

# Marketing Research Traditions: Toward Theoretical Unification or Pluralism?

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## Abstract

Theories of marketing and their future directions are increasingly discussed topics. A significant theme is whether we can construct a unifying logic for the marketing discipline (Vargo and Lusch 2004), or whether marketing should be seen as a theoretically pluralistic field (Möller and Halinen 2000). This issue is first addressed by examining the characteristics of marketing as a scientific domain. Next, a selected set of research traditions or schools of marketing (marketing management, services marketing, marketing channels, interaction and network approach in business marketing, relationship marketing) are described in terms of their intellectual goals and metatheoretical assumptions. This evaluation suggests that the fundamental aspects in assessing the explanatory value, limitations, and relative closeness of research traditions are the assumptions they make about: (i) marketing exchange relationships, (ii) the context of this exchange, and (iii) the actors carrying out the exchanges, in addition to their epistemological and methodological bases. Lastly, the results are used to argue for the adoption of theoretical pluralism in the marketing discipline.

*Keywords: Service-dominant logic, Paradigms, Paradoxes and dualities, Marketing theory*

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## 1. Marketing as a Research Domain(s)

Marketing is a complex, multilayered, and dynamic social phenomenon. Traditionally, the core or “basic substance matter” of marketing (Hunt, 1991) has been viewed as the exchange relationship and its context (Bagozzi 1974, 1979; Hunt 1976, 1983). What brings complexity to this core is the embedded character of marketing exchange manifested, for example, in the Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett (1988) “Marketing Theory” monograph, in the fundamental explananda proposition of marketing by Shelby Hunt (1983), and in the layered conceptualization of Möller and Wilson (1995) examining the character of business markets and marketing, as well as in the so-called post-positivistic views of marketing. Drawing on these sources, marketing as a research domain seems to consist of several interrelated layers:

- individuals and their behaviors (behaviors of customers and sellers);
- groups and their behaviors (family buying behavior, sales teams, buying centers);

- organizations or firms and their behaviors (marketing and customer organizations, other relevant actors);
- functions and their behaviors (marketing as a function and its interactions with other company functions);
- management (marketing as specialized and institutionalized management);
- interorganizational behaviors (between buyers and sellers);
- institutional systems and their dynamics (e.g., distribution channels); and
- markets, industries, and cultures, and their dynamics (forming the context of marketing and consummating behaviors).

In each layer, a researcher can ask content and structure-specific questions, as well as dynamic or process questions. For example, what aspects characterize “market oriented organizations”, and why? Through what processes does market orientation evolve? Based on this kind of positive understanding, one can begin to

pose and answer normative questions, such as how to construct a “market oriented organization”. For a discussion on the positive and normative perspectives, see Hunt (1983, 2002).

The layered character of marketing has had significant consequences for theory development. First, due to its simultaneous broadness and depth, there are several layers and aspects of marketing which have received relatively scant attention since the 1960's: marketing organization/organizing marketing, marketing as a management profession, markets, and cultures. Second, because of the complexity of interesting phenomena in different layers, there often exist different research traditions or schools of thought in each sub-domain or layer. Third, as the underlying assumptions of these traditions, and subsequently their research approaches, vary, there have been communication problems between researchers representing different schools of thought. This has impeded the development of a general theoretical understanding of marketing and has also led to paradigm “wars”.

In brief, the complexity concerning both the domains of marketing and the research approaches involved suggest that marketing researchers should have advanced metatheoretical skills in order to evaluate and make sense of the various schools of thought in marketing.

## **2. Marketing Research Traditions: A Contested Field**

How does one become “multi-lingual” in terms of marketing theories? The current paper addresses this question by first briefly examining the core marketing research traditions. The following traditions or approaches, an essentially subjective listing, are included: marketing management, services marketing, marketing channels, the interaction and network approach in business marketing, and relationship marketing. Consumer behavior is not included, as it forms a distinct discipline in its own right.

Each of these traditions is briefly assessed by examining the cognitive goals, theoretical driving forces, underlying assumptions, and insights provided for the marketing domain. The aim is not to make judgment on which research approach is better, but to develop an understanding on their relative descriptive and explanatory strengths and limitations, as well as on the assumptions these are based on. For theoretical comparisons of research traditions within marketing and management, see Anderson (1986); Arndt (1985); Brodie et al. (1997); Burrell and Morgan (1979);

Coviello et al. (1997, 2002); Gioia and Pitre (1990); Mattsson (1997); Möller (1994); Möller and Halinen (2000); Möller (2006a); Tikkanen (1996); Vargo and Lusch (2004); and Walker et al. (1987).

The metatheoretical analysis indicates that each tradition provides a particular and partial view of its focal phenomena, dependent on its ontological and epistemological assumptions and the issues it has chosen to take to the foreground, along with its intellectual goals. In this context, only very brief descriptions of each tradition or school can be given.

The *Marketing Management School* is a normative theory of the development of optimal marketing management solutions. In solving the key questions (optimal marketing mix, segmentation solution, and offering positioning), the school relies on the monopolistic theory of competition and marginal utility theory, and on being informed about customer preferences and responses (Chamberlin 1965, 1st published 1933, Dorfman and Steiner 1954; Dickson and Ginter 1987; Kotler 1967, 1971). A key assumption is that there exist working markets with primarily independent actors. The school of thought is silent about customer relationships, organizing marketing activities, and strategic marketing issues.

The *Services Marketing School* describes the service provider-customer relationship. Consumers' quality experiences and subsequent satisfaction toward the service are seen as outcomes of an interaction relationship between the personnel and the customer (cf., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). In addition, the organizational aspects in service production and marketing are stressed (“internal marketing” concept, Grönroos 1981). Much of the research in this school of thought is empirically driven: inductive orientation is prominent among Nordic researchers aimed at developing broad, managerially-oriented frameworks (Grönroos 1990). A more theoretical base has been constructed for the customer service expectations and behavior, using foundations from consumer behavior.

Research in the *Channels Research Tradition* often involves examining how actors in a marketing channel behave, and how and why various forms of channels evolve. The basic normative goal is defining efficient relational forms between channel members. This tradition is primarily theory-driven and attempts to combine the economic, political, (power, dependency)

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