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Factors Affecting the Study of Important Marketing Issues: Additional Thoughts and Clarifications

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ABSTRACT

Stremersch (2021) and Wierenga (2021) provide valuable reactions to our ideas in Kohli and Haenlein (2021). We highlight some of their suggestions we found particularly helpful and use this opportunity to clarify some of our ideas. In particular, we like the concept of a "project funnel," the notions of "vertical drift" and "lateral drift," and a "Universal Marketing Knowledge Classification System." We clarify our ideas relating to the role of "supplying" or foundational disciplines, importance of theory, selfidentities of scholars, evaluation of research rigor, and learning about marketing phenomena.

We are thankful to Stremersch (2021) and Wierenga (2021) for providing many thoughtful comments and kind remarks in response to our paper (Kohli and Haenlein, 2021). In this note, we underscore the usefulness of some of their suggestions and clarify some of the ideas in our original paper.

1. Useful new suggestions

We very much like the concept of a "*project funnel*" suggested by Stremersch (2021; Figure 2). Breaking up the research process into four phases—awareness, consideration, choice, and execution—is an excellent way of thinking more granularly about the issues involved in doing important research. One could extend the funnel by adding the next phase (publication) and considering how the awareness, ability, and motivation of journal editors/reviewers—as perceived by authors— influences their choices in earlier phases of the funnel.

We also like Wierenga's characterization of the marketing discipline's relationship with "*supplying disciplines*" such as psychology and economics and "*adjacent disciplines*" such as strategy and organizational behavior (2020; Figure 2). The concepts of "*vertical drift*" and "*lateral drift*" are elegant ways to think about how the study of various research issues has evolved.

We also like the idea of a "*Universal Marketing Knowledge Classification System*" suggested by Wierenga (2021). While putting such a system in place may pose some challenges, it would be a welcome resource for mapping out the domain of marketing knowledge and relating research studies to one another. Such a system would also help engender greater precision in the language used in academic discourses. Finally, the system could help marketing scholars develop self-identities around substantive issues/questions (a practice we strongly recommend).

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2. Clarification I: The Role of "Supplying Disciplines

We completely agree with Stremersch (2021) that diversity among scholars is useful and that we should welcome and nurture researchers from other disciplines. Our concern is not with diversity *per se.* Instead, it is with the research issues addressed by marketing scholars with backgrounds in other disciplines. We argue that it is important for researchers from the so-called supplying/foundational disciplines to develop knowledge that is important to *marketing* stakeholders (rather than stakeholders of other disciplines). As Stremersch notes, "*we need to ensure we still are enough about marketing rather than seeing marketing merely as an application field.*" Addressing questions of importance to marketing stakeholders calls for researchers to be interested in marketing and to immerse themselves in marketing phenomena.

We would also like to underscore that a research question/issue does not automatically become important for marketing simply because a supplying/foundational discipline has addressed it. Conversely, a research question/issue does not become *unimportant* simply because a supplying/foundational discipline has *not* addressed it. As Wierenga (2021; p. 5) notes, "*There is also the danger that the supplying disciplines set the research agenda for marketing.*" As we argue in our paper, the importance of a research question/issue should be judged based on three criteria—the *number* and *status* of marketing stakeholders likely to change their behaviors following research on the issue and the *magnitude* of their behavioral changes.

We completely agree with Wierenga (2021) that it is valuable to include material from supplying/foundational disciplines in doctoral curricula in marketing. However, we must also include literature uniquely or predominantly about marketing issues and problems, even if other disciplines do not address them. It is a matter of balance. There appears to be a need for adjustment. As Wierenga (2021, p. 5) notes, "*the current dominant role of the supplying disciplines in marketing has become dysfunctional.*"

3. Clarification II: Importance of theories

Wierenga (2021) provides a useful historical account of theory development in marketing. He suggests that theory building may be taking a back seat today because of the higher priority being placed on solving pressing marketing problems/issues resulting from the emergence of new technologies and ever more complex issues raised by them.

We argue that theory building and practical problem solving are mutually reinforcing activities. A theory helps explain, predict, and influence a phenomenon of interest. To the extent a theory addresses an important phenomenon, it helps explain, predict, and influence that phenomenon. A useful or practical theory is *about* an important phenomenon and helps address/solve issues related to that phenomenon. Contrarily, a theory is not useful or practical if it addresses an unimportant phenomenon (i.e., one that is not of much value in practice). As a businessman cited by a founding father of social psychology noted, "*there is nothing as practical as a good theory*" (Lewin, 1943, p. 118). Similarly, as Wierenga (2021, p. 16) notes, "*This does not imply that this work [focusing on smaller units of analyses and more granular marketing instruments] is theory-less.*"

To be clear, we are not advocating the development of "grand theories" or pursuing a "unified theory" of marketing. Instead, we encourage the development of useful "middle-range" theories, as discussed by Merton (1957). "Middle-range" theories may be thought of as theories that employ constructs with moderate levels of abstraction. Such theories reflect generalized insights that hold beyond individual/isolated cases and inform practitioners of the actions they could take in their particular cases.

As Wierenga (2021) notes, the ICT "revolution" is changing the practice of marketing and is a fertile area for developing new knowledge. Many problems/issues raised by these developments call for the development of new theory. For example, the practical problem of the extent to which a firm should rely on newer forms of communication such as influencer marketing calls for new theory that sheds light on the conditions under which influencer marketing leads to higher (or lower) business performance. Indeed, new phenomena may present opportunities to develop organic/indigenous marketing theory (with constructs and propositions that are uniquely or predominantly about marketing phenomena).

4. Clarification III: Self-identities of scholars

It appears we did not do an adequate job of articulating our recommendation about developing self-identities focused on marketing phenomena. Our concern is that marketing scholars self-identify as "behavioral," "quantitative," and "strategy." While exceptions exist, the "behavioral" label implies the lab experiment method, the "quantitative" label implies the econometric/analytic modeling method, and the "strategy" label implies the survey method. In their place, we recommend that scholars develop self-identities focused on substantive marketing phenomena (e.g., marketing channels, customer relationship management) or new methods (e.g., componential segmentation) for generating insights into them.

To be clear, we are not advocating that each scholar should have a single self-identity throughout his/her academic career. At the same time, we think immersing oneself in a phenomenon is vital for generating novel and useful insights about the phenomenon. However, this does not mean that a scholar should ignore other disciplines that may stimulate thinking about the marketing phenomenon. This also does not mean that a scholar should confine himself/herself to a single marketing phenomenon for his/her entire career. To be sure, delving into multiple phenomena over time, especially post-tenure, can be stimulating and help a scholar make substantial contributions over the course of his/her career. Thus, a scholar may develop multiple self-identities. Indeed, scholars cited in Stremersch (2021) have multiple identities focused on multiple marketing phenomena (note, however, that these identities are *not* "behavioral" or "quantitative," or "strategy"). Similarly, we concur with Wierenga (2021) that a scholar's self-identities may change over time, may not be obvious in early stages, and only evolve over the course of a career.

5. Clarification IV: Evaluation of research rigor

Stremersch (2021) alludes to the debate between those who believe there is (or should be) a trade-off between research rigor and importance (relevance) and those who believe there is not (or should not) be a trade-off. We completely agree with his position that we need to become better at embracing residual ambiguity when studying important problems. Stremersch offers several suggestions for helping us embrace residual ambiguity. We think these are helpful ideas and agree with the vast majority. We are not as confident, however, of the suggestion that editors should use the criterion of "*whether given the research question, the researchers have done the best that one possibly can do*" While this idea has intuitive appeal, no matter what a study's design, an editor/reviewer can always assert that the researchers could have included one more experiment, one more control variable, one more analysis, one more robustness check, one more company (or one more respondent/informant) in the sample. One has to stop at some point, and this is a judgment call.

We argue that the judgment about the rigor of a study's method should be made based on a simple criterion: How likely is it that the conclusions of the study are wrong? This depends on several well-known factors and some that typically get insufficient attention: (1) Is the purpose of a study to estimate effect sizes or show the presence of effects? In case of the latter, using more advanced/complicated methods is unlikely to alter a study's conclusions. (2) How strong are the theoretical arguments for the hypotheses being tested? In addition to empirical findings, strong theoretical arguments provide additional bases for confidence in a study's conclusions.

In sum, evaluation of a study's rigor should be about the confidence one can place in its conclusions, not its complexity or elaborateness *per se*. To be sure, this is a judgment call, but editors/reviewers must not shy away from making it, just as they routinely make other judgment calls including, (a) what is a big enough sample size, a good enough measure proxy available in secondary data, an acceptable confidence interval (or p-value), (b) whether results from a single company's dataset will generalize to all companies, or from a lab setting to natural settings, and more fundamentally, (c) whether the study of a research issue makes (or could make) a sufficient contribution to warrant publication.

6. Clarification V: Learning about marketing phenomena

We agree with Stremersch (2021) that "*Learning by not doing is difficult.*" We also agree that long-term immersion that spans over many years and includes regular interactions with C-Level executives can be invaluable. However, realizing such long-term immersion may be difficult for many because of constraints related to financial and other resources and access to C-Level executives. We believe even a short-term engagement with lower-level executives may be better than none at all, even as we wholeheartedly endorse longer and deeper immersions.

7. Conclusion

While it is nice for our research to be cited by other disciplines, we believe we must address issues that are important to marketing stakeholders and develop knowledge that can influence their behaviors. We hope the collective ideas in this set of articles are helpful to authors and editors/reviewers and will serve to stimulate more research on important marketing issues.

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