Bridging the B2C and B2B Research Divide: The Domain of Retailing Literature

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Abstract

As the oldest academic journal in marketing, \textit{Journal of Retailing} publishes research dealing with all sorts of B2B and B2C retailing-related topics. However, there appears to be a perception that \textit{Journal of Retailing} welcomes only research pertaining to B2C issues. In this article, we debunk that perception through an analysis of the content of \textit{Journal of Retailing} articles published during the 2002–2008 period. In particular, we find that only 18.7\% of \textit{Journal of Retailing}'s content is devoted exclusively to B2C or C2C (consumer-to-consumer) topics. The remainder focuses on B2B research issues. We explore the implications of these findings for researchers who wish to pursue retailing-related B2B research.

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Introduction

Conventional wisdom has it that B2B marketing and B2C marketing are two distinct entities, and never the twain shall meet. Championing this dichotomy are academic journals specifically devoted to B2B (alternatively, read “industrial marketing”) or B2C (alternative label being “consumer marketing”) domains (e.g., \textit{Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology}), academic scholarly sub-groups (e.g., ISBM, ACR), and of course a whole host of textbooks devoted to business versus consumer marketing. The purpose of this polemic is to argue the following points:

- First, that the B2B versus B2C divide is an obsolete concept.
- Second, it is difficult to isolate pure B2B or pure B2C research in business.
- Third, the field of retailing straddles and actually brings these two together.

B2B versus B2C divide is obsolete

During the 1980s and early 1990s while the field of marketing was engaged in a soul-searching introspective debate involving philosophy of science prescriptions (cf., Anderson 1983; Bazozzi 1984; Hunt 1990; Peter 1992), Fern and Brown (1984) advanced another heretical idea in their article titled “The Industrial/Consumer Marketing Dichotomy: A Case of Insufficient Justification.” In summary, they argued (page 75):

... [T]o date the observed differences between industrial and consumer marketing (1) have not been causally related to marketing practice or theory formulation, (2) have not been tested empirically, and (3) have not been justified on logical grounds. In short, the purported differences have not played an instrumental role in the development of marketing thought.

The wisdom of this early prognosis is now being supported by at least three streams of research in contemporary marketing thought: (1) the emergence of the Supply Chain Management (SCM)\textsuperscript{2} perspective to managing businesses amply

\textsuperscript{2} SCM refers to a set of approaches utilized to efficiently integrate suppliers, manufacturers, warehouses, and stores, so that merchandise is produced and

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demonstrates that this B2B and B2C division is artificial (cf. Brown et al. 2005); (2) the nascent service-dominant logic being advanced by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2006) and their colleagues (e.g., Lengnick-Hall 1996; Lusch, Vargo, and O’Brien 2007) which entails the co-production of the creation of value by including consumers into process; and (3) the increasingly noteworthy marriage of ostensibly consumer behavior and interpersonal constructs like attribution, personality, trust, and commitment into B2B contexts.4

Pure B2B or pure B2C research is relatively rare

In Table 1, we code the 204 articles published in Journal of Retailing from 2002 (Volume 78) to 2008 (Volume 84). Allowing for multiple classifications, we see that these 204 studies yielded 673 classifications. This amounts to approximately 3.3 (673 divided by 204) classifications per study. This ratio itself suggests that pure B2C and B2B publications will be in minority. Note that only 126 of the 673 classifications (or 18.7%) were categorized as B2C. In Table 2, we summarize this information by year, and provide year-wise counts of pure B2C and pure B2B articles (the individual study details are presented in Appendix A).

In the seven years analyzed, only two pure B2C articles (or 0.3% of classifications) were published in Journal of Retailing, the analogous number for pure B2B categorizations was 57 (or approximately 8.47% of classifications) (Table 2). These counts underscore the premise that pure B2C and pure B2B articles are indeed relatively rare in the Journal of Retailing. Stated differently, 91.23% of the categorizations fall in the cusp of the B2C and B2B research domains.

Retailing straddles the B2C and B2B domains

There is a controversy in the textbooks about the definition of retailing. At the first blush, textbooks emphasize the B2C aspects of retailing.5 While in their description of retailing functions, they stress the role of retailers as intermediaries between the consumers and distributors and/or manufacturers and the services they provide to consumers (e.g., providing assortments of goods and services, credit extension, post purchase services) as well as upstream channel members (e.g., holding inventory,