



Resurrecting marketing: Focus on the phenomena!

Suvi Nenonen¹

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Abstract

This commentary provides three complementary perspectives to the Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) article “The marketing discipline’s troubled trajectory: The manifesto conversation, candidates for central focus, and prognosis for renewal.” First, the evolution of marketing as an academic discipline should be assessed also in relation to other fields. Second, it is time for an honest stocktake of the wider impact of marketing to societies and the biosphere. Third, an enduring and fruitful sense of community for marketing scholars could be found from marketing phenomena instead of the always contested theoretical perspectives.

As a marketing scholar, I am a child of the troubled and fragmented Era IV. When I started my PhD journey in 2006, a prevalent discussion in many—if not all—disciplinary courses related to how academic marketing had lost its way, become obsolete, been ignored by other academic disciplines, and been forgotten from the boardroom discussions.

Since then, various analyses and cures have been proposed. For some of the recent works, please see for example Hunt (2020a, 2020b); Key et al. (2020); Moorman et al. (2019); Möller and Halinen (2022); Steenkamp (2018); Vargo (2020); Voola et al. (2022); Yadav (2020). Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) continue this conversation, mapping the evolution of marketing, concluding that “Era IV’s (1) fragmentation, loss of central focus, and loss of community, (2) problems with its largest sub-field of study, (3) reliance on borrowed concepts, frameworks, and theories, and (4) doctoral programs’ focus on nonmarketing topics have resulted in significant, potentially existential, problems for the marketing discipline.” As antidotes for these ailments, they encourage creating comprehensive theoretical frameworks and integrative frameworks for marketing knowledge, ensuring stakeholder relevance, as well as developing

theories for marketing phenomena. Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) conclude by summarizing three theoretical frameworks that could serve as focal points for the renewal and re-institutionalization of marketing: service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), general framework of integrative marketing (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2021), and resource-advantage theory (Hunt, 2013).

In this commentary, I would like to offer three complementary perspectives to the viewpoints presented by Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue): two linked to the analysis of the current situation and one related to the proposed solution.

Assessing the evolution of marketing in the context of other academic disciplines

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) elucidate how the birth of marketing as an academic discipline can be, at least in part, attributed to economics. Efficiently organized industrial production was generating such vast quantities of products that it required an equally efficiently organized system of distribution—but the economics as a discipline did not find this topic as an interesting one.

However, after this, Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) remain silent about the interactions between marketing and other academic fields, except when discussing the tendency of marketing scholars to borrow concepts, theories, and frameworks from other disciplines.

✉ Suvi Nenonen
suvi.nenonen@hhs.se

¹ Department of Marketing & Strategy, Stockholm School of Economics, P.O. Box 6501, SE-11383 Stockholm, Sweden

I posit that gaining an inclusive assessment of where we stand as an academic discipline, we must also relate ourselves to other fields. For example, and as explained by Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue), the early marketing placed a great emphasis on distribution—but since then logistics and supply chain management have branched out and created distinct academic identities. Should we mourn for this loss, or are both marketing and supply chain management better off as distinct, but related fields? Furthermore, other disciplines have entered business schools since Era II (1950–1980) when marketing was “re-institutionalized as a professional/managerial discipline.” In my mind, two are particularly relevant to the evolution of marketing: strategic management and entrepreneurship. The *Strategic Management Journal* was established in 1980 and the Strategic Management Society was founded shortly afterwards, in 1981. In entrepreneurship, key dates include 1974 (foundation of entrepreneurship interest group in the Academy of Management, nowadays ENT division) and 1976 (establishment of *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* journal).

If economics was ignoring a societally important question in the early 20th century, giving rise to marketing, then perhaps we should ask ourselves which important questions related to value creation were we ignoring during our golden years that provided the platform for strategic management and entrepreneurship? What are the big questions that are being overlooked today? And perhaps even more importantly: do we, as marketers, have to “own” research questions and topics—or could our unique value come from our ability to orchestrate cross-disciplinary research teams, able to tackle the truly meaningful research questions? If marketing were to position itself as such a linchpin, our tendency to borrow concepts, theories, and frameworks from other fields might, in fact, be a major silver lining.

Assessing the evolution of marketing against our wider impact

Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) call for “returning to the roots of macromarketing as a domain in which marketing impacts society.” I suspect an increasing number of marketing scholars find themselves nodding when reading such calls to action. After all, it would be heretic—now in the 2020s—to be advocating for research or business practices that advance the deterioration of the biosphere or consumer welfare, or increase the levels of social polarization, injustice, and even outright unrest.

But wait. Has not marketing been actively contributing to these negative outcomes, throughout the discipline’s golden years, during its troubled era, and at very present? Did not marketing promote excessive consumption,

disproportionately focus on shareholder value, and undermine the social cohesion? Even though it is not pleasant to acknowledge, we marketers are not impartial. To the contrary, we are at least partially to blame. Against such backdrop, it would not be utterly far-fetched to claim that marketing’s marginalization serves a greater good.

It is convenient to not think about these matters—and I am as guilty as anyone in this respect. However, as illustrated by Prof. Daniel Nyberg, we no longer have the privilege of assuming that we are neutral creators and disseminators of knowledge: “While perhaps amoral, current marketing scholarship and teaching are not neutral or unbiased. There is nothing neutral with supporting business-as-usual—the expansion of consumer capitalism—considering the ever-increasing greenhouse gas emissions with current destructive impacts on communities and habitats. There is no objective position or sideline on a burning planet. Facing the threats of climate change, whether we like it or not, we, as scholars, are all agents of change.” (quoted in Voola et al., 2022, p. 100).

Without undermining the invaluable and ground-breaking work done by numerous marketing scholars on sustainability marketing, social marketing, better marketing for a better world, transformative service research, sustainable consumption, responsible consumption, sustainable business models, and circular economy—just to mention a few research strands—a comprehensive analysis of marketing as an academic discipline should include an explicit and honest account of the impact we have had to society and to the Earth.

Of course, marketing is not the only disciple that needs to take a good look into the mirror—none of the subjects taught in business schools can escape this—but the ongoing vibrant discussion about the challenges in marketing may ironically give us a head start.

Finding the focus from marketing phenomena instead of theories?

I wholeheartedly support Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) in their call for a stronger sense of community for marketing as an academic discipline. I also appreciate why they advocate for indigenous theory development and establishing unifying theoretical frameworks. Having said that, I am not entirely convinced that we can find a lasting sense of community from any theory, no matter how brilliant, comprehensive, or indigenous to marketing. After all, are not we as social scientists trained and hardwired to find faults in existing explanations, to prove theories wrong?

Thus, perhaps we can find a more enduring and fruitful sense of community by truly embracing the marketing

phenomena. Hunt et al. (2022, in this issue) mention that our “focus should be renewed on developing organic/indigenous marketing theories for explaining and predicting *marketing phenomena*” (emphasis added)—but they leave the concept of ‘marketing phenomena’ undefined. They are not alone in this; also other accounts of marketing’s woes have highlighted the importance of marketing phenomena without defining them (cf., Key et al., 2020; Varadarajan, 2020).

To me, marketing phenomena are externally oriented (rather than internally oriented) and they relate to value creation to multiple stakeholders (rather than value capture to the focal firm alone). Such marketing phenomena can be investigated through multiple theoretical perspectives—both theories that are indigenous to marketing as well as the ones we have borrowed from other disciplines—but a phenomena-driven reference point allows proponents of different theoretical perspectives to co-exist and even cross-pollinate. Marketing phenomena are also more understandable to practitioners than our theories that are oftentimes codified using a precise but impenetrable language. Thus, communities built around marketing phenomena are more likely to foster effortless interaction across the academia-practice divide. Finally, phenomena-focused research approach might be particularly useful in today’s data-rich environment (Golder et al., 2022).

Concluding remarks

Marketing may still be in the process of finding its way out from the troubled and fragmented Era IV. Perhaps the shift to the Era V has already occurred; change of an era is notoriously hard for contemporaries to pinpoint. I hope that the future generations of marketing scholars conclude that the Era V truly emerged when marketing made its peace with the past and embraced the big questions of the 21st century with gusto and in collaboration with other disciplines. By doing meaningful research, we will be recognized as meaningful.

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