

Editorial

The present issue of Marketing ZFP differs from many other issues in that we seek to revive an old tradition: academic discourse. The impetus for this was provided by a paper by Mr. Gierl that addresses a fundamental problem in marketing research and, moreover, adopts an unusual approach to illustrating its argument: a dialectical time-travel scenario between a modern-day researcher and an Inquisitor of yore. We therefore expect the paper to generate considerable, and perhaps divergent, responses. In any case, it highlights an important issue that deserves the attention of both marketing researchers and marketing practitioners. Accordingly, this issue contains Mr. Gierl's article, four commentaries on it, and a concluding response by Mr. Gierl. The issue is completed by a paper by Ms. Bambauer-Sachse and Ms. Stuhldreier.

Gierl's paper addresses a fundamental but often neglected question in the social sciences: Do scientific constructs represent phenomena grounded in reality, or are they inventions created by researchers? The author argues that construct proliferation, particularly in marketing and consumer research, may undermine scientific credibility when newly introduced constructs lack an underlying real-world correlate. Using a Socratic-style dialogue and the historical example of *demonic possession*, the paper develops a three-part typology for evaluating construct ontology. Type A criteria – including precise definitions, validated scales, institutional authority, usefulness, functional necessity, cross-cultural/historical invariance, and “more-is-better” reasoning – cannot establish a construct's reality because they can equally support clearly invented constructs. Type B criteria provide indications of invention, particularly when a construct occupies a progressively shrinking unexplained residual, or when a *cui bono* analysis reveals interests that benefit from its existence. Type C criteria provide positive evidence of reality-groundedness through language independence and theory independence, illustrated using *trust* as a contrasting case. The paper, therefore, proposes an additional ontological audit of scientific constructs. Rather than rejecting established methods of construct validation, it argues that measurement validity and theoretical usefulness are insufficient to demonstrate existence. Researchers should explicitly examine whether constructs reflect genuine human dispositions or merely researcher-generated conceptual artifacts, thereby reducing construct inflation and strengthening scientific trustworthiness.

First commentary by Marion Garaus. Garaus largely supports Gierl's concern about construct proliferation but cautions against equating all new or fine-grained constructs with arbitrary inventions. She stresses that meaningful differentiation can capture distinct consumer experiences and proposes ecological validity as an additional criterion. She also emphasizes the reality of sub-

jective experiences and argues that constructs should be evaluated within their historical and social context.

Second commentary by Harald Hruschka. Hruschka situates Gierl's argument within the broader debate between realist, instrumentalist, and constructivist views of psychological constructs. He accepts the usefulness of Gierl's Type B criterion based on the increasing explanatory power of alternatives, but questions the *cui bono* criterion. He is also skeptical about the feasibility and necessity of several Type C criteria and doubts whether they will substantially reduce construct inflation.

Third commentary by Martin Klarmann. Klarmann agrees that marketing suffers from construct inflation but disputes Gierl's explanation that researchers intentionally invent constructs detached from reality. He defends Cronbach and Meehl's nomological-network approach as part of the solution rather than the problem. He advocates subjecting new constructs to theoretically demanding, “risky” or “severe” tests that can genuinely falsify their proposed nomological relationships.

Fourth commentary by Hans Mühlbacher. Mühlbacher welcomes Gierl's attempt to distinguish reality-grounded from invented constructs but questions whether social scientists can ever establish the ontological reality of unobservable constructs with certainty. Using trust as an example, he shows that the same observations permit competing explanations. Rather than searching for a single “true” cause, he advocates pluralistic scientific discourse in which alternative perspectives are compared and critically evaluated.

Response by Heribert Gierl. Gierl responds to four commentaries and illustrates the approach using the established marketing construct of part-worth utility. He maintains that researchers should distinguish constructs grounded in psychological reality from constructs invented for theoretical or pragmatic purposes, while acknowledging that invented constructs can still be useful. The paper applies three types of criteria (A/B/C) established before to part-worth utility. Type-A criteria, such as validated measurement, usefulness, institutional acceptance, and accumulated research, are considered insufficient to establish ontological reality. Type-B criteria raise doubts about part-worth utility because behavioral research demonstrates context-dependent and constructed preferences, challenging the assumption that utilities are stable and stored in memory. Type-C criteria, particularly cross-theoretical stability, could provide positive evidence, but current neuroscientific findings do not establish part-worth utilities as distinct cognitive entities. Gierl concludes that part-worth utility is presently more plausibly interpreted as a useful conceptual construction than as a psychological reality. He argues that rigorous measurement and nomological validation should there-

fore complement, not replace, ontological audits, which could help prevent persistent “zombie constructs” and construct inflation in marketing research.

The paper by Bambauer-Sachse and Stuhldreier examines how corporate response strategies on social networks influence favorable engagement among complaining commenters and passive observers. Drawing on social network theory and social exchange theory, the authors first conducted four online focus groups and subsequently tested their hypotheses in a 2×2 between-subjects experiment with 249 active social media users. The study compares responding to all comments with selectively responding to some positive and negative comments. Results show that response strategy has no direct

effect on favorable engagement intentions; instead, distinct indirect mechanisms emerge. For complainants, replying to all comments increases perceived customer orientation, which enhances favorable engagement. For observers, replying to all comments increases the perceived entertainment value, which in turn promotes engagement. The findings suggest that companies should respond comprehensively to user comments while emphasizing customer care for complainants and entertaining, interactive communication for observers.

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