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Actionable marketing knowledge: A close reading of representation, knowledge and action in market research

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ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualizes the notion of *actionable marketing knowledge* by investigating how market researchers produce and justify actionable recommendations for their clients. We build upon the market practices approach, as well as a close reading of market research reports, to conceptualize the rhetorical strategies used to guide firms into action. The findings show three rhetorical strategies: First, *framing managerial anomalies* draws managerial attention to perplexing situations. Second, *loading instruments with meaning* develops a narrative in which charts and tables "speak for themselves." Third, *signposting prescriptions* reduces interpretive flexibility by encoding guidelines within the text intended to lead readers to an intended interpretation. The relevance for business marketing is that by studying the ways representations are encoded in business reports, business scholars can better understand knowledge calibration in the theory-praxis gap.

1. Introduction

Marketing knowledge is an important concept in marketing theory (Eisend, 2015), but scholars tend to focus on its declarative aspect (know what) rather than its procedural aspect (know how) (Lilien, Rangaswamy, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2002; Rossiter, 2001). This can be a limitation by overemphasizing the codified knowledge at the expense of its application (Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014). To address this limitation, scholars call for more research on how marketers solve managerial problems at work, just like engineers do (Uncles, 2002). In other words, scholars call for more research about "how marketing is actually done in organizations" (Skålén & Hackley, 2011, p. 189).

"Actionable marketing knowledge" was the key construct used in this investigation. From a broad perspective, the construct refers to the somewhat coherent meanings situated within the marketing worldview that are intended to enact managerial action. More formally, actionable marketing knowledge is how "declarative knowledge" (Eisend, 2015) and "procedural knowledge" (Wierenga, 2002) interact in a situated managerial context, and as part of a codified marketing ontology (Rossiter, 2001).

This study investigates actionable marketing knowledge in the context of market research. Market researchers are knowledge-intensive business service firms (KIBS) (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Santos & Spring, 2015) that produce market representations to enable managers to act within their business environment (Diaz Ruiz, 2013). The theoretical anchor of this investigation is in the market practices stream (Kjellberg, Azimont, & Reid, 2015; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Mason, Friesl, & Ford, in press), as well as the stream on constructive market research (Bjerrisgaard & Kjeldgaard, 2013; Diaz Ruiz, 2013; Nilsson & Helgesson, 2015). This stream argues that representations have the capacity to expand business strategies available to firms (Hagel, Brown, & Davison, 2008), for example, firms re-imagine future versions of markets, and then work towards bringing into effect novel market configurations (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010). Similarly, researchers found that marketing managers place less importance on the "truth value" of market research reports and more importance on the production of compelling accounts that impose a sense of order (Jacobi, Freund, & Araujo, 2015).

Our research question is as follows: "*How do market researchers frame social practices into marketing knowledge that is made actionable for their clients?*" To answer this question, we choose to study the complicated interactions between representation, knowledge and action (Rabinow, 1986; Von Krogh, 1998) to investigate how market researchers construct marketing knowledge for their clients. To detail, we audited market research reports to understand the sequential validations used to stabilise accounts as facts (Latour, 1999; Smith, 1978) and build devices intended for guidance (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1992). Thus, this study provides a response to the call for more research to support market researchers in their objective to regain relevance (Phillips, 2011) and for marketing scholars to support the construction

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of meaningful managerial insights (Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014; Nenonen, Brodie, Storbacka, & Peters, 2017).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the key constructs—representation, knowledge and action—both in the social sciences and in marketing research. Section 3 presents the method, empirical materials and analysis. Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 discusses the implications for theory and managerial practice.

2. Theoretical frame

2.1. Representation, knowledge and action

2.1.1. Representation

Representation is the act of portraying objects, people and events in the world through products of the mind, such as concepts and signs (Stern, 2004). In its simplest terms, a representation stands for something else; however, a representation may have either a strong or weak correlation with the original object. The strong version is like a reproduction in which the representation and the object are mistaken to be the same. The weak version is a simulation in which the representation and object differs (Baudrillard, 1994/2004). This distinction is anchored in Western thought, for example for Aristotle, *mimesis* means that the creations of the mind seemingly reflect objects of the world. In contrast to the Aristotelian tradition, scholars like Baudrillard (1994/2004) and Bateson (1972/2000) argued that representations precede the social reality that they supposedly mimic. More than simply standing for an underlying original and pre-existing object, representations call into being, and quite literally produce, that to which they supposedly refer (Hall, 1997).

2.1.2. Representation and knowledge

Representation and knowledge have different meanings (Rabinow, 1986). Knowledge is a system of "justified true beliefs" that can be either formal and explicit or informal and tacit (Von Krogh, 1998, p. 135). "To know," for Rabinow (1986, p. 235), "is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so, to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations," but for Rabinow representation and knowledge differ: "Philosophy's eternal concern is to be a general theory of representations, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretence of doing so)."

Constructivists argue that people use symbols to indicate meaning and thus construct knowledge. Marcus and Fischer (1999, p. 12) developed the notion of a "crisis of representation" to explain the complicated relationship between representation and knowledge as "problems of interpretation of a reality that eludes the ability of dominant paradigms to describe it, let alone explain it." Moreover, Smith's (1978) "factual accounts" describe the ways people use language games to authorise an account as factual and convince each other to recognise the validity of assertions they make. One consequence is that even facts must be agreed upon. Latour (1999) developed a "circulating reference" to explain how scientists agree on facts using devices progressively loaded with meaning that "speak for themselves" (Latour, 1999, p. 102).

2.1.3. Representation and action

Because representations involve systematic distortion and non-resemblance (Baudrillard, 1994/2004), using representations to act requires active interpretations to assign a context to knowledge (Bateson, 1972/2000). One example is the *map maker's dilemma* (Korzybski, 1994[1933]), which describes the complicated relationships between representation, knowledge and action. For Korzybski (1994[1933]), mapmakers rely on creative distortions to design useful maps. For example, because of their intended use, a nautical map differs significantly from a geopolitical map.

In a much-circulated quote, Baudrillard (1994/2004, p. 365) wrote that "abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance," and later continues "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory." Managerial scholars have advanced the notion that representation can precede action. In *Reframing business: When the map changes the landscape*, Normann (2001) argued that firms can use representations to shape business markets. For example, firms envision a more effective market configuration and then shape markets by organising others to enact that vision (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011).

2.2. Market representations, marketing knowledge and actionable marketing knowledge

2.2.1. Market representations

Marketing scholars recognise that representations rarely describe markets directly and unequivocally (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006; Stern, 2004). Managers represent social reality through a series of simplifications and abstractions that differ not only in modes of production (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010), but also in means of interpretation (Day & Nedungadi, 1994). In market representations, marketers select objects from social reality and translate them into the ontology of markets (Diaz Ruiz, 2013).

While representations may either strongly or weakly correspond to reality, market representations are so widely used that managers often assume strong correspondences. For example, managers rely on marketing conventions to translate social practices into marketing concepts (Day & Nedungadi, 1994). If the conventions are followed, the correspondence between representation and knowledge is taken for granted. However, conventions are not always successful thus representation and knowledge differ. One example is the debate whether asking purchasing intentions to establish market share fits with actual sales; while it is possible that the figures overlap, it is also possible that this form of representation is distorted from observed behaviour. To account for these differences Diaz Ruiz and Kowalkowski (2014) distinguished between *representational accuracy* and *representational actionability*. *Representational accuracy* refers to the correspondence or closeness between the findings that market researchers re-present as well as actual market practices (cf. Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Nenonen et al., 2014). *Representational actionability* refers to constructing meaningful programs of action that firms can implement.

2.2.2. Marketing knowledge

Rossiter (2002) distinguished between five forms of marketing knowledge: 1. Marketing concepts are the building blocks or semantic choices that define a marketing ontology. 2. Structural frameworks refer to a classification scheme "that helps to organise, and therefore begins to solve, a marketing problem" (Rossiter, 2001, p. 14). 3. Empirical generalisations are relationships between marketing concepts (if-then). Generalisations are at the core of academic marketing (Eisend, 2015). 4. Strategic principles are prescriptions or guidelines used to identify a situation and choose a response (if-do). 5. Research principles are also guidelines used to understand the business environment. Rossiter (2001, p. 19) stated that "the prescription, though, is to use or commission a particular market research technique, rather than to take a particular strategic action."

Not all marketing knowledge is declarative. "Marketing decision-makers in practice have a much richer treasure of marketing knowledge at their disposal than the codified body of knowledge that has emerged from systematic academic research" (Wierenga, 2002, p. 355). In other words, research in marketing has focused on declarative knowledge at the expense of procedural marketing knowledge (Jones & Tadajewski, 2011; Uncles, 2002; Wierenga, 2002). Procedural marketing knowledge can be defined as "all the insights and convictions about marketing

phenomena that marketing managers use or can use for making marketing decisions" (Wierenga, 2002, p. 356).

2.2.3. Actionable knowledge

That marketing knowledge should be actionable is a tautology in that it is true by definition; however, a recurrent complaint among managers is that marketing knowledge is not always managerially relevant (Grønhaug, 2002; Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014). Therefore, marketing knowledge can be both successful in its declarative aspect (Eisend, 2015) and simultaneously useless for specific firms (Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014, p. 166). To address this limitation, we turn to the notion of actionable knowledge. For Argyris (1996, p. 1), "actionable knowledge is not only relevant to the world of practice, it is the knowledge that people use to create that world." Argyris (1996) emphasized that actionable knowledge is creative; thus, it is designed to produce consequences. In other words, managers use representations to produce effects in the world (Normann, 2001).

Research on decision-making has produced a host of concepts that address the relationship between managerial knowledge and action; one of these concepts is knowledge calibration (Pillai, 2010; Pillai & Min, 2010). This notion refers to the correspondence between accuracy and confidence in knowledge (Pillai, 2010). Research on knowledge calibration aims to increase the fit between the knowledge that firms generate and use, for instance, by creating a managerial position tasked with aligning managerial expectations and knowledge production by means of training, auditing records, and monitoring implementation (Pillai & Min, 2010, p. 1367). However, one of the limitations of knowledge calibration is that it focuses exclusively in accuracy and confidence, and this is the gap between representation and knowledge instead of the gap between knowledge and action.

2.3. A constructive approach to market research

Market research firms are knowledge intensive business firms (KIBS) that trade on market representations to advise managers regarding how to act in markets (Berghoff, Scranton, & Spiekermann, 2012), especially in relation to consumers (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). Extant literature has argued that market research generates market knowledge by means of accumulation (Cruz-González, López-Sáez, & Navas-López, 2015). This view assumes a strong correspondence between representation and knowledge of markets (e.g., Christen, Boulding, & Staelin, 2009). In other words, the literature on market research presupposes that market research is mimetic, thus representation and knowledge overlap (c.f. Ferreras-Méndez, Newell, Fernández-Mesa, & Alegre, 2015).

In contrast to the mimetic view, constructive scholars hold that market research expands the repertoire of managerial actions in ways other than previously recognised (Diaz Ruiz, 2013; Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010). Market research is capable of framing managerial worldviews and elucidating novel marketing strategies (Bjerrisgaard & Kjeldgaard, 2013). For example, using a quasi-experiment, Diaz Ruiz and Kowalkowski (2014) found that given contrasting accounts of how a market works, marketers follow divergent marketing strategies; thus, representations extend the repertoire of actions available to managers. Furthermore, Harrison and Kjellberg (2010) found that highly technological firms use market segmentation techniques *before* any actual market exists. In other words, managers rely on projections that impose order on complex social realities to ensure continuity. Lastly, Bjerrisgaard and Kjeldgaard (2013) investigated how market researchers working in close cooperation with their clients produce novel business strategies.

Market researchers negotiate tensions between representation, knowledge and action (Diaz Ruiz, 2013; Nilsson & Helgesson, 2015). One example is the following request by clients: "I want it fast, factual and actionable" (Bernhardt, 1994, p. 12). Market researchers must continuously negotiate the representation's relevance with their clients. For instance, Grandclément and Gaglio (2011) described the series of translations needed make focus groups correspond to the real-world consumers. In addition, Hackley (2003) demonstrated that advertisers hold contested interpretations regarding what constitutes the consumer subject in advertising. The contestations between representation and knowledge is constructive in that they enable firms to develop visions of a redefined market (c.f. Araujo, Finch, & Kjellberg, 2010; Azimont & Araujo, 2010) and then shape markets by convincing other actors to enact the organisational vision (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011).

3. Research design

In this study, the ways market researchers construct market representations through ad-hoc reports were analysed. These reports are accounts tailored exclusively for the client, and presented during a meeting. The crux of the reports, besides presenting the findings, is proposing recommendations for managerial action. The ad-hoc market research report is a self-contained device that must be clear even in the absence of market researchers. Therefore, the reports are primary data because market research reports explicitly frame findings and recommendations for each client.

The reports used for this paper were collected when the first author conducted a consultation for an advertising agency in Mexico City. The project required browsing through ad-hoc reports for a client of an advertising agency to provide reinterpretations and novel insights that advertisers could use for their clients. During this consultation, the key insight was that multiple market research reports offered seemingly contradicting interpretations. After auditing the reports closely (Woodside & Sakai, 2009), the finding that motivated this paper was that while seemingly dealing with market facts, the reports led to a narrative that supported certain managerial recommendations. Most importantly, while alternative readings are possible, alternative interpretations were discouraged through guidelines embedded in the text.

The corpus for this investigation included four market research reports, which are summarised in Table 1. Each investigation was ad hoc, meaning that each report was commissioned and tailored to the specific needs of the client. The industries represented in the reports include soft drinks, financial services, fast-moving consumer goods and sports apparel. Each report was produced by a different market research agency for a different client. The common link was the advertising agency. The executives at the advertising agency agreed to grant access to a limited number of ad-hoc reports for academic investigation under two conditions: first, that the anonymity of the clients would be preserved, and second, that proprietary insights from both the client and the agency would be safeguarded.

Investigating marketing agencies is an emerging trend in marketing research (Ariztia, 2015; Hackley, 2003; Jacobi et al., 2015). For example, Hackley (2003) conducted and in-depth analysis on how advertising planners create and contest stories of the consumer subject. Furthermore, Ariztia (2015) analysed how advertisers develop a consensus of what constitutes an insight. Jacobi et al. (2015) discussed how advertisers present business opportunities to their clients in the form of gaps. This type of research constitutes the investigation of marketing-as-practice (Skålén & Hackley, 2011); however, obtaining access to

Table 1
Market research reports under study.

Client	Technique	Context	Type of study
Alfa	Qualitative (focus groups)	Soft drinks	Advertising pre-test
Bravo	Meta-analysis of market research reports	Financial services	Synthesis of market research reports
Charlie	Quantitative (audience panel)	Fast-moving goods	Advertising impact test
Delta	Quantitative (personal interviews)	Sports clothes	Usage and attitude

agencies is complicated due to requirements such as non-disclosure agreements. To address the confidentiality issue, marketing academics must use alternative methods to gather data. Some methods include participant observation (Hackley, 2003), reflexivity of a researcher's experience (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), case studies (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010), or auditing reports (Woodside & Sakai, 2009).

3.1. Brief description of the market research reports

3.1.1. Alfa, a qualitative pre-test in advertising

This study was a qualitative investigation of urban young adults in focus groups, and the topic was soft drinks. The purpose was to select a storyboard and to develop an ad. The report provided a general overview of how young adults become part of a consumer community. Most of the report involved testing TV ad storylines in which the brand was a sign of membership in a consumer community. In addition, Alfa tests were used to determine whether each ad advanced consumers' purchasing intentions. The findings were summarised in a chart that contrasts four items: visual impact, emotional response, connection with the brand, and understanding the marketing message. Interestingly, each ad outperformed another in the following items: emotional response and understand the message. This means that each ad has certain given characteristics, and the brand managers must decide which characteristics are most appropriate.

3.1.2. Bravo, a meta-analysis of market research reports

This was a study of the accumulated ad-hoc market research reports for a financial firm over a period of three years. The report summarised 12 previous reports corresponding to nearly 7500 interviews and 24 focus groups. *Bravo* repurposed existing studies for new findings, which is an uncommon practice per its introduction: “the analysis of accumulated research is uncommon, […] firms often commission fresh market research every time.” In addition to the meta-analysis, *Bravo* reported a dozen interviews with middle managers and identified 10 business insights that the client could implement without commissioning new market research projects.

3.1.3. Charlie, a quantitative test for performance in advertising

This performance test compares consumers' recall of ads that firms commission to TV and radio. The method involved a consumer panel with 450 respondents who were asked about their favourite TV shows and the ads that they remembered from those shows. The report generated a “standard” and compared given results with the average of all observations produced using the same method. The ads tested using *Charlie* that performed above the standard and were thus evaluated positively led to the recommendation of increasing airtime.

3.1.4. Delta, a quantitative U & A

Delta is a “Usage and Attitude” study that describes sports practices of a given demographic group and their attitudes towards brands related to sports equipment in detail. For the Delta method, a long questionnaire was provided to 3596 respondents in seven countries. The report included almost 100 charts and 50 tables of descriptive analytics (such as frequencies, averages and counts) displayed as bar charts and tables with percentages. The study included a summary featuring key differences across the demographics. One example was that “consumers play more soccer in Brazil (56%) than in the USA (12%).” At the end of the report, *Delta* proposed consumer profiles called “clusters” from which the daily routines of consumers and the attitudes towards brands in the category can be used for market segmentation.

3.2. Qualitative analysis

Business researchers have a long tradition of using qualitative methods in industrial marketing (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010). Scholars use single case studies (Piekkari et al., 2010), narrative analyses (Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos, & Olkkonen, 2012), and reflexivity of their own managerial experiences (Andersen & Kragh, 2010) to determine how firms operate. The aim is usually to develop a theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013), defined as “the process through which researchers seek to make sense of the observable world by conceptualizing, categorizing and ordering relationships among observed elements” (Andersen & Kragh, 2010, p. 50). Multiple methods can be used to develop a theory. One method is the ex-ante approach, which detects and uses tensions and paradoxes constructively in the development of new insights. Tensions demonstrate contrasting divergences between theories, and between theories and practices (Andersen & Kragh, 2010).

To address the quality of the research, Wolcott (1994) and Leitch, Hill, and Harrison (2009) argued for understanding naturally existing phenomena. Wolcott (1994) argues that validity involves identifying and making sense of critical elements and plausible interpretations of practices that occur naturally; hence, the onus is in the closeness to existing practices. The managerial relevance of the reports under study is demonstrated in that the reports were not only commissioned in the first place, but were also considered useful enough to revisit. The first author was hired to re-examine the reports to identify alternative interpretations using triangulation. Because the project was a consultancy, alternative interpretations were discussed with clients, including questions regarding the reasons they did not identify certain insights in the original interpretation.

Rather than focusing on internal validity, qualitative researchers tend to focus on trustworthiness. Leitch et al. (2009, p. 67) suggested that “quality must be internalized within the underlying research philosophy rather than something to be tested upon completion.” Trustworthiness is based on the practical value and possibility to understand new meanings, new possibilities, new dialogue and new questions. In this case, it is argued that the way in which market researchers communicate is rather common, i.e. through overhead slides and discussions during business meetings; however, due to the many graphic elements, qualitative techniques designed for words are inappropriate. Methods such as a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) are meant for unstructured texts. The reports used in this study contained graphics, tables, figures, diagrams, bullet points, floating text, symbols, colours, photographs and running text. Therefore, following Leitch et al. (2009), this qualitative study provides a novel way to analyse this hybrid material. In addition, Leitch et al. (2009, p. 75) discussed “substantive validation” in terms of transparency of the processes that support interpretations. Consequently, the following section explains the guidelines for interpretation.

3.2.1. Analysis: mapmaking strategies used to encode and decode meaning

The material is hybrid in that in addition to words, reports include symbols, conventions for ordering figures, recurring themes, and visual aids. To analyse these disparate elements, the market research reports were considered to be structured accounts designed for guidance, similar to a map. The literature on how mapmakers encode guidance served as a foundation for the analysis (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1992).

Table 2 introduces the process for analysing the empirical material building upon the literature on map making (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1992). The ways market researchers validate their reports as objects intended for guidance, like maps, were analysed. Whether maps establish newly discovered territories or demonstrate complicated social realities, maps are useful in understanding the surrounding environment; however, maps are deceivingly complex because mapmaking involves projections and distortions (Obrist, 2014).

4. Findings

The reports were organised in such a way that recommendations

Table 2
Mapmaking strategies used to encode and decode meaning in market research (MR) reports.

Mapmaking strategy	Description	Use in maps	Use in MR reports	Question for analysis
Selection	Focus on the key elements that best support an intended reading	The Mercator projection preserves directional accuracy, thus used for sailing	Only a few graphs support the most crucial insights	What charts and figures most prominently substantiated the managerial insights?
Classification	Generate themes that readers can easily identify and compare	Logistic maps that compare multimodal transportation	Business insights reflect the dominant themes in the report	Which pre-existing classifications were mirrored in the recommendation?
Simplification	Eliminate distracting aspects from the report	Rivers are removed from maps intended for politics	Some material from the fieldwork is omitted in the final report	Would the figures sent to an "annex" section support an alternative recommendation?
Exaggeration	Emphasize points that maintain a storyline	Tourist maps increase the scale of popular attractions	Notes within charts emphasize intended readings	How market researchers prioritized which findings receive the most visibility?
Symbolisation	Design visual aids that best communicate the storyline	Political maps in the USA use blue and red to signal democratic and republican parties	Bright colours and changes in font mark statistical differences	Which codes reduced interpretative flexibility?

seemed to flow seamlessly from the findings; however, this achievement requires a series of strategies scripted within the text. Table 3 summarises the strategies that market researchers used to constrain interpretative flexibility by providing an intended reading. We distinguish the following three rhetorical strategies. First, *framing managerial anomalies* draws managerial attention to perplexing situations. Second, *loading instruments with meaning* is a strategy that develops a narrative in which charts and tables "speak for themselves." Third, *signposting prescriptions* encode guidelines within the text to lead readers to an intended interpretation. While all the strategies were identified in the material, some reports predominantly featured certain strategies and lacked others.

4.1. Move 1: framing managerial anomalies

An anomaly is a puzzle or as a perplexing situation that the market research report is meant to solve (cf. Jacobi et al., 2015). For example, *Charlie* measures performance in advertising and justifies its findings as follows: "While we know that our clients put every effort into making great ads, sometimes unexpected circumstances occur, and ads simply do not work." Market researchers promise that their proprietary method can help their clients determine when advertising is ineffective. *Charlie* carefully avoids antagonising its clients, noting that the anomalies are perplexing or unexpected, rather than the fault of managers: "Even the best-crafted advertising program sometimes fails to reach its goals. The creativity may be on target, and the programming in media may be spot-on, and yet consumers sometimes simply do not remember them." By framing consumer behaviours as anomalous, *Charlie* pre-emptively justifies negative results.

Market research reports are justified through contrast structures. For example, *Alfa* frames a study as follows: "[the brand] traditionally has been successful with youngsters, but a diminishing interest in the brand has been noted recently." Thus, *Alfa* relies on a "contrast structure" (Smith, 1978) in which a problem—the diminishing interest in the brand—is anomalous when contrasted with the first clause, "the brand has been traditionally successful with youngsters." By framing the problem as a contrast structure, the report encourages discovering in-depth motivators that may explain puzzling consumer behaviours.

Delta has more contrast structures arguing that because child obesity is growing exponentially sports are more popular in Latin America. While a cursory correlation may exist between child obesity and the popularity of sports, this does not imply causation. We identify child obesity as a rhetorical strategy because it does not carry through to the recommendations. For instance, *Delta* motivates the report as a matter of child obesity, but the recommendations fail to address obesity. The objective of the study reads: "Identify the habits and behaviours of teenagers towards sports (focusing primarily on women), and identify geographical differences." The few managerial recommendations are linked to the popularity of certain sports in the region rather than to child obesity.

An anomaly can also be defined through unexpected consequences. For instance, the client that commissioned *Bravo* re-analysed the report because the context changed: "While existing studies found interesting opportunities, the recommendations were not conclusive." The report attributes the cause to legislation: "Since the [Legislation] is expected to come in force soon, we need to adjust previous projects." The rhetorical move that justifies *Bravo* is that the courses of action previously recommended are no longer contextual. *Bravo* presented an anomaly in which previous projects failed to live up to their expectations, but reports can reach their potential if reanalysed properly. This is a rhetorical move because the managers feel that changes in the business environment require novel interpretations.

4.2. Move 2: loading instruments with meanings

The largest section of the reports showed results through a series of

Table 3
Rhetorical moves framing factual accounts in market research.

Rhetorical move	Definition	Activities	Example
Framing managerial anomalies	Set the stage using a puzzle or a perplexing situation that the market research report is set to solve.	1. Contrasting structures 2. Drawing unexpected consequences	Even though the TV ad was tested, it did not produce the intended effect. Despite an increase in media spending, the Top of Mind is lower than expected.
Loading instruments with meanings	Accounts that translate observations of commonplace social practices into marketing facts. Frame observations of social reality within the marketing ontology.	1. Setting up comparisons 2. Sequencing charts 3. Hinting interpretations within charts	A graph that compares brand usage in weekdays vs. weekends recommends purchasing media on weekends. A graph that compares loyal users vs. casual users recommends improvements in a loyalty program.
Signposting prescriptions	Guidelines that constrain an intended reading and reduce interpretive flexibility	1. Colour-coding 2. Symbolisation 3. Placing figures and obscuring addendums	Reporting geographic regions and ethnicity which enables the construction of a market segments at the intersection. Colour-coding the results in which green means good and red means bad obscure the subtleties of the findings.

data visualisation techniques, such as graphs, tables and figures. Most of the charts were presented without an immediate interpretation and were left to "speak for themselves"; however, as stated in the literature, charts are more than simply passive objects, as they tell stories and frame narratives (Preda, 2007). In this section, the ways market researchers load instruments with meanings to anchor their findings as facts are discussed. By allowing the chart to stand on its own, analysts can detach themselves and construct a narrative not only by carefully placing charts in a certain order but also by including a series of symbols, colours and marks to highlight key findings. Three ways in which charts are loaded with meaning were identified: by setting up comparisons within given classifications, by sequencing charts in a specific order and by hinting towards interpretations within a chart.

One way in which charts are loaded with meaning is through the selection of a classification scheme. Classification is an aggregating strategy used to reveal patterns in an otherwise unstructured material, which involved proposing recurrent comparisons in this case. For instance, *Delta* shows many charts with differences between age groups; thus, unsurprisingly, the recommendation would be to prioritize an age categories. Similarly, *Bravo* reclassifies existing market research into patterns distinct to those that were emphasized in previous iterations. *Bravo* goes to great lengths to explain why the new interpretations were unseen and how its new classifications led to new paths for action. One example is using a new aggregation method: "Our cluster analysis found new groups of consumers. […] Previous research grouped consumers by demographics only, but we include now attitudes." Different patterns emerge, depending on which themes market researchers choose to classify. The reclassification in *Bravo* enables a narrative in which what was previously ignored now becomes important. The categories highlight what market researchers selected for inclusion, while obscuring the rest.

Charts are loaded with meaning by sequencing a storyline; in other words, charts are presented in a certain order. In the case of *Delta*, while sports clothing can be bought and used by a wide range of consumers, the report presents three sections: gender (focusing on women), age group (focusing on 14- to 22-year-olds) and country of residence. This selection frames a storyline in which practicing sports is a negotiation mechanism for transitioning from childhood to adulthood; hence, a "coming-of-age" narrative. A narrative can be created when presenting a collection of charts in which the behaviour of teenage girls is compared with their older and younger counterparts; that is, the narrative is encoded by sequencing charts featuring categories of age and gender and then is generalised by country.

Another way to load meaning into charts is by framing takeaways. For instance, this can be done in the title: One chart in *Delta* is titled, "Countries in which football [soccer] has the most growing potential." The chart communicates both a piece of information (countries in which football/soccer is popular) and an implied recommendation (focus on certain countries to capture their potential). A well-crafted title conveys more than merely a description of a chart; titles also give voice to the market researcher through the charts. For instance, the title of one chart in *Charlie* is "[The first ad] is not memorable or well-branded." The title not only has a clear message (the ad does not perform well enough) but also leaves no opportunity for a critical examination of the chart itself, such as which aspects of the ad can be improved. The chart is used as evidence of the interpretation that has already been imposed. Since the title is a statement rather than a description of the instrument, the title reveals the otherwise hidden voice of the market researcher.

4.3. Move 3: signposting prescriptions

Signposting is an allusion to the strategies that cartographers use to make maps readable (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1992; Obrist, 2014). An example of such strategies is using symbols to highlight important sections. Market researchers use a variety of rhetorical strategies in the form of signposts that are intended to reduce interpretive flexibility. One example is that *Charlie* is organised based on a single metric that communicates the recommendation of whether or not to broadcast an ad. *Charlie* relies on a chart in the form of a traffic light in which the meaning is unambiguous: green means good, and red means bad. Moreover, by listing its aggregation method as a proprietary patented method, the report is shielded against ambivalence. That is, while measures in *Charlie* include several other calculations, they are hidden from view. Another type of signpost is showing only what is important. For example, *Charlie* places unwanted instruments as addendums so that attention is focused on the performance metric, while the extensive calculations are hidden. Selecting what to present and what to hide is a representational technique that is commonly used for developing price bundles in which individual calculations are hidden from view (Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2015).

Three strategies for signposting were identified: colour-coding, symbolisation and placement. Colour-coding involves using visual cues to emphasize parts of the instruments that require extra attention. For example, *Alfa* uses green for positive attributes associated with an ad and red for unwanted attributes. Colours and shapes are used to mark statistical differences that are significant between categories and thus are used to show the attitudes and behaviours that better represent consumers' attitudes. An understanding of colour schemes is important when decoding reports.

Another strategy is to include symbols intended to guide readers. For instance, *Delta* relies on a series of "do not miss this" symbols for marking the sections that have crucial instruments. Other symbols include the use of pictures, such as in *Alfa*, a qualitative research method,

to illustrate the reactions of interviewees in a focus group. The pictures do not depict the interviewees; instead, they are stock photos that suggest certain behaviours. One additional strategy is organising a report in such a way that the most important information is included first. For example, *Bravo* and *Delta* include a section called "executive summary" in which the most important findings are presented.

Signposts enhance representational actionability by constraining how the findings relate to recommendations. One example is the following quote in *Bravo*, the meta-analysis of existing market research reports: "Although potentially successful and beneficial for the consumer, [the findings] cannot be implemented fully because of the differing regulatory frames in the country. It is recommended that [the client] advocates [changes in regulations], as it is beneficial for the whole industry." This recommendation assumes that the client has the political leverage to influence upcoming legislation. The findings are useful only if the client can implement the guidelines as intended; however, changing legislation is far from easy, and thus the recommendation will only be considered useful if the report makes a strong case as to why such an effort is required.

5. Discussion

5.1. Calibration between representation, knowledge, and action

The findings in this study show that market researchers constrain interpretative flexibility by encoding guidelines in their reports that encourage an intended reading. This insight has implications about what actionable marketing knowledge is, and how it differs from declarative marketing knowledge. At this point it is worth restating that our definition of actionable marketing knowledge is how "declarative knowledge" (Eisend, 2015) and "procedural knowledge" (Wierenga, 2002) interact in a situated managerial context (Rossiter, 2001). We build upon this definition to contend that actionable marketing knowledge must respond to the requirements of both declarative- and procedural-knowledge.

Since most extant literature is limited to declarative knowledge, the preeminent preoccupation is the correspondence between representation and knowledge (Leitch et al., 2009). However, while this requirement is sufficient for marketing's codified body of declarative knowledge, firms must contextualize and situate solutions to their problems in a different way than scholars do (Nenonen et al., 2017). To address this limitation we expand the notion of knowledge calibration (Pillai & Min, 2010) to include how firms and market researchers harmonize the correspondence between representation, knowledge, and action.

In Fig. 1 we expand the notion of "knowledge calibration" (Pillai & Min, 2010) to explain how market researchers and their clients harmonize not only representation and knowledge, but also representation and action. Knowledge calibration for Pillai and Min (2010) means harmonizing between the knowledge that managers possess and how confident managers are of its usability (c.f. Pillai & Goldsmith, 2006; Pillai, 2010). We expand this conceptualization arguing that market researchers make their findings useful and actionable when calibrating their accounts as both factual (Smith, 1978) and useful (Grønhaug, 2002; Lilien et al., 2002). To explain, we know from the literature that managerial insights can be qualified as such only in hindsight, that is, once their effects are known (Akrich, Callon, Latour, & Monaghan, 2002). Therefore, knowledge calibration argues for a continuous series of adjustments over time. In contrast to continuity in Pillai and Min (2010), market research reports are self-contained, thus market researchers must calibrate knowledge for each report. Market researchers do this by producing devices designed for guiding their clients into acting, just like mapmakers develop maps for specific usages. By investigating the ways market researchers convince their clients to implement courses of action, we demonstrate that actionable marketing knowledge is contingent, situated and emergent as opposed to cumulative and lineal.

Lilien et al. (2002) argued that to solve the theory-practice gap in marketing, marketers should be considered problem solvers. Consequently, and in stark contrast to the linear accumulation of marketing knowledge in market research (e.g. Ferreras-Méndez et al., 2015), the findings of this study show that marketing knowledge is contingent on how market researchers frame no only the problems of their client but also the business environment. Market researchers produce guidance devices that are like maps. These devices are encoded and decoded as scripts intended for purposeful action as opposed to declarative knowledge.

A methodological implication is the need for quality assessment techniques to assess how words, charts, and symbols work together to establish a narrative intended for guidance. To do this, the practice of auditing can be productive; auditing is well established (Woodside & Sakai, 2009), but uncommon in industrial marketing. Business researchers interested in case studies can benefit from auditing hybrid reports intended for purposeful action. The method in this paper can be productive for expanding case-study research to audit reports.

5.2. Managerial implications in market research

While the current literature on marketing conceptualizes market research as a tool for learning about markets (Berghoff et al., 2012), learning is just one objective of market research. Market researchers, like engineers, provide solutions to their clients (cf. Jones & Tadajewski, 2011). While market research seemingly deals with cumulative declarative knowledge, this may not always be the case; hence, "more" information does not necessarily means "better" decisions. Market researchers frame their findings into recommendations by a process of

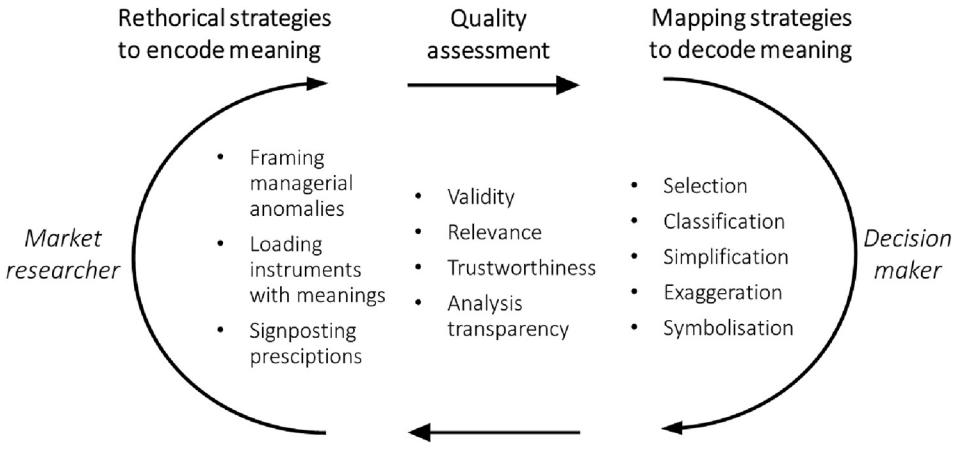

Fig. 1. Calibration between representation and actionable knowledge in market research.

encoding and decoding instructions about how to put their reports into use. This indicates that instead of a commodity that every market research agency can replicate, actionable marketing knowledge is contingent on how each market research firm applies marketing knowledge to problems.

Two implications can be drafted for practitioners commissioning and using market research. First, learning about the market is more problematic than previously acknowledged, because instead of solely accumulating information, its goal is acting. The preoccupation with declarative knowledge means that as long as quality assessment is ensured, all market research firms were considered equivalent (Phillips, 2011). However, preoccupations with procedural knowledge mean that the expertise of which market research firms manage the project matters. The implication is that competing firms configure their accounts to gain competitive advantages. The manner of framing accounts constitutes a perspective that is uniquely configured by each market researcher. We address Bernhardt (1994) arguing that market researchers can distinguish their services by more than just the method for data collection. Their unique understanding of the challenges faced by their clients constitutes a platform for distinguishing their offerings.

We expand Nenonen et al. (2017) arguing that marketing managers can reduce the gap between theory and practice by working backwards from the effects that the client wants to achieve and forwards to abstracting and concretizing what constitute a market of interest for their clients. This means that the process for producing actionable marketing knowledge must be calibrated for each problem and encoded in close cooperation with clients to ensure that knowledge is calibrated to what managers consider useful.

6. Opportunities for future research

In this paper, the ambiguous relationship between representation, knowledge and action in business firms was investigated; however, significant research opportunities remain. For example, scholars must understand how representational practices shape future markets (Hagel et al., 2008; Kjellberg et al., 2012). The notion of representational accuracy cannot be fully deployed in terms of the future, such as when proposing scenarios or when focusing on innovations that can change how markets operate and how firms intend to create changes in markets (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011).

Due to the lack of studies on representations of markets, the important question regarding how multiple actors reimagine markets remains unanswered. For example, there is evidence that multiple actors within a market have contrasting beliefs regarding how markets should work (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006), which provides an opportunity to expand theories developed for business markets into consumer markets.

7. Conclusion

Marketing knowledge is made actionable in the calibrations between declarative and procedural knowledge. The paper described how market researchers produce business recommendations and guidance for their clients by encoding guidelines that reduce interpretative flexibility. Based on the close reading of market research reports, it was demonstrated that market researchers use rhetorical strategies to construct factual accounts and employ rhetorical strategies to solve marketing problems. Thus, market researchers select anomalies that draw managerial attention, load instruments with meanings that speak for themselves, and then encode signposts within the text that guide readers to an intended interpretation.

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