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THEORY/CONCEPTUAL

Toward an integrative theory of marketing

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Abstract
Many scholars have observed that the marketing discipline has become too fragmented and myopic, straying away from its core managerial marketing issues. To some, the complex discipline-transgressing phenomena are knowledge-producing, while for others, it is the discipline's problem of an identity crisis. This article argues that continuities and discontinuities of theoretical and methodological processes result from the contextual forces that continuously create new perspectives, paradigms, and schools of thought. Many traditional schools of marketing thought have either become obsolete or metamorphosized into new schools of thought. It has led to several theoretical advances that promise to develop into a general theory of marketing. However, none have grown into a full-blown integrative theory of marketing to tie in the various subdisciplines of marketing. We present an overall framework of marketing that could become the basis for developing an integrative theory of marketing with views relating to the core marketing processes and how the evolving contextual forces interactively impact them.

Keywords Marketing discipline · Marketing theory · Integrative marketing theory · Marketing context · Schools of marketing thought

Introduction

While it is widely acknowledged that the marketing discipline has grown exponentially in the past four decades, there is a growing concern that the discipline has broadened too far, creating fragmentation and splintering of groups with no overarching theory to hold the various specialized areas unified within a common marketing perspective (Ferrell, 2018; Steenkamp, 2018; Tamilia, 2011; Wilkie & Moore, 2003, 2007). Moreover, whereas some have lauded the broadening of the marketing concept as enriching with potential for theory building (Anderson et al., 1999; Bagozzi, 1978, 1979; Kotler, 2018; Levy, 2002, 2018), others have noted that it has muddled marketing thought and hindered the development of a general theory of marketing (Arndt, 1978; Bartels, 1974; Hunt, 1983; El-Ansary et al., 2017).

According to Hunt (2020a, b), the marketing discipline has lost its core cognitive identity because some of the areas, such as consumer behavior, have drifted away from the central focus on marketing, and that too much emphasis has been placed on research methods and other nonmarketing subjects, without sufficient grounding in theoretical, empirical, and historical knowledge-content of the marketing discipline in the doctoral programs. He considers this as a basic failure of the discipline's institutionalization and a reason for its impairment in reproducing itself. Other scholars have expressed similar concerns (Lehmann et al., 2011; Piercy, 2002; Reibstein et al., 2009; Yadav, 2020). Thus, as a way forward, Hunt (2020a, b) suggested that in addition to revamping the doctoral program, the discipline should restructure itself to ensure that it has a mainstream central focus rooted in its history of marketing management/strategy and macromarketing. He also makes a plea to consumer behavior to reconsider its "divorce" from marketing given the rich history of its contributions to the marketing discipline.

The growing divergence between marketing academia and practitioners is another recurring concern (Reibstein et al., 2009). Wind (2019) calls it ironic that despite the growing importance of customer-centricity in business strategy, marketing's role in many companies is being marginalized, with limited responsibilities for CMOs (Chief Marketing Officers).

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In fact, recent news suggests that Bank of America will ax the position of its CMO and make the Head of Marketing Operations report to the Head of Digital (Auchterlonie, 2021). Such news about the relegation of marketing positions in corporations does not bode well for the discipline. Moreover, marketing executives also ignore marketing academic publications. This has prompted some to call for a discipline reform (Key et al., 2020; Moorman et al., 2019; Sheth & Sisodia, 2006; Varadarajan, 2020). The scholarly debates within the marketing discipline about its domain premise may, therefore, appear to be an "acrimony in the ivory tower" (Sheth, 1992) unless an integrated view of marketing is developed that binds the various perspectives together, for academic research, teaching, and practice.

The need for an integrative theory in marketing couldn't be more significant. Over the past many decades, marketing scholarship has grown immensely. However, it has also become nanoscopic with many miniature and mid-range theories (Hunt, 1990; Stewart & Zinkhan, 2006; Yadav, 2014). The lack of a unifying paradigm or a unifying research object has led to fragmentation into many subdisciplines. Although, one could argue that academic disciplines are a particular form of division of labor in science crucial for its professionalization and development. Hence, working separately towards the overall knowledge production by disciplines and subdisciplines should be considered a rational and efficient arrangement characteristic of modernity (Krishnan, 2009). Nevertheless, an academic discipline should also have a distinctive lens with a set of knowledge and skills institutionalized in a curriculum, creating a community of professionals cultivating a distinct habitus (Beck & Young, 2005).

Marketing is a distinct profession, linked to a career path and profession outside of academia; it should exhibit some homogeneity in its approach and outlook to exert its influence like other mature professional disciplines, such as medicine and law. Its jurisdiction could be broad as a branch of knowledge, but the marketing viewpoint needs some unity in its outlook. As Kuhn (1962) argued, disciplines should be organized around certain ways of thinking or larger theoretical frameworks, best explaining empirical phenomena in that discipline or field. Therefore, an integrative theory or framework could spark a greater degree of coherence in marketing's disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) way of thinking, producing a stronger identity with well-defined borders (Becher & Trowler, 2001). The integrative function brings constructs and propositions together into a consistent and useful whole (Howard & Sheth, 1969). It also helps limit the domain of the discipline, excluding the anomalies that do not fit the prevailing outlook. However, when many exceptions remain unexplained, a newer perspective and theoretical framework would replace it.

The purpose of this article is to explore the prospect of an integrative theory of marketing that is inclusive of its academic tribes and encourages collaboration across various subdisciplines of marketing, including marketing strategy, marketing science, consumer behavior, and business-to-business marketing. The ambition to develop a general theory of marketing as a signal of becoming a social science is one of the most significant knowledge development goals of the discipline (Bartels, 1968a, b; El-Ansary, 1979; Hunt, 1983, 2010; Hunt et al., 1981; Sheth et al., 1988).

The impact of the evolving context of marketing

Like other social sciences, marketing is a contextual discipline. Its evolution can be understood in the context of specific historical conditions that formed the foundation of the marketing discipline and its continuity or departure from the obsolete practices and ways of thinking—what Kuhn (1962) had famously termed as 'paradigm change.' Like other disciplines, marketing has been reorganized not by the cumulative process but by the succession of scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts. These shifts result from contextual forces impinging upon marketing practice forcing the discipline to reorient itself time and again.

Contextual forces act as exogenous variables that prompt or inhibit decisions in specific directions. When context changes, both marketing practice, and theory evolve and advance. Sheth and Sisodia (1999) prodded us to revisit marketing's lawlike generalizations as many contextual factors relating to location, time, competition, and customer-centric concepts and theories had fundamentally altered marketing practices. In the current context, we observe four megatrends that are significantly impacting marketing to which the discipline is adjusting: (1) changing demographics; (2) digital economy; (3) emerging markets; and (4) globalization.

Several demographic trends, such as the aging population; working women; single adult households; and a more significant proportion of the ethnic populace, redefine consumption and consumers. The need-mix of consumers has shifted more towards services, making service-dominant (S-D) logic more compelling for the marketing discipline (Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). With increasing pressure on consumers' discretionary time, marketing has to adjust to anytime, anywhere selling and fulfillment. The assumptions of "normal curve" (central tendency to the mean) are being challenged because more consumers are clustering to the two extremes between low price and high-value luxury goods instead of gravitating to the center, thus creating a "well curve" and squeezing marketers in the middle. It is one of the key reasons for the recent retail apocalypse and the failures of retailers positioned in the middle. Overall, the fundamental impact is that the average (or mean) is a less helpful matrix to measure. Instead, the range (variance) is more critical. This growing heterogeneity in domestic markets is making mass customization inevitable for micro-targeting.

Coupled with the demographic change is the exponential growth of digital technology. Although technology-related turning points have reshaped marketing almost every few decades, the digital economy is transforming consumption and marketing practices at far greater levels than those achieved by introducing electricity, telephony, and television. It has resulted in the phenomenal growth of e-tailers, such as Amazon, and the meteoric rise of e-commerce, altering the process of how consumers shop and how supply chains operate for last-mile delivery to consumer homes and undertake reverse pick-up.

Moreover, the Internet's global reach has rendered obsolete the traditional retail thinking on laws of retail gravitation and the understanding that success is based on retail "location, location, location." Smartphones, apps, and mobile payment systems have reduced the gap between the urban and rural markets and advanced and emerging economies. It has given rise to the sharing economy unhinged from asset-ownership or transfers, adopting new subscription and dynamic pricing models. Currently, over 10 million Apps exist to facilitate "moment-based marketing" and customer experience enhancement.

In the digital economy, customers form their networks connected with others across multiple platforms and geographies. They can boost or deny access, engagement, customization, and collaboration opportunities to marketers within such networks. As generators of content on social media, customers today can promote or bash brands or even compete against them with their own set of offerings. Their influence through "word of mouth" is vast and borderless.

Thus, customer networks and their influential marketing effects within the new digital economy have far-reaching consequences. The demise of intermediary channel institutions and the rise of direct-to-consumer (DTC) marketing are inevitable. New approaches to marketing and branding have made non-traditional unicorns, such as Airbnb, Apple, Google, Uber, and Yahoo, far more valuable than traditional industrial-age companies, such as General Electric or General Motors.

These new-age companies set themselves up to operate globally right at the outset, like other high-tech companies that face tremendous pressures due to high R&D costs and the short lifespan of their evolving technologies. To reach the largest number of customers within a short cost-recovery time frame, concurrent global marketing and price-skimming are imminent and replaces the old model of country-by-country sequential marketing and penetration pricing strategies. Thus, globalization has produced many new brands in consumer electronics, cell phones, automobiles, appliances, garments, and consumables. It has also led to the restructuring of many industries, with manufacturing outsourcing to low-cost countries. It is one reason why China propelled itself to become a manufacturing powerhouse, with many US and European companies sourcing their products or components from China and other low-cost countries. Even after the return to higher tariffs to equalize cost advantage was imposed by the US government, globalization has continued unabated. The evidence is seen in the offerings of many e-commerce companies, such as Amazon, Alibaba, and Flipkart, which continue to sell foreign-made products, in addition to local products. Thus, the nature of competition, even within domestic markets, has changed from local to international for all. Consequently, the marketing discipline has a new paradigm to adjust to in a globalized world.

Furthermore, globalization is compounded by the rise of emerging markets. They are the new growth engines of the world economy, with countries such as China and India becoming large enough markets to rival the United States, or many European countries and Japan, at least in terms of economic size based on purchasing power parity (PPP). These emerging markets are growing due to consumption shifts from unbranded to branded products, unorganized retailing to modern retailing, and rapid growth in smaller towns and cities compared to large metros. Changing lifestyles and consumption dynamics in emerging markets are significantly altering market assumptions (Sheth, 2011). Moreover, as economies transition from agriculture-based to manufacturing or services-based to support market modernization, they exert enormous pressure on the planet's resources and environment (Apte & Sheth, 2016). Thus, macromarketing and sustainability issues are beginning to reoccupy the central position within the marketing discipline (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021).

Evolution and discontinuities within marketing discipline

The contextual changes have made many traditional schools of marketing thought redundant and only for the history books. Of the twelve schools of marketing thought identified by Sheth et al. (1988) (see also, Shaw & Jones, 2005), only a few have survived, while the contextual forces have implicated others in morphing into new emergent schools of thought. The four new schools of marketing thought that have emerged to reflect the changing context of the marketing environment in the past three decades are marketing strategy, services marketing, relationship marketing, and international marketing schools of thought. Except for the macromarketing and buyer behavior (now relabeled as consumer behavior) schools of thought, others have either become obsolete or subsumed within the new emergent schools of marketing thought.

Marketing strategy school of thought has emerged due to the tremendous growth in managerial marketing thinking with its enlarged focus on competition and competitive performance, strategic positioning, and development of marketing capabilities within the organization (Anderson, 1982; El-Ansary, 2006; Varadarajan, 2010; Wind & Robertson, 1983). In addition to managerial marketing thinking, the marketing strategy school of thought has adopted ideas from other schools, such as the functionalist school, institutional school, and organizational dynamics school to enrich itself. In effect, the marketing strategy school has become a subdiscipline of marketing wherein other new emergent schools of marketing thought–i.e., relationship marketing, services marketing, and international marketing–are considered special contextual conditions of marketing strategy. Furthermore, several new theoretical ideas developed within the marketing strategy school of thought could be viewed as potential for creating a general theory of marketing–such as market orientation, rule of three (R3), and the resource-advantage (R-A) theory. We will examine these in the next section.

Services marketing, which grew out of commodities school of marketing thinking, highlighted the unique aspects of services as intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable from consumption, and perishable (IHIP characteristics) (Bateson, 1979; Berry, 1980; Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012; Lovelock, 1983). Supported by DTC and online marketing, the service economy accelerated the process of disintermediation, thus fundamentally changing the theoretical premise of the institutional marketing school of thought. The explosion of research within services marketing was fueled by SERVQUAL, the scale to measure service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Subsequently, new thinking of service-dominant (S-D) logic emerged that emphasized the fundamental process of service provisioning by both goods and services, away from the principal focus on outputs (e.g., products) to processes (e.g., service provision, value creation). Thus, it was distinct from the earlier "services school" thinking represented by SERVQUAL and the IHIP characteristics, which focused on creating intangible units of output ("services"). Instead, the S-D logic suggested a shift in orientation from production to value (co)creation. In addition, it identified commonalities across several research streams and subdisciplines, such as relationship marketing, services marketing, and business-to-business marketing that emphasizing organizational processes with institutional rules and norms as a means for value creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Sheth & Uslay, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). From that perspective, the S-D logic has the potency to offer an integrated or a general theory of marketing. However, it is not fully developed yet.

Over the past three decades, relationship marketing (RM) witnessed spectacular growth as a marketing practice and discipline (Hunt et al., 2006; Sheth, 2017). A paradigm shift from the transactional and adversarial marketing approach to close-cooperative and collaborative relationships among marketing actors creates mutual value (Brodie et al., 1997; Harker & Egan, 2006; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 1997). RM's principles began to resonate with the broader marketing community in the 1990s and beyond due to a confluence of factors, including the rise of the service economy, network arrangements, and the adoption of digital technologies.

Today RM thinking is at the bedrock of new emergent approaches and customer-centric models, customer engagement, customer experience, customer valuation, and value co-creation processes. It overlapped services marketing and grew through transformative ideas relating to the institutional and managerial schools of marketing and organizational dynamics, social exchange, and consumer behavior schools of thought. Although relationship marketing considerably advanced through the application of transactional cost economics, inter-organizational theories, relational contracting perspective, and social-psychological theories of consumer behavior, its core concepts have been incorporated with the R-A theory by Hunt and Morgan (1995a, b), that we discuss in the next section of this article.

Amongst the prevailing traditional schools of marketing thought, the buyer behavior school of thought has seen the most growth. It is now called the consumer behavior (CB) school of thought. CB has become a subdiscipline of marketing. It has become more eclectic in theory and methods, with controlled experiments becoming more prevalent than surveys. It has shifted its perspective from understanding the psychology of choice-behavior to a more immersive understanding of the consumer's ecosystem in the context of real-world consumption through the conduct of odyssey research that resembles more of the anthropological studies involving community immersion. There is also a new movement of transformative consumer research (TCR) that focuses on consumer welfare and the quality of life effect of consumption Davis et al., 2016; Mick et al., 2012); plus, studies on consumption cultures (focused on social and cultural drivers, instead of economic and psychological drivers of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kozinets, 2001, 2002). In effect, the buyer behavior school is on the verge of becoming a stand-alone discipline, with a greater focus on behavioral sciences instead of marketing.

Although CB School has generated a vast number of publications, it has yet to develop a comprehensive theory of consumer behavior anchored on consumption (as opposed to buyers). Such a grand theory of consumer behavior would be helpful, mainly if it builds upon the ideas of mindful consumption (Sheth et al., 2011), to provide normative guidance for protecting consumers, the community, and the planet from over-consumption or harmful consumption and disposal of waste. At that level, it would overlap and integrate with the macromarketing school of thought.

Recently, macromarketing (how marketing impacts society and how society impacts marketing) has gained renewed interest both within and outside the marketing discipline. People are concerned about the environmental impact of our economic activities and the effects of automation, outsourcing of jobs, trade imbalances, recurring economic recessions, and the growing epidemic of non-infectious diseases (e.g., obesity, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, mental health). There is also a continuing debate whether marketing adds value or negatively impacts society's well-being. As such, macromarketing is taking center stage within the marketing discipline. Therefore, an integrative paradigm of marketing must be concerned about the role and effects of marketing for a better world (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021; Sheth et al., 2020; Uslay, 2019).

Finally, international marketing has emerged from being a contextual practice (Sheth, 1997; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2001) into a school of marketing thought, primarily due to the forces of globalization and the growth of emerging markets, as well as due to opportunities related to demographic diversity and rapid diffusion of digital technology around the world. Even though international marketing does not have an integrative theory, its market selection processes, market development, market mobilization, and market activation are core managerial marketing processes that could help conceptualize an integrated marketing theory. As Sheth (2020) points out, the current perspectives and practices in international marketing offer a very significant opportunity for rethinking in various terms of marketing theory (viz., differentiation advantage to aggregation advantage and resource improvisation); marketing strategy (e.g., from market orientation to market development, and conversion of non-users to users); marketing policy (e.g., from compliance to inclusive growth, and mindful consumption); and of marketing practice (from globalization to fusion with local culture, a national brand advantage, and pervasive innovation). Thus, we can envision international marketing continuing to morph into global marketing and become even more central to developing a general marketing theory.

In search of an integrative theory of marketing

Grand theories in marketing have been less prevalent since the early attempts by Alderson (1957, 1965), Bartels (1968a, 1968b), and Howard and Sheth (1969). However, there has been a renewed interest in theory development within the marketing discipline (Hunt, 2020a, b; Stewart & Zinkhan, 2006; Yadav, 2014; Zeithaml et al., 2020). Several scholars have aspired to develop a general theory of marketing, especially after the emergence of relationship marketing. However, significant breakthroughs have been few and far between. The four notable exceptions are (1) market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990), (2) the service-dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2017) (3) the Rule of Three theory by Sheth and Sisodia (2002), and (4) resource advantage (R-A) theory of competition (Hunt, 2000, 2010; Hunt & Arnett, 2006; Hunt & Morgan, 1995a, b;). We briefly look at the potential of these theoretical perspectives as a foundation for a general theory of marketing.

The concept of market orientation that emerged as a process of examining the consistency of a firm's actions and culture to the marketing concept for creating customer value and a learning organization (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Slater & Narver, 1995;), had a universal appeal. Hundreds of studies and local adaptations followed worldwide (Kirca et al., 2005). Market orientation is an integrative organizational mechanism for tracking customer needs, competitor strategies, and environmental factors that may cause market disequilibrium. Extant research suggests that a firm's performance is positively related to its market orientation and, in turn, a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Hunt & Morgan, 1995a, b; Jaworski & Kohli, 1996; Kirca et al., 2005; Narver & Slater, 1990; Siguaw et al., 1994). However, despite its exponential rise and wide acceptance as a construct, no one, including the authors, has attempted to develop a full-blown general theory of marketing based on market orientation. It remains a construct and a normative perspective for the organization.

The service-dominant logic (SDL) contends that marketing is a value creation process involving all marketing actors, including consumers. According to SDL, all providers are service providers, wherein service is the fundamental basis of exchange (Vargo, 2008). Furthermore, it defines service as the use of resources for the benefit of another party and considers the consequent value as idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning-laden. Hence, it contends that value is co-created with customers and assessed based on the value in context (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Therefore, the co-creation of value in the service ecosystem, connected by shared institutional arrangements, is key to understanding market dynamics in a service-dominant world (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Several conceptual papers and empirical studies have appeared relating to the service-dominant logic demonstrating its potential. Observing the impact of SDL in the fundamental shift in marketing scholarship in recent years, Bolton (2020) notes that a majority of scholars (some without knowing it) have adopted the theoretical tenets of SDL, with its expansive view of the aggregate marketing system. Even though Vargo and Lusch have never claimed a theory status of SDL, Hunt (2020a, b) has called it an exemplar of a valuable conceptual framework for furthering the development of indigenous marketing theory. However, despite its appeal and impact, SDL has remained a paradigm. Although it continues to evolve in its axioms, inductive realist approach, and fundamental premises (see Vargo & Lusch, 2016), it is yet to develop into a full-blown general theory of marketing.

The Rule of Three (R3) theory advanced by Sheth and Sisodia (2002) suggests competitive markets evolve in a highly predictable fashion governed by the "Rule of Three." It argues that an industry structure comprising three large generalists and numerous smaller specialists is "optimal" for firm stability and profitability in a competitive environment. The full-line generalists make money through high volume and low margins. The specialists make money through high margins and low volume. Contrary to economic theory norms, each market is partly an oligopoly and partly a monopolistic competition. They coexist and complement in the short run. The relationship between market share and profitability is non-linear in these structures, whereby small- and large-share firms can achieve high profitability, but mid-sized firms languish.

R3 theory has many implications for corporate, marketing, investment, and policy. It has also received empirical support with global evidence of the natural phenomena (Sheth et al., 2020; Uslay et al., 2010). Thus, R3 has the potential to become a general theory of marketing from a competition perspective. However, its biggest weakness is that it does not explain regulated monopolies or the lack of industry concentration in partnerships and owner-managed businesses. In the future, academic scholars may examine the moderating effect of regulation, ownership, changing demographics, and technology advances on the rule of three.

Compared to market orientation, service-dominant (S-D) logic, and the Rule of Three, the resource-advantage (R-A) theory proposed by Hunt and Morgan (1995a, b) is far advanced toward becoming a general theory of marketing. Although initially presented as a general theory of competition and not a theory of strategy or marketing, Hunt and Arnett (2006) subsequently argue that R-A theory extends Alderson's (1965) functionalist theory of market processes toward establishing a general theory of marketing. It draws upon, extends, and has numerous affinities with the "differential advantage theory"–a combination of views of Alderson's (1965) functionalist theory and Clark's (1961) theory of effective competition. It also draws upon Ricardo's (1821) idea of comparative advantage for nations favoring international trade. It argues that, like nations, firms have a comparative advantage in efficiently and effectively producing particular market offerings of value for specific market segments due to the heterogeneity of resources available to firms in the same industry.

The R-A theory construes that beyond the neoclassical view of resources as just land, labor, and capital, many other forms of resources (tangible and intangible), such as financial, physical, legal, human, organizational, informational, and relational, could be unique to a firm providing it positions of differential advantage in the marketplace. From that perspective, it accommodates both market orientation and service-dominant logic concepts while also considering know-how, relationships, and brand equity as assets. The R-A theory is interdisciplinary as it has been developed in the literature of several disciplines, including marketing, management, economics, ethics, and general business. It also draws upon numerous other theories and research traditions, including evolutionary economics, "Austrian" economics, industrial-organization economics, institutional economics, resource-based perspective, and transaction cost economics, among others (Hunt & Arnett, 2006). Indeed, Hunt (2010) superbly summarizes how other theories and perspectives are incorporated and related to parts of R-A theory (see, for example, Hunt, 2010, pp. 394–395). As mentioned earlier, the R-A theory also incorporates the core ideas from relationship marketing thinking. Hence, we will not separately consider relationship marketing theory as an integrative theory for the marketing discipline.

In essence, the R-A theory provides an integrative framework for competitive strategy and strategic marketing. However, despite its comprehensiveness and compelling arguments, the R-A theory is still not widely studied and utilized for guiding the marketing discipline and its educational programs. Many young scholars are unaware of its existence—partly due to the discipline's over-emphasis on marketing analytics and little emphasis on studying marketing theory and its evolution in their Ph.D. coursework.

A framework for an integrative theory of marketing

While there is great promise for a general theory of marketing to emerge based on the constructs, paradigm, and theories discussed above, there is still a need for a conceptual framework (and subsequent integrative theory) to tie in the various subdisciplines of marketing into an integrative whole. As a business function and academic discipline and a legitimate institution in society, marketing's fundamental role, purpose, premise, and mechanisms should be understood at the broadest level by managers, the consuming public, and policymakers. Theory, research, and scholarly dialog within the discipline must guide management and public policy decision-making to address problems that require the application of marketing processes (Webster & Lusch, 2013). It should elevate marketing thinking to the level of continuously rethinking its implicit models with fundamental changes in the economy, society, and politics to remain relevant and societally useful. An integrative framework would encourage both mid-range and general theories of marketing to emerge, providing descriptive and predictive insights. These could form the building blocks for theory development, including a nomological structure for linking the various concepts, kernel theories, mid-range theories, and grand theories already developed (and forthcoming) in marketing and its subdisciplines.

To this end, we submit a framework (see Fig. 1) for building an integrative theory in marketing. At the outset, we would like to mention that the objective and scope of this paper is not to offer a theory, or a set of theoretical propositions associated with this general framework. Instead, the aim is to articulate an overall model for the study of marketing in the context of the forces that shape its decisions and determines its outcomes. It is commonly understood that a theory includes consistent propositions relevant to the factual world with some empirically testable lawlike generalizations (Alderson, 1957; Rudner, 1966). However, as Vargo and Koskela-Huotari (2020, p. 2) point out that essentially "(t)heory represents an integrated understanding of the phenomena of interest.… It has to do with how we stitch together concepts into cohesive narratives and scrutinize their implications." Therefore, the theoretical debate and integration across subdisciplines of marketing can be greatly facilitated if different aspects of the phenomenology of marketing are defined, their interrelationships described, and the implications for its theory and praxis are outlined. An overarching framework should allow us to do this and to compare existing theories and approaches, spot and specify empty slots and lacunae, address the diversity of the issues studied in various subdisciplines of marketing, and eventually develop an integrated perspective and a general theory of marketing.

Thus, as in Fig. 1, our proposed framework consists of two dimensions related to the notion of forces impacting marketing decisions and their outcomes. One dimension involves understanding the exogenous forces to which marketing must continuously adjust (and occasionally alter). It represents the externalities and uncontrollables that impact the marketing function. The second dimension relates to the endogenous activities and processes by which marketing creates value for customers, businesses, and society. It is the second dimension on which the marketing function is primarily geared to act, as they are controllable.

Exogenous forces

In our suggested framework for developing an integrative theory of marketing, the exogenous variables are contextual forces that constantly impact the marketplace behavior, such as the economy, changing demographics (socio-cultural environment), globalization, public policy, technology, and evolving competition. They have both magnitude and direction and hence are like vectors. These vectors act as momentum generating or countervailing forces on markets and marketing, causing evolutionary changes (or sometimes revolutionary changes, depending upon the level of intervention made by other market actors) in structure and marketing processes. The role of marketing processes is to regularly sense, prepare, and adjust to these external forces to bring about desired benefits to its stakeholders. However, from a strategic perspective, marketing also attempts to shape these exogenous conditions (called market-shaping or market driving), and thus its consequent effect, for a favorable position for achieving desired goals (Carrillat et al., 2004; Jaworski et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2000; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). In that sense, marketing seeks a net impact of the "resultant force"

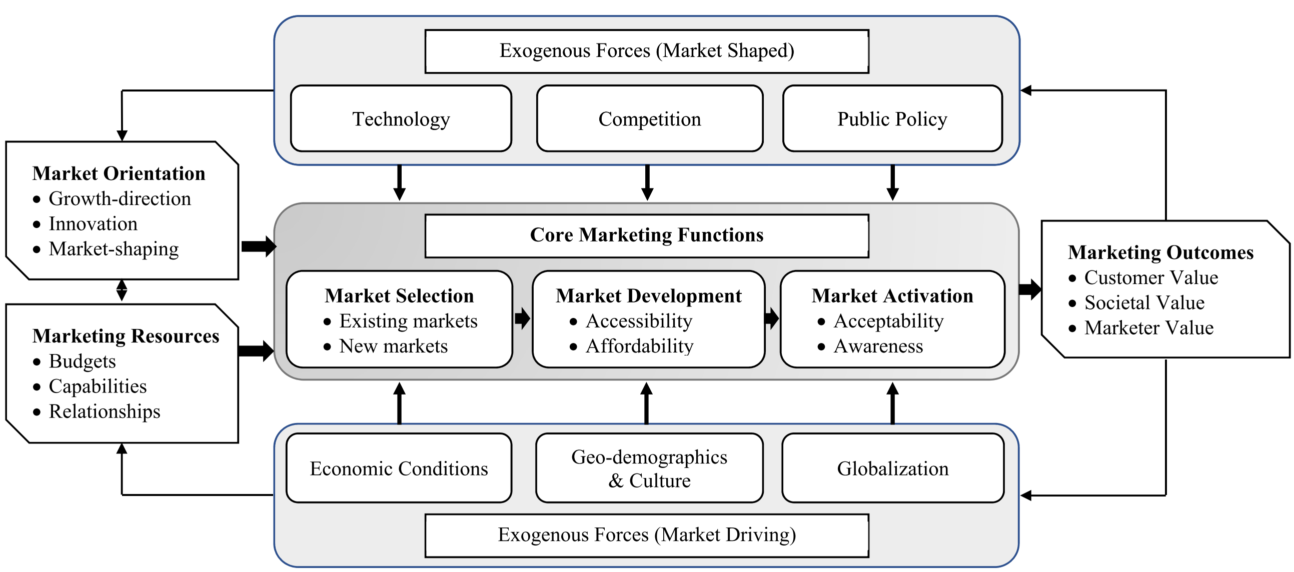

Fig. 1 A general framework of integrative marketing

between the exogenous contextual forces and the endogenous marketing force they deploy, comprising an integrated set of resources and actions to achieve outcomes and results. The exogenous forces shape market needs (broadly defined to include customer needs, wants, and aspirations), and the endogenous forces create value outcomes by fulfilling some of those market needs.

From a market-shaping perspective, the actions of various market players, both individually and collectively, have a bearing on how the exogenous factors of technology, competition, and public policy evolve over time. Hence, marketing strategies are also consciously directed to create outcomes that would shape the market's technological preferences, competitive situation, and public policy in favor of the focal organization.

Although strategic marketing decisions are influenced by the changing context of all exogenous variables, some forces, such as the economy, geo-demographics, and globalization, act more unidirectionally to drive markets. They result from socio-political-economic factors prevailing within a global, regional, or local context of a market. Thus, they become market drivers to which marketing must adjust instead of attempt to shape, at least in the short-term. Thus, in Fig. 1, we depict the exogenous variables as two groups. One group represents the exogenous variables that are more directly impacted or shaped by marketing (technology, competition, and public policy). The other exogenous variables are shaped by socio-political-economic conditions and act as market drivers (economy, geo-demographics, and globalization).

Value creation role of marketing

Essentially, marketing is what marketers can do to create value in the market. They can study and anticipate market (customer) needs, deploy resources, and employ processes to achieve desired outcomes. In the classic stimulus-organism-response (S–O-R) sense, the market is the "black-box," and marketing is the stimulus provided to generate desired responses to realize outcomes. It uses internal and external resources (broadly defined to include time, talent, and treasures–such as money, expertise, relationships, and brands) to perform the core marketing functions of market selection, market development, and market activation that act as stimuli to generate market responses. In other words, marketing continuously anticipates market needs and accordingly positions the organization to achieve desired responses and outcomes through its core marketing functions.

The value outcomes are not limited to financial results but also include the creation of future assets (and resources), such as brand and customer equity, relational arrangements, capabilities and expertise, social capital, and positive environmental impact. These value outcomes are not only for the focal organization but also for customers, partners, market actors, employees, communities, and society. It is developed through integrated marketing processes and activities, including co-creation activities with partners, such as customers, consociates, and the government. Ultimately, for the focal organization, these outcomes become future marketing resources.

Marketing capabilities and resources

Developing and utilizing unique marketing capabilities and resources to deal with the exogenous vectors, and undertake marketing actions to affect requisite results, is a force multiplier for the focal organization. Market orientation is a form of capability that helps sense market changes and prepare for the needed response to exogenous factors. They reflect the strategic intent of the organization in terms of its growth direction (whether to achieve growth through products, markets, or acquisitions); its innovation plank (moderate or radical innovation); and its market goals (be market-driven or shape markets). Thus, market orientation helps position the firm with the requisite information and capabilities to harness its resources and apply marketing forces to produce desired outcomes.

On the other hand, marketing resources (including budgets, brands, capabilities, and relationships) are critical variables deployed by marketing to create the marketing force. According to R-A theory, these resources provide a competitive advantage for developing offerings for select markets (Hunt, 2010). Thus, the potency and magnitude of these resources partially determine the extent of the marketing force that could be generated. At the same time, marketing capabilities help undertake the marketing functions more effectively and efficiently. In essence, marketing capabilities, resources, strategic relationships, and market orientation are all catalysts connecting the exogenous forces with the endogenous marketing functions and activities to achieve superior outcomes. The resources by themselves do not produce the requisite energy to result in favorable outcomes. Instead, it is how the resources are deployed through the core marketing functions that determine the direction and magnitude of the marketing force that will stimulate the innate and relative market forces (relative to competitive marketing activities) in favor of desired market response and outcomes.

Core marketing functions

The core marketing process and functions involve the three stages of market selection, market development, and market activation.

1. *Market selection* is the choice decision about who to serve, which market to enter, and when to exit specific

markets. Whether the marketer is a private, public, for-profit, or non-profit organization, the proper market selection is vital irrespective of whether they have business or social objectives. Not everybody can always succeed in all markets at all times. Hence selecting appropriate markets becomes essential. The exogenous factors play a crucial role in market selection because the dynamic changes in the marketplace shape opportunities and challenges. Whether demographics, technology, economics, or public policy, exogenous variables can affect market needs and competitive structures. Each exogenous variable helps in determining both entry and exit decisions for the marketers as it produces opportunities and challenges to which marketers must respond. Hence, the R3 theory can be a valuable guide to market selection strategies. It clearly articulates and explains how each of the exogenous factors shapes markets and enables converting wants into needs and aspirations.

The firm's strategic intent, market opportunities, and resource advantage become critical determinants of market selection. It can be argued that market selection should be based on what an organization wants to be in terms of who to serve (strategic intent) and whether it wants to be a full-line generalist or a niche specialist (positioning). Both R-A theory and the theory of differential advantage explain how an organization can move from a focus on cost efficiency to price skimming possibilities by creating unique features, benefits, brands, and distribution channels to differentiate from the competition. Similarly, deciding to be a full-line generalist results in the firm becoming channel-agnostic, while niche players often need to develop vertical integration. Thus, market selection and firm positioning have a bearing on all consequent marketing strategies and processes.

2. *Market development* is the process of developing value for all key market players, including potential users, buyers, and payers of a particular product or service. The value creation process involves innovation, quality improvement, and functional superiority (performance value); differentiation, uniqueness, and customer-centricity (positioning value); fair price based on target costing, lean operations, and creative financing options (price value); and user-friendly customization, personalization, and collaborative engagement (personalization value). In addition, market development implies that marketers actively configure and communicate value propositions to various customer groups as affordable (both economic and psychological affordability) for the relevant customer groups (Prahalad, 2004). It is essential to extend the reach in availability and convenience, frictionless accessibility to the offered value at locations and times pertinent per customer needs. It also involves establishing and nurturing partnerships and market relationships that help in value creation (through innovation) and value distribution processes. Essentially, market development is the process of creating at least two of the 4A's of marketing value creation (Accessibility and Affordability) highlighted by Sheth and Sisodia (2012).

Moreover, market development also implies processes for shaping markets by changing the structure or composition of a market and behaviors of its players (Jaworski et al., 2000). It involves radical innovation and proactive customer orientation that anticipate and address customers' latent and future needs to deliver a leap in customer value through unique business models (Blocker et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2000). It goes beyond deployment of resources; it is a process of value creation that combines resources in a novel way that facilitates and reconfigures the resource mobilization process to match with customer value creation opportunities (Carrillat et al., 2004; Flaig et al., 2021; Nenonen et al., 2019). As the S-D logic argues, value is co-created by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary, coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

3. *Market activation* is the function of bringing the value proposition into active consciousness of consideration by the relevant customer groups and triggers action. It involves building awareness and persuasion to achieve the acceptability of the idea and the offerings. Awareness building requires various measures (such as advertising, content marketing, word-of-mouth communication, trade fairs, etc.) that help develop requisite product knowledge and brand awareness among the target customer groups. It aims to create the idea and product/service acceptability. Both functional and psychological acceptability must be achieved among customers for them to act favorably. For functional acceptability, it may at times require "functional fusion" (global with local) and "psychological fusion" (with consumption culture). Therefore, activation involves a set of integrated actions that ultimately create and convey value to the customer concerning all the 4As and 4Ps of marketing (Sheth & Sisodia, 2012).

Market activation also involves functions, institutions, and infrastructure for facilitating action by customers. It includes the process of creating sales organizations, e-commerce sites and mobile apps, ATMs or vending machines, and channel partners for sales, delivery, customer service, fulfillment, logistics, and undertaking other supply chain functions. In addition, creating proper assortments, experience designs, price bundles, sales promotion programs, product placements, events, and social media experience sharing are vital processes of market activation. They all act in an integrative manner to ultimately mobilize and energize the market in desired directions.

Marketing outcomes are resultant effects of the marketing vector (force involving both magnitude and direction) applied in the context of exogenous vectors (the direction and magnitude of contextual forces operating in the marketplace). There are three aspects of the marketing outcomes that matter—the value it creates for customers, the value produced for society, and the value derived by the marketer. The customer value is the satisfaction and feeling of an improved status (economic and non-economic) that they may obtain due to participation in the marketing activity. The marketer's value comes from enhanced financial results, competitive market position, and the extent to which they are endeared and endorsed by the select market groups. Finally, societal value is in terms of the well-being of the society and its long-term sustainability in terms of the economic, social, and governance (ESG) parameters. The ESG framework considers the usual financial considerations of profitability and growth while emphasizing its more significant societal role. Thus, marketing for a better world is a crucial goal for marketing to achieve.

The proposed framework does not explicitly mention consumer behavior or marketing science activities but is implicitly embedded within every stage of the marketing activity. For exogenous vector analysis and modeling and endogenous marketing activity planning, consumer behavior knowledge and marketing research modeling become implicit. Therefore, on that count, this is an integrative framework that can help build a general theory of marketing. It establishes a clear role and application of other theories and paradigms advanced recently, including market orientation, S-D logic, R-A theory, and R3. It also presents opportunities to develop new theories relating to the impact of exogenous forces on market structuring, selection, market development, market activation, and their effect on marketing results. Reversely, it offers opportunities to theorize how a set of interactive and integrated marketing activities change the market's motion in terms of its energy, momentum, and velocity. We explain this theoretical opportunity in the next section.

Theoretical conceptualization of integrative marketing force

Markets are in a steady motion, and a marketing force is needed to alter its course. A marketing force comprises a particular set of integrated and interactive activities deployed to energize markets and change their motion and momentum to achieve desired results. As in Newtonian physics, marketing force can have both magnitude and direction, making it a vector quantity. It can produce "thrust" by accelerating the current market motion if it is in its desired direction; or it can cause "drag" by decreasing the velocity of the market motion (as in de-marketing); or it can produce "torque" by changing the rotational speed of market motions (counter-marketing). Thus, intuitively, marketing can be described as a force that pulls or pushes the market and market actors to act in a specific direction.

The marketing force attempts to change the relative velocity of market motion by overcoming friction due to innate market inertia (as in new market development) or countervailing forces of exogenous variables, such as economic conditions, consumer culture, geo-demographics, globalization, technological advances, government policies, or competitive activities. However, at times only a minimal marketing force can provide the thrust, producing substantial results due to the favorable market forces. For example, when competitive imitation occurs in the context of a product's life cycle, it often leads to growth "take-off" due to the aggregate effect of the competitor marketing forces acting in the same direction.

Markets, like other open systems, achieve their state of momentum (constant velocity or constant acceleration) unless acted upon by an "external net force" or "resultant force" (in this case, the net effect of both the exogenous vector and the marketing vector). Although markets do not have an "absolute rest frame," there are times when dynamic equilibrium occurs in constant velocity motion with kinetic friction. In such a situation, although marketing force may have been applied in the direction of the movement, the kinetic friction force exactly opposes the applied force. Thus, it explains innovation resistance as to why masses resist change. According to Ram and Sheth (1989), both 'risk perception' and 'state of happiness' are factors that lead to the formation of habit and become the opposing forces of change. This results in zero net force (resultant force), and since the market started with a non-zero velocity, it continues to move with a non-zero rate. This phenomenon can be understood in the context of how things in space (or solar systems) appear to move at relatively zero speed and seem stationary despite their continuous movement. In the same way, although markets may be in constant motion, at times, it would appear to be locked in a time warp with no evolutionary changes in its form, structure, or processes because marketers (or market administrators) have not intervened substantially to impact the overall market process and energy.

Thus, three forces get applied on the market: (a) the exogenous force of the macro environment; (b) the marketing force being applied to energize the markets; (c) the innate/natural force within the market that is driving prevailing interactions and activities within and between market actors. The innate force within the market can be considered as a non-fundamental force as it's often the consequence of the two external fundamental forces of the environment and the marketing activities. The innate market force could be the "normal force" (due to attraction or repulsive forces between sub-parts of the market); the "tension force" (due to conservation of mechanical energy of the market operations and the friction); the "elastic force" (the tendency to return to its steady state of operations); or the "buoyant force" (caused within extended market structures due to pressure gradients and resistance). The task of marketing is to leverage these forces and utilize them for energizing markets to seek desired outcomes. For example, old products that people loved, such as a pinball machine or vinyl music records, can be remarketed as a hobby for nostalgia or as a counterculture cyclical fashion.

While marketing works to balance against the exogenous forces and the natural market forces, it must create greater than net-zero effects to change the market momentum (motion and velocity). Our proposed theoretical framework depicts the structural realism of the market and suggests how marketing forces can work to change market motions, steering it into the requisite direction to achieve desired outcomes. The marketing force (vector) comprises the magnitude and direction of the marketing resources (assets and capabilities) deployed and the specific focus of the marketing efforts (in terms of the core marketing functions). The method of application of this force is the fundamental premise of our theoretical framework. In a more developed theory, one could explain how marketing as an energizing force uses the inherent potential energy of the market resources and charges the market elements creating acceleration and conversion into kinetic energy. The marketing capabilities and orientation act as catalyst forces in this conversion process. Thus, it can be assumed that when marketing forces are aligned across multiple actors, particularly between the buy and sell sides, it would create resonance, magnifying and amplifying the market effect. However, entropy should also be expected, wherein the system may degenerate into chaos unless integrated marketing actions are regularly undertaken to fuel the momentum.

Although, as stated earlier, our purpose in this paper is not to offer a theory or a set of propositions, based on our framework, we make the following declarative statements that would help future theory development:

1. Marketing's primary purpose is to create value for customers, society, and the marketer.
2. Marketing is a force applied to energize markets, altering their motion and momentum to produce desired value outcomes.
3. Markets are subject to three forces–the innate (or natural) market force prevailing in the market, the exogenous force of changing macro-environment, and the marketing force applied to energize the markets. Marketing outcomes are a result of the net effect of these three forces.
4. The exogenous forces of the macro-environment can be supportive or act as a countervailing force to the marketing effort. Supporting exogenous forces propel (or accelerate) the market movement towards achieving desired marketing outcomes through multiplicative effect. In contrast, countervailing exogenous forces cause drag and deceleration in the market momentum impacting marketing outcome achievement.
5. At any given time, the market has its innate force (natural force due to prevailing attraction or repulsion among market players). Thus, the exogenous and applied marketing forces produce a net effect on the innate market force altering its motion and momentum.
6. While marketing considerations are influenced by the external forces, it in turn also influences and shapes the external forces through direct and indirect effects.
7. The marketing force impinges upon the innate market force by changing relationships and interactions to create market attraction to its side and repulsion to its competitors.
8. The magnitude of the marketing force depends on the extent of marketing resources deployed to energize a particular market. However, its effect depends upon the direction of the applied marketing force vis-a-vis the direction and magnitude of the exogenous forces.
9. Market orientation and capabilities of the firm act as catalyst forces to help convert the potential energy of marketing resources into kinetic energy of the marketing force.
10. Market energy is a function of the size of the market (its mass) and the speed by which it acts in a chosen direction (speed or velocity).
11. A marketing force is created when resources are applied to the core marketing functions of market selection, market development, and market activation.
12. Market selection is the process of determining where to apply the marketing force. It specifies the overall market mass to be energized–the greater the market mass and inertia, the higher the requisite marketing force to achieve desired outcomes.
13. Market development is the process of "ionization" that charges the potential energy of the market to create the necessary movement/momentum in the market (kinetic energy). Thus, the more accessibility (convenience and availability) and affordability (economic and psychological affordability) created by the market development efforts, the greater the favorable market momentum and value outcomes.
14. Market activation is the process of aligning marketing forces to produce a synchronous effect that amplifies and magnifies the forces to create "resonance" and acceleration of market action towards the desired outcome. Thus, the higher the awareness created (both product and brand awareness), the greater the acceptability achieved (functional and psychological acceptability) through market activation, the more favorable the outcomes.
15. Marketing outcomes are value created for the customer, society, and the marketer. Unless the marketing forces create customer and societal value, it will not be sustainable. The marketing value outcomes also reshape future markets and the nature of exogenous forces.

Conclusions

The marketing discipline has progressed tremendously over the past few decades. New schools of marketing thought have emerged, making a few traditional marketing schools' thought redundant or developing fresh new perspectives. Only two schools of marketing thought from the past are still surviving and thriving—the buyer behavior (relabeled as consumer behavior) and the macromarketing schools of thought (Layton, 2007). All other traditional schools of thought have become part of history books or metamorphized into the four new emergent schools of marketing thought—marketing strategy school, services marketing school, relationship marketing school, and the international marketing school of thought. The transformation (or emergence of newer schools) is caused by four major contextual forces: changing demographics, the rise of the digital economy, globalization, and the growing importance of emerging markets in the overall context of marketing practice.

The surviving and emergent marketing schools have added considerably to scholarly research and knowledge for the future. At least four new theories and paradigms have prospects for a future general theory of marketing. However, despite its promises, we are yet to see a general theory of marketing that would integrate its various perspectives and tie the subdisciplines together.

This paper develops a broad theoretical framework that incorporates various subdisciplines of marketing into a single integrated marketing model. It integrates the most dominant marketing thinking (i.e., market orientation, R-A theory, and service-dominant logic) into a holistic framework that covers the broad marketing landscape and offers direction for future research in the field. Although no formal theory is presented here, the framework establishes the prospect for developing an integrative theory of marketing in the future. The theoretical conceptualization of functional and integrative marketing forces and the declarative statements relating to how marketing forces operate in creating market value would be helpful in the development of an integrative general theory of marketing.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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