

Breaking Barriers: How Creativity Drives Research

Russell W. Belk¹ , Renata Andreoni Barboza² 

¹ York University, Schulich School of Business, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

² Centro Universitario Ibmec, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

How to cite: Barboza, R. A., & Belk, R. W. (2025). Breaking barriers: How creativity drives research. BAR-Brazilian Administration Review, 22(1), e250035.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-7692bar2025250035>

Keywords:

creativity; innovation; research

JEL Code:

M10

Publication date:

February 21, 2025

Corresponding author:

Renata Andreoni Barboza
Av. Pres. Wilson, n. 118, Centro, CEP 20030-020,
Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
renata.barboza@professores.ibmec.edu.br

Editor-in-Chief:

Ricardo Limongi 
(Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil).

Editorial assistants:

Eduarda Anastacio and Simone Rafael
(ANPAD, Maringá, Brazil).

ABSTRACT

There are many difficulties in carrying out academic research, but one of the first barriers we encounter throughout our careers as researchers is the difficulty of working on relevant and innovative topics. In this honest and inspiring conversation about creativity and innovation in academic research, Dr. Renata Andreoni Barboza, a lecturer in marketing from the University Center Ibmec-RJ, engages with eminent Professor of Marketing Russell W. Belk from the Schulich School of Business. In this thought-provoking conversation, they discuss the difficulties in identifying new academic research topics, the search for innovation, and valuable guidance for researchers who want to get out of their comfort zone.

Data Availability: BAR – Brazilian Administration Review encourages data sharing but, in compliance with ethical principles, it does not demand the disclosure of any means of identifying research subjects.

Plagiarism Check: BAR maintains the practice of submitting all documents received to the plagiarism check, using specific tools, e.g.: iThenticate.

Peer review: is responsible for acknowledging an article's potential contribution to the frontiers of scholarly knowledge on business or public administration. The authors are the ultimate responsible for the consistency of the theoretical references, the accurate report of empirical data, the personal perspectives, and the use of copyrighted material. This content was evaluated using the double-blind peer review process. The disclosure of the reviewers' information on the first page is made only after concluding the evaluation process, and with the voluntary consent of the respective reviewers.

Copyright: The authors retain the copyright relating to their article and grant the journal BAR – Brazilian Administration Review, the right of first publication, with the work simultaneously licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0) The authors also retain their moral rights to the article, including the right to be identified as the authors whenever the article is used in any form.



Professor, your research involves innovative subjects in diverse contexts. How do you come up with research topics? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: There's no one way. They come to me gradually when the things I've been reading suggest a new project. There's one that I have been doing some work on, NFTs, and I got an email from a man in India that I had met previously. He was interested in doing a paper on conceptual art, which rang a bell for me because his premise was that conceptual art is all about the idea; execution isn't essential. I saw a similarity between that and the NFTs I was researching, so we crafted a paper that is now being revised. In other cases, someone I've met requests that I join their project, and sometimes that's interesting; sometimes it isn't. Sometimes, it's an effort to say: Here's my data; how do you make this a publication? In some cases, it is not possible. I'm keeping up with readings that interest me and pursuing what I find curious and things that suggest themselves. To be sure, there's no formula; there are several different ways. That's also a rich source for me — to attend conferences and meet people on their campuses.

What are the main tips you can offer anyone stuck and needing help deciding on their next research? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: Well, I think it's also helpful to go to different departments, in other disciplines that have a different way of thinking than we do, or to think about researching if you know someone in a different area who might still have an interest or a shared interest in a topic. Reading heavily can help, and I tell my students to read all sorts of things, both high and low, so manga, anime, graphic novels, and more academic publications can be helpful sources of inspiration. But it's easier today. Before using the internet, I was trying to develop research ideas; I'd go to the library and review the current issues of journals, such as medicine, law, psychology, or everything else. If I saw something interesting in the table of contents, I'd look at the article. If it were interesting, I'd make a copy to return to my office and read. Then, I would compile an annotated bibliography and start doing it by hand on cards. I finally gave that up because nowadays, it's easier to search on Google Scholar and find things there.

There's a danger in that because you sometimes find things out of context where you can access full text and search for what you're interested in, but that makes it easier today than in the pre-internet days to find things.

That's an advantage; even AI can monitor and alert us to interesting things.

Are there any practices or habits you recommend to stimulate creativity for research? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: So there's a variety of them in what is called abductive reasoning, and there's a book by Tavory and Timmermans ([Tavory & Timmermans, 2014](#)), for example, sociologists who talk about defamiliarizing and alternative casing and the basic abductive approach. You might have done some qualitative research with coding and building up in grounded theory from open to axial to selective coding, but after that, stepping back from the data, finding puzzles, anomalies, and curiosities, and assuming you have the data already, but, in doing that, trying to find explanations that could help to explain those curious anomalies that we don't really throw away data in qualitative research, but try to delve into it more profoundly and resolve those puzzles. And so that can be a loosening thing, but as I said, in general, abductive reasoning is contrary to common sense; rather than diving in more deeply, it's backing up and looking more broadly.

What inspires you to search for new research topics? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: It is often circumstantial. I was invited to a conference in Paris about mobility and getting around in Paris, and I thought about: Why do we privatize things? Wouldn't it be easier if we shared things like rides and automobiles? That got me thinking more broadly about sharing. I did a little research on the topic and eventually crafted a paper that I called 'Sharing' ([Belk, 2010](#)), a single word. That was how that came about.

There've been a couple of instances, including my paper on the extended self, where it was initially going to be a chapter in a book. In that particular case, I was also going to have a chapter on materialism, which turned out to be another paper. Still, I cannibalized that book draft and pulled out separate papers for journals. I've done that a couple of times, but I certainly don't start planning to write a paper that will introduce a new topic. I'm pursuing things that interest me and seeing where it goes.

I got contacted by a man in India, and we're working on a paper looking at things like the subscription economy, the streaming economy, and the sharing economy. His focus on conceptual art, minimalizing things and getting to the essence is, if you think about it, what brands are about, so we bring in brands a little bit. Coca-Cola is worth much more in terms of its goodwill and reputation than its bottling plants, chemicals, etc. It has broad implications,

even though it began with a mash-up of these two ideas between NFTs and conceptual art minimalism. That's been fun to work with, but I generally dive more deeply when I find something interesting and curious.

When I say fun, I am more childlike and playful. And this is sometimes called primary process thinking, a term Freud coined. When we write it up, we need to use secondary process thinking to make it logical and orderly, and so forth. Initially, it served as brainstorming with others or yourself, where you say anything and everything goes well. I'm not going to be critical; I'm just going to jot down things. I may play with diagrams and visuals, but it's childlike, playful, uninhibited, nothing is the wrong sort of stage, and that's the fun part. When you get to writing it up, it can still be fun, but it's different because you're finding things in other literature to bring in or new ideas to bring in.

How have creativity and innovation influenced your career as a researcher? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: I started in experimental social psychology, and I taught statistics and experimental design for a while, but the topics I was interested in, things like gift giving and collecting, didn't lend themselves very well to experimental methods, and so I'd been reading more sociology and anthropology, and studying gifts, for example, and eventually the methods started to burn a hole in my curiosity, I had to go out and apply some of them. The only way to do that was to jump in, so I wrote to maybe a dozen people I thought were crazy enough to entertain the idea. I've been working on some video work, which was crude then. We didn't have smartphones with excellent cameras in them, so I wrote to people, including Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, Morris Holbrook, and a bunch of others, and I propose that we spend the summer going across the country from Los Angeles to Boston, in RV caravan, full of cameras and tape recorders and such, and we applied it. It excited people, and we began to do some reading and get together at conferences. We also needed some money for this project, so we approached the Marketing Science Institute, which is usually positivistic and quantitative. We told them we have this project; we are still determining what we'll find and how long it will take. Still, we'll take all the money you can give us, and they said, well, it's interesting that might shed a new light on things. And so they gave us US\$ 5,000 or less, a couple of US\$ 1,000 for a pre-test we're planning to do in Arizona, and we did some video.

It was a whirlwind week of research and then several weeks of analysis, and we sent it to the Marketing Science Institute, and they gave us some more money. We got some cash from ad agencies, car companies, and others, so the project took place and was, for me, especially in several others, the inception of thinking about qualitative research.

So, we found some really interesting stuff. We wrote up the pre-test and sent it to the *Journal of Consumer Research*, and it got published. Then, we wrote up the final project and the book, and the final project was published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. The project excited other people, and it was the start of what is now called Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), a label that Eric Arnold and Craig Thompson did, and an invited article for JCR as well. So it's born fruit. That was the free idea that excited me and a bunch of others, and as I say, it was the inception of qualitative consumer research.

What are the main mistakes researchers should avoid when looking for new research topics? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: Well, a couple of things. Sometimes, when I go to a university and talk to the PhD students, they ask what hot new topics we should be getting into and trends. And that's a wrong question because even if I identified them correctly, it would no longer be a hot topic when they got data and analysis and wrote a paper. It'd been well-researched, so that's one of the things to avoid.

Another one is to, although people would disagree with this, have a theory in mind and use that as a starting point for researching a topic. I don't think we can generate original theories if we begin with a theory we plan to use. So, read everything and be aware of those theories, but an open mind doesn't mean an empty head, so you can go ahead and do the reading. Then, be open enough to consider again using abductive reasoning. What might account for the puzzle anomalies here? And it may be that you wind up falling back on an existing theory, but at least you're opening yourself up to a broader array of things, so I would say don't go in with a theory; go in with a phenomenon, something that you want to understand, and approach it openly and with your power of thought as well as whatever else you can bring to it, it's done, your prior knowledge, prior reading.

We learn from our mistakes, so it's OK to make them, but be open and flexible. Change, even research topics, at midstream. That's difficult to hear if this is your dissertation and you've been working on it, but short of, you know, committing yourself to being kicked out of a program. Try to be open to new ideas at each stage along the way, talk to each other presented at conferences, and do things that will get you some feedback from others.

Look to something other than your supervisor for a topic. It should be something that you're interested in. You can talk with your supervisor about things, but don't expect to be handed something on a plate. Those are a few of the things to try to avoid.

Many years ago, I went to a conference, and you were there talking about robots and their potential to change consumption. How do you find topics with the potential to be significant research topics? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: I was just curious. I can remember even as a child having a toy robot, and those things stick with you; I can remember talking with my father. I started as a geophysics major, then went into English literature and eventually business. My father was an artist, and he was in advertising agencies, and Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard, 1957) had recently come out. I'd read that and used to think: So, can advertisers do this to people? And that's stuck in the back of my mind, so when I got to business, I knew some of the things that interested me from those dinner table conversations. In terms of finding things, I am not out to find things that will be new; I'm just trying to find exciting things that I think have yet to be researched very heavily, and they may turn out they may not.

I'm doing a project and am still determining what will come of it; with a doctoral student and a postdoc, we start with one of four cartoons, and it's an experiment. These cartoons or graphic panels are of a man hitting a woman; the man can be a human or a robot, and the woman can be a human or a robot. So it's an experiment; it is a panel for a graphic novel, but we still need the storyline. Can you give us an idea of what a storyline might be? And so we got these beautiful stories from 10 people in each of those cells, and we're now analyzing those. So this is a group effort, and it's nice because people of different genders, ages, and backgrounds are a part of it. And so they're each bringing something a little bit different to it.

My doctoral student is working on neurodiversity, partly because she has a Down syndrome brother she helped raise. That made her very aware of these areas. The diversity, equity, and inclusion movement started about the same time. She started the program about a year and a half ago, and that's how she came to that topic: so many different people in different ways.

There is a postdoc, and she's working on yoga as a physical activity to be fit and yoga as a mental discipline to develop a particular philosophy and way of being concerned not with self-care but with the care of others. So, she interviewed several people on both types of yoga to determine what people get out of each of those forms. My doctoral students are as much an inspiration to me.

I started my introductory marketing class for MBAs by showing them scenes from videos from the far north of Canada, where traditional ways of living with hunting and fishing have been disrupted. Still, there needs to be more wage labor, and things are costly. It can only be flown in for many months of the year, so the ships can't land because it's all ice. And so, you know, for better or worse, colonialism has had a significant impact. What do they do now? It gets them out of their comfort zone; they think of Canada as more than Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, but these far-flung regions also need various exercises to get people's thinking to open up. There's also a way to open up my thinking for my students.

Can you share another example of an innovative research project you led and explain how creativity contributed to this process? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Russell Belk: Sure, I've got another project with a woman at an Oregon university. She contacted me and said, "I've got this project on people with severe facial differences. Are you interested in discussing that and possibly working together?" And I said yes, it sounds fascinating. So we did some reading and contacted NGOs and nongovernmental agencies to help source people. Hence, organizations that were helping blind people and people with severe facial differences, acid attack victims in India, and so forth, and none of them wanted to work with us, partially because we didn't have any facial differences ourselves. We started, and this was also the start of COVID-19, by contacting people with severe facial differences who had a social media presence. We contacted them and had great success getting them to help us. So we interviewed them; they also gave us access to their social media, and some posted multiple times a day and advocated for people with facial differences. We wound up having 19 people in our sample, very diverse people with some congenital and some later acquired by accidents and diseases. They were terrific, and we went to some of them and said we'd also like to give you an assignment if we can. Could you film yourself getting ready in the morning?

Could you film yourself discussing whether you ever try hiding your differences with cosmetics, glasses, or other aids? They were accommodating in giving us that material; we shared a video and sent it to them.

Part of this was a video we're still working on. We've got a couple of articles — I think we've got two publications from the project so far — but not the capstone, so they gave us some suggestions, and we modified the video accordingly.

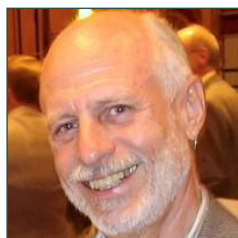
We sent it to the Association for Consumer Research Film Festival, where it was accepted and won Best Film. However, two people, one of whom lived in Northern California and another in Washington State, were so into this project that they came to the conference. They were there for the Q&A that followed the film's premiere, and they were well-received and enjoyed the conference. They posted about the winning video on their social media, and then we started getting contacted by some of the NGOs that had turned us down. Coming full circle with them was gratifying, and we're still pursuing the project. In terms of writing up the initial data and then gathering some further data, we also presented this at a conference on disability in Northern Ireland and one on anti-consumption. It was the keynote address in both cases, so it's been very well received, and the papers are now well accepted.

So, that was a project we made up as we went along. We had just the opening idea of people with severe facial differences, and we wound up with people on five continents. One woman from Brazil had a black birthmark on her face, but she was also a model, so some of these people were inspirational, succeeding despite their difficulties.

REFERENCES

- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868-882. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>
- Belk, R. (2010). Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(5), 715-734. <https://doi.org/10.1086/612649>
- Packard, V. (1957). *The Hidden Persuaders*. David McKay Co.
- Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive analysis: Theorizing qualitative research*. University of Chicago Press.

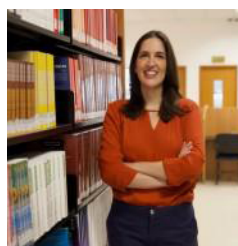
Authors



Interviewee

Russell W. Belk 

York University, Schulich School of Business
111 Ian MacDonald Blvd, North York, ON M3J 1P3, Canada
rbelk@schulich.yorku.ca



Interviewer

Renata Andreoni Barboza 

Centro Universitário Ibmec
Av. Pres. Wilson, n. 118, Centro, CEP 20030-020, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
renata.barboza@professores.ibmec.edu.br