

THE DEVIANT CONSUMER:
PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS, AND PRIORITIES FOR MANAGEMENT ACTION
AND MARKETING RESEARCH

Michael K. Mills, University of Southern California

Abstract

Deviant consumer behavior is approaching epidemic proportions, yet has received little research attention. Several problems inherent in the area have impeded both management action and research progress. This paper reviews these problems and suggests priorities for both management action and future research.

Introduction

Deviant consumer behavior may be defined as behavior in a marketing context that society considers inappropriate, illegal or in conflict with previously accepted societal norms. Some examples include shoplifting and other pilferage, price altering, destroying or damaging merchandise, marring instore fixtures or restrooms, writing of "bad" checks, consumer fraud, and the like. Such behavior is rampant and is on the increase. Yet, little marketing research has been devoted to this issue (see Mills, 1979 for a review of studies in the area).

Problems For Research In The Area

That comparatively little research attention has been paid to this area by marketing scholars perhaps may be illustrative of several problems including (1) lack of adequate conceptual frameworks, (2) ethical and legal issues, and (3) special methodological research problems.

Lack of Adequate Conceptual Frameworks

With the exception of some recent pioneering work (Mills, 1979), most consumer deviance studies have suffered from the lack of an actionable theoretical base. Thus, more conceptual work and empirical tests need to be done to guide research in the area.

Ethical and Legal Problems

The rather sensitive nature of deviant consumer behavior also makes for a number of potential research design problems. While it is possible to design an experimental study to capture or reveal deviant offenders, for example, the ethical aspects are not so clear-cut. A field study of deviant consumers may also represent considerable ethical considerations for the researcher (e.g., Humphreys, 1970), as may various legal considerations.

Special Methodological Research Problems

Several special methodological questions must often also be dealt with. For example, what is the appropriate sampling frame? Should one utilize apprehended offenders (admittedly a very biased sample) or a more generalized sample? Utilizing self-reported deviants appears to offer a reasonable approach, although this and more projective methodologies are admittedly rather "soft". Some researchers (e.g., Geurts, et. al., 1975) have attempted to utilize the randomized response design to good effect. However, this approach has several drawbacks.

Problems for Management Action

Management of affected businesses are also faced with a number of problems. These include problems of an economic nature, lack of a mechanism allowing for coordinated investigations of apprehended deviant offenders, the legal and social aspects of dealing with consumer deviants and the irritation and anxiety of customers due to stringent security procedures. These problems have severely hampered management action in this area.

Priorities for Management Action
and Marketing Research

Several priorities exist, then, for both managerial action and for marketing research. Critically important are studies which shed further light on the motivational aspects underlying the deviant consumer behavior problem, especially as this may differ for different demographic or socioeconomic groups. Additionally, further research attention must be directed towards the interaction between the store environment and the individual as this is reflected in consumer deviance. Additional attention must also be directed toward determining the most effective methods for alleviating deviant consumer behavior. Coordinated management action and cooperative efforts between affected businesses are also of primary importance, as are more attempts at public relations and other consumer-oriented activities.

References

- M. D. Geurts, J. Reinmuth, and P. R. Andrus, "Researching Shoplifting and Other Deviant Consumer Behavior Using the Randomized Response Design", *Journal of Retailing*, 50, 1975, pp. 3-38.
- L. Humphreys, Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places, (Chicago: Aldine, 1970).
- M. K. Mills, A Power-Conceptual Analysis of Deviant Consumer Behavior in Retail Stores, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, 1979.