

**RESPONSE TO:
“FROM SCIENTIFIC CONTROVERSIES TO BRAND COMMUNITIES:
WELCOME TO A BRANDED WORLD!”**

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From David Ford

I hope that my comments to this paper are constructive within the spirit (or brand identity?) of the IMP Conference. But my comments are those of someone with a well developed scepticism towards the alleged newness, ubiquity, continuity, explainability and predictability of all trends, movements and economic phenomena, especially towards those “trends” that have been turned into business techniques!

I believe that the paper provides a stimulating starting point to a debate that could proceed in a number of different directions. I do have a few concerns about the paper which mostly centre on the issue of conceptual clarity, but which I believe can be addressed within its current overall approach. These concerns may be outlined as follows:

It seems that each generation thinks that it is the first one to discover or invent many things; including most philosophical, political or business ideas and even sex – all of which have

actually been around for quite a long time. Similarly, economic or political commentators often seem to take the view that the world or conditions within it in our own particular time are dramatically different from those that have ever existed before. Common current examples of these phenomena are the ideas that globalisation is new, that competition is now more intense “than ever before”, or that networks are an *emerging* form of organisation. However, time spent studying business history, or the idea of the business network, or sex will quickly find that many previous periods in history have been times of globalisation; that people have been doing sex pretty much as they do today and that the concept of the network is not a new technique but a useful way of interpreting business in all historical periods.

Hence, I think that a paper that spends time thinking in terms of so-called “post-modernism”, or some supposed new age of business practice or technique runs the risk of falling into the trap of *imagining* some “newness” in business structure or process.

Similarly, we all face a grave danger if we attempt to forecast historical trends such as the rise of the Service-Dominant Logic. In particular when we observe an apparent increase in service-related business we seek to offer explanation for that increase. Thereby we enshrine the idea that the increase is part of a secular trend and we seek to provide explanations for this now “obvious” phenomenon. In this way we fall into the old *narrative fallacy*. This is further illustrated by our subsequent willingness to provide equally plausible explanation when the growth in service based business subsequently declines. In fact, we do not know if and how this business trend, or any other in life will actually continue.

The temptation to see supposedly overwhelming trends leads us to the idea of brands in academic research¹. Those of us who work in or close to areas study that are of disputed academic legitimacy may apply a number of defence mechanisms to cope with this lack of legitimacy:

One obvious mechanism is to emphasise and re-emphasise our links to strong disciplinary bases in the social sciences (CCT?); another is to emphasise our empirical strengths and how we are in touch with the “real world”; a third is simply to say that *our area is somehow different from others and special in some ways*. Finally, we could seek to bolster our legitimacy by trying to show how the things that we study, in this case brands are not only important in the study of business but can even be applied to areas of academic study. This latter approach is taken in this paper and elsewhere.

The approach appears to have at least two problems: The first is that it may confuse the idea of brand, of which more later. But perhaps more importantly, by claiming the specialness of our area we neglect similar phenomena in other areas and at other times, as we noted above. Thus, the idea of the *research paradigm* and its effect on the work of scientists operating within it is well documented throughout science, as what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science”. Similarly the idea of changes to the dominant paradigm, what Kuhn called a “scientific revolution” has similarly been widely observed and documented without relying on the idea of the brand. The authors’ academic brands are possibly nothing more than partial and transitory paradigms.

¹ There is also one point where the paper shifts from talking about “academic” brands to branding in the conventional sense within marketing practice.

This then brings us to a possible confusion about the idea of the brand, which also relates to a point about Service Dominant Logic and to the normative/positive dichotomy that we will talk about later. The authors cite Naomi Klein about the growing importance of brands and their deleterious effects on human society. The citation is interesting because throughout her book Klein demonstrates a confusion about brands that also relates to a problem with Service Dominant Logic and indeed with most “marketing” thinking. Klein, the authors and many writers see the brand as a device of *suppliers*, which exist to suit their needs. In Klein’s case at least, the brand exists without apparent concern for welfare of customers. It is true that a brand is an important device to ensure consistency of demand for products that are based on speculative production. But more importantly, brands exist because customers want or need them. Brands provide both clarity and consistency for customers.

Brands exist and are purchased because that clarity correlates with (often un-articulated but nevertheless real) requirements of customers. I think that throughout the paper the authors confuse the idea of the brand from the perspective of the brand holder and from the perspective of the customer. If we relate the idea of the brand to that of the research paradigm then “academic brands” exist because they are useful to those who adopt them, often *in-spite* of any conscious effort by the brand holder. Brand identity is defined by customers and not by suppliers.

I believe that the authors’ apparent confusion about the idea of the brand and their one-sided supplier focus (which is also a characteristic of the Service Dominant Logic paradigm) is closely related to their view of strategy and what may be called “the normative problem”, as follows:

It seems that there is no single idea that may help us to understand the nature of marketing or purchasing behaviour that can avoid being turned into a superficial technique within months of its development.

The normative problem has been endemic in marketing from the earliest days of the development of so-called “managerial marketing”. Perhaps the most common example of it is the technique of “relationship marketing”, which apart from being a contradiction in terms has meant that a useful descriptive or explanatory variable has degenerated into a technique that perpetuates a one sided view of what happens between customer and supplier.

I believe that this paper to some extent at least falls into the normative “hole”. It seems to confuse the existence of a paradigm with the idea that those who have been involved in developing ideas that have become a paradigm have a strategy for the paradigm as opposed to a strategy for the developing their own ideas or research or any strategy at all. Even more dangerously, the paper infers that those involved in the development of ideas *should* have a strategy for the development of those ideas into a paradigm and for the success of that paradigm and its domination over others.

One immediately has to scream:

“Whatever happened to the idea of science as a process of “Conjections and Refutations”. Whatever happened to “The Open Society”. Sir Karl Popper would turn in his grave!

The idea of the research brand is the antithesis of what could be thought of as “good science”.

On a more detailed level, the authors throw the term “strategy” around rather loosely without making it clear how they are using it. Thus, strategy is conventionally viewed as conscious and stated aims, objectives and ways of achieving them. Conversely, strategy is sometimes viewed as something that can be inferred from the actions of an actor. This latter approach of course runs the risk that it implies analysis and intent where none existed – it becomes simply the observer’s or the actor’s post hoc rationalisation of what happened. The paper infers that researchers have or want to have a strategy.

Perhaps I have had a unique experience. I know researchers, myself include who are desperate to explain their ideas to others. But I don’t know any that have anything that could have been considered to be a coherent strategy to do that or can be seen to have followed such a “strategy”.

A few words about Service Dominant Logic: The first point to make is that Service Dominant Logic is itself part of a dominant and I would argue damaging paradigm within marketing. This paradigm involves the examination of what happens between customer and supplier almost exclusively from the perspective of the vendor. It consigns the customer solely to the role of responder at best and cannot accommodate the notion of the customer as an active part of the interaction, let alone its initiator or dominator. This paradigm also negates much of its explanatory value by the willingness of its devotees to slip into often trite, unjustified and unjustifiable normative statements for business people.

We can build on the points made above about apparent newness and the “normative problem” in marketing. We can then add some thoughts about the nature of business relationships or

networks; about the idea of interaction; about customer and supplier problems; about the idea of an “offering” consisting of advice, service, product adaptation and logistics, all of which are well documented in IMP and other literature over the past thirty years. We would then be tempted to ask a simple question about the Service Dominant Logic Paradigm:

“What is new? Why the fuss?”

Finally, a word about IMP: Obviously my views about the research that has taken place under this heading over the past thirty years is both subjective and with a hindsight that is different from that of one of the authors who has also been involved from the early stages. The IMP “Group” may be described as a *network* of researchers with a rather particular set of interests and at least some tenuous commonality in views, approaches to and ideas about what happens between business companies. The things that we categorise as networks are associated with a number of identifiable characteristics that relate to the points made above. They have no identifiable centre or boundaries, anyone can “enter” or “leave” and the network definition changes with the topic of attention of the observer. Any network will look different depending on the perspective of each observer. Networks are not directed by anyone. They consist of a structure of relationships and interdependencies and the process within them is one of interaction. This means that the participants cannot act separately from each other. Networks don’t “have” a strategy, but their observable but unpredictable direction is the outcome of the interplay between their evolving structure and process. Perhaps this brief description may be applied to the dynamics of research in any area, even including Service Dominant Logic!

I think that the IMP Group provides a good example of a network. It has rambled, stumbled, changed shape, lost any apparent direction, found others at other times. What has happened has not been the result of the conscious strategy of anyone.

Is it a brand?

Well contrary to what I've said before (a refutation?) I believe that it is in that those away from it can identify it and the things that are associated with it are reasonably predictable. For example, it certainly isn't very good at telling managers what to do and it does spend lots of time thinking up new words to describe the same things². But it isn't a brand in the managerial (ugh!) sense or in the sense that it is the outcome of strategy. It is true that we have tried to argue against the ideas of many others, but we haven't planned their demise. If the IMP is anything it is a community of researchers engaging in a selfish activity of spending other people's money to research something that seems interesting and even quite important.

References

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Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 5th edition, Princeton University Press, 1971.

Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge, 5th edition, London, Routledge, 1992.

The Poverty of Historicism, London, Routledge,

² The paper provides some amusement in its search to reify the IMP Group. For example, it talks about my explanation that IMP stands for Industrial Marketing and Purchasing or International Marketing and Purchasing, depending on the audience. Far from being a carefully thought out example of Brand Extension, this was just a joke – Only the title changes, the content remains the same!