

CLEARING THE PARADIGMATIC FOG – CONTRASTING THE IMP AND THE MAINSTREAM IN B2B RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Theory development in business marketing has gained increased traction in recent years as evidenced by the IMM (2013) Special Issue on “Theoretical perspectives in industrial marketing management” and the research movement driven by the Service Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). While research in B2B marketing has significantly increased and become more fragmented, it is essential to create a better understanding of the current knowledge bases of the domain and analyze where the field is heading. An obvious approach for creating such an understanding is to examine the principal research paradigms (or research approaches) to business marketing (see e.g. Nicholson, Brennan, and Midgley, 2014; Pels, Möller, and Saren, 2009).

The objective of the paper is to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the B2B research domain by making the underlying assumptions and intellectual goals of its key research paradigms transparent, and thus enable a rational assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm. The key premise of the study is that the North American mainstream tradition (NAM) and the IMP Group driven research approach (IMP) form the dominant paradigms of B2B marketing. Paradigmatic profiling is used as a method of analysis (Möller, 2013; Nicholson et al., 2014; Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, and Johnston, 2013). As a form of meta-theoretical mapping it allows us to gain a better understanding of the fragmented knowledge base, to identify the white domains, and to provide suggestions on how to enhance theory construction in the field. Through an analysis of implicit assumptions and key drivers of paradigm development, the study also adds to our understanding of why we are doing specific kind of research, and how we could make better informed decisions concerning our studies.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we are going to show how the existence of two mature research communities exerts significant influence not only on how we as individual scholars delineate our field and carry out research, but on the nature of knowledge and theory development in business marketing in general. There are significant differences between the research goals and worldviews of the NAM and IMP research. In a nutshell, the North American mainstream tradition is driven by science ethos; it seeks explanations and is overwhelmingly restricted to the use of quantitative analysis. The IMP Group driven research, guided by social constructivism and critical realism, is emphasizing description and understanding and underlines the uniqueness of business contexts, utilizing qualitative methods,

especially case studies (Dubois and Araujo, 2004; Easton, 2010; Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010; Möller, 2013). These two research communities have generated a remarkable amount of theories and knowledge over the last 40–50 years covering a wide range of business marketing issues from traditional market segmentation to key customer management and strategic business networks (Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch, 2011). However, because of their deep-rooted distinctive views of how research should be conducted, we claim that the current NAM and IMP communities are actually inserting blinders for B2B researchers making them unable to recognize significant research questions and restricting unnecessarily the ways they are carrying out research.

In brief, we argue that a deep understanding of the paradigmatic character of the NAM and the IMP research is essential for breaking free from the limitations of these approaches and for enabling new innovative openings in business marketing research.

The objective of the paper is to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the B2B research domain by making the underlying assumptions and intellectual goals of these two paradigms transparent, and thus enable a rational assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm. Based on the analysis, we will propose directions for future business marketing studies. The overall purpose is to stimulate debate on the current state and future prospects of business marketing research and thus advance our scholarship.

The paper is more like a thought piece than a conventional conceptual contribution. Although we will anchor our views on the extant business marketing research and notions on metatheory, we do not produce a literature review or state-of-the-art analysis, nor a historical narrative. Since a number of relevant literature reviews are available, we will use them as background material. We underline that the reading of the literature and the conclusions we draw are based on our personal experience, introspection, and enactment in the business marketing research scene. As authors of this paper, we both represent the IMP School rather than the mainstream and are well aware of the difficulties of crossing paradigms (see Midgley, Nicholson, and Brennan, 2014). Thus, we wish the reader to notice that the paper is innately personal and its conclusions should be treated as our subjective proposals for future business marketing research.

NAM AND IMP AS PARADIGMS

The paradigm construct encompasses a number of important dimensions (Morgan, 1980). It refers to (1) the worldview and beliefs about carrying out research, (2) research communities or schools, which have constructed the paradigm and maintain it, and (3) the research practices and methods seen as efficient – and legitimate – in problem solving. When a research community has reached a deeply institutionalized state, it tends to change from innovative research to normal science (Kuhn, 1970). One should note that paradigms are not theories but research orientations that underlie theories and often remain implicit, and are taken-for-granted (Arndt, 1985; Möller, Pels, and Saren, 2009).

We claim, that the NAM and the IMP form the dominant research paradigms in the business-to-business marketing domain. They have evolved into relatively self-sufficient research communities with their distinctive intellectual goals, worldviews and methodological orientations (Cova, Ford, and Salle, 2009; Cova, Pardo, Salle, and Spencer, 2015; Möller, 2013; Möller and Halinen, 2018). Together they cover the majority of current research in business marketing (Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch, 2011; Dant and Lapuka, 2008; LaPlaca, 2008; Mummalaneni and Lichtenthal, 2015). Both the NAM and IMP research communities have reached a mature and institutionalized state – both are over 35 five years old and are carrying out what Kuhn described as paradigmatic normal science (Kuhn, 1970). Their current research mostly cover established questions providing primarily

confirmatory results or, at best, incremental improvements to the existing knowledge base, and they have established their own scientific journals, conferences, and doctoral education forums to enforce paradigmatic development. One should note that we do not see NAM only a North American paradigm; it has been espoused all over the world. Its intellectual origins and main scholarly journals originate, however, from the USA.

Our second premise is that it is possible to construct valid simplifications of the NAM and the IMP centered research enabling their meaningful analysis and comparison. Both traditions cover an extensive research domain and contain each various individual theories and research streams (Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch, 2011; Möller and Halinen, 2017; Möller 2013). Yet, we claim that they can be compared as paradigmatic approaches, implying a high abstraction level and use of meta-theoretical tools (see e.g., Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Midgley, Nicholson and Brennan, 2017); Möller, Pels, and Saren, 2009; Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011). The advance of SDL has recently challenged B2B research, but it cannot be considered as a full-fledged B2B paradigm (Brodie, Löbler and Fehrer 2019; Vargo and Lusch 2017).

The paradigmatic difference of the NAM and the IMP research communities enable us to understand the current paradoxes troubling the business marketing research. A number of scholars see problems in the theory development of business marketing so as marketing in general. These include: (1) *lack of practical relevance* in addressing key managerial problems, i.e. the ‘theory-praxis’ gap (Åge and Cederlund, 2014; Baines, Brennan, Gill and Mortimore, 2009; LaPlaca and Vinhas daSilva, 2016; Reibstein, Day, and Wind, 2009; Slater, Hult, and Olson, 2010); (2) “*growing balkanization*” of *academic marketing* into quantitative modeling, behavioral research on customer behavior, and network approach’ (Möller, 2013; Reibstein et al., 2009); (3) *too little theory* or theorizing compared to emphasis on methods, data and empirical aspects (Möller, 2013; Yadav, 2010); and (4) *too little and/or too stagnant research* compared to the knowledge challenges that the changing business environment and the renewal of marketing practices would require (Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Lilien, 2016; Steenkamp, 2018).

We suggest that these somewhat contradictory conundrums are primarily due to the dominant and deep-rooted paradigmatic research positions of the NAM and the IMP traditions. They both just seem to be running out of steam! In order to break through of the stagnant stage of the business marketing theory, an analysis of the fundamental premises underlying these approaches is needed.

We will use a paradigmatic level profile approach in providing a detailed comparison between the fundamental premises of the two paradigms. By condensing the descriptors from extant studies, we ended up with four dimensions often employed in describing research paradigms:

1. The basic goals of the tradition; its core research domain(s), what main questions it is asking and what it tries to achieve (research agenda). This dimension involves interpreting the scientific values or *axiology* of the research community.
2. Worldview; the assumptions about the nature of the core research phenomena, its actors and their behavior and context embraced by the tradition (*ontology*).
3. View of knowledge construction (*epistemology*), what kind of explanatory mechanism does the tradition use to produce new knowledge; primary mode of empirical investigation?
4. Use of research methods (*methodology*), what are the basic methods employed, their benefits and limitations?
To expand these we will use a fifth dimension:
5. The disciplinary background and driving forces of the research paradigm; i.e., what kind of forces have influenced the development of the research community and its orientations (*disciplinary history*)?

NORTH AMERICAN MAINSTREAM RESEARCH (NAM)

Major research streams

Three major streams can be distinguished in the NAM research: (1) Marketing Management including organizational buying behavior, sales management, NPD and innovation, marketing strategy and other marketing mix driven research; (2) Channels research, including distribution and logistics, and (3) Supplier-customer relationships (Pels et al., 2009, Möller et al., 2009; Möller, 2013; for key themes see Backhaus et al., 2011; LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009a, Reid and Plank, 2000). We maintain, that this clustering covers reasonably well the different theoretical streams within the NAM tradition, and enables the description of its paradigmatic features

Driving forces guiding the NAM approach

A few key developments along the life cycle of the marketing discipline also underlie the development of NAM research in business marketing studies. These include transition of seeing marketing as a management function instead of an economic activity, the rise of operations research, modeling and multivariate statistics, and the pressure to institutionalize marketing as a respected business school discipline following the model of natural sciences. These forces provided a vital impetus for growth in marketing faculties and in quantitative research. The cultural change permeated all levels of academia from student recruiting, through curriculum development, to doctoral education, faculty selection and reward systems. The change is ingrained in the editorial policies and practices of major marketing journals and thus influences the activities of all researchers within marketing still today.

Paradigmatic characteristics of the NAM research

All three research streams share a strong managerial orientation and natural sciences research ethos. Research is method-driven and it typically makes a silent assumption about the working-markets even in the B2B context. We claim that the NAM research community represents a strong monoculture, even if with some variations, deeply embracing the dual values of managerialism and natural science-driven research orientation. With managerialism, we do not mean that the research would be evaluated by its direct applicability but that the assumed managerial decision-making problems guide the focal themes to be studied. The science emphasis is reflected in the variable-based objectification of research phenomena (ontology), and in the overriding legitimacy of such knowledge claims, which have been constructed with quantitative methods. That is, the science orientation shapes the ontology, epistemology and methodology of the NAM community.

Strengths and weaknesses of the NAM research

In short, the knowledge construction of the NAM community – its underlying epistemological beliefs – favors significantly research adopting variable-based and variance-based research designs addressed with some form of quantitative modeling. This prioritizes research of such managerial and organizational behaviors that occur frequently, are relatively stable, or can be reduced to be represented with a relatively small number of variables, often in the “antecedents – core construct – consequences” format (Figure 1., left end part of the continuum). This research orientation has been highly successful in producing the dominant share of our current knowledge of business marketing and sales management, new product design, and customer/supplier relationship management. Publications of NAM research and the textbooks presenting its research approach and methodology have permeated the curricula of business schools all over the world. The paradigm has deeply influenced the way scholars have been framing, studying and educating business marketing over the

decades. It has also changed business practices in terms of marketing management frameworks and procedures. As such, the NAM tradition can be regarded as highly influential paradigmatic research community (about the criteria of impactful research, see MacIntosh et al., 2017).

One of the weaknesses of the NAM culture is the restriction it poses on the research phenomena and questions. Based on our analysis we contend that the dominant share of NAM research has addressed such marketing phenomena that have either inherently relative low complexity, or the complexity of which the researchers have reduced with research designs so that the focal issues are amenable to the culturally legitimate methods. The underlying reason is the restrictive qualities of the embraced science-orientation and the espoused modeling methodology. Matching these and characteristics of such complex social systems as marketing requires reduction (through simplifying assumptions) and reification (through concepts like ‘trust’, ‘loyalty’, ‘expectations’ materialized in the use of quantified measures). Reduction of reality involves all research; the issue is to what extent we can do it and still get relevant results.

An equally relevant feature of the NAM culture is the fact that the community has avoided, or been poorly equipped to address complex research phenomena characterized by radical change, uncertainty, and rare occurrence. This means that highly relevant strategic issues such as intricate business model innovations, introduction of disruptive technologies, emergence and construction of networked business models, and orchestration of collaborative ecosystems have been out of reach for the NAM community. We believe that this self-induced incompetence to address issues, which really matter for business driven by high-tech or digitalization, is the main reason for the demands to improve the managerial relevance of the NAM research.

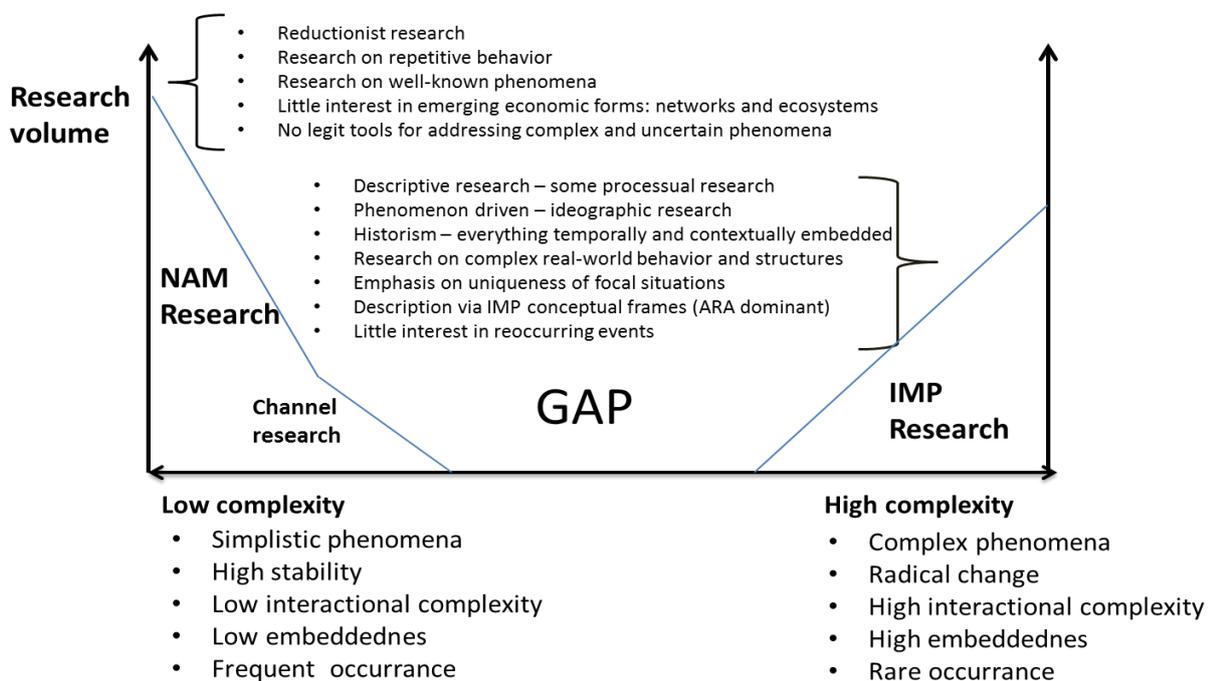


Figure 1. Research GAP: NAM and IMP research on a complexity continuum

While the volume of NAM research has increased considerably there have been no real theoretical breakthroughs since the introduction of the political economy paradigm in channel research in the

early 1980s (Stern and Reve, 1980), or the emergence of customer relationship marketing in early 1990s (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Both innovations were primarily conceptual and were not driven by the studies and findings of the NAM community. However, the NAM researchers were quickly able to address and model those issues expressed by the political economy view on channels structure and behaviors that were amenable to the NAM methodology; this also occurred with the relationship marketing themes. The main innovative aspects, the contextual and process issues included in the political-economy framework were, however, excluded, so as the dynamic and cultural aspects of relationship development. The SDL movement (Vargo and Lusch, 2017), endorsing a network view of value creation and emphasizing a process perspective, has been practically shunned by the NAM community.

These developments suggest that the NAM research community has lost its innovativeness, its ability to renew itself from inwards the community. Moreover, it has not been able to fully utilize important new research ideas brought forward by other than NAM scholars. This is a very serious condition because of the large size and cultural influence of the NAM research community. If the researchers espousing NAM values and research orientations are not able or interested in addressing strategically important issues, the potential impact of business marketing as discipline will wane.

IMP GROUP DRIVEN RESEARCH (IMP)

Major research themes

Three interrelated periods can be identified in the IMP driven research: interaction approach to business relationships (starting from early 1980 onwards), network approach to markets and relationships (commencing from 1990), and – more vaguely – an extension of the core IMP research (introduced from 2000 onwards) (see Möller and Halinen, 2017). As the IMP research is thematically more coherent than the NAM studies we aim to capture its key features – interaction and the network perspective – simultaneously. In this we utilize largely the available analyses of the IMP research (Axelsson, 2010; Ford and Håkansson, 2006; Håkansson and Snehota, 2017; Möller and Halinen, 2017; Möller, 2013; Ratajzak-Mrozek, 2017).

Driving forces guiding the IMP Group approach

Several intermingled threads help to understand the development and thereby the character of the IMP scholarship. It is predominantly phenomenon-driven and puts high emphasis on temporal embeddedness, i.e. description of phenomena in their temporal and contextual setting. The young founders of the IMP experienced themselves as challengers of the taken-for-granted view of markets and marketing. This challenger role and certain skepticism towards ‘other views’ has also continued to empower the community. The community has a passion for making sense of complexity, and as a young and originally small research community, it has strived for expansion by institutionalizing the tradition (Möller and Halinen, 2018) and evangelizing its core ideas.

Paradigmatic characteristics of the IMP research

The IMP research community shares a profound interest in examining highly complex issues and phenomena in a real world context. Besides this ‘thriving on complexity’, social constructionism guides much of the scholarship of the core IMP members (Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002) although not often explicitly discussed. Descriptive orientation with conceptual sense making reflects the prominent IMP way of addressing network complexity and providing understanding through rich description. Sticking to the IMP ‘tools’ to safeguard the ‘correct’ adoption of the central ontological and epistemological assumptions of the IMP network

theory and the use of the IMP constructs are also prominent aspects of the IMP culture (Cunningham, 2008; Cova, et al. 2015; Cova and Salle, 2003; Möller, 2013).

In sum, we see that the IMP research community, like the NAM, represents a strong culture deeply embracing the values of phenomenon-driven research, descriptive orientation and social constructionism. These orientations are manifested in prioritizing empirical case research as the dominant method of inquiry.

Strengths and weaknesses of the IMP research

In short, the research ideals – making sense of complex network relationships, structures and processes – and knowledge construction values of the IMP community favor significantly phenomenon driven case research on complex, dynamic, and embedded network and network management topics (the right hand-side of the complexity continuum in Figure 1). During the last 30 years the IMP scholars have been able to develop a highly powerful conceptual language (Interaction Framework, ARA-Framework, Four Resources -framework, Network picture -concept) suited for analytical description of any complex network phenomenon. These frameworks were truly radical theoretical innovations, transforming the way scholars have since viewed and studied business marketing, and led to the paradigmatic status of the IMP community (Cova et al., 2015; Håkansson and Gadde, 2018; Möller and Halinen, 2018). Through numerable books, conferences and journal articles the IMP Group has diffused its research perspectives, conceptual frames and empirical results across the globe becoming the ‘other’ dominant paradigm in parallel with the older North American mainstream research (Möller and Halinen, 2018).

The unmistakable success of the IMP community does not mean that network approach is free of limitations. The ontological foundation of the core IMP, regarding all actors, resources and activities as heterogeneous and unique (Håkansson and Snehota, 2017) and seeing networks as fluid, interactively created structures whose evolution is unpredictable (Bizzi and Langley, 2012), entails a theoretical impasse. The uniqueness and undifferentiated fluidity perspectives have led to a huge number of primarily descriptive case studies trying to make sense of the complexity and process character of networks. Over the past 30 years, the IMP case studies have successfully reproduced the postulated complexity across a great variety of business and innovation networks.

Unfortunately, this approach has discouraged the query of theoretically more advanced questions. For example, are there any systematic variation, and if yes why, between networks and their management due to their function and goals, business and technological context, and historical development? In the same vein, are there any such variation in the network processes and why? When assuming idiosyncrasy these kind of questions are useless since everything is unique. This position makes comparative research designs unwarranted, blocking one of the simplest but also most effective method of scholarly research. The idiographic orientation is also manifest in the vague nature of the managerial suggestions by the IMP research. When each management problem or decision is seen as unique and postulated to be influenced by history and contextual embeddedness only very broad proposals can be offered (Bizzi and Langley, 2012; Möller, 2013; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017).

Our view that the core IMP research community is a captive of its own ontological fundamentals is manifest in its lacking ability to produce new theoretical propositions. The IMP created its most significant theoretical innovations, the interaction approach to business relationships and the network approach, in the early 1980s and in the mid 1990 respectively. After these breakthroughs the community has, in spite of the huge increase in the volume of IMP-driven research, and a marked extension of research themes (Möller and Halinen, 2018), mainly produced incremental

improvements in its core conceptual frameworks. The introduction of the cognitive view of network management around 2005 is a delightful exception. However, theoretically the main substance of this perspective came from management and strategic studies and organizational theory (Colville and Pye, 2010; Henneberg, Mouzas, and Naude, 2006).

In brief, we see that the IMP Group scholarship represents clear signs of a mature research paradigm, dominated by ‘normal science’. The early radicalism seems to have turned into theoretical conservatism. One reason may be the early need to evangelize and defend the IMP core ideas to the then dominant traditional marketing research community. This appears to have led to a prominently inward-looking culture among the core IMP scholars, and consequently to safeguarding the fundamental IMP worldview and frameworks against any major outside influences.

NAM AND IMP IN COMPARISON – THE WAY AHEAD

The analysis of the North American mainstream and the IMP Group driven research on business marketing revealed not only significant differences between these dominant approaches but also considerable limitations, as well as eminent positive aspects.

By examining the paradigmatic profiles of the NAM and IMP scholarship one can note that these dominant business marketing research approaches have opposite research interests, contradictory worldviews, and that they employ very different research methodologies. Several significant conclusions can be drawn. First, it is fortunate that we have these alternatives. Together these paradigms have been able to cover a significantly broader part of the business marketing -domain than any single research approach. Moreover, their distinctive research streams and programs are providing us such sets of analytical and sense making tools that enable widely different ways of knowledge production.

The sketched benefits do not come free, however. Learning to read, understand, and utilize the extensive knowledge bases, theory formation, and research logics and methods offered by the NAM and the IMP paradigms requires considerable investments and cognitive efforts. Perhaps even harder for some is to accept or at least tolerate the distinctive worldviews of the ‘other’ paradigm. To lower at least this kind of mental barrier (see Midgley, Nicholson, and Brennan, 2017) we have tried to show that the underlying theoretical assumptions and methodological choices form effective research tool bags for addressing the kind of issues and problems the paradigm prioritizes.

All is not obviously well in the ballpark, however. The widely distinctive research interests and tool bags of the NAM and the IMP communities have left open a significant gap in our knowledge of business marketing. We feel that the magnitude of research issues either actively shunned by the focal paradigms or just passively omitted is extensive. The underlying reason is that by specializing on research phenomena at the diametric ends of the complexity continuum the NAM and the IMP communities have left an incredible gap of significant domains and issues under researched, as illustrated in Figure 1.

How then to fill or narrow this gap? Can we improve the NAM and/or IMP approaches or do we need entirely new programmatic research openings in business marketing? We may question whether the current paradigms are effective enough in dealing with the important future topics of B2B research (e.g. innovation, buying, customer analytics, digitalization, customer journeys and ecosystems, see Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Lilien, 2016) and answering the research call of ever more complex ,dynamic and systemic business phenomena. A proper discussion on these issues and a research proposal will be provided in the finalized version of this paper.

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