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Developing and renewing marketing as a scientific discipline through reflexive cocreation

Anu Helkkula¹ · Eric Arnould²

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Abstract

Shelby V. Hunt was long interested in codifying and parameterizing the marketing discipline with a distinctive focus on the principles of making scientific claims. In their article, Hunt et al., (2022, in this issue) present their concerns about the scholarly status of marketing, highlighting the loss of a central, mainstream research focus. However, we think the real challenges are different than those that worry the authors. Marketing as a scientific discipline evolves by adapting from and contributing to theories, concepts, and methods in related research fields. Thus, we claim that the potential of marketing discipline lies in the diversity of intertwined and divergent research streams, such as service-dominant logic and consumer culture theory. We propose that a cocreational approach that questions foundational assumptions and a purely managerial orientation, is more likely to produce a renewal of marketing scholarship and provide solutions to wicked social problems than a single reductive theoretical approach.

Keywords Marketing theory · Philosophy of science · Cocreation · Value · S-d logic · Consumer culture theory

We are happy to have the opportunity to provide commentary on Hunt et al.'s (2022, in this issue) article, and we applaud the authors for producing a polemical piece worthy of commentary. Reasoned debate is at the heart of liberal scholarship. The article reviews the marketing discipline's development. It argues that marketing's credibility and legitimacy as an academic discipline has declined and is declining. To identify the discipline's historical strengths and challenges, and potential future, they divide marketing's history into four eras, from Era I (1900–1920) to Era IV (1980–2020), and add the upcoming Era V. They claim that Era IV led the discipline into such troubled waters that some researchers (e.g., Akaka et al., (2021); Ferrell et al., 2021;

Hunt, 2020a; Key et al., 2021; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2021), have identified a need to re-institutionalize the discipline.

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) claim the primary problem is that marketing has lost its “mainstream, central focus of research”. They elaborate additional problems: the discipline's largest sub-field of study, consumer behavior, has significantly separated itself from marketing; the discipline's increasing reliance on “borrowed concepts, frameworks, and theories;” and “the focus of the discipline's doctoral programs on nonmarketing subjects” (Hunt et al., 2022, in this issue).

We agree that the marketing discipline faces major challenges. We also agree with the authors' claim that “the marketing discipline did not become troubled because it followed a faulty master plan. Rather, it *evolved* to its current, troubled state” (Hunt, 2020, 31). But we think the challenges Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) mention are outcomes of other problems and that the real challenges lie elsewhere. And we disagree with the reasons for this troubled trajectory. Next, we elaborate why we see these points as outcomes rather than reasons of marketing's trajectory.

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“Marketing has lost its mainstream, central focus of research”

In Era IV, the discipline evolved into a *loosely connected* composite of four major, separately institutionalized sub-fields of study: consumer behavior, quantitative/modeling, marketing management/strategy, and macromarketing (Hunt, 2020, 14). As the main reason for this fragmentation, Hunt et al. (2022 in this issue) see the lack of mainstream, central focus of research. They refer to Key et al. (2021, p. 448, 452) to support their argument that marketing “stand[s] at an existential crossroad in the history of the field” and propose a specific agenda for change that constitutes a “return to fundamentals.”

First, we begin with a simple taxonomic disagreement before digging deeper. Hunt et al.’s taxonomy is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what the underlying dimensions might be since it mixes a methodological orientation with substantive ones. The authors’ taxonomy ignores the field of service/services marketing, which is certainly as robust as strategic marketing or consumer research and, which has spawned a journal, *Journal of Service Research* that is close to *Journal of Marketing*’s impact factor. Furthermore, scholars working in robust tactical domains like integrated marketing communications, public policy, or branding may also take issue with the taxonomy. We worry these oversights are part of a more general problem in mainstream marketing scholarship to adopt an essentializing ontology. Seeking to define “real” marketing in terms of a set of approved concepts is hostile to scholarly growth and diversification. Healthy disciplines, like biology or physics, both constantly revisit their foundational premises and expand their scope of inquiry. For example, Newtonian physics has been supplemented by quantum physics, string theory, and even more exotic conjectures. Biology has supplemented Darwinian species-focused evolutionary theory with a vision of ecosystems evolution. Further, the latter field has been revolutionized by the science of plant communication. In each case, these theoretical developments have also entailed new measures and new tools of measurement. Rather than a reductive view of marketing, we would seek to emulate the expansive approaches evident in other fields.

A second point is to dispute the claim of evolutionary fragmentation. It seems to us that each of these four sub-fields (consumer behavior, quantitative/modeling, marketing management/strategy, and macromarketing) aims to make firms and consumers more efficient, more effective, and more streamlined within the boundaries of a single, overarching narrowly conceived market model developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Adam Smith, revised by the Austrian School and assimilated to Kotler’s vision of

managerial marketing, is the prevailing orthodoxy across all four fields. Voices that would critique neo-liberal capitalism (e.g., Firat, 2018; Firat et al., 1990; Maclaran et al., 2007; Tadjewski, 2006) are at best marginal to these four sub-fields.

Similarly, rather than returning to fundamentals, we think that marketing should reconsider what its fundamentals should be. Are they in fact nothing more than rehashed Austrian school neo-liberal economics applied to managerial problems (Arnould, 2022)? Or should they include a historical, comparative science of a field of human economic activity in which its instantiation within market capitalism is only one instantiation among many.

Should marketing not continually question its ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises as robust maturing disciplines do? We fondly recall that Shelby Hunt participated in such debates in the mid-1980s (Anderson, 1983; Hunt, 1983, 1990). We support studying both old and new marketing regimes and contexts, and how they can enrich the discipline and help it to re-examine its premises (Helkkula & Arnould, 2022). Otherwise, the next shiny new thing, which marketing scholarship always seems eager to embrace, whether Big Data, machine learning, AI, neuromarketing, the metaverse, etc., will not provide a panacea to marketing’s problems of relevance and theoretical substance.

As a field, marketing can certainly continue to apply theory just as engineering applies advances in physics and chemistry, for example. But as a science it needs an integrative, critical approach that looks at phenomena both comparatively and historically, and at the micro, meso, and macro levels to create a holistic scientific picture. In this regard, research in S-D logic, which Hunt et al. offer as a programmatic alternative, has embraced such an approach, and thus created a holistic framework for research (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). S-D logic also provides a platform for vigorous debate (Campbell et al., 2013; Hietanen et al., 2018). While these researchers could be called devil’s advocates, healthy disciplines understand they have a role in renewing the discipline by raising questions that may blaze a trail for new thinking.

Finally, Hunt et al., (2022, in this issue) claim that “society still lacks an adequate understanding of marketing’s economic role. The subjects historically associated with the discipline are still needed by its stakeholders in Era V.” Here, we agree with the authors. However, we would probably argue that the problem stems in part from the relentless managerial approach bent to the service of profit-making industry, and the relative marginalization in institutional leadership and institutional priorities of those voices promoting what Badot et al. (2007) called *societing* or *societal marketing*.

“The evolution of the discipline’s largest sub-field of study, consumer behavior, to significantly separate itself from marketing”

Rather than saying that “the CB area has *evolved* in such a manner that, to a significant extent, it has separated itself from marketing and is no longer a sub-field of the discipline,” (Hunt et al., 2022, in this issue), we would say that Belk’s (1986) argument for an actual science of consumer behavior has prevailed. What consumer behavior research has done, is to transcend the narrow managerial focus of marketing’s Era III. The best consumer psychology has explored the psyche of the consumer subject, while Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has situated the consumer in comparative social and cultural contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). CCT scholarship has adopted the relatively obvious point of departure that consumption is a feature of all human culture. Moreover, Transformative Consumer Research has sought to harness scientific knowledge in the service of solving wicked social problems, precisely addressing the problem of societal relevance (e.g., Hein et al., 2016). Thus, we would invert Hunt et al.’s argument to say that mainstream marketing, if that is the position that the authors would like to claim for themselves, has been slow to integrate advances in understanding the nature of consumer markets and the role of markets in both the economy and society pioneered by scholars in consumer research.

A similar argument could be made for S-D logic, showing that a focus on service can offer a robust scientific foundation for a socio-economic theory that incorporates markets and marketing but is not limited to the managerial marketing perspective (Akaka et al., 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Marketing has privileged its managerial focus, thus is not able to truly take in the customer perspective. S-D logic, however, has recognized that diverse resource providers (firms, customers, and other relevant actors) cocreate value for all parties who are motivated to take part in resource integration. This service orientation has also initiated an enormous change in practice (Rust & Huang, 2014; Wirtz et al., 2022). Previously product-oriented companies have reimagined themselves as service companies. Even job titles have changed as a result: product/brand managers have become customer/service experience managers.

“The discipline’s reliance on borrowed concepts, frameworks, and theories”

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) claim that “Healthy academic disciplines have indigenous, conceptual works that both organize their current knowledge-content and point out ways to further advance their disciplines. Marketing’s

ever-increasing stress on borrowed theories in Era IV contributes significantly to its troubled trajectory.”

We argue that to have indigenous concepts, frameworks and theories, the discipline needs to innovate. However, marketing has been reluctant to revisit its ontological and epistemological foundations. This discourages new thinking, and renewal. For example, the review process for Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) seminal piece on S-D logic in *Journal of Marketing* took five years and required 4 major, risky revisions, 6 reviewers, and 2 editors. It is difficult to develop significant new concepts if the review process at the top marketing journals imposes a confirmatory research model rather than a discovery-oriented research model. We claim that the lack of respect for discovery oriented research is the real reason for Hunt et al.’s complaint (2000, p. 17, following Zeithaml et al., 2020, p. 32): “Marketing scholars can continue on the well-worn road of largely testing or extending theories by borrowing from allied disciplines, or we can challenge ourselves to [develop indigenous concepts, frameworks, and theories that] make a significant difference in the lives of managers, public policy officials, and/or consumers.” On the other hand, the dramatic success of a discovery-oriented theory like S-D logic or CCT, both within and outside of marketing, offer excellent examples of the societal value of indigenous theory development.

Furthermore, we claim that the reason for a lack of indigenous theories is precisely because marketing has isolated itself from the study of markets and marketing in a historical and comparative perspective and restricted itself to the Austrian School’s modification of Adam Smith’s economic paradigm. It has cut itself off from empirical cases that would allow the field not only to expand its theoretical apparatus and “test” the generalizability and limits of current theories, but also to identify how solutions to marketing problems were addressed in marketing systems other than those of liberal capitalism. Marketing has thus abandoned the historical and comparative study of marketing to historians, anthropologists, and sociologists (e.g., Callon, 2021; Cochoy, 2015; Collins, 1990; Karatani, 2014; Meillassoux, 1971; Polanyi, 1944; Slater & Tonkiss, 2013), who on the other hand, do not master the scholarly terrain of Era III and IV marketing scholarship. Because the discipline fails to recognize marketing as a broader category of economic activity than that constituted by capitalist markets there is a short circuit in the process of knowledge production. Would this situation be reversed, then marketing could develop a robust body of theory relevant to different times and places, including a future other than one that perpetuates the present troubled situation.

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) write that “When a discipline has a strong sense of community, scholars feel they are part of a common enterprise; they *identify* with the

discipline. The evolutionary fragmentation of the mainstream during Era IV has significantly impaired the discipline's sense of community." We claim that the marketing discipline's lack of sense of community relates not to a reductive essentialist agreement on "what marketing is," but to its incapability to be an open platform for innovation. The marketing discipline continues to avoid actively questioning its ontological and epistemological foundations as healthy fields of scholarship and science do. Even the dustiest, conservative corners of the humanities such as medieval studies have shaken off their hidebound approaches with new theoretical models (e.g., Dinshaw, 1999). By contrast, the marketing discipline continues to focus on existing concepts and relationships, which does not activate a renewal of the discipline, and instead enables only minor developments within an existing paradigm, what Kuhn (2012/1962) called normal science. Therefore, it is not surprising that the marketing discipline has difficulties building community, let alone understanding, analyzing, and giving solutions to the current challenges facing society and business, such as those identified in the IPCC reports and United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

"The focus of the discipline's doctoral programs on nonmarketing subjects"

Hunt et al., (2022, in this issue) refer to Yadav (2020, p. 60, 61) noting that doctoral programs lack an "immersion in the substantive richness in our field" and that "doctoral programs should prioritize the addition of a well-designed course on theory construction." We agree on this point but probably disagree with what the authors would incorporate in the "substantive richness", e.g., service and consumer culture, for starters, not to mention the historical and comparative instances of marketing and marketing phenomena mentioned above.

We also agree with Hunt et al. that doctoral programs should indeed prioritize well-designed courses on theory construction. However, theory construction should be neither superficial nor limited to confirmatory testing. Courses in theory construction should dig into the ontological and epistemological foundations of theory to enable doctoral students to create substantial contributions. For example, the concepts of market, marketing, and consumer have rarely been problematized in mainstream marketing. By contrast, S-D logic and CCT question all three constructs (Vargo & Lusch, 2017; Bájédo & Gordon 2022).

We assert that doctoral courses should inspire doctoral students to cocreate new knowledge that adds to the discipline, which is the major learning outcome of most doctoral programs. However, before doctoral students can cocreate

new knowledge, they need to become critical of the existing state of affairs. Identification of major blind spots in existing theorizing is only possible by questioning the ontological and epistemological foundations of current theory, frameworks, and concepts.

Plural theory courses are needed, as well as the epistemological and methodological options to accompany theoretical choices. But the discipline needs to ask what kinds of theory courses, and in which disciplines. In every case, students should not just read the last 4 years of the *Journal of Marketing*, but work that deals with topics of interest whether in marketing or in the foundational social science disciplines. For example, if a program takes pricing as a central theme, students should be exposed to work in economics, sociology, and history that examines the nature of prices from varying perspectives. This of course also touches on the nature of money (e.g., Simmel, 1990; Graeber, 2012). Students of pricing should know something about this history if they are to develop robust theories of prices and pricing, rather than only the minutiae of how modern firms set prices to achieve various tactical goals, or how consumers respond to tactical variations in money prices.

The problem is worse than the absence of marketing courses in marketing doctoral education because most doctoral students in marketing come from engineering, economics, or psychology, fields which are innocent of the "rich substantive content" of marketing as historical and contemporary phenomena. But this problem cycles back to the narrow ontological and epistemological framing of marketing as a mechanical field, in which simplistic, confirmatory, causal models of truly complex phenomena are continually and repetitively advanced, and prioritizes theory testing and denigrates discovery.

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) note that "A discipline's renewal capability springs from its human resources (e.g., its scholars and stakeholders), and institutional resources (e.g., its journals and professional associations). We agree that people are key resources in research but disagree with the argument that agreement on an essentialized subject matter imparts a sense of community. Mainstream marketing, consumer research, econometric modelling, and macromarketing already adhere to the fundamental axioms of liberal capitalism. Instead, the lack of camaraderie Hunt et al. lament is primarily a symptom of a more general subjugation of academia to the competitive, productivist logic of neo-liberal market capitalism (e.g., prioritizing quantity over quality in journal publications) that discourages collaboration and cooperation (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Crowley & Hodson, 2014) rather than the lack of an agreed substantive disciplinary foundation.

Looking forward

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) discuss whether the discipline can renew itself starting in Era V from 2020 onwards and suggest a road map aimed at developing the discipline: “(1) comprehensive theoretical frameworks, (2) stakeholder relevance/engagement, (3) organizing/integrative frameworks for marketing knowledge, and (4) theory development for marketing phenomena.” How could we disagree since these are generic recommendations that could apply to many scientific fields? Of course, the devil is in the details.

The authors’ proposal that R-A theory could provide such an integrative theory is troubling since this theory is wedded to a narrow firm centric logic and a vision of resources as existing things, rather than things that emerge via both market and non-market interactions. At best R-A provides guidance for firms in mature industries. In the end, R-A does not question and redress existing ontologies as S-D logic and CCT try to do.

We support the proposition that S-D logic can provide one path forward in the service of these objectives, but we would reject the essentialist notion that a single “organizing/integrative framework” is the only path forward. This is a nostalgic, modernist gesture wistfully dreaming of reduction to a totalizing theory of economic causation that philosophers of science from Kuhn (2012/1962) to Morin (2022) would find dubious.

Coffin and Chatzidakis (2021) offer an alternative suggestion based on an ecumenical approach to theory and method, which invites marketing scholars to identify substantive areas of interest to which multiple theoretical orientations and methodologies could be brought to bear. Thus, we support ecumenicism in marketing scholarship. Moreover, we think that a cocreational approach, where top scholars, schools, and institutions (e.g., MSI, AMA, AMS) encourage different streams to critique and integrate concepts, methods, and theories, is more likely to produce marketing solutions to wicked social problems, such as climate change and global inequality, than a single reductive theoretical approach.

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