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## The study of important marketing issues in an evolving field<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In response to Kohli and Haenlein (2020), this paper addresses how, at this point in time, marketing can be maximally useful, both for contributing to the body-of-knowledge of marketing and for solving practical marketing problems. I first discuss the three current major dynamics in marketing and how to deal with them: (i) Vertical drift (movement away from marketing in the direction of its supplying disciplines); (ii) Lateral drift (new business fields becoming active in native marketing territories); and (iii) The ICT revolution. Next, the paper examines the alleged low tide of marketing theory and discuss how, in the absence of new grand theories but in an abundance of studies on specialized marketing problems, the field can organically develop marketing knowledge. Finally, the paper investigates the role of subdomains in marketing and related issues of the unity of the field and the self-identity of marketing scholars. The paper produces several recommendations, summarized in the last section.

### Introduction

How can research in marketing be maximally useful, both in the sense of making contributions to the body-of-knowledge of marketing and helping to solve marketing stakeholders' problems in practice? This is the topic of this paper and the subject addressed in the article by Ajay Kohli and Michael Haenlein (further referred to as K&H): "Factors affecting the study of important marketing issues: Implications and recommendations" in this same issue of IJRM. K&H are concerned that much of the current academic research in marketing "is not particularly useful." (p1). They complain that the proportion of articles that address important

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<sup>1</sup> I thank my colleague Gerrit van Bruggen for his stimulating comments on an earlier version of this paper and the AE for useful suggestions

issues relative to the total number of articles has declined and question what can be done about it. K&H present a framework with the factors that influence the likelihood of studying important marketing issues and propose actions for improvement. K&H deal with important issues, and their ideas are very stimulating. This paper responds in the following way.

First, I add a time dimension to the discussion. Marketing as an academic field is not constant but has been evolving throughout its 120 years of history, with different issues and different approaches being dominant at different times. The time dimension will help to understand the emergence of the issues discussed in the K&H paper and also how to deal with them at this point in time that is the 2020s. One of the current dynamics in the field is the increasingly dominant role in marketing of “the so-called foundational disciplines especially psychology and economics” (K&H p 6). In this paper, I call this “vertical drift” ((see Figure 1). K&H are very critical about the role of these founding disciplines in marketing, causing that “expertise in the foundational disciplines is sometimes higher valued than expertise in the marketing discipline”, which “undermines the discipline” (p6). This is a valid concern, but as will be discuss, the supplying disciplines definitely also have a positive function in today’s marketing and the issue is to find the right balance. The paper also discusses two other dynamics, not mentioned by K&H. One is that other (newer) business disciplines are increasingly becoming active in native marketing territories (called “lateral drift” here) and the other is the dramatic effects of the ICT revolution on our field.

Second, K&H are deeply concerned about the decline of theoretical work in marketing. In their paper, the word “theory” (or “theoretic”) appears no less than 44 times. They speak of “the precipitous decline of conceptual articles in major marketing journals” (p 6). They propose to put much effort in improving the abilities of PhD students in conceptual development and theory

construction. For an evaluation of this concern, this paper puts the attention for theory in marketing in a historical perspective, discussing the changing role of theory in marketing over time and the best way of developing marketing knowledge at the current stage of the field. In this context, I propose the creation of a Universal Marketing Knowledge Classification System.

Third, K&H are critical about the role of subfields or subdomains in marketing. They observe that the self-identities of marketing academics are often more related to their subdomain than to marketing itself, which reduces “marketing scholars’ interest in learning about issues related to phenomena that are uniquely or largely marketing” (p 8). In a growing field, the partition in subdomains cannot be avoided. The issue is how to benefit from its positive effects, and at the same time maintain the unity of the field. In this context, I propose to create a new, global “Marketing Centre Court Conference.” The paper also discusses the relationship between the self-identity and the life cycle of marketing scholars.

### 1. **Current dynamics in marketing**

Figure 1 shows the “ecosystem” of marketing with its surrounding disciplines located upstream, parallel, and downstream relative to marketing, all together located in the wider environment. The arrows in the figure refer to three important and challenging dynamics, (i) vertical drift, (ii) lateral drift, and (iii) the ICT revolution.

Upstream from marketing, we have the supplying disciplines. Marketing’s most important supplying disciplines are psychology, economics, and econometrics & OR.

<Figure 1 about here>

Psychology provides general knowledge about human behavior and human decision-making, which is essential for understanding consumers, marketing managers, salespeople, distributors, and all other human actors in the domain of marketing. Economics is the field where marketing

comes from. Marketing is about exchanges between suppliers and customers. Supply and demand are basic concepts in economics. Marketing builds on this when investigating exchange processes in depth and developing the tools to match supply and demand. For marketing mix optimization, marketing uses the principles of micro-economics. Furthermore, behavioral economics, a synthesis of psychology and economics, is important for the analysis of marketing phenomena (e.g. prospect theory). Econometrics & OR are essential disciplines for quantitative approaches in the data-intensive field of marketing for data analysis, model building, and marketing optimization. These fields are themselves built on mathematics and statistics.

Parallel to marketing are the adjacent disciplines: other functional disciplines such as finance (FIN), production & operations management (POM), strategy (STR), and organizational behavior (OB) that, like marketing, deal with specific problem areas of organizations.

Downstream from marketing, there are two elements: marketing management (the practice of marketing) and the receiving disciplines. The results and insights from the marketing discipline are used by decision-makers in organizations to solve marketing problems. In the other direction, problems faced in marketing practice generate new research questions. Figure 1 also shows that marketing is not at the end of the knowledge chain, but that it supplies inputs to important other fields, the receiving disciplines. Examples include areas such as health and nutrition, hospitality, political science, and entertainment. These receiving disciplines benefit from high quality research in marketing.

Figure 1 shows that marketing and its supplying, adjacent, and receiving disciplines are surrounded by the wider environment, with a multitude of social, economic, political, climatic, and technological factors. Of all these factors, recent changes in technology, especially the ICT revolution and the advent of the Internet have been the most consequential for marketing. They

have created a host of new marketing phenomena, thereby profoundly changing the landscape of research in marketing.

### 1.1 Vertical drift

Vertical drift means that the scientific center of gravity is moving away from marketing per se in the direction of the supplying disciplines. Marketing is losing ground to the basic disciplines such as psychology, economics, and the quantitative fields. What is called “vertical drift” here has been noticed by other authors, as demonstrated by cites such as: “Marketing scholarship is little more than applied psychology, economics or statistics” (Day & Montgomery 1999); “Attitude of looking down on research with a primary focus on marketing and labeling this as applied or ad hoc” (Rust 2006); and “The basic disciplines are perceived as more rigorous and prestigious” (Lehmann, McAlister, & Staelin 2011). K&H refer to this as a “borrowing orientation,” where marketing authors “apply theories from respected disciplines such as psychology and economics to marketing contexts” (p7).

Almost sixty years ago, the Ford Foundation (Pierson 1959) and the Carnegie Foundation (Gordon & Howell 1959) reports on business education significantly strengthened the role of the basic disciplines in marketing. This was extremely beneficial for the field at that time. Marketing changed from an applied field with a primarily descriptive approach to a rigorous, analytical discipline, directed at observing, explaining, and predicting marketing phenomena. However, the current dominant role of the supplying disciplines in marketing has become dysfunctional. It draws resource capacity away from marketing towards these disciplines and it makes the contribution to the supplying disciplines a more important criterion for evaluating papers than their contribution to marketing. There is also the danger that the supplying disciplines set the research agenda for marketing. Researchers will be inclined to study those aspects of marketing

that are interesting from the perspective of psychology, economics, or statistics, for example. It is evident that vertical drift hampers the development of marketing as an independent discipline (Rust 2006) and there is every reason for trying to stop it. In this context, K&H make valuable recommendations with respect to hiring and reward and recognition criteria. In addition, they recommend rebalancing the doctoral curricula with more courses/seminars dealing with substantive marketing theories, which may require dropping some of the courses in the supplying disciplines. In my view, we have to be careful with this. There is no doubt that doctoral students in marketing should be made aware of the “breadth and richness of marketing issues” (K&H p 6) and get acquainted with the foundations of the field and the important theoretical work in marketing. At the same time, we must recognize that knowledge from the supplying disciplines remains indispensable for the proper study of marketing phenomena. Doctoral training in the supplying disciplines such as psychology, economics, and the quantitative fields should not be included in a marketing doctoral program because of “an unfortunate value system among some in the marketing community” (K&H p 6), but because of “enlightened self-interest”. These disciplines are simply needed for a thorough understanding and analysis of marketing phenomena. When working on “important marketing issues”, they are inputs to the production process of marketing knowledge, besides other inputs such as marketing theories and data. They help us to probe the mechanisms underlying marketing phenomena, such as the purchasing behavior of buyers, the decision-making of marketers, the movements of prices in markets, and for the extraction of marketing knowledge from massive datasets. However, the research agenda should always be determined by marketing issues and the end product of research in marketing should always be new insights formulated in terms of marketing concepts and variables. In this view, the supplying disciplines are instrumental for building the body-of-knowledge of

marketing, comparable to the role of physics and chemistry for engineering and medicine. They serve the marketing discipline by helping to understand marketing phenomena and to find solutions for marketing problems. However, the specific role of the supplying disciplines in marketing has changed. As marketing became an academic discipline in itself, from “foundational” disciplines they have become “auxiliary” disciplines. Furthermore, the currently dominant auxiliary disciplines, predominantly psychology, economics, and quantitative methods have no exclusivity status. It depends on the particular marketing issue as to what auxiliary discipline to deploy. For example, for the understanding of purchasing hypes we need insights from mass psychology; for the understanding of cultural differences in consumer behavior we need anthropology and sociology. Concepts for sociology can also be used in network analysis, for example in industrial marketing. In the future, neuroscience may become an important help understanding how consumer preferences are formed.

## 1.2 Lateral drift

Lateral drift is the phenomenon that other business disciplines are replacing marketing in parts of its original domain. Lateral drift is most clearly visible for the fields of Production and Operations Management (POM) and strategy. Marketing started out with an emphasis on distribution, but later became a fully-fledged discipline dealing with a broad set of marketing phenomena (Jones & Shaw 2002). Already in 1974, Bartels foresaw the emergence of a new field “termed logistics or physical distribution”, because in his view marketing was turning away from these topics. By now, this area has practically been taken over by POM. In the beginning, POM focused on the optimization aspects of logistical problems through OR techniques, but in recent years, it also embarked on the empirical study of substantive issues in logistics and distribution, often very close to marketing. For example, the titles of articles in recent volumes of



the Journal of Operations Management (JOM), a prominent journal in the POM field, include many marketing-related terms, such as “supply chain agility”, “bargaining power in supply chains”, “buyer-seller relationships”, “consumer perceptions”, “consumer preferences”, and “service quality”. The most frequently occurring term is “supply chain management” (SCM). A supply chain is what marketers call a “marketing channel”, a very prominent marketing concept, dating back from the time that distribution was the focus of marketing. POM is also developing a behavioral branch, called Behavioral Operations (Croson, et.al. 2013) or Behavioral Operations Management (Bendoly, van Wezel, & Bachrach 2015), with clear overlaps with marketing.

Besides POM, strategy is another field that has moved into the domain that used to be marketing’s hunting ground. In 2005, Webster observed: “concepts such as product differentiation, segmentation, targeting, and positioning are genuine marketing concepts, but it seems that these topics are migrating towards the academic realm of strategic management” (Webster 2005). A look at the strategy journals shows that such a shift has indeed taken place. Looking at recent volumes of the leading strategy journal, Strategic Management Journal, one finds many articles with titles including words such as “innovation”, “competition”, “new ventures”, “entrepreneurship”, “market entry”, “customer focus”, “product portfolio management”, and “buyer-supplier exchange”. Lateral drift, the phenomenon that other business disciplines are taking over areas that used to belong to marketing, can be related to the observed decrease of the influence of the marketing department in companies and the increasingly tactical focus of marketing, with an emphasis on advertising and promotions (Verhoef & Leeflang 2009; Homburg et al. 2015).

K&H do not mention the phenomena associated with lateral drift, but these developments have clear implications for future research in marketing and its domain of application. Marketing

is the oldest academic business field besides finance and accounting and was the only one for many decades. It used to cover a broad range of topics, including physical distribution, marketing channels, competition, and innovation. The Journal of Marketing started in 1936, whereas the leading journals in POM and strategy published their first issues only in the 1980s. Marketing has to recognize that there are new kids on the block that have valuable specialized expertise. Marketing could treat these newcomers as competitors, but it makes more sense to work together and combine marketing insights with the specialized expertise of these new fields because often “important marketing issues” are directly related to issues about logistics or strategy. If we cannot beat them, let’s join them, but try to get in the lead. Marketing has a unique claim of being the steward of demand generation (Srinivasan & Hanssens 2009). Demand brings in the revenue that is essential for the continuity and the success of a business. This gives marketing a strong point of departure, but if our research is to have impact, this impact can be greater in synergy with the other business fields. At this moment, marketing is too much of an island. In a recent study of the “citation trade” among leading business journals, Clark et al (2014) found that marketing does not have a prominent place in the “family of business studies”. Marketing’s citation exports to other business disciplines are much lower than for other business fields, inducing the authors to speak of the “academic remoteness of marketing” (p 228). This suggests that marketing is too much inward-oriented and isolated from the other business disciplines. Marketing should reach out to its sister disciplines and strive for a central role as the integrator of the different business fields with the goal of maximizing customer satisfaction. Initiatives from the part of marketing in the direction of other business fields for joint research projects, joint courses, joint conferences, and joint special issues of journals would be a good start.

### 1.3 ICT revolution

Developments in technology have dramatically changed the field of marketing. Starting in the 1960s at a moderate pace with the arrival of mainframe computers, followed by PCs and scanning technology in the 1970s and 1980s, changes in the 1990s became much more hectic, with the Internet, web browsers, search engines, Wi-Fi, smartphones, and visual assistants (Ratchford 2020). Rust (2020) mentions technological trends as the most important force that is changing marketing. In the beginning, the implications of these new technologies for marketing were mainly in the areas of data (more and better data, e.g., CRM data and clickstream data) and methods (more advanced methods, e.g., Bayesian statistics and structural equations). Wedel and Kannan (2016) recently reviewed the implications of data-rich environments for marketing analytics. Besides a data revolution, there is a digital revolution. The ICT revolution started to change the marketing landscape and processes at a “frenetic pace” (Kannan and Li 2017). Digital marketing was a revolution for our field (Verhoef and Bijmolt 2019). Within a short period, a host of new marketing phenomena and concepts emerged: online marketing, webshops, shop bots, retailer apps, mobile marketing, social media, blogs, multi-channel buying, database marketing, customer value, website marketing, viral marketing, eWOM, customer reviews, user-generated content (UGC), consumer platforms, consumer forums, brand communities, consumer networks, online advertising (Internet and mobile), display advertising, sponsored search advertising, and platform marketing. All these new marketing phenomena must be studied and their opportunities for marketing must be explored. A host of papers on digital marketing are appearing in the marketing journals. One journal, the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* focuses specifically on this subject.

Marketing is not the only field active with research in the new area of online and digital marketing. For example, in the fields of Management Information Systems (MIS) and computer science there is much work on topics such as online marketing, online reviews, online advertising, mobile marketing, and electronic retailing. This is not a drift in the sense that other business fields are intruding on former marketing homeland, but this is a new field, and the question is who will conquer it. So far, marketing does not seem to have the upper hand. Ratchford (2020), who compared the numbers of articles on marketing-related aspects of the Internet in MIS journals and marketing journals, concluded that “marketing lagged behind in picking up these issues” (p 20). Here again, marketing can benefit from expertise in adjacent fields. Digitalization calls for more integrated research (Broekhuizen et al 2020). However, marketing should secure a leading role in this new research domain, which is, essentially, about marketing phenomena. This requires investments in capabilities. If we want a strong enduring position in digital marketing, new marketing PhDs should have enough basic knowledge in quantitative and computer-related fields. Referring to our discussion about the role of the supplying disciplines in marketing, making cuts in these subjects in doctoral marketing curricula is not an option.

## **2. Marketing theory**

There are concerns about the decline in theoretical work in marketing. Yadav (2010) found that the percentage of conceptual papers in JM dropped from 26% in 1978-1982 to 7% in 2003-2007, and there are no indications that this trend has reversed since then. As mentioned earlier, this is a deep concern of K&H. This concern is felt by many other marketing academics.

The review process in marketing has increasingly insisted that articles have “theory” (Lehmann 2020).

## 2.1 Demand and supply of marketing theory

How much theory do we need in marketing and how harmful is the alleged stagnation in the development of marketing theory? In contrast to the worrying state of theory development, marketing is in excellent shape in terms of output. In 2011, Lutz (2011) observed that submissions and publications in academic marketing journals are constantly growing. This high level of supply has not changed since then. Is all this work theory-poor and thus limited in terms of contribution? To answer these questions, we have to think about the role of theory in marketing. The ideal level of theory in a field depends on (1) the nature of the field and (2) the state of that field at a specific point in time. As regards the nature of the field, basic disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics, physics, psychology, and economics have a high ideal level of theory. For the more applied field of marketing, the ideal level of theory is lower. In its early years, the field of marketing was even not supposed to deal with theory at all. “This was the exclusive province of economics” (Alderson 1957, p 4). More recently, Kamakura (2014, p 131), a former JMR editor, argued that marketing should solve real and practical problems, rather than producing elegant but sometimes “impractical theories”.

The nature of the field implies that the demand for theory in marketing derives primarily from the need to have a basis for actions in marketing practice (Alderson 1957). According to Alderson (1957), the role of theory in marketing is twofold. On the one hand, theory develops “a body of marketing science”: “principles and insights that are generally applicable”. On the other hand, there is “the use of scientific techniques in the orderly investigation and solution of marketing problems in concrete situations” (Alderson 1957, p12). The contributions of research

in marketing are always between the two poles of (i) building the body-of-marketing knowledge based on empirical regularities and (ii) developing methods for the solution of practical marketing problems. The point of gravity on this interval has varied over time, and currently lies in the direction of the second pole. As regards the body-of-marketing knowledge, at this moment there are empirical generalizations in marketing (Bass and Wind 1995; Hanssens 2015), but we are yet far from a situation where most marketing phenomena are adequately covered by documented regularities, let alone laws. Furthermore, we have progressed only very modestly in our “quest” for a “General Theory of Marketing” (Sheth, Gardner, & Garrett 1988; Shaw 2014). At the same time, the field is continuously exploring the new marketing phenomena and developing tools to help marketing practice dealing with the new digital reality.

The demand for theory is also dependent on the state of the field at a particular point in time. The emphasis on theory has varied considerably over the course of marketing history. In an analysis of the first forty volumes of JM (1936-1976), Grether (1976) found that in the early period (when marketing was primarily a descriptive discipline), the percentage of papers on marketing theory was low (4.4%). It reached a peak of 14.3% in the 1956-1959 period, sparked to a great degree by the work of Alderson (1957; 1965). This was the time that marketing became a field of management, with central notions such as the marketing concept and the marketing mix. Next, the share of theory papers in JM decreased to 6.7% in the late 1960s. Towards the end of JM's first forty years (the mid-1970s), there was revived interest in marketing concepts and theory, especially concerning marketing's societal and consumer role (Grether 1976). Over the whole period 1936-1976, the average share of marketing theory articles in JM was 7.4%. In his review of the subsequent twenty years of JM (1976-1996), Kerin (1996, p 7) qualifies the 1976-1985 decade as “the period that witnessed the most vigorous interest in

theory building and the role of theory in JM's history". In later years, interest in theory decreased again, although the 7% that Yadav reported for the period 2003-2007 does not contrast very strongly with the long time average of 7.4% for the first forty years of JM. So, it seems that theoretical work in marketing comes in waves and that we are witnessing an ebb tide now. Notwithstanding the many pleas for more theoretical work in marketing, and the offering of tools and frameworks to stimulate this (Bagozzi 1984; MacInnis 2011), a substantial new stream of theoretical and conceptual work in marketing has not taken off yet. Recently, Zeithaml et al. (2020) recommended the "theory-in-use"-method as a useful approach to theory development in marketing. K&H's recommendations for developing the conceptual abilities of doctoral students through seminars on conceptual development and theory construction (p 6) are definitely useful, but we have to recognize that at this moment, structural factors work against a strong emphasis on marketing theory. There are two main reasons for this.

## 2.2 Reasons for the current low tide of theory in marketing

First, marketing phenomena and marketing problems are moving targets. As observed earlier, new marketing phenomena are emerging almost every day. In this respect, marketing is different from many other scientific fields. "More than most other fields of scientific inquiry, marketing is context-dependent" (Sheth & Sisodia 1999, p72). Fields such as physics, biology, astronomy, psychology, and neuroscience deal with phenomena that are, in principle, constant: nature, plants, animals, the galaxy, human beings, and the brain. They have been studied for centuries, with ever more sophisticated theories and methods. However, marketing is currently confronted with a tsunami of new phenomena and new problems in marketing that require investigation. Of course, there has always been change, for example, from commodities to brands, from personal selling to mass advertising, and from traditional grocery shops to

supermarkets with scanner check-outs. Until about 1990, these changes occurred at a moderate rate, enabling researchers to do conceptual as well as empirical work on these topics. However, the ICT revolution dramatically changed the arrival rate of new marketing phenomena (see the long list in the previous section). It is the duty of researchers in marketing to deal with “the marketing phenomena and marketing problems of our days” (Bartels 1976), to explore and to solve the many entailing “important marketing issues”. At this point in time, apparently this has a higher priority than developing new grand theories or finding generalized empirical regularities.

The second explanation for the current low tide for marketing theory is the development towards ever more detail. Over time, the focus of marketing actions has changed from the total market (all potential customers) to market segments of similar customers, to individual consumers, and for individual consumers, to specific stages of their customer journey (touchpoints). All of this is due to better and more refined data. Something similar happened to the marketing instruments. The marketing response functions of the 1970s (Kotler 1971) were defined at the level of the marketing mix elements, for example, sales as a function of price or advertising expenditures. The empirical generalizations in marketing also tend to be formulated at this “general” level (Bass & Wind 1995; Hanssens (2015)). Of course, the overall elasticity of sales with respect to advertising expenditures is of interest. However, for a marketer, it is more important to be able to determine the effectiveness of a specific display advertisement, the value of a keyword in paid search advertising, or the financial returns of a specific viral campaign. Research in marketing must develop the methods and tools to deal with these detailed problems. This shift towards more detail is also visible in the very specific topics of work published in marketing journals, for example, how consumers search online for cameras (Bronnenberg, Kim,



& Mela 2016) and how to make people happy with smaller food portions (Cornil & Chandon 2016). It is also reflected by the findings of Mela, Roos, and Deng (2013) of ever narrower keywords in the marketing literature.

This does not imply that this work is theory-less. Researchers studying specific new marketing phenomena and new marketing instruments also need the guidance of conceptual models and theories, as they examine under which circumstances (e.g. for which types of products, which types of customers, and in combination with which other instruments) a particular type of marketing action is most effective. These “theories” are usually tailored towards very specific instruments. In this context, Merton (1957, p 5-6) refers to “theories of the middle range,” intermediate to “full-blown or master-theories” and “day-to-day routines of research.” The work on a highly diversified set of new marketing phenomena is extremely useful for solving the marketing problems of our days, even if it does not produce grand theories at this moment.

### 2.3 Universal marketing knowledge classification system

Although individual projects may be quite specific, academic researchers should always ask the question of how the findings of an individual study add to the organically growing body-of-marketing knowledge. If, for example, a researcher deals with the question if five-color brochures are more effective than four-color brochures (K&H call this “a less important problem”- p2), the outcome of this particular study should be incorporated in the larger body-of-knowledge about the factors that affect the effectiveness of brochures in marketing. Brochures are important marketing instruments hence this type of knowledge is “important”. At the same time, when dealing with “important marketing issues”, for example “under what conditions do online channels serve as substitutes versus complements to offline channels” (K&H’s example)

such a question can usually not be answered in a one-shot study. A series of projects, with different products, in different industries, and in different countries is needed to answer that question. So, this important issue has to be split up in a number of less important (?) sub-questions. This somewhat blurs the classification of marketing issues into important and unimportant.

In the current state of the field, probably the most useful contribution to marketing theory building is the development of a clear and uniform classification system for marketing knowledge. Research in marketing is scattered over an enormous number of different topics. For their “Topical History of JMR”, Huber, Kamakura, and Mela (2014) extracted as many as 801 terms from 2531 article abstracts. In their “Keyword History of Marketing Science”, Mela et al. (2013) found that the authors of MS articles used a total of 4654 keywords, of which 2357 were unique. For a comparison, we can look at the field of economics, which uses the “JEL” codes for the classification of research. The very broad field of economics (encompassing marketing and much more) only uses 814 categories in the JEL to classify its research (JEL 2019). The extremely large number of keywords in marketing shows two things. First, it confirms that research in marketing is scattered over a huge number of detailed problems. This is the characteristic of an applied field. Second, it implies a need for abstraction. A glance at the content tables of the major marketing journals gives the impression of a smorgasbord of sophisticated studies, well-executed and interesting in themselves, but each with a limited scope and without a clear link to the larger whole. There is nothing wrong with detailed studies, as long as their findings are incorporated in a larger body-of-knowledge. Keywords should be defined and then combined into higher-level categories to arrive at a meaningful stratification of research in marketing. Such a classification system, shared by the major journals and conferences in the

field, would contribute greatly to the coherence of our field. It would also help to identify black spots in our knowledge, define new research questions, and stimulate programmed research where each new project systematically builds on the results of previous ones. In this way, a high-quality marketing knowledge classification system will help the “organic/indigenous” (K&H’s expression) growth of the body-of-knowledge of marketing. It will also help marketing practitioners to locate the research papers that directly relate to a specific issue. Creating a universal marketing knowledge classification system is a major challenge. An authoritative cross-journal and cross-association taskforce would be a good starting point. Bringing the results from a plethora of different marketing studies together in a comprehensive marketing knowledge classification system implies an inductive, bottom-up approach to the development of marketing knowledge. This is the necessary empirical counterpart of a conceptual theory-building effort as proposed by K&H. For the effective accumulation of marketing knowledge, both theory and empirical observations are needed. Let us remember Kant’s famous statement “Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer. Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind.” (“Thinking without content is empty. Observations without concepts are blind”) (Kant 1787, p 75). The systematic collection of findings in a universal classification system can help to detect underlying frameworks of relationships and stimulates the writing of conceptual and theoretical papers. As shown in Zeithaml et al (2020), conceptual papers can achieve very high citation scores.

### **3. Marketing subdomains and the self-identities of marketing scholars**

The influx from the supplying disciplines has not turned marketing into a “melting pot”, as was expected in the 1970s (Shugan 2002, p6). The existence of clearly identifiable subdomains is troubling many marketing scholars. For example, Shugan (2002) talks about the

“fragmentation of the field”, Reibstein, Day, and Wind (2009) about the “balkanization of academic marketing”, and Lilien (2011) mentions the “silo-based nature of our profession”.

K&H are afraid that marketing scholars primarily identify with one of these subdomains, instead of with marketing itself.

### 3.1 The role of subdomains in marketing

I distinguish four subdomains in the marketing landscape: (a) marketing strategy, (b) marketing mix decision-making, (c) consumer behavior, and (d) models and methodology. These are the corners of the “marketing diamond” pictured in Figure 2.

<Figure 2 about here>

They are all inside the circle demarcating the marketing domain. On the vertical axis are marketing strategy and marketing mix decision-making, the two classical domains that constitute the core of marketing. In terms of history, marketing strategy goes back the farthest (Hunt 2018). It became customary to subdivide marketing strategy into two parts: (i) defining the target market(s), i.e. the group(s) of customers whose patronage will be sought; and (ii) composing a marketing mix, i.e. the tools that a company combines to satisfy the target group(s) (Oxenfeldt 1958; McCarthy 1960)<sup>2</sup>.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the two other subdomains of marketing: consumer behavior and models & methodology. These are pictured on the horizontal axis of Figure 2. Both areas are instrumental for the decisions of the vertical axis, i.e. for finding the right customer groups, deciding how to approach them, and for optimizing the marketing mix. The knowledge and methodologies developed in these two subdomains are essential for the success of marketing. The subdomains in Figure 2 are highly interdependent and need each

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<sup>2</sup> Following this division, Figure 2 shows four subdomains of marketing, instead of the three subfields mentioned by K&H.

other's expertise. Marketing strategy determines the customer groups to be served, thereby defining the space for the marketing mix decisions and the focus for consumer research. Models and methods help to precisely measure marketing instrument effects, which are essential for optimizing the marketing mix. At the same time, information goes in the other direction. Consumer research and the analysis of large databases with advanced methods can discover new opportunities for marketing strategy and marketing mix decisions.

The emergence of subdomains in a growing field is unavoidable and not necessarily bad. An academic field may have unified science aspirations, encouraged by Kuhn's (1962) writings, but it often does not work that way (Hughes 2013). For example, fields like management organization and management studies have many respected subfields (Whitley 1984; Hughes 2013). For marketing, the differentiation in subdomains is logical and is likely to continue as marketing develops further. Specialized subdomains have deep expertise, and each subdomain has its own set of connected fields outside marketing, as shown in Figure 2. The subdomains also act as the "windows" of marketing to the outside world, ensuring that marketing remains firmly anchored in the overall ecology of sciences. Marketing subdomains are not each other's competitors, but the source of synergy. Research in marketing is not a constant-sum game so that more efforts in one domain come at the cost of some other domain. For example, PhD programs in marketing need history and theory (Hunt 2018, p 44) and models and methods. It does not help if marketing scholars from different subdomains behave as members of competing "academic tribes" (Becher and Trowler 2001), or "view each other as irrelevant or adversarial" (MacInnis 2005, p 15),

For mutual understanding and recognition, it is important to realize that the subdomains deal with different research questions and use different research methodologies. In the domains

of consumer behavior and models & methodology, the research problems tend to be relatively structured and narrow. Marketing strategy typically deals with “broad-ranging, ill-structured” problems (Clark et al. 2014, p 234). In the area of marketing mix decision-making, the goal is often to measure the effects of “integrated marketing programs” (Morgan et al. 2019, p 20), involving a complete range of marketing instruments, which is often complex. Consumer behavior research can make use of advanced experimental designs, and the field of models & methods can use the most sophisticated data analysis technology. Other marketing subdomains operate in less favorable methodological conditions. For example, the method of (field) experiments is rarely applicable in marketing strategy research (McAlister 2016; Gneezy 2017). Structural equations methodology is of limited value in research on marketing decision-making (McAlister 2016), and marketing strategy research often requires the collection of primary data through surveys (Moorman 2016), with all its inherent limitations. K&H are completely right that in decisions about research, design trade-offs must be made between methodological rigor and the importance of an issue. For example, one cannot draw conclusions from a survey of 200 companies with the same precision as from a dataset with two million online purchasing transactions. “Specialization implies more refined reviewing criteria” (Deighton 2007). Therefore, I propose to explicitly formulate different research reviewing criteria, depending on the marketing subdomain and the type of research question.

### 3.2 Self-identity of marketing scholars

Recognizing the value of subdomains in marketing, I agree with K&H that scholars, in whatever subdomain, should primarily see themselves as marketing scholars. I also fully support K&H’s ideas for hiring, promotion, and tenure policies that can help to create a marketing identity among faculty in marketing departments. I add one proposal here. The world-famous

Wimbledon stadium has many tennis courts. However, the most prominent games are played on Centre Court. Following this analogy, excellent research takes place in many subdomains of marketing and is presented at a wide range of conferences: Academy of Marketing Science, ACR, AMA, ANZMAC, EMAC, Marketing Science, national conferences, etc. It is striking that the two conferences that are generally considered as the most prominent, ACR and Marketing Science, are located in the “side-branches” of Figure 2, not the main axis, Marketing Strategy-Marketing Mix Decision Making. This raises the question: What institution feels primarily responsible for guarding the development of marketing as an academic field? For dealing with really “important marketing issues”, a kind of center court for marketing can help. I propose to create a “Marketing Centre Court Conference”, a new, distinctive, high-level marketing conference, with strict requirements regarding marketing relevance of the submitted papers, high quality standards, and the condition that papers are joint work from specialists from different marketing subdomains. The focus should be on the core phenomena and issues of marketing today, with the purpose of moving the frontiers of marketing knowledge. Such a “Marketing Centre Court Conference” will stimulate a sense of unity, a feeling that we are all part of the same discipline, and together contribute to the overall success of the field. The current institutional structure of conferences and journals in marketing is almost fifty years old, with most marketing scholars sticking around in their own “bubble.” A new summit conference can act as a reset, create new dynamics, ideas and perspectives, and provide the momentum to take the field to its next level.

### 3.3 Life cycle of marketing scholars

I agree with K&H’s recommendation that marketing scholars develop self-identities that focus on specific marketing phenomena (instead of a specific marketing subdomain). As

examples, they mention several names, including Marnik Dekimpe, who is identified with “retailing and channels”, Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, “identified with global marketing”, and myself, associated with “marketing management support systems.” To add an example from the U.S., Roland Rust is associated with service research. However, marketing scholars do not usually start out that way. Marnik Dekimpe started as a specialist in time-series analysis, Jan-Benedict Steenkamp is an expert on measurement theory, I started in the field of stochastic models, and Roland Rust started in OR for media optimization. So, many marketing scholars start out with a focus on a particular method or a particular disciplinary approach and later in their career develop a specific set of marketing phenomena as their field of expertise. This trajectory from a narrow specialization towards becoming a broader, more all-round, marketing scholar characterizes the life cycle of many colleagues in the field. It makes little sense for a beginning marketing scholar to immediately take on a big marketing issue with the ambition of contributing to grand marketing theories. It is better to start dealing with modest size problems and being prepared for this with a sufficient baggage of marketing knowledge and a thorough training in the behavioral and quantitative supplying disciplines. Of course, the evolution from narrow to broad is not a necessary condition for any successful academic marketing career. It is easy to give examples of very successful marketing scholars who have contributed from a specific niche during their entire career.

#### **4. In conclusion**

Inspired by the stimulating paper by Ajay Kohli and Michael Haenlein (2020), this paper dealt with the question of how at this point in time (the early 2020s) research in marketing can be maximally useful, both for the development of marketing knowledge and the solution of



marketing problems in practice. The major topics were vertical drift, lateral drift, the ICT revolution, the role of marketing theory, and the position of subdomains in marketing. The discussion produced several recommendations. Here, I mention three of them:

- 1 Concerted efforts to get marketing out of its isolation and actively seek cooperation with adjacent business fields such as operations management, management information system, and strategy
- 2 A Universal Marketing Knowledge Classification System with the purpose of bringing together and integrating the scattered results of today's many high-quality marketing studies, often on very detailed topics
- 3 A Marketing Centre Court Conference, a new, global, distinctive conference with high quality standards, dealing with the core issues of marketing today and with the purpose of moving the frontiers of marketing.

This paper is a snapshot of the current status of marketing and proposes ways to deal with the important marketing issues of the 2020s. Marketing will move on and evolve further under the influence of external and internal forces, definitely entailing new challenges. Doing the right things now will create the best perspectives for a successful marketing future.

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## Figures

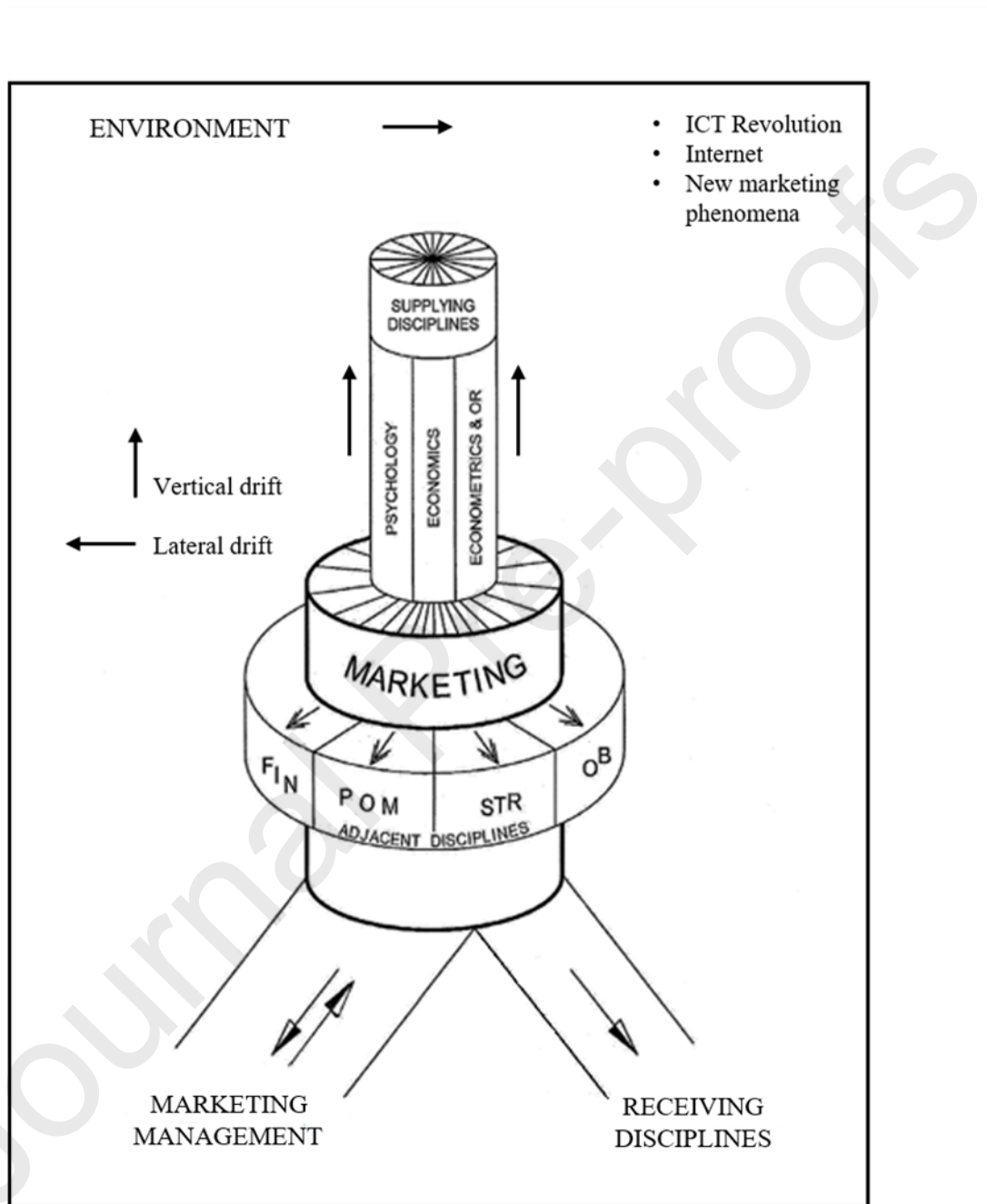


Figure 1 Current dynamics in the marketing ecosystem

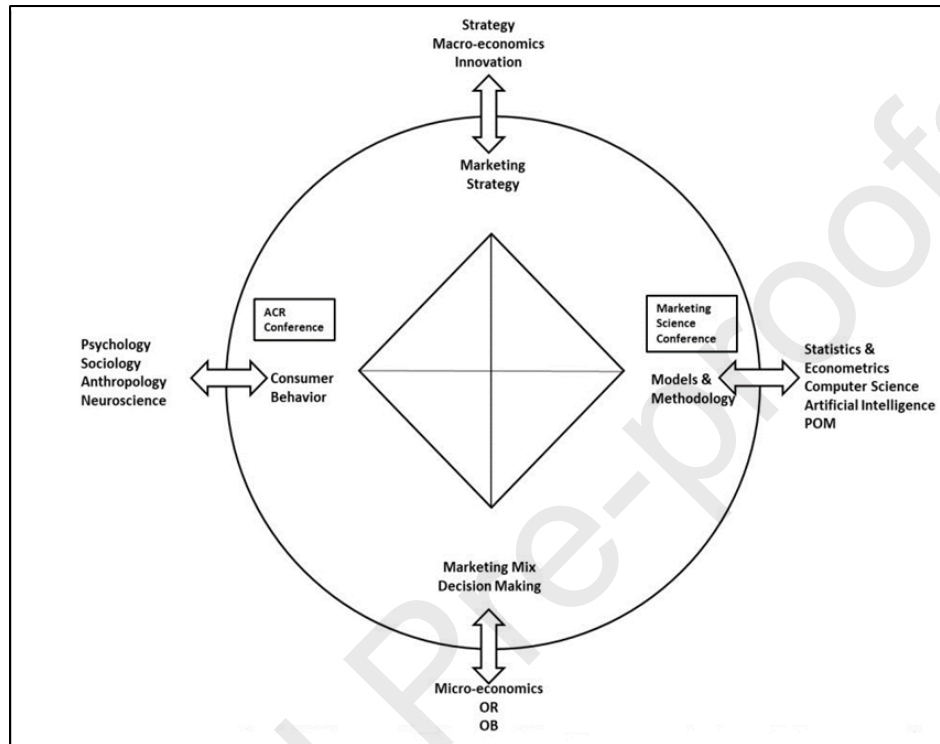


Figure 2 Subdomains of marketing and their connections with adjacent fields outside marketing

## The study of important marketing issues in an evolving field

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