Viva la revolution! For evidence-based marketing we strive

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1. Introduction

As a discipline, mainstream marketing research has been remarkably cohesive. It has been dominated by a small number of traditions including the marketing engineers who observe marketing relevant behaviours and see improvements in statistical models as advancement; the cognitive researchers interested in modelling latent mental constructs particularly attitudes, values and beliefs, often relying on measures of intentions believing these reflect real behaviours; and the interpretivists who search for the meaning behind actions.

Understandably, each “school” sees their approach as the most fruitful way to advance marketing knowledge, and may perceive the other schools as misguided. However, collectively there has been much concern about the lack of scientific progress, real world impact and relevance, and respect from other academic disciplines. As early as the 70’s, concerns were raised that too much focus was being given to techniques and “newness” over important useful knowledge.

“…too large a proportion of the consumer (including marketing) research literature is not worth the paper it is written on or the time it takes to read.

Unless we take some corrective measures soon, we stand to all drown in a mass of meaningless and potentially misleading junk!” (n.p., Jacoby, 1978).

Some four decades later, such problems are still being echoed (e.g. Kohli, 2017; Nenonen et al., 2017; Storbacka, 2014) including in the 2017 European Marketing Academy Conference keynote speech by Professor Ajay Kohli, the Gary T. and Elizabeth R. Jones Chair who recently wrote:

“Many theories in the academic literature do not speak to issues of strong interest to managers,” (Kohli, 2017).

Other examples of the “crisis literature” in marketing include:

“Advertising academicians and advertising practitioners seem to live in different worlds,” (p. 425 Nyilasy and Reid, 2007);

“There are no real innovative ideas in academic research, only short payoff studies; only ‘knowledge creep’ and not ‘knowledge spurt’.” And further “there is little generalizable, accumulated marketing knowledge to be disseminated to marketing’s constituencies.” (AMA Task Force 1988, p. 17) in (Nyilasy and Reid, 2007);

“In its present state, academic research in marketing should be ignored by marketing practitioners.” (p. 40–41 November, 2004);

“…consumer psychology risks becoming marginalised in its efforts to explain or be relevant in the real world.” (n.p., Romaniuk and Nguyen, 2017)

“It seems to be the case that the type of research output that is viewed by academics as being of the highest quality, is the type of research that is viewed by managers as being of the least interest.” (p. 294 Brennan, 2004);

“It is clear from this survey that academic journals devoted to marketing are largely unknown and unread by marketing managers.” (p. 12 McKenzie et al., 2002);

“Unfortunately, it seems that academic research in management and marketing is moving further and further away from the golden quadrant (new theoretical understanding and high levels of practical usefulness) (Storbacka, 2014),” (p. 1131 Nenonen et al., 2017).

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There is also a growing appreciation of questionable research practices (QRPs) in disciplines such as psychology (e.g. failing to report all dependent measures and conditions, collecting more data after seeing whether results were significant, stopping data collection after achieving the desired result, selectively reporting studies that "worked") (for a summary see John et al., 2012). While we are unaware of systematic documentation of QRPs in marketing, the common focus on reporting statistical significance for single studies creates the conditions where these behaviours could too easily occur. Also as with other disciplines, marketing has a paucity of replications published in leading journals (Evanschitzky et al., 2007), and there have been high profile retractions of articles from leading researchers such as Dirk Smeesters, Diederik Stapel and Brian Wansink.

A possible solution to the slow rate of progress over four decades and to the problems identified requires marketing researchers to take a different approach to discovery. Recent commenters supporting this idea suggest that it is likely to need to be in collaboration with industry (Kohl, 2017; Nenonen et al., 2017). A very different approach to discovery, that has a proven record of being valued by industry, is already being adopted by one group of researchers who operate under a markedly different research philosophy than most other researchers. These researchers focus on an "empiricist" research approach that differs quite starkly from the dominant approaches in marketing. They are known as the Empirical Generalisationists (EGs) because of their strong emphasis on documenting and interpreting scientific laws about marketing and buyer behaviour (Sharp and Wright, 1999).

This EG philosophy is disproportionately popular amongst Australasian academics and its findings are gaining traction within industry, particularly amongst global brands. For an example, see the 2015 interview with the Australian Association of National Advertisers, where John Broome (then Marketing Director of Kellogg’s ANZ) advocated the importance of marketing science, mathematical evidence and empirical laws in developing strategies for brand growth following his exposure to EGs and their discoveries (Homewood, 2015). For an overview of the global transformation of Mars Inc. to evidence-based marketing, see Kennedy and McColl (2012). While the "EG school" could perhaps become one of the features that distinguish Australasian marketing research in the next century, for the marketing discipline to advance as a whole, we call on researchers around the world to give it a try.

In order to facilitate this and enhance understanding of the movement, we describe the views and practices of EGs, as well as the challenges this school faces. This paper may be considered by some as provocative, seeking to divide the research community by pointing out that one group is different. We think that this is important. There is a group of researchers that behave differently, and this should be known so that the outputs from this group can be assessed separately (e.g. how well do their theories predict the future? Does their advice make practitioners more effective and/or more efficient compared to following advice coming from the traditional approaches?). Only when others understand what this group is trying to achieve can their performance be evaluated. New research (e.g. research degree students) should know that there is an alternative to the mainstream; that an approach to doing science in marketing exists and its outputs should be independently compared and tested. This is a foundation of good science and is expected to be good for the discipline of marketing and for businesses more generally.

2. An introduction to the Empirical Generalisationists

Empirical Generalisationists (EG) value and work to different objectives compared to other schools of thought, and they adopt different research methods underpinned by clear views on how scientific knowledge is best developed. Unlike much of the research into marketing, their research leans towards a “data first” approach rather than “theory/model first”. They search for law-like patterns in many sets of data (Ehrenberg, 1990). Initial findings tend to be simple. When EGs apply modelling techniques to their data, they look first for underlying patterns and then use simple models that generalise across different conditions. EG researchers place a high value on prediction of the future (as a test of theory), and identifying the boundary conditions of knowledge (e.g. when laws or patterns apply and when they do not). EGs tend to see other marketing researchers as overly abstract; exposing complex theories to weak tests and evaluating models in terms of their fit to one-off sets of past data rather than their ability to predict or to generalise new sets of data or new conditions.

Philosophers of science would associate EGs with the empiricist or new experimentalist movement. This philosophical movement rejects the “old” ideas that scientists develop grand theories that hold sway until falsified or overthrown by revolutionary new ideas. Instead, the new experimentalists see science as a more gradual process of empirical development of knowledge. “Old” theories may well continue to be useful empirical generalisations even when “superseded” by new knowledge. For example, Einstein’s theories did not prove Newton’s “wrong”. Rather, they predicted the boundary conditions of Newtonian mechanics (high velocity or intense gravitational fields). Newtonian mechanics still hold within these boundary conditions, and continue to be used. Both Einstein’s and Newton’s theories consist of useful evidence-based laws.

Gradualist EG approaches came to prominence in psychology with the seminal work of Greenwald et al. (1986). In the marketing literature, the issues of replication and the growth of empirical knowledge have also been addressed in the work of Scott Armstrong at Wharton, while Marketing Science published a special issue on empirical generalisations in 1995 and Journal of Advertising Research published two issues on the same topic in 2009 and 2013.

Perhaps the most well-known advocates of this approach in marketing were the late Andrew Ehrenberg and Frank Bass. Ehrenberg was not only a highly successful EG researcher but also an advocate of this approach publishing papers on how to do EG research (Ehrenberg, 1995; Ehrenberg et al., 1994; Lindsay and Ehrenberg, 1993; Ehrenberg and Bound, 1993). Ehrenberg was often seen as a heretic, someone who did things very differently and was not to be followed, even by some who recognised that he was extraordinarily successful in creating scientific knowledge.

Around the world there is a group, admittedly small, of ‘Ehrenbergian’ researchers building on the work started by and/or inspired by Ehrenberg, with a particularly high concentration in Australasia. Work in the EG traditions has long been done by researchers at Massey University, the University of South Australia and the University of New South Wales. There has also been some interest in Ehrenbergian work from other researchers such as at Flinders, Monash, Swinburne, Deakin, Griffith, Auckland Victoria and Otago Universities. There is a base of EG researchers continuing in the UK (Southbank, Exeter and Kingston Universities) including researchers such as Phil Stern, Robert East, Charles Graham, Francesca Dall’Olmo Riley, Chris Hand and Dag Bennett. There is also some interest in North America, for example, Scott Armstrong (Wharton) takes an EG approach to forecasting problems, Jerry Wind (Wharton) has been a key proponent co-leading the two EmpGen conferences and their corresponding special editions in the Journal of Advertising Research, and Herb Sorensen a leading shopper researcher has collaborated with EG researchers.

Why has the EG approach been so productive in developing industry-relevant knowledge? Part of the answer may lie in the use of industry-sourced data and industry-sourced metrics, as these frame the problems faced by managers in their daily work. Research that makes use of same data and metrics as used by managers is more likely to produce results that can be understood and applied
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