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## Industrial Marketing Management



## Research trajectories of Service-Dominant Logic: Emergent themes of a unifying paradigm in business and management

Attila Pohlmann<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Valterri Kaartemo<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Hawai'i Pacific University, College of Business, 900 Fort Street Mall, Honolulu, HI 96813, United States*

<sup>b</sup> *Shidler College of Business, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2404 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, United States*

<sup>c</sup> *Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, Rehtorinpellonkatu 3, 20500 Turku, Finland*

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### ABSTRACT

We describe the research trajectories associated with S-D Logic and the scholarly activity it encompasses across a breadth of disciplines by conducting a bibliometric analysis of a body of literature citing two fundamental S-D Logic publications between 2004–2014. The bibliometric analysis reveals four pertinent research trajectories: Value co-creation, Resources (incl. integration), Brands, and Innovation. These empirical findings are supported by qualitative insights and projections obtained from structured interviews with S-D Logic scholars using the Delphi method, which identifies ten research trajectories: Actors, Context, Innovation, Institutions, Markets, Resources, Service, Systems, Value co-creation, and Value propositions. The main tenets, relevant literature, and syntheses of research questions for the aforementioned research trajectories are provided. Results indicate that the scientific community is evaluating fundamental ontological and epistemological questions of S-D Logic. Emergent themes (complex and fractal phenomena, generic conceptualizations, technological innovation and democratization processes, and institutionalization practices) are discussed. The results provide insight into the development of paradigms in the managerial sciences. The delineation of the paradigm's thematic boundaries, its emergent themes, and identification of central research trajectories informs an advanced understanding of the nature of economic exchange and value creation for both practitioners and the managerial sciences, thus aiding the transdisciplinary production of knowledge.

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### 1. Introduction

The “open source” format (Lusch & Vargo, 2006) of the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) has spurred substantial interest within the academic community. The ongoing scholarly debate sparked by the introduction of S-D Logic is an indicator for the paradigmatic properties of S-D Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). While this expansion is a testament to the integrative qualities of S-D Logic, its interdisciplinary dispersion muddles the paradigm's boundaries — even more so amidst ongoing debates situated across a breadth of disciplines.

Lusch, Vargo, and Tanniru (2009) recognize S-D Logic as a potentially unifying paradigm that enables an informed understanding of the true nature of economic exchange. Our goal is to describe the research trajectories of S-D Logic and the scholarly activity it encompasses. A closer look at research trajectories can aid in the understanding of the unifying paradigm's thematic boundaries, the conceptual cornerstones of scholarly interest and debate, and emergent higher order themes. Taken together, these insights advance understanding of the nature of

economic exchange and value creation for the business and management sciences and aid in the transdisciplinary production of knowledge. However, for this developing unifying paradigm's potential to be attained, the interrelations between its key concepts need to be clarified.

Having followed the development of S-D Logic since its introduction, we asked ourselves, what are the research trajectories motivating the development of the paradigm? We sought to find ways of empirical inquiry that highlight these central areas of interest and debate. The resulting analysis and interpretation may provide advanced insights as well as a point of entry for scholars and practitioners alike who are involved in shaping the future of the paradigm.

Over the course of the past decade, the S-D Logic literature has branched into a wide variety of interdisciplinary topics, including those relevant to industrial marketing, such as sales (Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012), or supply chain management (Tokman & Beitelspacher, 2011). A cursory inspection of this activity can easily bring forth the impression of classic paradigmatic tension (Kuhn, 2012) between two strongly debated competing paradigms — namely Goods-Dominant Logic, which emphasizes tangible output and discrete transactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and Service-Dominant Logic, which emphasizes the integration and application of resources for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). However,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [pohlmann@hawaii.edu](mailto:pohlmann@hawaii.edu) (A. Pohlmann), [valterri.kaartemo@utu.fi](mailto:valterri.kaartemo@utu.fi) (V. Kaartemo).

the incommensurability of competing paradigms that usually triggers a scientific revolution presents a wicked problem (Buchanan, 1992), that does not have a single solution for an integrative discipline such as the business and management sciences; possibly even an unsolvable problem in the social sciences (Dogan, 2001). Evidently, S-D Logic was proposed as a logic, a worldview or theoretical lens so to speak, rather than claiming to be a testable theory. Moreover, the transcending conceptual nature of S-D Logic, fosters general disciplinary integration. Consequently, the consensus that would mark the acceptance of a paradigm is likely to remain scattered across disciplines, thus seemingly inchoate.

The key to understanding the paradigmatic influence of S-D Logic lies in exploring its impact on the business and management sciences by evaluating its capacity to stimulate the myriad ongoing debates, re-evaluations, and improvements true to its “open source” goal. Involved in this process of paradigm negotiation are scholarly resources. These scholarly resources broadly encompass all the entities involved in the production of knowledge, which are generally embodied by academic publications, but they also include the ephemeral aspects of this process, such as idea generation, experimentation, discussions, contributions, and citations.

This awareness suggests that a retrospective analysis of the aforementioned process of knowledge production would principally serve the purpose of documenting past developments with only a limited capacity to predict future developments or to examine such predictions. Thus, we present a combined retrospective and prospective approach to reveal the pertinent research trajectories of the S-D Logic paradigm. We accomplish this goal by analyzing retrospectively the bibliometric structure of the academic debate spurred by S-D Logic. We enrich these empirical findings by combining them with the insights and projections obtained from structured interviews with S-D Logic experts (Delphi method, Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Finally, we synthesize common higher order themes that emerge from the content of the scholarly activity under analysis. The methodological approach laid out here therefore lends itself to studying paradigms in any type of integrative discipline in the social sciences.

This article is structured as follows: First, we review the literature on research trajectories. Second, we present the bibliometric methodology and results. Third, we describe the Delphi method, summarize the extracted research trajectories and organize the gathered research questions by philosophical categories. Fourth, we reflect these findings against the bibliometric data, discuss how they relate to S-D Logic, and propose emergent higher order themes for the business and management sciences that are characteristic of a unifying paradigm.

## 2. Research trajectories

The objective of this article is to identify research trajectories pertinent to the S-D Logic paradigm. As paradigms develop through cumulative knowledge growth, their developmental stage may be determined by the scientific community's degree of consensus regarding the paradigm's theoretical structures and the methodological approaches employed to explore them (Kuhn, 2012). Mapping research trajectories can provide higher-level insights into the development of paradigms in the business and management sciences and, more specifically, refine some of the fuzzy boundaries surrounding themes central to the study and development of a unifying paradigm. Generally, advancements in research fields occur along specific research trajectories wherein key concepts are refined and extended in scope. Such advancements are rarely triggered by sudden and radical change; thus identifying research trajectories may point to fruitful areas for future research. Specifically, as knowledge accumulates over a period of time, a framework becomes necessary to organize the generated facts and ideas (Mackenzie & House, 1978). We argue that such an organizing framework may be constructed by analyzing research trajectories, since their identification nurtures the growth of scientific fields (Schildt, Zahra, & Sillanpää, 2006).

Retrospective research trajectories have previously been studied by applying bibliometric means. For instance, Vogel and Güttel (2013) used co-citation analysis to study the development of the strategic management literature. Callon, Courtial, and Laville (1991) employed co-word analysis to analyze research trajectories in the polymer sciences. Although adopting a dynamic approach, namely comparing dominant themes across time periods (Vogel & Güttel, 2013), allows for the identification of past research trajectories, its capacity to extrapolate and identify future themes is limited, therefore applied prospective research methods to identify research trajectories are needed. We first present the results of our bibliometric analysis and follow up by discussing the findings of our futures research (Delphi study).

## 3. Bibliometric analysis: knowledge discovery through co-word analysis

### 3.1. Bibliometric research process

We employ a co-word analysis to identify the research trajectories of S-D Logic. The idea of knowledge discovery through co-word analysis was initially proposed by Callon, Courtial, Turner, and Bauin (1983) as a bibliometric analysis technique to map out associations between words in textual data. Co-word analysis does not rely on an a priori definition of themes, but instead empirically detects and extracts themes via the co-occurrence of words (Callon, Law, & Rip, 1986; Callon et al., 1991; He, 1999). The focus of this method of inquiry is not on the content of the individual scholarly resources, such as published articles, but rather their citation structures and shared themes. More specifically, the meta-data and citation trees contained within indices such as Thomson Reuter's Web of Science serve to map the structure of academic knowledge.

We divided the workflow of co-word analysis into five basic steps: (1) collection of raw data, (2) extraction of relevant information from the raw data, (3) network generation and calculation of similarities between items based on the extracted information, (4) use of a clustering algorithm to detect the themes, and (5) use of a similarity measure to detect connections between clusters across specified sub-periods (Cobo, López-Herrera, Herrera-Viedma, & Herrera, 2011).

The software SciMAT (Science Mapping Analysis Tool) ver. 1.1 (Cobo, López-Herrera, Herrera-Viedma, & Herrera, 2012) was used to generate a full network map of keywords and their co-occurrences over the entire publication period under study (2004–2014). The entire period is divided into sub-periods and an independent network is generated for each sub-period. Following the logic that the more keywords a set of documents has in common the more similar the documents are. Themes are thus indicated through affiliation. From the citation data, SciMAT internally generates a complete network, in which a node represents a keyword and the edges between these nodes represent the co-occurrence of keywords in all documents in the sub-period corpus. However, it would be difficult to visually render and interpret such a large network; hence the use of an algorithm to reduce the network by extracting clusters of prevalent keywords. These clusters reveal the thematic areas in which scholarly activity was present (i.e. the conceptual subdomains of a research field). Cobo et al. (2011) define a thematic area as “a group of evolved themes across different subperiods.” In the following, we refer to research trajectories as the themes that are linked across time sub-periods due to their similarity.

However, while pointing to areas of scholarly activity and interest, the bibliometric approach only allows limited insight with regards to the nature of the debate and will need to be supplemented with qualitative methods of inquiry. For each sub-period, the relative position of thematic clusters within the overall network – and consequently among each other – can be plotted in a strategic diagram using established network measures such as Callon's density and centrality (Callon et al., 1991). The density measure denotes the internal strength of a network cluster whereas the centrality measure indicates the

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