

Clearing the paradigmatic fog — how to move forward in business marketing research

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ABSTRACT

Although research in business-to-business (B2B) marketing has significantly increased, critical voices questioning the managerial relevance and theoretical innovativeness of the discipline abound. To find reasons for the alleged stagnation and forward the discipline, obtaining a better understanding of its current knowledge bases is essential. We aim to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the B2B research domain by analyzing its major research communities and their paradigmatic ways of producing knowledge. The key premise is that the North American mainstream tradition (NAM) and the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) group-driven research approach form the dominant research cultures of B2B marketing. Paradigmatic profiling is used as a method of analysis for making the underlying assumptions and intellectual goals of the two communities transparent, enabling a rational assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. By contrasting the two paradigms, we highlight the fragmented knowledge base, identify neglected issues and unanswered questions, and suggest how to advance theory construction in the field. By analyzing the implicit assumptions and silent drivers of the NAM and IMP research communities, the study adds to our understanding of why we conduct this kind of research, how we can make better informed decisions concerning our studies, and how we might break free from the invisible paradigmatic cages to advance our discipline.

1. Introduction

“Oh no, another exploratory single case study reinventing the wheel.”

“Oh no, another SEM modeling exercise with ridiculously simple measurements of complex issues” (remarks overheard at the AMA, ISBM, and IMP conferences).

Have you ever deeply considered why you are conducting the kind of research you generally do, the questions you examine, and the methods you use? It seems that our scholarly behaviors are deeply rooted—whether we are aware of it—in the beliefs and values of the research communities we have socialized in (Mizruhi & Fein, 1999; Möller, Pels, & Saren, 2009; Nicholson, Brennan, & Midgley, 2014; Ojansivu, Medlin, Andersen, & Kim, 2022). If you are a business marketing researcher like us, you are highly likely to follow either the North American mainstream tradition (NAM) or the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) group-driven research approach characterized in the starting quotes above. This community following is greatly disregarded in everyday

practice, so what matters?

1.1. Focus of the paper

In this study, we will show how the existence of the two mature research communities significantly influences how we, as individual scholars, delineate our field and conduct research and what kind of knowledge and theory we as collectives produce in business marketing. This is vital, as we see that the NAM and IMP research leave significant research issues uncovered and do not meet the current needs of strategic management or societal development (Key, Clark, Ferrell, Stewart, & Pitt, 2020; Möller, Nenonen, & Storbacka, 2020).

Significant differences exist between the research goals and world-views of the NAM and IMP research. Briefly, the NAM tradition is driven by a science ethos; it seeks law-like explanations and is overwhelmingly restricted to the use of quantitative analysis. The IMP group-driven research, guided primarily by social constructivism, seeks rich description and understanding and underlines the uniqueness of business contexts that it examines with qualitative methods, especially case studies

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(Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Easton, 2010; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010; Möller, 2013; Pels, Möller, & Saren, 2009).

These two research communities have generated a remarkable amount of theories and knowledge over the last 50 years, covering various business marketing issues from traditional market segmentation to key customer management and strategic business networks (Backhaus, Lügger, & Koch, 2011; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009; Reid & Plank, 2000). However, due to their deep-rooted distinctive views of how research should be conducted, we claim that these traditions insert mental and methodological blinders for business-to-business (B2B) researchers, severely limiting their ability to address strategically and societally significant research issues. Therefore, we join the recent criticism concerning the stagnancy of the marketing discipline (for excellent summaries, see Ferrer, 2020; Key et al., 2020; Möller et al., 2020). The discipline cannot offer adequate research knowledge on the changing business environment and marketing modes that are rapidly transforming due to continuing digitalization, globalization, and the demands for sustainable development.

In this study, we aim to analyze the restricting character of the current NAM and IMP research communities and to show why these dominant paradigms are simply running out of steam. Also, we suggest how we can break free from the cultural hegemony they embrace. In the advancement of business marketing research, considering the power of paradigms is vital.

1.2. Premises of our discussion

Our arguments are based on a few premises that we want to make transparent immediately. First, we claim the possibility of constructing valid simplifications of the NAM and IMP-centered research, enabling their meaningful analysis and comparison. Both the NAM and the IMP research cover an extensive research domain, and each contains various theoretical approaches and research streams or “tribes” (Andersen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2020; Backhaus et al., 2011; Möller, 2013; Möller & Halinen, 2017; Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, & Johnston, 2013b). To analyze them, we will use a high abstraction level and examine them from a paradigmatic perspective, utilizing meta-theoretical tools (Arndt, 1985; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Midgley, Nicholson, & Brennan, 2017; Möller et al., 2009; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). Notably, what we call in simple terms the NAM research is not only confined to North America but also extends across all continents. Despite its international reach, we choose to label it this way since its key intellectual ideas and main contributors originate from the United States. We see that NAM is a somewhat clumsy term but did not find an available alternative covering the various research streams that we consider belonging to the NAM.

Second, drawing on the paradigm notion by Kuhn (1996) and Morgan (1980), and the elaborations thereof, for instance, by Anderson (1983, 1986), Arndt (1985), and Hunt (1991) in the discipline of marketing, we claim that the NAM and the IMP can be regarded as paradigms of business marketing research. Based on the most recent bibliographic analyses, their ontological groundings are so different that a natural dialogue and travel of ideas between the communities have been hindered (Aramo-Immonen et al., 2020). Both approaches have evolved into relatively self-sufficient research communities with their distinctive intellectual goals, worldviews, and methodological orientations (Cova, Ford, & Salle, 2009; Cova, Pardo, Salle, & Spencer, 2015; Möller, 2013; Möller & Halinen, 2018). They have reached a mature and institutionalized state—both are over 35 years old and seemingly performing what Kuhn (1996) described as paradigmatic normal science: a disproportionate study of established questions that provide primarily confirmatory results or, at best, incremental improvements to the existing knowledge base.

Third, we presume the NAM and the IMP communities dominate in business marketing; together, they cover the majority of extant research (Backhaus et al., 2011; Dant & Lapuka, 2008; Mummalaneni & Lichtenenthal, 2015). The Service-Dominant Logic has recently challenged B2B

research, suggesting new ideas of the generic actor, value co-creation, and ecosystems, but it can hardly be regarded as an established paradigm (Brodie, Löbner, & Fehrer, 2019; Ford, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2011), not to speak of a dominant B2B marketing paradigm.

1.3. Goals of the study

Our principal objective is to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the business marketing domain by analyzing its major research communities, the NAM and the IMP, and their paradigmatic ways of producing knowledge. We accept that most researchers have some knowledge and sentiments about the NAM and IMP research but contend that a more analytical comparison offers several valuable benefits.

- By contrasting the two communities and identifying their major research streams and drivers of paradigmatic development we will make their underlying assumptions and intellectual goals transparent.
- This enables us to evaluate the consequences of dominant position of NAM and IMP for B2B research.
- Comparing the two paradigms allows us to identify both well-developed domains and untapped areas in the current research.
- The analysis enables us to suggest the advancement of each tradition and identify what kind of new research openings are needed to overcome their limitations and blind spots.

These goals correspond to the theory assessment and enhancement section of Yadav's (2010) scheme of strategies for theory development and resonate with Tadjewski's (2010, 442) call for “moving beyond paradigm and contextual parochialism in marketing theory.” The revealing of the gaps left by the current NAM and IMP research allows specific suggestions for how to improve the B2B research practices to meet the strategic business challenges and respond to the climate emergency transition (Key et al., 2020; Rust, 2020). Our analysis suggests that the NAM and the IMP research directions have evolved to form strong paradigmatic cultures that influence not only what we perceive as relevant questions in the business marketing study but also what kind of research we regard as scientifically legitimate. The bipolar situation hinders productive dialogue and advancement of the research field.

In addition to these more theory-development related benefits the study offers several advantages for research practice.

- The analytical descriptions of the NAM and IMP research offer an in-depth understanding of the limitations and possibilities of these research traditions, and of the underlying reasons for pursuing specific kinds of research.
- This enables researchers and doctoral students to make deliberate choices concerning their research projects.

The revealed weaknesses and research gaps help to direct research efforts towards significant issues.

Assumably, the target papers should be provocative to stimulate debate. Therefore, our study is more like a thought piece than a conventional conceptual contribution. Our views anchor on the extant business marketing research and the numerous overviews and evaluations of the research domain, but we wish to underline that reading the literature and the conclusions drawn are based on our own introspection (Gould, 1995) and long-term enactment in the business marketing research scene. We have both worked closer to the IMP community than the mainstream, and we are aware of the difficulties of crossing paradigms (Midgley et al., 2017). We have, however, tried our best to be equally critical toward both traditions by carefully utilizing the meta-theoretical tools in the analysis.

The study applies paradigmatic profiling as a method of meta-theoretical analysis (Möller, 2013; Pels et al., 2009). We contrast the

two research communities by describing and comparing their views of good science regarding their axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological beliefs and assumptions. By raising awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions and by offering avenues for future research, we encourage researchers to renew our scholarship. In essence, we pursue what [Nicholson, LaPlaca, Al-Abdin, Breese, and Khan \(2018\)](#) have called a revelatory assumption challenging.

The study proceeds in the following way. First, we will briefly discuss the characteristics of research paradigms and communities. This enables us to present the assessment criteria we will use in comparing the NAM and the IMP traditions. Second, we will describe and analyze the two research communities, and evaluate the consequences of their paradigmatic profiles and dominant roles for business marketing theory. We have provided summaries of each approach to make our analysis more transparent. A reader familiar with these studies may want to move directly to the analysis parts. Last, we propose avenues for future NAM and IMP research and for the advancement of the entire business marketing domain.

2. The power of research communities and paradigmatic research

To specify a basis for a meta-theoretical analysis of the NAM and the IMP paradigms, first, we will briefly recap the concept of the research paradigm, its functions and dysfunctions, and the role of research communities in constructing them.

2.1. The notion of paradigm

The existence of paradigms, alternatively labeled as research orientations, traditions, or schools, has been discussed in marketing since the early 1980s ([Anderson, 1983, 1986](#); [Arndt, 1985](#); [Brodie et al., 2019](#); [Dholakia & Arndt, 1985](#); [Hunt, 1991](#); [Kavanagh, 1994](#); [Saren, 2016](#)). This discussion has been highly inspired by Thomas Kuhn's seminal work on the progress of science ([Kuhn, 1996](#)) and the heated science-philosophical debate it created in the late 1960s ([Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970](#)). [Kuhn \(1996, 10\)](#) saw paradigms as “accepted examples of actual science practice—examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—[and which] provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research.” Based on this discussion, [Morgan \(1980, 606\)](#) elaborated the paradigm construct and saw it refer to three broad meanings. First, the worldview and assumptions researchers have about their research phenomena, or reality in a general sense. Second, the scholars themselves and their alliance into schools of thought and related scientific achievements. Third, “the concrete use of specific kinds of tools and texts for the process of scientific puzzle solving” (p. 606). Without going into more details about the debate, we adopt this multidimensional view of a paradigm in this study.

One should note that paradigms, in their meta-theoretical meaning, are not theories but research orientations that underlie theories and often remain implicit and taken for granted ([Arndt, 1985](#); [Möller et al., 2009](#); [Morgan, 1980](#)). Paradigms can be seen as cognitive belief systems or specific ways of seeing the world through scientific research. They function behind our concrete research efforts, often unnoticed, and significantly influence what we study and how we conduct research.

As a meta-theoretical concept, a research paradigm is often seen to contain four key dimensions that link the philosophy of science to research practice. We will use these dimensions to describe and contrast the NAM and the IMP research communities and their paradigms in business marketing research ([Arndt, 1985](#); [Saren, 2016](#)):

1. The *axiology* of the research community, what is valued by the scholars embracing the paradigm; its core research domain(s); what kind of questions it perceives as significant; the goals it tries to achieve.

2. Worldview or *ontology* embraced by the tradition; the assumptions about the nature of the core research phenomena, the actors, their behaviors and contexts; accumulated and shared knowledge of the study field.
3. View of knowledge construction, i.e., *epistemology*; the assumptions about how knowledge can and should be produced about the study field; the type of explanatory mechanism the tradition uses to justify new knowledge; the primary mode of empirical investigation.
4. Use of research methods, i.e., *methodology*; through what kinds of methods the selected issues and problems can be effectively studied and solved; the prioritized process of research.

2.2. Research communities as creators of paradigms

Besides the outlined meta-theoretical characteristics, there is clearly less understanding of the sociological aspects of paradigms that could help explain why they are so influential in guiding research practices. Ultimately, research communities construct “research traditions” or “schools” and thus create and maintain the paradigms ([Barnes, Bloor, & Henry, 1996](#); [Mizuchi & Fein, 1999](#)).

An established research community is characterized by intersubjectivity ([Anderson, 2012](#); [Prus, 1996](#)). Its members have constructed and share a set of internalized beliefs about research practices informed by science-philosophical assumptions. Intersubjective understanding allows researchers and audiences to appreciate the underlying assumptions grounding their research projects. Research communities can also be seen as linguistic communities ([Barton & Tusting, 2005](#)) sharing a conceptual language or as communities of practice sharing ways of conducting research activities ([Midgley et al., 2017](#)). Clearly, the notions of a paradigm and a research community are intimately intertwined—researchers construct the paradigm, but when it gets institutionalized and forms a dominant culture, it also envelopes and influences researchers. By examining this dynamic relationship, we can reveal significant consequences that such communities exert on B2B research and its progress.

The sketched paradigm formation contains some visible positive functions, for instance, in the IMP group's development ([Håkansson & Gadde, 2018](#); [Möller & Halinen, 2018](#)). First, the innovative and often “dogma challenging” character of a new research opening influences the allocation of researchers' attention to examine novel issues or address existing domains from a new perspective. The early ideas of the IMP group emerged from the perceived contrast between the recognized long-term buyer–seller relationships and the dominant marketing theory assuming independent actors and atomistic markets ([Håkansson, Hennesand, & Waluszewski, 2004](#)). This contrast induced the creation of new theory-driven knowledge. Second, when the institutionalization of the research community is successful, its shared focus and perspective support collaborative research efforts. Launched research programs enable cumulative knowledge construction and significantly impacts the community. This often includes promoting new science or research ideals, and the opening and legitimizing of novel research methodologies.

Paradoxically, great success in paradigm construction may also cause several problems. Effective institutionalization and entrenched intersubjective congruence tend to turn the community into a monoculture, favoring only studies following the ideals and guiding norms provided by this paradigm. Competitive pressure compels a growing number of researchers to publish along the lines of the dominant tradition. The achievements of such research tend to be, however, incremental and address relatively narrow issues within the pool of accepted knowledge base ([Hopwood, 2008](#); [Rust, 2018](#)). This diminishes the probability of conducting research on new problem areas or creating new theoretical visions and methodological innovations ([Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017](#)). Strongly held beliefs about what is correct and valuable for the tradition transform into norms and reward systems that diminish the influence of skeptics and refute “devil's advocates” that normally exist in

multi-voiced scientific communities (Kornfeld & Hewitt, 1981; Popper, 1963).

The internalized mental and theoretical framing is likely to bias researchers' interpretation and appreciation of the work and findings emanating from other "foreign" research cultures. The tendency contributes to cultural inbreeding and even blindness, which practically nullifies the potential benefits of having multiple parallel research traditions (Nicholson et al., 2014). Extremely, researchers may unknowingly become prisoners of an invisible cage, inhibiting opportunities for disciplinary progress. A strong paradigmatic framing, like religion, turns the biblical saying "seeing is believing" around to "believing is seeing," or as the late Richard Normann (2001) suggested "...a map changes the landscape." Such is the power of paradigmatic communities, so researchers beware!

2.3. Comparing paradigmatic research communities

Various meta-theoretical comparisons of research traditions have been produced within marketing and management fields (Arndt, 1985; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Möller, 2013; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). These vary greatly regarding their focus, examining either a limited set of relatively close theories (Peteraf, DiStefano, & Verona, 2013), multiple theories addressing a specific research domain (Möller, 2013), or entire disciplines like marketing or organizational theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Sheth, Gardner, & Garrett, 1988). Raising above the everyday puzzle-solving of research practice, these comparisons are often clarifying and much appreciated among scholars.

Focusing on the B2B research domain, we will use the paradigmatic profiling approach to demonstrate the differences between the NAM and the IMP traditions. This method creates a profile of the prototypical characteristics of each tradition, first defining a set of descriptive criteria and then evaluating the traditions accordingly (Möller, 2013; Pels et al., 2009). The resulting description is more detailed than what the abstract typology method would yield (cf. Arndt, 1985; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and the method concentrates on the science-theoretical dimensions, not on members of research communities or research themes as in bibliometric analyses (Backhaus et al., 2011; Peteraf, DiStefano, & Verona, 2013).

Both the NAM and the IMP communities, as broad and mature research paradigms, contain several parallel theories and clusters of researchers (Backhaus et al., 2011; Möller & Halinen, 2017). We acknowledge that significant differences between these theories exist but maintain that, at the meta-theoretical level, the differences between the paradigms are more substantial. Embracing alternative realities and orientations in knowledge construction, the NAM and the IMP communities represent almost opposites of each other.

Next, we will provide abridged descriptions of the NAM (Section 3) and the IMP (Section 4) research and identify the drivers of these research communities. We will then use this material (Section 5) to examine the meta-theoretical and cultural features of the two communities and their consequences for research practice.

3. North American Mainstream (NAM) research

We first focus on the NAM research as it paved the way for the entire scholarship on business marketing (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013). Studies on the evolution and structure of NAM research have identified some central research themes: organizational buying behavior, sales management, new product and innovation development, channels and distribution, buyer–seller relationships, and marketing strategy and planning (Backhaus et al., 2011; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). These six themes have been identified as most representative between 1970 and 1995 (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Johnston & Lewin, 1997). More recently, the range of topics has extended to cover concepts, such as value, service-dominant logic, and systems selling (Lindgreen & Di Benedetto, 2018). By emphasizing the role of digital technologies,

customer power, and increasingly global markets, Lilien (2016) condensed the contemporary core themes into B2B innovation, B2B buying behavior, and B2B customer analytics.

To provide a concise description of the vast amount of mainstream research, we categorize it by using available meta-theoretical analyses of business marketing research (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; LaPlaca & Vinhas da Silva, 2016; Möller, 2013; Pels et al., 2009). Möller (2013) classified B2B research into three major streams: (i) marketing management, (ii) channels research, and (iii) relationship marketing. Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013) examined the domain's evolution regarding economic and behavioral orientation. Therefore, we divide the NAM research into two major orientations that further divide into more specific research streams with somewhat different theoretical or methodological approaches (Fig. 1). However, it is not our purpose to investigate each stream in detail, but using the meta-theoretical dimensions to identify whether they share a common paradigmatic core.

3.1. Marketing management orientation

Marketing management as a research orientation evolved from late 1950s onward. It is based on the combination of the "marketing concept" and the management of the marketing mix, the "4 P's." The firms exist to satisfy customer needs profitably, and in pursuing this goal, they deploy mix of competitive marketing parameters (Pels et al., 2009; Webster, 2005).

This orientation has a clear normative goal; it aims to derive optimal management or strategy solutions (Kotler, 1967, 1971; Webster, 2005). This pursuit builds on microeconomics, especially on monopolistic theory of competition and marginal utility theory, and on the perceived need to know what customers prefer and how they respond to marketing activities (Chamberlin, 1933; Dickson & Ginter, 1987; Dorfman & Steiner, 1954; Kotler, 1967, 1971; Lilien, Kotler, & Moorthy, 1995). A related but often implicit assumption is that of "working markets" operated by independent buyers and sellers (Pels et al., 2009). In pursuing these, the marketing management oriented research employs modeling techniques that can be grouped under the marketing science umbrella (Winer & Neslin, 2014) or alternatively under the label of managerial marketing research, which draws primarily on statistical analysis.

3.1.1. The managerial marketing stream

The managerial stream within the marketing management orientation highly prioritizes empirical research and the opportunities that statistical analysis offers for testing hypotheses and solving managerial problems. An important foundation of this stream is the study of organizational buying behavior used to inform customer segmentation, product development, and sales management. Briefly, understanding of the organizational buying behavior provides the basis for the strategic planning of offerings involving targeting, and the planning of sales and other marketing communications activities (Pels et al., 2009). The *Market Planning for New Industrial Products* by Choffray and Lilien (1980) perfectly exemplifies this stream.

The managerial stream is generic and versatile. Its domain covers all business marketing topics, from segmentation to relationship management (Reinartz, Krafft, & Hoyer, 2004), from services to solutions (Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, & Wilson, 2016), and from personal selling to social media marketing (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016). Methodologically, various statistical methods, sometimes combined with qualitative pre-studies, are employed (see e.g. Hulland, Baumgartner, & Smith, 2018). Occasionally, case studies and qualitative data are used to create phenomenon-driven conceptualizations and to showcase the relevance of the topic (Macdonald et al., 2016; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011).

The managerial research typically adopts a pragmatist problem-solving orientation, where the managerial implications and the

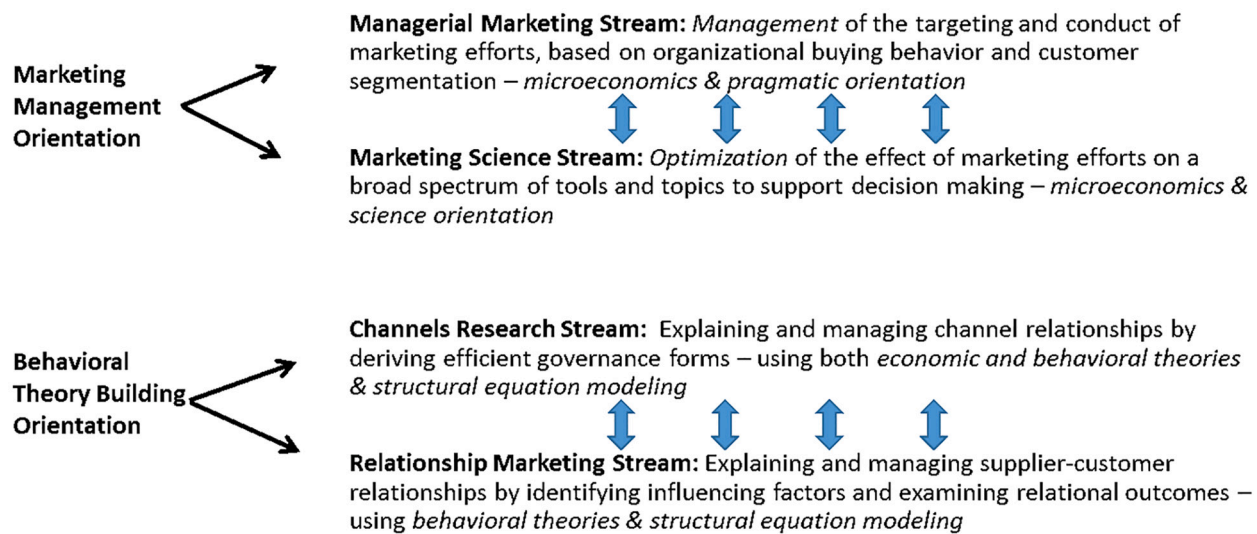


Fig. 1. Research streams of the NAM tradition.

practice of business marketing are emphasized even at the cost of disciplinary and theoretical input (Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, & Johnston, 2013a). Customer relationship management (CRM) research offers a case in point (Möller, 2013). In the managerial stream, CRM is seen as a means to increase customer loyalty, which is achieved by tailoring marketing communications and offerings to customers. The importance of interaction between market actors is acknowledged, but there is little interest in conceptualizing the psychological and behavioral aspects of customer relationships. Consequently, the perspective on relationships remains superficial (Möller, 2013).

3.1.2. The marketing science stream

The marketing science stream assists marketing decision-making using mathematical modeling (e.g., hidden Markov models or Bayesian models) and optimization as a methodology. Studies draw heavily on business marketing concepts, tools, and research results, but the aim of seeking optimal managerial solutions overrides the need to apply or develop theory.

Owing to developments in modeling and problem-solving software, and the availability of digital data, the science stream is applied to any domain of marketing decisions (Leeftang & Wittink, 2000). Besides the more traditional marketing parameters, such as pricing (Zhang, Netzer, & Ansari, 2014) and communication (Kim & Kumar, 2018), the approach offers “marketing engineering tools” for channel solutions, eSales, and eMarketing decisions (Lilien, Rangaswamy, & DeBruyn, 2017). To optimizing customer’s lifetime value or a company’s customer equity, this stream has also focused on customer relationships and customer portfolio management (Kumar, Sriram, Luo, & Chintagunta, 2011; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Tarasi, Bolton, Hutt, & Walker, 2011). Even social networks and their effects on company performance have been quantified and modeled (Wang, Gupta, & Grewal, 2017).

3.2. Behavioral theory-building orientation

In historical overviews of the B2B research, scholars have identified an important turning point (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; LaPlaca & Vinhas da Silva, 2016). In early 1990s, disciplinary knowledge creation shifted from description and classification to explanation and theory development, and behavioral sciences became common besides economics as a theoretical foundation of studies. This development surfaced along with the rising interest in buyer–seller relationships as opposed to transactions as a form of

business exchange. In our analysis, this shift marks the emergence of behavioral theory-building orientation.

In the North American context, the focus on buyer–supplier relationships can be linked to the seminal article by Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987). The authors argued that while exchange relations had been the core theme in marketing from late 1960s, the discipline was silent about the development and management of these relationships. This relational perspective induced the relationship marketing initiative, seen by many as a major paradigm shift and detachment from the marketing management view (Grönroos, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The behavioral theory building orientation utilizes structural equation modeling and analysis (SEM) that was introduced to marketing research in late 1970s and gained a dominant position in quantitative marketing research from mid 1990s onward (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 2000). SEM facilitates versatile theory development, enabling the testing of multi-level explanatory models with complex moderator and mediator variables (contingency effects, situational effects) (Hair Jr., Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016; Palmatier, Gopalakrishna, & Houston, 2006). Within behavioral theory building studies, we have discerned two research streams—the channel research and the relationship marketing research (Fig. 1). For the short descriptions of these streams, we owe to the “Theory mapping of business marketing” (Möller, 2013).

3.2.1. The channel research stream

Channels research emerged from late 1970s onward, focusing on explaining and managing dyadic relationships between business marketers and channel members (Robicheaux & El-Ansary, 1975; Frazier, 1983). Put simply, this research focuses on two interrelated layers—channel systems that relate to channel structures (Robicheaux & Coleman, 1994) and the dyadic relationships that operate within this structure (Stern & Reve, 1980).

This layered character reflects in the theoretical goals of the channels research (Möller, 2013). At the system level, the aim is to explain how channel structures evolve and how they influence channel relationships. On the relational level, the goals are to understand how the channel context influences channel member relationships, to identify efficient governance structures for various relationships, and to examine managerial decisions related to channel partners (Möller, 2013). Generally, channel relationships are seen as interdependent and reciprocal.

The channel research stream has a dualistic disciplinary background—channel structures and relationships are studied by combining the economic and the behavioral or political perspective (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1999; Stern & Reve, 1980). The economic

perspective embraces transaction cost economics, which defines the efficient governance structure in dyadic relationships (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997). Its core concepts include asset specificity, uncertainty, and transaction frequency. Under specific combinations of these contingency factors, matching governance structures and safeguarding mechanisms can be postulated (Kumar, Sriram, et al., 2011; Wathne & Heide, 2004). The behavioral perspective draws from social exchange theory and organizational sociology, employing such concepts as power and dependency, expectations, cooperation, trust, commitment, communication, and conflict to analyze channel relationships. Thus, channel research has roots based on power and conflict behavior (French & Raven, 1959; Gaski, 1984; Heide, 1994; Pondy, 1967).

The channel research stream brings three points at fore—both economic and political aspects and their interaction should be considered in examining channel behavior; a focal channel and a dyadic relationship form the recommended unit(s) of analysis; and complex relationships cannot be understood outside their context or environment since dyadic behavior and the channel system are reciprocally interrelated (Heide, 1994; Kumar et al., 2011; Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997; Wathne & Heide, 2004).

3.2.2. The relationship marketing stream

The key theoretical interest of the second stream—relationship marketing—is to understand relational exchange, especially supplier–customer relationships, their elements and development, and the factors influencing them. Relationship marketing research is behaviorally driven, its theoretical goal is to identify the antecedent factors that shape customer–supplier relationships and to explain how relationship characteristics influence relational outcomes. This logic is illustrated by Morgan and Hunt's (1994) influential *commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing*, where the relationship benefits, termination costs, shared values, communication, and potential opportunistic behaviors are seen to influence perceived trust and commitment toward the relationship. These reciprocally drive the relational outcomes constituted by the propensity to cooperate or leave the relationship, perceived uncertainty, and functional problem solving (Anderson & Narus, 1990; De Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001).

Managerially, relationship research emphasizes the creation and management of effective customer relationships in an enduring and mutually beneficial manner, and the development of capabilities involved in these processes (Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Krause, Handfield, & Tyler, 2007; Palmatier, Gopalakrishna, & Houston, 2006). Compared to the conceptually more simplistic managerial and science streams, the relationship stream offers theory-based tools for rigorous modeling of the relationships and their evolutionary dynamics (Harmeling, Palmatier, Houston, Arnold, & Samaha, 2015).

As behaviorally driven, the relationship research draws on several theories. Adding to the service marketing research, this stream has been influenced by social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and its applications within channels research. Since Dwyer et al. (1987), the key concepts of this theory—attraction, trust, shared values, and commitment—have been central in research, and reciprocal relationships where both parties play an active role have been in focus. Other less significant sources are the relational contract approach (MacNeil, 1980) and aspects of transaction cost economics and its applications in channels studies (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Heide & John, 1992). Concentrating keenly on dyadic relationships, the relationship stream has, however, only little to say about the context of relationships. It is not interested in how exchange contexts or other relationships influence the focal relationship or its parties.

3.3. Drivers guiding NAM research

We have described NAM research through four research streams reflecting the marketing management ethos, behavioral theory development, and quantitative emphasis of business marketing studies.

Despite the differences in theoretical and managerial goals, we argue that these streams share common cultural and paradigmatic values that become visible in the historical drivers of the NAM research. In the 1950–60s, several threads joined to form the new research culture for the entire marketing discipline, with remarkable ramifications for developing business marketing studies.

3.3.1. Marketing as a management function

The view of marketing as a management discipline, not a study of economic activity or distribution system (Cox, 1965), gained traction in early 1950s (Webster, 2005). The construction of the marketing concept marked a major transition from the earlier focus on selling, pricing, and distribution, where marketing was primarily seen as a support function. The new perspective regarded marketing concept as a management philosophy focusing on customer orientation, and the management of the firm's marketing instruments or parameters (Alderson, 1965; Naert & Leeflang, 1978; Drucker, 1954, Kotler, 1967; Levitt, 1960; McCarthy, 1960).

The rapid commercial and socioeconomic development in the post-war United States triggered this development. By mid 1950s, the economy entered a long-term boom market with rapidly growing consumer demand, which significantly increased product selection and merchandise means. The enhanced competition about consumers' preferences motivated the formation of customer segmentation, product planning, and branding; consequently, the size and importance of marketing personnel in companies grew rapidly. Increased marketing investments called for effective planning, and "the marketing strategy came to rely increasingly on statistical analysis of market research data" (Webster, 2005, 121). This posed distinctive demands to academic marketing scholars and educators. Marketing professionals needed tools for deeper understanding of customer behavior and methods for conducting market and customer analysis, and for solving segmentation, product planning, and targeting problems. All this had a strong impact on the emergence of industrial marketing as evidenced by the establishment of the *Industrial Marketing Management* journal in 1971.

3.3.2. Rise of management science and quantitative methods

Conceiving marketing as a management function posed a formidable set of decision problems for marketing managers and scholars alike (Dickson & Ginter, 1987; Kotler, 1971). Luckily, powerful tools are becoming available. Operation analysis methods were developed to solve the logistical problems of WW II and were applied to commercial production, distribution, and logistical problems. This quantitative movement contained many interrelated analytical tools, such as mathematical modeling and optimization methods, information management, multivariate statistics, and forecasting methods. Their use in management and management research became entitled as management science (Churchman, 1956; Starr, 1965). The establishment of *The Management Science Institute* in 1953 and, consequently, the *Management Science* journal in 1954 paved the way for the fast diffusion of the quantitative movement.

By 1970s, these management science methods expanded to include causal modeling and structural equation techniques. These enabled the testing of more complex and hierarchical theories involving both latent and observable variables (Bagozzi, 1980; Kaplan, 2008). SEM started dominating much of the behaviorally oriented business marketing research from 1980s onward.

3.3.3. Institutional pressure to scientificate business schools

Along with the availability of quantitative methods, institutional pressure on business schools enforced disciplinary development. Although improving the theoretical foundations and research methods among the marketing scholars was strongly desired (Alderson & Cox, 1948), a decisive impetus for the quantitative approach came from the Ford and Carnegie foundation reports on U.S. business education (Tadajewski, 2006; Webster, 2005). The reports (Gordon & Howell,

1959; Pierson, 1959) demonstrated business schools “...having serious liability crisis with students who lack the intellectual and scholarly abilities of their peers in other disciplines, and in equal measure, the research conducted by the academic staff was criticized for being largely descriptive and unscientific” (Tadajewski, 2006, 170–171). Concerning marketing education, the Ford Foundation took a central role by granting funds for conferences, workshops, and textbooks, which provided the core for new curricula development and doctoral education. These efforts included advanced courses for faculty at Harvard and MIT in late 1950s (Schlossmann, Sedlak, & Wechsler, 1987). Among the early results were the publication of seminal texts, such as *Mathematical Models and Methods in Marketing* (Bass et al., 1961), *Quantitative Techniques in Marketing Analysis* (Frank, Kuehn, & Massy, 1962), and *Management Sciences in Marketing* (Montgomery & Urban, 1969; Webster, 2005).

The influence of these activities was multiplied and diffused to the U.S. top business schools inducing the birth of what Staelin (2005, 146) called the “first generation Ford Foundation scholars,” including Frank Bass, Robert Buzzell, Edgar Pessemier, John Howard, and Philip Kotler. Within 10 years, they transformed the doctoral education and faculty selection to reflect the new marketing science approach. It was manifested in journals, such as the *Journal of Marketing Research* (founded in 1964) and *Marketing Science* (in 1982), and the activities of Marketing Science Institute established in 1961, linking the research interests of business and academia. In Europe, the Ford Foundation promoted the americanization of business schools in 1960s (Kaplan, 2014; Locke, 1989) and helped establish INSEAD in 1958, the London Business School in 1964, and the European Institution for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) in 1971. The fast adoption of the USA-lead research orientation was reflected in textbooks (e.g., *Building Implementable Marketing Models*, Naert & Leeflang, 2013), the European Marketing Academy Conferences (EMAC, founded in 1975), and in the contents of its journal, the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. These developments provided a vital impetus for growth of marketing faculties and the emergence of quantitative research practice in the entire marketing discipline, including the nascent field of industrial marketing.

3.3.4. *Becoming the dominant research culture*

The ideals and practices imposed by the described drivers were broadly adopted by the marketing faculty. The cultural change permeated all levels of the academia from student recruiting to teaching curriculum and doctoral education, faculty selection, and reward systems. The new norms ingrained in the editorial policies of major marketing journals exert an important influence till date. For business marketing, the science-based research ideal emphasizing quantitative analyses became a central cornerstone that over the years institutionalized into the NAM paradigm. Maintaining the established status, or “cultural hegemony” turned itself into a major driver of the NAM community. In this study, we question whether the protection of the establishment has happened at the cost of the discipline’s vitality.

4. Industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) group-driven research

A few opposing forces and critics appeared against the strong mainstream over the years. The most significant of these is the IMP approach (Möller & Halinen, 2018). We will briefly present its streams and drivers, followed by a comparison of the paradigmatic profiles of the NAM and the IMP research.

4.1. *Research streams of IMP research*

The origin of the IMP group is humble. It commenced in the late 1970s when primarily junior scholars from five European universities and business schools collaboratively started a research project (Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). Based on an empirical investigation of

nearly a thousand business relationships—national and cross-national and from multiple industries—the group developed a framework of buyer–seller relationships, the so-called Interaction Model (Håkansson, 1982; Turnbull & Valla, 1986). This study revealed that business exchange typically occurred within complex, long-term relationships between the buyer and the seller company due to various interaction episodes and adaptations (Håkansson, 1982; Möller & Halinen, 2018). These viewpoints, novel and theoretically attractive, challenged the prevailing transaction view and initiated the expansion of the IMP research movement.

Three interrelated periods can be identified in the development of IMP-driven research—interaction approach to business relationships (starting in the late 1970s), network approach to markets and relationships (commencing early 1990s), and more vaguely, an extension of the core IMP research (from 2000 onward) (Möller & Halinen, 2018). The paradigmatic features of the IMP research can be best captured by depicting the interaction and the network approaches as its major research streams (Fig. 2.).

Here, we largely utilize the available analyses of the IMP research (Axelsson, 2010; Ford & Håkansson, 2006; Håkansson & Snehota, 2017; Möller, 2013; Möller & Halinen, 2017; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017; Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996).

4.1.1. *The interaction approach*

The early IMP research focused on the supplier–customer relationships trying to understand their nature and the patterns of interaction between companies relationally (Håkansson, 1982; Möller & Wilson, 1995; Turnbull et al., 1996). A fundamental assumption driving this research was actor interdependence (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). The adopted view suggested that supplier–customer relationships, as indeed any business relationship, were complex and dynamic; interaction was a continuous process between active and purposeful actors. Interaction affected the relationship, but it was also affected by the relationship where it occurred (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). Consequently, much of the initial IMP research is characterized by empirical efforts to construct deeper knowledge and an understanding of inter-firm relationships (Håkansson, 1982; Ford, 1990, 2002; for compiling early IMP research).

In his theory mapping, Möller (2013) analyzed the goals and theoretical background of the interaction approach, which we use here for its relevant parts. The managerial goal was to gain a more realistic view of the creation and management of complex interactive business relationships. Central to this aim has been to examine the interactive processes—resource exchange, social exchange, and adaptations—through which the relationships evolve and the parties try to achieve relational benefits (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller & Wilson, 1995; Turnbull et al., 1996).

In their empirical studies, IMP researchers have sought support from various theories and disciplines (Möller, 2013; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017), including resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), social exchange theory (Cook & Emerson, 1978), and transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1985). Moreover, business marketing studies from a broader front, channel research and international business studies have contributed to its formation (Turnbull et al., 1996). The economic aspect of interaction is included regarding the parties’ investments in the relationship and in adaptation costs (Hallen, Johanson, & Seyed-Mohamed, 1991). The performance of a relationship is generally examined with such behavioral indicators as relationship atmosphere, expectations, or mutuality, which can be interpreted as perceived satisfaction on the psychosocial aspects of interaction. Also, some “harder indicators,” e.g., perceived effectiveness and efficiency, are employed (Halinen, 1997; Walter, Ritter, & Gemünden, 2001). The approach clearly emphasizes collaboration, its modes, and enablers, such as mutuality, trust, and commitment.

4.1.2. *The network approach*

Dyadic interaction studies soon indicated that achieving an

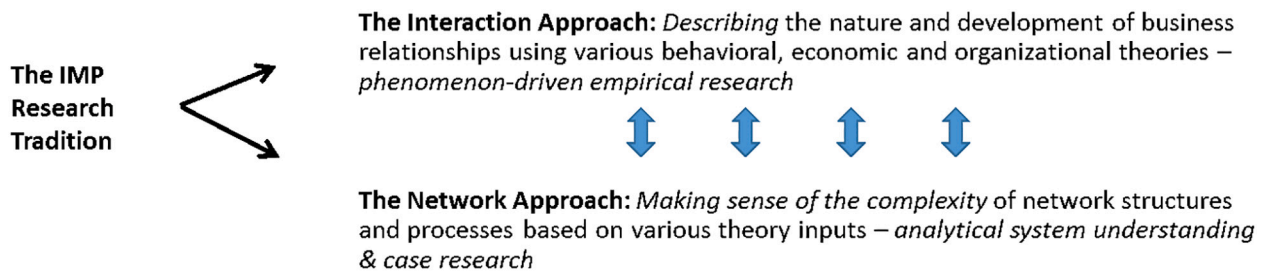


Fig. 2. Research streams of the IMP tradition

understanding of any complex business relationship presumed knowledge of what kind of relationships the actors had with other parties. Consequently, the network context became a focus of interest (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Axelsson, 2010). This finding motivated the construction of the network approach to business marketing (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Håkansson, 1987) (Fig. 2).

The markets as networks perspective postulates a more realistic representation of business markets than the traditional theory of markets (Porter, 1997). Based on empirical evidence, IMP scholars have argued that business markets can be better described through complex and relatively enduring networks of actor relationships (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Håkansson et al., 2004; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Mattsson, 1997).

A central conceptual innovation for making sense of networks and the constituting actor relationships is the widely applied Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) framework (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). It proposes that any business relationship is formed by actor bonds, activity links, and resource ties, and along the same logic, that the entire network where the organization is connected should be characterized through actor webs, activity patterns, and resource constellations. The ARA model postulates a highly complex structure where a change in one element may involve changes in others. For example, one actor's product innovation may influence its relationships, thus influencing the network-level characteristics (Ford & McDowell, 1999).

As complex structures, networks have proven difficult to study empirically. Extensive data and multiple methods are required, but the macro-level examination was unattractive for IMP scholars who wanted to work close to the phenomenon and managerial reality. Most of the IMP research has therefore used a case study methodology and focused on restricted networks using the focal network perspective (Alajoutsjärvi, Möller, & Rosenbröjer, 1999) or examined networks from a focal company's perspective (Anderson et al., 1994; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005).

Briefly, the intellectual goal of IMP studies has been to challenge the prevailing view of business marketing by creating an understanding of industrial networks as both structures and processes (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). Therefore, the proposed frameworks and network concepts have been critical as analytical devices. Researchers have examined numerous topics and phenomena from the network perspective, seeking answers to complex and systemic questions. For instance, how interdependence plays out in different network contexts, how managers make sense of networks, how companies strategize or innovate in networks, how networks emerge, or how they are managed (for thematic overviews, see Håkansson & Gadde, 2018; Möller & Halinen, 2018). Despite its eclectic theoretical background, the IMP community has created a distinctive research paradigm, largely, as seen, by constructing its own worldview.

4.2. Drivers guiding IMP research

Several intermingled threads help to understand the emergence and progress of the IMP scholarship. We distinguish four drivers in this

development.

4.2.1. Understanding the phenomenon in its temporal and contextual setting

Understanding business marketing phenomena from the business actors' perspective emerged early as an implicit goal for knowledge creation in this tradition. The first IMP project (Håkansson, 1982) paved way for a continuing reliance on empirical, phenomenon-driven research, and launched an entirely new paradigm where business relationships were seen as enduring, interactive, and often international (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). The study of business relationships in their unique contexts as subjectively perceived evolving entities has inspired the IMP community ever since (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). "Relationships always have a time dimension and thus an uncertain future and a history with subjective interpretations and memories. Relationships are thus undetermined; their meaning to those involved is changing over time and their development depends on how the parties interpret and reinterpret different acts. . ." (Håkansson & Snehota, 1998: 20).

Past developments affect relationships though, for instance, in the form of past collaboration or contingencies related to the spatial interaction context, e.g., geographical location or business culture (Törnroos, Halinen, & Medlin, 2017). Relatively few IMP studies consciously employ historical research methods (Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Halinen & Mainela, 2013), but the underlying valuation "history matters" is strongly present and reflected in the study of network processes (Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012).

4.2.2. The role of a skeptic challenger

The young founders of the IMP experienced themselves as challengers of the taken-for-granted view of business markets and marketing. This is demonstrated in the way they contrasted the "market-as-network" view with "the received view" of markets, seen as atomistic marketplaces of independent buyers and sellers (Ford & Håkansson, 2006; Håkansson et al., 2004; Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). This early "David versus Goliath" spirit that reflects the B2B research situation in the 1980s and 1990s has endured to empower the IMP community. The community maintains skepticism toward those research streams that do not share the phenomenon-driven and spatio-temporally embedded approach, or the qualitative methodologies espoused by the core community (Waluszewski, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2017).

4.2.3. Passion for analytical description of complexity

The early recognition of interactive and networked character of business markets ignited a continuing passion within the IMP community for seeking a deeper understanding of the complexity of the business world (Håkansson & Snehota, 2017). This orientation intimately relates to the undetermined and unique character of relationships and networks embraced by the IMP scholars. To make sense of this kind of reality, the community relies on a highly general set of conceptual tools constructed by its core members, e.g., the interaction model (Håkansson, 1982), the ARA framework, (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), and the four Rs framework (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002).

4.2.4. Strive for expansion

The strong desire of the IMP group to disseminate its paradigmatic view and research results can be seen as the fourth developmental driver. As a young and originally very small research community, presenting a non-orthodox research approach, the group struggled to get its studies published and recognized (Möller & Halinen, 2018). This has induced evangelizing and building institutions, such as annual conferences, doctoral tutorials, launch of *the IMP Journal*, and organizing IMP development workshops and symposia (Håkansson & Gadde, 2018; Håkansson & Snehota, 2017). An eminent feature in the IMP expansion is the striving of the central IMP members to maintain the core ideas of the research approach intact by indicating what is acceptable as IMP research and what is not.

5. The NAM and the IMP research contrasted—the nature and consequences of paradigmatic research cultures

We aim to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the B2B research domain by making the underlying assumptions and intellectual goals of its key research paradigms transparent, and thus, enable a rational assessment of each paradigm. Drawing on the descriptions of the NAM and the IMP research, we portray their cultural and paradigmatic profiles and discuss how the paradigmatic way of knowledge production influences the NAM and the IMP-driven research. We start by examining the paradigmatic profiles of these communities, displaying their core characteristics regarding their axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological features, depicted in Table 1.

5.1. Paradigmatic characteristics of NAM research

Despite its significant volume and versatile nature, NAM research demonstrates considerable cohesion regarding its meta-theoretical features (Table 1). All research streams share a strong managerial orientation and natural science-based ideal of academic research, connected to realism as a primary ontological foundation, and objectified measurement of business reality and quantitative methodologies as principal epistemological guidelines (Lilien et al., 1995, 2017). Central to the B2B domain, they also share an assumption of working markets shaped primarily by competitive forces (Möller et al., 2020). Focusing on the current state of the B2B domain, we closely consider only the most prominent features of the NAM research, its managerial orientation, science-orientation, assumption of working markets, and method-driven character.

All the four NAM research streams (Fig. 1) share a strong *managerial orientation*; the ultimate goal of research is to construct better tools for guiding managerial behavior and for solving managerial problems. This applied research ethos is, by definition, pronounced in the marketing management-oriented streams, while the behavioral theory-building orientation is balancing between theory-building and problem-solving targets. We see managerial orientation as a deep cultural trait in the NAM research community, reflected in the constant calls for closing the theory-praxis gap, or conducting more relevant research (Åge & Cederlund, 2014; Baines, Brennan, Gill, & Mortimore, 2009; LaPlaca & Vinhas da Silva, 2016; Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009).

The cultural and institutional prominence of managerialism is highly significant as it guides what kind of issues and themes receive research attention and funding. The Marketing Science Institute's research priorities properly illustrate the situation (Marketing Science Institute Research Priorities, 2020–22). Concentrating on managerially relevant and solvable issues, this orientation also influences the criteria academic institutions, such as universities, journals, or grant-awarding foundations use to evaluate research and researchers.

Science-orientation forms another core cultural feature underlying the NAM research communities. We use the term to refer to the emulation of natural sciences research ethos based on theory-testing or problem-led modeling and quantitative analysis generally. It includes viewing the

Table 1

Paradigmatic comparison of the NAM and the IMP research

	North American Mainstream (NAM)	IMP-Group Driven Research (IMP)
Goals and values (axiology)	Natural science-ideal: explanation and prescription; methodological rigor; providing management tools and relevant knowledge for B2B marketing decision-making. Method-driven research where existing theoretical frameworks are incrementally improved.	Social science -ideal: understanding and description; use of various interpretative methods; making sense of contextual and temporal complexities of B2B markets and marketing. Phenomenon-driven research, where the central frameworks are used as analytical devices.
Worldview (ontology)	Realism and critical realism co-exist. Objective (inter-subjective) reality exists and is taken for granted. Working markets with relatively independent suppliers and customers. Competition is the major force shaping markets. Supplier's viewpoint is dominant. Marketing actors, their activities and relationships are considered as measurable units with quantifiable characteristics or variables. Environment is transparent and its effects on actors are measured.	Social constructionism and critical realism co-exist. The world is subjectively perceived and constructed and exist in multiple local realities. Markets defined as networks of interdependent business relationships. To compete, actors also need collaboration. Actor's behavior is embedded; actions cannot be understood out of their historical context. Business actors learn and construct their environment through enactment; the actor-environment relationship is reciprocal and environment is non-transparent. Actors are adaptive and changing.
Knowledge construction (epistemology)	Objective measurement of research phenomena; problem solving and explanation assumes traditional causality – identifying “effects of causes.” Measurement and variable based-knowledge construction prioritized. Pre-formed problem or theory-based hypothesis guides the knowledge construction.	Subjective knowledge of research phenomena; scientific knowledge is ultimately a product of social negotiation. Only actors can make “reality” visible. Focus on both structure and process; time and history matter. Emphasis on understanding through thick description via case research. IMP-based conceptual frameworks form a legitimate way to construct knowledge.
Research tools (methodology)	Strong emphasis on quantitative methods, mathematical and statistical modeling, optimization, and experimental designs. Recent movement toward the use of multi-level analysis and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). How variables are statistically associated is central for the analysis.	Strong emphasis on qualitative methods, case study research and process research. Trend toward a more varied use of interpretative research approaches (e.g., narrative research, ethnography, action research).

research domain and its core phenomena through quantifiable variables and analyzing the relationships between the focal variables with management science-driven modeling methods or statistical analyses. Therefore, science orientation contains ingredients of both the ontological and epistemological characteristics of the NAM research. This orientation is intensely embraced by the advocates of the managerial marketing and marketing science streams, but also highly influential in behaviorally oriented channels and relationship marketing research.

The notion of working markets refers to the widespread, but often

silent, assumption about the context of business marketing, perceived as competitive markets of independent companies. The view is prevalent within the marketing management-oriented streams, where suppliers and customers are assumed to behave independently, switching and choosing business partners for every specific need. In the relationship marketing stream, suppliers and customers are regarded as interdependent and active parties of the relationship. Among the broad NAM community only the channel researchers have shown greater interest in the context where the marketing behavior and activities take place.

NAM research is also *method driven*, a feature intimately related to the discussed science orientation. The strong science ethos combined with the tendency to examine relevant research phenomena through objectification induces unequivocal endorsement of quantitative research methods. Only knowledge produced through quantitative analysis, generally assuming variable-based research designs, is seen as significant or legitimate. This reflects in the editorial inquiry among the reviewers of the *Marketing Science* journal, suggesting that the extreme attitude of “rigor no matter what” exerts a significant role among its reviewers (Chintagunta et al., 2013). The marketing management-oriented streams prioritize the problem-solving modeling methods of management science, whereas the majority of channel and relationship marketing studies have been designed to match the SEM principles. Briefly, we argue that the dominant share of NAM research is conducted using the available modeling methods.

5.2. Paradigmatic characteristics of IMP research

Table 1 also concisely summarizes the main paradigmatic characteristics of the IMP research. Compared to the drivers of this approach, we offer a few expanding comments on its culture. The points we are making are highly intertwined—thriving on complexity, social science orientation, subjective knowledge creation, and sticking to the IMP conceptual tools.

IMP research *thrives on complexity*. The community shares a profound interest in examining highly complex phenomena and issues in a real-world context. The complexity orientation reflects in the interaction and systemic interdependence perspectives, referring to the view that actors, business relationships, and networks are mutually constituted through the continuing interactions of their members (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). This also implies that singular events or actor relationships cannot be understood in isolation without knowledge of their context and connections within the focal network (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Related to this orientation, the IMP community tends to consider all actors, resources, and activities, and obviously their resulting combinations, as unique (Håkansson & Snehota, 2017). This links directly to the philosophy of science position(s) of the IMP community—preference to phenomenon-driven research related to complex market structures where thick descriptions of empirical cases are highly valued (Table 1).

In contrast with the natural science ideal of the NAM paradigm, *social science orientation* guides much of the scholarship of core IMP members (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002). Studies follow the principles of social constructionism or critical realism, although often implicitly (Peters et al., 2013a). Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) suggested that the orientation of IMP studies is close to moderate constructionism, which enables consideration of multiple perceived realities. Another important orientation is critical realism (Sayer, 2000), which looks for the underlying causal mechanisms of specific network behaviors, relationships, and structures (Easton, 2010). Relatively few studies, however, employ critical realism analytically and systematically (for exceptions, see Harrison & Easton, 2002; Mason, Easton, & Lenney, 2013).

For the IMP community, *subjective knowledge creation* forms an important basis for the analytical description of business marketing phenomena. Even if various methodologies and science-philosophical approaches are applied, qualitative methods dominate. Researchers

use and create generic constructs (actors, resources, network pictures, and network change) to make sense of the core phenomena, i.e., network structures and processes and firm behavior in networks. These core constructs are applied in various business contexts—generally via case research—to create descriptions of subjectively perceived complex realities.

Sticking to the IMP conceptual tools is a prominent feature of this endeavor. The core IMP scholars tend to safeguard the “correct” adoption of the central ontological and epistemological assumptions of the IMP network theory, and the proper use of its constructs (Cova et al., 2015; Cunningham, 2008; Möller, 2013). This tendency has induced conceptual coherence, resilience, and continuing incremental improvement of the conceptual toolkit of the IMP scholarship.

Overall, we see that the IMP research community, such as the NAM, represents a strong culture deeply embracing the values of phenomenon-driven research, descriptive-analytical orientation, and use of case research as the dominant inquiry method. The outlined values are maintained by an inward-looking attitude on theory development, and by safeguarding the core values through social practices of the community.

5.3. Consequences of NAM and IMP cultures—a research gap

Our analysis suggests that there is a layered causation underlying the kind of research conducted by the NAM and the IMP communities. First, deeply held cultural values seem to be the underlying reason for the paradigmatic features of both the NAM and the IMP research communities. Second, the internalized paradigmatic norms concerning worthwhile research domains and issues, and legitimate procedures and techniques for conducting scientific research shape the accumulating research, both its empirical results and theory formation. We discuss these consequences using Fig. 3, which summarizes the characteristics of the predominant NAM and IMP research and describes the resulting research gap that these communities have left unaddressed. The complexity continuum of research phenomena is based on the early views of complexity, when Weaver (1991) depicted problems ranging from ‘simplicity’ to ‘disordered complexity’, in between laying ‘the problems of organized complexity’.

5.3.1. Consequences of the NAM research culture

The cultural and paradigmatic characteristics of the NAM and the IMP research communities are depicted at the top of the Fig. 3. Although conceptually diverse, the cultural beliefs and orientations and the meta-theoretical characteristics are deeply intertwined, and therefore presented in the same rectangle, but separated with a broken line. We propose that the value-laden deep cultural beliefs (at the top of the rectangle) influence the more directly observable and operational aspects of research, especially the practices of knowledge production (epistemology and methodology).

Concerning the NAM research, our analysis so far indicates that the core cultural values of the community include the adopted natural science ideal and the managerial orientation. These fundamental orientations further coincide with the assumption of working markets and competition as the primary forces shaping markets and marketing behavior. These cultural aspects are commonly “hidden” and disregarded but materialize in the tendency to prioritize research that explains and objectifies research phenomena or solves managerially relevant problems with science-driven methods.

Briefly, we suggest that the entire knowledge construction within the NAM community—its underlying epistemological beliefs—favors inquiry that adopts variable-based and variance-based research designs addressed with some form of quantitative modeling (cf. Table 1). This prioritizes research of such managerial and organizational behaviors that occur frequently, are relatively stable, and can be reduced into a relatively small number of constructs and measurable variables (the left end of the complexity continuum, Fig. 3). Commonly, a nomological

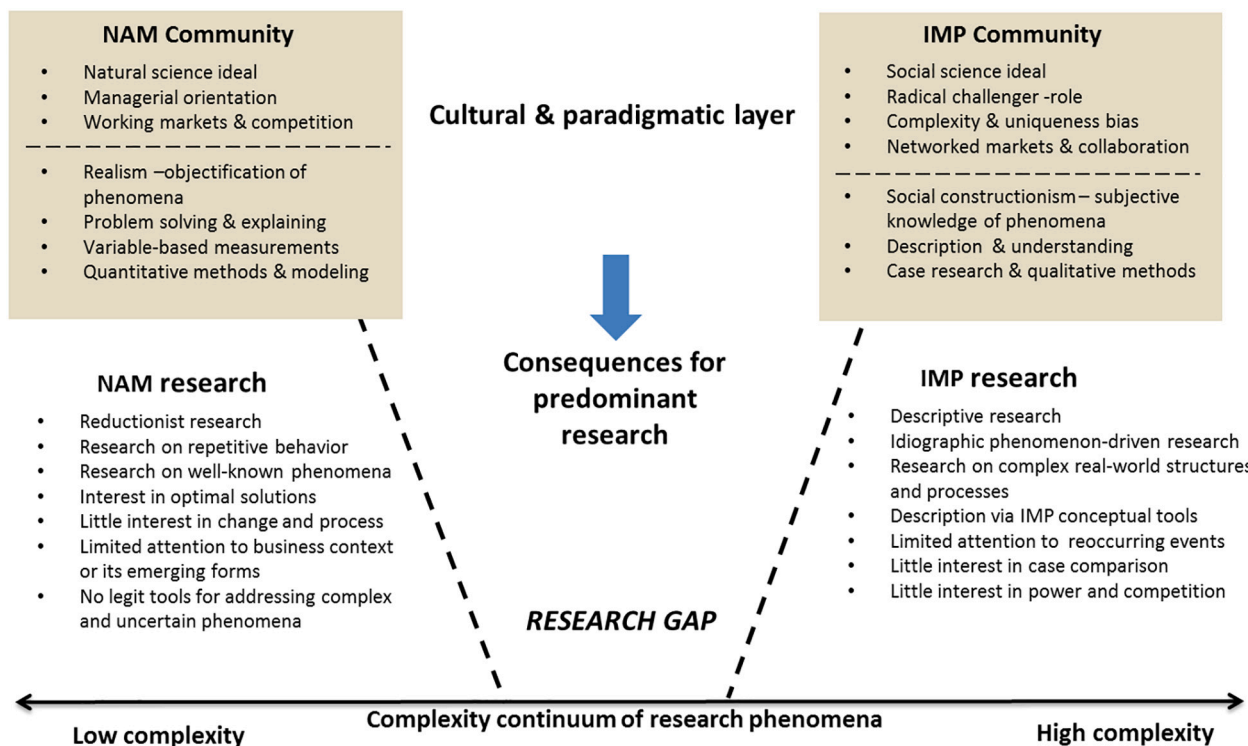


Fig. 3. Consequences of dominant research cultures for B2B marketing research.

network of “antecedents—core construct—consequences” is posed and operationalized via multivariate statistical modeling or formed into a solvable problem and addressed with the management science methods.

The sketched characteristics of the NAM community severely restrict the research phenomena and questions that the NAM can address. Based on our analysis, we contend that the dominant share of NAM research has addressed such marketing phenomena that have either inherently relatively low complexity or the complexity of which the researchers have reduced with research designs so that the focal issues can be scrutinized with culturally legitimate research methods. This generally implies detachment of the phenomenon from its broader empirical context, use of simplifying assumptions, and reification of social concepts into narrow measurable variables. All research obviously involves reduction of reality; the issue is to what extent we can do this simplification and still achieve valuable research results?

Briefly, we see that the entrenched reliance on objectifying the world together with quantitative modeling has induced avoidance of complex and dynamic issues, and processual research in general. This tendency has been enhanced by the generally taken-for-granted assumption of working markets as the dominant form of business context. The constricting qualities of the embraced science-orientation and the sophisticated methodological requirements have effectively impeded NAM scholars from addressing complex research questions (Clark, Key, Hodis, & Rajaratnam, 2014).

This means that highly relevant strategic issues—such as intricate business model innovations, introduction of disruptive technologies, emergence and construction of networked business models, and orchestration of collaborative ecosystems—have been practically out of reach for the NAM community. These strategically and socially significant themes have been, instead, addressed by strategy researchers (Adner & Kapoor, 2010; Fuller, Jacobides, & Reeves, 2019; Kapoor & Agarwall, 2017), or B2B scholars adhering to the SDL thinking (Bahar, Nenonen, & Starr Jr, 2021) or the IMP tradition (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Perks et al., 2017). We believe that this self-induced incompetence to address strategic issues is the main reason for the demands to improve the managerial relevance of the NAM research. The

NAM tradition has painted itself in a corner, determined by its science-driven ideals and strict methodological requirements.

The strong paradigmatic culture has directed the choice of research questions also in other ways. Due to its strong managerial orientation, the NAM culture seems to expect each study to contribute relatively directly to managerial practice. This tends to favor normative theory development over positive understanding. Regarding research questions, this means prioritizing “How to?” questions over “What is it?” and “Why is it so?” Broad research topics involving explanation of temporal emergence and investigation of contextual contingencies such as the evolution of the organizational forms utilized in various types of business marketing have received little attention. The same applies to the influence of digitalization on business models and marketing practices as a research topic.

Paradoxically, the same strong culture has made the NAM community extremely successful. It has produced the dominant share of our current knowledge of business marketing (for core NAM achievements see Appendix A). Publications of NAM scholarship and the textbooks presenting its research approach and methodology have permeated the curricula of business schools globally. The NAM community has deeply influenced the way scholars have been framing, studying, and educating business marketing over half a century. Through its theories and frameworks, it has also changed business practice. As such, the NAM tradition can be regarded as a highly influential paradigmatic research community.

On the critical side, the matured character of the NAM research—its established research streams, its entrenched cultural spirit, and the successful academic performance and institutional positioning of its scholars—has induced complacency that breeds only incremental research improvements. While the volume of research has increased considerably, there has been no real theoretical breakthroughs since the introduction of the political economy paradigm in channel research (Stern & Reve, 1980), the emergence of the relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and the SDL movement from mid-2000 onward (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Also, all these innovations are primarily conceptual. They did not emerge from the empirical findings of the NAM

community, rather the community advanced its empirical study such that the ideas were amenable to the NAM methodology and served its paradigmatic goals.

NAM researchers could quickly model the relational issues (channel and buyer–seller relationships) while the most innovative aspects, the contextual and process aspects of the political-economy framework were excluded (e.g. how various channel structures emerge and how the structure influences channel behavior and vice versa). Likewise, the dynamic and cultural aspects of relationship development, addressed by the Nordic School (Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1999), were not given proper space by the NAM researchers. The community has also largely shunned the SDL movement's systemic view on value creation as too multilayered and complex to operationalize with the accepted methodological and model building apparatus.

The sketched developments suggest that the NAM research community has lost its innovativeness, its ability to renew itself from within. Taking up new themes (servitization, social media, and digitization) is not enough if their research is conducted with the orthodox research designs and methods, despite the requirements of the phenomenon. The community has not been able to fully utilize important new research suggestions and methodological orientations brought forward by other disciplines or non-NAM scholars. This is a serious handicap for the entire B2B marketing field because of the global extent and cultural influence of the NAM research community. If the researchers espousing NAM values and research orientations are not able or interested in addressing the ever more complex strategic issues, the potential impact of business marketing as discipline will wane. Concerning the entire marketing discipline, this weakening has already taken place, as indicated by the discipline's meager scientific impact over other branches of business studies (Clark et al., 2014).

5.3.2. Consequences of IMP research culture

Like in the NAM research, we suggest that the cultural and paradigmatic features of the IMP research have had significant consequences for the type of research conducted or shunned by the community. We illustrate this again with the complexity continuum of the research phenomena (Fig. 3).

The key features of the IMP culture—the espoused social science ideals, the thrive on complexity, and the radical challenger-role that the IMP group adopted against the prevailing market and marketing mix views—have importantly influenced the nature of IMP research. Heterogeneity of actors and resources in business networks is one of the key assumptions of the community, and it values high the view that particular behaviors, events, and structures are highly dependent on previous network developments and current socio-economic context. An additional cultural feature is the emphasis on studying collaborative relationships and behaviors.

Overall, these cultural characteristics and ontological views have resulted in knowledge production practices that are typical in part of social sciences and humanities. This involves social constructionism and thick description enabled by qualitative methods, which all aim to create understanding of the meaning of contingent, unique, and often cultural or subjective phenomena (Ponterotto, 2005).

Briefly, the research ideals—making sense of complex network relationships, structures, and processes—and the knowledge construction principles of the IMP community favor phenomenon-driven case research on complex, dynamic, and embedded network topics; that is the right hand-side of the complexity continuum in Fig. 3. Drawing primarily on interpretative sensemaking in theorizing from case studies (Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011), the IMP scholars could, over the last 30 years, develop highly powerful conceptual frames (Interaction Model, ARA Framework, Network picture concept) adept for analytical description for any complex network phenomenon (for core IMP achievements, see Appendix A).

The impact of these conceptual frameworks and the entire IMP network approach has been significant for the B2B marketing research.

The IMP paradigm has essentially changed the way many B2B scholars examine the context of marketing not only as clusters of dyadic buyer–seller relationships but also as connected relationships in networks (Möller & Halinen, 2018). Within the entire marketing discipline, the IMP approach provides probably the most valid conceptual tools available for addressing the complexity of current business markets. The influence of the approach is visible in journal articles, doctoral theses, and the curricula of most European and Australasian business schools. Yet, its view on uniqueness of the business marketing phenomena and the ensuing emphasis on case research and interpretative sensemaking have appeared too “foreign” for the mainstream research community. Recent bibliometric research indicates that although scholars often refer to IMP research, its core tenets and theoretical contributions have limitedly impacted the mainstream marketing and other business disciplines (Aramo-Immonen et al., 2020). The paradigmatic and cultural distance has simply been too wide to overcome.

The strong cultural emphasis on complexity and uniqueness has had significant constricting consequences for research. Over the past 30 years, scholars have produced numerous case studies that describe networks and their process character (Halinen & Mainela, 2013). These studies have successfully reproduced the postulated complexity across various business and innovation networks. Unfortunately, this primarily empirical and phenomenon-driven approach has discouraged the query of the theoretically more advanced questions and research designs. The community has not been asking questions related to difference or variation, not to speak of the underlying reasons for them. For example, we lack enough knowledge of how networks and their management differ depending on their function and goals, business and technological context, or historical development. Or, whether there is any systemic variation in the network processes and why? When everything is unique, these kinds of systemic questions are simply useless. The ontological foundation of the IMP group, regarding all actors, resources, and activities as heterogeneous and unique (Håkansson & Snehota, 2017) and seeing networks as fluid, interactively created structures where nothing is predictable (Bizzi & Langley, 2012), seem to entail a theoretical impasse.

This position has made comparative research designs superfluous and even impossible, blocking one of the simplest but also most effective methods of scholarly research. The idiographic orientation is also manifest in the vague nature of the managerial suggestions the IMP research typically provides. When each management problem or decision is postulated to be influenced by temporal and contextual embeddedness, only very broad proposals can be offered (Bizzi & Langley, 2012; Möller, 2013; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017).

We claim that the core IMP research community is captive of its embraced ontological fundamentals, as NAM is captive of its science-ideal and methods. Due to its deep-rooted culture, the IMP community cannot produce new theoretical propositions. The IMP group created its most significant theoretical innovations: the interaction approach to business relationships and the network approach in the early 1980s and in the mid-1990s, respectively (Möller & Halinen, 2018). These were truly radical innovations, transforming the way scholars viewed and examined business marketing, and induced the development of the paradigmatic status of the IMP community (Cova et al., 2015; Håkansson & Gadde, 2018; Möller & Halinen, 2018). After these breakthroughs, the community has—despite the huge increase in the volume of IMP-driven research and a marked extension of research themes (Möller & Halinen, 2018)—mainly produced incremental improvements in its core conceptual frameworks. The introduction of the cognitive view of network management around 2005 is a delightful exception, but even here, the main theoretical substance of this perspective came from the management literature, strategic studies, and organizational theory (Colville & Pye, 2010; Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2006).

Briefly, we see that the IMP community scholarship represents clear signs of a mature research paradigm, dominated by “normal science” and a tendency to safeguard its core theoretical beliefs and consequently

to avoid new breakthrough research. The early radicalism seems to have turned into theoretical conservatism. One reason may be the early need to evangelize and defend the IMP core ideas to the dominant traditional marketing research community. The espoused idiographic orientation and sticking mainly to single-case research have turned the core IMP community into a cloistered society, with relatively little impact on the mainstream business marketing research.

6. A way forward—overcoming the cultural barriers

The analysis of the cultural and paradigmatic characteristics of the NAM and IMP research shows that these communities have almost diametric research interests, worldviews, and attitudes to knowledge construction, and consequently have produced highly differentiated knowledge of business marketing. Both communities have been extremely successful, but—we claim—their dominance has inserted a high price to the field by leaving significant research domains and issues underdeveloped or even ignored. In this section, we first address briefly this research gap, and then offer suggestions for advancing the NAM and IMP dominant research to better address the underdeveloped domains of research.

Notably, we do not consider any merging of these research communities. The nature of their fundamental goals and values are practically opposite. Instead, we propose to develop them internally by examining ways to alleviate their culturally learned barriers (Midgley et al., 2017).

6.1. Research gap between the two paradigms

The “white areas” between the NAM and IMP communities are marked by the research gap in Fig. 3. The knowledge production strategies adopted by the two paradigms have been successful in addressing research phenomena of either relatively low (NAM) or high complexity (IMP), but left a considerable lacuna around business marketing topics that fall in between, from medium-to-high level of complexity. We argue that the revealed research gap covers important business marketing issues and opportunities for theory development (Table 2). Here, we will only address aspects we believe require most attention.

First, we lack adequate knowledge or understanding about the emergence of various new market forms or ecosystems that rely on networks. This refers to both descriptive research (what kind of market forms) and processual research (through what kind of emergent and deliberate processes do these new forms evolve). We also know very little about the reasons or driving forces of their emergence. This concerns both “market contexts” and networks (Table 2). Similar what, why, and how questions should be posed for addressing the voids related to research on marketing channels and intentionally constructed strategic networks. What kind of particular forms evolve and why? And why are such context-driven questions so important? Western societies are dramatically changing. Various political and global crises, radical innovations and societal transitions are disrupting the markets and forming new conditions for B2B companies to handle and benefit from (Key et al., 2020; Möller et al., 2020). We thus need more systematic and contextually specific knowledge on the current and evolving marketing strategies and practices, including business models, digitization of marketing and sales, and servitization of offered solutions (Raddats, Kowalkowski, Benedettini, Burton, & Gebauer, 2019; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020).

All the presented research gaps have in common the need to develop contextualized research and theory development. That is, we need better understanding of what contextual structures and forces influence the emergence and construction of specific market forms, channel structures, and networks, alongside new organizational forms, business models, and marketing practices. This is challenging because of the nested nature of contextual forces (Bamberger, 2008; Möller et al., 2020; Möller & Halinen, 2017). Using other vocabulary, all business marketing

Table 2
Gaps in B2B Marketing Research

North American Mainstream Research (NAM)	IMP-Group Driven Research (IMP)
Market forms and processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of market forms exist in different industries/business fields? Why we have the specific market forms – through what kind of processes these have evolved and why – key drivers? What forces are transforming current market forms – view of the future? 	Why specific network forms and processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of network forms exist in different industries/business fields? Why we have the specific network forms – through what kind of processes these have evolved and why – key drivers? What forces are transforming current network forms – view of the future?
Channel structures, processes & relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of channel structures exist in different industries/business fields? Why we have the specific channel structures – through what kind of processes these have evolved and why – key drivers? What forces are transforming channel structures – view of the future? What kind of contractual relationships there are between various channel members in various industries/business fields, and why – key drivers? Through what kind of processes these have evolved? How are the channel structures related to channel performance, and how do the structures and their changes influence channel member roles and profitability? What forces are transforming current contractual relationships – view of the future? 	Existence and types of strategic nets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of intentionally constructed contractual networks (strategic nets) exist in different business fields and why – their drivers? Through what kind of processes have various strategic nets been constructed, or dissolved? What kind of actor roles there are and do they vary systematically across different nets? How to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of various strategic nets, and how to assess the member profitability? What factors are influencing the member profitability and does it change along the life cycle of various strategic nets?
Business marketing practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there specific differences between the business marketing practices across various industries and business contexts – drivers of potential differences? Are there specific differences between how business marketing practices have been organized across various industries and business contexts – drivers of potential differences? Are there specific differences between the marketer and customer roles across various industries and business contexts – drivers of potential differences and their profitability consequences? 	Management in and of strategic nets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of network management practices and processes exist in various kinds of strategic nets? Are there any systematic variation between the effectiveness of various management practices in different types of nets and/or phases of net construction and maintenance? Through what kind of process network management capabilities are constructed, are there differences in effectiveness, what are their drivers?

behaviors, solutions, and structures are conditioned by complex sets of contingent factors (Jackson, Helfen, Kaplan, Kirsch, & Lohmeyer, 2019). The burning question then is how these gaps can be addressed by advancing the NAM and IMP research.

Based on our analysis of the cultural foundations of the NAM and IMP research communities, we see that the primary way to advance their research in any radical way is through addressing, or more directly loosening the core cultural values and beliefs that guide the knowledge production in each community. Fig. 4 illustrates this. To seize the opportunities for theory development (see the arrows in Fig. 4), scholars need to overcome various cultural barriers (the dotted lines) that encapsulate into an issue of legitimacy for the NAM and that of ideology for the IMP. In the following, we suggest some avenues for moderating

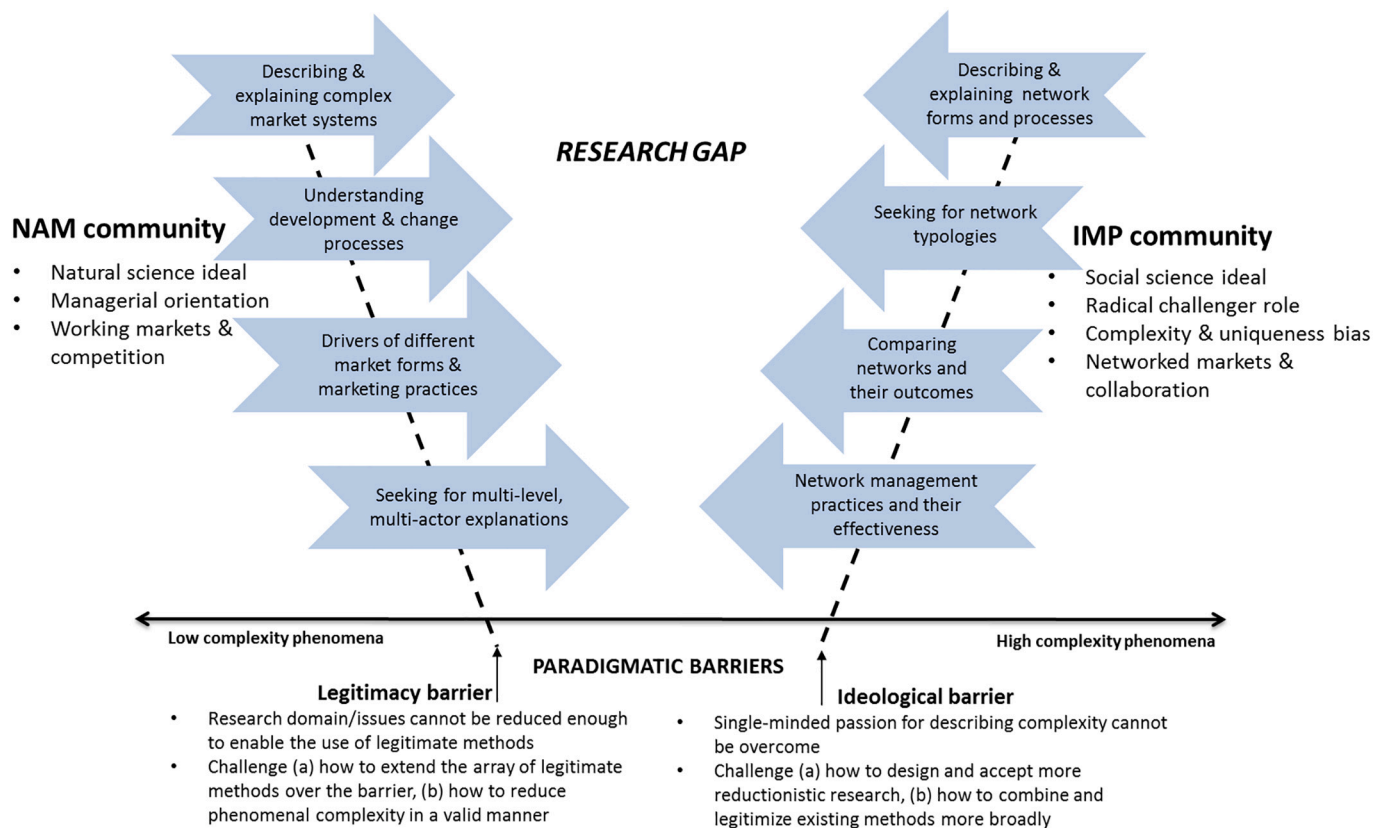


Fig. 4. Suggestions for Filling the Research Gap Between the NAM and IMP Communities

these barriers while advancing B2B marketing research.

6.2. How to advance NAM research

As discussed, the NAM community is effectively a captive of its science-driven worldview, the managerial orientation, and the competition bias and working markets premise (Fig. 4). As a deeply rooted belief system, the science ideal dominates the entire practice of knowledge production defining the right epistemological and methodological choices. This means that the science orientation works as a *legitimacy barrier* for the acceptable methodological tools for NAM researchers (see the left side of Fig. 4). Combined with the more implicit values of the managerial relevance and working markets and competition, they pose severe hurdles for filling the research gaps.

6.2.1. Mitigating the research legitimacy barrier

Enduring adherence to the natural science ideal has evolved to hypothesis testing-oriented research and mathematical modeling and to a set of meticulous norms of acceptable, or indeed scientifically legitimate methods. This necessitates strong reduction of the complexity of research issues and prioritizing variable-based quantitative modeling. We suggest that the most acceptable way, regarding cultural norms, to cross what we call the legitimacy barrier is through development and adoption of such quantitative methods that can address the multilayered and complex marketing phenomena in a less reduced manner than before. This would also allow the description and explanation of complex market systems.

The most notable development toward this direction is the growing application of the qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (cf., Ragin, 2009; Woodside, 2016, 2017). Compared to the traditional SEM modeling and statistical analysis, which is variable-based, the QCA analysis is case-oriented, enables contextual analysis by considering a set membership of the particular cases under study (e.g., firms and their

organizational forms, behaviors, and solutions like KAM), is applicable for small to medium-sized populations, and enables the recognition of conjunctive recipes (outcomes resulting from several interdependent conditions) alongside multiple paths to the outcomes (equifinality) (De Villiers, 2017; Jordan, Gross, Javernick-Will, & Garvin, 2011).

Briefly, adopting QCA would enable NAM researchers to shift to a configurational approach for theory development. Configurational approach, more common in organization and management research, sees business reality inherently gestalt-like. This means that the success (or non-success) or any other state or characteristic of a firm, business network, or strategy is influenced by a configuration of multiple factors, with complex causal relationships (Greckhamer, Furnari, Fiss, & Aguilera, 2018; Misangyi et al., 2017).

For example, strategy scholars have long recognized that organizations are open systems, and that superior performance is achieved by aligning strategies, structures, and environmental conditions (Miller, 1987). Similarly, all strategically relevant business marketing phenomena from the development of solution selling concepts to the orchestration of innovation networks can be characterized as configurational (Möller & Parvinen, 2015), as also the “Business marketing practices,” and “Management of strategic networks” sections in Table 2 indicate.

Overall, we recommend that business marketing scholars should increasingly adopt the configurational research approach and the QCA methods to efficiently address the complexity of business markets and marketing. The opportunities that these methods offer are illustrated in a small but increasing number of B2B marketing studies (Salonen, Terho, Böhm, Rajala, & Virtanen, 2021; Tóth, Thiesbrummel, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2015).

6.2.2. Managerial orientation—getting beyond the mere business interest

While the legitimacy barrier describes the epistemological and methodological cage of the NAM research, the management orientation refers to the prioritizing of the marketing management perspective in

the research topics addressed and questions posed (Fig. 4). Briefly, the NAM community tends to pose questions on “how to manage business marketing,” especially “how to identify and construct efficient and productive solutions.”

Getting free of this cultural orientation would enable NAM researchers to concentrate on more fundamental questions, such as “What kind of marketing phenomena exist and emerge, and why” and to address how marketing efforts influence other stakeholders beyond managers (see examples in Table 2). This would bring marketing scholarship properly to the realm of social sciences instead of serving only one stakeholder group. Alternatively, we advocate merging marketing with what is currently somewhat mislabeled as “macro-marketing”. Here we echo the calls for B2B marketing to take its responsibility for solving global economic, social, and environmental issues by contributing to sustainable markets and marketing (Sharma, 2020).

6.2.3. Extending the view outside of the working markets and competition

The majority of NAM research does not pay much attention to the business context but generally assumes “working markets” and takes competition as the key force shaping buyer and seller behavior for granted. Another shared feature of NAM research is the scarcity of process research. We have little understanding through what kind of processes various market forms or channel structures evolve or how, for example, digitalization or the availability of big data are transforming marketing practices in various businesses (see Table 2). This relates to the normative ethos and priority to provide managerial advice instead of seeking explanations for business marketing phenomena and their emergence. Another reason is probably that the science orientation emphasizing variance-based modeling and one-directional causal relationships lacks adequate tools for analyzing the emergence and change of complex market systems.

Because of the adopted micro-economics foundation, competition bias, and limited research on processes, NAM-oriented researchers tend to have a misleadingly simple view of markets, their change dynamics, and the role of collaboration in marketing (Möller et al., 2020; Nenonen & Storbacka, 2021). This is still the situation, despite the fact that the view of markets as socially constructed systems, originating from the institutional and systems perspectives in marketing, can be traced back to the 1960s (Alderson, 1965; Fisk, 1967). Since mid-2000, the market systems perspective has held a central role in the modern macro-marketing research (Layton & Grossbart, 2006; Wooliscroft, 2021). The B2B marketing research lags severely behind of this development.

Briefly, we suggest that the NAM community should embrace the systems view of markets and start to examine the drivers and processes of various market forms, channel structures and relationships, and the triggers and emergence of various business marketing practices and organizational solutions (see Fig. 4). This is a tall order and will require longitudinal research combining historical analysis with appropriate data banks (Argyres et al., 2020; Geels, 2005; Godfrey, Hassard, O'Connor, Rowlinson, & Ruef, 2016; Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2005; Rosenkopf & Schilling, 2007). Utilizing natural experiments, that is, comparing theoretically different business fields and their market forms and evolving marketing practices presents a little used path for theory development.

Another avenue, offering a better match for the science orientation, is utilizing more complex QCA modeling, as discussed above, enabling aspects from several contextual levels as potential explaining and triggering factors. This approach does not offset the need for proper longitudinal research and analysis of markets as complex institutional systems. The QCA method is suitable for more restricted research topics, allowing the modeling of multilayered “antecedents” and the focal phenomenon (Salonen et al., 2021).

To summarize, we recommend that the NAM research community start to look at business markets and marketing beyond the narrow managerial and market perspectives and seek seriously to broaden its

legitimate research methodology. The crossing of the legitimacy barrier would enable the NAM researchers to fully address socially and strategically important issues, such as emerging market forms and their development dynamics, changing channel systems, and evolving business marketing practices. The proposed epistemological and methodological expansions would also provide the NAM community with better tools for addressing the substantial changes and openings brought by digitalization, big data, and artificial intelligence (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020).

6.3. How to advance IMP research

As with the NAM research, the business marketing studies driven by the IMP group seem to be captives of the fundamental cultural aspects of the community. We see that the unwavering interest in the complexity of business networks, especially the adherence to the uniqueness of research phenomena related to the social constructionist orientation, effectively restricts the development of the IMP research. As all these orientations are interrelated, we label them *the ideological barrier* (Fig. 4). This label captures the value-laden prioritization the IMP community embraces in studying highly complex issues in their historical and contemporary contexts.

To develop its research program, the IMP community should be able to cross the ideological barrier developed through the evolution of the community. The barrier encompasses an emphasis on deep description of unique cases and omission of the development of more comparative studies. Traversing the barrier entails mentally accepting and methodologically conducting more reductionist research, paradoxically the exact opposite to the legitimacy challenge of the NAM community.

We advocate crossing the ideological barrier by conducting more theory-driven research that would identify and examine different types of business networks in terms of their goals, construction, organizing forms, governance, and management. That could result in typologies that would lead to theory development. We see that there are ample research results and empirical descriptions for moving from dominating interpretative sensemaking to more systematic theory building and even toward theory-driven contextualized explanation guided by prior knowledge and specific theoretical propositions. This suggestion covers all three levels of issues in Table 2: (a) examining why we have specific forms of networks and their evolution and construction processes, (b) why we have different types of strategic networks or nets, and (c) why there are different governmental, organizational, and managerial solutions across different types of strategic networks.

6.3.1. Taking process and evolution seriously

We call for further research on both the processes and evolution of networks, and their construction and management toward the future. At the macro network and strategic network levels, the study of evolution requires similar historical and longitudinal research efforts when addressing the advancement of NAM research to cover the evolution of market and channel forms. Powell et al. (2005) provided appropriate analytical examples of the evolution of the biosciences field in the United States. The socio-technical systems (STS) analyses by Geels and colleagues offer significant ideas and solutions for multi-level analysis of network evolution and change (Geels, 2005; Roberts & Geels, 2019).

Other valuable sources include Håkansson and Lundgren (1995), analyzing the networked construction of digital imaging technology and its applications, and Möller and Svahn (2009) proposing a three-phased evolution path for the networked emergence of a new business field, and proposing firm-level capabilities relevant in field orchestration. We encourage scholars to undertake multilevel-analysis and the identification of various groups of conditioning factors (enablers and constrictors) to address processes both at the macro and micro levels of networks (Geels, 2005; Halinen, Törnroos, & Elo, 2013; Möller et al., 2020).

Compared to the scant research on the evolution of macro-networks and various network forms, the research on strategic networks and their

management has been expanding rapidly (Möller & Halinen, 2017). Most studies, although highly interesting, address individual network cases and their construction and/or management (Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012; Dessaigne & Pardo, 2020; Kragh & Andersen, 2009). Although they provide incremental improvements in conceptualizations or additional support to the main tenets of IMP network theory, the studies rarely challenge the underlying uniqueness premise. The methodological challenge for conducting comparative multiple-case studies is obviously paramount, but they could be feasible by loosening the underlying preference for comprehensiveness and by applying a narrower process view (Aaboen, Dubois, & Lind, 2012).

6.3.2. Relaxing the strongest premises

Viewing markets and webs of interdependent relationships entails the idea of networks as organically evolving entities that cannot be managed; only managing *in* networks is possible (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Fehrer, 2020). The major midway proposition comes from the strategic nets perspective introduced by Möller and colleagues between 2003–2007 (Möller & Rajala, 2007; Möller, Rajala, & Svahn, 2005; Möller & Svahn, 2003). The approach focuses on designed network organizations and thus differs ontologically from the emergent and, in principle, borderless view of business networks dominating the IMP core research. The strategic net approach suggests that because of the different ontological properties of each generic net type, it is possible to derive theory-driven propositions concerning the management of these nets, the required capabilities (Möller & Svahn, 2003), mechanisms, and organization (Möller & Rajala, 2007).

The strategic net approach has gained momentum, leading to studies examining the construction and management of different types of networks (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Keränen, Komulainen, Lehtimäki, & Ulkuniemi, 2021; Nordin, Ravald, Möller, & Mohr, 2018; Perks et al., 2017). A notable opportunity is to combine the strategic network perspective with the “market work” (Mason, Friesl, & Ford, 2017) or “market shaping” perspectives (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2016), or with the institutional and stakeholder theories (Van Bockhaven & Matthysens, 2017) for studying new markets and business construction. The IMP approach offers a highly valuable multi-actor perspective to the concerns of sustainable marketing, servitization, or digitalization, but it would benefit from theory input outside of its own realm. The comparative and contingency research perspectives we advocate will presume moving away from interpretative sensemaking in case research toward contextual explanation and utilization of natural experiment opportunities (Welch et al., 2011).

Drawing on the notions of the strategic net approach and previously mentioned configuration research (Greckhamer et al., 2018; Misangyi et al., 2017), we recommend that the IMP community start to pursue theory-driven studies to identify the drivers of various types of business and innovation networks and their efficient organizational and governance forms, and managerial capabilities. The study of Keränen et al. (2021) on “Restructuring existing value networks to diffuse sustainable innovations in food packaging” and that of Penttälä, Ravald, Dahl, and Björk (2020) on “Managerial sensemaking in a transforming business ecosystem: Conditioning forces, moderating frames, and strategizing options” offer excellent examples.

The research questions concerning the “Existence and types of strategic networks” and “Management in and of strategic networks” posed in Table 2 offer further direction. Again, multi-level analysis and identification of the drivers conditioning the network phenomena under study are recommended with comparative research designs analyzing theoretically selected cases. Special attention should be given to the measurement and analysis of the effectiveness of various network forms and practices. Longitudinal studies contrasting theoretically diverse business and innovation networks should be prioritized to single case studies. Moving toward these suggestions would, however, require traversing the strong ideological barrier of IMP research (see Fig. 4).

7. Concluding discussion

In this study, we provided a meta-theoretical analysis of the business marketing research domain by analyzing its major research communities, the NAM and the IMP communities and their paradigmatic ways of producing knowledge. We were motivated by a persistent sensation that the field is not advancing in its theory development (Möller, 2013; Yadav, 2010) nor is it meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing business environment—an observation shared by many marketing scholars (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Lilien, 2016; Fehrer, 2020; Key et al., 2020; Rust, 2020). Briefly, we started to doubt the ability of the NAM and IMP communities to produce new research openings. For us, they seem like mature research communities pursuing inert paradigmatic research that enables only incremental renewal.

To substantiate these reservations, we conducted the reported meta-theoretical analysis of the NAM and IMP research, paying attention to three aspects: the prevailing paradigmatic assumptions guiding research practices, the historical background and values espoused by the communities, and the consequences of these on the research questions asked and the kind of knowledge produced. Based on the analysis, we showed that the underlying belief systems and knowledge production practices differ essentially between the two communities, forming strong, internally coherent cultures. Contrasting the two paradigms, we found major research gaps that current research has left untapped with respect to current contextual challenges and proposed accordingly a set of specific recommendations for the advancement of the NAM and IMP research.

7.1. Research implications

Our examination suggests that, to understand current research traditions, we must have knowledge of their evolutionary history and the research communities that have constructed them. Here, we add to the valuable contributions of Cortez and Johnston (2017) and Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013) in B2B marketing and Kumar (2015) in the mainstream marketing. We argued that those social and science policy drivers that pushed the business marketing field forward in the 1950s and 1960s are still greatly influencing the research practice. Our study specifies that the shared values of the community provide strong heuristics that guide the dominant way of conducting research. The shared intracultural values influence the prioritization of the research issues, theorizing performed within the community, and research practices regarded as effective or, indeed, scientifically legitimate. In fact, the community culture guides the entire knowledge production system and the valuation of its results, and consequently, also its researchers.

Our study shows that the NAM community embraces a natural science ideal and managerial orientation, prioritizing quantitative modeling-oriented reductionist research and assuming that all business phenomena can be addressed through objectification and variable-based research methods. The IMP community values social constructionism and descriptive research conducted through case analysis, stressing the temporal and contextual dependence and uniqueness of research phenomena. NAM research excels in modeling relatively simplistic, frequently occurring business marketing phenomena but has no interest or legitimate research tools for performing processual research or addressing complex strategic issues. The IMP community, in turn, concentrates on descriptive analysis of complex business networks and their focal relationships, investigating events and processes. Because of the strong emphasis on the uniqueness of phenomena, IMP researchers have been reluctant to construct systematic theories and have shunned managerial generalizations.

Obviously, the cultural barriers between the NAM and IMP communities are high. Midgley et al. (2017) distinguished between philosophical, cultural, and psychological hurdles for achieving methodological pluralism. Our results highlight that the barriers between the underlying research paradigms appear primarily at the cultural level, as a legitimacy issue related to scientifically acceptable

research practices regarding the NAM and as an ideological issue related to the prioritization of descriptive qualitative research of unique phenomena regarding the IMP.

Based on our comparative meta-theoretical analysis, we further maintain that strong research cultures form scholarly blinders and risk leaving important research questions unaddressed. The cultural heritage ingrained in the values of the community creates various biases in the knowledge base of the research domain over time. We were surprised by the relative weakness and even absence of the positive science-driven knowledge construction of business markets and business marketing (cf. Hunt, 1983), and the negligence of the business context and its effects thereon (cf. Möller et al., 2020). The study identifies several gaps in the current knowledge, e.g., what kind of market or network forms exist; how they evolve and why; what kind of channel systems or strategic networks exist; how they evolve and why; and how these various market forms can be effectively managed. It seems that the business marketing domain is lacking systemic research on the evolution of business markets and their emerging new forms, and on the influence of business context on business marketing strategies and practice.

Based on the analysis, we recommend that B2B scholars open their eyes and set more ambitious questions for research to develop B2B marketing theory. We call for raising the level of theorizing in particular. Our key argument is that to improve the scientific value and relevance of business marketing research, the NAM and IMP communities should alleviate their recognized cultural barriers and seek fresh pastures beyond their current paradigmatic boundaries. Our suggestion resonates with the recent call of IMM journal editors to advance interdisciplinary research in business marketing (Markovic, Jaakkola, Lindgreen, & Di Benedetto, 2021). Broadening the disciplinary horizons is, however, not sufficient or even feasible as a sole measure. We also need to be ready for cultural change, i.e., to loosen the self-imposed ontological, epistemological, and methodological restrictions of research.

7.2. Caveats

Finally, a few limitations and caveats should be addressed. Within the limits of one paper, we could not carry out a proper historical analysis of the evolution of the NAM and IMP research traditions but relied primarily on the available treatises. The development of the B2B marketing, and marketing in general, would benefit from historical research examining the evolution of the field addressing the role of economic, social, institutional, and science-related forces. A comparison with such neighboring fields as strategy, management and organization theory would be highly welcome.

Another issue is that, at the level of research practice, the business marketing domain does not divide into clear-cut paradigmatic camps. Therefore, we depict the NAM and IMP research on a continuum of complexity, not as a dichotomy. This implies that a part of B2B studies do not self-evidently represent pure NAM or pure IMP but operate often on a transition zone between the two paradigms. By focusing on the core aspects of the NAM- and IMP-driven research, we have understandably left out business marketing research that is not carried out under these

broad umbrellas. As the two major paradigms that have governed the business marketing domain for decades, the analysis of the NAM and the IMP research has, however, been well motivated to highlight the need for cultural change in the discipline. It is delightful to see that many innovative studies have recently been published outside of, or at least stretching, the paradigmatic boundaries of the NAM and the IMP to renew business marketing research. Many of these studies draw on theories that reside beyond the conventional business marketing domain or utilize methodological pragmatism or pluralism to seek path-breaking contributions (Coreynen, Matthysens, & Van Bockhaven, 2017; Midgley et al., 2017; Nenonen, Storbacka, Sklyar, Frow, & Payne, 2020; Pedersen, Ritter, & Di Benedetto, 2020). For example, the expanding studies of the market shaping and construction, drawing on economic sociology and systems perspective, offer great promise (Nenonen & Storbacka, 2021) as do studies addressing the network embedding of start-ups, using various network theories as a resource (Baraldi, Havenvid, Linné, & Öberg, 2019).

Some of our readers, the so-called pragmatists, may feel that they do not belong to either of these camps but have been able to jump between the NAM and IMP types of research depending on their current research interest. Some others may feel that they have resisted the stickiness of paradigms and moved to another camp at some point of their career. It is naturally possible, though demanding, to turn to another “religion,” that is, to learn the cultural research norms of several research approaches (Midgley et al., 2017). However, even if individual scholars can take a permissive stance toward paradigmatic contingencies, paradigms as cognitive belief systems tend to stay the same. That is, the scholars are playing according to the community rules to get accepted, whether they notice it themselves or not. Yes, that is the power of the paradigms!

We do hope that our findings and propositions encourage critical discussion on the state of business marketing research, facilitate researchers to identify their personal “paradigmatic profiles,” and—if they will—also to break free from them to advance investigations that address the current knowledge gaps of our discipline. We need both new openings and augmented NAM and IMP insights to address the fundamental business and societal issues brought by the climate change and ecological crises. This calls for new analytical tools for addressing the role of environmental contextuality in B2B marketing. Hopefully, the introduced research continuum and gap analysis fosters the way forward.

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Appendix A. Achievements of NAM and IMP Research Traditions—Examples

North American Mainstream Research (NAM)	IMP-Group Driven Research (IMP)
Managerial theories and decision-making aids – for the sake of brevity this covers both the Managerial marketing and Marketing science streams	Interaction approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Business customer segmentation• Sales management models• NPD – planning, forecasting & diffusion tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Framework model identifying the key constructs for analyzing and representing business relationships between interdependent actors (types of bonds – economic, legal, technical, knowledge, procedural; investments, attraction, expectations, trust, commitment, shared values and norms.

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North American Mainstream Research (NAM)	IMP-Group Driven Research (IMP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pricing models • Logistic models • CRM-models & Customer value models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Customer portfolio management ◦ Customer (multi)channel management ◦ Customer life-cycle management <p>Widely implemented support models/systems for business marketing functions & decisions which can be specified and quantified successfully.</p> <p>Channels research stream</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanatory modeling channel, primarily marketer-channel partner, relationships based on TCA, social exchange theory, and resource dependence theory. • Utilizing an antecedent – focal phenomenon – consequences designs created an articulated theory of channel relationships involving politics (power, interdependence, conflicts), economy (efficiency, performance), and sociology (expectations, trust, commitment). <p>Relationship marketing stream</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanatory modelling of supplier-customer relationships; similar to the Channels research. • Extension to explanatory modeling of customer value creation and management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Value-based portfolios ◦ Combined offering - product and services ◦ Customer life-cycle value management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying interaction processes: resource exchange, social exchange, adaptation, coordination. These are analytical tools for examining relationship development. • Identifying and examining collaboration as a major force (besides competition) shaping relationship development and change. • Conceptual tools for relationship management. <p>Network approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework models (Actors-Resources-Activities, Four Rs) identifying the key constructs for analyzing and representing business markets as networks of interdependent actor relationships. • Extensive case-study based evidence on the networked character of business fields, special attention to technical development and innovation. • Extensive case-study based evidence on the influence of time (history) and context on the focal network relationships and their development. • Conceptual tools for managerial sense making and navigation in networks. • Tools for deriving actors' network maps/theories.

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