



**Marketing concepts can have a life of their own:
representation and pluralism in marketing concept analysis**

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Abstract

The expansion and fragmentation of marketing theory has led to the introduction of a plethora of concepts, definitions and theoretical constructs, over the last few decades. Subsequently, marketing scholars have been developing sophisticated concept analysis tools to alleviate the field’s terminological confusion and facilitate the process of theory development. Drawing inspiration from Tahtinen and Havila’s (2018) recent contribution in the area of marketing concept analysis, this think piece aims to critically explore the methodological and philosophical assumptions of systematic concept review methods, seeking to broaden the discussion around the politics and context of marketing theory development. I suggest that apart from the meticulous examination of the conceptual marketing language, marketing theorists can elaborate on how social processes, ideological viewpoints and institutional forces shape the development of marketing concepts. Finally, I provide recommendations on how the theoretical development of marketing language can embrace a fresh awareness towards cultural contexts, consumers and marketing practices that remain under-explored or marginalized in the literature.

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Introduction

The ‘broadening movement’ of marketing thought (Kotler and Levy, 1969), gradually managed to disengage the marketing paradigm from the rigid principles of commercial marketing and facilitated an expansion of marketing theory and language into new research domains related to societal, educational, health and spatial (amongst others) phenomena. Consequently, the application of marketing knowledge in non-profit areas contributed to the expansion of the field’s disciplinary space and enriched marketing discourse with a plethora of emerging concepts, theories and definitions. Although the ‘invasion’ of marketing language into, for example, artistic and religious institutions was met with suspicion or opposition in the past, nowadays, their organizational goals and management practices are heavily infused with marketing concepts. Simultaneously, the rapid growth of business schools, globalization of marketing practice and outpouring of marketing journals has contributed to the quick expansion of marketing topics and issues (Wilkie and Moore, 2003).

The (re)structuring of marketing scholarship has not always been a harmonious and synergistic process, since struggles for paradigmatic dominance (Lowe et al, 2005; Maclaran et al, 2009), emphasis on a logical empiricist orientation (Tadajewski, 2008) and biased peer-reviewed practices (Brown, 1995; 2000) have diminished the academic space for challenging/critical approaches and ‘third world’ academics (Brown, 1998). Nowadays, marketing theory and knowledge has evolved by becoming more diverse and fragmented regarding its research focus, conceptual analysis and methodological tools (Stewart and Zinkhan, 2005). The research specialization and fragmentation of the field has positively advanced methodological contributions and enhanced our understanding of emerging and growing marketing concepts and theories. For example, the increasing managerial applicability, aesthetic nature and ideological function of ‘branding’ (Holt, 2002) has been prompting marketing researchers to constantly rethink and re-evaluate the theoretical development and conceptual complexity of this multi-dimensional construct. Likewise, technological advancements (e.g. online shopping) and institutional movements (e.g. Fairtrade) are invigorating both the theoretical space and conceptual boundaries of areas such as marketing analytics and ethical marketing respectively. Accordingly, we observe the proliferation of dynamic and changing market concepts that expand paradigms of marketing thought and evolve together with social processes and business megatrends. Therefore,

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marketing scholars and theorists should constantly elaborate on the development of sophisticated concepts analysis methods, with the capacity to reduce terminological/conceptual confusion and concurrently to embrace sensitivity towards different philosophical traditions and ways of seeking marketing knowledge.

Concept-centric methods in marketing theory

In their recently published paper, in Marketing Theory, Tahtinen and Havila (2018) offered a fresh and innovative contribution on how we can comprehend, reflect on and elucidate the conceptual confusion that occurs in emerging marketing fields. The authors drew upon the work of Giovanni Sartori, a leading political scientist, who introduced guidelines for the “concept analysis method” in the 1970s. These guidelines can be applied both in comparative politics - concepts like freedom and democracy e.g. - and social sciences in general (Sartori, 1984; Collier and Gerring, 2009). Applying the method to a specific marketing research field, Tahtinen and Havila (2018) show that the existence of several definitions/descriptions, for the same marketing phenomenon, causes conceptual confusion to marketing theorists and disrupts the process of theory development. Subsequently, the authors competently summarize the principles of CAM analysis and explain the advantages of its application for scholars who follow both positivist and non-positivist research paradigms.

Leaving aside the methodological technicalities of the paper and drawing inspiration from Tahtinen and Havila’s (2018) contribution, this commentary seeks to offer a critical review on the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of systematic concept reviews in general, aiming to widen the discussion around the context and politics of marketing theory development. Therefore the aim of this paper is threefold: Firstly, I elaborate on how the inherent dynamism and complexity of marketing concepts could prompt marketing theorists to reflect on and emphasize the influence of socio-political forces on the shaping of marketing conceptual language. Secondly, I suggest the use of more synthetic approaches for concept analysis and directions for future research aiming to stimulate fruitful debates on the interface between concepts, language and marketing knowledge. Thirdly, I provide conclusions, which seek to prompt marketing theorists to rethink - from a critical perspective - the evolution, theoretical diversity and complexity of marketing concepts.

The dynamic nature of marketing concepts

The CAM method and concept-centric literature reviews in general, have the potential to elucidate the conceptual confusion within a research field so as to “illustrate the meanings and boundaries of the concepts, as well as their theoretical roots and assumptions” (Tahtinen and Havila, 2018; p. 4). Nonetheless, the assumption that conceptual confusion might jeopardise a field’s theory development, seems to embrace a somewhat linear and normative perspective as regards the emergence and evolution of marketing theory concepts and definitions. For example, both social scientists and business scholars have been debating on the origins, theoretical clarity, ideological background and use of the term sustainable development (Worster, 1993; Banerjee, 2003; Du Pisani, 2007). Apart from a plethora of definitions, meanings, practices and policies - in this wide research field - conceptual confusion is heavily constructed and shaped by the incompatibility of political assumptions and economic viewpoints. Accordingly, linguistic and conceptual confusion has been driven by the ideological and theoretical pluralism of scholars who disagree on what exactly should be primarily sustained - usually at the expense of the other -, for example: moderate economic growth, the global ecosystem, local and underprivileged communities, green forms of energy or/and food security. The intensity, dynamism and inherent complexity of these debates has been gradually injected into the emerging research fields of sustainable consumption, green marketing, sustainability marketing and environmental marketing (see Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011 and McDonagh and Prothero, 2014). Behind and within the terminological confusion of these emerging theoretical areas, we can identify, problematize and critically discuss the dialectical tensions, conflicting views and interrelationships between the dominant economic paradigm(s), the role of marketing and the ideology/consequences of consumption. Although, qualitative marketing researchers can use concept-centric analyses to compare and criticize the existing conceptual language, further research is needed to show how a systematic concept review can capture the complexity and interrelationships of institutional forces (e.g. 2015 Paris agreement), changing values (e.g. ethical consumption) and fiscal policies (e.g. environmental taxes) that inform, shape and define the concept of sustainable consumption. Possibly, an in-depth comprehension of (marketing) theory development could embrace a synthetic approach that meticulously scrutinizes the use of conceptual language as well as the antagonistic and co-operative

tendencies amongst social and political forces that gradually (dis)connect conceptual boundaries and (re)define theoretical assumptions.

Undeniably, a careful categorization, distinction and mapping of concepts and definitions can help marketing theorists to reflect upon the structure and development of an emerging field. However, the adoption of a very pragmatic mindset can also lead to a selective and taxonomic consideration of *conceptual confusion* as a phenomenon which might be seen predominantly or primarily as a linguistic issue and theoretical case that has to be systematically deconstructed, rather than as a dynamic outcome of historical and cultural forces, amongst others. Hyperbolic emphasis on the linguistic basis of concepts can also, to a great extent, understate and overshadow the seminal role of groups, individuals and/or popular culture for the development of marketing theory and practice. For example, a (re)emerging research field like psychoanalytic approaches to marketing (Cluley and Desmond, 2014) owes its theoretical foundations to extraordinary scholars, research groups and endless sessions which produced concepts and tools that help us to comprehend marketplace behaviour, unconscious motivations and consumer psyche. Perhaps, special issues, edited books and semi-biographical reflections (Levy, 2014; Holbrook, 2015) can equally shed light to the conceptual diversity and complexity of this particular field, compared to a systematic review of conceptual language aiming to categorize meanings and map conceptual boundaries. Bastos and Levy (2012) recently explicated the evolution of the concept of branding, adopting both a theoretical and practical viewpoint, which reflects and intermingles the perspectives of the practitioner, the scholar and the consumer. Drawing upon a wide variety of secondary sources, and Sidney Levy's unparalleled scholarly experience in the area, they showed that forces such as the media, economic developments, popular English dictionaries and advertising practice have been transforming the emerging field of branding, leading to its current multifunctional and multidimensional form. For example, the phenomenal annihilation of time and space via the Internet, growing demand for commercial aviation and social media's popularity have been constantly readjusting both consumers' and scholars' perceptions towards vigorous theoretical concepts like 'brand image', 'place branding' and 'brand positioning' respectively. Apart from technology, sources of popular culture - such as music, celebrities and films - have exerted considerable influence on the development of advertising, propaganda and consumer behaviour themes and concepts

(Arnould and Thompson, 2005; O' Shaughnessy, 2017; Bradshaw and Scott, 2018). Consequently, methodological tools and frameworks aiming to explore the linguistic and historical development of marketing concepts could possibly embrace the discipline's embeddedness within society, and vice versa. Whilst literature/systematic reviews of marketing concepts will typically adopt more rigid chronological and thematic criteria to re-organize, trace and/or assess existing knowledge, critical conceptual reviews could move beyond standardized organizational patterns for the evaluation of theory development. Accordingly, critical-orientated conceptual reviews have the capacity to reflect and demonstrate the ongoing interrelationships between evolving marketing concepts and societal processes so as to elaborate on the politics and context of marketing theory development. Injecting a more socially orientated perspective into conceptual, relational or content analysis methods, is capable of enriching marketing theory development with an enhanced understanding of cultural pluralism, ideological divergence and institutional change. Georges Canguilhem - a French philosopher of science who spent his life tracing the history of scientific concepts - suggested that concepts can have "a life of their own" (Hacking in Schmidgen, 2014, p. 64) and, to some degree, this might be also true in marketing scholarship.

The research context from above and below.

Systematic concept reviews and theoretical analyses offer a panoramic breadth of definitions whilst highlighting the embedded linguistic complexity of the literature. Mapping the theoretical terrain of growing and emerging fields can show how concepts present different facets of the same phenomenon and broaden understanding around the origins, use and evolution of marketing discourse and theory. Nevertheless, emphasis on the categorization of dominant concepts and definitions might lead to the adoption of a somehow deductive and peripheral analysis. This approach might overshadow geographical, cultural and linguistic features of consumer groups and business communities, within their research contexts, that collectively 'should' produce marketing theory. Possibly, a careful review of marketing papers employing citation/bibliometric analysis, meta-theoretical assumptions and/or concept/linguistic analysis tools, will show that their 'data' and bibliographical sources heavily stem from studies published at Northern European and American institutions, in CABS-listed journals. Arguably, the methodological processes searching for clarity,

comparison and consistency in marketing concepts and definitions ought to keep up with a penetrative awareness of contexts, individuals and practices that remain under-explored or marginalized in the literature.

Marketing scholars, including the author, cannot avoid or resist the use of terms like ‘globalized markets’, ‘interconnected supply chains/consumers’ and ‘technologically integrated corporate environments’ to summarize the complexity and assume the growth and internationalization of consumer culture and marketing practice. Likewise, emerging fields related to digital marketing or branding might embody common linguistic foundations based on the universal use and understanding of the World Wide Web, social media, logos and set of images. On the contrary, in some parts of the world Internet censorship defines access or suppression to customer information, while globally 1 out of 7 people live below the poverty line of \$1.90 per day and 20 per cent are illiterate (UN Sustainable Goals, 2018). Together with the advancement of marketing scholarship regarding poverty (Kilbourne, 2004; Varhit and Belk, 2008; Shridharan et al, 2017), marketing textbook definitions and meta-theoretical research on concepts should critically discuss or acknowledge issues around diversity, representation and location in theory production. For example, in the ever-growing sub-discipline of consumer behaviour/research, the perceptions of concepts like ‘inconspicuous consumption’, ‘fashion-conscious’, ‘social risk’ and ‘healthy eating’ can differ significantly based on research participants’ diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. A more careful examination of geographical, gender and class representations in authors’ samples can strengthen and further validate the results of literature and concept systematic reviews. Considering the scale and growth of marketing practice and consumer purchase in Asia, a cross-linguistic outlook of concept analysis could also incorporate the ever-growing academic and practitioner use of non-English marketing concepts, such as the well-known Chinese business concept of “guanxi” (Wong, 2007). Although the main focus of citation and systematic concept analysis is on concept definition and term description, future research could possibly explore further how a panoramic view of scholars’ theoretical subtlety and a culture/context sensitive perspective can develop more synergy, especially for qualitative researchers who seek to expose power structures and suppressed voices (Tahtinen and Havila, 2018, page 11; Maclaran et al, 2009). Such an approach, will necessitate more academic

space, a more careful selection of international marketing journals and a more in-depth and critical engagement with academic studies and media sources.

Marketing concepts and definitions do not simply constitute building blocks of theory and generic representations of phenomena. They present the key generic ‘tools’ to comprehend, enquiry and last but not least compare the nature and role of marketing actions and consumer behaviour within diverse societies/cultures and asynchronous economies. Accordingly, concept-related methodological tools have the potential to elucidate and debate whether or how long-standing implicit assumptions, cumbersome paradigms and context-specific research preserve, define and guide the development of new theory. Similar to the underused but extremely valuable critical discourse analysis (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015) and Derrida’s deconstructionism (Marsden, 2001) methods, systematic concept reviews can contribute in highlighting both the breadth of conceptual confusion as well as in scrutinizing the reasons behind the wide acceptance and unjustified denial of some concepts in marketing theory.

Concluding comments

Over the last 30 years, marketing concepts and language have entered the public realm and imagination (Brownlie et al, 1998; Levy and Luedicke, 2009). Taking into account the discipline’s fragmentation, popularity and growth, concept analysis methodological tools can turn into truly powerful vehicles to show what lies behind the conceptual confusion of emerging fields. The systematic interrogation of competing and interrelated concepts, definitions and meanings can demonstrate and emphasize the constantly evolving nature of the marketing discipline. Hopefully, future research will seek to develop further the intersection between the concept analysis methods and marketing theory and forthcoming studies will attempt to slightly rethink, stretch and readapt the somehow rigid guidelines so as to consider and embrace the theoretical diversity, complexity and fragmentation of contemporary marketing theory. Synthesizing multi-stage systematic reviews with a nuanced understanding of secondary data around consumer trends, marketplace ideologies and scholarly representation can stimulate further discussion and research around the development of research fields as well as oppressed and marginalized views and perspectives. Also, future research on systematic concept reviews could be supplemented with a critical

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discussion on how the conceptual language of the emerging fields has been shaped by the external environment and/or in-depth interviews with seminal marketing theorists and/or marketing historians in the area. Following Dholakia (2012; 222), if a marketing concept or phenomenon is approached from multiple levels - a “zooming in-out process” - we can disclose, observe and rethink aspects which otherwise could remain obscure.

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