

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect



Australasian Marketing Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ausmj

A subjective personal introspective essay on the evolution of business schools, the fate of marketing education, and aspirations toward a great society

Morris B. Holbrook¹

Columbia University, Emeritus of Marketing, Graduate School of Business, New York City, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

This essay pursues an approach that I call Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) to comment on my own impressions concerning my experiences over the past fifty-plus years at one of our leading graduate schools of business. Herein, I trace my progress from MBA candidate to doctoral student to faculty member to retiree by suggesting ways in which – from my admittedly idiosyncratic perspective – business education has devolved toward a lower level of academic excellence, an abandonment of scholarly values, an unfortunate anti-intellectualism, a neglect of its commitment to the advancement of business- or marketing-related knowledge for its own sake, and a betrayal of its responsibility to work toward the protection of social welfare. Though the situation seems a bit hopeless, I offer a few modest suggestions for possible improvement.

© 2018 Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

I am pleased and honored to receive an invitation to contribute my comments to this special issue of the *Australasian Marketing Journal* (AMJ) on marketing education. Using an approach that I refer to as Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI), I plan to report my private impressions concerning the ways in which the practice, habits, values, and goals of marketing-related MBA education have changed and, in my opinion, declined. I have noticed this over the past half-century during which I have participated in the business-school scene. I hope that my long involvement in the world of business teaching and marketing instruction qualifies me to offer my reflections in ways that might be of interest to readers of AMJ.

Before continuing, I should point out that I love my school – Columbia University in general and its Graduate School of Business in particular. For over fifty years, I have been fortunate, privileged, and indeed blessed to attend and serve this great institution – as an MBA candidate, a doctoral student, a junior faculty member, a senior professor, and an emeritus retiree. Throughout, the school

has treated me with a kindness and generosity for which I am truly grateful. But, despite or even because of this, Columbia is the school I know best and, therefore, the one I must often use as an example to illustrate what I perceive as difficulties in our educational system. I mean no disrespect to the fine institution where I have studied and taught for most of my life. Rather, I see it as my duty to share my observations in ways that might conceivably encourage others to make much-needed improvements to benefit us all.

When I completed my undergraduate years as an English major at Harvard in 1965, I realized that I would need to find some profession more lucrative than writing poetry in order to support myself in the manner to which I hoped to become accustomed. This implied an imperative for me to seek some sort of career-enhancing program of graduate study. I thought about continuing in English Literature or switching to my other avocation, music. But the courses I had taken in these subjects during my crushingly difficult college years had seized upon things that I had once loved – books and musical performances – and, through an excess of mind-numbing pedantry, had spoiled them for me. Fortunately, my love of books and music eventually reawakened in the fullness of time. But meanwhile, to prevent such spoilage in the future, I decided to find an area of study devoted to a topic that could not be ruined for me because I already hated it. This quest led me straight to the field of business.

Despite my inveterate distaste for the capitalist ethos, I understood that I needed to work at something; that the reason they

E-mail address: mbh3@columbia.edu

¹ Morris B. Holbrook is the recently-retired Dillard Professor Emeritus of Marketing, Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, New York City. From 1975 to 2009, he taught courses at the Columbia Business School in Marketing Strategy, Consumer Behavior, and Commercial Communication. His research has covered a wide variety of topics with a special focus on issues related to communication in general and to aesthetics, semiotics, hermeneutics, art, entertainment, music, motion pictures, nostalgia, and 3-D stereography in particular. He pursues such hobbies as playing the piano, attending concerts, going to movies and the theater, collecting musical recordings, taking stereographic photos, and being kind to cats.

call it work is that you don't enjoy it; and that business was as far from something I might enjoy as I could imagine. So I applied to the Harvard Business School (HBS) (located right across the Charles River and visible from my window in Dunster House), Columbia University's Graduate School of Business (CUGSB), and another couple of schools, just for the fun of it. My beloved bride-to-be Sally had already spent one year in Columbia's Master of Social Work program. We were scheduled to be married on August 14, 1965, one week before the fateful deadline that Lyndon Johnson later set for marriage-related draft exemptions. So we made a deal that in retrospect, from a feminist viewpoint, seems rather preposterous. Specifically, we agreed that if I was accepted at HBS, Sally would move with me to Boston; whereas if I was accepted at CUGSB but not HBS, I would move to New York City to be with Sally at Columbia.

Foolishly, I felt fairly confident of acceptance at HBS because my grades at Harvard College had been pretty good. But my alma mater quickly disabused me of any such unwarranted optimism by rejecting my application on the grounds that I lacked real-world experience. They recommended that I could gain the required maturity by joining the US Army. This helpful advice descended upon me in the spring of 1965 at the time of the military buildup in Vietnam, and I greeted it with a lack of appreciation that I still feel to the present day. Suffice it to say that this episode left me with a hearty dislike for real-world experience and, I must confess, a deep-seated hatred of the Harvard Business School. I shall pursue this theme again later when I discuss my opinions concerning the deficiencies of the much-touted but woefully over-rated Harvard Case Method.

So I entered the MBA program at what we then called Columbia University's Graduate School of Business (CUGSB) and, somewhat to my surprise, found it to be a warm and caring place. The administrators were nurturing; the professors were accessible and supportive; and my fellow MBA candidates were friendly, thoughtful, and intellectually curious. We wore coats and ties to class, and we treated our professors with the respect they deserved. I could not have imagined calling a professor by his first name. Nor could I have imagined coming to class in a tank top, blue jeans, and sandals. And, yes, the clearly masculine references in the last couple of sentences are intentional and even politically correct because in those days, not counting secretaries and a few administrative staff members, there was not one single woman to be found within the walls of Uris Hall where CUGSB had its home. There were also no people of color, no Latinos, and no international students to speak of. In short, the place – like many or most other American business schools at the time – was as homogeneous in terms of gender and ethnicity as you might imagine. (I do not have statistics to support this assertion, but that's how I remember it from the vantage point of SPI, and I do not fear that the detailed data would contradict me.)

All this changed, of course, over time. Soon after I arrived, the school hired its first female professor: Margaret Chandler, a distinguished sociologist with a specialty in union-related issues. Today the school prides itself on its inclusiveness in recruiting and admitting women, members of all ethnic groups, and a huge diversity of students from all around the world. But, in 1965, it was just us white guys.

To my delight, the courses I encountered when I arrived at Columbia – when compared to my ordeal as an undergraduate in English at Harvard – seemed interesting, full of new information, and (surprisingly) not too difficult. Our professors showed concerns with issues of real intellectual import, and I was constantly challenged to think about questions and problems that had never crossed my mind. Indeed, I found myself in a climate of real scholarly excitement about the study of business, and I began to regard this study as an academic endeavor worth pursuing for its own

sake. In that light, I found a special resonance in a passage from Alfred North Whitehead that was engraved on the wall of Uris Hall just outside its main entrance: "A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions." This slogan implied a vision of CUGSB's purpose as one of contributing to social welfare in ways that would benefit a wide variety of stakeholders – owners, managers, employees, suppliers, customers, other members of the surrounding community, and the environment at large. I eagerly bought into that kind of idealism in ways that, to my dismay, would be challenged in the years to come.

I decided to concentrate in the area of marketing, and very quickly encountered some marvelous teachers in that field of study: Al Oxenfeldt, a well-trained economist with a delightfully acerbic sense of humor; Abe Shuchman, a master of statistical analysis with a deep irreverence toward excessive pedantry; Charles Ramond, a psychologist who served with distinction as Editor of the *Journal of Advertising Research*; and especially John A. Howard. Working with his former doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh, Jagdish Sheth (then a young faculty member at Columbia), Professor Howard taught the course on Buyer Behavior while he and Sheth worked feverishly to complete the creation of their masterpiece on that topic: *The Theory of Buyer Behavior* (1969). John (whom I did not call by his first name for another twenty-five years or so) would walk into every class meeting with his arms full of mimeographed copies of their latest chapter (this being before the days of Xerox machines). We the students would devour these stimulating documents and would then participate in riveting intense discussions about various subtleties of interest. For example, does confidence mediate the effect of affect on purchase intention, or does confidence moderate the relationship between affect and purchase intention? John believed the former, I the latter. And we never could agree – as late as 1994, when I helped with revisions to John's textbook, we were still debating this point. As a teacher, no one could have been more open to the ideas of others than John. Indeed, in my own case, he generously went far beyond the call of duty – hiring me as a research assistant for two summers; after I received my MBA, shepherding me into the Ph.D. program where I studied with him for another eight years; and, ultimately, giving me a job on the CUGSB faculty in 1975, where I remained until I retired in 2009, almost thirty-five years later. (I indelibly remember the phone call I got from John right after my first year in the MBA program at CUGSB. I was indolently lounging on the beach at a lake near Charlottesville, Virginia. John somehow got wind of the sad fact that I did not have a summer job. So, via persistent calls to my parents in Milwaukee, he managed to track me down in the wilderness and offered me a position as his research assistant on what became the famous Post Instant Breakfast study. These acts of kindness, generosity, and even mercy continued for the rest of our time together, up until he passed away in 1999, three and a half decades after we had first met (Holbrook, 1989; 1998; 2001))

It should be clear from what I have said thus far that my CUGSB professors in general and John Howard in particular were, in every sense, "full service" education providers. They felt excited about the intellectual content of business and marketing studies; they regarded their areas of expertise as real academic specialties; and they encouraged the efforts of any student who shared their interest in research-related methods and topics. They preached and practiced the virtues of scholarly investigation, and they supported the efforts of those who, like yours truly, wanted to follow in their footsteps.

During my first few years on the CUGSB faculty, starting in 1975, I keenly felt the oft-acknowledged pressure to "publish or perish." But the School facilitated my task of publishing frequently by letting me teach the same course over and over – the Introduction to Marketing Strategy, which I taught four times a year

for seventeen years. This saved preparation time and thereby maximized my opportunities for engaging in research. Very often, in those days, my MBA students took an interest in my research and wished to pursue independent studies. I sponsored these quite eagerly, in many cases getting publishable joint-authored papers as the rewards for my efforts. The topics of these articles included (among others) the multidimensional scaling of preferences toward jazz singers with [Rebecca Williams \(1978\)](#); a structured projective technique for assessing product images with [Neville Hughes \(1978\)](#); an information-display board suitable for use in a mail questionnaire with [Karl Maier \(1978\)](#) and then, again, with [David Velez and Gerard Tabouret \(1981\)](#); a Features-Perceptions-Affect model of responses toward performances of a piece by J.S. Bach as performed by [Stephen Bertges \(1981\)](#); studies of the spatial representations of preferences toward jazz musicians with [Doug Holloway \(1984\)](#) and with [Glenn Dixon \(1985\)](#); a philosophical analysis of aesthetic value with [Bob Zirlin \(1985\)](#); a multidimensional representation of features determining preferences toward different versions of a pop song by [Gary Dodgen \(1985\)](#); estimating the financial rewards from winning Oscars in various categories with [John Dodds \(1988\)](#); assessing the financial returns from including one or another star in a motion picture with [Tim Wallace and Alan Seigerman \(1993\)](#); an interpretive analysis of consumption symbolism found in the film *Out of Africa* with [Mark Grayson \(1986\)](#); and a technique for measuring price differentials related to brand equity with [David Bello \(1995\)](#).

Clearly, the list of genuinely committed and appreciative MBA students, who wanted to study with me and who did excellent work in that direction, is a long one. And please notice that these were MBA students and not PhD students. (I enjoyed the help of quite a few doctoral students, as well, but here we are focusing on the MBA program.) So the level of intellectual involvement among the MBAs as part of our community of scholars excelled in those days – during the 1970s, 1980s, and into the early 1990s. Unfortunately, all this would change in ways that now command our attention.

As we entered the 1990s, the MBA students in my Marketing-Strategy classes at Columbia still retained quite a bit of the old scholarly spark and inquisitive curiosity that had endeared this group to me so strongly over the years. My enthusiasm as a teacher in this inviting climate reached its zenith during the early 1990s, about the time when I accepted an invitation to visit my friends and colleagues at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Australia during March of 1996. My duties as an official ECU visitor included presenting a couple of talks about my research, making a short documentary film about my work, and delivering the commencement address at the graduation ceremony of ECU's Business School. The latter assignment strayed far beyond the ambit of anything that I had ever attempted before (or since). It filled me with so much anxiety that I spent months – probably more time than I had ever invested in any publication for even the most prestigious marketing journal – preparing what turned out to be a ten-minute speech. Into that oration, I wove all sorts of references to things Australian: kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, wombats, dingoes, platypuses, echidnas, crocodiles, emus, black swans, and kookaburras; trees that drop their bark; Rupert Murdoch, "Banjo" Paterson, Paul Hogan, Mel Gibson, and Evonne Goolagong; Vegemite; brollies, tellies, jaffles, and yabbies; "Waltzing Matilda." But I spoke most prominently about penguins. My main thrust focused on the most obvious and hackneyed of themes – namely, that life is tough but we must try as hard as we can. Or, as Donald Trump recently put it in his commencement address at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA, "Nothing worth doing ever, ever, ever came easy." To pursue this trite but nonetheless sincere attempt at an inspirational message in a way that I hoped would resonate with Australian sensibilities, I conjured up twelve admirable character-

istics of penguins, truly exceptional creatures whom we would do well to emulate. I recommended that we should all aspire to the display of these commendable virtues and concluded with the following homespun story.

On this theme, I wish to conclude by reporting a related insight that recently appeared in the literature on penguins. It comes from that great American fountain of knowledge about business, namely The New Yorker magazine, as found last September in a somewhat corny but nonetheless relevant cartoon by S. Gross.

In this drawing, nine penguins stand on the edge of an iceberg, surrounded by a dark and choppy sea below, gazing up at the tenth penguin who hovers overhead with his wings extended and calls out, "We just haven't been flapping them hard enough."

I have mentioned this cartoon to quite a few people and have found that hardly anybody ever laughs. Frankly, most people just don't seem to think it's all that funny. At first, I wondered why nobody laughs. But, lately, I have concluded that the cartoon fails to amuse partly because it appears to express something so profound about the human condition in general and about life as a businessperson in particular.

In this spirit, I regard this cartoon as a metaphor that encapsulates almost everything I have said and almost everything we need to know about the achievement of success and about the related goals for education in the world of business.

The truth is that, however hard business graduates may have worked on their studies in the past, they will now have to work even harder, the only difference being that, in the future, they will get paid for it. The truth is that the world of business can often provide painful options about as attractive as the choice between standing on an iceberg or plunging into the cold sea.

Figuratively speaking, the truth is that, however hard we may have been flapping our wings until now, we probably have not been flapping them hard enough. And, I'm afraid, the truth is also that, flap though we might, we are often going to flop.

In truth, like real-life penguins, as opposed to cartoon characters, we shall never actually manage to fly, no matter how hard we flap our wings. But that expenditure of effort on striving to achieve something inherently unattainable can still make us strong.

And pursuing this sort of strength can bring us one blessing that we might share with the flying penguin in the otherwise corny cartoon by Gross: Nobody will laugh.

Optimistic as this vignette might sound, I dimly recognized as early as the mid-1990s that the tide had begun to turn against the sort of committed intellectual curiosity and dedicated scholarly inquisitiveness that I had so much enjoyed while working in the academic community that had existed at CUGSB during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

In my opinion, the first symptom of trouble began when Columbia – like so many other schools – introduced its program of student-centered course evaluations. The manner in which these student-satisfaction surveys were (and are) conducted was (and is) so misguided that I must regard them as a cynical attempt to cater – even to pander – to students. These students are regarded as customers, with course offerings regarded as products provided by the professors who teach them. The underlying logic regards the school as a business dedicated to maximizing the customer satisfaction of its students in ways that they will recognize and appreciate, responding favorably to the flattery of being asked to register their often ill-conceived opinions. Of course, I realize that some sort of feedback from students can improve and strengthen a professor's design and delivery of course materials. To me, this sort of help-

ful feedback arrived most conspicuously when students used their body language (yawning, dozing, staring out the window) or their interpersonal-communication skills (dropping by to complain or to ask questions after class) to signal their approval or disdain. And of course, I also recognize that a formal set of course evaluations must reach the professor only after the grades have been turned in so as to avoid any retaliatory biases that might otherwise exist. However, those who have planned the course-evaluation systems at my school and elsewhere have made the colossal mistake of thinking that these evaluations should be anonymous (presumably to insure the freedom of students to respond as irresponsibly as they might wish without fear of being detected). (By the way, this reminds me of the misbegotten logic that argues for the anonymity of those who participate in a journal's review process. But my strong animadversions to the system of reviewing submissions to our major journals stray a bit too far from the present topic and will not entertain us further in the present essay.)

To my amazement, many or even most people with whom I have spoken do not immediately recognize the profound absurdity of a course-evaluation system based on anonymous responses. So please permit me to offer what I hope is an instructive analogy. Imagine that, at the end of every term, each student received a list of his or her grades in the five courses that he or she had been taking – say, an A, two Bs, one C, and an F. Further suppose that no attempt was made to identify which grade pertained to which course so that the student was powerless to ascertain which grade belonged to, say, Accounting and which to, say, Marketing. Obviously, the students affected by this ridiculous policy would riot. (Or, more likely in today's culture of political correctness, they would vociferously present their discomfort with what they saw as an inappropriate grading system through the intervention of their class representatives.) They would demand the right to know which professor had given them which grade. And, of course, their objections would carry the force of unassailable rectitude. Yet notice that the typical system of anonymous course evaluations proceeds in a manner fully as preposterous as that of the anonymous grading system just imagined. For a professor who gets a negative response in the course evaluations, it makes all the difference in the world whether that response has emanated from the brightest and most dedicated student in the class or from some slacker who never attended class meetings, never did the assignments, did not understand the material, and – during those few moments when he did show up – spent his time playing with his iPhone or making E*Trade deals on his laptop. As the recipient of student-satisfaction results, I felt that it was my right (after turning in the grades) to know which student provided which evaluation. For a while, based on suitably convincing explanations, I succeeded in persuading most members of my classes to sign their reviews. These I read with care while ignoring the rest. But over time, with the increasing surge of student entitlement that accompanied the school's posture of running itself like a business and treating its MBAs as customers, students felt no need to comply with my wishes and indeed began to voice their dissent (punishingly but, of course, anonymously). So I gave up. And, in my opinion, the still-anonymous student-satisfaction course-evaluation system is the worse for it.

This trend toward running the school like a business and pandering to students by embracing a system of anonymous customer-satisfaction surveys gained momentum when CUGSB hired a new dean in the early 1990s. I should preface my related comments by gratefully acknowledging that this new dean was exceedingly nice to me – kind, generous, and supportive in ways that inspire my most sincere gratitude. But he bolstered his new position by launching two initiatives that – albeit unintentionally – proved damaging (in my opinion) to the intellectual climate of the school.

First, recognizing that Columbia has the advantage of its location in the world's financial capitol, New York City, our new dean proclaimed his intention of making CUGSB a more finance-oriented educational institution. This meant elevating the position of the Finance and Economics Division (which, after considerable enlargement, came to be known as the "Mega-Division") and, conversely, diminishing the footprint of the Marketing Division (which gradually began to sink toward a lower level of course offerings and related resources). Feeling their oats, members of the Finance and Economics Division began insisting on a posture that was caricatured in the movie *Wall Street* by Michael Douglas' Gordon Gekko, with his slogan "Greed Is Good." Put more politely, the school's guiding philosophy gravitated toward a finance-friendly emphasis on the mandate to "maximize shareholder equity." This, of course, implies ignoring other stakeholders that used to be of real concern to business-oriented academics – managers, employees, suppliers, customers, and other external participants. For years, to my marketing-strategy students, I had been preaching a gospel of regarding the firm as a Dynamic Open Complex Adaptive System (DOCAS) trying to survive in a potentially threatening environment. This implied a purposeful sensitivity to sustainability within a reciprocally interconnected ecology. This focus on DOCAS, to my mind, had resonated with the aforementioned words of Alfred North Whitehead carved on the wall at the entrance to our building, advocating the need to "think greatly" of our business function. But those words had disappeared a few years earlier when the school covered over the wall in the process of adding more rooms to house student-employer job interviews. With the intensified finance-inspired mantra of maximizing shareholder equity, the former concerns for social welfare and ecological responsibility had vanished along with Whitehead's memorable exhortation.

Second, though the new dean came from a background in Marketing, he had apparently forgotten (or chosen to ignore) the first lesson taught in Marketing Strategy 101. Virtually every marketing educator would agree that the key to gaining a competitive advantage entails differentiating one's offering in a way that shields it from competition. Conversely, the biggest mistake a marketing manager can make is to try to appeal to the average consumer via a mass-marketing approach with a one-size-fits-all offering. Yet, ironically enough, the imitation of other schools that offered standardized core courses to a mass market of students was exactly the direction in which our new dean chose to move. Specifically, he had noticed that some other schools (Wharton, Columbia's number-one competitor, rumored to be among them, though further rumors suggested that Wharton had experienced disappointing results with this strategy) had begun to cluster students into groups that took all their required core courses together. Allegedly, students loved this clustering approach because it gave them a chance to make a few friends among the never-changing set of people with whom they constantly mingled in all their basic courses, hour after hour, day after day. However, this networking-oriented clustering plan for required core courses necessitated that each core course be standardized so that students could feel that they were all offered exactly the same thing by whichever professor was assigned to teach their particular section. Formerly, students had been given the chance to take different versions of the basic marketing-strategy course taught by professors with different styles in ways that covered somewhat differing points of view. Each student had enjoyed the opportunity to choose the version of the course that best fit his or her needs and wants. In other words, the student market had effectively been treated as self-selected segments with differing preferences. The system had worked pretty well, and some students had ended up in my sections because they actually valued my somewhat unconventional style of teaching Marketing Strategy (involving, as pre-

viously mentioned, DOCAS and all that). Those self-selected students were relatively happy, whereas other students (for example, those obsessed with maximizing shareholder equity) would have been miserable if forced to take my sections of the marketing-strategy course. But, during the 1990s, the new clustering-oriented mandate to standardize the course changed all that. To insure that all sections were as identical as possible so as to avoid potential complaints about a lack of equality ("equality" being more important than "quality" in this regime), each instructor was required to teach the same material, with the same textbooks, with the same lecture notes, with the same PowerPoint displays, with the same cases, with the same problem sets, and even with the same predigested jokes and stories. One belabored argument in support of this disastrous idea was based on the efficiency entailed by such a scheme. Because every professor would teach the exact same version of the course, if there were (say) five professors leading sections of a given core course in a particular term, each would need to prepare only one fifth of the material, using that prepared by the other four faculty members for the remaining classes. They could then pass their course materials to those teaching during the next term for even greater savings in labor. Efficient? Yes. Intellectually honest? Not so much. So, when the plan was brought to a vote at one of our faculty meetings, I rose for perhaps the only time that I ever spoke in one of these convocations. I wrote "McCourse" on the blackboard, echoing some of the famous arguments offered by Ritzer (1993) along similar lines, and proceeded to explain why I thought that standardized course offerings represented a truly terrible idea. After my heartfelt speech, our inexplicably complacent faculty members voted to approve the cluster-based standardized core-course offerings by a unanimous show of hands, mine being the only hand conspicuously not raised in support. One compatriot spirit did come forth surreptitiously after the meeting to say that she secretly agreed with me. So, with spectacular irony, my acquiescent colleagues ratified the design and implementation of an introductory marketing-strategy course that thoroughly embodied and vividly exemplified the single greatest marketing fallacy that it is possible to commit – namely, a ruinous mass-marketing initiative based on the much-discredited premise of "one-size-fits-all".

Predictably and for very good reasons, the MBA students who attended CUGSB at the time hated the new standardized core course. In preparing the homogenized classes, any shred of individual initiative, personal investment, or intellectual endeavor had left the building. And it was obvious to our then-current crop of MBAs that their opportunities for a stimulating educational experience had also flown the coop. But ask yourself, Dear Reader, what happens when such a relentlessly ill-advised clusterfuck is put into practice and stubbornly retained despite the cries of outrage coming from its intended victims. The answer is that – gradually, over time – the new curriculum begins to attract applications from the kinds of students who like to have their marketing lessons and other course materials spooned out to them like pabulum in homogenized and predigested form. So the students with stubbornly original and restlessly creative minds, whom I had liked so much and with whom (as listed earlier) I had rejoiced in working on collaborative research, began to disappear from the school. They were replaced by those who, with networking always foremost on their minds, preferred to march in lock-step through the corridors of learning to achieve an elevated level of conformity as duped disciples of identical standardized lesson plans. (Alarming, one self-satisfied MBA candidate even confessed in a *New York Times* interview that he had come to Columbia for its networking opportunities and did not care a hoot about anything his professors might have to offer.)

I anticipated all this and – despite the much-touted advantages of efficiency – begged to be excused from teaching the stan-

dardized McCourse on Marketing Strategy in the future. I paid a heavy price for this resistance because, to replace my marketing-strategy core-course assignments, I then needed to prepare two entirely new courses – namely, Consumer Behavior (CB) and Commercial Communication in the Culture of Consumption. The first was a fairly traditional CB course, albeit with my own peculiar slants, biases, and preoccupations. The second was a rather innovative seminar that borrowed from the emerging postmodern perspectives to examine ways of understanding audiences for the arts, entertainment, and advertising. Both courses started out strongly in terms of enrollments and reception. But as the years went by and greater numbers of sheep-like, profit-oriented, finance-minded, networking-inclined, job-seeking automatons populated the school's class rosters, fewer and fewer students showed up to take my two courses. Eventually, only six or seven seemingly inquisitive and appreciative MBAs would appear in my classes. Some additional seats were filled by students from other parts of the university – Teacher's College, the School of International and Public Affairs, Barnard College, Columbia College, the Behavioral Sciences, Journalism, Law, Medicine, Social Work, and so forth. I enjoyed this diverse group of students. And cross-registrations such as these struck me as part of the essence of what a great university has to offer. But, unfortunately, such cross-registrants did not pay tuition directly to CUGSB in ways that pleased the school's administration. So in due course during the first few years of the new millennium, the chairman of my division told me that I must go back to teaching the required now-standardized core course on Marketing Strategy to three clusters totaling roughly two hundred networking-obsessed, learning-averse MBA candidates.

Anticipating trouble, never in my life have I worked so hard to succeed on any assignment. Yet never have I failed so miserably. For starters, the course itself as designed by a committee of my colleagues struck me as a pedagogical disaster. To prepare, I attended a section taught by one of our most talented and esteemed faculty members. But I discerned no clear structure in the course outline. The material struck me as dumbed down in ways aimed at the lowest common denominator. The shared PowerPoint presentations seemed poorly constructed and amateurish. The readings were haphazard and unconvincing. And worst of all, but true to the tendency to copy competitors, the course made extensive use of Harvard Business School cases – a teaching style that, for good reasons, I deplore.

O, Harvard Case Method. How do I despise thee? Let me count the ways.

I realize, of course, that HBS cases are tremendously popular with MBA students and teachers alike. They give the students a feeling that they are participating in a hands-on experience that reflects the real world in ways not available when taking courses from those misguided professors who (like yours truly) rely on arcane concepts and abstract theory found in scholarly books and journal articles. It is far better, these students believe, to delve into the nitty-gritty of real business practicalities, as represented by the HBS cases. But, unfortunately, these cases and the ways in which they are taught embody a elaborately-engineered, collectively-condoned, fundamentally-phony teaching scheme that, when carefully considered, qualifies as nothing more than a humongous hoax.

These aspects of collusive misdirection arise in at least three ways, related to the three key participants: the case writers, the students, and the teachers.

First, the cases are designed to appear like veridical accounts of facts and figures that represent true real-world business problems tackled by actual business organizations. However, close inspection suggests that – in an attempt to create a streamlined teaching vehicle that does not embarrass its protagonists, the case-based narrative fictionalizes many aspects of the situation in question. Var-

ious issues are collapsed, glossed over, or rearranged in order to meet the relevant teaching objectives. Key data that must remain proprietary are omitted or disguised in ways that preserve secrecy. Complexities are disregarded or dumbed down so as to serve pedagogical purposes. In short, anyone who really wanted to gain real-world knowledge of one or another business organization would do better by reading its annual report, by studying relevant stories in the *Wall Street Journal*, or by watching shows such as those hosted by Jim Cramer on CNBC and Maria Bartiromo on Fox Business News.

Second, the prescribed technique for teaching a case hoodwinks students into believing that – by putting their ill-informed minds together for an hour or two – they can successfully grope their way to the solution of a challenging business problem that has confounded real-life managers for months or years. Unequipped with relevant concepts or pertinent theories, these students approach the case with little more than their common sense and popular misconceptions on which to rely. Almost at random or (more politely) by trial and error, they voice disconnected opinions and offer scattered observations that would amount to nothing were they not winnowed and collated by an essentially manipulative teaching strategy.

Third and most appallingly, the discussion leader pretends that the solution to the case emerges from the insightful colloquy among members of the MBA class. In truth, after carefully studying the helpful instructor's manual that conveniently accompanies every case and perhaps even reading the case itself, the teacher knows in advance what solution he or she is looking for. She or he then guides the discussion in that direction, selectively latches onto whatever haphazard student comments happen accidentally to fit the lesson plan, writes them on the board, and in this way steers the group toward arriving at precisely the solution that the case writer intended to encourage all along. At the end of the class, the blackboard looks exactly like the creators of the case planned it. Yet the students incorrectly believe that they have worked together to arrive at an inspired solution. In truth, they have been outrageously scammed and don't even know it.

I should mention that I wrote the preceding paragraphs before reading the excellent new book by Duff McDonald entitled *The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite* (McDonald, 2017). Drawing on work by scholars such as Mintzberg (2009) and Contardo and Wensley (2004), McDonald excoriates the Harvard Business School in ways that gladden my heart – especially when he incisively attacks the lamentable excesses of the HBS Case Method. I might add that McDonald & Friends expose the dim-witted insistence with which HBS disciples celebrate their ingrained obeisance to real-life practicalities at the expense of potentially insightful theories.

I regret to say that my own school has partially succumbed to this management pleasing, practice-worshipping litany. For example, I recently participated in writing a chapter on marketing for a book commemorating CUGSB's one-hundredth anniversary (Holbrook et al. 2016). While reading the finished volume and being strongly impressed by the admirable achievements of my esteemed Columbia colleagues, I was powerfully struck by the frequency with which the carefully edited authors of various chapters harped on the practice-based justification for the school's curriculum and research initiatives. Without half trying, in 242 pages, I found over 50 such often formulaic and sometimes far-fetched appeals to the practitioner-oriented ethos.

For all these reasons I view the HBS Case Method as an inherently anti-intellectual activity – one that arouses my distaste but that appeals irresistibly to the minds and egos of the sorts of MBA students who want to take a required standardized course taught in lock-step by members in a committee of professors who teach from the same set of lecture notes, reading assignments, problems

sets, exam questions, and PowerPoint displays. I am too much of a nonconformist to participate cheerfully in that kind of intellectual dishonesty.

But, albeit with feelings of dread, I tried. Indeed, as previously mentioned, I worked harder to prepare for that course than I have worked on any other undertaking in my life. I struggled to make the prescribed course content fit with my own beliefs about what students should learn. I strived to include all the talking points that my colleagues thought were important. I surrendered all aspects of my much-valued academic freedom for the sake of enacting the role that the school wanted me to play. But I could not fool those self-satisfied, profit-hungry MBAs. Like a big and strong but incredibly stupid horse, that somehow senses fear in its rider and throws the hapless equestrian into the mud, my huge and inherently nasty class of two hundred MBAs somehow intuited my pitiable discomfort and ruthlessly punished me for it. My scores in the course evaluations reached the lowest nadir attainable. With clear evidence in their comments that the students had maliciously collaborated in their survey responses, I set new records for vindictive student dislike, as reflected in my appallingly miserable teaching ratings.

Indeed, I found this experience so distressing, so embarrassing, and so humiliating that I immediately began contemplating my retirement, and moved unwaveringly in that direction for the next three or four years. Fortunately for me, in recognition of my ineptitude in teaching a standardized core course, the school mercifully permitted me to go back to teaching my Consumer Behavior and Commercial Communication classes. I again attracted the few compatriot spirits who had somehow found their way into our MBA program, as well as a number of empathetic souls from other parts of the university. These relatively amiable MBAs and cross-registrants chose me freely for courses that they wanted to take and seemed to appreciate what I offered them. All things considered, I rounded out my teaching career at Columbia on an agreeably pleasant note.

But, all the while, I could not help noticing the sacrifices to academic integrity that flourished all around me. Inklings of further trouble had begun to surface during the mid-1990s when Columbia's rankings started to suffer in the sorts of polls conducted by *Business Week* and *US News & World Report*. The *Business Week* poll included survey responses from each school's graduates, and it turned out that MBA students similar to those who had treated me with such punishing disdain did not possess even enough public-spirited decency and self-preserved common sense to give their own school favorable ratings in a poll that would affect the prestige and marketability of their own academic diplomas. By figuratively cutting off their noses to spite their faces, the actions of these disgruntled students spoke volumes about their inability to treat others with kindness and respect, much less gratitude. At the time, I served as a member of the school's Admissions Policy Committee. When pressed with questions about how we might improve the situation, I pleaded the case for recruiting nicer students. Needless to say, my well-intentioned advice fell on deaf ears. In fairness, I must admit that in the fullness of time the school did seem to succeed in attracting exactly those sorts of MBA candidates who would favor a curriculum composed largely of required standardized core courses whose instructors had homogenized their offerings to reach hitherto unexcelled heights of anti-intellectualism and academic vapidity.

One might wonder what the school could do to address such a problematic situation. One misguided answer hinged on marketing. Specifically, the school began a program to brand itself. It redesigned its stationery, revised its promotional materials, and changed its name from "Graduate School of Business at Columbia University in the City of New York" (rather dignified, I always thought) to "Columbia Business School" or "CBS" for short (thereby

echoing Harvard's "HBS," while blurring Columbia's identity with that of a major television network). As Columbia Business School marched forward, a new dean arrived on the scene in 2004. This one was a brilliant scholar, an economic advisor to president George W. Bush and presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and a generally nice fellow with a good sense of humor. The dean's flair for self-deprecating comedy worked overtime in 2010 when Charles H. Ferguson created his documentary film entitled *Inside Job*. Ferguson devoted a major portion of the film to trashing the Columbia Business School in general, plus one of its Economics professors and its dean in particular. In an on-screen interview (thanks in part to aggressive editing, I suspect), our generally mild-mannered dean appeared a bit petulant, and Ferguson won an Academy Award for his efforts. As a retiree, I had stopped suffering through faculty meetings; but my friends in attendance at one of these events told me that our dean referred with mock pride to his "Oscar-winning performance." Nonetheless, I suspect that *Inside Job* and the interview in question did little to burnish the brand image of CBS (the school, not the TV network).

Branding CUGSB as CBS fits, of course, with the whole project of running the university in general or its individual schools in particular like businesses. As such, the application of branding strategies to academic endeavors fills me with a certain amount of distaste (left over from days of yore when we knew that a "brand image" inevitably entailed some degree of permissible puffery or purposeful phoniness). Such a strategy reached full flower in what I regard as one of the satiric masterpieces of our time – namely the sublimely ridiculous promotional video released by Appalachian State University in 2005 and entitled "Hot, Hot, Hot" (Vids 2005). Opinions differ on whether this delicious parody was originally meant as a serious attempt to enhance ASU's brand image or, rather, was intentionally tongue-in-cheek to begin with. Either way, I regard it as a definitively hilarious send-up of all the trumpery that can result from treating an academic institution as a business.

Speaking of which, we cannot fail to be reminded of the philosophy espoused by Donald J. Trump – namely, that not only his scandalously discredited Trump University but also the United States of America should be run like a business. In this connection, to gain a sense of what Mr. Trump means by the word "business," we might contemplate the long list of atrocities that he is alleged to have committed: shipping jobs overseas, paying starvation wages to foreign employees, refusing to honor debts to suppliers and workers, pocketing big revenues before declaring bankruptcy, an unwillingness to supply tax records, retaining ownership of family businesses so as to defy conflict-of-interest regulations, showing rampant xenophobic prejudices against Muslims and Mexicans, displaying egregious disrespect toward women, firing law-enforcement prosecutors in ways that might constitute obstructions of justice, disguising or denying ties with Russia that might put him in a compromised position, and many others (including, not least, abruptly hanging up the phone after a contentious conversation with Australia's Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull). Whenever Trump is accused of some such nefarious activity, his standard excuse is to claim that it is "good business."

Here, we find the concept of business dragged through the dirt, degraded, and defiled in ways that reduce it to what practically amounts to a form of criminality. Such a view cannot help but rub off on the ways in which business is viewed in the modern world. As an illustration of this dismal progression, on a day shortly before I retired, I walked into Uris Hall, right past the spot where the aforementioned but now-obliterated inspirational words of Alfred North Whitehead had once shined down on all who entered. Not thirty feet from what used to be Whitehead's elevated message, I observed the installation of a new school motto in the form of a huge banner that proudly proclaimed, "We will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." Standing directly under this new

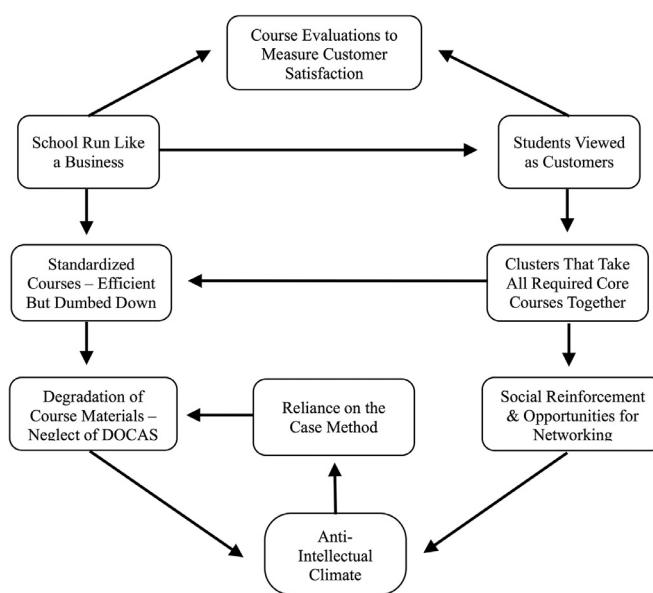


Fig. 1. Inter-relations among the main factors contributing to the decline of marketing education at one graduate school of business.

insignia, I found our dean. So I asked him if he did not think that our sights, our ambitions, our goals, our aspirations had sunk a bit in the scheme of things to the point where they now reflected a very mediocre standard of excellence. To my surprise, he wholeheartedly agreed with me but said, by way of explanation, that the school had erected the banner in deference to the wishes of the MBA students, who had adopted this rather paltry pledge and wanted it proclaimed for all to marvel at. This seems to be what happens when you let the inmates run the asylum (an insulting figure of speech, no doubt, but perhaps one with an element of truth lurking therein).

The arguments advanced thus far appear as a diagrammatic summary in Fig. 1. Pause for a moment to observe and recall how the various factors combine and interact to reinforce one another so as to create the downward spiral that I have described in the present essay. When considered all together, as a self-reinforcing system of mutually-supportive mistakes, the syndrome displayed in the diagram seems to beg for some sort of problem-ameliorating prescription.

But, wincing as I write this, I must confess that I see no ready solutions for these and the other problems mentioned in the present essay. The tide seems to have turned against us, with a vengeance. To mix metaphors rather flamboyantly, we cannot put the toothpaste back into the tube, and it's too late to shut the barn door. Still, I shall end with a few modest suggestions for minor ways in which we might tweak the current system for MBA education in Marketing and other areas of study to achieve some admittedly small improvements.

- (1) Stop running the university in general and its various schools in particular like businesses. Instead, run each school like an academic institution.
- (2) Stop regarding students as customers. Instead, regard them as channels of distribution, whereby knowledge created by the school is implemented and disseminated throughout society.
- (3) Stop viewing the business school as a brand to be promoted like laundry detergent or soda pop. Instead, view it as a community of scholars dedicated to the creation of business-related knowledge.

- (4) Stop asking students to submit anonymous course evaluations. Instead, ask them to sign their names to their student ratings.
- (5) Stop grouping students into clusters that take all their core courses together. Instead, let them find and choose their own circles of friends with whom to form lasting relationships based on something more than short-term proximity and opportunistic, career-enhancing networks.
- (6) Stop requiring students to take standardized core courses. Instead, let them gravitate toward sections taught by professors whose idiosyncratic teaching styles match their own preferences.
- (7) Without intruding on their academic freedom, encourage such professors to pursue a broadened conception of the business as a Dynamic Open Complex Adaptive System (DO-CAS) that must balance the interests of multiple stakeholders (not just those who own stock in the company) interacting within an environment in ways that pursue long-term survival by seeking a sustainable ecological niche (not just short-term wealth-maximizing profits).

If these seven steps were followed – plus many others too numerous to mention – it might be possible to move the ethos of the contemporary business school (as exemplified in part by my own beloved institution) back in the direction of where I found it when I first came to the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University in the City of New York fifty-plus years ago. It might be possible to move back to where I first encountered a distinguished philosopher's exalted assurance that "A great society is a society in which its men [and women] of business think greatly of their functions.

Suggestions for further reading

Holbrook, M.B. (1993). Gratuities and latitudes in M.B.A. attitudes: Customer orientation and the *Business Week* poll. *Market. Lett.*, 4, 267–278.

Holbrook, M.B. (1995). The four faces of commodification in the development of marketing knowledge. *J. of Market. Manage.*, 11, 641–654.

Holbrook, M.B. (1997). On reaching, grasping, flapping, and flopping. *Market. Educator*, 4.

Holbrook, M.B. (1998). The dangers of educational and cultural populism: Three vignettes on the problems of aesthetic insensitivity, the pitfalls of pandering, and the virtues of artistic integrity. *J. of Consum. Affairs*, 32, 394–423.

Holbrook, M.B. (2004). [Review of *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* by Derek Bok]. *J. of Macromarket.*, 24, 68–74.

Holbrook, M.B. (2004). Gratitude in graduate MBA attitudes: Re-examining the *Business Week* poll. *J. of Ed. for Bus.*, 80, 25–28.

Holbrook, M.B. (2005). Marketing education as bad medicine for society: The gorilla dances. *J. of Pub. Policy & Market.*, 24, 143–145.

Holbrook, M.B. (2005). Marketing miseducation and the MBA mind: Bullshit happens. *Market. Ed. Rev.*, 15, 1–5.

Holbrook, M.B. (2006). Does marketing need reform school? On the misapplication of marketing to the education of marketers. In J.N. Sheth & R.S. Sisodia (Ed.), *Does marketing need reform? Fresh perspectives on the future* (pp. 265–269). Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

Holbrook, M.B. (2007a). Five phases in a personal journey through the troubled waters of academic values in a world of business: Where's the beef? *J. of Pub. Policy & Market.*, 26, 135–138.

Holbrook, M.B. (2007b). Objective characteristics, subjective evaluations, and possible distorting biases in the business-school rankings: The case of U.S. News & World Report. *Market. Ed. Rev.*, 17, 1–12.

Holbrook, M.B. (2008). Compromise is so ... compromised: Goldilocks, go home. *European Bus. Rev.*, 20 (6), 570–578.

Holbrook, M.B. (2012). Catering to consumers or consuming the caterers: A bridge too far ..., way too far. In L. Peñaloza, N. Toulouse, & L. Massimiliano (Eds.), *Marketing management: A cultural perspective* (pp. 489–504). Visconti, New York: Routledge.

Holbrook, M.B. (2014). Morris the cat or the wolf-man on the Upper West Side: Animal metaphors and me. In S. Brown & S. Ponsonby-McCabe (Eds.), *Brand mascots and other marketing animals* (pp. 76–88). London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Holbrook, M.B. (2015). *Inspirational Applications, Part I: Marketing Education*, In H.J. Rotfeld, *New Legends in consumer behavior: Morris B. Holbrook*, Volume 14. Series Editor Jagdish N. Sheth. Delhi, India: Sage Publications.

Holbrook, M.B. (2016). Reflections on jazz training and marketing education: What makes a great teacher? *Market. Theory*, 16, 429–444.

Holbrook, M.B., & Day, E. (1994). Reflections on jazz and teaching: Benny and Gene, Woody and we. *Eur. J. Market.*, 28, 133–144.

Holbrook, M.B., & Hulbert, J.M. (2002). What do we produce in the "knowledge factory" and for whom? A review essay of *The Knowledge Factory* by Stanley Aronowitz. *J. of Consum. Affairs*, 36, 99–114.

References

- Bello, D.C., Holbrook, M.B., 1995. Does an absence of brand equity generalize across product classes. *J. Bus. Res.* 34, 125–131.
- Contardo, I., Wensley, R., 2004. The Harvard Business School story: avoiding knowledge by being relevant. *Organization* 11, 211–231.
- Dodds, J.C., Holbrook, M.B., 1988. What's an Oscar worth? An empirical estimation of the effects of nominations and awards on movie distribution and income. In: Austin, B.A. (Ed.), *Current Research in Film: Audiences, Economics, and Law*, 4. Ablex Publishing, Norwood, NJ, pp. 72–88.
- Holbrook, M.B., 1989. *John Howard: A Life in Learning* [Videotape]. American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL.
- Holbrook, M.B., Howard, J.A., 1998. The Elgar Companion to Consumer Research and Economic Psychology. In: Earl, P.E., Kemp, S. (Eds.). Edward Elgar, Massachusetts, pp. 310–314.
- Holbrook, M.B., 2001. Remembrance: John A. Howard (1915–1999). *J. Consum. Res.* 28, 337–338.
- Holbrook, M.B., Bertges, S.A., 1981. Perceptual veridicality in esthetic communication: a model, general procedure, and illustration. *Commun. Res.* 8, 387–424.
- Holbrook, M.B., Dixon, G., 1985. Mapping the market for fashion: complementarity in consumer preferences. In: Solomon, M.R. (Ed.), *The Psychology of Fashion*. D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, MA, pp. 109–126.
- Holbrook, M.B., Grayson, M.W., 1986. The semiology of cinematic consumption: symbolic consumer behavior in *Out of Africa*. *J. Consum. Res.* 13, 374–381.
- Holbrook, M.B., Holloway, D.V., 1984. Marketing strategy and the structure of aggregate, segment-specific, and differential preferences. *J. Market.* 48, 62–67.
- Holbrook, M.B., Hughes, N.C., 1978. Product images: how structured rating scales facilitate using a projective technique in hypothesis testing. *J. Psych.* 100 (2), 323–328.
- Holbrook, M.B., Lehmann, D.R., Schmitt, B. Columbia Business School, 2016. *Marketing*. Columbia Business School: A Century of Ideas. Columbia University Press, New York, NY, pp. 81–105.
- Holbrook, M.B., Maier, K.A., 1978. A study of the interface between attitude structure and information acquisition using a questionnaire-based information-display sheet. In: Hunt, H.K. (Ed.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, 5. Association for Consumer Research, Ann Arbor, MI, pp. 93–98.
- Holbrook, M.B., Moore, W.L., Dodgen, G.N., Havlena, W.J., 1985. Nonisomorphism, shadow features, and imputed preferences. *Market. Sci.* 4, 215–233.
- Holbrook, M.B., Velez, D.A., Tabouret, G.R., 1981. Attitude structure and search: an integrative model of importance-directed information processing. In: Monroe, K.B. (Ed.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, 8. Association for Consumer Research, Ann Arbor, MI, pp. 93–98.
- Holbrook, M.B., Williams, R.S., 1978. A test of the correspondence between perceptual spaces based on pairwise similarity judgments collected with and without the inclusion of explicit ideal objects. *J. Appl. Psych.* 63, 373–376.
- Holbrook, M.B., Zirlin, R.B., 1985. Artistic creation, artworks, and aesthetic appreciation: some philosophical contributions to nonprofit marketing. *Adv. Nonprofit Market.* 1, 1–54.
- Howard, J.A., Sheth, J.N., 1969. *The Theory of Buyer Behavior*. John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.
- McDonald, D., 2017. *The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, The Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA elite*. Harper Business, New York, NY.

- Mintzberg, H., 2009. America's monumental failure of management. *Globe Mail*. Available at: theglobeandmail.com/opinion/americas-monumental-failure-of-management/article78356.
- Ritzer, G., 1993. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Vids, 2005. Appalachian State University is HOT HOT HOT [YouTube]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVENWl8uBeg>.
- Wallace, W.T., Seigerman, A., Holbrook, M.B., 1993. The role of actors and actresses in the success of films: how much is a movie star worth. *J. Cult. Econ.* 17, 1–27.