

Grounded in Reality or Invented?
Lessons on Construct Ontology from Demonic Possession and Trust
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Executive Summary

Purpose: This article addresses the commentaries on the target article, aims to assess the ontological status of part-worth utility – one of the most firmly established constructs in marketing – and relates those comments to this construct. Furthermore, this paper proposes that the criteria introduced in the target article are also highly applicable to contemporary marketing constructs.

Methodology: We briefly review the history of conjoint measurement, examine aspects that might qualify part-worth utility as a mere scientific invention, and propose a method to evaluate the grounding of this construct.

Findings: The discussion leaves us skeptical about whether part-worth utilities actually exist as stable latent realities. More likely, they belong to the conceptual inventions of scientists. However, we outline a path forward to empirically test and potentially revise this position.

Originality: We surmise that assessing the ontological status of part-worth utility challenges a foundational dogma in marketing research. Precisely due to this conceptual challenge, the endeavor offers genuine originality.

Research Implications: For researchers, we provide a clear pathway to examine the construct of part-worth utility if they wish to maintain its ontological status. Moreover, we provide ontological counterarguments to the commentaries on the target article.

Implications for Practice: We recommend that practitioners demand that researchers (e.g., those offering results from conjoint measurement) demonstrate the grounding of the employed construct in reality. If researchers offer AI-driven conjoint analysis, practitioners should be especially careful, as such results risk being conceptually detached from real human decision-making.