



## Normal vs spectacular science: The IMP Group and BtoB marketing



Bernard Cova<sup>a</sup>, Catherine Pardo<sup>b</sup>, Robert Salle<sup>b</sup>, Robert Spencer<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> KEDGE Business School, BP 921, 13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France

<sup>b</sup> EMLYON Business School, 23 Av. Guy de Collongue, 69134 Ecully Cedex, France

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### ABSTRACT

This paper endeavours to track the underlying scientific process driving research activities and output. It takes research in the business-to-business field as the empirical setting and puts the works of the IMP Group into focus, using bibliometric analyses and historical vistas as background evidence. We argue that what may appear at first sight as a limited development should rather, in fact, be interpreted as “normal science,” i.e. based on the robustness of the core models and conceptual framework, with fine adjustments of these taking place over time. Indeed, the BtoB realm—and in particular the activities and production of the IMP Group and associated researchers—would seem to contrast rather radically with the broader area of marketing in that it benefits from a resistant conceptual framework which seems to have weathered the test of time, and which can be used as a building block for research development and is less sensitive to managerial trends and fashion.

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### 1. Introduction

Marketing science is known for its regular production of new concepts and conceptual frameworks (Brown, 2007). One explanation for this may be that the quest for novelty and originality is a key trait of our discipline (Hubbard & Lindsay, 2002). Compared to the “hard” sciences, one never ceases to be amazed by the extent of this creativity and the production of new management concepts and models. Indeed, it is easy to conceive that the observation of phenomena in constant change—such as the dynamics of business markets—needs to be accompanied by a change in the conceptual frameworks of the discipline in order that this changing world be accounted for. At the same time, however, one could also consider that the strength of a scientific discipline lies in its capacity to repeat and extend prior and existing frameworks. From this latter perspective, the value of the conceptual frameworks rests in their ability to remain valid even if the world under observation changes.

Clearly, these two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can even possibly be framed within a same apparent paradox. Taking the case of the IMP Group as example, we consider to which extent these two paths can be observed in business-to-business (BtoB) marketing. It has been nearly 40 years now since the IMP members first met and launched an investigation into international business relationships called the IMP1 project. It has been more than 20 years since a further project—IMP2—exploring networks in business markets began. Key outputs from and in-between these projects have been the two core IMP models: the interaction model and the Actor-Resource-

Activity (ARA) model. One can imagine on the one hand researchers, stuck in a groove, arguing for the “same old song” to be told time and time again, in a desperate and failing attempt to account for a contemporary changing world. One can also imagine, at the other end of the scale, the extreme robustness of these two models and their capacity to interpret even the most specific changes affecting the nature and scope of business interactions.

The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss the dimensions of both stability and change in the path of the conceptual development and production of a research group through time. The case of the IMP Group demonstrates that despite the apparent stability of the conceptual work—particularly noticeable due to the strength of both the interaction and ARA approaches as referential models—the IMP conceptual tool kit proves to be adapted to account for the transformation of contemporary business exchanges impacted by digitalization, servitization, and others post-industrial forces, combined with the increasing focus on sustainability. It thus displays the characteristics of Kuhnian normal science at work.

Recourse to bibliometric reviews is relevant to be able to report on the key concepts and conceptual frameworks a scientific community mobilises itself. Members of the IMP Group have regularly attempted this exercise using more or less sophisticated methods on the history of IMP conferences. Within the IMP community itself Gemunden (1997), for example, classifies IMP publications into four major groups. Similarly, Morlacchi, Wilkinson, and Young (2000), on the basis of the direct and indirect links between researchers, identify subgroups within the IMP community and describe in detail the way they evolve over time. Easton, Zolkiewski, and Bettany (2002) emphasise the wide variety of topics covered. Henneberg, Jiang, and Naudé (2007) analyze the degree of co-publishing that has taken place in the IMP Group

E-mail addresses: [bernard.cova@kedgbs.com](mailto:bernard.cova@kedgbs.com) (B. Cova), [pardo@em-lyon.com](mailto:pardo@em-lyon.com) (C. Pardo), [salle@em-lyon.com](mailto:salle@em-lyon.com) (R. Salle), [robert.spencer@kedgbs.com](mailto:robert.spencer@kedgbs.com) (R. Spencer).

community. Authors outside the IMP community have also performed solid bibliometric analysis of IMP production. In 2008, for example, Petra Barth produced a PhD dissertation titled, “The history and the development of the IMP group reasoning: A bibliometric approach.” In 2011, Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch published a citation and co-citation analysis of BtoB marketing literature which pointed out the continued pertinence of the IMP conceptual framework and research. More recently, Wuehrer and Smejkal (2013) performed a longitudinal review of IMP conference papers from 1984 to 2012 via keyword co-occurrence analysis, in order to clarify the paradigmatic status of the scientific endeavours of the IMP Group (Wuehrer & Smejkal, 2013). These works provide us with relevant hints of the continued pertinence of the IMP framework over time.

## 2. Building the initial conceptual frameworks

The description on the IMP Group website ([www.impgroup.org](http://www.impgroup.org)) defines the Group as having its origins in the 1970s. The first major international IMP project on industrial marketing and purchasing involved researchers from universities in 5 European countries. The text further refers to the “interaction model”, which is described as a dynamic model of buyer–supplier relationships developed for use in comparative (international) empirical studies. The foundational role played by this broad-based modelling of the empirical world is emphasised: the results of research into 900 business relationships across Europe supported the seminal idea that interaction in a relationship context is better seen not as simple independent transactions, but rather as sets of complex exchanges between buying and selling firms.

The interaction model proposed in 1982 can be characterised as being parsimonious. Indeed, the model seems relatively simple as it comprises four groups of variables that describe and influence the interaction between buying and selling companies: variables describing the parties involved, variables describing the elements and process of interaction; variables describing the environment within which the interaction takes place; variables describing the atmosphere affecting and affected by the interaction.

This brief presentation, reduced to a few lines here, compresses the time period of the research efforts undertaken. It hides, in fact, the reality of the underlying muddling-through process which took place over the 10 or so years leading up to and including the first IMP (IMP1) research programme (Turnbull & Valla, 1986). The book resulting from this programme (Håkansson, 1982) is portrayed as a challenge to the then traditional ways—inspired initially by the field of consumer goods—of examining industrial marketing and purchasing.

The IMP Group's research stance relative to “mainstream marketing” relates to the—at that time—omnipresent and inherently normative marketing mix model and its theoretical foundations. The criticisms were directed at the mainstream marketing management approach, promoted worldwide, along with the numerous extensions to it (Håkansson et al., 2004). The theoretical building blocks of the work of the IMP Group over this time period (Håkansson, 1982; Turnbull & Valla, 1986) drew on the differences observed from the empirical study of business markets when confronted with the dominant theoretical position adopted within marketing management, anchored in the field of consumer goods. The IMP Group thus clearly affirmed its position, and its theoretical framework, rather descriptive in nature, with an accompanying set of assumptions, became clearly identifiable.

For Wuehrer and Smejkal (2003), p.148, the IMP Group in its early years displayed a “very loose [...] interrelationship of keywords.” The different texts analysed by these authors demonstrate a diversity of perspectives introducing a variety of disconnected or loosely connected themes. They argue that such diversity occurs when there exists a basic questioning of the body of knowledge and uncertainty as to which research direction to take, with a consequent competition across themes.

The next major empirical research effort implemented by the IMP Group was the IMP2 research programme. The interaction model (with its focus on the dyad) was enriched by the integration of a *network perspective* relating to business markets, where the business landscape displays a network-like form (Håkansson et al., 2009).

The IMP2 studies, along with the accompanying assumption of connectedness or interdependency in markets, provided the foundations for the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model. This ARA model (the acronym was not used in the very first works and emerged later) was first presented as a model of industrial networks (Håkansson & Johanson, 1993) allowing simultaneously analysis of stability and change when considering actors or group of actors. Actors, resources, and activities were seen to form structures described as networks. Håkansson and Snehota (1995) proposed to consider the three dimensions—actors, resources, and activities—as three layers of the substance of a relationship (a relationship was said to have a “profile in terms of activity links, resource ties and actor bonds” (p. 26). The Actor-Resource-Activity model was seen as being a framework dealing with business relationships (as a variable) but which allows the dynamic aspects of business or industrial networks to be apprehended. Thus, the dynamics of interaction in networks, underlying processes, and the way individual firms operate in networks, came to complete the IMP Group's conceptual picture on interaction (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

In summary, 20 years after its creation in 1976, the IMP Group could count on the emergence of two major, complementary, conceptual frameworks: the interaction model (Håkansson, 1982) and the ARA model (see, for example, Håkansson & Johanson, 1993; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). These two complementary conceptual frameworks should be seen rather as milestones down the conceptual path and not as stand-alone events. A continuous process of providing deeper understanding and development to perfect them took place (Ford, 1990).

## 3. Consolidating the conceptual frameworks

Overall, then, with the base frameworks considered as stable, the 1990s and the 2000s demonstrate a period of harmonisation, consolidation, and development of the concepts and of the theoretical background. Both Barth (2008) and Wuehrer and Smejkal's (2013) bibliometric findings emphasise the strong homogeneity and constancy of the key IMP concepts, and the fact that “relationship” remained the most prominent keyword during the whole period. For Wuehrer and Smejkal (2013), a certain conceptual stability as displayed by the IMP Group at that time represents the conditions necessary for the emergence of a consistent stream of research content. This provided the means of escaping the temptation of following managerial fads and “the crowd” that other research groups might succumb to.

Barth (2008) adds to this analysis the fact that the IMP Group takes inspiration from developed scientific approaches and builds on previous research results, and particularly on work produced internally by Group members. This can be demonstrated by a high intra-group citation rate. She notes that, out of the papers presented during the IMP conferences between 1995 and 2006, Håkansson and Snehota (1995) is ranked first among the references cited, with Håkansson (1982) in second position. Moreover, these two pieces of work are quoted in more than 10% of the papers presented, thereby underlining the structural role of the conceptual frameworks contained within.

Thus, after a relatively turbulent initial period leading to the co-development of the theoretical background and the group of actors involved first in the IMP1 research programme and then in the IMP2 programme, a consolidation phase occurred. Researchers worked on ideas about the dimensions of each of the elements of the frameworks and the process of interaction between these elements. Håkansson et al. (2009) dig deeper into the underlying concepts of actor, activity, and resource, along with focus on the notions of variety, motion, and relatedness, on business networks in action and on the interaction process

as “substance” and as a “central factor” involved in forming the business landscape.

The consolidation phase the IMP Group went through in the '90s and 2000s period is of course not disconnected from the more general evolution of the conceptual landscape of the BtoB marketing discipline as a whole. In their analysis of the structure and evolution of BtoB marketing over the 1979–2000 period, Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch (2011), p. 947 report on a “convergence in the core BtoB subfields” and the emergence of a common base of knowledge, with increasingly limited cases of individual approaches in favour of combined research designs.

This convergence led to synergies across core paths of research, which enabled the combined application of different approaches to specific research phenomena. The analysis conducted by these three scholars shows that the supplier–customer relationship seems to be the dominant topic of the BtoB research field: “in the past 20 years, interactions among industrial transaction partners, as expressed by the period-spanning buyer–seller relationship topic, came to dominate scientific discussions” (Backhaus et al., 2011, p. 947).

The conceptual frameworks developed by the IMP Group at the beginning of the 1980s, and then consolidated over the years that followed, seem highly relevant, as they are at least in some way confirmed by the convergence of the works in the area of BtoB marketing overall. Indeed, Backhaus, Lügger, and Koch (2011, p. 947) emphasise “the strong role of the IMP Group within the BtoB marketing discipline.”

In their analysis of 14,260 scientific records in the Scopus database from 1956 to 2009 dealing with industrial marketing, Vieira and Brito (2015) show a rather parallel evolution of scientific knowledge across four different stages: genesis (1956–1984), early development (1985–1995), consolidated production (1996–2003), scientific maturity (from 2004). Interestingly, they noted a dual convergence on two poles of attraction for publication purposes, *Management Science* journal on the one hand, and *Industrial Marketing Management* on the other, with IMP-related works being mostly concentrated on the second.

#### 4. Extending towards new realms

Observers of the development and evolution of the various IMP works report on the most recent period as a period of “framework extension,” characterised by a multiplication of new research areas. Wuehrer and Smejkal (2013) point out an increase in the number of new keywords since 2006 amongst the top 15 in comparison to previous years. This perhaps indicates the emergence of new research areas, spinning around in the research network without any specific structure. But, again, as in previous periods, the fundamental building blocks of the IMP framework are not experimenting radical changes. Barth (2008) thus reports that the key milestones in network marketing thinking in the 1980s are still valid and of importance. Even if process analyses and case studies have shifted focus, with new themes being explored by the IMP Group, there remains a continued use of the seminal IMP concepts and models. Seminal IMP thinking thus serves as a backbone in the process.

It is challenging to provide examples, but among the themes that have been articulating in the IMP research from the mid-2000s, are the works developed around the market shaping concept (building on the concept of performativity of economics as developed by Michel Callon where markets are considered as sets of practices and marketing is read as market-ing (Araujo et al., 2008; Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009). The network pictures concept (Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Ford & Redwood, 2005; Ramos & Ford, 2011) based on Karl Weick's notion of sense-making also provides an illustration of what these new areas could be by promoting the idea that network pictures—which are managers' subjective mental representations of their relevant business environments—are shaping managerial decisions, actions, and evaluations. Another new area—along with the more in-depth considerations of the nature of actors, activities, and resources, mentioned previously—may also be identified relative to the notion of strategizing

(Baraldi et al., 2007; Gadde et al., 2003), or how the individual actions of companies transform into strategies at the network level,

#### 5. A case of normal science

At first sight, the IMP Group could give the impression of a research group largely supported by models that have been kept unchanged for many years (Harrison, 2004). This stability could be misinterpreted as an obstacle to deal with the changing characteristics of our contemporary changing world. Yet, it appears that such stability rather expresses a convergence that is taking place at the larger level of the whole BtoB marketing research. Thus, it is leading to the idea that the concepts of both “interaction” and “networks”/connectedness are well suited for the observation of the business landscape, thus giving birth to a sort of grand re-integrative theory of business exchanges.

The IMP conceptual framework/tool kit has the powerful ability to allow for reading and analysing a huge number of BtoB exchange situations. Of course, one may feel that for a changing world to be analysed, new models must be proposed. But what if the so-called “old” concepts and models allow researchers to account for so-called new phenomena? This may be considered rather as a proof of conceptual robustness than one of an outdated approach. The plasticity of the IMP frameworks enables them to be used across different empirical settings and, through its further investigation, allows research journeys to be progressively refined as a result.

This, indeed, is how normal scientific activity is perceived to operate. According to Kuhn (1996), science development can be described as a succession of stages where normal science alternates with revolutions. Scientific revolutions emerge from the discovery of anomalies (phenomena that are difficult to explain within the context of the existing paradigm) and lead to new paradigms to be proposed. Kuhnian normal science develops inside an existing paradigm. Normal science is a “development-by-accumulation” science. It is the most common context of science whereby the objective is not to build new paradigms but rather to use them as starting points for new work. As pointed out by Kuhn (1996, p. 144), “In so far as he is engaged in normal science, the research worker is a solver of puzzles, not a tester of paradigms.”

The initial IMP founding period (mid-1970 to mid-1980)—with the interaction model developing against the mainstream marketing management model—displays the very characteristics of a scientific revolution, with as end result a shift in paradigm in the field of industrial marketing. From the point of view of an academic community, it may appear as particularly attractive and exciting to provoke such Kuhnian paradigm shifts. These, however, are only episodic periods of scientific development. Science cannot be made only of scientific revolution. Periods of normal science are needed to ensure development. The consolidation and extension periods of IMP Group development are thus more related to normal science. We argue then that these periods must not be viewed as unimportant. They must especially not be considered as periods of weakness or weakening. They are in fact fully meaningful periods of development.

#### 6. Conclusions

The field of marketing is known for its capacity to—perhaps too often—generate new concepts or approaches which strongly resemble new managerial and/or academic fads: “Every year, hundreds of gleaming marketing models roll off the academic production lines... while adding their intellectual emissions to our already overheated academic atmosphere” (Brown, 2007, p. 291). Its major academic journals are searching for novel and original contributions while denigrating replication-with-extension research. Hubbard and Lindsay (2002) show that the nine major marketing journals (EJM, IJRM, JAMS, JAR, JCR, JM, JMR, JR, and MS) publish essentially original and novel empirical research.

However, the case of the work produced by the IMP Group in BtoB marketing demonstrates, in contrast, a certain permanency and stability of its major theoretical frameworks. These frameworks are not frozen but in a perpetual rejuvenation movement, which does not significantly affect their global architecture (Håkansson et al., 2009). Their contributions, just as the vast majority of BtoB marketing research, are mainly published in industry-specific journals (IMM, JBIM) which are not part of the above journal listing. Without wanting to resuscitate a dichotomy between BtoB and BtoC marketing, which on the one hand may be unfounded (Cova & Salle, 2008), but which in any case has served its time, it cannot be denied that research in the BtoB area escapes the syndrome of the succession of research looking for significant differences (Hubbard & Lindsay, 2002) and of the subsequent multiplication of paradigm shifts.

This raises several related questions. Is it the object of the research that provides such stability? Do industrial market practices thus demonstrate greater permanence than those relating to end-user consumers? Or is it rather the practices of the researchers themselves that vary? IMP researchers—even if they are ever-thirsty for new and groundbreaking contributions—are perhaps not launched in the “race for (publications) stars” in top-ranked journals, which incidentally seldom publish BtoB research. IMP researchers are also perhaps defending what Nicholson, Brennan, and Midgley (2014) call a “crenelated paradigm” against those seeking to challenge their ideas and consequently refusing to question the limitations of their existing models. In asking why not, we opt for a mix of these reasons: research objects and actors’ strategies join forces each side of the fence to provide on the one hand spectacular, or on the other normal, science.

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**Bernard Cova** is professor of marketing at KEDGE Business School Marseille and visiting professor at Università Bocconi, Milan. Since the early 1990s, he has participated in post-modernist streams of consumer research and marketing, focusing on a tribal approach. He is also known for his research in B2B marketing, especially in the field of project marketing. He has served in editorial positions for many top European marketing journals, published over 100 papers and articles and over 20 books.

**Catherine Pardo** is professor of marketing at the EMLYON Business School. Her primary research interests cover key account management and B2B distribution. Her work has been published in several international reviews such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *European Journal of Marketing* and the *IMP Journal*.

**Robert Salle** is professor of marketing at the EMLYON Business School. His research interests include buyer–seller relationships, offering strategies and project marketing and solution selling. He has published his research in books and in journals such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* and the *IMP Journal*.

**Robert Spencer** is head of the Marketing Department and the Markets and Consumption research cluster at KEDGE Business School, France. He serves on the editorial review board of several major international journals and his research activities cover a variety of fields, including market studies from a market making and shaping perspective, consumption, industrial marketing and purchasing, sustainable sourcing, key account management, and network theory.