Editorial: Business-to-business marketing: imagining something different

Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing plays an indisputable role in organizations and within the marketing discipline, as demonstrated by recent reviews (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2018; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Valenzuela-Fernandez *et al.*, 2019). While the field of B2B marketing is maturing and theories are becoming more refined, critical voices are emerging, attempting to revisit some of the taken-for-granted concepts, ideas and divides in B2B marketing (Araujo, 2023; Lilien and Wuyts, 2022; Möller and Halinen, 2022). Researchers have revised core B2B marketing phenomena such as exchange (e.g. Dalsace and Jap, 2017), actors (e.g. Guercini *et al.*, 2014; Medlin, 2012; La Rocca, 2013; La Rocca *et al.*, 2015), emergence of networks (e.g. Cheng and Holmen, 2015; Järvensivu and Möller, 2009; Johnston *et al.*, 2006; Medlin and Törnroos, 2015; Schurr, 2007), contextuality (e.g. Elo *et al.*, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne and Törnroos, 2017; Ivanova and Torkkeli, 2013; Ojansivu and Medlin, 2018) and even the concept of a business relationship (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013; La Rocca, 2013). In recent times, questions pertaining to ontology and metatheory have gained prominence (Lowe and Tapachai, 2021; Medlin, 2022; Ojansivu *et al.*, 2020, 2022), prompting B2B scholars to critically examine their roots and collective heritage.

Our call for papers was directed specifically towards researchers willing to think outside the box and imagine something different. It was our aim to encourage authors to bend and even change the existing rules to create something interesting and atypical that would open insights into new futures for B2B research. Indeed, we wanted the authors to not accept existing B2B marketing phenomena but to imagine something different either through re-evaluation of existing concepts, or developing new theories or exploring with different ontological lenses. We invited empirical (qualitative and quantitative) as well as conceptual research papers that aimed for a deeper and different understanding of B2B marketing. We aimed to ignite passion and interest among B2B marketing researchers and inspire approaches that challenge established notions of what B2B marketing research should encompass in terms of methods, theory and contexts.

We received a total of 25 paper submissions for the special issue. Initially, we desk rejected ten of these papers due to poor quality or insufficient alignment with the special issue's aims. This left us with 15 papers for further review. During the first review round, 9 of the 15 papers received a major revision decision, 1 received a reject and resubmit decision and 5 received a reject decision. Ten papers proceeded to the second review round. In the second review round, three papers received a major revision decision, two received a minor revision, two received a reject and resubmit decision, and three author teams did not submit revised versions. Consequently, seven papers moved on to the third review round. Following the third review round, two papers received an accept decision, two received a major revision decision, two received a minor revision decision, and one author team did not submit their revised work. As a result, four papers advanced to the fourth review round. In the fourth and final review round, three papers were accepted, and one was rejected. In summary, 5 out of the initial 25 papers were accepted for inclusion in the special issue. The guest editors also had papers accepted in the special issue, and these underwent the standard *JBIM* review process conducted by well-known anonymous senior academic reviewers. All in all, one might say that achieving publication is never a straightforward process, and researchers always need to work on developing their skills in presenting theory, method, analysis and discussion for future research and management implications. On the other hand, we extend our gratitude to the reviewers who have not only guided the papers through the review process but have also helped unsuccessful authors take the next steps in developing their skills. Good research demands that neither authors nor reviewers and editors accept repetitive methodological approaches within the academic knowledge base. We want to express our gratitude to all authors and reviewers involved in this special issue for their courage and persistence.

In the following, we provide a summary of the five papers featured in the special issue. We then wrap up with some comments regarding potential future research.

Five papers

Halinen, Nordberg-Davies and Möller – time to look forward: advocating future orientation in business network research

Halinen *et al.* (2023) argue that B2B researchers need to incorporate an "explicit future orientation" rather than continue using theoretical frameworks where the future is implicitly incorporated into the research focus. For example, frameworks such as network pictures and network strategizing implicitly consider a future orientation given they focus on change processes or present sensemaking. Explicit future orientations are particularly relevant in our current environment due to recent societal crises and their expected disruptions (Forum for the Future, 2021). In particular, the disruptions expected due to transitioning to sustainable societies and the changes from digitalization, such as, how artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to disrupt our current supply chains, service offerings and actor interactions through changes to socio-material processes. Halinen *et al.* (2023) argue that a future orientation can be developed by focusing on current theoretical frameworks (where future is implicitly implied) and extending their time horizon, whether objective or subjective (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002), to near term or distant emerging futures. At the same time these authors warn that by doing so B2B researchers need to ensure that theoretical myopia does not develop due to an over reliance on

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simply repeating current approaches, such as process analysis and sensemaking. Finally, and most importantly, these authors suggest to drawing on ideas and concepts from futures research, such as future images, visioning, foresight capability and networked foresight. Adoption of these ideas and concepts will require different research foci and new research questions for B2B researchers to investigate.

Vejnovic, Purchase and Tarabashkina – marketing research agency, creative agency and client relationships: a study of relationship tensions

Vejnovic *et al.* (2023) discuss the presence of tensions in various types of relationships, which can either have positive or negative effects on knowledge sharing and value development. The study specifically focuses on the triadic relationship involving creative agencies (CAs), market research agencies (MRAs), and clients in the context of advertising campaign development. This triad is formed when clients collaborate with CAs and MRAs to create and execute creative concepts. The authors outline the workflow and tasks performed by each actor within this triad. They categorize tensions into three main types: behavioral, structural and emotional. While previous research has extensively explored tensions in customer-brand relationships and inter-organizational contexts, it has paid limited attention to triadic relationships. The authors point out that despite recognizing tensions within this triadic relationship, prior research has not thoroughly examined them or proposed methods for their mitigation. The study aims to address this gap by investigating the tensions in the MRA-CA-client triad and providing insights on how to minimize them. The authors conduct an in-depth qualitative case study with 25 interviews collected across the involved organizations. They analyze the data using first-, second-, and third-order codes, allowing for transparent and detailed abductive reasoning. The authors apply behavioral, structural and emotional tension categories when analyzing the case study. They identify six processes that influence tensions in the triadic relationship between the MRA, CA and client. Subsequently, the authors construct an empirical framework based on these six processes, illustrating the complex interdependencies and links between behavioral, emotional and structural tensions. The findings contribute to the literature on tensions and triads by elucidating the critical role of informal governance mechanisms in the mediation of triads where informal governance mechanisms supersede only seldomly used formal contracts. The authors provide recommendations for practitioners regarding how to minimize tensions. These recommendations are specific to the behavioral, structural and emotional tensions identified in the empirical research, offering concrete guidance for managers involved in triads within the context of marketing services.

Vanharanta and Wong – dialectic customer portfolio management

Vanharanta and Wong (2023) present a new and interesting formalization of critical realism that is open to change according to a dialectic mechanism, which they present in some detail. Building upon earlier formulations of the dialectic, concerning thesis, antithesis, synthesis (for an overview of the dialectic, see Bhaskar, 2008; Lefebvre, 2009; Putnam *et al.*, 2016), the authors propose a model of dialectic change which is argued within the field of portfolio management of business relationships. The essential parts of the dialectic mechanism are suggested as follows:

- to view a portfolio not in terms of categorical dualities, but rather in terms of non-dualities so as to gain a depth ontology;
- to prioritize absences in a portfolio, rather than the presence of for example a capability;
- to consider a portfolio not as a closed totality, but as a changing and open system of totalities and sub-totalities; and
- to accept that only in praxis can a portfolio be understood and managed, and that to do so is also an ethical matter.

One can sense in this portrayal of a dialectic mechanism the ontological depth of critical realism, and the critique of portfolio management schemes that rely upon simple matrices grounded in appraisals of "real" elements into systems of hierarchical categorization that seem aimed at resolving a firm's strategy as it pursues its future plans. One can ask, how does one note absences, by what formulation, by what system of knowledge, by which ontological perspective and so on, and find interesting questions to consider.

Vanharanta and Wong (2023) open up general research questions, which given the exploratory character of the article is sensible – one would not at this early stage want to be overly prescriptive. There remains considerable theoretical work to manage research of absences, since any such phenomenon relies for its detection upon a lens which focuses also on a context or else how is an absence noted, e.g. one can see this issue in Teece's (2007) theorizing of dynamic capabilities. Teece's (2007) conceptualization of dynamics and outcomes is central to grasping that a capability either exists or does not. Of course, these issues are not only the concern of those pursuing realist ontologies, because absences are also constructed in social activities (e.g. a pause in a social process) by human actors for pursuing their goal. One issue that deserves further research attention is the application of Totality (even an open totality) in motivating a dialectical mechanism inside a critical realist ontological view. Totalities are "all" inclusive in some way, but in what ways also remains a mystery (see Morin, 1992, who comments from a systems perspective). Like the phrase "the research was conducted in a holistic manner," or "our method was holistic," one is left wondering by which Lens and conceptual boundary, and ontological viewing point, is a Totality envisaged (for some guidance see Adam, 1995; Bernstein, 1992; Blumer, 1966; Lefebvre, 2008; Shotter, 2016)? This issue of reification deserves considerably more deep and slow research (see Blumer, 1954), because as academics wanting to publish we face editors and reviewers looking for answers that are unitary/complete. Yet, we live in a business world that is open and changing, which is why Vanharanta and Wong (2023) idea of an open totality is important: there is a strong link to a key aspect of the phenomena we study.

Ojansivu – the concept of discontinuity in project marketing research: emergence, dissipation and glimpses of the future

Theoretical concepts and managerial relevance are both important considerations within B2B research. This paper investigates how the concept of discontinuity and closely aligned concepts, change over time in relation to theoretical focus and managerial relevance. The paper systematically reviews 31 years (1993–2023) of project marketing publishing data from major marketing and management journals. The author (this issue) draws semantical, etymological and epistemological insights to trace the development of the discontinuity concept. While originally emerging from project marketing research, the relevance of discontinuity has changed in relation to the rise of ongoing services and maintenance contracts following project completion. The results highlight the phases during which discontinuity, similar concepts, and research foci evolved over time. The discontinuity concept became detached from the increasingly service-intensive project business practice, creating a theory-praxis gap. As this gap became more glaring, it resulted in the stagnation of publications that incorporate discontinuity and/or related concepts. The author proceeds to discuss the changes in project marketing resulting from major disruptions in the marketplace, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, and disruptions in global supply chains. The author's conclusion highlights the emergence of new widespread discontinuities in projects, extending beyond the initial definition of discontinuity, which was previously regarded solely as a matter of on/off economic exchange. These new ubiquitous discontinuities have the capacity to encompass all four exchange elements:

1. product or service exchange;
2. information exchange;
3. economic exchange; and
4. social exchange.

Consequently, the author develops a two-by-two conceptual framework that categorizes projects based on their complexity/proprietary nature and the extent of integrated services in their delivery. This framework results in four distinct project types (sporadic, interlinked, polyamory and monogamy), each characterized by specific exchange elements and unique features of discontinuity. This framework provides valuable insights for B2B marketing and can be used to explore how exchange elements align with different project types, along with the nature of discontinuity in the resulting post-project business relationships. The findings of this paper will have relevance for B2B and project marketing researchers, as well as for other disciplines such as project management and services marketing that deal with the new ubiquitous discontinuities in projects. It advocates interdisciplinary collaboration between these fields to advance conceptual innovations and propel project marketing research forward.

Ojansivu – relevance and its epistemic underpinnings in B2B marketing research: four axioms and nine relevance types

This paper explores the relevance of B2B marketing research through a performative-phenomenal lens, particularly how scholarly research can be valuable for both scholars and practitioners. "Performativity," in this context, refers to the idea that B2B marketing concepts not only convey information and describe something but also have the power to bring about change and shape our lives. "Phenomenal" is related to B2B marketing problems that are essential for practitioners' experience and for understanding business practice. As emphasized by Ojansivu (2023a, 2023b), it is crucial to foster industry collaboration with the many B2B marketing stakeholders. Currently, only "3.5% of large firms in Australia collaborate with universities, similar to the values of 31.3% in the UK, 34.9% in France, 43.2% in Germany and 70% in Finland (Ojansivu, this issue)". In countries like Australia, a hidden boundary exists between universities and businesses, leading the latter to prefer collaboration with consulting companies over universities. In contrast, countries like Finland promote close collaboration between businesses and universities, fostering a necessary dialogue to develop state-of-the-art industrial equipment crucial for the nation's export-heavy economy. Ojansivu (2023a, 2023b) traces the development of B2B marketing research across various strands, topics, time periods and geographic regions. The examination of relevance in B2B marketing is conducted with the concept of episteme (Foucault, 1980), arguing that different research strands within B2B marketing have deeply rooted epistemic underpinnings that influence their interpretation of relevance. Four axioms are proposed to define the characteristics of relevance in the B2B marketing context using a performative-phenomenal lens. These axioms suggest that relevance in the B2B marketing context is as follows:

1. practice-oriented;
2. perishable;
3. relative; and
4. scattered.

The implications of these axioms for research are discussed, including the need for the following:

- dialog among various B2B marketing stakeholders;
- adaptation to the changing marketing environment and updating of existing knowledge accordingly;
- utilization of a wide range of publishing outlets to cater to specific stakeholder needs; and
- promotion of cross-fertilization between research strands to overcome epistemic myopia, reach wider audiences and make broader contributions.

Furthermore, Ojansivu (2023a, 2023b) develops a conceptual framework aimed at revitalizing the relevance of B2B marketing research. This framework, linked to temporality and different aspects of learning, presents nine types of relevance, allowing scholars to map their contributions to these various relevance types.

Future research

Due to the current climate crisis, the degradation of natural capital and widening social inequalities human society is rapidly reaching a "crucial juncture…[if we want] to live within planetary boundaries" (Forum for the Future, 2021, p. 5). Working through this juncture is going to require a different mindset by changing current organizational thinking towards an "enhancement" approach that results in a net positive impact or a business whose handprint is greater than their footprint (Hahn and Tampe, 2021; Konietzko *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, requiring a different mindset will mean that historical theorizing may not be useful when considering the future (Halinen *et al.*, 2023). B2B researchers are well positioned to adjust research approaches to encompass this new mindset, which could include: developing value propositions that include planetary health and societal well-being (Konietzko *et al.*, 2023); and expanding B2B research on business/network interdependence to include societal and natural systems. Thus, there appears to be a need to extend process research to include interactions between organizations and their impact on natural resources. Furthermore, the relevance of AI within these interactions and its effects across business networks, as well as its impact on the natural and human entities, requires attention. In this context, researchers must consider different ontological positions. For example, is an AI entity considered an actor or merely a resource within a firm engaged in interactions within business relationships (see Medlin, 2022)? Consequently, we suggest that researchers will encounter challenges in developing ontological positions to expand the concept of the network horizon to encompass natural entities.

Such different mindsets will require B2B researchers to focus beyond considering current changes to sustainability/environmental practices that focus on minimization and restoration (e.g. Bayne *et al.*, 2021) to include practices that will regenerate and enhance planetary health (Hahn and Tampe, 2021). As we see it, whichever ontological distinctions are drawn upon must be elaborated clearly by future researchers. The present normalized method of leaving ontological matters implied is problematic for new researchers and business practitioners.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has described the introduction of AI as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, fundamentally changing "how we live, work and relate" (source: https://www.weforum.org/focus/fourth-industrial-revolution). The WEF highlights that this revolution can "create both huge promise and potential peril" while arguing it has the ability to develop a "human-centered future". As with previous revolutions, history is unlikely to offer completed or full indications of how future potential disruptions will reorientate our present and future interactions. Corley and Gioia (2011) highlight that such a reorientation is going to require prescient theorizing, highlighting that management scholars need to consider problems that are likely to arise in the future. They describe this orientation as "projective futurism" (p. 25). Research on how actors envision the future is therefore becoming more important (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Halinen *et al.*, 2023). Brown *et al.* (2015) build on this to highlight, within a sensemaking context, that research approaches can take a retrospective or a prospective orientation, with an emphasis on the observation that prospective-oriented research is lacking. Halinen *et al.* (2023) highlight that B2B researchers need to develop a future orientation through drawing on methodological approaches from futures research. With most marketing research methodologies using retrospective approaches, future research requires prospective orientations (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Corley and Gioia, 2011). Alternatively, longitudinal methodologies that follow development in and over time are useful. In this vein Halinen *et al.* (2012) suggest flow, sequential and point mapping of processes for studying how futures develop in different ways (see e.g. Medlin and Törnroos, 2015). Both these issues will require B2B researchers to embrace prospective orientations to consider something different. This also implies accepting new methodologies and developing new methods (Halinen *et al.*, 2023), where the first concerns different constructions of ontological positions (Shotter, 2014) and the second is focused to specific ways of conducting research within each position (see Flick, 2009; Shotter, 1990).

To summarize the main message of this special issue, researchers should have the courage to adapt concepts, methods, and theories when they see compelling reasons for doing so. These reasons can include changes in the business environment, the emergence of new B2B marketing phenomena or the introduction of ideas from other disciplines (such as sociology, management and psychology) or even (touch wood) from within our own discipline. Alvesson and Sandberg (2014) refer to this as "box-breaking research," where researchers generate novel and influential ideas, as opposed to "boxed-in" research that mainly repeats what we already know. Of course, this is easier said than done, as scholars are often limited by the narrow mindset of the research strands and communities they affiliate themselves with. Scholars need to "break out" from their research communities to experience new perspectives and mindsets, and then they need to "break [back] in" to the same communities to introduce their novel ideas without facing epistemic backlash (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2022). It is essential to learn from other research communities and disciplines by cross-fertilizing ideas, exploring different viewpoints (including those of practitioners, consultants and educators), and maintaining an open mind to avoid becoming too confined. The underlying idea is that a primary aim of research is to continue *imagining something different*.

Ilkka Tapani Ojansivu
Department of Marketing, Management and International Business (MMI), University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland, and Department of Management and Marketing, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia

Sharon Purchase
Department of, The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, and

Christopher J. Medlin
Adelaide Business School, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

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