Relevance, rigor and impact of scholarly research in marketing, state of the discipline and outlook

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Abstract

This commentary presents a dissenting point of view on some of Key et al.'s (*AMS Review*, 2020) observations concerning the relevance and rigor of scholarly research in marketing, impact of scholarly research in marketing on research in other disciplines, and influence of the marketing function in firms at the top management level.

Keywords Relevance and rigor · Marketing theory · Value proposition and values proposition of the marketing academy to society

Introduction

The value proposition and values proposition of the marketing academy

Science “An objective, logical, and systematic method of analysis of phenomena, devised to permit the accumulation of reliable knowledge.” (Lastrucci 1963, p. 6).

Marketing science Objective, logical and systematic methods of analysis of marketing phenomena devised and used for the creation and accumulation of reliable knowledge.

Value proposition of the marketing academy Members of the marketing academy create reliable knowledge on marketing phenomena and disseminate the knowledge by posting it in the public domain for use by individuals and organizations, worldwide.

Constituencies in a society who may find reliable knowledge on marketing phenomena to be of value include decision-makers in for-profit, not-for profit and governmental

organizations, researchers and educators in marketing and allied disciplines, students of marketing and allied fields of study, journalists, and consumers.

Values proposition of the marketing academy Members of the marketing academy are committed to respecting, upholding and abiding by the university's core mission, namely, the creation and dissemination of objective knowledge, and their grand compact with society. They consider society as the ultimate client for the knowledge they create, and specific constituencies such as marketing educators, practitioners and students as intermediate clients. [Adapted from Hunt 1992 on the *responsibilities of the marketing discipline*].

The grand compact of the academia with society: The state grants academic freedom to faculty—the privilege of conducting research free from the dictates of the church and state. In exchange, the state demands from faculty a commitment to the ideal of objective knowledge (See: Hunt 1992).

In the opening paragraph of their article, Key et al. (2020) highlight the importance of the *academic value proposition of the marketing discipline* founded on theoretical and conceptual research. Two other value propositions that also merit our collective thought are the value proposition and the values proposition of the marketing academy to society. In that spirit, the above position statements on the value proposition and the values proposition of the marketing academy to society are proposed for consideration and deliberation by the marketing academy.

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As highlighted in the proposed definition of marketing science, its principal focus as a scientific endeavor is the creation and accumulation of *reliable knowledge* on marketing phenomena (i.e. knowledge based on which marketing decisions can be made and actions taken with confidence). Also, as highlighted, a commitment by the marketing academy to society that is enshrined in the grand compact between academia and society is the ideal of *objective knowledge*. Issues relating to the relevance and rigor of scholarly research in marketing and allied business disciplines are sometimes framed and debated as relevance *versus* rigor or *balance between* relevance and rigor. That is, the pros and cons of a tradeoff of some level of rigor for greater relevance or vice-versa. In this regard, a caveat that should be borne in mind is that marketing knowledge generated by research studies that tradeoff some level of rigor for greater relevance would be less reliable compared to studies that employ the current state-of-the-art of conceptual and empirical rigor.

The theoretical and conceptual value proposition of the marketing discipline

Key et al. (2020) describe their article on the theoretical and conceptual value proposition of the marketing discipline as a dissenting perspective on the current course of scholarship in marketing. They note that a discipline-wide drift and myopic approach to rigor and relevance is a central premise that emerges from a critical self-examination of the field of marketing. They enumerate a number of concerns regarding the current state of the field and outlook, and the need for theoretical and conceptual advances to move the discipline forward, increase its impact, create value, and preserve its overall relevance. Further, they note that the purpose of their dissenting opinions is not to cast a disparaging shadow on the contributions by countless scholars over several decades to advancing marketing knowledge, but to stimulate critical self-reflection at the discipline level in order to combat an uninformed march into an unintentional future that could result in lack of relevance. They note that questioning the current state and trajectory of the discipline are crucial for creating potentially impactful marketing knowledge and disseminating them through scholarly journals, in classrooms and to organizations.

This commentary strives to contribute to the conversation initiated by Key et al. (2020) on the current state of the marketing discipline and its outlook. In light of

space considerations, the scope of this commentary is limited to only some of the issues that are the focus of Key et al.'s article. Specifically, some of their observations concerning the relevance and rigor of scholarly research in marketing, reliance by researchers in the marketing discipline on theories developed in other disciplines to research marketing phenomena, influence of the discipline on scholarly research in allied disciplines, and influence of the marketing function in firms at the top management level.

Conjectures on the current state of the discipline and outlook: a cautionary note

Key et al. (2020) describe the current state and outlook of the marketing discipline as a discipline that is (1) adrift and myopic in its approach to rigor and relevance, (2) on an uninformed march into an unintentional future that could result in lack of relevancy, and (3) finessing its way to irrelevance. Two caveats should be borne in mind regarding the above and other discipline level generalizations about marketing's shortcomings by Key et al. First, the marketing discipline, over the course of several decades, has evolved into a number of specialized fields. Most marketing academics, in an attempt to stay current with the state-of-the-art in their chosen field of specialization, are likely to read only articles published in scholarly journals that are aligned with their research and teaching interests. Given our limited knowledge or lack of knowledge of research and scholarship in other specialized fields, there is a need for caution when making generalizations about marketing's shortcomings at the discipline level.

The second caveat is the number of observations that are the basis for Key et al.'s (2020) discipline level generalizations about marketing's shortcomings. A very conservative estimate (guestimate) of the scholarly research output of the marketing discipline published in a select list of 24 journals and 4 business magazines listed in Footnote # 1 would be well over 1000 articles each year, 10,000 articles during the decade of 2010 to 2019, and 40,000 articles during four decades from 1980 to 2019. The above estimates are indicative of the vastness of the cumulative body of knowledge of the marketing discipline. The titles of the journals that the estimates are based on are indicative of the breadth of the discipline (i.e. specialized streams of research such as advertising,

consumer behavior, innovation, interactive marketing, marketing and public policy, and strategic marketing).¹

Relevance: the many facets of relevance of scholarly research in marketing²

Issues concerning the relevance of scholarly research in marketing, or lack thereof, are the focus of the essays by Clark and Pitt in Key et al. (2020). Clark's essay is titled, "Finessing our way to irrelevance." Pitt notes that most scholarly research in marketing is ignored, because researchers in marketing ignore (1) artifacts and technologies as shapers, (2) biology, (3) information technology, until it is too late, (4) the shadow of the field, (5) new ideas, and (6) good writing. It should be noted that the nature and scope of relevance of marketing relevance

¹ Basis for the estimate (guestimate):

- A. Seven leading marketing journals: Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Marketing Science, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and Journal of Retailing.

On average, each year, about 50 articles are published in each of these journals. This translates to about 350 articles annually, 3500 articles during a decade, and 14,000 articles over the course of four decades (1980 to 2019) in the seven journals combined.

- B. Fourteen additional marketing journals: AMS Review, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Innovation and New Product Management, Journal of Interactive Marketing, Journal of International Marketing, Journal of Macromarketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, Journal of Strategic Marketing, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, and Quantitative Marketing and Economics.
- C. Three broadly positioned business journals: Journals that publish a few articles in each issue addressing marketing related issues – Management Science, Journal of Business Research, and Journal of International Business Studies.
- D. Four business magazines: Business Horizons, California Management Review, Harvard Business Review, and MIT Sloan Management Review.

A conservative estimate of the total number of articles focusing on marketing related topics published in the above 14 marketing journals, three broad based business journals and four business magazines would be over 700 articles each year, 7000 articles during the decade from 2010 to 2019, and 28,000 articles during the four decades from 1980 to 2019.

Collectively, in all of the journals and business magazines listed above, a very conservative estimate of the annual output of scholarly marketing knowledge would be well over 1000 articles. The cumulative body of knowledge output would be well over 10,000 articles during the decade of 2010 to 2019, and well over 40,000 articles during the four decades from 1980 to 2019.

The year 2019 was the 38th year of publication of *Marketing Science* and the 36th year of publication of the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. The other five journals have a publication history longer than 40 years. Similarly, some of the journals in the list of 14 marketing journals have a publication history that is less than 40 years.

² Some of the text presented in this section draws on Varadarajan (2003).

is multifaceted, and managerial relevance is only one of its many dimensions. Broadly construed, *marketing relevance* encompasses (but is not limited to) the following.

- *Managerial relevance*: Research of relevance to marketing practitioners—research that contributes to (has the potential to contribute to) better marketing decision-making in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations (i.e. enable decision-makers to make more informed marketing decisions).
- *Research relevance*: Research of relevance to researchers in marketing—research that contributes to improving the quality of scholarly and applied research in marketing.
- *Public policy relevance*: Research of relevance to decision-makers in governmental and quasi-governmental agencies (e.g. Department of Justice, Federal Trade Commission and Securities and Exchange Commission in the US, and similar institutions in other countries)—research that contributes to improving laws and regulations governing the practice of marketing and welfare of the public as customers and consumers.
- *Marketing education relevance*: Research of relevance to marketing educators—research that has an impact on curriculum content, pedagogical material, manner of delivery of marketing knowledge in the classroom, etc.
- *Consumer welfare relevance*: Research of relevance to the public as customers and consumers—research that enables the public to make informed decisions on matters relating to the acquisition, possession, consumption and disposal of products.

In addition to the above constituencies based perspective of the scope of marketing relevance, certain other facets of relevance should also be borne in mind. They include (1) direct versus indirect relevance, (2) articulated relevance by the researcher versus discovered relevance by readers, (3) first-order versus second-order relevance, (4) conceptual versus instrumental relevance, (5) enduring relevance versus relevance during a specific time frame, (6) latent relevance, (7) serendipitous relevance, (8) immediacy of relevance, and (9) breadth of relevance (Varadarajan 2003). A brief discussion on some of these facets of relevance follows.

Alleviation of poverty and hunger afflicting mankind were the principal relevance considerations behind the pioneering research by the late Dr. Norman Borlaug (recipient of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize) to develop genetically improved high-yield disease-resistant varieties of seeds for growing rice, wheat, corn and other food grains. On a scale of research relevance for the wellbeing of humanity, only a few other research endeavors in the annals of human civilization rise to the level of Borlaug's research. A study lists the Green Revolution as one of 50 human civilization-transforming innovations since the wheel (Fallows 2013). By increasing the

yields of various food grains more than four-fold, Borlaug's research was instrumental in alleviating hunger and poverty that afflicted hundreds of millions of people in developing and less developed countries during the last century. In addition to the intended relevance (alleviation of poverty and hunger), Borlaug's research also resulted in a number of other unintended (un-envisioned/serendipitous) socially beneficial outcomes. For instance, the Green Revolution has been instrumental in preventing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of acres of forestland and their conversion into agricultural land in order to increase food output to feed a growing world population. The effect of the Green Revolution in preventing the destruction of vast stretches of forest green cover precedes our recent and growing awareness of the adverse environmental impact of deforestation.

Universities are home to both the passionates and the agnostics about relevance and research impact³

Universities are (should be and always will be) home to both researchers passionate about the relevance and potential impact of their research as well as those who are agnostic. In his book, *"The Mathematician's Apology,"* Hardy (1941, p. 75) described number theory, his area in mathematics, as useless. He noted: "If useful knowledge is, as we agreed provisionally to say, knowledge which is likely, now or in the comparatively near future, to contribute to the material comfort of mankind, so that mere intellectual satisfaction is irrelevant, then the great bulk of higher mathematics is useless." He also noted (p. 90–91): "No discovery of mine has made, or is likely to make, directly or indirectly, for good or ill, the least difference to the amenity of the world." Almost six decades later, in a review of a book on cryptography by Singh (1999), Osseman (1999) noted that although number theory did initially seem useless, in 1977, three mathematicians came up with an ingenious method to put it to practical use. According to Osseman, their simple but clever use of a little-known elementary result from number theory evolved into a multimillion dollar software business and the installation of a software program being on millions of computers worldwide.

Rigor: the virtue of prizing rigor and truth above all else

Key et al. (2020, section "Leyland Pitt", paragraph 3) note, "At the same time however, much of academic marketing research seems to prize rigor and truth above all else; whether it is actually interesting or relevant seems to matter less and less." In a later section, they allude to the Management discipline as having achieved a remarkable balance between rigor and relevance. It is debatable as to whether researchers

in the Management discipline strive for a *balance* between rigor and relevance. However, should this indeed be the case, a shift to both rigor *and* relevance may be in the best long-term interests of the discipline. A number of considerations justify prizing rigor and truth above all else, regardless of whether the questions that are the focus of a research study are interesting and/or relevant. First, as highlighted in the introductory section, pursuit of truth through rigor in research is the hallmark of science (Lastrucci 1963), and integral to the grand compact between the academia and society (Hunt 1992). Second, Stewart, in his essay in Key et al., draws attention to the credibility crisis currently faced by social sciences in the aftermath of the findings of the Reproducibility Project (i.e. differences between the findings of the replication research studies and the findings reported in previously published research). Any dilution of rigor in scholarly research (i.e. the current state-of-the-art of conceptual and empirical rigor) will only further erode the credibility of academic social sciences. Third, while there is always a possibility of a research endeavor being serendipitously relevant, it is inconceivable that a research endeavor would be serendipitously rigorous. Cole's (2005, p. 13) characterization of a research university as an institution with *tolerance for unsettling ideas* and *insistence on rigorous skepticism* is instructive in this regard. He notes:

"The university ought to be viewed in terms of a fundamental interdependence between the liberality of its intellectual life and the conservatism of its methodological demands. ... We permit almost any idea to be put forward—but only because we demand arguments and evidence to back up the ideas we debate and because we set the bar of proof at such a high level. These two components, tolerance for unsettling ideas and insistence on rigorous skepticism about all ideas—create an essential tension at the heart of the American research university. It will not thrive without *both* components operating effectively and simultaneously."

Bernard (2006, p. 11) points out the knowledge will be closer to the truth in certain disciplines than in other disciplines. He notes:

"In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1996 [1690]), Locke reasoned that since we cannot see everything, and since we cannot even record perfectly what we do see, some knowledge will be closer to the truth than other knowledge. Prediction of the behavior of planets might be more accurate than the prediction of human behavior, but both predictions should be based on better and better observation, measurement, and reason..."

³ Some of the text presented in this section draws on Varadarajan (2003, 2017).

All else being equal, marketing knowledge created by employing scientific research methods will be farther from truth compared to knowledge created in the physical sciences and natural sciences by employing scientific research methods. However, as Bernard (2006) alludes to, greater conceptual rigor (better and better reasoning through development of new theories and refining existing theories) and empirical rigor (better and better observation, measurement, modeling, analysis, etc.) is the proven pathway for creating more reliable marketing knowledge (i.e. knowledge that is closer to truth).

Overbye's (2009) observations concerning the values that science imparts in scientists also is also insightful concerning the virtue of prizing rigor and truth above all else. He notes:

"Science is not a monument of received Truth but something that people do to look for truth... That endeavor, which has transformed the world in the last few centuries, does indeed teach values. Those values, among others, are honesty, doubt, respect for evidence, openness, accountability and tolerance and indeed hunger for opposing points of view. These are the unabashedly pragmatic working principles that guide the buzzing, testing, poking, probing, argumentative, gossiping, gadgety, joking, dreaming and tendentious cloud of activity ...Nobody appeared in a cloud of smoke and taught scientists these virtues. This behavior simply evolved because it worked... And indeed there is no leader, no grand plan, for this hive. It is in many ways utopian anarchy."

Advances in research rigor, both conceptual and empirical rigor, are hallmarks of progress in scientific method, and indispensable from the standpoint of creating reliable knowledge. As researchers in a discipline become aware of weaknesses in their current methods of inquiry, refinements in them and new research methods take root. Consequently, the current research rigor thresholds (conceptual and empirical rigor threshold), for doctoral dissertations and journal articles in the marketing discipline are considerably higher than they were a decade ago, and will be substantially higher a decade from now than they are currently.⁴

The following illustrations from other disciplines provide additional insights into the virtue of prizing rigor and truth in research, above all else. At a number of laboratories

worldwide, several thousands of researchers are currently working on developing a vaccine for the coronavirus. In the absence of rigor during every step in the development and testing of the vaccine, it would be an exercise in futility, and a waste of precious time and resources. It would not result in a vaccine that can be safely administered to humans and bring to an end the pandemic. The concerns voiced by a number of leading scientists in the US about the specter of compromises in research rigor in the development of a safe and effective vaccine for the coronavirus in the face of political pressure to speed development of the vaccine is instructive in this regard (LaFraniere et al. 2020).

As noted in an earlier section, alleviation of poverty and hunger were the principal relevance considerations behind Borlaug's pioneering research to develop genetically improved high-yield disease-resistant varieties of seeds for growing rice, wheat, corn and other food grains. However, in the absence of rigor during every stage of research that spanned well over a decade, the development of genetically improved high-yield disease-resistant varieties of seeds to alleviate hunger and poverty would not have materialized.

Impact of scholarly research in marketing on scholarly research in other business disciplines

Key et al. (2020) draw attention to a study based on a bibliometric analysis of leading journals in accounting, finance, management, and marketing that found marketing scholarship to be the least influential of the four (Clark et al. 2014). During the period of their study (1990 to 2011), they found finance to have had the greatest volume of total citation exports (14,585), followed by management (8303), accounting (4958), and marketing (2486). Clark et al. further note that marketing's largest volume of citation exports (2237) and imports (5636) are with management, and it had virtually no citation exports to either finance or accounting. Regarding the use of the term, "export" in the context of patterns of knowledge flow across disciplines, the following caveat should be borne in mind. While researchers routinely draw insights from other disciplines (i.e. they import), they do not proactively engage in exporting knowledge. Export of knowledge from a discipline is merely an artifact of researchers in other disciplines importing the knowledge.

A plausible explanation for the differences in the citation patterns across business disciplines reported by Clark et al. (2014) is differences in the propensity of scholars in different disciplines to explore other disciplines for knowledge insights. Beginning with the doctoral program, in the marketing discipline, there is considerable emphasis on looking outward into allied disciplines for conceptual, theoretical and methodological insights. A cursory review of articles published in

⁴ In specific reference to published research in marketing, during an informal conversation at an academic conference, an issue that surfaced was the distinction between *true progress in research rigor* and *pretense of greater rigor* or *façade of greater rigor*. There was some conjecturing that some of the gyrations in mathematical modelling and statistical analysis in some of the research published in marketing journals are in the vein of the latter. I lack the expertise to comment on this issue, and defer to expert journal editors and reviewers.

marketing journals would show references to books and journal articles in other fields such as accounting, anthropology, biology, computer science, economics, finance, law, management, management information systems, political science, psychology, sociology, statistics, etc. In fact, in marketing, a doctoral dissertation proposal (manuscript) submitted for review to the dissertation committee (journal) that is void or weak in respect of building on scholarly insights from other disciplines is likely to be viewed as shallow. Marketing scholarship benefits from the receptivity of its research community to build on insights from other disciplines, and relatedly, the research community being not afflicted by the “not invented here” syndrome.

Influence of the marketing function in organizations at the top management level

Key et al. (2020) highlight certain trends as cause for concern. They include the (1) decline in the influence of the marketing function in organizations, (2) elimination of the position of the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) in a number of organizations, (3) acquisition of advertising agencies by management consulting firms and information technology firms, and (4) decline in the influence of the academic discipline of marketing in universities. The first three pertain to developments in the world of business. Even if the empirical evidence in support of the above were to be overwhelming, marketing academics should view them only as interesting research questions worthy of scholarly research, and not as developments to be alarmed about. Our focus as marketing academics should be *disinterested pursuit of truth* – describing, understanding, explaining and predicting marketing phenomena of interest.

The following are some research questions that may be worthy of investigation in our quest for disinterested pursuit of truth: (1) What explains the relative influence of different organizational functions in firms? (2) What explains changes in the relative influence of organizational functions in firms? (3) What explains the emergence of dominant coalitions in firms (certain organizational functions emerging as more dominant and wielding greater power than other functions)? (4) What explains the marketing function wielding more versus less influence in certain types of firms, industries, and country markets, than in others? (5) What do various macro environmental trends portend for the relative influence of the marketing function in organizations in the future? (Varadarajan 2004).

The findings of the following studies serve to illustrate the essence of *disinterested pursuit of truth* in scholarly research. In their study, Homburg et al. (2015) report a decline in the influence of marketing department in organizations. They further caution that this trend could have an adverse effect on firm performance, in light of their finding that an influential marketing department makes the greatest contribution to firm performance.

Based on analysis of data from up to 155 publicly traded firms over a 12-year period (2000–2011), Germann et al. (2015) report that firms benefit financially from the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) being a member of the top management team [the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and executives directly reporting to the CEO]. Specifically, they report that the performance of firms with a CMO was about 15% higher than that of firms without one. Instead, let us suppose that the findings of the above research studies were as follows: (1) Homburg et al. finding the degree of influence wielded by the marketing department to have a negative effect or no significant effect on firm performance, (2) Germann et al. finding no significant difference between the performance of firms with a CMO versus without a CMO, or firms in which the CMO is a member versus not a member of the top management team. In the spirit of disinterested pursuit of truth, they would still constitute important research findings worthy of dissemination through scholarly journals.

In closing

Key et al. (2020, Conclusion section) conclude their article by noting: “All disciplines need periodic reflection and self-assessment. The ultimate goal is to have other scholars’ critique, challenge, or add more support for our positions. In this way we can advance and have a positive impact on the field of marketing.” This commentary presents a perspective on the relevance, rigor and impact of scholarly research in marketing, the current state of the field and outlook. It also complements Key et al.’s article by drawing attention to certain other considerations that are pertinent in the context of some of the issues they focus on. At the same time, the commentary voices disagreement with their positions on some of the issues. As Key et al. note, engaging in constructive debate and dialog on important issues is crucial to the advancement of the discipline. Understandably, when challenging a point of view of a fellow scholar or voicing disagreements, it is important that we adhere to the norms of civility in scholarly discourse.

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