ARTICLE IN PRESS

Industrial Marketing Management xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

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

What do introduction sections tell us about the intent of scholarly work: A contribution on contributions

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the semantic strategies used by scholars in claiming academic contributions in the field of industrial marketing. Contribution is a fluid term, its semantic implications often casting a shadow over doctoral examinations or decisions of whether, or whether *not*, to accept a paper for publication. But, as a research student, publishing academic or reviewer, clear guidance as to what amounts to a contribution is, at best, fragmented and no broad and comprehensive review and analysis seems to have been performed on this topic in any discipline. Ladik and Stewart (2008:157) note that despite the frequency of the question − what is a contribution? - being posed, "it has seldom been directly addressed in print." We adopt a position in this paper that a contribution strategy is a deliberate form of rhetorical approach used by authors to communicate the distinctive value of their written works to an audience. Currently, guidance as to the different contribution strategies is fragmented, largely conceptual and conflates the intentionality of authors at the time of writing with the post-rationalization of measures of "impact" at some point in time after publication. We are concerned here with author intentionality in making contribution claims as conscious "rhetorical acts" (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997:1028). Our broad aims are therefore to first, develop an analytically generalizable framework for examining the intentional contribution strategies of authors in any discipline and to deploy it to present specific conclusions for industrial marketing scholarship; and second, provide exemplars of the rhetorical acts of authors in this discipline as a guide to future scholarship in any discipline. Our contribution here is therefore to academic scholarship – we aim to contribute on the subject of contributions itself, providing a performative framework useful for scholars, research students, editors and reviewers.

The procedures and analysis reported here unfold in three phases. In the first phase, papers on the subject of scientific contributions that identify the different strategies that have been used (we refer to these as *known* strategies), are identified and reviewed. In short, we start with *what is known* about making a contribution. We identify a lack of consolidated guidance available as to different known contribution strategies. Currently, advice is fragmented across different papers in different disciplines. A first product of the analysis is therefore a comprehensive framework, which consolidates what is known and which will be of interest to scholars in any discipline. In order to test the conceptual framework developed in phase 1, a second phase of the analysis was undertaken and is presented through a systematic review of a contemporary three-year survey of three leading academic journals. Our approach is systematic, in that we seek to uncover different types of contributions made in research papers and do so by proceeding through a series of steps in which semantic codes were developed, and papers classified against them (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). The sample used to develop the analysis is substantial, based on the consideration of 538 papers in the three highest ranked industrial marketing journals (based on the Chartered Association of Business School (CABS) listing, 2015), *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM), the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* (JBIM) and the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* (JBBM).

The purpose of this survey was to capture the rhetorical acts of authors and to associate them with the contribution strategies found in phase 1. To our knowledge, only one systematic review has been performed on the subject of contribution claims in any discipline, that being project management (Hallgren, 2012). Our approach allowed for the identification of the relative use of strategies, combinations of strategies, and which strategies are most relied upon as free-standing strategies. In the first two phases, we therefore present an abductive analysis − one of best fit between strategies observed by the researchers being used by authors in the survey, and "known" contribution strategies. Throughout, we capture and present exemplars of the semantics deployed in each of these strategies. We believe we are the first to provide such an exposition and feel this will be helpful to scholars. Moreover, by also identifying the limited use of certain strategies, further discussion of potential future use of these strategies is

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.02.014
Received 13 December 2016; Received in revised form 17 February 2018; Accepted 20 February 2018

Please cite this article as: Nicholson, J.D., Industrial Marketing Management (2018), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.02.014

advanced in the concluding section. A third phase of research amounted to a confirmatory phase, which explored whether there are other possible contribution strategies being used by authors that are not "known" – and which fall outside the parameters identified in phase 1. The third phase of research therefore moves from an abductive to an inductive logic and attempts to mitigate against coding bias and contradictions between introduction sections and the body of the papers analysed.

We present our methods in three parts, in conjunction with the three phases of analysis. Implicit in the structure of most formulaic papers is that a literature review is not methodical and therefore should precede an exposition of methods in the flow of a paper. However, we adopt a non-formulaic structure (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013) in which the approach to literature reviewing is indeed methodical, and which therefore requires explanation before exposition. Instead of what would usually be one methods section, the development of this paper is in three phases, with different methodological techniques attached to each phase. In each section, we therefore present and discuss the findings from the three phases along with the methodological implications.

2. Phase one: development of a conceptual framework – what is "known" about making a contribution?

Our first objective is to consolidate the papers on the subject of scientific contributions and identify the different strategies that are proposed to have been used – we refer to these as "known" strategies. Our aim in this section is to develop a conceptual framework identifying known strategies as a first stage in empirically exploring the rhetoric games of authors. We move in this section to identify and discuss these *known* contribution strategies.

2.1. Methods used in phase one

This phase identifies what is known on the subject of making a contribution. This first phase of our analysis is therefore a traditional review of the literature on the subject of academic contributions. A difficulty in performing a "systematic" review of papers on contributions is that the search term, "contribution" identifies every paper claiming to make one. This ubiquity of the term prevents confidence in an exhaustive systematic digital search being made. Instead, having identified key literatures, we used "cited in" and "cited by" searches from key journals to establish the extent of the literature. Thus, we characterize our approach as abductive, using multiple phases, as no guarantee of exhaustiveness can be made in relation to phase 1 alone. We did not limit the search to any particular disciplinary area.

2.2. Phase one findings

An early observation is that journal editors write much of this discourse. However, a small number of substantive (but conceptual) discussions of contribution have been made − mostly in the last 10 years. We start with a discussion of practical and theoretical contributions.

2.2.1. A brief word on contributions to practice

A key tension between theoretical and practical contributions has been explored as the rigor-relevance gap, both in marketing (Baraldi, La Rocca, & Perna, 2014; Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2014; Gummesson, 2014) and in the broader management literature (Fincham & Clark, 2009; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). One solution proposed by Kieser and Leiner (2009) is that academics should base their contributions not on past research, but on practical problems − and this argument would seem to suggest that a clear statement of this intent should appear in the introductions of papers. Hallgren (2012) proposes *practical application* as a specific category of contribution. This is along the lines of *basic and applied* research in the hard sciences. However, beyond this work, there seems to be little discussion of how authors form their research questions and position their contribution strategies in the introductions to their papers. Cuervo-Cazurra, Caligiuri, Andresson, and Brannen (2013:285) and Doh (2010:98) both suggest that practical implications are often included only as "afterthoughts" in papers as a token closing paragraph. Indeed, the three journals utilized in this research ask authors to include a section on managerial application as part of the article. The methods undertaken in this analysis − to explore contribution claims through introduction paragraphs, do not therefore lend themselves well to the examination of practice based problems in this paper and therefore the subject of contributions to practice lies outside the scope of this paper.

2.2.2. Contributions to theory

We are concerned primarily with theoretical contributions. There are several perspectives on what constitutes a theoretical contribution. These include an assessment of *interestingness* (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006), *utility* (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) *originality* and *value* (Bergh, 2003) and being something which "adds, embellishes or creates something beyond what is already known" (Ladik & Stewart, 2008:157). However, there is a danger in a measure of interestingness that entertainment value is also implied. Seemingly responding to this concern, Corley and Gioia (2011:11) speak of "advancing knowledge in a way that is deemed to have utility or usefulness for some purpose." These comments introduce a consideration of *progress* into a discussion of contribution. Hazen (2016) more specifically speaks of *building* or *extending* theory. In these senses, a contribution is interesting because it provides utility, usefulness or value to at least one audience whose knowledge is advanced by considering an argument or the findings of a study. A further nuance in the discussion is that of *magnitude* − a consideration that contributions are not all equally utilitarian, useful or valuable. Indeed, a single work may contain a substantial breakthrough in thinking, and a body consisting of several pieces of work may contain a cumulatively lesser contribution than in a single paper. Ladik and Stewart (2008) offer an eight-point spectrum of contribution types from straight replication to the development of a new theory. However, we propose that the magnitude of the contribution can only be post-rationalized, and indeed a loaded element in this spectrum to which we offer challenge in this paper is that a replication of an existing study is a lesser form of contribution. A second implicit assumption of such a spectrum is that each paper contains *one*, rather than a *combination,* of contribution strategies within a paper.

We believe that scientific utility, in contrast to practical utility, should denote the ways in which the proposed contribution is favourably juxtaposed or indeed contraposed to what is already theoretically known. The body of work on contributions suggests that there are several strategies to articulating contributions and we explore each of these in turn in the following sections.

2.2.3. Incremental contributions

A contribution predicated on *incremental* originality is based on a traditional *gap spotting* approach to reviewing literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Hallgren, 2012; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Many commentators observe this incremental approach to be the dominant mode of a publishing strategy (e.g. Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). Tadajewski and Hewer (2011:450) suggest that "embedding your research within the existing literature is a must and allows editors, reviewers, and readers to orient themselves." Alvesson and Gabriel (2013:248) refer to this approach as "a missing brick in a wall that the researcher diligently provides." However, a gap may exist because there is no value in filling it (Tadajewski & Hewer, 2011). Indeed, there seems little value in building a bridge across a river no one wants to cross; therefore, a gap spotting strategy must be coupled to an assessment of *utility* in filling the identified gap.

Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) discuss different sub-strategies within the broader strategy of gap-spotting. The first sub-strategy they identify is *confusion* spotting. Confusion exists where a collection of