

*Full Length Research Paper*

# A phenomenographic study investigating consumers' conceptions of marketing in Taiwan

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**Consumers' understandings of marketing are related to their product attitudes or brand image formation. However, little empirical evidence exists of what marketing means to consumers. This study documents a new term called conceptions of marketing, which refers to the beliefs and understandings held by consumers about marketing. The purpose of this research is to investigate the variation in how marketing is conceptualized by consumers. The interview data were gathered from thirty participants with various characteristics in Taiwan and were analyzed using a qualitative research method, the phenomenographic approach. The study identified four qualitatively different categories by which marketing is understood by these participants, including marketing as 'delivery', 'creating attraction', 'guidance' and 'agency'. Within each concept, a functional and a philosophical view of marketing are discerned, and some general characteristics of the conceptions of marketing are also described.**

**Key words:** Conceptions of marketing, phenomenographic approach, Taiwan.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the American Marketing Association, "marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders". This official definition of marketing is widely used in textbooks and taught in university lecture halls around the world, but not all individuals fully understand it (Alam and Khalifa, 2009). They cannot accurately memorize or comprehend it in a certain way, although they may be exposed to the definition. In fact, though ordinary consumers are immersed in marketing activities (for example, advertisements, sales promotions) in their daily life (Alam, 2009), their views about marketing may be formed as a result of experiencing marketing activities, and thus they may have their own views about marketing. Consumers' understanding of marketing is thus probably distinct from the academic marketing definition. Therefore, the study is interested in knowing what marketing means to consumers.

This research documents a new term the study calls conceptions of marketing, which refers to the beliefs and understandings held by consumers about marketing. A "conception" can be further defined as the fundamental

way a person understands a phenomenon or an object in the surrounding world (Eklund-Myrskog, 1998). Conceptions of marketing emphasize how consumers interpret, perceive, understand, and conceptualize marketing.

In the marketing literature, the term marketing concept is often advocated as a fundamental idea of marketing by which organizations survive and prosper through satisfying the needs and wants of customers (Evans and Berman, 1997; Pride and Ferrell, 2000). It is regarded as a philosophy of doing business. Marketing concept differs from the term conceptions of marketing mentioned in this study. As illustrated in Figure 1, marketing concept leads organizations to plan and perform marketing activities in order to communicate with a target, for example, using the 4Ps' strategy. In a marketing environment, consumers' conceptions of learning would be formed when experiencing these activities delivered by the organization. Marketing concept focuses on how an organization integrates marketing into its business process, while conceptions concentrate on how consumers interpret marketing based on their experience (Alam et al., 2010).

Why are consumers' conceptions of marketing important? Previous research has shown that the adoption of the marketing concept influences marketing activities,

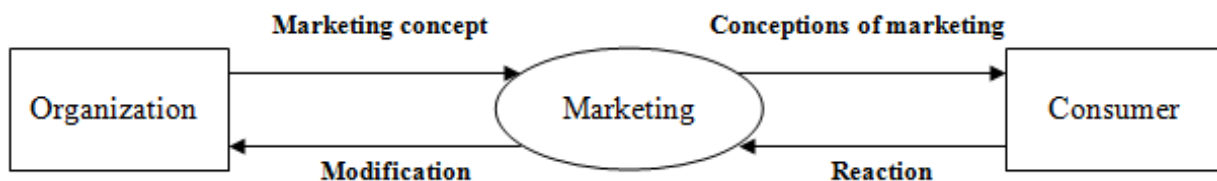


Figure 1. Marketing concept versus conceptions of marketing.

such as new product planning (Lawton and Parasuraman, 1980). Marketing practitioners are marketing originators and planners. Their understanding of the marketing concept and extent of putting the concept into practice might impact their firm's marketing performance. In the same way, consumers' conceptions and understandings of marketing might affect their reaction to the organization marketing activity and then influence product attitudes or brand image formation. Organizations can further utilize consumers' reactions to modify their marketing plans (Figure 1). What marketing means to consumers and the role of conceptions of marketing in consumer behavior might be an important issue in marketing research.

How can the study capture consumers' conceptions of marketing? Phenomenography, a qualitative research approach, is a type of interview which probes deeply into how each subject perceives the phenomenon of interest. It aims to reveal the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or conceptualize various phenomena in the world around them (Marton and Booth, 1997). General practice deals with people with a diversity of experiences, and it is important to be able to recognize them all. Consumers experience marketing activity diversely in their daily life, and this study is concerned with what kind of conceptions of marketing exist. The phenomenographic approach is adapted in the present investigation to illustrate consumers' conceptions of marketing.

This paper will introduce phenomenography, followed by an explanation of the methodological approach taken to collect data before presenting the findings of that data collection. The study considers some of the academic and practical implications of the data before drawing conclusions and making some suggestions for future research in this area.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OF PHENOMENOGRAPHY

Phenomenography is designed to answer particular questions about people's thinking and learning (Marton, 1981). It aims at identifying and mapping the qualitative different ways that people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of the world around them. Such ways of differentiating should prove useful in understanding other people's understandings

(Marton, 1986). The major characteristics of phenomenography are concerned with its attempt to capture conceptualizations that are profound to the experience of a selected phenomenon, and categorizations of different ways of understanding.

Phenomenography developed in education research. It originated with Frence Marton and his colleagues at the University of Goteborg in Sweden. Their phenomenographic research revealed that when a group of students read the same excerpt from a passage of text, they understood it in a finite number of qualitatively different ways. The students described different understandings of the same material, and this variation in understanding could be clearly allocated by researchers into distinct categories (Marton, 1995; Marton and Svensson, 1979). As a consequence of their initial research, it was proposed that if students had a limited number of qualitatively different understandings of learning, then it was reasonable to expect that people hold limited numbers of different understandings of all kinds of phenomena (Marton, 1986). Subsequent studies have shown that their hypothesis was correct (Gerber et al., 1995; Renstrom et al., 1990; Svensson, 1989). Phenomenography, on the one hand, has continued to emerge in educational research (Eklund-Myrskog, 1998; Hella, 2008; Marshall et al., 1999; Ingerman et al., 2009; Lin and Tsai, 2008); on the other hand, it has gradually begun to be utilized in various other academic disciplines, such as leisure (Watkins and Bond, 2007), health care (Björk and Ahlström, 2008; Jensen and Lidell, 2009), and life science (Yang and Chen, 2002). Although there is almost no phenomenographic research published in the area of marketing research, the potential of this research approach indicates the need to become aware of its development. The objective of the study in phenomenographic research is not the phenomenon being discussed per se (first-order perspective), but rather the relation between the subjects and that phenomenon (second-order perspective) (Uljens, 1991) (Figure 2). Phenomenography is a second-order perspective that describes the various ways in which a phenomenon is experienced by subjects, but not a first-order perspective that is a statement about the phenomenon (Marton and Booth, 1997). The ways of understanding experiences are the principle theme of interest. Phenomenographers are interested in describing alternative views of phenomena as people of certain groups perceive them. To acquire the subjects'

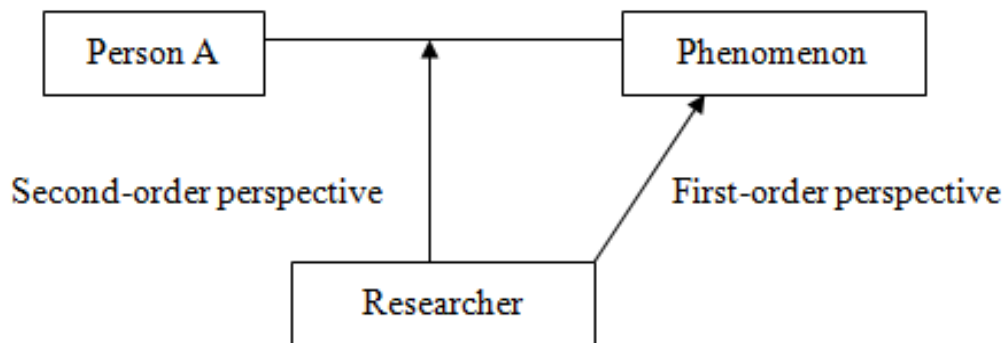


Figure 2. First- and second-order perspectives (Uljens, 1991).

qualitatively different understanding or conceptualization of the phenomenon is the main concern of phenomenographic research.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate variations in consumers' conceptions of marketing through the phenomenographic approach. The study focuses on the second-order perspective, as it concerns the relationship between consumers and marketing phenomena (Alam et al., 2010). It should be noted that the current study is not to controvert or debate the essence of the marketing, but to provide a different view of marketing from the consumers' perspective.

## METHODS

### Participants

As Bowden and Green (2005) suggested, in a phenomenographic study, the number of interview participants should ensure sufficient variation in ways of seeing, but not be so many that it makes it difficult to manage the data. In practice, most phenomenographers find that between 20 and 30 participants meet the two criteria.

The participants in this study were selected based on their age, family status, education, occupation and geographic area within Taiwan. Since individuals' conceptions of marketing may be related to their life experience, participants with different characteristics, such as age and occupation, would reflect different life environments and experiences. The purpose of considering geographic variations is thus for exploring possible existing views about marketing. Thirty participants were enrolled in the sample from northern, middle, and southern Taiwan, and there were an almost equal number of both genders. For each area, approximately ten participants were selected for the interviews about their marketing meanings. The mean age of the participants was 38.3 years. Details of the demographic profile of the participants are shown in Table 1.

### Data collection

The interviews were undertaken in a semi-structured way. The aim was to bring forth the interviewee's awareness of his or her own insights into life experience concerning marketing. The guiding interview questions were oriented towards the experience under investigation. The discourse directed each participant to describe their conceptions of marketing and consider their experience based

on questions such as "in your life experience, what is marketing?" "What do you mean by marketing?", and "In your view, what is the role of marketing in your life?" During the interview, additional questions such as: "Could you tell me more about that?", "Could you explain that further?" "What do you mean by that?", and "Why did you say that?" were posed in order to clarify the meaning, deepen the understanding of the answer, and ensure that the interviewer had understood the informant correctly (Bowden and Green, 2005). Each interview, which lasted 25 to 40 min, was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and then fully transcribed for further analysis. The transcripts of these interviews were the main data source for analyzing participants' conceptions of marketing.

### Data analysis

The transcribed material was analyzed according to the phenomenographic procedure as elaborated by Marton and Booth (1997). It is described step by step by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991). The data analysis started with repeated readings of all the interview transcripts to become acquainted with the content (familiarization). The second step involved compilation, as the researchers considered the selected parts of the transcribed material, and picked out the significant statements that characterized the interviewees' views of marketing (condensation). A total of 342 statements were identified and compared. The third step involved sorting; similar statements were placed together into groups as preliminary categories (grouping). The fourth step involved comparison; the content of the categories was compared with regard to similarities and differences both within and between the groups (comparison). The categories were labeled in order to illustrate their essence (naming). Finally, contrasts within each category were made clear by means of quotations that illuminated the variation in statements (contrasting). Two researchers, the author and an experienced phenomenographer, performed each step of the analysis separately. Säljö (1988) believed that interjudge correlation coefficients exceeding .80 may be considered adequate. In this study, the two researchers classified the interviewees' conceptions of marketing, reaching 88% agreement. For the interview data which they did not agree upon, they reviewed the interview transcripts again and discussed them case by case until consensus was reached, and then determined a final categorization together.

## FINDINGS

Through a phenomenographic analysis of the participants' interview results, four qualitatively different

**Table 1.** Profile of participants.

ID No.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Family status
#1	19	Female	Student	BS (in progress)	Single
#2	24	Male	Graduate student	MS (in progress)	Single
#3	37	Female	Teacher	PhD (in progress)	Married
#4	42	Male	Engineer	Master	Married
#5	30	Female	Hair stylist	High school	Divorced
#6	55	Male	Factory director	BS	Married
#7	56	Female	Nurse	BS	Divorced with kids
#8	25	Female	Technician	BS	Married
#9	68	Male	Retired police officer	BS	Married, empty nester
#10	29	Female	Technician	BS (in progress)	Single
#11	63	Male	Post office worker	High school	Married
#12	39	Male	Small business owner	High school	Married
#13	32	Male	Life insurance salesman	BS	Married
#14	33	Female	Teacher	MS	Married
#15	31	Female	Civil servant	MS	Married
#16	40	Female	Marketing manager	MBA	Married
#17	44	Female	Housewife		Married
#18	27	Male	Graduate student	PhD (in progress)	Single
#19	47	Male	Production manager	BS	Divorced with kids
#20	54	Female	Small business owner	BS	Married
#21	37	Male	Taxi driver	BS	Married
#22	43	Male	Sales manager	MS	Married
#23	26	Female	Research assistant	MS	Single
#24	52	Male	College professor	PhD	Married
#25	32	Female	Dietician	MS	Married
#26	20	Male	Student	BS (in progress)	Single
#27	35	Male	Consultant	MBA	Married
#28	24	Female	Graduate student	MBA (in progress)	Single
#29	33	Female	Engineer	BS	Married
#30	51	Female	Small business owner	High school	Married

conceptions of marketing, including 'delivery', 'creating attraction', 'guidance' and 'agency', were identified in this study. The four categories about conceptions of marketing are described as follows, with some interview quotations provided as illustration.

### Marketing as 'delivery'

In the first category, the participants conceptualize marketing as the delivery of information. These participants tend to regard marketing as an activity related to informing, broadcasting, providing, announcing, or introducing some product information (for example brand, function, price) to the people. Marketing activity lets them know and acquire the product information. For example, they responded that:

i) Marketing is to deliver products or services to customers, and make them aware of the merchandise or

service. (#5)

ii) Marketing is a way of introducing merchandise to people who need it. (#11)

iii) Marketing is to introduce products, brands and functions for customers. (#13)

iv) Marketing is to provide information, including products offered, specific functions and new product launches. (#15)

### Marketing as 'creating attraction'

In the second category, the participants regard marketing as creating attraction. The purpose of marketing is to make the product more interesting, and then to catch the consumers' attention and elicit consumers' desire. This will help make them buy the product. For example, they stated that:

i) Marketing is to make things interesting, so as to

stimulate one's interest. (#9)

ii) Through marketing, it will draw one's attention to the product and tempt someone to buy the goods. (#10)

iii) Marketing is doing something to draw your attention, and making things valuable for you to purchase or consume. (#21)

### **Marketing as 'guidance'**

In the third category, marketing is viewed as guidance. The participants characterized in this category, highlighted that marketing can lead a company's selling activity through planning, and give direction for marketers' decision making. For instance, they stated that:

i) Marketing is like a pilot or compass that guides you in the right direction and helps you to make adjustments accordingly. (#6)

ii) Marketing is a helper to market intelligence gathering, product selling and production management. (#16)

### **Marketing as 'agency'**

In the final category, marketing is conceptualized as agency. For these participants, marketing plays a mediator role between sellers and buyers. Moreover, they emphasize that the sellers and buyers should be considered simultaneously when doing marketing planning. For them, marketing is like an interface between sellers and buyers, supply and demand; it is also a two-way process of thinking, not a one-way process. For instance, these participants replied that:

i) Marketing plays the role of incorporating customer needs and enterprise profits. (#1)

ii) Marketing plays the role of an agent and a mediator. (#20)

iii) Marketing is to forecast customers' demands and satisfy customers' needs in order to gain the most benefits for both sides. (#22)

iv) Marketing is to build up the bridge between customers and industries. (#22)

### **Distribution of interviewees' conceptions of marketing**

The main purpose of this study is to characterize the variations in conceptions of marketing among the interviewees, rather than to focus on classifying or labeling individual interviewees. Therefore, for a fuller representation of the interviewed participants' conceptions of marketing, each was allowed to be included in one or more categories according to his/her conceptions of marketing. The distribution of each participant's conceptions

of marketing among the four categories is presented in Table 2.

As presented in Table 2, 'delivery' was conceptualized as the major feature of marketing for all interviewed participants. In addition, the 'creating attraction' category was expressed by fourteen participants. However, the 'guidance' category was found to be mentioned by merely five participants, whereas the 'agency' category was mentioned by only four. Moreover, the fact that most participants have multiple conceptions of marketing is clearly verified in this study.

### **Relationships among the four conceptions of marketing**

Four categories of the conceptions of marketing, 'delivery', 'creating attraction', 'guidance' and 'agency', are revealed in this study. The study consider that the first two conceptions are related to a functional view of marketing, as these two place more emphasis on what marketing does. The functional view implies that marketing is confined to helping to promote products and services through the provision of product information, and hence stimulates demand. The last two conceptions are related to a philosophical view of marketing, as these two put more weight on how marketing does what it does. The philosophical view implies that marketing can be seen as a guiding philosophy which considers customers' wants and needs while meeting the organization's goals for the organization. Based on the marketing definition, marketing emphasizes that doing marketing should coordinate consumers' needs and the organization's goals simultaneously. From this perspective, the philosophical view is closer to the marketing definition than the functional view. The level of the philosophical view is higher than that of the functional view. Moreover, consumers who hold 'delivery' or 'creating attraction' conceptions focus on marketing activities they can perceive, such as advertisements, sales promotions, and product packaging. On the other hand, consumers who hold 'guidance' or 'agency' conceptions, concentrate on the efforts behind the marketing activities such as planning and strategy. Therefore, the functional view is oriented to a focus on the 'outer' aspects of marketing (communication between consumers and organization), while the philosophical view is oriented to a focus on 'inner' aspects (communication within the organization). The relationships among the four conceptions of marketing are summarized in Table 3.

### **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to employ the phenomenographic approach and analysis method to investigate consumers' conceptions of marketing, and attempt to

**Table 2.** Participants' conceptions of marketing.

ID No.	Delivery	Creating attraction	Guidance	Agency
#1		✓		✓
#2	✓			
#3	✓			
#4	✓			
#5	✓			
#6	✓		✓	
#7	✓	✓		
#8	✓	✓		
#9	✓	✓		
#10	✓	✓		
#11	✓	✓		
#12	✓	✓		
#13	✓			
#14		✓		
#15	✓	✓		
#16	)	)	)	)
#17		)		
#18	)			
#19	)	)		
#20	)	)		)
#21	)	)	)	
#22	)			)
#23	)			
#24	)	)		
#25	)	)		
#26	)		)	
#27	✓	✓		
#28	✓	✓	✓	
#29	✓	✓		
#30	✓		✓	
Total	27	19	6	4

**Table 3.** Relationships among the four conceptions of marketing.

Conceptions of marketing	View of marketing	Level	Focus
Delivery Creating attraction	Functional view	Lower level	Outer focus
Guidance Agency	Philosophical view	Higher level	Inner focus

to provide a different aspect of marketing from the consumers' perspective. This study is the first to propose the idea of conceptions of marketing, then identify four qualitatively different categories of conceptions of marketing, including marketing as 'delivery', 'creating attraction', 'guidance' and 'agency'. The functional-philosophical view, higher-lower level, and outer-inner focus are proposed to describe the structural relationships

among these four conceptions. Obviously, consumers have their own understandings of marketing which are quite different from the marketing definition.

According to the distribution of the interviewed participants' conceptions, most of them expressed the 'delivery' conception of marketing. In general, the sellers often utilize mass media to communicate with consumers when promoting their products. Consumers directly experience

these communication activities, such as advertisements, sales campaigns, road shows, etc., and acquire product information through these activities in their daily life. As consumers are exposed to the environment over a long period of time, their conceptions of marketing are gradually formed. Thus, the 'delivery' conception of marketing was highly emphasized by the interviewed participants.

The 'agency' conception, which considers both sellers and buyers simultaneously when doing marketing, is closer to the accepted marketing definition than the other three. However, the least number of interviewees indicated the 'agency' conception in this study. It seems that most of the interviewees do not fully comprehend this marketing definition. This might be related to work experience. Table 2 shows that there were four interviewees who hold the 'agency' conception (#1, #16, #20 and #22); most of them have work experience related to marketing, such as marketing manager (#16), small business owner (#20), and sales manager (#22). For them, authentic marketing work experience might be helpful in forming a higher level marketing conception.

Market segmentation centers on the belief that everyone wants the same thing. It comprises dividing a market into identifiable groups of similar consumers (Nath, 2009). The classification of conceptions of marketing in this study, for marketing managers, can be implemented in market segmentation. For example, for consumers who view marketing as 'delivery', a good marketing practice may mean a well-implemented communication activity. When they are aware of a good product communication activity, they may have a positive attitude toward the product. This shows that sellers should pay more attention to their communication activity plan if they target these consumers. When consumers hold the 'agency' conception, they can understand that sellers aim all their efforts at satisfying their consumers - at a profit. They would be likely to sacrifice appropriately, such as making a monetary sacrifice. Honesty would be the best policy for sellers when communicating with these consumers. Also, this simple classification of conceptions of marketing would be helpful in recruiting new marketing employees. Marketing managers can promptly realize interviewees' understanding of marketing through interviews, and recruit appropriate employees according to the needs of the position.

While acknowledging that the study results are afore described, two limitations are noted. The first limitation concerns the interpretation of complexity. A less or more complex understanding of marketing may have been a product of individuals' varying linguistic abilities to articulate their experiences or of their varying interest in studying marketing as much as it was of their capabilities of relating to marketing. However, this limitation is tempered by the phenomenographic proposition that capabilities reflect how individuals relate to situations in which they are discussing their experiences. The second, the data collection was from Taiwanese consumers with

different characteristics. Phenomenography does not attempt to assert that participants hold specific conceptions, but instead, gathers evidence to illustrate the range of conceptions present within the population under study (Marton and Pong, 2005). This study does not aim to make the findings to arrive at a generalized conclusion, but focuses on the aggregate understandings of these participants. As this study argues, consumers' conceptions of marketing are related to their experience of marketing activities. Marketing environments vary across countries. Exploring different groups' (for example Americans', Europeans', teenagers', women's) conceptions of marketing should be pursued in future research. This would be helpful for understanding consumers' conceptions of marketing more broadly and deeply.

Cohen (1999) proposed a comprehensive and systematic model, dimensional qualitative research (DQR), for approaching and realizing the objectives typically set in a qualitative research study. DQR comprises eight dimensions which are referred to as BASIC IDS, including behavior, affect, sensation, imagery, cognition, interpersonal relations, drugs, and socio-cultural aspects. The dimensions of BASIC IDS can be employed to systematically explore market-related contexts. Phenomenography aims to reveal the different ways in which people experience or conceptualize various phenomena in the world around them (Marton and Booth, 1997). As phenomenography uses different people's experience or thoughts as a resource, it is expected to contribute to exploring aspects of the behavioral and cognitive dimensions, where a diversity of experience or thought can provide a more thorough understanding of a phenomenon. For example, interviewers can ask respondents to share their experience of service or their thoughts about what service means to them. Ways of experiencing service or conceptions of service would be identified, and then such findings might provide useful information for service design. The phenomenographical approach can be effectively employed in market research applications to explore behavioral and cognitive dimensions.

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