinking Skills**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***General Conceptual Thinking Skills*** | ***Specific Conceptual Thinking Skills*** | ***Definition*** | ***Impact on Thinking*** |
| Envisioning | Identifying | To see, apprehend, notice, or behold something that we haven’t seen or considered before | Makes us realize that there is something important that we haven’t seen before |
| Revising | To see what has been seen before in a new way, to reconfigure, shift perspectives | Makes us realize that what we’ve previously seen can be understood in a new way |
| Explicating | Delineating | To detail, describe, chart or depict an entity and what it entails; To focus on pieces (trees vs. the forest) | Makes us realize that things are more complex, micro, or particularistic than we previously thought |
| Summarizing | To consolidate, digest, reduce smaller ideas into bigger ones; to focus on the whole (forest vs. the trees) | Makes us realize that things are more simple, macro, or holistic than we previously thought |
| Relating | Differentiating | To discriminate, see differences, parse, see nuances, see dimensions that have yet to be considered | Makes us realize that things are more distinct, different, separable, multidimensional, or heterogeneous than we previously thought |
| Integrating | To unify, synthesize, amalgamate, harmonize, make the pieces make sense in terms of a coherent whole | Makes us realize that things are more similar, inseparable, unidimensional, or homogeneous than we previously thought |
| Debating | Advocating | To endorse, justify, support an idea | Makes us realize what is false, untrue, wrong, inappropriate, unacceptable |
| Debating | To rebut, challenge, counter-argue, or dispute an idea | Makes us realize what is true, correct, appropriate, acceptable |

These conceptual thinking skills can be applied to ideas about (a) a construct, (b) a theory, (c) a domain of study, (d) a research procedure, (e) a research paradigm, (f) the discipline of consumer behavior or marketing, or (g) science itself. See MacInnis 2011 for more information.