

The challenge of researching and theorizing the interactive business landscape

Empirical observations that exchange between businesses mostly taking place in the context of “thick” interactions might be considered as trivial – they obviously do. But, such an apparently obvious empirical observation actually challenges some of the most basic assumptions of traditional marketing theory. To put it short, findings of the IMP research over 40 years show that economic exchange is not a simple mechanism, rather they evidenced the materiality of business exchange, its double-sidedness where both sides are active and involved in different social and material settings and also hold different views of these. Hence, hand in hand with the IMP projects’ ambition to offer a deeper understanding of the content and consequences of interaction and business relationships goes the ambition to elaborate adequate analytical models.

A comprehensive IMP theory on business exchange is, however, still in becoming. The IMP project is though resting on some basic assumptions. Perhaps the most central assumptions are the notion of resource heterogeneity and that of interaction having a substance and consequently being context dependent. There are also some conceptual models clearly developed to allow the investigations of the content and consequences of interaction, including how interaction processes are connected and create network forces, such as the interaction model (Håkansson, 1982), the ARA model (Håkansson and Johanson, 1988; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) and the 4R resource interaction model (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002).

However, while IMP scholars seem to agree on the existences of “thick” interaction between businesses with network consequences, the question of how to research and conceptualize this phenomenon has been the object for intense – and probably healthy – discussions, agreements and disagreements. The reasons for the controversies are obvious – at least if we consider the challenges that the analysis of business interaction and its empirical, theoretical, methodological, political and practical aspects present. As suggested in an overview of the IMP project in Håkansson *et al.* (2009, pp. 1-9), the research challenges regard how to capture and interpret an interaction that has “substance” and “rainforest-like” characteristics, i.e., interdependencies that are both visible and invisible, which stretch over time and space – and are interpreted in different ways by those involved. Considering these challenges, the search for suitable theoretical and methodological constructs, as well as the debates concerning these, is probably a never-ending story. Several of the papers in this issue are contributions to the debate with the ambition to review and comment on some of the theoretical and methodological experiences made in the IMP research and relate it to issues emerging in other research settings.

The first paper, “Wroe Alderson, IMP and the evolution of theory”, by Lars-Erik Gadde and Kajsa Hulthén, draws attention to one of the early sources of theoretical inspirations of the IMP project. It discusses the phenomenon of the rise and fall of theoretical contributions over time and, last but not least, the fact that a once inspiring contribution appears to have lost its importance and continues to exist as an embedded, underlying assumption in other constructs – such as the IMP approach. The point of

departure is the conceptualizing by Wroe Alderson (1898-1965), whose work on the role of structure and operations of channel networks and marketing institutions made him, at least in the mid-twentieth century, one of the most influential marketing theorists. However, already in the mid-1970, Alderson's contributions seemed to have vanished from leading marketing journals – basically at the same time as the emerging IMP project became profoundly inspired by his perspective on structures and processes in business landscape as organized behaviour system of which he emphasized the heterogeneity. The paper focuses on why the central ideas of Alderson, with “functionalism” and a “system approach” as central ingredients, during the second half of the twentieth century did lose their role as an inspiring source in marketing research, while offering so much to IMP researchers. The authors argue that when marketing at that time became generally producer oriented, with McCarty's 4P thinking in the foreground, effectively articulated by Kotler (1967), it also became closer to micro economic theory – which simply did not fit with Alderson's genuinely holistic approach. IMP scholars, on the other hand, found inspiration to how to approach the observed “thick” interaction in Alderson's criticism of mainstream economic theory and his attention to the heterogeneity of resources as well as the connectedness of business exchange. The paper reveals that concepts from Alderson's thinking contributed to several central features of the IMP framing: relationship benefits through voluntary interdependencies, adaptations, heterogeneity and cooperation. The authors argue that Alderson's functionalist approach still has much to offer for researchers engaging in empirical studies of contemporary marketing practices.

The second paper, “Methodomania? On the methodological and theoretical challenges of IMP business research”, by Håkan Håkansson and Alexandra Waluszewski, examines how IMP has coped with methodological challenges, and furthermore, how to avoid “methodomania”, i.e., treating methodology as a question of mastering of certain techniques and rules. The paper elaborates on a distinction made by science historian Peter Galison (1997) who identifies two different but equally rigorous approaches utilized in microphysics: studies based on “images”, which allows data in their original form, and “logic”, which require the translation of original data to some assumed paths. The image-logic distinction is used to examine approaches in studies of business exchange, when the research object (relationships) embraces two sides of business exchange, and furthermore, by a mix of ideas stemming from practice and theory, with conventional market thinking in the foreground. The conclusion is that the image-based method has been central in the development of the IMP network approach. In order to shed light on the content of business exchange, from the very start, the IMP project has been focussed on the production of a large set of, in Galison's terminology, “hard facts” about the existence, substance and importance of interaction and the relationships it is creating. The image-based methodology has also led to the development of a set of “imaging instruments”, each with an ability to picture the content and consequences of business exchange. Furthermore, IMP's imaging instruments have also made it possible to analyse the interplay between theoretical models of the business exchange and the way business exchange actually takes place.

The third paper, “Researching business interaction: introducing a conceptual framework and methodology” by Morten H. Abrahamsen, proposes a conceptual framework and a methodology to research business interaction. Researching interaction implies focusing on ongoing processes instead of separate episodes, on actors who aim to affect but are equally affected by the interaction process in ways that are not necessarily apparent to them at first, and on addressing multiple characteristics

that are unique to each specific interaction episode or relationship. The author suggests the investigation of business interaction in terms of who interacts (the actors involved), where they interact (the space dimension), when they interact (the time dimension), why they interact (their ascriptions for interaction) and how they interact (their strategic intent) from the perspective of a single actor. This framework is applied in a study on network changes, presented by Abrahamsen (2011) and Abrahamsen *et al.* (2012a, b), experienced by actors involved in the distribution of Norwegian salmon in Japan. In the concluding discussion, the author emphasizes that the suggested framework allows both data reduction and data display, which are considered as two important aspects of qualitative studies. At the same time, the suggested framework provides an understanding of the complexity and richness of interaction since it allows the comparison of data across a larger sample of respondents. Furthermore, comparing the ascriptions of interaction at single actor, dyadic and network level can provide valuable insights into the reasons for why the actors act in the way they do.

The fourth paper, “Economic deals in the construction industry – implications for socio-material interaction and monetary processes”, by Malena Ingemansson Havenvid, Håkan Håkansson and Åse Linné discusses the IMP framework’s ability to investigate a phenomenon that has been implicitly touched upon already in some early IMP studies but which has been explicitly in focus more recently – the interface between social-material interaction and the money-handling processes. The empirical setting is the construction industry, which is claimed to have two distinct and different environments: one consisting of physical objects and construction and another consisting of financial agreements and money. Furthermore, construction companies also tend to be at the interface of public and private socio-material structures and balancing long-term and short-term financial developments. Therefore, the authors underline the understanding of the relation between socio-material interaction and monetary processes is important for developing relevant industrial and economic policies. The study is based on an investigation of three housing construction projects, all managed by a large Swedish construction company, and the identification of the main interactions and related deals. The concluding discussion concerns the intricate relationship between deals and the social-material interaction processes among construction actors. The investigated deals are not project-specific or isolated phenomenon but interrelated in specific ways to form “deal structures”, beneficial for the involved actors’ engagement in projects over time. Every established deal does exclude some other possible deals – and consequently influences the development of both socio-material interactions and future deals. The paper’s message to actors that want to influence a development pattern is to get directly involved in the construction of deals – since these are difficult to affect in a general way.

The fifth paper, “An old picture ... or is it? The relations between business and political networks in Hungary” by Tibor Mandják and Judit Simon, utilize the IMP framework to investigate a challenging and important contextual aspect of business exchange – the relationship between the political and the business setting. The paper examines the Hungarian political and business contexts during a period when the relationship between the two went through significant changes, from the late 1960s market socialism over to the contemporary market economy of the last 20 years. The IMP framework is used to identify and analyse business and political networks during both economic systems and also the change in relationships between business and political actors over time in terms of vertical and horizontal linkages. Monetary aspects such as “soft budget constraints” and idea aspects such as ideology are also paid attention to. Besides a historical overview, the paper utilizes two detailed case

studies, where focal companies were successful before the transition period, and also were thought to have significant chance of surviving after the transition. The paper reveals that the personal relationships that span the business and political networks during the socialist system tended to replicate themselves also after the transition. The established relational behaviours of business and political actors appeared to survive the transition – something that affected the outcome of the new economic regime. The main conclusion is that historical political structures can have long-term, unanticipated impacts – on settings that were never thought to be affected.

The sixth paper, “Market investments in resource interfaces: understanding market assets in networks”, by Frans Prenekert, uses the IMP framework to investigate market investments as parts of on-going business exchanges between firms in their day-to-day operations, in order to understand how market assets take shape. The paper is based on an empirical study of the Chilean fish farming industry, focusing on a salmon production network and the interactions between a focal and related tangible and intangible resources. The purpose is to provide an account of who forms what market assets through what investments in a business network. Market investments are approached as a process where firms commit resources to some resource interface(s) and receive some form of return for such resource commitment. Hence, market investments are considered as sustaining resource interfaces and creating market assets, at the same time as resource interfaces also enable and/or require continued market investments. In the concluding discussion, the paper shows that market investments made by way of ongoing operations are a way of creating market assets consisting of developed and unique resource interface. Thus, the paper underlines an earlier observation in the IMP research – making resource interfaces more valuable to some specific contexts and firms most likely makes them less useful for others as they become increasingly specialized and adapted to a given context. Including both direct and indirect resource interfaces in the study, this paper reveals that indirect resource interfaces create “bridging” of resources as a complement to direct resource interfaces that create interacting resources. Finally, the paper emphasizes the commitment of resources to existing resource interfaces, the ensuing creation of market assets and its use and value for firms.

The last two papers address the question what conversations with other theoretical approaches can contribute to IMP research? In the seventh paper, “Learning from intelligent conversation: how can insights from system theory contribute to advance IMP research?”, Luitzen de Boer and Poul Houman Andersen argue that a comprehensive review of system theory, closed systems included, can provide more in-depth discussions of topics related to IMP research. The reason for this is not that system theory is complementing or possible to integrate with IMP research – but rather that they relate to similar empirical reference points and share some intellectual roots. The ambition is to offer IMP researchers a general language that can be used to describe typical IMP phenomena in a more precise way, and to identify new opportunities for theoretical refinement and directions for future empirical work. Three key issues of system theory are chosen: system boundaries, system structure (architecture) and homeostasis (striving for stability). The key issues are considered as “puzzles” and the authors discuss how they are addressed in system theory and IMP research. In the concluding discussion, the authors suggest that the three “puzzles” might serve as one of several thematic structures for organizing IMP research. Furthermore, it is claimed that the three puzzles are implied

in much of the theorizing within the IMP research community. However, the authors remark that the IMP research community comes short of addressing issues that calls for a concerted theorizing effort, and the IMP research therefore suffers from a jungle of conceptualization, and an underutilization of existing knowledge and findings.

In the last paper, “Let’s talk about innovation – is there a hidden potential of knowledge exchange between open innovation and IMP?”, Christina Öberg, investigates the sharing of theoretical and empirical experiences, or rather the lack of such sharing, between open innovation and IMP scholars. On the surface, there seems to be a kinship between the two as both are approaching innovation processes as phenomenon that takes place among multiple parties and both acknowledge the collaborative aspect of innovation. However, a citation analysis suggests that open innovation and IMP researchers seldom seem to find inspiration from each other, although IMP researchers seem to consider at least some open innovation contributions. A deeper look into the basic assumptions of the open innovation and IMP approach reveals some complementarities, but also some severe contradictions. Although the open innovation literature pays great attention to company’s internal as well as external sources of knowledge and acknowledges collaboration inside the company as well as with other companies, the main focus is how this interaction pattern is managed by a focal company. Open innovation is therefore a rather company-centric view on the innovation process while IMP is based on analysis of both sides of the interaction interfaces, including its social, technological, economic and political dimensions, and is therefore considered as more concerned with the contextual aspects and the embeddedness of the innovation process. In the concluding discussion, the author suggests that the open innovation research findings on how innovation processes are related within companies on its transactional aspect and non-financial contributions could be valuable for IMP. It is also argued that IMP’s understanding of what theoretical underpinnings are necessary in order to capture the contextual aspects of the innovation process could be of value for open innovation scholars interested in innovation processes involving multiple parties.

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