



## Clearing the paradigmatic fog: A rejoinder to responses

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### 1. Introduction

We are most grateful to the authors of the three commentaries for our article “Clearing the paradigmatic fog – How to move forward in business marketing research” (Möller & Halinen, 2022):

- Lilien and Wuyts (2022). Comments on “Clearing the paradigmatic fog – How to move forward in business marketing research: A response to Möller and Halinen (2022)”.
- Luis Araujo (2023). A tale of two paradigms. A comment on Möller and Halinen (2022).
- Rod Brodie and Fehrer (2022). Service-dominant logic as mainstream: Integrating apparently disparate marketing paradigms? A response to Möller and Halinen (2022).

Warm thanks are also due to the Industrial Marketing Management Journal and its editorial team, especially to John Nicholson—the Associate Editor for Target and Position Papers—who enabled the commentary discussion. We appreciate the avantgarde role of the IMM in advancing research on business marketing.

To refresh readers' memories, the main aim of our paper was to provide a meta-theoretical analysis of the B2B marketing research domain by analyzing its major research communities: the North American mainstream tradition (NAM), the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group-driven approach, and their paradigmatic ways of producing knowledge. The goal was to make their underlying assumptions and intellectual goals transparent, enabling an assessment of their

strengths and weaknesses. By contrasting the two paradigms, we highlighted the fragmented knowledge base of the marketing community, identified neglected issues and unanswered questions, and suggested how to advance theory construction in the field.

We are delighted to see the debate on the future of the B2B marketing discipline that our paper has created in various academic forums. In the published commentaries, the authors suggest alternative ways to examine paradigm development. At the same time, we are concerned about misinterpretations of our ideas. We begin our rejoinder by addressing the distinct aspects brought up in each commentary and conclude with a discussion of the propositions to renew the discipline.

### 2. Response to Lilien and Wuyts

We very much appreciate the ideas provided by and the efforts of Gary Lilien and Stefan Wuyts in our article. Coming from the Institute for the Study of Business Markets at PennState University (ISBM), Gary Lilien is one of its founding persons, and we value the experience and expertise underlying the commentary.

Lilien and Wuyts offer three points of contention toward our paper and a more fundamental challenge. We will address these in the order of presentation.

#### 2.1. Is there a reason to be optimistic?

First, they contest our conclusion that mainstream business marketing research (MB2B) is overwhelmingly dominated by quantitative

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analysis and state that our claim that “only knowledge produced by quantitative analysis ... is seen as significant or legitimate” is contradicted by the number of influential qualitative MB2B studies (Lilien & Wuyts, 2022, p. 502).

We acknowledge that our description of the two dominating paradigms (NAM and IMP) offers a simplified picture of the B2B research domain. The high abstraction level forced us to leave several exceptions and deviant cases unaddressed. However, although the examples our colleagues use have been highly influential (e.g., Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Zeithaml et al., 2020) they form a very small exception in the long history of MB2B studies. The strength of the quantitative orientation is reflected, for example, in the fact that the overwhelming share of over 100 market orientation studies—initiated by Kohli and Jaworski (1990)—have been quantitative (Kirca et al., 2005; Van Raaij & Stoelhorst, 2008).

Moreover, one should note that many of the significant articles in marketing have been primarily conceptual. In other words, their influence did not stem from qualitative or quantitative methodologies or originate from a specific paradigm, but they generated novel theoretical propositions, often synthesizing several research streams (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1987; Stern & Reve, 1980; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). These kinds of landmark articles have been most influential over the long history of B2B research, irrespective of the paradigm or community from which they have been proposed.

Over the past 20 years, theoretical papers published in top journals have diminished (Yadav, 2010). This worrying trend (Key et al., 2020) is, in our interpretation, due to the dominance of the NAM culture, which places high priority on empirical contributions and underscores the use of quantitative and mathematically sophisticated methods.

In short, we welcome the new trends mentioned by Lilien and Wuyts but maintain that the overwhelming majority of MB2B studies utilize some form of quantitative analysis. For example, the emergence of the ‘theories-in-use’ approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020) is still scant, although the idea was presented in 1982 (Zaltman et al., 1982). Our view of the NAM has been shaped by the publishing history of over 50 years, and we believe that, unfortunately, the culture encompassing the guiding heuristics of NAM research and publication is still predominantly natural science oriented.

The second criticism is that we have portrayed a misleading view of how NAM addresses buyer–seller relationships, treating them superficially and assuming that suppliers and customers “behave independently, switching and choosing business partners for every specific need” and that we also provide “a misleadingly simple view of ... collaboration in marketing” (Lilien & Wuyts, 2022, p. 502). The authors note that the management of interorganizational relationships is one of the most influential tracks within MB2B.

Lilien and Wuyts refer primarily to how we regarded, and still regard, what we call Marketing Management Orientation streams as presuming working markets and the CRM approach about relationships that focuses on how to manage a relationship (see Fig. 1, Möller & Halinen, 2022, p. 284). We agree that the channels research stream—especially studies drawing on the political-economy approach (Stern & Reve, 1980)—analyze B2B relationships in greater depth, addressing both their social and economic aspects. However, the early calls for understanding the processual nature of relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987) and the influence of context on relationships (Stern & Reve, 1980) have mostly remained unattended.

We are also afraid that the claim that the MB2B has “largely made the transition from dyads to networks” (Lilien & Wuyts, 2022, p. 502) is overly optimistic. The initial North American call for network research in the late 1990s by Achrol and Kotler (Achrol & Kotler, 1999) has not materialized in any thriving network research within the NAM community. The general premises of the network theory (e.g., Möller & Halinen, 2022) are alien to MB2B scholars, and the complexity of networks does not make them easily amenable to quantitative analyses or to drawing managerial implications, which are the probable reasons for the

modest progress. We hope that the more recent article (Achrol & Kotler, 2022) will pave the way for an increased research interest in business networks and their close ‘cousin,’ the business ecosystems.

## 2.2. New openings and their limits

Lilien and Wuyts criticize our pessimistic view of the stagnation of NAM research and claim that MB2B is alive and well. We applaud the reported recent interest in complex strategic issues but emphasize that it is of recent origin and very limited thus far. In this sense, it is not representative of the dominant history of MB2B research. We hope to see more of this. We are also pleased to learn that the NAM is being renovated by addressing new topics and phenomena, such as customer services platforms (Zhou, Allen, Gretz, & Houston, 2022). However, this has not been our major concern but rather that the NAM community continues to approach new topics with old research tools and from the perspective of the established premises. We thus repeat our view that if the NAM research is not expanding its dominant methodological dogma, it does not have the necessary tools for analyzing such complex processes as the disruption of business fields (Möller et al., 2020) or the shaping of markets requires (Maciel & Fischer, 2020).

## 3. Response to Araujo

We are grateful to our esteemed colleague Luis Araujo for his insightful comments on our article. Many of the points raised do not conflict with ours but are elegant interpretations of our arguments that are only possible when based on an extensive knowledge of literature. We very much appreciate your effort. There are, however, some critical notions in his reading of the paper that we have difficulty recognizing. These raise some observations on our part as well as a concern for potential misunderstandings and pitfalls in the clarity of scientific communication.

Araujo starts by linking our paper to the so-called paradigm wars of the 1980s: “In many ways, this article reads like a throwback to a different age when paradigm wars were rife and ‘rancorous disputations’ pervaded the marketing discipline” (Araujo, 2023, p. 271). We interpret this as a friendly remark, because who likes war? Our intention was not to go backwards or provoke confrontations but to recognize the significant influence that research communities and their metatheoretical beliefs exert on how researchers perceive B2B issues, how they practice research, and what kind of results they produce. We see this as an ongoing phenomenon, and one of our goals was to make this influence visible and recognizable in the B2B research context. We also believe, perhaps idealistically, that understanding the motivations, pros, and cons of various research approaches can increase mutual understanding.

### 3.1. Clearing or obscuring the picture?

The key criticism from Araujo (2023) is that our “comparison of the two paradigms with contrasting scopes has resulted in [a] hazy picture” (p. 271). It is unfortunate that our lengthy description of the development and nature of the two paradigms does not provide a clear enough picture for our scholarly readership.

We agree that we could have identified more schools of thought—such as Sheth et al. (1988)—especially concerning the NAM strand of B2B research that contains several streams (Möller & Halinen, 2022, Fig. 1). We decided against this solution, as the core idea was to strive for a sharp comparison between NAM- and IMP-driven research. The debatable point of our solution is whether the NAM research streams share an underlying paradigmatic orientation that is strong enough to allow reasonable bundling for analytical purposes. We obviously think so, but this is a moot point.

Other reservations posed by Araujo are linked to the way in which we examine these paradigms. Araujo (2023) states that we “stick to a narrow reading of Kuhn’s (1970) arguments regarding to the nature of the

paradigms, ... based on watertight distinctions between normal and revolutionary science” (p. 271) and that we “rely on an interpretation of Kuhn’s paradigms as insular cognitive belief systems” (p. 271). This is an interesting reading, since we did not aim at any ‘watertight’ distinctions or insular image of the two paradigms. Instead, we position the NAM and the IMP research communities on a continuum and describe them as evolving paradigms by making visible the social, economic, and academic trends and contexts that influenced their evolution. We admit that our evolutionary description was sketchy and recommend more historical research on the development of contemporary marketing thought. In the article, we also challenged both communities to renew themselves and suggested themes that fall between paradigms, assuming that lowering paradigm barriers is possible. This thinking is closer to Lakatos’s view of research programs, which can co-exist and co-evolve, each producing good science according to its own premises (Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Leong, 1985). However, the NAM and IMP programs have constructed relatively polar views within their own communities on how to carry out effective and legitimate research on business marketing. As each address either different phenomena or views the same phenomena from different perspectives, they have both been able to offer valuable results and live parallel lives. We are not experts of philosophy of science debates from the 1970–80s, but we have been informed about how these debates (Kuhn, Popper, Lakatos, Feyerabend) have been interpreted and used in the marketing discipline (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Arndt, 1985; Leong, 1985). Therefore, we apologize for the pragmatic application of the original ideas and for potential misinterpretations.

Araujo (2023) further states “...that although ideas clearly matter, we should not jump to the conclusion that the fate of paradigms depends on impeccable logic or representational accuracy” (p. 272). This is not what we argue, either. We clearly caution the reader that our profiling of the NAM and IMP traditions are simplifications for analytical and provocative reasons. We consciously abandoned detailed representational accuracy for comparative clarity. Drawing on Isaac (2009), Araujo places high priority on the role of theories that transform and renovate the discipline. This is an important notion. The evolution of paradigms should not be seen as deterministic or fatalistic; rather, it is a matter of how keenly the community follows paradigmatic beliefs while developing new theories. The central question is whether researchers are ultimately able to withdraw from learned assumptions. Although paradigms are fuzzy, abstract, and difficult to capture—not least because of their manifold meanings as deeply rooted, legitimized assumptions by the communities of scholars constructing and transforming the paradigms—their evolutionary patterns can be discerned, and they matter (Leong, 1985; Midgley et al., 2017).

With important implications for the further development of research, Araujo (2023) continues by arguing that our paper has a “paradox at the heart of argument” (p. 272). “Having provided a tightly argued case as to why incommensurability reigns supreme, M&H propose that NAM and IMP could selectively trade ideas for the benefit of both. If NAM can move toward a systems view of markets and IMP swallow the need for mid-level theorizing, we have the prospect of a détente if not a friendly rapprochement” (Araujo, 2023, p. 272). These are ‘big guns’ that require both refutation and refinement. We do not argue for or believe in strong incommensurability. Instead, we describe the development of the research communities and their paradigmatic assumptions and outline their key driving forces and characteristics. Based on this, we suggest that NAM and IMP, by lessening some of their core cultural barriers, could separately approach what we have identified as the research GAP or white areas. For clarity, we do not suggest a “shared agenda” or integration of these communities or a combination of their theoretical lenses. However, we would not mind a greater mutual understanding, which we hope our paper will advance, and we are happy to endorse “friendly rapprochement.”

### 3.2. The pertinent role of institutions

Referring to the institutional influences of research communities on scholarly work, Araujo (2023, p. 271) suggests, drawing on Becher and Trowler (2001), that “academics may be less prone to adopt unitary identities and susceptible to groupthink, at least in the earlier stages of their careers” than we have emphasized. This is an insightful point that would require further study. Although we share the view that established researchers have made investments in learning ‘the ropes of carrying out particular research’ and have developed positions to be defended, we also see that, for doctoral students and younger researchers, much depends on their cultural context. If they are socialized in a national and/or disciplinary research culture emphasizing a particular research approach, working in a university/department endorsing that approach, and being couched by a professor believing in one valid way of conducting research, the student generally does not have the intellectual freedom that Araujo postulates. In particular, doctoral students are more or less forced to adopt the paradigms of their supervisors and learn the canons of how to get published and promoted. Doctoral education is about learning the right way to do research and to value the right things. We are afraid that the more the faculty underlines top rankings, the less freedom doctoral students have with respect to the methods that they use, the journals they must target, and whose criteria they must pass.

Drawing on Miller (2007), Araujo (2023) concludes by advocating such novel research that “... breaks free from paradigms, falls between paradigms or is pre-theoretic” (p. 272). While we see the value of seeking novelty, we maintain our argument: it is as difficult for scholars to break free from research socialization as it is for any person to break free from her social context. By recognizing the characteristics of various research cultures, one can try to make a deliberate change of camp, while recognizing this process requires considerable intellectual investment and un-learning. In conclusion, thank you, Luis; together, we can move toward new beginnings. However, as we are influenced by historical baggage, we call for young brains to stand up to this challenge.

## 4. Responses to Brodie and Fehrer

First, we offer our warm thanks to Brodie and Fehrer (2022) for their positive comments on our paper on the dominant research paradigms in B2B marketing research. We appreciate how they found the paper useful for a discussion on the potential role of the service-dominant logic (S—D logic) approach as an integrative avenue in forming a ‘grand theory’ for marketing. As a discussion on SDL would require a paper of its own, and this was not our original goal, we will focus on a few critical comments Brodie and Fehrer raise and the alternative view of paradigms that their commentary presents.

### 4.1. Grand theory as a paradigm

Brodie and Fehrer boldly promote S—D logic as an “indigenous grand theory of marketing, 2022, p., 499.” Twenty years after the launching of the S—D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), it seems that the core S—D logic community still shows a similar missionary drive as we identified in the early IMP community (Möller & Halinen, 2022). The community expresses ardent conversionary vigor toward other existing theoretical approaches. Perhaps this is a characteristic of all challenger movements in science.

We are afraid that the multidimensional nature of the concept of paradigm creates a risk of comparing apples with oranges (Barnes et al., 1996; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Masterman, 1982; Morgan, 1980). Proposing a grand theory as an umbrella for several research orientations (each advocating different paradigmatic assumptions) represents a different approach to paradigms than our metatheoretical analysis of the science–philosophical assumptions of the B2B research orientations. We appreciate the way in which Brodie and Fehrer extended our

metatheoretical analysis of the NAM and IMP research communities to cover S—D logic-driven research (Brodie & Fehrer, 2022, Table 1). We also endorse the multi-philosophical perspective on science and the plurality of research orientations that they promote but see that the idea of service-dominant logic “integrating” the NAM and IMP approaches requires critical reflection.

#### 4.2. Can S—D logic really integrate NAM and IMP research?

Brodie and Fehrer contend that “Rather than adopting an ‘either-or’ binary perspective, we argue for a ‘both-and’ pluralistic perspective to integrate the disparity and ‘clear the fog’” (Brodie & Fehrer, 2022, p. 500). In brief, they suggest that “...the S-D logic provides a meta-position, because of its distinct narrative and meta-lexicon of the market and value cocreation and hence, can serve as an integrating framework for both, NAM and IMP” (p. 500).

First, we have not promoted any binary perspective or dichotomy but have tried to reveal the cultural characteristics and metatheoretical positions of the NAM and IMP orientations and their consequences in terms of research goals, practices, and results. Because of their fundamentally different orientations, we do not see that they can be ‘integrated,’ but obviously they can be understood and utilized for the advancement of B2B marketing research—as we have tried to show. We argue that S—D logic does not offer any shortcut for this kind of comprehension; the method required is metatheoretical and historical analysis. This pertains to an in-depth description of the S—D logic movement itself. With this, we do not mean to undervalue the perspectives made available for B2B research by the S—D logic community.

#### 4.3. The value of S—D logic

The emphasis S—D logic gives to the context, its postulated layered character, and the co-creation of value are highly relevant aspects. However, these have also been offered by the IMP Group, the critical realism school of social science (Sayer, 2010), and, more recently, the market systems and ecosystems approaches (Möller et al., 2020).

We concur that as an abstract conceptual lexicon, S—D logic offers a general theoretical vocabulary for describing marketing phenomena. However, because of this generality and descriptiveness, it does not offer any explanatory theories of markets, their emergence, and development. To achieve this, we claim that S—D logic (as well as the NAM and IMP) must be supplemented with theories of contexts, as argued in Möller and Halinen (2022) and Möller et al. (2020). Hence, we call for theories that inform us under what kinds of contextual conditions we can expect specific kinds of market systems, networks, or ecosystems to emerge from and prosper.

We sincerely thank Rod Brodie and Julia Fehrer for their comments and suggestions concerning our paper, and we look forward to continuing the advancement of marketing theory.

### 5. Propositions to advance B2B marketing research

We are delighted that the authors of the commentaries did not disagree with our comparative approach or disregard our suggestions in any deeper sense. Another and more forward-looking perception is that all authors were able to utilize our study to offer ideas on how to advance our discipline.

First, Lilien and Wuyts (2022) vision that addresses such emerging novel themes as digital and internet-based service platforms, sustainability, and digital analytics will enable firms to enhance their strategic agility and management in general (see their Fig. 1). In brief, by addressing new and highly relevant issues, “MB2B can continue to reinvent itself as needed and remain vital” (p. 503). We see this as an important path to progress along but would add the need to advance research methods and, even more importantly, to start to ask more complex contextual ‘why questions,’ thus extending the dominant ‘how

to manage’ orientation typical for the MB2B. For example, what kinds of market forms exist in different industries or business fields? Why do we have specific market forms and through what kind of processes and drivers have these evolved and why? In other words, what forces are transforming current market forms? Thus, we maintain a call for cultural renewal within the NAM community.

Second, Araujo (2023) highlights the need to foster theoretical innovativeness in research. As mature research communities are deeply ingrained in their research norms, he is openly critical of their renewal. As a remedy, Araujo calls for initiatives to come outside its paradigmatic cages. We fully agree but again emphasize the need to intentionally liberalize the institutions governing the research practices (universities and their doctoral education, funding bodies, and academic journals) and their current conservative cultures. This takes up time and calls for courage. Peter LaPlaca's long editorship of *Industrial Marketing Management* offers an encouraging example of how to initiate and foster academic innovativeness through a journal (Möller & Halinen, 2018).

Finally, Brodie and Fehrer (2022) discuss the possibility of developing “a pluralistic metatheoretical perspective for marketing which would be able to bridge the various siloed research traditions” (p. 499). They offer S—D logic for the role of a general theory of marketing based on its generic descriptive conceptual lexicon. While sympathizing with the call for pluralistic research and the usefulness of constructing higher-level metatheories, we remain skeptical of any bridging or integrating of paradigmatically different research traditions. To advance theorizing in B2B marketing, we should go beyond the lexicon character of S—D logic and develop S—D logic or competing approaches toward more context-sensitive theories with explanatory power. In other words, theories should be able to propose why specific market forms and marketing practices evolve, and even more ambitiously, why certain practices are more effective than others.

A common issue in all the commentaries concerns metatheoretical analysis. A longitudinal metatheoretical analysis of such research streams as the NAM/MB2B and IMP research presumes strong abstraction. One must forsake many trees to see the forest—that is, we have had to ignore many detailed features and even branches in the vast NAM research. We believe, however, that through this simplification process, we have been able to paint a picture that captures the main features and dominant principles of NAM research. It is evident, however, that all research in marketing deserves proper historical research that would examine its theoretical and philosophical foundations. The methods of historical research are well-grounded, but we would like to see further development of the metatheoretical perspective and its ‘tools’.

In conclusion, we warmly welcome the valuable ideas that Lilien and Wuyts, Araujo, and Brodie and Fehrer have brought forward. All the proposed ways—development through studying novel themes, supporting innovative and ‘paradigm-free’ theorizing, and constructing general theories—offer avenues for renewing the B2B discipline. Personally, we would like to see deeper and more critical theory construction, and we hope that our original article and the commentaries discussed by eminent scholars pave the way for disciplinary advancement.

#### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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