Individual Written Assignment
Due at the start of class, Tuesday, February 7

Academic research on consumer behavior has become an increasingly popular topic in the mainstream media. Brief reports on recent research can often be found in the science and business sections of newspapers, magazines, and blogs. Because these reports will likely be your most common source for new consumer behavior research once this course is over, I wanted to give you a chance to compare and contrast these reports to the sources they draw from. This will help you cast a clear and critical eye on any research findings you read about outside of class, and make you a better consumer of marketing ideas as well as general scientific knowledge.

For this assignment, I have chosen a selection of articles from the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the premier journal in consumer behavior research, and a corresponding popular press report about each. Your task is to read one of the articles and its report, write your own brief research report on it, critique the research in your own words, and discuss how well the media report itself describes the research.

Some suggestions for completing this assignment:

*Reading the journal article:*

You will need to do a fairly close reading of the article, to catch the nuances of the research. Read the introduction carefully, so you understand the past research and how the researchers developed their hypotheses. Take a minute once you’ve finished reading the introduction, and think about how you would test the researchers’ hypotheses. What kind of research would you do—descriptive, correlational, or experimental? What would be the independent and dependent variables, if you were to do an experiment? What kinds of questions would you ask? This can help you see whether the methods the researchers chose were intuitive and capture the phenomenon they wished to investigate.

The methods section(s) will tell you exactly what the researchers did to test their ideas. Again, read this carefully, so that you know the types of questions and activities participants completed, and how the researchers manipulated their independent variables, if they ran experiments. Think about the experiments from the point of view of a participant. Would any of the procedures have been confusing to you, or heavy-handedly led you to confirm their hypotheses? The results sections may be difficult for you to understand; that’s okay. Don’t worry about the exact stats and numbers—pay attention instead to the patterns of the data; are they in the same pattern the researchers predicted? The discussion sections will sometimes summarize these findings in words instead of numbers; this can help if you find the results hard to follow. They will also be a good place
to stop and think about open questions about the previous study; what "holes" are subsequent studies designed to patch?

Finally, the general discussion will summarize the article and describe future directions for research. Read this to learn about the implications of this research for applied marketing and behavior, and to think about the bigger ideas behind the research.

Reading the research report:

Read this after you've read the journal article. Think about how well the report describes the methods the researchers use and what they found. Does it leave out important details about what participants did? Does it focus on unimportant details instead? Do the conclusions the author draws fit with what was actually found? Do they talk about correlational data as if it's causal data? Sometimes the researchers will provide a quote for the report—do they accurately comment on their own findings? If the author correctly described the findings, did he or she understand their importance, or overextend their meaning?

Writing the paper:

Start by briefly describing the research article in your own words. What were the researchers' hypotheses? Very generally, how did they go about testing them? What did they eventually find? What do their findings mean for "real people"? Write this as if you were the one writing the popular press research report—it should be written so that a general audience, like your roommate or your mom, could understand what the research article was about. This means that you should write this fluidly, rather than as a series of bullet points. Try to make it as fun and readable as possible. (This will help give you a sense of the kind of thought and the tradeoffs that go into a popular press research report, as well as communicate to me what you got out of the article.) This section should be a page long, at most.

The second section of the paper will be a short critique of the paper. What did you think about the article? Was it good or bad? Was it interesting, or at least were the ideas interesting? Did their methods make sense to answer the questions they were asking, or would you have gone a different route? Were there important points you felt they didn't address? Do you think their findings reflect something important about the world, or are they a "hothouse flower," something one would only find in a laboratory? You can answer any of these questions, all of these questions, or none of these questions. Basically, I want to know whether you thought the research was interesting, well-executed, and worthwhile. If you thought it was, why? If not, why not? This section, too, should be written fluidly and be about a page long, at most.

The third and final section of your paper will be a brief critique of the popular press research report. Did the author do a good job of capturing what the article was about? Did he or she omit important details, or include unnecessary ones? Did he or she accurately describe and analyze the type of research that was conducted? Do the broader implications of the paper make sense and follow from what was actually found? Essentially, if this were the only information you had about the article, would you truly understand what it was about? If so, how did they do a good job, and could it be
improved? (Hint: Almost all such reports can be improved, even if they are well done.) If they didn’t do a good job, how could it be fixed? Again, use the previous questions as a template if you wish, but make sure that I see what you thought about the accuracy of the report, and the accuracy of such reports in general. Be sure to support your answers. The third section should be, you got it, no more than a page long.

One helpful hint: don’t hand in your first draft. Finish the paper with enough time left before it’s due so that you can set it aside, even for an hour. Come back to it and read it through slowly (sometimes even reading it aloud is best); this way you can hopefully catch typos, grammatical errors, and even errors in logic before you hand it in and I catch them.

Formatting the paper:
• Again, your assignment should be no longer than 3 double-spaced pages. Since the length of the paper is rather limited, you should do your best to make every sentence count. Be concise!
• Use a standard 12-point Times New Roman font and 1” margins.
• Be sure to include a separate cover page, so that your name and other information won’t cut into your page length. On the cover page, be sure to include your full name and the paper/report you chose to critique. (I should be able to tell when I read your paper, but just in case!)
• Please do not use report covers or folders of any type. Staples are good enough for me!

Collaboration:
You may discuss your ideas with other people in the class (or with me). However, you should make sure that the thinking and writing about your article and report are your own. Each person must submit his/her own assignment.

Grade break down (20 points possible):
• Description of research article in your own words 6 points
• Critique of research article 6 points
• Critique of popular press report 6 points
• Writing (should be clear and free of careless mistakes) 2 points

Extra credit:
You can earn one point of extra credit by turning in your assignment by 5pm on Tuesday, January 31st. Just put the assignment in my mailbox (212 Bryan) by 5pm that day.
You can also earn one point for each of the questions below. Mark your answers as “extra credit.” These answers do not count against your page limit, but altogether they shouldn’t take more than half a page.
• In the article you chose, what were the independent and dependent variables in the first experiment the researchers described?
• Most of the studies you read about in your article were experiments. Briefly imagine and describe a real-life correlation (not one that the researchers
described) that would support the researchers’ findings. (For example, if the article consisted of experiments that demonstrated that people buy more extended warranties when the product is full-price than when it’s on sale, you could support that finding with real life correlational data showing that the more expensive an item is, the greater is the percentage of purchasers who elect to pay for the warranty.)

Papers and articles for reviewing:


