

Marketing Theory

<http://mtq.sagepub.com/>

Conformity around dominant Marketing Cognitive Products: Networks, mediators and storytelling

Gilles Marion

Marketing Theory 2010 10: 192

DOI: 10.1177/1470593110366904

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://mtq.sagepub.com/content/10/2/192>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Marketing Theory* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mtq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mtq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://mtq.sagepub.com/content/10/2/192.refs.html>

Conformity around dominant Marketing Cognitive Products: Networks, mediators and storytelling

Gilles Marion

EMLYON Business School, France

Abstract. *The purpose of this article is to offer a set of propositions to explain why new paradigm announcements in the field of marketing ideas failed to trigger breaks with the dominant approaches. This field is considered a market where Marketing Cognitive Products (MCPs) are competing. Insofar as the quality of an MCP is neither perfectly observable nor fixed, we would argue that whether in the academic or practitioner segment of the cognitive market, its perceived quality is contingent upon processes of qualification. Three strong social processes increase the probability of conformity around dominant MCPs: the consequences of their market share; the network of interaction with mediators within a market segment; and the effects of MCPs' storytelling power. In this stagnant situation, dominant MCPs gradually change and their domination is reinforced through the re-interpretation and co-optation of challengers. In the global cognitive market the dissemination of dominant MCPs is increasing the conformity of practitioners around these ideas, while the proliferation of MCPs is leading to customer confusion. **Key Words** ● change ● conformity ● fragmentation ● marketing ideas ● qualification ● translation*

From time to time a paradigm shift, a radical thought, a new logic or a renaissance is announced in the field of marketing to challenge conventional wisdom. This revolutionary stance is marked by the announcement of a bold new programme to initiate change in the production, diffusion and transformation of marketing ideas and their associated practices. However, it is not long before most new paradigm announcements disappear. The purpose of this article is to explain why such programmes failed to trigger breaks with the dominant approaches and to offer a set of propositions to describe the strong social processes that increase the probability of conformity around established logics.

Around 25 years ago, Peter and Olson (1983) argued that science was a special case of marketing, successful scientific theories being those which performed well in the marketplace of ideas, thanks to the marketing skills of their proponents. Today, even defenders of scientific realism acknowledge that marketing academe 'must have quality products that are worth packaging, distributing and promoting' (Hunt and Edison, 1995: 638). We start with the suggestion 'that marketing knowledge has itself become a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed' (Brownlie and Saren, 1995: 621). We need only look at the marketing section of business magazines or at the books in airport lounges to find products provided by consultants, academics or critics competing in the 'intellectual' attention space. These products may be labelled lessons, rules, best practice or critical perspectives. Whatever the output may be, in this paper we label it a Marketing Cognitive Product (MCP), to the extent that it belongs to the cognitive content related to marketing phenomena.

We first outline a taxonomy of MCPs. Second, we show that the perceived quality of an MCP results not only from the isolated individual's assessment of its overall qualities, but also from the foregoing processes of its social qualification. Third, we describe the qualification processes of a dominant MCP. Fourth, we argue that the domination of a limited number of dominant MCPs is reinforced through co-optation of challengers. In the last section we underline the dissemination of dominant MCPs in the global cognitive market, as well as a proliferation of MCPs that lead to customer confusion.

A taxonomy of MCPs

Marketing knowledge offers a wide range of potential MCPs. Insofar as it is unreasonable to seek fundamental truths in marketing we outline the taxonomy of MCPs' extended meanings developed along the probability of being true or false, or of not necessarily being true or false (Table 1).

A proposition supported by a logical line of arguments, empirically testable, and true over a range of conditions until a new proposition supersedes it, will be considered an MCP that is probably true. For instance the market share–profitability relationship is based on the rationale that a large market share results in higher economies of scale and greater brand power. But this statement is true over a complex range of conditions. Despite a large number of studies, it is far from being a law-like generalization (Uncles and Wright, 2004). The only safe conclusion one can make is that there is some evidence that in some industries there is a loose relationship between market share and profitability (Szymanski et al., 1993).

Most MCPs, either predictive or descriptive, are not necessarily true or false. A large number of predictive propositions, about which the 'truth status' is unknown, either rest on debatable definitions of variables and/or are highly context dependent. For instance a positive relationship between advertising expenditure and sales can be observed for a number of fast-moving consumer goods but this is far from being a valid generalization (Leone and Schultz, 1980). Another example of

Table 1

The taxonomy of MCPs' extended meanings

MCP	Definition	Examples	Comments
Probably true	Proposition, considered as true until a new proposition supersedes it	Market share–return on investment relationship	True statement over a range of conditions
Not necessarily true or false	Proposition supported by some lines of argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising spending–sales relationship • Children's influence over adult purchasing 	Context dependent prediction
	Descriptive framework supported by some lines of argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Ps classification • Marketing eras testable 	Tractable framework not empirically
Probably false	Generalization from strange particular to applicable principle	Claims made on behalf of subliminal techniques	Not purged from marketing literature

debatable propositions are the antecedents and consequences of children's influence over adult purchasing through requests and demands for food products (Ambler, 2006 *versus* McDermott et al., 2006).

A large number of descriptive frameworks are commonly accepted in marketing textbooks while they are not empirically testable: the 4Ps classification, the marketing eras or Maslow's hierarchy of needs, for instance. These frameworks are so tractable that they are immune to denial by reality. They provide a context for thinking about practical issues rather than practical answers. However, they remain in a favourable light among marketers because a catchy statement expressed in a simple way is more memorable and more readily used.

Finally, a generalization from one specific instance to applicable principles is probably false. Popular media are replete with such MCPs, for instance claims made on behalf of subliminal techniques, some of which are not purged entirely from the marketing literature (Brown, 2008).

To sum up, MCPs can take several forms and, with one or two odd exceptions (the so-called law-like generalizations), most of them are either debatable propositions or infinitely interpretable outputs not necessarily true or false. Although the certification of an MCP as true within some scientific communities may facilitate its dissemination, we find it difficult to believe that this process is the sole cause of its popularity; we follow Woolgar (2004: 456), arguing that 'it is mistaken to suppose that the value of ideas relates to their intrinsic features rather than to the complex of relations which gives them their sense'.

In the contested epistemic terrain of marketing ideas, and from a marketing perspective, we are going to develop a conceptual framework to describe the processes that determine which MCPs tend to hold the largest market share in the cognitive market and tend to remain dominant.

The perceived qualities of an MCP

To explain why a particular MCP is most likely to gain adherents and win intellectual prestige, the marketing perspective suggests the following answer: the most successful product is endowed with the best perceived value. However, the perception of the value of an MCP may be subject to social influence.

The individual's assessment of the value of an MCP

From a marketing perspective, the perceived value of an MCP, like the value of any product, is based on perceptions of its benefits and costs (Rogers, 1995) and, according to Holbrook (1999), benefits and costs can be self-oriented or other-oriented. Table 2 suggests some ways to assess benefits and costs.

Table 2

Benefits and costs of an MCP

	Benefits	Costs
Self-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • utility • attractiveness • pleasure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding • learning • unlearning
Other-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easy to be shared • storytelling pleasure • gain of status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficult to be shared • social disapproval • loss of status

Self-oriented benefits of an MCP can be assessed in three ways: (1) through a *utility* based reasoning, that is its capacity to rationalize disparate elements and then to give a solution to a problem (a multi-attribute model of customer choice, for instance might have a good rating on this dimension); (2) in terms of its *attractiveness* linked to its novelty or cleverness (an ethnography of the new bikers, for instance might have a good rating on this dimension); and (3) in terms of intellectual *pleasure*, that is the capacity of an MCP to challenge and satisfy intellectual curiosity (a framework acknowledging the experiential aspects of consumption, for instance might have a good rating on this dimension).

Self-oriented 'costs' of an MCP can be assessed through the degree to which it is difficult: (1) to be *understood*; (2) to be *learnt*; and (3) to *unlearn* previous MCPs. These non-monetary costs are contingent upon past experience of the potential

adopter because, in general, evaluation processes are contingent upon individuals' prior knowledge and the match of information to this knowledge base (Bettman, 1979).

Another-oriented benefit looks beyond the self to some 'relevant audience': family, friends, colleagues or professional peers. A specific aspect of the market for marketing ideas is that the adopter of an MCP can become simultaneously a mediator of this MCP. Acting as a mediator means that people endorsing or rejecting an MCP will develop the tendency to share their beliefs because they tend to promote what they think is fair or valid in the marketplace. Therefore the perceived value of an MCP is governed not only by an individual's preferences but also by the preferences of other market participants. This interdependence of preferences arises because, in the mediator position, receiver and source are mixed. Thus other-oriented benefits of an MCP are contingent upon: (1) the anticipated degree to which it is *easy* to express, to justify and to share; (2) the anticipated pleasure of *storytelling* associated with it; and (3) the anticipated enhancement of *status* resulting from its assertion.

Three types of other-oriented 'costs' (*i.e.* associated with the position of mediator) should be anticipated: (1) the degree to which it is difficult to express, to justify, and defend its intended outcomes; (2) the risk of social disapproval, mockery and threats of exclusion associated with its assertion; and (3) the loss of status resulting from its assertion on the social scene. These costs are contingent upon the nature of the social system in which the individual is embedded and the compatibility of the MCP with more general social values.

To sum up, adopting an MCP with high benefits and low costs is relatively inexpensive. In contrast, adopting an MCP requiring considerable learning time or involving the risk of social disapprobation is much more expensive.

The social influence

The value of an MCP, like the value of most competitive products, is neither perfectly observable nor established once and for all (not fixed). It can be improved or made different by its promoters or repositioned by competitors. For instance according to *BusinessWeek* (7 August 1995: 22) marketing gurus Treacy and Wiersema secretly purchased 50,000 copies of their book (*The Discipline of Market Leaders*) from stores across the United States. The store they purchased from just happened to be the one whose sales are monitored to select books for the *New York Times* bestseller list. Their book made the bestseller list and, subsequently, sold well enough to continue as a bestseller.

From an individual perspective, the simplest and superficial cause of this success is that people facing similar decision problems make similar choices. However, direct analysis of alternatives can be costly and time consuming, so a plausible alternative is to rely on other market participants: 'What! You haven't read that book' or 'In our company, every marketer should read that book!'

Individuals interact with one another in networks. We would argue that in any given network an individual will be more likely to conform to the attitudes, beliefs

and behavioural propensities exhibited by the local majority. Therefore, an individual's assessment of any MCP rests on dimensions considered as relevant in his/her interpersonal networks; dimensions that result from social, and continuous, processes of 'qualification' (Callon et al., 2002: 200) through the active role of market participants (authors, bookstores, newspapers, colleagues, professional peers . . .). MCPs cannot be attributed with an existence outside of the minds that interpret them and the social processes that make them legitimate.

The system of MCPs enables great variation in quality with respect to their intrinsic characteristics (definition of their terms, relationships between their terms, structure and form of their arguments, storytelling power . . .), and with respect to the reputation of the sellers and the mediators because 'a good basis for evaluating claims of new marketing paradigms is to ask about the role and position that the claimant is coming from' (Palmer and Ponsonby, 2002: 186). Thus we use the word quality in its broadest sense to describe any or all of the various features of an MCP: its content, its form, its mediators and its source. Quality is a multidimensional variable and to be precise we have to talk of MCPs' *qualities*: the perceived value of an MCP results from an individual judgement about its overall qualities regarding features of claims and claimant.

One individual's belief is partly a function of the number of other individuals who already hold this belief. This heuristic is practised in the most varied sets of circumstances, from the individual decision about cultural products such as songs, books, and movies (Salganik and Watts, 2008), to intricate organizational decisions. By imitating already existing and accepted models, organizations reduce the risk of being called into question by customers and important institutional actors, and thereby increase their chances of survival (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Therefore we assume that individuals and organizations are using the popularity of MCPs as a signal of quality.

The management fashion literature (Abrahamson, 1996) has stressed the role of third parties in the diffusion of management ideas: firms mimic competitors that appear progressive, while consultants and customers encourage them to adopt new ideas. In the same vein, it could be expected that marketing practitioners put considerable faith in the ideas of their trusted colleagues inside the firm, and of their professional peers outside the firm. All these market participants are contributing in their own right to the diffusion of MCPs. Whether or not an MCP is dominant, its perceived quality results not only from the isolated individual's assessment of its overall qualities, but also from the foregoing processes of social qualification.

The qualification processes of a dominant MCP

The processes of qualification described in Figure 1 determine which MCPs tend to remain dominant. By qualification we mean social mechanisms through which the assessment of the perceived quality of an MCP is enacted, i.e. the restricted scope of MCPs being easily accessible by customers, the status hierarchy of their mediators, and their storytelling power.

Processes of qualification

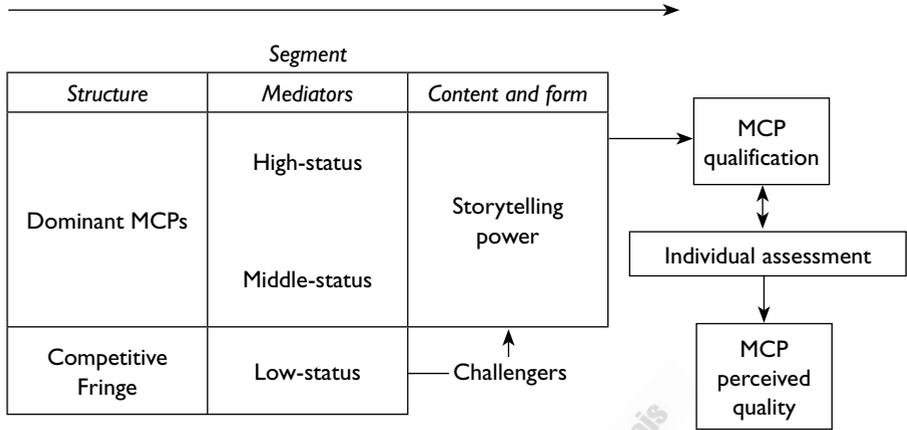


Figure 1

The qualification processes of a dominant MCP

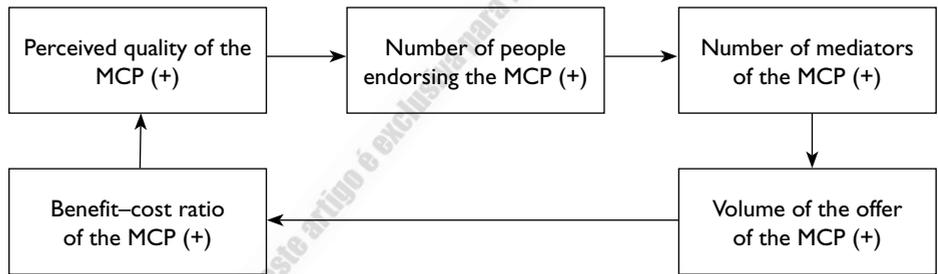


Figure 2

Relationships between perceived quality of an MCP and its volume

Perceived quality and market share of an MCP

Figure 2 depicts the positive relationships between the perceived quality of an MCP and the number of its mediators (i.e. the volume of its offer): (1) the perceived quality of an MCP increases with its benefit–cost ratio; (2) the probability of its adoption by an individual is positively related to its perceived quality; (3) the total number of people endorsing (and mediating) it is positively related to the probability of its adoption by individuals; (4) this process increases the volume of its offer; and (5) its benefit–cost ratio is positively related to the volume of its offer.

As with information sharing, the mediation of an MCP involves no material cost (except the physical medium). The volume of its offer (the extent of its mediation)



is the number of people who adopt it. This leads to a dynamic process of reinforcement: more adopters of an MCP lead to an increase in its perceived quality. An 'average' individual has good reason to adopt an MCP that has been endorsed by a large number of people. As far as the quality of an MCP is not perfectly observable, and because nobody can be expert in every field of marketing, the best cognitive strategy is to use frequency as a valid proxy indicator of the quality of an MCP. Several studies document that repetition of statements increases the individuals' belief in their validity. Repetition makes statements more salient/available in the individuals' memory (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973) and makes the statements more familiar; familiarity serves as a cue to validity (Hawkins and Hoch, 1992). The more numerous the people around an individual to believe in the relevancy of an MCP, the higher the presumed benefits and the lower the costs for this individual to endorse such a belief. When many mediators are claiming an MCP, its legitimacy is enhanced which, in turn, decreases the social costs of its adoption. Legitimacy being defined as 'a general perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995: 574).

It is more beneficial and less costly to adopt an MCP that is consistent with the general world view. When costs are very low and the volume of mediation is very high, this process will endow an MCP with a 'taken-for-granted' status. Conversely, a low volume of mediation means that the product is probably a controversial one. In between, we can acknowledge more or less 'ready to think' and 'ready to be shared' MCPs. It follows that a small number of MCPs have a strong market share.

Proposition 1: there is a positive relationship between the perceived quality of an MCP and its market share of the cognitive market.

The mediator role

It is not sufficient to state that an individual reacts to the number of endorsers of an MCP. We also have to look at mediators' identity. An MCP endorsed by people closest to the prospective adopter will be viewed as being worthy of adoption. For instance it is more beneficial for a marketing executive to adopt an MCP shared by successful peers, for marketing academics to teach MCPs available in popular textbooks, for marketing researchers to select research issues in the mainstream, and for junior practitioners to acquire 'marketing status' by imitating higher-status managers.

Potential adopters are generally able to perceive, at least partially, the qualities of alternative MCPs; and to consider, at least partially, the consequences of a choice. But as choices become more numerous and/or vary on more dimensions, individuals are likely to use the judgment of other people. Experienced academics might have greater ability in deciphering the content of an MCP, and experienced practitioners can directly collect more primary information on the outputs resulting from its implementation. But both are unlikely to be able to generalize their

observations alone. Journalists, critics, marketing students or 'average' consumers may have strong feelings about an MCP, but they have to look for secondary data provided by a credible source in order to believe in some kind of regularities. Thus, we would argue that any potential adopters of an MCP have to trust some credible source in order to assess the quality of any MCPs.

MCPs associated with more credible sources are attended to more closely, recalled more successfully, and regarded as more reliable; while those endorsed by mediators endowed with a lower status are avoided. The perceived quality of an MCP rises not only with the number of others endorsing it, but also with the legitimacy of the adoption of a legitimate MCP. Inasmuch as the MCP quality is not perfectly observable, the market status of its mediator is a signal of its underlying qualities. Thus, we suggest that the greater the market participants' uncertainty about the underlying qualities of an MCP, the more they will rely on the mediator status to make inferences about its qualities (Podolny, 2005).

Proposition 2: the perceived quality of an MCP is contingent upon the status of the mediator who is endorsing it.

Status hierarchy of mediators

The position of a mediator in the status hierarchy is contingent upon a two (ideal–typical) phase process (Urban et al., 1993; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001). First, in order to have a chance of having their MCPs considered, mediators must demonstrate that their offers conform to the criteria that define members of the audience's consideration set, lest these actors be ignored as unintelligible and/or illegitimate. This first phase of competition: (1) induces mediators' *conformity* to the relevant dimensions of the cognitive market structure (i.e. dimensions used for categorization of MCPs and mediators); (2) reduces mediators' competition to a small number of alternatives because members of the audience do not have the cognitive capacity to compare countless actors; and (3) favours the early mover in the consideration set over latecomers, because a consideration set tends to be extracted from the prevailing one. These processes of exclusion screen out mediators that do not conform to the comparative frame used by the audience and categorize acceptable mediators.

Once unintelligible and/or illegitimate mediators have been eliminated from the consideration set, the audience members compare the acceptable mediators in order to select the more credible sources. This second phase generates *differentiation* among mediators, because they are emphasizing the uniqueness of their identity (and of their MCPs). This two-phase process entails a hierarchy of mediators. Highly typical mediators are placed at the top (with high status); less typical mediators in the middle; and peripheral mediators (the competitive fringe with low status) at the bottom.

Minority MCPs are confronted with stronger resistance than dominant MCPs. The endorsement of an MCP by low-status mediators is less likely to be noted. However, as challengers, low-status mediators can originate a counter-normative

MCP and can defy accepted MCPs because, being screened out of consideration, they have nothing to lose. Thus, among minority MCPs, only the most convincing ones remain as promising challengers, because they have been severely selected.

Middle-status mediators face the strongest pressure to demonstrate conformity, because they feel insecure in their membership of a group, a network or a community. For instance junior marketers looking for a career as well as marketing academics striving for tenure enjoy less freedom to deviate from conventional MCPs. However, as they easily join the majority, they do not need to be as deeply convinced as mediators endorsing a minority MCP.

High-status mediators need not devote as much effort or time to convincing the audience of the validity of MCPs they are endorsing because they have greater access to leading networks and media. As long as an audience regards status as a signal of an MCP quality, the social costs associated with it afford the high-status mediator insulation from the competition of challengers. Moreover, high-status mediators can more easily co-opt alternative (possibly deviant) MCPs because they feel confident in their social acceptance and their legitimacy. When playing the role of gatekeeper they are able to increase their own status: (1) by showing their ability to articulate a properly selected MCP (i.e. one that does not sully their status) with the prevailing set of consideration; and (2) by reinforcing, through this act of nonconformity, their differentiation from direct competitors (other incumbents of the conventional wisdom) because it shows that they enjoy greater exposure to unconventional MCPs.

Therefore, higher-status mediators have a greater ability to set the rules of the game and to define the relevant dimensions of this cognitive market. They consistently earn greater returns than the low- or middle-status mediators because they are *'rule makers'* followed by *'rule takers'* (Hamel, 1996). Similar processes of auto-enforcement can also be underlined in the hierarchy of papers and journals 'the more a paper is cited, the better the paper and the journal publishing the paper [...] Conversely, uncited journals are likely to remain excluded' (Macdonald and Kam, 2007: 642), as well as in the domination of a few marketing textbook authors that keep their hands on the levers of power.

Proposition 3: the status hierarchy of mediators reinforces the prevailing MCPs.

The segments

Social status is largely a matter of perception. People will observe, influence and be influenced by those belonging to the same segment of the cognitive market (readers of the same set of journals, members of an academic community or a professional association). A segment is a portion of the cognitive market whose participants take one another into account as they carry out interrelated activities. For instance we can see the emergence of specific MCPs belonging to the business-to-business segment (Cova and Salle, 2008); to the services segment (Grönroos, 1994); to the entrepreneurial segment (Read et al., 2009); or an upsurge of a criti-

cal feminist segment (Catterall et al., 2005). In each segment 'local' celebrities may have a powerful impact on 'local' cognitive markets because people are involved in specific social networks that restrict their access to MCPs. Thus, the MCP market is not a homogeneous field; it is rather a set of networks being made up of segments more or less in connection and interaction.

Existing segments help to explain convergence among individuals or organizations and a higher degree of persistence of dominant MCPs. People only have access to some segments because they mostly interact with mediators belonging either to their interpersonal network(s) or to their customary media. Indeed, some people have a larger network than others. But any one person can have a conversation or debate with only a limited number of other people. This means that people are not exposed in a homogeneous fashion to all the available MCPs and that they are asserting, rejecting and defending them through a network of interactions. It follows that assessment of an MCP by an individual is largely influenced by the volume of information and the convergent arguments being offered by mediators in his or her accessible segment.

Segment insulation may vary among individuals because it is contingent upon the existence of strong/weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties (i.e. infrequent and transitory social relations) provide people with access to information beyond that which is available in their own social circle. They are a crucial bridge linking otherwise unconnected segments of a network. The exposure of an individual to a variety of unconnected segments of a network will increase the open mindedness of this individual. However, existing segments reinforce the process described in Figure 1. Debates about MCPs take place mainly within a specialized segment before greater controversy can involve greater interaction among segments.

Proposition 4: there is a positive relationship between the perceived quality of an MCP and the status of its mediator within the segment accessible to any potential adopter.

MCP intrinsic characteristics

An MCP is not purely an idea. Ideas are in someone's mind, while an MCP has to be presented in forms that vary: bland statement, graph, histogram or pleasant story. Some MCPs are more catchy, more appealing, easier to store and retrieve and, as a whole, better performing in a word-of-mouth or buzz process. This selection process is contingent upon the MCP's intrinsic characteristics, its content and form. An MCP properly stylized, and supported by a narrative told with the proper plot sequence that increases its storytelling power, will be more successful in the cognitive market.

The 4 Ps classification is a canonical example: (1) its simplicity has proved a helpful device in teaching; (2) being first mover has been highly rewarding and challengers of this classification (5 Ps, 4 Cs, or whatever) still remain on the competitive fringe; (3) it provides a model for the quest of marketers to understand the behaviour of buyers in response to the stimuli to which they are submitted; and

(4) it is helpful in giving an answer to the question ‘what is marketing?’ because it helps to explain why all the functional areas of management must be oriented toward the customer. Such a framework ties together its detailed contributions, making it easier to understand, to store and to retrieve than a collection of issues.

Diffusion of an MCP rests mostly on a translation process (Latour, 1987) because, confronted with a variety of people, diffusion requires an active mediator. If there is no one to take it up, the process stops. A continuous chain of people, finding an MCP valid and acceptable then translating it, is necessary to maintain its existence. For instance ruthless simplification by journalists is required to squeeze complex subjects into a short article and a nice coloured diagram is mandatory. An MCP is more appealing and worthy of adoption when it is easily translated into various forms used to express it (diagram, testimonial or illustrating story) through various media (screen and bullet points, picture or film). Therefore: ‘Marketing management texts and courses are designed to have an experiential appeal’ (Hackley, 2003: 1345).

An MCP does not remain invariant, as it is translated in the diffusion process from adopter to adopter. Mediators will adapt, customize (dropping or adding parts) or reinterpret an MCP in order to suit their audience, because the reasons for adopting and mediating it may vary across individuals. Its name may be unchanged while its content evolves or an old idea may be renamed (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005), but it is usually made different. Whatever the variations, the most relevant translations (i.e. able to increase the rate of adoption) are endowed with a high storytelling power because they adopt the dramatized language that characterizes the buzz process and the style of popular media: star cases, legends of successful innovations or spectacular effects on performance: ‘Marketing scholars may find that offering stories to one another to support or repudiate claims about the meaning of a sequence of events is a useful way to perform scholarship’ (Deighton and Narayandas, 2004: 19). Thus, the rate of diffusion of an MCP is related to its storytelling power.

Proposition 5: within the segment accessible to any potential adopter there is a positive relationship between the perceived quality of an MCP and its storytelling power.

We have been developing the social processes of qualification described in Figure 1 that determine which MCPs remain dominant in the cognitive market. An MCP appears as dominant in the same way as we can notice the emergence of a dominant design which is not necessarily the one which embodies the most advanced technical performance but has the effect of enforcing standardization through custom or general consent.

This stagnant situation does not result from the presence of a set of well accepted law-like generalizations. Most marketing principles (in textbooks and in the classroom) are based on insufficient systematic empirical evidence. Moreover, despite more than 70 years of academic endeavour, a general theory of marketing has simply not become established. Therefore, probably because marketing is a context-driven discipline, law-like generalizations remain scarce in marketing

literature. The situation is stagnant because challenging MCPs are either co-opted by the mainstream or are put away in low status niches.

Gradual change and MCP proliferation

Change in MCPs is often construed as a radical shift (for instance Keith, 1960; Grönroos, 1994). Most producers of 'new' MCPs sense time as an irreversible arrow of progress (the so-called marketing eras are typical of this belief) and maintain that a revolution (or an epistemological break) is on the verge of discovery. Conversely, commentators who want to protect human beings from the domination of marketing are taking the MCPs asserted by marketing gurus at face value and see the situation as an unparalleled catastrophe. Pro-marketing and anti-marketing share the same belief toward change: it is a revolutionary process, while postmodernists maintain that the 'catastrophic' situation is to be acclaimed. We disagree with this view on (radical) change. Emphasizing discontinuity is an old rhetorical strategy mainly used by MCP suppliers to frame and position their outputs in order to be 'interesting' (Johnson, 2003). In contrast, we would argue that dominant logic follows a gradual accumulation of incremental changes.

Gradual processes of change

Gradual change constitutes a continuum of situations. At one end of the spectrum lie the isomorphic processes of diffusion in which dominant mediators easily transpose, and translate, dominant logic from one segment to another (from FMCG to banking or to non-profit organizations, for instance). Moreover, most challenging MCPs are reinterpreted and co-opted through limited bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) within the established logic, thereby reinforcing their domination: 'Each new edition of Kotler's monumental marketing manifesto faithfully records and unflinchingly co-opts every alternative, adjustment or aspersion' (Brown, 2002: 314). Thus we stress incremental change in dominant logic and the persistence of dominant MCPs over long stretches of time.

At the other end of the spectrum lie larger processes of bricolage in which challengers forge 'new' logic by combining deviant and dominant MCPs through recombination; for instance the return to Alderson's propositions (30 years later) to reassert the role of marketing in the strategic dialogue, or the comeback of Frédéric Bastiat (1801–50) in marketing literature, thanks to the S-D Logic looking for some pedigree (Vargo and Lush, 2004; Wooliscroft, 2008). When successful, these processes lead to a new niche or a new segment within the 'intellectual' attention space.

A limited number of dominant MCPs (customer centricity, marketing mix management, for instance) are sustained by the existence of an established hierarchy of mediators (rule makers) and the conformity of followers (rule takers). From an individual point of view two strong processes are increasing the probability of conformity around a dominant MCP inside a segment: (1) the

embeddedness of controversies about an MCP in social relations prevents contact between an adopter and mediators that could change the former's opinion. For instance practitioners involved in FMCG are more exposed to MCPs provided by market research companies or advertising agencies sharing their own view on consumers; and (2) the ability of people to join a new small 'MCP club' is inversely related to the perceived costs (cognitive and social) of endorsing and defending the MCP claims. That is why a large majority of people extracting information from a segment are rule takers and that rule breakers are severely selected.

Polonski et al. (2006) found that there is a significant bias of authorship within the 20 leading marketing journals. There is a global contribution to publishing, however, works published between 1999 and 2003 are still dominated by academics based in North America. Therefore, new ideas are not being aired in the literature and the status quo is not challenged. In the same vein, Hackley (2003: 1346) underlines marketing tendency 'to canonize more and more defunct professors into guru-ism (which) makes it increasingly difficult for tyro-gurus to create a space for a "new" contribution'.

Proposition 6: domination of dominant MCPs is reinforced through co-optation and selection of challengers.

MCPs in the global cognitive market

What is the situation from a global perspective? On the one hand, thanks to the globalization of marketing activities, some dominant MCPs (customer orientation; the segmentation, targeting and positioning sequence for instance) have never been so popular. Disseminated by business schools and a multitude of executive training seminars, they are more and more embraced in hitherto hostile fields such as non-profit organizations, health care organizations and public administration. They are also well accepted in top companies emerging from rapidly developing economies such as Brazil, China or India. Marketing is infusing and transforming cultures around the world. The cultural transformation that the 'McDonaldization' thesis (Ritzer, 1993) suggests, is replacing local diversity with conformity to dominant MCPs in a world market society. Popular marketing textbooks continuously aggregate, co-opt, comment on, and distribute MCPs as an accepted body of marketing knowledge.

Proposition 7: in the global cognitive market the dissemination of dominant MCPs is increasing conformity of practitioners around those ideas.

On the other hand, larger bricolage striving to break the existing rules and conventions are increasing the proliferation of challenging MCPs (co-creation of value or consumer culture theories for instance) supported by new hierarchies of challenging mediators. Moreover, some residual MCPs (marketing eras, for instance) are still endorsed by laggards, while several cognitive products closely related to marketing management (strategic management, total quality management, customer relationship management, supply chain management . . .) are find-

ing homes in disciplines other than marketing. Thus a variety of cognitive products create conceptual clutter for academics and confusion among practitioners.

We do not really know if the number of challenging MCPs is increasing. What we do know is that the variety of mediators endorsing MCPs is increasing through academic journals, business magazines, popular media, blogs, search engines, etc. As a result, noise is increasing. Academics from a diversity of disciplines, consultants and marketing gurus, best-selling authors, publishing houses, business schools and popular media together take part in the qualification/requalification processes of MCPs.

We would argue that there is no clear boundary between those hierarchies of mediators. The perceived quality of an academic statement is contingent upon how the community of researchers communicates to those outside its segment and how it is popularized in/by the media. However, MCPs provided by marketing academics are most sensitive to competitive products from popular media because both types of products are promoted with the very same know-how originating from the marketing discipline. The result is that an academic statement is not always the most convincing one. Thus, most marketing discourses are a hybrid of consulting and academic styles. As a result, the number of MCPs with an unknown truth status increases, leading to customer confusion.

Proposition 8: MCPs' proliferation is increasing noise in the cognitive market, leading to customer confusion.

Conclusion

From a marketing perspective we offered a set of propositions to describe the strong social processes that increase the probability of conformity around dominant MCPs: the consequences of their market share; the networks of interaction within a market segment; and the effects of MCPs' storytelling power. We outlined a spectrum for gradual processes of change in dominant MCPs through cooptation of challenging MCPs by the mainstream. We underlined the dissemination of dominant MCPs in the global cognitive market as well as the proliferation of MCPs leading to customer confusion.

Indeed, all our propositions (i.e. some more MCPs) remain to be tested. Inasmuch as the quality of an MCP is neither perfectly observable nor fixed, we argued that its perceived quality is based on processes of social qualification and requalification. It is negotiated by actors in popular media as well as in academic journals. That is why, in marketing literature, we are continually moving between different meanings and interpretations. And that is why the discipline is unable to establish final definitions (i.e. formalized and fully accepted) for 'relationship marketing' or 'customer orientation' or a host of other constructs initiated by the 'broadening of marketing' (Kotler and Levy, 1969).

We argued that change in MCPs revolves around the processes of bricolage and that 'new paradigm' announcements failed to trigger breaks with the dominant



approaches because they are mainly addressing superficial and local change. How many dimensions of a dominant logic must change in order to tip the balance from minor change to major change? This has not been resolved in this article. We only suggested that the main challenge is to describe the processes of major change in MCPs. They could be transformed through large processes of bricolage by people forming weak ties among segments of the cognitive market. But, more probably, major change should be triggered by practitioners' dissatisfaction with existing MCPs when they are confronted with rapid growth/decline in sales, or through an external shock, such as the advance of information and communication technologies, or when we face a global crisis that arouses images of the Great Depression.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Grégoire Croidieu, Philippe Monin, Agnes Nairn, Christiane Prange, Lionel Sitz and Bruno Versaavel, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

References

- Abrahamson, E. (1996) 'Management Fashion', *Academy of Management Review* 21(1): 254–85.
- Ambler, T. (2006) 'Does the UK Promotion of Foods and Drink to Children Contribute to Their Obesity?', *International Journal of Advertising* 25(2): 137–56.
- Bettman, J.R. (1979) *An Information Processing Theory of Consumer Choice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Brown, S. (2002) 'Vote, Vote, Vote for Philip Kotler', *European Journal of Marketing* 36(3): 313–24.
- Brown, S. (2008) 'Mesmerizing Marketing: A Compact Cultural History', *European Business Review* 20(4): 350–63.
- Brownlie, D. and Saren, M. (1995) 'On the Commodification of Marketing Knowledge: Opening Themes', *Journal of Marketing Management* 11(7): 619–27.
- Callon, M., Méadel, C. and Rabeharisoa, V. (2002) 'The Economy of Qualities', *Economy and Society* 2(May): 194–217.
- Catterall, M., Maclaran, P. and Stevens, L. (2005) 'The Critical Impasse in Feminist Perspectives on Consumers', *Journal of Marketing Management* 21(5/6): 489–504.
- Cova, B. and Salle, R. (2008) 'The Industrial/Consumer Marketing Dichotomy Revisited: A Case of Outdated Justification', *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* 23(1): 3–11.
- Czarniawska, B. and Sevón, G. (2005) *Global Ideas. How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*. Malmö: Liber and Copenhagen Business School.
- Deighton, J. and Narayandas, D. (2004) 'Stories and Theories', *Journal of Marketing* 68(1): 19–20.
- Granovetter, M. (1973) 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78(6): 1360–80.
- Grönroos, C. (1994) 'From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing', *Management Decision* 32(2): 4–20.

- Hackley, C. (2003) 'We Are All Customers Now . . .' Rhetorical Strategy and Ideological Control in Marketing Management Texts', *Journal of Management Studies* 40(5): 1325–52.
- Hamel, G. (1996) 'Strategy as Revolution', *Harvard Business Review* 74(4): 69–76.
- Hawkins, S.A. and Hoch, S.J. (1992) 'Low-involvement Learning: Memory without Evaluation', *Journal of Consumer Research* 19(3): 212–25.
- Holbrook, M.B. (ed.) (1999) *Consumer Value. A Framework for Analysis and Research*. London: Routledge.
- Hunt, S.D. and Edison, S. (1995) 'On the Marketing of Marketing Knowledge', *Journal of Marketing Management* 11(7): 635–39.
- Johnson, M.S. (2003) 'Designating Opponents in Empirical Research Reports: The Rhetoric of "Interestingness" in Consumer Research', *Marketing Theory* 3(4): 477–501.
- Keith, R.J. (1960) 'The Marketing Revolution', *Journal of Marketing* 24(1): 35–8.
- Kotler, P. and Levy, S. (1969) 'Broadening the Concept of Marketing', *Journal of Marketing* 33(1): 10–15.
- Latour, B. (1987) *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leone, R.P. and Schultz, R.L. (1980) 'A Study of Marketing Generalizations', *Journal of Marketing* 44(4): 10–18.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966) *The Savage Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDermott, L., O'Sullivan, T., Stead, M. and Hastings, G. (2006) 'International Food Advertising, Pester Power and its Effects', *International Journal of Advertising* 25(4): 513–39.
- Macdonald, S. and Kam, J. (2007) 'Ring a Ring O' Roses: Quality Journal and Gamesmanship in Management Studies', *Journal of Management Studies* 44(4): 640–55.
- Meyer, J.W. and Rowan, B. (1977) 'Institutional Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology* 83(2): 340–63.
- Palmer, A. and Ponsonby, S. (2002) 'The Social Construction of New Marketing Paradigms: The Influence of Personal Perspective', *Journal of Marketing Management* 18(2): 173–92.
- Peter, J.P. and Olson, J.C. (1983) 'Is Science Marketing?', *Journal of Marketing* 47(3): 111–25.
- Phillips, D.J. and Zuckerman, E.W. (2001) 'Middle-status Conformity: Theoretical Restatement and Empirical Demonstration in Two Markets', *American Journal of Sociology* 107(2): 379–429.
- Podolny, J.M. (2005) *Status Signals. A Sociological Study of Market Competition*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Polonski, M.J., Garma, R. and Mittelstaedt, J.D. (2006) 'An Examination of the Globalization of Authorship in Publishing in 20 Leading Marketing Journals', *European Business Review* 18(6): 437–56.
- Read, S., Dew, N., Sarasvathy, S.D., Song, M. and Wiltbank, R. (2009) 'Marketing under Uncertainty: The Logic of an Effectual Approach', *Journal of Marketing* 73(May): 1–18.
- Ritzer, G. (1993) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Rogers, E.M. (1995) *Diffusion of Innovations* (4th ed.). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Salganik, M.J. and Watts, D.J. (2008) 'Leading the Herd Astray: An Experimental Study of Self-fulfilling Prophecies in an Artificial Cultural Market', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71(4): 338–55.

- Suchman, M.C. (1995) 'Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches', *Academy of Management Review* 20(3): 571–610.
- Szymanski, D.M., Bharadwaj, S.G. and Varadarajan, P.R. (1993) 'An Analysis of the Market Share–Profitability Relationship', *Journal of Marketing* 57(3): 1–18.
- Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. (1973) 'Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability', *Cognitive Psychology* 5(2): 207–32.
- Uncles, M.D. and Wright, M. (2004) 'Empirical Generalisation in Marketing', *Australasian Journal of Marketing* 12(3): 5–18.
- Urban, G.L., Hulland, J.S. and Weinberg, B.D. (1993) 'Pre-market Forecasting for New Consumer Durable Goods: Modelling Categorization, Elimination, and Consideration Phenomena', *Journal of Marketing* 57(3): 47–63.
- Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2004) 'Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing', *Journal of Marketing* 68(1): 1–17.
- Woolgar, S. (2004) 'Marketing Ideas', *Economy and Society* 33(4): 448–62.
- Wooliscroft, B. (2008) 'Re-Inventing Wroe?', *Marketing Theory* 8(4): 367–85.

Gilles Marion is currently Professor at EMLYON Business School (Lyon, France). His research interests include issues pertaining to marketplace ideologies and consumer's interpretive tactics, semiotic consumer research, marketing management history and marketing's effect on society. He has written several articles in English and French which bring together this research interests: *The Marketing Management Discourse: What's New Since the 1960s?*, *Marketing Ideology and Criticism: Legitimacy and Legitimization, Customer-Driven or Driving the Customer? Exploitation versus Exploration*. Address: EMLYON Business School, 23 avenue Guy de Collongue, BP 174, 69132, Ecully Cedex, France. [email: marion@em-lyon.com]