

A Review of Dominant Ontology of Current Marketing Research - Towards Developing an Alternative Research Approach

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the ultimate presumptions (ontology) of the knowledge-creating enterprise in marketing - the marketing research - with a view to proposing alternative research approaches to dominant positivistic-based research tradition in marketing. Thus, the paper calls for a paradigm shift in research approaches from positivistic methodology to post-positivistic methodology requiring marketing researchers to look for alternative research approaches such as (1) case study research (2) grounded theory (3) anthropology and ethnography (4) action research (5) critical research.

It is argued that the general marketing theory - the outcome of marketing research - is not substantially developed due to the imbalance of the research approaches used by marketing researchers from the very inception of the discipline. Positivism based on objective rational ontology was the foundation of mainstream marketing research methods, over emphasis on which has resulted in a missing link between marketing research findings and the true marketing reality in the field.

Introduction

Formation, shaping and reshaping of marketing theory is a function of marketing research, the outcome of which largely depends on the research approaches used by the researchers. Ontological assumptions behind these research approaches significantly influence the findings of marketing research. This paper seeks to examine these ultimate presumptions (ontology) behind the knowledge creating enterprise in marketing-marketing research with a view to proposing alternative research approaches to dominant positivistic-based research tradition in marketing.

According to Vedic philosophy (Gustavsson, 1992) "knowledge" is the outcome of an interaction between three elements; (1) the knower (marketing researcher) (2) the process of knowing (methodology of knowing) (3) the known (the body of knowledge called marketing theory). The main argument of this paper is that the "known" is inadequate or irrelevant due to the inappropriate process of knowing, the research approaches. Thus, this paper focuses on current marketing research methodology adopted by marketing academics with a view to establishing the need for an alternative methodology. The preferred methodology to know about something is a function of ultimate presumptions about the nature of what is to be known. These presumptions frame the mindset of the researcher and influence the approaches to be included in the toolbox of the "knower". Therefore, the "knower's" role in "knowing" the "known" is critical.

General marketing management theory has not developed in any substantial way during the past decades (Gummesson, 2001). The current body of marketing management knowledge is a "patchwork" of fragmented models, assumptions, case stories and checklists to be added on top of a much outdated marketing mix and four P's. Microeconomic theory was the foundation of all these jigsaw models. Northern European Nordic School of Services and relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1994; Grönroos, 1997; Gummesson et al., 1997; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) have been critical of the mainstream marketing management paradigm since 1970's.

Though recent developments such as Services and B-to-B (business-to-business) marketing, relationships, networks, quality, knowledge management, brand equity, green marketing, information technology and other developments have had some impact on the existing "theory", these developments have not been able to initiate a paradigm shift for marketing theorists to what Gummesson (2001) termed "bake a cake according to a new recipe rather than just adding decorations on the glazing of the old cake". This deficiency in the theory development is attributed to the inability of marketing academics to grasp the reality, which is too complex to be reduced to a set of numerics in statistical and mathematical models.

The forceful thrust in applying highly quantitative approaches in marketing theory building originated with the ontological assumption that human beings can be compared to a natural science substance such as matter that is studied under a controlled environment in a laboratory. Further, it is assumed that human beings act rationally and objectively. Research approaches, drawn from these presumptions, tend to be highly quantitative with complex statistical and mathematical modelling that requires researchers to make assumptions and to hold important variables *ceteris paribus* resulting in unearthing a pseudo-reality. A shift in the process of knowing-the methodological approaches is necessary to grasp marketing reality in a more effective and meaningful manner. Moreover, the American Marketing Association's taskforce

on the development of marketing thought in 1988 concluded that there has been "too little effort directed to a systematic development of marketing knowledge" (AMA, 1988:4). Marketing academics are not prominent in the practice of marketing since their research outcomes are significantly distant from the marketing reality in the field.

Practitioners, through popular books, consultancies, and in-house company training programmes, command a much larger audience than do marketing academics teaching in business schools (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). The gap between marketing research outcomes and the marketing reality is attributed to the inappropriateness of the mainstream research approaches used by academics.

In the next two sections of this paper, the ontological assumptions of the current mainstream marketing research approaches and alternative ontology to research approaches are presented. Thirdly, alternative research approaches are outlined.

Ontology of existing "theories"

For mainstream marketing researchers, (marketing) reality is "out there" and can be objectively understood. Marketing reality is not socially constructed or within the perception of the social agents. It is objective and can be objectively studied and understood by the researcher, who is assumed to be distant from the very reality he is trying to understand. A researcher studying consumption patterns of a particular community, of which the researcher himself is a constituent, has to maintain a distinction between himself and his community. He is supposed to be an outside observer prohibited to bring his own experience and value judgment to the analysis. The reality (known) is not in the eye of the beholder (knower); rather it objectively exists free from the influence of the knower or the researcher. Therefore, there exists a divorce between the researcher and the observed phenomena (marketing reality). The research subjects (individuals, groups, firms) are assumed to be capable of being objectively studied like matter in the natural sciences. Positivism or modernism is the main philosophy of the research approaches in the mainstream marketing research project.

Research approaches in mainstream marketing research are derived from the conventional wisdom that is predominantly neoclassical economics. As microeconomics is the root of marketing, neoclassical economic assumptions dominate in the set of basic assumptions in marketing. Econometricians are the main architects of the existing "theory" with their extreme rationalistic, positivistic and quantitative oriented simplifications of complex consumption behaviours of individuals. Mathematical and statistical rigour required researchers to operate in the shallow level devoid of true marketing realities. An alternative that deviates from the

mainstream "science" is labelled as a "taboo" and non-scientific. Rational economic behaviour of firms and individuals and efficient market mechanism are the key assumptions in neoclassical economics. The human being is perceived to be an objective mechanism that responds objectively and rationally to various stimuli. Social, cultural, political, and anthropological factors are assumed to be constant and passive. They are more or less in the background of the analysis, not in the foreground. Marketing related human as well as organizational behaviour then is reduced to an atomistic level and few independent and dependent variables are isolated to verify the causality. With highly complex, very ambitious statistical and mathematical models, these isolated variables are manipulated for diverse patterns and predictions. In this process the researcher tends to lose the touch of reality in the actual field from which the rich data emerged. Objectivity being the main gospel of inquiry, extreme care and caution are exercised to maintain a clear distance between the observer (researcher), and the observed.

Epistemology or the science of obtaining knowledge is a function of the set of ontological assumptions about the nature of marketing reality. If reality is out there free of any involvement of the researcher (objective) the set of approaches to understand this marketing reality ought to be derivative of this ontology. For example, if one is teaching navigational methods to a group of young sailors, the ultimate assumption (ontology) about the nature of the world is crucial to the validity of the teaching. If the world were assumed to be flat, his teaching would caution the sailors about falling from the edge of the world. On the other hand, if he assumes the world to be a globe, he would teach a set of different navigational methods to his students. In this analogy navigational method is epistemology and the assumption about the nature of the world is ontology.

Survey questionnaires are the main tools of data capture and it is assumed that subjects respond to these questionnaires free from biases and emotional attachment. The contextual issues are held constant though the context itself appears to be the area around which the research phenomenon revolves. In the analytical sphere, qualitative responses are assigned quantities that subsequently become the main raw material for the analytical machine. The Popperian falsification technique is the main method of theory building. Thus, hypotheses or tentative solutions to research problems are derived and tested empirically. Data is gathered "objectively", free from biases.

The intellectual puzzle pertaining to the ontological assumptions of the mainstream marketing research paradigm is whether complex human behaviour can be reduced to a simplistic and atomistic level and whether reductionist and positivistic rational efficient market assumptions of neoclassical economics are valid in the context of the social, cultural and anthropological dynamics of individuals, groups and organizations. This calls for a paradigm shift in marketing research approaches.

Alternative Ontological Assumptions

Marketing relates to the exchange process by which social constituents obtain products, services and experiences for need and want gratification. Thus, marketing is a social process connected with the exchange behaviour of people. Marketing reality, thus, is socially constructed. Individuals form into groups formally (organizations) or informally in obtaining goods and services that generate value to satisfy their needs and wants. The interaction between the marketer and the buyer is the nucleus of marketing with other environmental factors in the periphery. The dyadic relationship between buyer and marketer is essentially a psychological transaction that is influenced by a plethora of variables. Buyer behaviour is the resultant manifest level actions of behavioural intentions originated in the buyer's thought process that in turn a function of social, cultural, political, and anthropological factors. The reality is subjective, that is, it exists in the eyes of the knower who intern is a part of the reality. The researcher's experience and judgement are a critical part of the reality and there should be a relationship between the knower and the known. Therefore, there does not arise a problem of biasness. The role of a marketing researcher under this alternative paradigm is expressed in the foregoing excerpt from Gummesson (2002):

...I see the researcher as the number one research instrument. I feel at liberty to use myself and my experience as evidence. This would traditionally be classified as a qualitative approach, or worse, as un-scientific.... I do not subscribe to the assumption that words are unreliable and fuzzy and merely preliminaries to numbers, which are precise and uncover the truth. The English language uses letters and words; the computer uses zeros and ones; mathematics and statistics use numbers, letters and graphs; non-verbal language ('body language') communicates with facial expressions, gestures, postures and artefacts. All are languages that represent phenomena with different symbols and a different grammar; all have strengths and weaknesses, and they cannot be ranked in order of excellence. To complicate matters, there is also tacit knowledge, which has no explicit language but communicates through advice, decisions and action...

Man is not a rational economic being; rather, he is a bunch of emotions and prejudices with a complex set of senses that initiate completely different responses to even the identical stimuli given in two separate instances. Multiple and alternative research approaches are necessary to capture this complex reality intact. Then only do the outcomes of marketing research become rich and meaningful. Marketing organizations, too, are collections of humans, structures, rules, norms, and prejudices. They also need to be studied with appropriate research approaches to understand the

"reality" as it is. Simplifications and assumptions that enable mainstream researchers to apply highly sophisticated mathematical and statistical models to analyse this complex fabric of human dynamics in marketing would result in outcomes far removed from the reality on the ground. It can be jubilation for the model itself but not for the academic community who wants to understand marketing reality as it is.

Accordingly, socially constructed marketing reality ought to be captured from qualitative research approaches that are rooted in subjective ontology. Qualitative research enables the researcher to grasp marketing reality "in total" and in a more natural setting. It uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic. Methodology is not rigidly predetermined; rather, it is emerging naturally as the researcher unfolds the complex web of marketing realities. The researcher's role is significant as he or she is part and parcel of the research instrument itself. All social actions of the actors require interpretation that is carried out by the researcher by creating meaning structures through interpretivism. In-depth interviews, participant observation, ethnography, narrative analysis, content analysis and case studies are some of the most popular methods.

Proposed Approaches

The resurrection of the qualitative school and the general concern of quantitative approaches' inability to grasp rich marketing realities together create a conducive environment for marketing researchers to look for alternatives to mainstream marketing research approaches. The academic praise of the supremacy of quantitative measurement shuts out most of marketing reality and hence the creation of more valid and general marketing theory (Gummesson, 2001). The foregoing comment by Van Maanen (2000) has vividly expressed the dilemma:

Qualitative research is back and back with a vengeance as many of the promises of quantitative research have come up empty. Counting and classifying can only take one so far. Meaning and interpretation are required to attach significance to counts and classifications and these are fundamentally qualitative matters. The two approaches are then bound together, neither capturing truth alone nor trumping the other. But, while quantitative skills are broadly identifiable and widely taught, qualitative skills are not...

Having said that marketing reality is socially constructed and subjective, the science of obtaining knowledge about this reality should also be different from the mainstream Popperian falsification. The subjective reality is in the perception of the researcher and the researcher himself becomes the research instrument as his

experience and judgement play a pivotal role in explaining and understanding the holistic marketing reality. Generalization of the findings is not an issue as replication of individual cases expands the understanding of the multiple marketing realities.

With a view to capturing this multiple marketing reality, this paper calls for a paradigm shift in research approaches requiring marketing researchers to look for alternative research approaches such as (1) case study research for grasping intricacy and ambiguity, (2) grounded theory for letting reality manifest its own way, (3) anthropology and ethnography for the importance of being in the field itself, (4) action research for making it happen and reflecting (5) critical research for understanding rich marketing realities from social theory perspective.

Case study Research

Teaching cases are not synonymous with case studies used for research. In teaching, marketing educators use cases as examples and illustrations. A teaching case is a well-written account of an actual marketing situation facing a company. In case study research, one or many cases are used to explain, describe and understand certain phenomena in marketing, thereby drawing some specific or general conclusions. There does not arise a need for generalization. The selection of the case site is itself a part of the research process and use of judgement and experience of the researcher plays an important role. A case allows the researcher to frame a holistic picture of all the complex variables operating in a certain marketing situation. The real world data that emerge from cases helps researchers form concepts and propositions enabling subsequent theory formation. Cases may be used for dual purpose. Firstly, they can be used in inductive form to create conceptual frames and theories. Secondly, in a deductive sense, cases could be used to verify the existing theories or to confront them with real world data. According to Gummeson (2002), the purpose of case study research is:

...usually systemic and holistic, to give a full and rich account of a network of relationships between a host of events and factors, and not just to identify single cause and effect links or piecemeal models..

The statistical generalization requirement does not arise in case study research. The selection of cases is purposeful. Replication substitutes generalization in case study research. Under a unique network of complex, dynamic variables, the researcher makes an attempt to understand a marketing situation in an holistic manner. See Gummeson (2000), Yin (1994) and Perry (1998) for further aspects of case study research.

Grounded Theory

With bare hands, marketing researchers go to the field and grasp slices of data. "Let the data emerge the theories" is the motto in grounded theory research propagated by Glaser & Strauss (1998), (1992). The researcher does not have any preconceptions or models in his mind when he is immersed in a sea of data. This is challenging to a marketing researcher with lots of expertise and personal judgement. With very soft and mild intervention, definite patterns are allowed to emerge from the data. Systematic categorization, and key word and concept attachments performed by the researcher facilitate patterns to surface. There are sophisticated computer packages for qualitative data analysis making the lives of researchers easy as far as a mass of data is concerned. All the categorizations, comparative analyse, axial coding, core variable identification, and memo analysis are done with the aid of computers. The guiding principle in grounded theory is not to distort the reality by the preconceived models of the researcher but to facilitate reality to come alive on its own. Though the ontology, on which grounded theory is based, is not solely subjective, grounded theory aids the marketing researcher to unearth rich patterns of behaviour that would otherwise have been hidden.

Anthropology and Ethnography

Marketing is a social process involving interaction between various social institutions. People are the most important central factor in the whole process. Therefore, the genesis, evolution and manifestation of people and their organizations help researchers understand and explain many problems that form certain marketing phenomena. Ethnographic researchers take field notes, perform direct participant observation, analyse artefacts, study photographs and films. Direct observation and in-depth interviews are the most commonly used data collection techniques. Most studies are longitudinal studies encompassing months, years and decades. The researcher confirms and concludes his theories based on the empirical data felt by his own senses by "being there" in the field interacting with the key social actors of the situation. See Bernard (1995) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) for a further discussion on anthropology and ethnography.

Action Research

The action researcher tries to regulate certain variables in order to understand the causality and the behaviour of various other important variables in marketing phenomena. The role of an action researcher is one of change agent. He attempts to make interventions and initiate change pertaining to the variables under his study.

The action researcher is deeply involved with the "known" unlike a traditional researcher who tries to maintain distance from the known. In a practical sense, an action researcher in marketing may be a person who is an academic as well as an external marketing consultant to the same organization. Further discussion on action research and action science is found in Argyris et al. (1985); Gummesson (2000); and Coghlan and Brannick (2001).

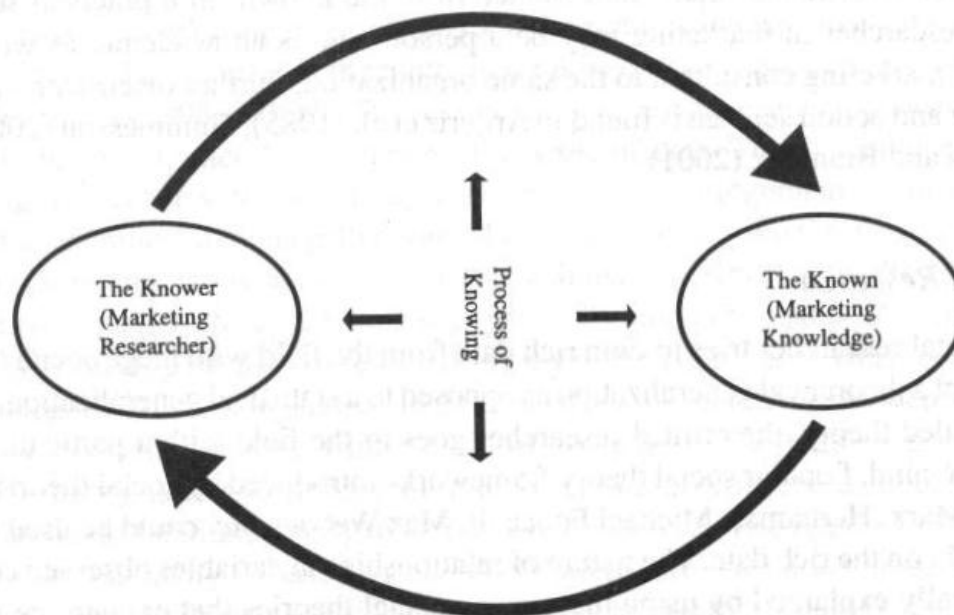
Critical Research

The critical researcher tries to twin rich data from the field with mega social theories to attempt a theoretical generalization as opposed to a statistical generalization. Unlike in grounded theory, the critical researcher goes to the field with a particular social theory in mind. Popular social theory frameworks introduced by social theorists such as Karl Marx, Herbamas, Michael Foucault, Max Webber, etc. could be used to shed some light on the rich data. The nature of relationships in variables observed could be theoretically explained by using these mega social theories that explain the general nature of the social dynamics.

Concluding Comments

This paper begins with the argument that general marketing theory has not developed substantially since its inception due to inappropriate research approaches adopted by marketing researchers. Marketing knowledge is the holistic outcome of the interaction between the knower, the process of knowing and the known (Figure 1). In the mainstream marketing research process the knower is not part and parcel of the known and an attempt is made to maintain a distinct divorce between the knower and the known. Ontological assumptions or the ultimate presumptions of the marketing researcher decide whether it is appropriate or not to maintain a divorce between the two. The subject matter of marketing is human behaviour. The marketing reality is multiple and is socially constructed. The totality is the composite whole of multiple realities of various actors in a given marketing scenario. The knower is an essential part of this multiple reality. Therefore, the researcher or the knower is required to play an active role in the marketing research process in order to assign meanings to diverse aspects of a marketing phenomenon. The objective (unbiased) role traditionally played by the marketing researcher needs a transformation into a more multiple and subjective one to understand the holistic nature of the "known". The fundamental character of the "known" is thus conditioned by the ultimate presumptions or ontology of the researcher or the knower. As a result, the "known" by mainstream marketing research approaches have been distant from the true marketing realities. The need for a post-positivistic marketing ontology is favoured as an alternative.

FIGURE 1: Vedic Perspective of Knowledge



The over emphasis on mainstream positivistic, quantitative research approaches has buried the marketing reality further down and simplistic causal associations about complex marketing reality are made prominent by sophisticated mathematical and statistical models. The ontological assumptions about the nature of man need rethinking to initiate a major shift. The rational economic man with maximizing objective behaviour seems soon losing its validity given the social, cultural, political and anthropological contextual specificities that constitute marketing reality.

The process of knowing is the science of obtaining knowledge in marketing. Properian falsification coupled with mathematical and statistical rigour is the predominant method in the mainstream process of knowing. The known is highly conditioned by the knower and the knowing. The capturing of true marketing realities by the marketing researchers thus depends on the appropriate ontology and the epistemology (derived from the ontology). The mainstream marketing research ontology and epistemology that is well suited to capture material phenomena are not holistic enough to grasp the complexities of the natural marketing scenarios. Moreover, econometric rigour that pervades over the mainstream marketing research approach needs a re-visit by marketing researchers to make their research outcome reflect a fair proportion of what is actually being there in the field. Then the role currently played by marketing practitioners (consultants) will gradually shift to marketing academics in universities.

The researcher's experience and judgement have to be incorporated in the research process with a view to capturing multiple social realities that are subjective in nature. The holistic nature of marketing reality can only be grasped by applying alternative research approaches derived from an epistemology aimed at understanding a multiple socially constructed subjective reality. Then only, will the findings of marketing researchers get closer to what really takes place in actual marketing situations. Thus, the gap between research findings and the reality will be reduced.

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