

Editorial: Introducing Interdisciplinary Research in *Industrial Marketing Management*

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ABSTRACT

Business-to-business (B2B) research is interdisciplinary in nature. A key element of interdisciplinarity is integration or combination of ideas, perspectives, and/or methods from different disciplines oriented toward producing new knowledge. However, domain silos often keep researchers focused on similar problems, methods, and theories over time. To break down these silos, *Industrial Marketing Management* introduces a new format of special issues focusing on interdisciplinary research, steered by two new associate editors: Elina Jaakkola and Stefan Markovic. The intention is to publish these interdisciplinary issues on a regular basis, each calling for novel applications of particular topics, concepts, theories, and/or methods from disciplines outside B2B research. The main aim of the interdisciplinary issues is to broaden the scope and potency of B2B research. Scholars from the B2B domain and other disciplines are invited to suggest interdisciplinary topics and themes that could be researched in the B2B sphere and that would be worthy of a journal issue.

Keywords: interdisciplinary research; business-to-business marketing management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In many academic fields, interdisciplinarity has been increasingly called for as an opportunity to break new ground and generate new knowledge (Huutoniemi et al., 2010). Moorman et al. (2019) note that a strong intradisciplinary focus limits the innovativeness of our thinking and the problems we address, as (1) domain silos keep researchers focused on similar problems, methods, and theories over time; (2) scholars commonly read the same journals and attend the same conferences so that knowledge tends to conform rather than challenge; and (3) beliefs about the boundaries of marketing or what constitutes “theory” or “rigor” are self-reinforced by reviewers and editors.

Business-to-business (B2B) research is inherently interdisciplinary: the theories that scholars apply to understand and explain business relationships, systems, and markets have their foundations in diverse disciplines, including economics, psychology, sociology, and management (Lindgreen et al., 2020). In this editorial, we argue for the importance of avoiding the perils of too strong a disciplinary focus by strengthening, broadening, and supporting interdisciplinarity in B2B research. Breaking down the disciplinary silos can offer fresh air and a fruitful ground for novel research that can facilitate the evolution of the B2B field. Cross-fertilization of viewpoints, concepts, and insights across disciplines is pivotal for ensuring that B2B research continues being relevant and abreast of the development of contemporary markets.

To support such cross-fertilization, *Industrial Marketing Management* introduces a new format of special issues focusing on interdisciplinary research, steered by two new associate editors: Elina Jaakkola and Stefan Markovic. The intention is to publish these interdisciplinary issues on a regular basis, each calling for novel applications of particular topics, concepts, theories, and/or methods from disciplines outside B2B research. The main aim of the interdisciplinary issues is to broaden the scope and potency of B2B research. We will address this aim by covering topics, theories, and perspectives that are either rapidly emerging in the B2B sphere or widely researched within other disciplines, to explore their relevance and potential in the B2B field. In addition, we aim to gather insights from other disciplines that may be necessary for addressing emerging business problems, which are or will be relevant for B2B marketing, or that relate to complex and multifaceted phenomena for which we need conceptual or methodological tools new to B2B research to address these phenomena. Our ultimate aim is to ensure the timeliness and continued relevance of B2B research, fighting inertia, and broadening its horizons.

2. CONDUCTING INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

The concept of *interdisciplinarity* is worth elaborating, as scholars are facing a myriad of variants of the concept, such as multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research. For the purpose of the new

interdisciplinary special issues in *Industrial Marketing Management*, we refer to a comprehensive and pragmatic definition developed by Aboelela et al. (2006, p. 341), based on their extensive review of definitions of interdisciplinary research:

Interdisciplinary research refers to any study or group of studies undertaken by scholars from two or more distinct scientific disciplines. Such research is based upon a conceptual model that links or integrates theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, uses study design and methodology that is not limited to any one field, and requires the use of perspectives and skills of the involved disciplines throughout multiple phases of the research process.

A key element of interdisciplinary research is, thus, *integration or combination* of ideas and/or methods from different disciplines that together produce something new and useful, either a novel solution to a research problem or an advancement of fundamental understanding of a phenomenon (Chan et al., 2009). Interdisciplinary research typically involves *interactive*, joint theoretical development through sustained communication among participants from different disciplines to advance knowledge on a common problem or phenomenon (Gustafsson et al., 2015). The outcome of such research, and its contribution, is then something that could not have been obtained by relying on ideas and/or methods from a single discipline, potentially leading to revelatory theoretical advancement (Chan et al., 2009; Gustafsson et al., 2015).

Interdisciplinary research has a marked difference to *multidisciplinary* research, where researchers from different fields examine a phenomenon in parallel rather than together. In other words, in multidisciplinary research, the components of the new knowledge are imported, exported, or pooled across boundaries without being substantially adapted and integrated (Aboelela et al., 2006; Huutoniemi et al., 2010). *Transdisciplinary* research, in turn, goes even further than interdisciplinarity in synthesizing conceptual ingredients from different disciplines to develop a new theory that is broader than a specific discipline (Huutoniemi et al., 2010). Transdisciplinary theorizing seeks to relate the involved disciplines into a fully synthesized, novel theory that is applicable across and beyond pre-existing theories in the contributing disciplines, and potentially gives rise to a new field (Aboelela et al., 2006; Gustafsson et al., 2015).

In practice, we see multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research approaches as representing a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy, featuring different degrees of conceptual distance and integration of theories from the participating disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is best understood not as one thing, but as a variety of different ways of bridging and confronting the prevailing disciplinary approaches (Huutoniemi et al., 2010). A simple starting point is to identify a significant phenomenon or problem—typically calling for a joint initiative between departments, faculties, or domains—and to jointly examine (1) what conceptual or methodological tools are needed to understand or address

this phenomenon or problem and (2) what role a particular B2B concept or theory can play in the process. An interdisciplinary research approach thus involves the process of integrating the conceptual elements through a theory synthesis, where the researchers unravel the conceptual building blocks that different fields use to conceptualize the phenomenon, and find a common ground on which to build a novel conceptualization (Jaakkola, 2020). Alternatively, researchers could start by embracing a concept, theory, or method outside the B2B domain, and explore its meaning and potential application in the B2B domain: what novel insights can be generated with this previously unused theoretical tool? Both approaches can result in new knowledge and insights, as long as the researchers make sure the concepts from different disciplines are sufficiently integrated to provide a framework that goes beyond a simple sum of the parts.

3. CONTRIBUTING TO THE INTERDISCIPLINARY ISSUES

The new interdisciplinary special issues of *Industrial Marketing Management* will welcome both narrow and broad *scopes* of interdisciplinarity. In *narrow interdisciplinarity*, B2B research is to be combined with conceptually close fields that represent the same broad domain of scholarly work. These could include other domains of marketing or management, such as branding, consumer behavior, management accounting, innovation, or strategy, where the theories and/or methods are relatively similar in their epistemological assumptions. In contrast, *broad scope of interdisciplinarity* is to be drawn from conceptually distant fields that cross the boundaries of wide intellectual areas (Huutoniemi et al. 2010), such as integrating B2B research business with medicine, anthropology, pharma, or MedTech. Disciplines tend to discuss and conceptualize problems, topics, and issues that constitute their subject matters in different ways, and, consequently, researchers address phenomena from different ontological and epistemological stances (Gustafsson et al., 2015). The greater the ontological and epistemological distance between disciplines, the more challenges researchers face when combining the concepts into a novel, joint framework (Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011). At the same time, the potential for breaking new ground is greater in these cases.

The interdisciplinary issues are thus open to many types of new theories, concepts, and disciplines. When the scope of interdisciplinarity is too broad and distant from the expertise of the associate editors, they will invite renowned scholars from the involved disciplines to join them in co-editing the interdisciplinary issue under consideration. This approach aims to foster expertise and fairness in the handling process of the submitted manuscripts with regard to disciplinary idiosyncrasies and knowledge sets. In such cases, the main role of the associate editors will be to ensure an adequate positioning of the theories, topics, methodologies, and/or perspectives from the other disciplines within the B2B sphere, and specifically in relation to the academic discourse taking place in *Industrial*

Marketing Management. This is a critical role, as all articles published in *Industrial Marketing Management* must be clearly positioned within the B2B context and advance knowledge in such context, regardless of the other disciplines that they may involve and build upon. The associate editors will also work closely with the journal's editors-in-chief.

Calls for papers for the interdisciplinary special issues will be launched approximately every two years. In light of the collaborative and interdisciplinary character of this new form of special issues, the associate editors would like to invite scholars from the B2B domain and other disciplines to contact them suggesting topics for future interdisciplinary issues in *Industrial Marketing Management*. As collaboration, interaction, and engagement are essential for advancing knowledge, the associate editors are looking forward to broadening the horizons of the interdisciplinary issues by discussing with scholars from B2B marketing and other disciplines about the topics that future issues could focus on and that are applicable to the B2B sphere.

4. CONCLUSIONS

With the introduction of the interdisciplinary issues in *Industrial Marketing Management*, we expect to achieve several objectives that are oriented toward developing new knowledge and enhancing interdisciplinary collaborations. More specifically, and following the positioning of *Industrial Marketing Management*, we first expect to broaden the field of B2B marketing by bringing in new topics, theories, perspectives, and/or methodologies, derived from a narrow or broad interdisciplinarity. By doing so, we expect to position *Industrial Marketing Management* amongst the first journals to address emerging business problems and phenomena that are or will be relevant in the B2B domain, and to attract new authors and readers to the journal, broadening its scope, reach, and impact.

Moreover, we expect to foster collaboration and interaction among scholars from different disciplines to build knowledge at the intersections of such disciplines. As Lindgreen et al. (2020: p. A4) argue, “researchers should consider working with colleagues outside their domain, as this will increase the size of the audience coming across their research—and could open entirely new research fields.” By welcoming interdisciplinary research, and extending explicit invitations to embrace it, we expect to fight the inertia of focusing on one's own research field, encourage brave research, and broaden the horizons of knowledge. We hope that this will lead to revelatory theoretical advancements that could have not been reached by focusing on theories, insights and/or methods from a single discipline only.

Finally, to achieve the above, and in line with the collaborative nature of research, we reiterate our invitation for scholars from the B2B domain and other disciplines to suggest interdisciplinary topics and themes that could be researched in the B2B sphere and that would be worthy of a journal issue.

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