



## Commentary

## Marketing's metamorphosis: From marketing's chrysalis to marketing's butterfly effect

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Chaos in science, recognizes that everything connects with everything. In weather, for example, this translates into what is only half-jokingly known as, the Butterfly Effect – the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York. (Gleick, 1987, p. 8)

### 1. The metamorphosis of marketing as social science

This paper follows the critical framework of Alvesson and Deetz (2000, pp. 16–20) that involves three key concepts, namely: insight, critique, and transformative redefinition. “Insight” signifies the process of examining varied ways in which the examined knowledge is created and sustained. “Critique” counteracts the dominant goals, ideas and discourses that imprint on management and organization phenomena, whilst “transformative redefinition” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) develops critical, relevant knowledge and practical understanding that permits change and enables competency development for new methods and operational procedures.

After studying marketing for three decades, I conclude that marketing is in chrysalis stage, as offspring of social science (e.g. psychology, neurology, biology, and physiology), and needs to grow from its current dependence on other well-established sciences for its theories, to a state of inter-dependence (rather than the advocated independence), co-creating theoretical and practical value. As inter-dependent socially constructed science, marketing can add value to a vast array of disciplines and constituents. I conclude that marketing scholars and practitioners (as combined term: “marketers”) will use limited resources most effectually, by focussing on creating value and contributing to the economic, social, physical and psychological well-being of all constituents, rather than to expend

energy on arguing its credentials. Further, a global iterative process focus, involving a wide range of business disciplines, will widen the scope and remove blind spots from marketers’ myopia. A web of integrated, collaborative progression (see gyroid later) will be more effective and beneficial to all, in contrast to a battle for solitary, independent survival. Furthermore, marketers stand accused of using various tricks, including falsehoods, half-truths and pseudo-scientific claims to manipulate consumer decisions and exploit customer vulnerabilities in line with organizations’ profit motives and businesses’ interests (Dahl & Yeung, 2015; Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012). Thus, marketers will do well to follow the advice of well-versed marketing scholars (Armstrong, 2003, 2005; Armstrong and Green, 2007; Woodside, 2010, 2013; Woodside et al., 2012) to enhance the rigour of their studies and build theories isomorphic with social, cultural, political, ecological and legal realities – with high, stable predictive value and fit – “Calling for adoption of a paradigm shift from symmetric to asymmetric thinking in data analysis and crafting theory to algorithms” (Woodside, 2013, p. 1).

### 2. Insight and critique

#### 2.1. Science

##### 2.1.1. Contribution to scientific knowledge

“Science refers to a systematic and organized body of knowledge in any area of inquiry that is acquired using ‘the scientific method’” Bhattacharjee (2012, p. 1)

This definition directs to two questions: Is marketing a systematic, organized area of inquiry? And, Do marketers use “the scientific method”? Most readers will all agree that marketing is an area of inquiry. Marketers ask, inquire, observe, study, investigate, compare, contrast, analyse, synthesize, create, ... and all the other methods of inquiry available to scientists. Is it a body of knowledge? An investment of five seconds on a Google-search or Google Scholar will result in the realization that the marketing body of knowledge is

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vast and well developed. Thus, what remains to be seen is, is the knowledge acquired using “the scientific method”? According to [Bhattacharjee \(2012, p. 1\)](#), “Scientific method refers to a standardized set of techniques for building scientific knowledge, such as how to make valid observations, interpret results and how to generalize those results. The scientific method must satisfy four characteristics: (i) replicability; (ii) precision; (iii) falsifiability; and (iv) parsimony.” Herein lies our first problem. Similar to law, theology, arts and music, marketers find it hard to replicate studies and theories must be specified in precise terms and independent, objective outsiders must be unable to falsify the theories. Consumers, suppliers, markets, channels, interests and brands change so fast that we can hardly keep pace. So how can marketers replicate studies involving multiple macro and micro variables, with specific reference to human attributes and characteristics and replicate findings? Difficult to answer, but is this phenomenon not true for any field involving humans, e.g. economics, politics, psychology or sociology? What makes marketing so different that it must be excluded from this elite group of “sciences”? Is it that parsimony is not achieved? Simply refer to complexity theory to know that economics, neuroscience and other social sciences suffer from the same difficulty in finding parsimonious theories and heuristics in the complexity of the world. So is marketing a science? [Armstrong \(2003\)](#) reports on the lack of importance and impact of posited theories in marketing. [Armstrong \(2003, p. 79\)](#), critical of the lack of replication, validity and usefulness, concludes, saying, “The number of important findings in marketing seems modest. Few researchers produce findings that meet the criteria of being replicated, valid and useful. Of those that do, few have surprising findings.” [Woodside \(2010\)](#) bemoans poor business and marketing research due to current empirical research’s low levels of combined accuracy, generalizability and complexity. Hence the larva stays in its cocoon, unable to mature and spread its large wings.

### 2.1.2. Adjacency to sciences

Would we argue that architecture is a science, or should we argue that building principles are based on scientific principles – gleaned from physics, mathematics and ecological science? Similar to the struggle of architects to have a distinct identity from engineers and builders, marketers also struggle to distinguish themselves from social psychologists, manufacturers, inventors, entrepreneurs, creatives and executive strategists. Within the recorded history of architectural practice, architects sought to “make architects themselves into mirror images of the science their buildings sometimes contain” ([Galison, 1999, p. 2](#)). As architects depended on science to fashion their identity and develop their credentials, so do marketers. At present marketers appropriate scientific knowledge and scientific principles from areas such as social and cognitive psychology, neurology, biology, and physiology ([Peter and Olson, 1983](#); [Sheth and Gardner, 1982](#)), but does this re-engineered application of principles and rules make it a science? Reconfiguring theories from other fields to apply in a marketing context clearly has some value. However, marketing will not advance rapidly or progress far en route to acknowledgement, as long as the discipline depends on other scientists to create theories marketers borrow or adapt for use. What would the gain or loss of scientific identity bring or take from the discipline of marketing? Are the adjacency and manifestations of marketers in advertising, promotions, and merchandising to science and the methods not sufficient? What does marketing gain by distinguishing its practices and output from various other technical scientific practices such as engineering (for product design)? In addition, rather than starting research with a borrowed theory or construct, it may be more useful to begin with a marketing phenomenon or problem in which we are interested, and then attempt to develop our own unique, accurate, generalizable, parsimonious theories that portray the complexity of the

marketspace/marketplace. While insights from other fields may aid in investigating the phenomenon, marketers should guard against letting those fields dominate any ideas we have on our own. Further, we should not constrain our search for additional insights to traditional areas of borrowing, such as economics, social and cognitive psychology, and statistics. Many disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, and clinical psychology have useful ideas to offer.

What does marketing lose by identifying itself as an applied science, integrating, evoking and applying scientific principles to innovate, modernize and possibly set the pace for a new, enterprising world? For example, the union of technology and marketing may reshape what it means to communicate and the channels to persuade customers, but the joining will also reshape the science of technology to ensure “modernized human experiences” and to consider the ethics and moral obligations of the technological advancement process.

### 2.2. Social

In contrast to natural sciences (studies of earth, life and physics), social science is defined as the study of people or collections of people, such as groups, firms, societies, or economies, and their individual or collective behaviours ([Bush and Hunt, 2011](#); [Krathwohl, 1993](#)). Social sciences are classifiable into disciplines such as psychology (the science of human behaviours), sociology (the science of social groups), and economics (the science of firms, markets, and economies). The list of disciplines does not include marketing. What can marketers gain by inclusion in the list?

Do marketing “scientists” add to the body of knowledge by studying people or collections of people? Indubitably. Do marketing scientists study the individual or collective behaviours of firms (branded organizations, profit/non-profit firms), brand societies or brand equity and market share – to name but one example from each? Indisputably. So, why then is there any hesitation in naming marketing a social science? Herein lies the crux of the problem: Marketers’ inability to allow other marketers and scientists to integrate within shared territories with other disciplines. Is marketing part of psychology? “Sure it is”, scholars in Consumer behaviour and buyer psychology will say. “No, it’s much less fuzzy and more precise!” marketing research analysts will reply. “Think about marketing analytics – those are pure facts and statistics, not psycho mumbo-jumbo. So, let’s keep marketing separate and distinct.” Is marketing part of sociology? “Sure it is”, niche marketing experts will say. “No, it’s much more! We don’t just study social groups, we also study virtual behaviour of individuals in anti-brand societies, so it’s much more than the science of social groups”. And so marketers have argued to widen the scope until marketing involves communication (PR, sales, advertising), entrepreneurship (innovation, product design, international exports), human resource management (cultural sensitivity, internal marketing, global B2B alliances, networking), statistics and information systems (analytics, metrics, sales forecasts) and so forth, involving and borrowing from these disciplines, but arguing to keep it as a separate, cocooned (separate, well protected and in rest) field of study. Although these arguments are entertaining to watch, the social science debate is unproductive. Moreover the wasted arguments misappropriate finite resources which could be more productively invested in the metamorphosis of the credibility and value of marketing.

Is the very struggle for inclusion not a sign of marketing’s infancy as science? Is it not true, as well established in the [Erikson \(1963\)](#) paradigm of identity development ([Nelson and Barry, 2005](#); [Rothbaum and Trommsdorff, 2007](#)), and confirmed in leadership theory ([Palus, 2010](#); [Rooke and Torbert, 2005](#)) that the immature struggle against its dependence to become independent, but only to arrive at true maturity and wisdom when she recognizes her

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