



# Consumer Complaining Behavior: a Paradigmatic Review

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Published online: 5 September 2020  
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## Abstract

Consumer complaining behavior (CCB) is an important stream of research and practice, as it links the domains of service failure and service recovery. CCB research, although extensive and temporally wide, exhibits a lack of concern for the underlying assumptions of scholarly inquiry. Researchers neither explicitly mention, nor consciously indicate their ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. We systematically identify the extant CCB literature and map it to two well-accepted paradigmatic classifications (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Deetz *Organization Science* 7(2): 191–207, 1996). Normative or functionalist paradigm with the assumptions of an objective external reality, a positivist epistemology, a determinist view of human nature, and nomothetic methodology emerges as the dominant CCB research paradigm. The implications of this dominance are discussed as a barometer of the future of CCB research and practice.

**Keywords** Paradigm · Ontology · Epistemology · CCB · Consumer complaint · Consumer complaining

## Introduction

A defining tenet of the marketing concept is the central role and importance of the customer (Homburg et al. 2017). Business organizations attempt to ensure that customer experience is satisfactory, even delightful (Oliver et al. 1997). However, humans are fallible (Lutz 1994), and so are organizations that are at a structural level, nothing but human collectivities. That a consumption

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**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-020-00148-8>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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experience can often lead to customer dissatisfaction, is a truth, that businesses realize, and do their best to remedy. Michel (2001) articulates this well when he comments that “*service failures are inevitable, but dissatisfied customers are not.*” The actions (or inaction) that customers take in response to service failures, collectively fall under the realm of consumer complaining behavior (CCB). The post-failure reaction of an organization comes under the domain of service recovery. Accordingly, CCB functions as the link between service failure and service recovery. Business firms get a chance to remedy the situation, only when the complaint response is visible to them, directly or indirectly. Hence, the significance of complaining behavior needs no emphasis. Further, it is imperative to understand that although the research domains of service failure, and service recovery, originated in the context of services literature, whereas CCB research mostly originated in the product domain, these distinctions have disappeared over time. Service-dominant logic provides us a lens to understand the convergence of goods and services (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Although CCB is a well-researched area, extant literature exhibits a surprising lack of concern for the underlying assumptions of the process of scholarly inquiry (Moules 2002). There is little mention of the ontological and epistemological viewpoints, that constitute the research paradigms governing the knowledge discovery and dissemination process. We make this observation based on a review of CCB research articles identified through a keyword-based systematic search. Based on this research gap, we follow a paradigmatic approach to assess the state of knowledge in CCB research.

From a scholarly perspective, we consider it necessary to undertake such a paradigmatic evaluation of the CCB domain for three specific reasons. Firstly, paradigms influence theory development, which ultimately drives empirical work. A lack of paradigmatic discussion hinders this iterative process and thus impedes a research domain’s progression (Tronvoll et al. 2011). Secondly, paradigm neglect leads to a state of habitual consistency, and the process of inquiry reduces to *mopping-up operations*, as Kuhn (1962) puts it. It hinders the use of diverse methods that are potentially more relevant to certain problems of the research domain (Lewis and Grimes 1999). Ellson (2009) observes an evangelistic repetition of favored research methods in the academic community, which he terms as nepotistic. The sameness that is generated as a result does nothing, beyond filling journals with pages (Ellson 2009). Lastly, paradigms fulfill several instrumental goals, and hence, their role in the advancement of a research domain needs to be taken into account. Pfeffer (1993) links the *technical certainty* and *consensus* characteristics of paradigm development within a research domain, with several instrumental outcomes, including its ability to attract resources and enable collaborative work. At the same time, Kuhn (1962) characterizes paradigm as an enabler of coherence, and a suppressor of novelty, indirectly necessitating paradigm failure as a pre-condition for scientific revolution to occur. Though paradigmatic analysis cannot enable to resolve these inconsistent views, a balanced view can only emerge from that exercise.

From a practice standpoint, too, contemporary realities of the marketplace are problematic for the way, CCB research has been predominantly conducted. Rooted mainly in the *marketing-as-exchange* view, most studies fail to account for consumers as value co-creators and participants (Tronvoll 2007). Similarly, they often ignore the processual nature of complaining, by treating dissatisfaction and consequent behavior, as one-off episodes (Tronvoll 2012). More importantly, most CCB studies have ascribed to the doctrine of *radical behaviorism*, thereby suppressing the inherent heterogeneity and intentionality of consumer choice (Foxall 2007). Paradigmatic assessment of CCB research, as envisioned under this study, can help uncover some of these theoretical and practical limitative peculiarities. Further, it is pertinent to add that, despite significant effort, we were not able to identify a similar work in the CCB domain. It makes our present effort, all the more worthwhile.

Beyond the introduction, this paper is divided into six sections. We begin with a broad overview of CCB research, and then move on to a discussion on paradigms and their significance in any research domain. In the third section, we detail the methodology adopted in selecting the extant CCB literature. Thereafter, we review the identified CCB literature in terms of different paradigmatic dimensions, before discussing the findings and implications for research and practice, and providing concluding remarks.

## CCB Research

CCB has evoked keen research interest for decades, both as a quest for scholarly inquiry and also as an imperative to aid managerial practice (Francken 1983). The initial theorization of consumer complaining restricted the phenomenon to different dichotomies, e.g., complaining/no complaining, private/public, etc. (Day and Landon 1977). Over time, CCB has expanded to its multi-dimensional nature, reflecting and encompassing different forms of complaining (Singh 1988).

'Voice,' as a salient response, involves direct complaints to the concerned firm. Viewed as a constructive behavior, it allows the firm to offer suitable remedy and recover before the negative consequences of failure become imminent (Hirschman 1970). '*Negative word of mouth*' (NWOM), is the sharing of dissatisfaction with current or prospective consumers and social groupings (Richins 1983). While traditionally, it was a private response limited to the immediate social relations, the internet, and social media have widened its reach to encompass virtual communities, transforming it into a potentially public action (Andreassen and Streukens 2013). Complaining may also involve appeals to external parties, who have regulatory, executive, or opinion-influencing power over the firm (Singh 1989). Termed as '*Third party complaining*', it signifies a higher-order response, wherein the consumer-firm relation fails to heal itself. Under '*Éxit*', consumers single-handedly terminate or cease the association with a firm (Hirschman 1970). These facets represent various CCB dimensions that are conceptually distinct and worthy of independent study.

Extant research generally regards dissatisfaction as the root of CCB. At the same time, viewing dissatisfaction as an insufficient condition for CCB to occur, identification of antecedents has been a second broad subject of inquiry. Development and refinement of the conceptualization of CCB, while delineating its taxonomies and typologies has also been a key focus area. Importantly, another set of studies have explored the complaint management or recovery aspect. Finally, CCB consequences have been investigated, both as a sole subject, as also in conjunction with other aspects.

We observe inconsistencies between CCB inquiries and broader consumer research, particularly in the past two decades. Much of CCB research assumes the several gaps between producers and consumers, the traditional antics, that current theorization, has left behind, long ago. Experiential nature, continuous interaction, and co-creation of value are central to the idea of marketing exchanges, as viewed from the postmodern lens (Firat and Dholakia 2006). Though isolated works have explored the links between CCB and contemporary developments, e.g., service-dominant logic, a dominant set has continued to stress on complaining as a discrete post-purchase phenomenon. Further, of late, there is significant interest in illegitimate complaining behavior, and extreme actions such as customer revenge/retaliation, brand sabotage, boycott, and vindictive complaining (Gong et al. 2014; Reynolds and Harris 2005). There is every reason to believe that illegitimacy or intolerance always existed and is not a phenomenon peculiar to the recent period (Cloward 1959; Rosenzweig 1938).

We argue that a part of these inconsistencies may reflect an artificial pattern in CCB research, accentuated by dominant ways of thinking, and hegemonic modes of inquiry. Well-established methodologies like the critical incidents technique (CIT), grounded in the realist ontology, contrivedly discretize an otherwise continual and relational process (Sharoff 2008). Additionally, emergent research needs to account for the continual partnerships of marketers and consumers in shaping each other's meaning, needs, desires, and vision. Accordingly, whereas extant CCB research largely germinates from dissatisfaction (satisfaction is viewed as the key to all the favorable fruits of consumer relationship for the firm), emergent marketing thought makes it imperative for the CCB domain to adopt the lens of empowerment rather than the avoidance of dissatisfaction (Firat and Dholakia 2006).

Looking for the underlying assumptions of CCB researchers and then classifying the research domain onto an objectively demarcated assumption space is a potential method to uncover the perceptible limitations of extant work. It can potentially yield directions for the future, and is thus, not restricted to tinkering with the past. With this objective, we explore the different paradigms that the CCB research has followed and, in turn, promoted. We use a broader lens to decipher CCB paradigms, as any aspect of human behavior is a subject matter of social sciences (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

## Social Science Paradigms

In any human endeavor, the significance of means cannot be subordinated to the ends. Whitford (2002) puts forward this argument effectively when he challenges the means-ends dualism. Successful termination of any human activity is the beginning of another one. Buchanan and Vanberg (1991) emphasize that human decisions are based on expectations that are conjectural, in light of an indeterminate future, that is continuously being created. Thus every singular *end* also serves as *means*, and both become two representations of the same truth (Whitford 2002). Applying this idea to the research process, exploration of knowledge, and using it to solve a specific research problem becomes a process of independent significance, separated from the utility of the solution itself. This significance of the research *means* is over and above the instrumental importance of the *end* being reliable and valid (Nilsen 2004). Being true for any knowledge domain, this proposition is all the more relevant for the social sciences (Ghoshal 2005). Gergen (1973) articulates the peculiar nature of social sciences when he views social psychology research as a historical inquiry. According to him, knowledge is confined within the historical boundaries and becomes contextual, unlike the natural sciences, where it can accumulate, on account of stability and broad repeatability of events. Thus, researchers in the domain of social sciences face unique challenges, while embarking on the exploration of knowledge.

A paradigm is the foundation on which the process of knowing, as also the mechanics of enhancing knowledge, stands. Kuhn (1962) calls it a “*strong network of commitments – conceptual, theoretical, instrumental, and methodological.*” His view thus enlarges the significance of a paradigm even further, as paradigmatic changes become the root of scientific revolutions. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), it is a *worldview*, one that identifies the researchers' place in the complex maze of inter-relationships, of which the individual is a part. It is our “mental model” that reflects deeply implicit assumptions, which very often need a conscious effort to unearth (Senge 1990). These assumptions have been classified into multiple aspects by scholars, in classifications that look distinct, but are generally consistent (Burrell

and Morgan 1979; Deetz 1996; Guba and Lincoln 1994). The paradigmatic framework proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979) is more comprehensive as it explicitly includes assumptions about human nature, along with the other dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

The first aspect is the researcher's view of what constitutes reality, i.e., what is there to be known? Ontology refers to these underlying assumptions about the nature of reality (Dixon and Dogan 2002). In the *Realist* view, we need to identify a fact that exists out there, independent of our appreciation of it, as well as being independent of the actions of various social actors involved. In the *Relativist* view, social reality is a subjective construction, shaped and updated continuously by the actors and their interrelationships (Reed 1997). The two aspects are joined by a continuum rather than being a forced choice (Fletcher 1996; Houston 2001).

Epistemology is the process of knowing and communicating the developed knowledge of reality (Ramoglou 2013). Once ontological assumptions are set, a researcher is confined to a limited range of epistemologies (Tronvoll et al. 2011). This process repeats until the last of the elements of the research process, i.e., a specific research method to be employed is chosen. Thus, paradigms demarcate and constrain the boundaries of knowledge development based on hierarchical assumptions about reality, ways of knowing it, and further boundary setting. A broad category of researchers fall in the realm of *empiricism, functionalism, and positivism*. Although these epistemologies do have different connotations, at a general level, these are considered as having a similar philosophy (Adler et al. 2007). In the realm of a realist ontology, knowledge is discoverable by employing *verifiability, falsifiability, or confirmability* criterion. To positivists, as we broadly refer to these related epistemological beliefs, there is a clear objective demarcation between the scientific and the non-scientific realm (Caldwell 1991). On the other end, some anarchists see science as nothing more than propaganda, in which power politics determines the acceptance of theories (Broad 1979). Although anarchism is an extreme paradigm having relatively few takers, there are multiple well-accepted paradigms on the continuum between positivism and anarchism. *Sophisticated falsification, critical pluralism, social constructionism*, are commonly referred to as anti-positivist and not anti-anarchist (Marsden and Littler 1996). The closer one moves to a relativist ontological view, the more constrained one is towards an anti-positivist epistemology (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

The third dimension that acts as a basis of segregation is the author's view of human nature. It is the broad composite of human needs, motives, predispositions, behaviors, mental capacities, and emotions that distinguish us from non-living objects, other living beings, and social groups (Sullivan 1986). Burrell and Morgan (1979), like their dualist view on different dimensions, view human nature as *determinist* or *voluntarist*. Human actions are either driven by social norms and institutional structures or based on individual initiative overriding these forces. These two extremes are akin to an individual's relationship to nature in the value orientation framework proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). All marketing institutions implicitly incorporate a view of human nature, falling at or on the continuum within these two extremes.

Finally, quantitative methods correspond to a realist ontology and a positivist epistemology. Since a researcher has an assumption of a reality independent of the human actors involved, and a hypothetico-deductive model of knowledge development, a highly structured research design employing quantitative methodology is relevant (Statler and Salovaara 2017). On the other hand, qualitative methods become relevant, as the ontological and epistemological position shifts to relativism and social constructionism. A researcher's perspective of the causality of observed facts acts as the link between epistemological position and the method employed.

These four dimensions serve as the first criterion for paradigmatic classification (Fig. 1). The second criterion is the dichotomy between *regulation* and *radical change*. While proposing the term *sociology of regulation*, Burrell and Morgan (1979) attempt to cover all research inquiries that look at society as a cohesive, self-supported, self-corrective, and regulated structure. In this school of thought, researchers attempt to comprehend and explain the incremental growth of social systems, and the order, these systems, reflect and reinforce. On the other hand, the researchers adopting the school of thought of *sociology of radical change* look for and evangelize structural contradictions, which according to them, need to be highlighted to enable the realization of actors’ true potential. These researchers attempt to break the hegemony of domination and vouch for change. Based on the combined usage of the two paradigmatic criteria, final classification of any research attempt is into four cells that represent four alternative research paradigms (Fig. 2).

Despite the widespread acceptance of Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigmatic classification, researchers find merit in proposing alternatives (Deetz 1996; Tronvoll et al. 2011). Deetz (1996) opines that the Burrell and Morgan (1979) classification is based on viewing the world from a particular dominant lens of *functionalism*. The other boxes represent the mere identification of the *others*. A refined understanding and commentary on the distinction between different research perspectives is possible by looking at alternate dimensions (Deetz 1996).

We use a combination of two paradigm classification approaches (Deetz 1996; Tronvoll et al. 2011), in our attempt to comprehensively assess the paradigmatic state of CCB research. *Emergent/apriori* and *consensus/dissensus* serve as the classification criterion in this approach (Fig. 3). The first dimension reflects the way the inquiry process is driven. In the *apriori* approach, a researcher may proceed with an overarching theory, research question(s) that are guided by theory, defined constructs, a stable conception, and an intent to generalize the results beyond spatial and temporal boundaries (Deetz 1996). The *emergent* approach, instead, allows

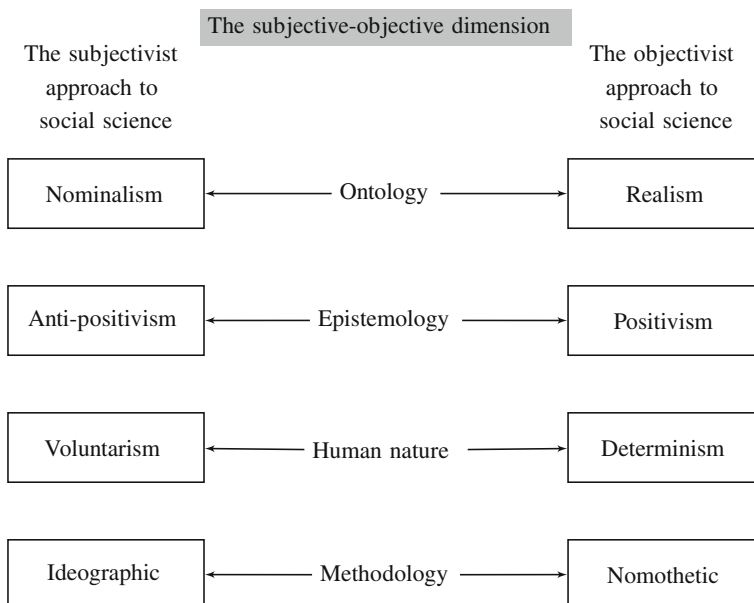
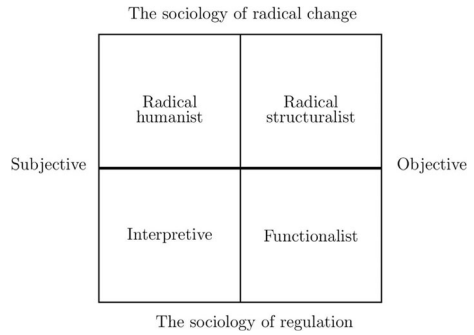


Fig. 1 Authors’ adaptation of Burrell and Morgan (1979) subjective-objective dichotomy

**Fig. 2** Authors’ adaptation of Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigmatic classification

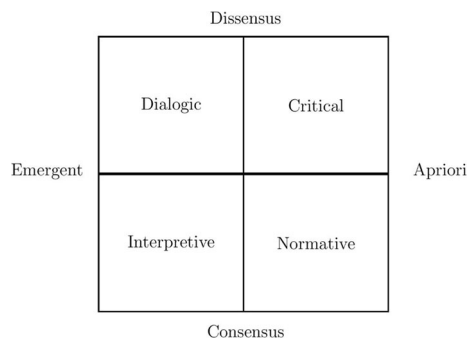


for play between the different actors in the research process. A researcher enters with a beginner approach, open to new meaning while generating research question(s), definitions, and associations between constructs (Deetz 1996). The knowledge gained from the research process is more of an insight and claims to have discovered the *truth* are not made. *Consensus* work both reflects and aims at the creation of order, as a natural outcome of social structures. Researchers attempt to identify similar patterns, and this identification also leads to further acceptance of the patterns (Deetz 1996). Occurrences that seem against established patterns are either devalued or presented as a different set of order. *Dissensus* work considers the deviations not as a random occurrence, but as the state of nature itself. Deetz (1996) postulates that this pole does not deny the existence of a structured reality, but aims to broaden the variety of discourse by going beyond what is directly apparent. He further emphasizes that this bipolar schema works only when we conceive of a temporal stillness, as every consensus changes to dissensus at some point, and vice-versa.

### Article Selection

We perform a multi-stage process to select the existing literature for this review, with keyword-search as the first step. We searched a comprehensive research database ABI/INFORM for keywords: *consumer complaint*, *consumer complaining*, *customer complaint*, *customer complaining*, and *CCB*. A systematic search is accepted as the standard procedure for review studies, and it scores over a traditional literature review, on account of being

**Fig. 3** Authors’ adaptation of Deetz (1996) paradigmatic classification

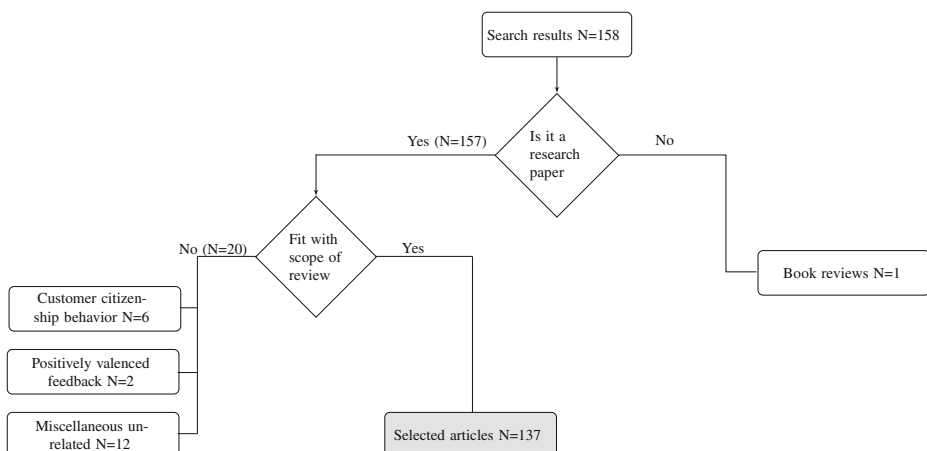


objective, more comprehensive, and replicable. In line with the objective of paradigmatic discussion, it is pertinent that the quality of articles is given emphasis, rather than sheer quantity. Towards this aim, we limit the search to top journals of the marketing domain. These journals serve as a benchmark for practitioners and researchers (Svensson 2005), both in terms of the breadth of research problems studied, as well as the multiplicity of theoretical paradigms and empirical methods employed. We scan review articles over multiple sub-domains within the marketing domain and collate the different sources to identify the top marketing journals (Davis et al. 2011, 2013; Lunde 2018; Rosenstreich and Wooliscroft 2006; Svensson et al. 2008). To ensure a match with the research domain of this study, top journals of some sub-domains like advertising (e.g., *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research*), business-to-business marketing (*Industrial Marketing Management*), etc., were intentionally excluded. Few journals related to the focus of the present study were self-selected (e.g., *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*). A total of 158 research articles were retrieved through the first stage. One book review was excluded, before manual reading of all abstracts, to ensure a match with the focus of the study. A total of 20 articles not focusing on consumer complaint behavior were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 137 research articles. This process of selection of extant literature is illustrated in Fig. 4.

The journals included in the selection process and the corresponding search inclusions are presented in Table 1. Further, we illustrate the relative contributions of various journal outlets using a Pareto graph in Fig. 5. A complete listing of the final 137 items is provided in Appendix-1 see (online supplement), whereas references contain only articles that have been cited in-text.

## Paradigms Employed in CCB Research

Looking at consumer complaining behavior from a paradigmatic lens, a researcher has two broad starting options. One is to look for the truth or causal explanation of observed facts, disregarding the individual state and nature of the actors involved (complainers, complaint-handlers, and other visible actors). The second approach is an attempt to understand the



**Fig. 4** Article selection process



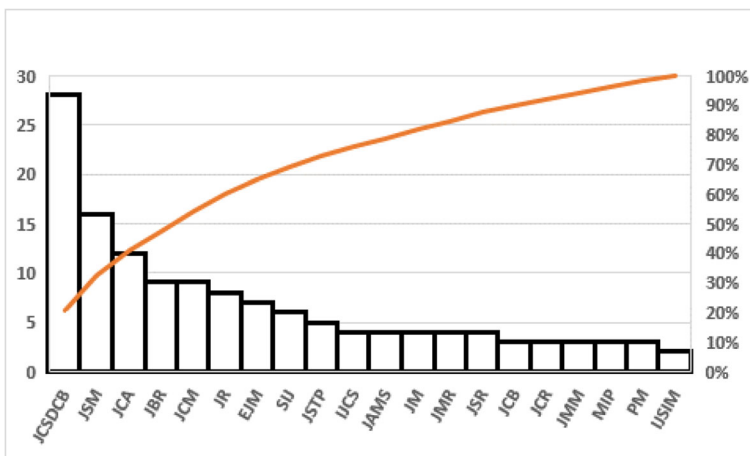
**Table 1** Distribution of selected articles by the journal of publication

S.no	Journal	Count	Percentage
1	Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior (JCSDCB)	28	20.4
2	Journal of Services Marketing (JSM)	16	11.7
3	Journal of Consumer Affairs (JCA)	12	8.8
4	Journal of Business Research (JBR)	9	6.6
5	Journal of Consumer Marketing (JCM)	9	6.6
6	Journal of Retailing (JR)	8	5.8
7	European Journal of Marketing (EJM)	7	5.1
8	Service Industries Journal (SIJ)	6	4.4
9	Journal of Service Theory and Practice (JSTP)	5	3.7
10	International Journal of Consumer Studies (IJCS)	4	2.9
11	Journal of Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS)	4	2.9
12	Journal of Marketing (JM)	4	2.9
13	Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)	4	2.9
14	Journal of Service Research (JSR)	4	2.9
15	Journal of Consumer Behavior (JCB)	3	2.2
16	Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)	3	2.2
17	Journal of Marketing Management (JMM)	3	2.2
18	Marketing Intelligence and Planning (MIP)	3	2.2
19	Psychology and Marketing (PM)	3	2.2
20	International Journal of Service Industry Management (IJSIM)	2	1.5
	Total	137	100

Acronyms used on X-axis are mapped to journal titles in Table 1

behavior of actors through their subjectivity, emphasizing them as creators of their own experience. These ontological assumptions serve as the starting point for other related differences (Majeed 2019).

We found the paradigmatic classification of CCB articles, a challenging task. This challenge of recognizing another author’s paradigmatic assumptions is echoed in the extant literature (Lewis and Grimes 1999). As commented by Smircich (1983), we observed that the CCB researchers neither explicitly state their philosophical assumptions, nor consciously give indicators to that effect. Accordingly, to make the process of paradigmatic classification of CCB research articles as



**Fig. 5** A Pareto-illustration of the relative contribution of various journal outlets to CCB research

objective as possible, we employed several iterative checks. For the Burrell and Morgan (1979) classification, we initially bifurcated the CCB articles on the subjective-objective dichotomy. Research articles that are based solely on the hypothetico-deductive approach, developed from an exposition of the existing theory, were classified as objective. Correspondingly, articles that allow subjects to articulate their predispositions, opinions, and behaviors without the constraints of the researcher’s pre-decided hypotheses, were classified as subjective.

A similar, yet different approach, was used to classify CCB research on the emergent/apriori dimension for Deetz’s (1996) classification. Broadly the emergent schema corresponds to a subjective pole and the apriori schema to the objective pole. However, in keeping with the original proponents (Deetz 1996; Tronvoll et al. 2011), the germination of research concepts, was taken as the decision criterion. In that sense, research articles, exhibiting development or transformation of research concepts by involving the CCB stakeholders, whether consumers, their social affiliates, firm frontline employees, firm managers or regulators, were classified as emergent. Research articles that are purely theory-driven, researcher proposed and held static at all stages in the research process, were classified as apriori. Thus despite a broad similarity of objective/subjective and emergent/apriori dichotomies in terms of CCB research, the emergent pole allowed for more liberal inclusion. Another point of difference is in multi-paradigm classification. Whereas triangulation of approaches allowed a particular research work to be categorized as both subjective and objective, conceptually, once some form of development and transition of research concepts was visible, the research work was classified as emergent, even when a hypothetico-deductive approach was subsequently adopted within the article.

On the second dichotomy of regulation vs. radical change, articles that significantly attempt to alter the CCB landscape, e.g., works that propose newer models of CCB incorporating recent ideas like service-dominant logic, delivery and complaining channels like online platform and social media, or those that suggest new ways of looking at the existing CCB landscape, were classified on the *change* side of the dichotomy. On the other hand, articles that incrementally add to the body of knowledge by building on existing models and theories were classified on the *regulation* side. As per Burrell and Morgan (1979), sociology of regulation and that of radical change are conceptually distinct on multiple dimensions, including on the status quo/radical change, consensus/modes of domination, solidarity/emancipation, among others. On the other hand, the consensus vs. dissensus dichotomy is related but narrower (Deetz 1996). In terms of CCB research, articles that attempt to preserve and reinforce the established discourse were classified on the *consensus* side. In contrast, articles that spell out the otherwise suppressed, non-normative behaviors were classified on the *dissensus* side of the dichotomy.

**Fig. 6** Classification of reviewed CCB articles as per Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigms (Six articles classified under multiple paradigms)

		The sociology of radical change			
		Radical humanist N=10	Radical structuralist N=5		
Subjective				Objective	
		Interpretive N=20	Functionalist N=108		
		The sociology of regulation			

**Fig. 7** Classification of reviewed CCB articles as per Deetz (1996) classification

	Dissensus		
	Dialogic N=15	Critical N=22	
Emergent			Apriori
	Interpretive N=16	Normative N=84	
	Consensus		

The final structure of the paradigm classification under both the approaches and the count of articles falling under each paradigm is illustrated in Figs. 6 and 7.

We present an indicative list of articles classified under the different paradigms, using the Burrell and Morgan (1979) framework in Table 2, and Deetz (1996) framework in Table 3.

As clear from Figs. 6 and 7, the majority of CCB works fall in the *functionalist* or *normative* paradigm. Among the pivotal works of such nature, Singh (1989) proposes and validates a comprehensive model of the consumer’s decision to engage a third party for complaint redress. Using an exclusively hypothetico-deductive approach, Liu and McClure (2001) provide one of the seminal works exploring cross-cultural differences in CCB. From the perspective of complaint management, Davidow (2003) presents a framework of organizational responses and consumers’ post-complaint behavior. Within the same paradigm, Luo and Homburg (2008) provide one of the few studies on CCB consequences, wherein they use the stochastic frontier methodology and the hypothetico-deductive approach to establish a link between complaints and the gap of stock value from a potential optimum.

Under the *interpretive* paradigm, McAlister and Erfmeyer (2003) undertake a content analysis of the causes and outcomes of consumer complaints made to a third-party government organization. Adopting a similar epistemology, Harris et al. (2013) use a qualitative process to decipher the differences in the perception of justice dimensions across online and offline complaining. Illustrating the *radical humanist* or *dialogic* paradigm, Reynolds and Harris (2005) adopt an emergent or subjective approach to explore the motives behind illegitimate complaining. Finally, while being on the sociology of radical change, works like Abney et al. (2017) and Tronvoll (2012) nevertheless, view CCB as an objective and deterministic process.

Though we had recognized the challenge in neatly classifying CCB articles across the different paradigms, the issue begs a further three-pronged discussion. Some of the articles were classified under multiple paradigms and are dealt with separately in the subsequent section. Second, though there are broad similarities across similarly-placed paradigms in the Burrell and Morgan (1979) and the Deetz (1996) frameworks, certain peculiar differences exist as already discussed. Accordingly, certain CCB works like Jacoby and Jaccard (1981), Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987), and Singh (1988) were classified differently across the two frameworks. This aspect is also further detailed in Table 3. Finally, the subjective nature of the exercise meant that some articles allowed comfortable classification, whereas, others were relatively hard to be precisely fit. Both the authors made an initial independent assessment in this respect. Whereas 115 (83.94%) and 121 (88.32%) CCB works were commonly classified across the Burrell and Morgan (1979) and the Deetz (1996) frameworks respectively, the differences in opinion on other articles were resolved by joint reading. Thus, though Figs. 6 and 7 show a clear demarcation, the illustrations

**Table 2** Selected CCB research articles in different paradigms as per Burrell and Morgan (1979)

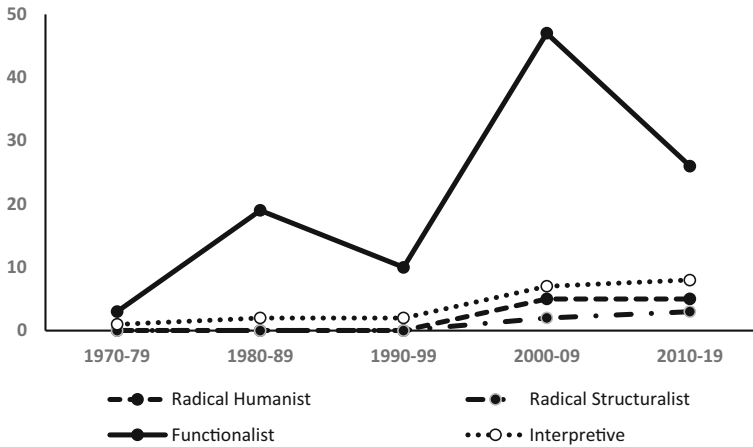
Paradigm	Research article	Major contribution
Radical humanist	Meuter et al. (2000)	Understanding satisfaction and CCB in the context of technology-enabled self-service.
	Reynolds and Harris (2005)	Explores the motives and forms of illegitimate consumer complaining.
	Harris and Russell-Bennett (2015)	Explores the intra-cultural variations in CCB, among different countries of similar cultural background.
	Johnson and Ross (2015)	Identifies adverse outcomes of social relationships on CCB.
Radical Structuralist	Tronvoll (2007)	Proposes a complete transition to the view of CCB by using the dynamic and process lens of service-dominant logic.
	Balaji et al. (2015)	Proposes and validates a model of public and private CCB with social media as the channel of complaint.
	Abney et al. (2017)	Explores the adaptive nature of service recovery strategies in the context of CCB via social media.
Interpretive	Jacoby and Jaccard (1981)	One of the initial broad-based exploration of CCB. Explored issues like complaints from satisfied users and even non-users and the ambiguity of deriving quality assessments from complaints.
	Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	Combines cognitive and emotive elements to explore non-complaining despite genuine dissatisfaction
	Gruber et al. (2009)	Explores the attributes of service frontline employees that lead to better customer satisfaction in a post-complaint and recovery context.
	Yan and Lotz (2009)	Proposes a social and psychological lens through which multiple ways of influence of other consumers on a focal consumer's complaint behavior are identified.
	Kasnakoglu et al. (2016)	Explores the possibility of positively valenced emotions being experienced by consumers in the complaining process and relates different emotional experiences to loyalty outcomes.
Functionalist	Liefeld et al. (1975)	Identifies the demographic antecedents of consumer complainers at an aggregate level, in one of the earliest such attempts.
	Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987)	Postulates complaint management as a defensive marketing strategy.
	Singh (1988)	The first empirical development of a CCB taxonomy.
	Singh (1989)	Proposes a comprehensive model of third-party consumer complaining behavior.
	Singh (1991)	Links industry structure and CCB.
	Liu and McClure (2001)	Looks at culture as a structural determinant of CCB.
	Mattila and Wirtz (2004)	Expands the CCB taxonomy lens from the complaint channel perspective, via experimental design.
	Lerman (2006)	First, to link politeness and CCB.
	Swimberghe et al. (2009)	Links religious commitment and CCB.
	Andreassen and Streukens (2013)	Individual and situational characteristics as an antecedent of adoption of online complaining.
Bergel and Brock (2018)	Identifies the impact of switching costs on CCB and service recovery evaluation.	

simplify the actual assessment. Most CCB articles can be viewed on the extremes within their respective paradigms, while few are positioned near the marginal boundaries between the paradigms. For example, the works of Balaji et al. (2015) and Juhl et al. (2006) permeate the zone bordering the *functionalist* and the *critical structuralist* paradigm, given the use of extant theorization in the prior case and positivist modeling in both the cases. However, both challenge

**Table 3** CCB research articles classified as per Deetz (1996) framework\*

Paradigm	Research article	Major contribution	Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigm	Point of divergence from Burrell and Morgan (1979) classification
Dialogic	Jacoby and Jaccard (1981)	One of the initial broad-based exploration of CCB. Explored issues like complaints from satisfied users and even non-users and the ambiguity of deriving quality assessments from complaints.	Interpretive	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
	Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	Combines cognitive and emotive elements to explore non-complaining despite genuine dissatisfaction.	Interpretive	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
Critical	Aron (2001)	Conceptualized grudgeholding as a manifestation of emotion-driven CCB and provided a detailed model for the same.	Interpretive	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
	Hempel et al. (1982)	Proposed a social marketing initiative for consumer protection agencies to improve their productivity.	Functionalist	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
	Warland et al. (1984)	Links CCB to other forms of social, economic, and political participation.	Functionalist	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
	Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987)	Postulates complaint management as a defensive marketing strategy.	Functionalist	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
Interpretive	Garrett and Toumanoff (2010)	Provides a different perspective of the identification of consumers who require regulation and protection.	Functionalist	Classified on the <i>disensus</i> pole, whereas from a broader perspective, it belongs to the sociology of regulation.
	Hsiao et al. (2016)	Proposes an aggregative perspective of consumer complaints, and emphasizing that individual complaint handling deals with the symptoms and not the causes of dissatisfaction.	Interpretive, Functionalist	Classified dually in Burrell and Morgan (1979), as it combines the subjective and objective approaches, taken singularly on <i>emergent</i> pole in Deetz's (1996) framework, as justified in the text above.

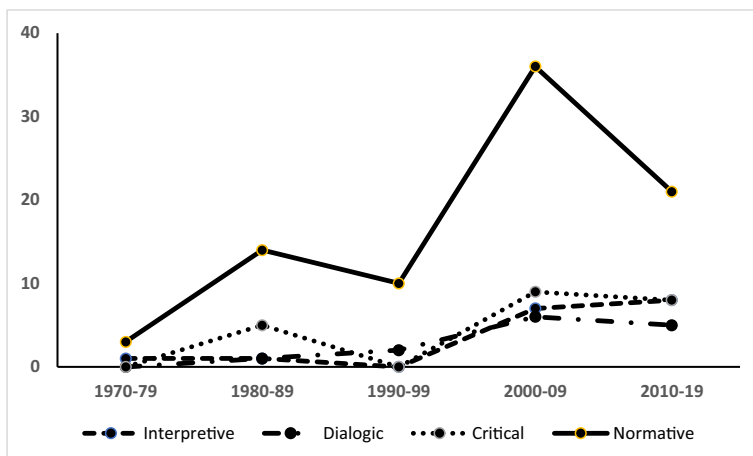
\*We only list a subset of studies in each paradigm (Deetz 1996), that do not map to the corresponding paradigm in the Burrell and Morgan (1979) framework



**Fig. 8** Paradigmatic evolution of CCB research as per Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigms (Six articles classified under multiple paradigms)

the existing order, with Juhl et al. (2006) challenging the mostly unanimous view of the increased propensity of complaining with time, and Balaji et al. (2016) being the first to demarcate the social media context into private and public forms of complaining. Similarly, the work of Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) lies near the intersection of *interpretive* and *critical humanist* paradigm, as it presented some of the hitherto unexplored ideas.

Assessing the evolution of CCB research as per the different research paradigms forms the final part of our analysis (Figs. 8 and 9). Across the time zones, the functionalist or normative paradigm has been dominant. However, the last two decades exhibit a paradoxical, yet desirable, trend toward alternative paradigms. In general, nominalist ontology and associated anti-positivist epistemologies are preferred strands of inquiry in the initial phases, when the state of knowledge of a phenomenon is grossly under-developed. As knowledge matures and theories develop, it is expected that research would assume a realist ontological stance, positivist epistemologies, and quantitative methods. An evolutionary assessment of CCB research thus suggests a clear, even if feeble, shift toward the hitherto unadopted paradigms.



**Fig. 9** Paradigmatic evolution of CCB research as per Deetz (1996) classification

## Discussion and Implications

The normative or functionalist paradigm emerges as the dominant paradigm in CCB research. This positivist view of the consumer's world has unarguably contributed a lot to better our understanding of it. The aim to objectively analyze and present the truth is an exercise worth every effort. At a micro-level, a realist ontology has improved our understanding of complainers and how non-complainers can be motivated to exhibit constructive complaining responses (Sharma et al. 2010). From the same perspective, it has also enabled firms to design complaint management policies that recognize the broad consumer expectations, improving the health of the marketing system as a whole (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987). Significantly, a tangibilization of the detrimental consequences of certain forms of CCB such as NWOM or third party action, as also of the beneficial outcomes of direct voice, could perhaps never be achieved without quantitative approaches (Luo and Homburg 2008). Thus, several research problems of the CCB domain in particular, and management research in general, present no alternative to positivism, for possible solutions (Hasan 2016).

The positivist approach to CCB has been further bolstered by technology-enabled *intelligence*. Recent work in consumer behavior research, including CCB, draws upon analytics, big data, and leverages computer-assisted techniques. Machine learning, social network analysis, data mining, intelligent agent, case-based reasoning, and other such approaches provide useful tools to model CCB (Cui et al. 2017) while overcoming some of the traditional challenges of common method bias, self-selection, representative sampling, and measurement validity. From a practice standpoint, these approaches aid efficiency by reducing manual labor and intervention. Though such top-level aggregated views obscure some CCB aspects, they provide tests for hypotheses by employing the traditional confidence level of investigation as insurance for the intentionality of behavior and other contingencies. Accordingly, they enable better predictions for the future while improving our understanding of the past.

At the same time, we must recognize the limitations of positivism and quantification in the context of CCB research. The root of its fallibility lies in its view of consumers as passive actors in the value creation and exchange process (Marsden and Littler 1996). Sewell Jr (1992) cautions that structure as a social force is disputable on several counts. The fundamental issue he raises is that structural arguments preclude any possibility of personal choice, thereby excluding all elements of agency from an individual's behavior (Reed 1997), reducing social processes to a superficial level. Secondly, structure is a superior explanator of stability, whereas it falters, when dynamics and changes are to be explained. This issue is crucial in CCB context, as complaining theories and models need to be reassessed in terms of the well-accepted transition to service-dominant logic (Tronvoll 2012), and to incorporate the experiential aspect of consumption (Goulding 1999).

Further, as reasoned earlier, CCB links an organizations' perceived failure and the potential of contextual recovery. When CCB research exclusively portrays and reinforces positivist frames of reference, policymakers who rely on it for insight, tend to place all consumers in the same boat. Consumer protection becomes a function of the quantity of the voices, and decision-makers expose themselves to the "majority fallacy" (Kuehn and Day 1962). Even if we constrain ourselves to the relatively micro-level issue of managerial response, adopting an aggregate, quantitatively modeled view of the complaining process, in the era of customized customization, is self-defeating (Ricotta and Costabile 2007).

At a similar level, some of the relatively under-researched CCB aspects are explainable by the over-reliance on objectivity. For example, only two of the articles retrieved via the

keyword search, focus on illegitimate complaining or deviant consumer behavior (Gong et al. 2014; Reynolds and Harris 2005). Fisk et al. (2010) attribute the under-developed nature of deviance research to ontological, epistemological, and methodological challenges. Summarizing the need of multiparadigm approach neatly, they comment “*Owing to their limitations, no single methodological approach emerges as best suited to the study of dysfunctional customer behavior*” (Fisk et al. 2010, p. 423).

Within the broader realm of consumer behavior, Venkatesh (1992) notices a post-positivist recognition of the idiosyncratic nature of consumers. Additionally, since both marketing and consumer behavior domains are multi-faceted, no single paradigm can answer all the questions posed (Tellis et al. 1999). The emphasis on encouraging and embracing a wider philosophical stance is not restricted to marketing and consumer behavior. Across different domains, there are voices for pluralism of research perspectives (Freeman and Lorange 1985; Gioia and Pitre 1990).

In view of the above discussion, despite the reliance on Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigmatic approach in this study, we do not subscribe to the *paradigm incommensurability* view as held by them. The argument for paradigm incommensurability is based on the insurmountable disparity between their assumptions (Burrell and Morgan 1979). However, scholars across multiple research areas have argued that inter-paradigm permeability can be achieved, without navigating the assumptional boundaries (Gioia and Pitre 1990; Schultz and Hatch 1996). CCB being a complex multi-faceted phenomenon, we accept the *paradigm crossing* approach postulated by Schultz and Hatch (1996), as a means to multiparadigm CCB research. In between paradigm incommensurability and paradigm crossing, the third approach of *paradigm integration* seems utopian, as an all-encompassing CCB theory may be hard to realize and validate.

Schultz and Hatch (1996) further detail the paradigm crossing options as *sequential, parallel, bridging, and interplay*. Sequential paradigm crossing is relatively the most adopted multiparadigm approach in CCB research, i.e., within the otherwise small number of multiparadigm CCB studies. Such an approach is evident in the CCB domain when Estelami (2000) attempts to identify the determinants of delight and disappointment as an outcome of the complaining experience. Estelami (2000) first used open-ended questions to enable the respondents to speak their own language. Without limiting the frame of reference of research to apriori set of constructs and hypotheses, the propositions were allowed to emerge from the inquiry process. Subsequently, a functionalist approach was used to validate the results obtained from the interpretive approach. A similar sequential approach is evident in the work of Tojib and Khajehzadeh (2014), when they identify nineteen different meta-perceptions associated with consumer complaining through an emergent scheme, before proposing and testing hypotheses to validate their proposed model. Whereas sequential and parallel approaches attempt to capitalize on paradigm’s complementarity, bridging and interplay approaches rely more on permeating the paradigmatic boundaries.

Another aspect of importance is the impact of CCB research on managerial practice. A body of knowledge can be used for instrumental gain (as an aid to the pursuance of specific goals), conceptualization (theoretical influence, but no direct outcome effect), or symbolism (as a means to legitimate a course of action, otherwise decided on different criteria) (Pelz 1978). Accordingly, broad concepts emerging from CCB research reach managers through executive programs, business education curricula, trade journals, books, and magazines. This knowledge dissemination, apart from being directly applied in decision-making, shapes managers’ worldview, and enables indirect broad and generalized application, through the language games of ambiguous terminologies (Astley and Zammuto 1992). Many managerial decisions are complex, and often



only retrospectively analyzable (Simons and Thompson 1998). When an assessment of real knowledge and ability is objectively difficult, jargons and quantity of observable knowledge, become symbols of social and contextual legitimacy (Feldman and March 1981). Ghoshal (2005) observes the destructive influence of management theories on business practice. He argues that “*academic research related to the conduct of business and management has had some very significant and negative influences on the practice of management.*” In the process underlying this destruction, he notes the obsession toward a positivist emphasis on *causal determinism* as one of the two primary mechanisms. The normative standards and the falsification logic set by the dominant functionalist paradigm prejudice issues of statistical significance and theoretical rigor, thereby inhibiting integrative solutions to complex real problems (Gulati 2007; McGahan 2007). Thus, the adoption of multiparadigm approaches, in addition to the sequential approach, may further aid CCB research.

## Conclusion and Limitations

The complaining landscape is changing, in line with the changes in the concept of value and exchange (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). We see a transition in the basis of complaining from product or service failure(s). As we move into the future, complaining, rather than being limited to cognitive assessment, may largely be triggered by experience failures (Homburg et al. 2017). This necessitates changing the entire lens of underlying assumptions made about the involved stakeholders.

We have stressed on the vital untapped potential offered by the paradigms other than the dominant objectivist worldview. The critical requirement for research practice irrespective of its domain is the intersubjectivity of results, i.e., the findings should not be contingent on one’s intuition. Any increment to extant knowledge needs to be confirmable (Helmer and Rescher 1959). This basic requirement of science is met, rather advanced, by a multitude of methods, adopting the anti-positivist stance, including qualitative approaches. As spelled out in the paradigmatic analysis of CCB research, the inclusion of alternative methodologies, that allow for an emergent conceptualization of CCB, has also contributed significantly toward enhancing our knowledge of CCB. Accordingly, there is a need to develop these approaches further. For example, whereas CCB research has primarily relied on critical incident recall or hypothetical scenario confrontation, the observational process as an approach may hold the key to effective CCB research in the future (Koussaifi et al. 2020).

Our advocacy for the co-existence of alternative paradigms draws from the postmodern turn in marketing thought (Firat and Dholakia 2006). Postmodernism supports an appreciation for the *others* while holding on to one’s preferences. Whereas CCB research has predominantly relied on a quest for identifying and understanding the structure-dominated reality, as permeated through all the CCB actors, it has relatively ignored the post-structural truism of reality, as constituted by social construction and normative conventions. We observe flashes of a resurgence in the otherwise dispossessed paradigms, e.g., Koussaifi et al. (2020) attempt at the construction of consumer complaint journeys via the usage of qualitative research diaries, self-reported by consumer respondents in their language, nearly in real-time. Such accounts fill the gaps, left by the relatively aggregate analytical models or the traditional hypothetico-deductive approaches.

The paradigmatic position of any scholar or a study is a choice, contingent on several factors ingrained into the individual psyche while being influenced by collective norms and

situational forces. It is not the intention of this study to alter the worldview of those fixated to one of the paradigms. However, we contend that humility towards accepting other beliefs about reaching the same objective of seeking the truth makes the world a better place for all. Accordingly, without favoring or discouraging any social science research paradigm, we aim to speak to a world at the margins. We urge such scholars to occupy the otherwise-sparsely occupied paradigmatic regions. In the words of Munz (1985, p. 72), “*Knowledge is not acquired by the pursuit of a ‘correct’ method; rather, it is what is left standing when criticism has been exhausted*”.

In undertaking the paradigmatic analysis of the CCB domain, we have made a humble attempt to decipher and convey the broad assumptive contours of CCB research. It would be unreasonable if we do not acknowledge the limitations of our work. The CCB research articles were identified through a keyword-based search. Although multiple keywords were used to avoid the exclusion of relevant articles, there is no potential method to check and prevent the same. Additionally, though we made efforts to specify and adopt an objective methodology to classify the CCB articles onto the different paradigms, the exercise is ultimately human. Thus, the issue of subjectivity and false selection cannot be ruled out. This is besides the question of assuming the stance of the original researcher(s), on a critical issue. Further, the paradigmatic classification is based on two approaches (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Deetz 1996), that are reasonably dated.

Despite the limitations, it is our opinion that CCB research will gain by this and similar initiatives that attempt to go at the heart of the systematic inquiry process, which any research is. Like consumers, researchers think differently before they act. Goulding (1999) stresses that a researcher’s reflection of the self in terms of the beliefs about the journey towards the truth should precede the definition of the research problem itself. While viewing research as an iterative intent of improving the *means* and the *meaning* of knowing, acceptance of diversity in terms of varying paradigms is only a first step. We need to move onto a state of peaceful co-existence of paradigms, as Datta (1994) puts it. It is perhaps only then that the collective dream of understanding social reality in its truest sense can be realized.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** Both the authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest to report concerning this study.

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