



Advancing conceptual-only articles in marketing

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There have been numerous calls for more conceptual, theoretical articles in marketing (e.g., Hulland 2019; MacInnis 2011; Yadav 2010). It has also been noted that conceptual articles are the most cited and garner an exceptionally high proportion of the major awards (e.g., Maynard/Hunt Award, AMA/Sheth Foundation Award, etc.). More generally, it can be argued that, even in “empirical” articles, it is the conceptual, theoretical contribution that is the real impact and essentially what is always cited.

Yet, conceptual articles continue to constitute a relatively small percentage of articles in marketing-related journals in general and, arguably, an even more miniscule proportion of articles in A-level and “elite” journals. In fact, the number of conceptual articles has been shown to be declining (Yadav 2010). Arguably, this dearth of conceptual, theoretical articles is leading to a situation in which marketing is becoming characterized as a theory-importing-only discipline (Clark et al. 2014; Piercy 2002) and increasingly “marginalized” (Lehmann et al. 2011: see also Hunt 2018 and this issue). A number of reasons have been suggested for this situation:

- The importance of theory is underemphasized in marketing doctoral education.
- Doctoral students are often not taught conceptual writing, except to the extent that it supports data-driven findings.
- Conceptual articles do not have clear templates as do empirical articles and, therefore, are perceived to be more difficult/riskier to write.

- Editors are often hesitant to publish conceptual articles, especially those that challenge institutionalized thought, either for the fear of jeopardizing their journal’s reputation, or lack of comfort evaluating conceptual articles.
- Both editors and reviewers are often less comfortable reviewing conceptual-only manuscripts.
- Various perspectives suggesting that all articles should be empirical or that conceptual articles are not adequately practical.

Some of these and related issues have been addressed in the Theory Forum, held at the AMS Annual Conference over the last several years. The Theory Forum is one of a number of *AMS Review* initiatives that, in line with its general goals, is intended to advance theory development in marketing. The development and publishing of special issues and special sections is another. Some of these special issues and sections focus on particular research streams and issues. Others have more general intended purposes, such as the initiation of disciplinary dialog on topics related to theory development. This special section “Advancing Conceptual, Theoretical Articles in Marketing: Importance, Writing, and Reviewing” is one of the latter.

The overall purpose of this special section is to extend discussion of theory development in marketing beyond the Theory Forum. In so doing, we hope to facilitate this development by emphasizing the role and importance of conceptual-only articles and exploring issues of problematizing, developing, writing and reviewing conceptual, theoretical manuscripts in the marketing discipline.

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The role and nature of conceptual articles

So, what is a conceptual article, or more specifically, a conceptual-only article? According to MacInnis (2011, p. 140), conceptualization is “a process of abstract thinking involving the mental representation of an idea.” It is the *sine qua non* of thought. In this sense, given that all science deals with

mental representations, or models (Hunt 2010), all scholarly articles are, necessarily, conceptual. Likewise, all credible scientific articles (should) provide evidence to support their conceptual contentions. What differs is the nature of this evidence. *Empirical articles* typically emphasize evidence based on observations of the phenomena of interest. *Conceptual-only articles* emphasize evidence based on existing literature, supported by coherent, compelling logic. Of course, this should characterize empirical articles as well but, arguably, in practice, it is easier to relax this requirement in empirical articles, as long as a sufficient *p* value or other “justifying,” quantitative or qualitative evidence exists.

So, where does theory fit into all of this? Theory represents an integrated understanding of the phenomena of interest. Theory is (should be) the purpose of all scholarly work. As Hunt (2010, p.172-73) notes, Alderson (1957, p. 5) identified theory as “a set of propositions which are consistent among themselves and which are relevant to some aspect of the factual world” and Rudner (1966, p. 10) defined theory as “a systematically related set of statements, including some law-like generalizations, that is empirically testable. The purpose of theory is to increase understanding through a systematized structure...” Regardless of the specific definition, the central, essential characteristics of theory are interrelatedness, logical consistency, and scrutability (empirical and knowledge-based). It has to do with how we stitch together concepts into cohesive narratives and scrutinize their implications. If conceptualization is the *sine qua non* of thought, theory is the *sine qua non* of scientific thought—that is, of science. Empirical evidence is a necessary part of science but is not its central purpose.

Thus, in principle, it can be argued that theory building goes (should go) hand-in-hand with empirical work; we would agree. However, there are several reasons that this might not be happening currently to the extent that it should. First, the bulk of scholarly work in marketing is done in journal articles and journal articles have traditionally had space limitations, making it difficult to both report theory development and its testing in the same article. Second, and arguably perhaps more important, it has become increasingly easy to hide behind methodological elegance and statistical precision in empirical studies, with theoretical contributions taking a back seat, rather than playing a foundational role.

Conceptual-only articles and the AMS Review

This is where the *AMS Review* comes in. It is the only marketing journal that *only* publishes conceptual-only articles. In that regard, it is similar to the *Academy of Management Review* and the *Psychological Review*. It is important to note that “conceptual-only” does not simply mean non-empirical. Rather, the conceptual-only criterion forces the theory to stand

on its own, albeit with support from the relevant literature. That is, the contributions of conceptual-only articles must rest on their ability to compellingly connect and synthesize theory from the literature (within and outside of marketing) with “problems” to be solved, both theoretical and practical. This mandates that they have logical, complete, and compelling conclusions based on the theoretical evidence, without a reliance on empirical evidence. In short, the aim of conceptual-only articles, in the *AMS Review* and elsewhere, is advancing theory development, rather than reporting empirical testing (see e.g., Gilson and Goldberg 2015). In Gilson and Goldberg’s (2015, p. 128) words, conceptual articles “seek to bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking.”

There is no set template for conceptual articles. However, as Fig. 1 illustrates, a typical conceptual-only article includes (1) a brief background that motivates a definitive statement of the problem to be solved by the article, as well as an overview of the approach to be taken to solve it, (2) a review of the literatures/theoretical frameworks to be used in solving the problem, (3) reconciliation of these literatures and their synthesis into a single theoretical framework for solving the problem, (4) application of the framework to the problem, and (5) implications for one or more audiences (e.g., for practitioners, researchers, educators, or policy makers)—see Jaakkola (this issue) and Barney (this issue) for additional views on developing good conceptual articles.

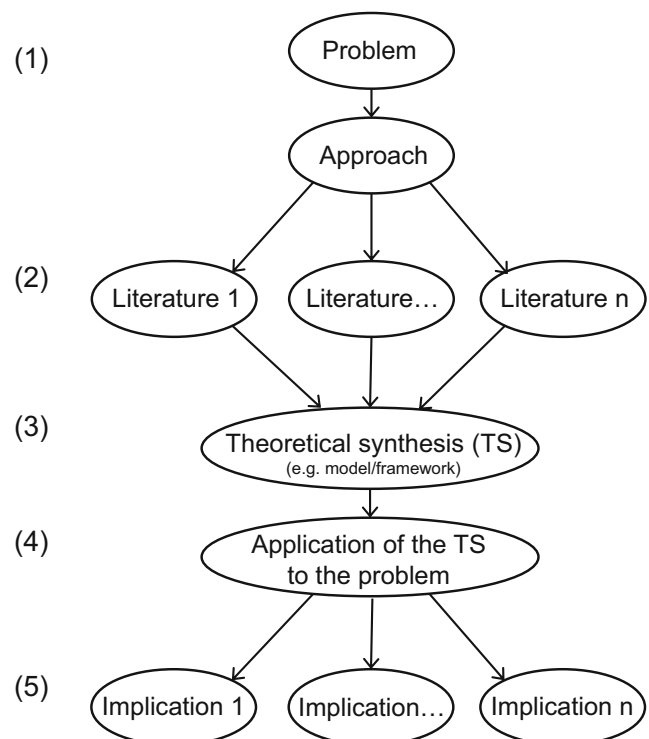


Fig. 1 Typical structure of a conceptual-only article

Most desk rejections occur because of deficiencies in the first and third items outlined above, problem definition and motivation, and theoretical synthesis, respectively. That is, the majority of desk rejections by the *AMS Review* result from the lack of the definition of a compelling problem to be solved and the lack of a sufficiently synthesized theoretical framework for solving it. The former requires more than identification of a “research gap” (cf. Alvesson and Sandberg 2011), many of which exist because filling them is not particularly interesting to any audience. That is, the identified problems should matter to a wide enough audience to warrant the effort required on the part of the writer, the reviewers, the editor, the publisher, and the reader to have them published in a scholarly journal and then read. The fact that something “has not been done before” is never, by itself, a compelling problem.

The other primary reason for desk rejections by the *AMS Review* is the lack of a theoretical synthesis, usually because the literatures on which the article rely are just juxtaposed, without reconciliation. That is, concepts are just “mashed up,” stuck together, without reduction to a common set of concepts. The proposed problem-solving framework should be grounded on one of the frameworks used, usually the most general and robust one, and then *informed by* other frameworks/literatures, rather than just having bits and pieces (e.g., importing of new concepts) from them added. Not taking the latter approach usually results in something of a “Frankenstein” model, which likely is too cumbersome and incomprehensible to provide a useful takeaway for any of the intended audiences.

The conceptual-only criterion of the *AMS Review* does not mean that no forms of observational evidence are acceptable. For example, the *AMS Review*, is very receptive to review articles, both conceptual and meta-analysis, with the latter, of course often having a quantitative component. However, for both types of reviews, the emphasis should be on the synthesis of the past research and implications for some audience, such as convergence on new, emerging ways of conceptualizing the phenomena of interest. Descriptive literature reviews that only provide an overview of the current state of the literature on a given research stream are not appropriate for the *AMS Review*. The “what’s new” and “what’s next” questions are important for distinguishing a conceptual review from a purely descriptive review (Gilson and Goldberg 2015)—see also Hulland (this issue).

Other kinds of acceptable, observational evidence include anecdotes, examples and illustrative cases that contextualize, exemplify and motivate conceptual contributions. In fact, such examples can be very powerful and helpful to the reader especially, as the level of theoretical abstraction increases. Such examples are encouraged. However, the anecdotes and examples should not become the central focus of the manuscript or the source of evidence; this is the role of the theory.

Overview of this special section

The special section “Advancing Conceptual, Theoretical Articles in Marketing: Importance, Writing, and Reviewing” includes eight contributions from prominent scholars, addressing some of the previously mentioned reasons contributing to why marketing as a discipline is suffering from a significant lack of conceptual scholarship and how to correct them.

Shelby Hunt’s paper “Indigenous theory development in marketing: the foundational premises approach” proposes an approach to theory development in marketing labeled the “foundational premises, inductive realist approach.” This approach is especially aimed at furthering the development of indigenous marketing theory—theory that might partially incorporate exogenous concepts but is primarily generated from academic marketing. The article explicates the seven specific steps for the foundational premises, inductive realist approach and illustrates each of the steps using service-dominant (S-D) logic as an example. In so doing, it also provides an excellent exemplar of the use of an illustrative case study in a supporting role in a conceptual-only article, rather than a focal, analytical role, as would be the case in an empirical article.

In “Designing conceptual articles: four approaches,” Elina Jaakkola addresses the issue of templates for conceptual-only articles by proposing four potential templates—theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology, and model—for such articles. In doing so, she highlights that important methodological considerations also exist for conceptual research that need to be clearly spelled-out in the article. More specifically, she argues that conceptual-only articles must also be grounded in a clear research design, and that authors need to explicate and justify the choice of theories and their role in the theoretical analysis.

John Hulland, the Editor of the *AMS Review*’s sister journal, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, distinguishes a specific type of a conceptual paper that reviews literature to develop and refine theory. His article “Conceptual review papers: revisiting existing research to develop and refine theory” also provides very useful guidelines for writing conceptual reviews that can make a strong contribution, as opposed to purely descriptive reviews that merely catalogue existing literature. The *AMS Review* welcomes conceptual review submissions for potential publication.

Just as writing a conceptual-only article can be a difficult task, so too can reviewing one be challenging. In “Effective reviewing for conceptual journal submissions,” Abbie Griffin and Gloria Barczak provide valuable guidance that can help all reviewers, but especially those reviewing conceptual-only articles. They do so by defining the elements—roles, responsibilities, responses, reactions, and respect—needed for effective reviewing for all manuscripts and providing a reviewing template, especially for conceptual-only articles. They also suggest how reviewing can

aid a scholar's own research and give practical tips on how everyone can become more efficient at reviewing.

In “Contributing to theory: opportunities and challenges,” Jay Barney offers insights for marketing scholars looking to make original theoretical contribution by drawing from the field of management and, especially, from his experience as the Editor of the *Academy of Management Review*. He does this by discussing potential ways of tackling the three challenging questions that scholars must address in their conceptual-only papers: (1) how to define the conceptual contribution of the paper, (2) how to position the paper in the ongoing theoretical discussions, and (3) how to critique prior research in a fruitful manner.

Arguably, one of the reasons for the lack of more conceptual-only articles in marketing is the underemphasis of theory in the marketing doctoral education. In his paper “Reimagining marketing doctoral programs”, Manjit Yadav, immediate past editor of the *AMS Review*, suggests five initiatives that might advance the content and structure of marketing doctoral programs so that they become more supportive of theory and theory development. These include: (1) adding marketing to marketing doctoral programs, (2) creating a dedicated space in the curriculum for theory construction, (3) restructuring the sequence of doctoral seminars, (4) making a foundational essay mandatory in dissertations, and (5) changing the culture of marketing doctoral programs.

In “Creativity and publication in marketing”, David Stewart argues that the best academic publishing is an exercise in creativity. Such creative work, can lead to high returns, but is also risky. To alleviate some of the risks related to creative work, such as the writing of conceptual-only articles, Stewart draws on the literature on creativity to give guidance on how to manage the creative process. His paper has valuable implications for both individual scholars engaging in conceptual work and for organizations that seek to facilitate high impact publication in marketing.

To encourage the development of new theories in marketing, Rajan Varadarajan, in “Advancing theory in marketing: insights from conversations in other disciplines” demonstrates the potential of theories stemming from other disciplines to shed light into marketing phenomena. This commentary also discusses how the marketing discipline is in need of developing organic marketing theories, evaluating theories currently in vogue in the field and discarding those theories found to be flawed.

There is one additional essay that was responsive to the call for papers for this special section that is being accepted for publication: “Marketing’s theoretical and conceptual value proposition: opportunities to address marketing’s influence.” Actually, it is a composite of five essays by five marketing scholars – Martin Key, Terry Clark, O.C. Ferrell, David W. Stewart and Leyland Pitt – that takes a somewhat controversial stand, at least as evidenced by the reviewers’ responses.

Given its contentious nature, rather than publishing the essay in this issue, it is being published online for now. We are doing this to allow the invitation of one or more commentaries to be published in print with it in the next issue. The intention is to let the positions it takes to be openly discussed by the discipline. Additional thoughtful, constructive commentaries on the topics raised will also be considered for publication.

The AMS Review-Sheth foundation annual doctoral competition for conceptual articles

In addition to the Theory Forum and the special issues and sections, a further initiative of the *AMS Review* in advancing theory development in marketing is the Annual Doctoral Competition for Conceptual Articles. The purpose is to encourage and assist marketing doctoral students in the development and publishing of conceptual articles. The winners receive cash awards provided by the Sheth Foundation and are invited to present their research at the AMS Annual Conference. For 2020, Jodie Conduit of the University of Adelaide and Michael Kleinaltenkamp of the Freie Universität Berlin are serving as co-chairs. They not only promoted the event and evaluated the entries but will also be mentoring the winners and runners-up through the development of full manuscripts for submission to the *AMS Review*. They have written a guest editorial for this issue outlining the purpose and process of the competition, as well as announcing the winners of the 2020 Doctoral Competition.

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