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

Rajiv P. Dant[a,*], James R. Brown[b,1]

[a] Division of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, Price College of Business, The University of Oklahoma, 307 West Brooks, Norman, OK 73019-4001, United States

[b] Department of Marketing, College of Business & Economics, West Virginia University, 1601 University Avenue, Morgantown, WV 26506-6025, United States

Abstract

As the oldest academic journal in marketing, *Journal of Retailing* publishes research dealing with all sorts of B2B and B2C retailing-related topics. However, there appears to be a perception that *Journal of Retailing* welcomes only research pertaining to B2C issues. In this article, we debunk that perception through an analysis of the content of *Journal of Retailing* articles published during the 2002–2008 period. In particular, we find that only 18.7% of *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.

Keywords: B2B marketing; B2C marketing; Retailing; Retailing Research Domain

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., *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B2B versus B2C divide is obsolete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)[2] perspective to managing businesses amply

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 405 325 4675; fax: +1 405 325 7688.
E-mail addresses: rdant@ou.edu (R.P. Dant), j.brown@mail.wvu.edu (J.R. Brown).
1 Tel.: +1 304 293 3053; fax: +1 304 293 5652.

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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Table 1
Summary of journal of retailing contents from 2002 to 2008.

Category number	Category descriptions	JR 2002–2008 (counts)	JR 2002–2008 (percent)
1	Buyer-behavior (B2C)	126	18.72
2	Relationships	64	9.51
3	Innovation and new product development	16	2.38
4	Marketing strategy	189	28.08
5	Channels of distribution	80	11.89
6	Marketing research	28	4.16
7	Services	32	4.75
8	Global marketing	14	2.08
9	Sales management	124	18.42
Totals		673	100.00

Note. Multiple classifications of studies was permitted.

demonstrates that this B2B and B2C division is artificial (cf. Brown et al. 2005); (2) the nascent service-dominant logic[3] 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,

distributed at the right quantities, to the right locations, and at the right time, in order to minimize system-wide costs while satisfying service level requirements (Simchi-Levi, Kaminsky, Simchi-Levy 2003). Importantly, the key premise of SCM is to do away with traditional functional silos (e.g., marketing, production, MIS, etc.) and treat the entire enterprise as a totality where all the activities starting from the supply point (i.e., manufacturers and suppliers) to the consumption point (i.e., B2B and final consumers) are seen as interlinked to each other seamlessly.

[3] Service-dominant (S-D) logic, an increasingly recognized radical viewpoint, posits service to be the central dominator in exchange (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2006) explicate why marketing thought is shifting from the erstwhile goods-dominant (G-D) logic to the S-D logic, and present the key differences across these competing perspectives. Specifically, under the G-D logic, the customer is segmented, targeted, promoted to, distributed to, captured and viewed as an *operand* resource (Lusch, Vargo and O'Brien 2007). Under this view, marketing thought emphasizes that customers be researched and analyzed, and subsequently, products be designed and produced to satisfy the identified customer needs and wants. In contrast, S-D rationale proposes that the customer be seen as a co-creator of value and an *operant* resource (Lengnick-Hall 1996; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Hence, the normative implication is that boundary between customers and suppliers should be removed, and suppliers must learn to co-create value with their customers.

[4] There is large but dispersed literature base that incorporates patently consumer behavior constructs like attribution (e.g., Anand and Stern 1985) and personality (Weaven, Grace, and Manning 2009; Weaven and Herington 2006), and clearly interpersonal sentiments like trust and commitment (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006; Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007) as explanatory variables for B2B outcomes.

[5] For example, Levy and Weitz (2004, p. 6) define retailing as "the set of business activities that adds value to the products and services sold to consumers for their personal or family use." In a similar vein, Coughlan et al. (2006, p. 425) state that "retailing consists of the activities involved in selling goods and services to ultimate consumers for personal consumption." Finally, the U.S. Bureau of Census (2008) describes the retail trade sector of the economy as comprising "...establishments engaged in retailing merchandise, generally without transformation, and rendering services incidental to the sale of merchandise. The retailing process is the final step in the distribution of merchandise; retailers are, therefore, organized to sell merchandise in small quantities to the general public [through bricks-and-mortar stores and non-store facilities]."