Relevance and its epistemic underpinnings in B2B marketing research: four axioms and nine relevance types

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Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to explore what characteristics contribute to the definition of relevance in business-to-business (B2B) marketing research and how/why different strands of B2B marketing maintain or lose their relevance.
Design/methodology/approach – This study is conceptual. It adopts a performative-phenomenal standpoint for B2B marketing research and approaches relevance through the concept of episteme, which is considered pivotal for understanding this phenomenon.
Findings – This study proposes four axioms that define the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research and discusses their implications for scholars and practitioners. Consequently, an action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research is developed, comprising learning and temporal dimensions, resulting in nine different relevance types.
Research limitations/implications – The central argument put forward in this study is that different research strands of B2B marketing have deeply rooted epistemic underpinnings that influence their interpretation of relevance. Consequently, fostering dialogue between practitioners and scholars is considered necessary to sustain relevance in B2B marketing research. B2B scholars are urged to think beyond their subspecialized silos and acknowledge how the business environment and the various strands of B2B marketing congruently shape B2B marketing relevance, while also embracing research methods that bring them closer to business practice.
Practical implications – Marketing practitioners and academics continue to drift apart. This study puts forward three recommendations to bring marketing academics and practitioners closer together.
Originality/value – The study contributes to the B2B marketing literature by grappling with the theory-praxis gap and critically exploring what constitutes relevance in B2B marketing research.

Keywords Relevance, Research, B2B marketing, Episteme, Performativity, Metatheory

Paper type Conceptual paper

> The field is changing rapidly under the impact of new empirical materials and theoretical ideas. What looks reasonable today is likely to take a different form tomorrow (Chomsky, 1995, p. 375).

> [...] social theory in general shows grave shortcomings. Its divorcement from the empirical world is glaring. To a preponderant extent it is compartmentalized into a world of its own, inside of which it feeds on itself (Blumer, 1954, p. 3).

1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing as a discipline should strive for the combination of theory and practice (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2018; Möller and Parvinen, 2015; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Peters *et al.*, 2013). Recently, however, there has been criticism regarding the overemphasis of theoretical aspects at the expense of practical applicability in B2B marketing and in marketing more broadly (Kumar, 2017; Nenonen *et al.*, 2017; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, there is a risk that scholars and different strands of marketing could become too imprinted on certain (rigorously perceived) theoretical constructs such that they fail to recognize that business practices are evolving.

Interestingly, various scholars and strands of B2B marketing have followed the same approach to validate their research by

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using narrow concepts and definitions. For example, Anderson *et al.* (1994) made the concept of a network horizon prominent in B2B marketing research, illustrating a firm's ability to understand other actors in the same network (see also Holmen and Pedersen, 2003). Complementary concepts followed, such as network pictures (Kragh and Andersen, 2009; Ramos *et al.*, 2012), sensemaking in networks (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2012; Colville and Pye, 2010; Henneberg *et al.*, 2010) and network competence or capability (O'Toole and McGrath, 2018; Ritter and Gemünden, 2003; Vesalainen and Hakala, 2014). Similarly, network initiation and intentional collective change have attracted numerous overlapping concepts, such as network mobilizing (Hermes and Mainela, 2014; Ritvala and Salmi, 2010), network orchestration (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006; Perks *et al.*, 2017) and market shaping (Azimont and Araujo, 2007; Baker *et al.*, 2018). Notwithstanding the distinctiveness of these concepts and the impact they have made in B2B marketing research, education and practice, one could not help but to wonder whether we are splitting (conceptual) hairs or whether we are moving the field forward inch by inch. A positive outcome of this development is a stronger identity for those adhering to these narrow concepts and to the strands of B2B marketing they represent, and indeed, differentiation and positioning are the core aspects of marketing.

Thus, why is it counterproductive to use these same strategies to elucidate the differences among various concepts and strands of B2B marketing? The problem with narrow definitions and concepts is manifold. First, they distract from the fundamental questions about B2B marketing relevance and shield the inner circle from critical questions about the correspondence between the theory and the real world. B2B marketing should strive to develop valuable and useful knowledge for scholars and various practitioners (Lilien, 2016; Möller, 2017). Often, however, practitioners are considered mainly a source for generating knowledge, not their actual consumers. Second, narrowly defined strands may further bolster the theory-praxis gap, as practitioners and the public are seldom interested in marginal contributions to subspecialized areas (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014). Third, as change is an inevitable constituent of business and society (Langley *et al.*, 2013; Peters *et al.*, 2013), theories will eventually trail behind evolving practice. At worst, new ideas will be suppressed by the rigid prevailing concepts (Ghoshal, 2005). Clearly, there is a need for an overarching framework for B2B marketing relevance that individual scholars and strands can use to evaluate their contribution. Thus, the following two questions are proposed:

Q1. What characteristics contribute to the definition of relevance in B2B marketing research?

Q2. How/why do different strands of B2B marketing maintain or lose their relevance?

We argue that different research strands of B2B marketing have deeply rooted epistemic underpinnings that influence their interpretation of relevance. Therefore, this study approaches these research questions through the concept of episteme (Foucault, 1980; O'Leary and Chia, 2007; Thompson *et al.*, 2013), which is considered pivotal for understanding relevance.

The Current study offers three main contributions to B2B marketing research. First, this study contributes to the literature grappling with the theory-praxis gap (Brodie, 2017; Lilien, 2011; Möller and Parvinen, 2015; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Nenonen *et al.*, 2017; Peter and Olson, 1983; Varadarajan, 2003) by suggesting four axioms that define the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research and proposing an action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research. This action plan comprises learning and temporal dimensions, resulting in nine different relevance types. Second, this study elucidates the drawbacks of silo thinking, in which each strand protects its own territory and downplays other overlapping strands to maintain favorable positioning (Becher, 1989; Moorman *et al.*, 2019; Tett, 2015). These silos extend to the debate about the preference for theory or practical applicability (Jaworski, 2011; Kumar, 2017; MacInnis, 2011), as each strand is indoctrinated into its own episteme. Consequently, we urge marketers to think beyond their subspecialized silos. Third, this study illustrates the need for metatheoretical reflection to renew research across various strands of B2B marketing and to advance B2B marketing as a discipline.

The article is organized as follows. First, to frame the discussion of B2B marketing relevance, the concept of episteme is introduced. Next, we examine the different epistemes visible in B2B marketing and their historical development. Third, we review the literature on relevance in the B2B context and discuss the role of performativity in supporting the unique characteristics of B2B marketing. Fourth, we propose four axioms that define the characteristics of relevance in the B2B marketing context. Fifth, we introduce an action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research comprising learning and temporal dimensions, resulting in nine different relevance types. The study concludes with implications for theory and practice as well as directions for future research.

2. Episteme

The word episteme originates from Plato's philosophy, where it was used to separate true scientific knowledge from common opinion, referred to as Doxa (Hirschheim, 1992). Foucault (1980) used the word in a more specific manner to refer to a generally accepted scientific interpretation of phenomena during an epoch. Foucault explains the following: "The episteme is the apparatus which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific" (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). According to Foucault, epistemes operate unconsciously, as people of a specific era tend to take basic knowledge assumptions for granted without metatheoretical reflection. Indeed, O'Leary and Chia (2007, p. 392) consider episteme "the underlying code of a culture or epoch that governs its language, its logic, its schemas of perception, its values and its techniques." Episteme can play a critical role in the development of B2B marketing theory, as it offers a metalevel to understand the potential trajectories, trends, structural changes and underlying assumptions of a discipline. However, there are other metalevel theories of knowledge development too, so how does episteme compare with other approaches?

Foucault, similar to Pepper (1942, 1967), was interested in the use of metaphors (Auxier, 2002). Many of the metaphors adopted in his work (e.g. genealogy) aim to understand the history of the present and would arguably fit into the "contextualism" root metaphor of Pepper (1942, 1967). In comparison to Pepper's (1942, 1967) root metaphors (formism, mechanism, contextualism and organicism) that focus on the metatheoretical positions of the "totality of

Western thought", episteme and Kuhn's (1962) "paradigm" are more geared toward scientific knowledge (Hussain, 2019, p. 34). Additionally, while the episteme, similar to Kuhn's (1962) paradigm, centers around the historicity of scientific knowledge, root metaphors acknowledge several coexisting knowledge constellations (Hussain, 2019). In this sense, root metaphors do not necessarily compete for a dominant position at any given time but might peacefully cohabit. Kuhn's (1962) concept of "paradigm shift" with its four stages (normal science, extraordinary research, adoption of a new paradigm and aftermath of the scientific revolution) provides a widely adopted explanation of scientific knowledge evolution and competition between different schools of thought (Morgan, 1980). Akin to Lakatosian research programmes (Lakatos, 1970), paradigms "shift" as a result of nomological inconsistencies and empirical evidence that warrant the dominant thinking unbearable based on scientific laws (Kuhn, 1962). In contrast, Foucault's episteme is ideological and evolves unconsciously (Foucault, 1980). While researchers must decisively desert a paradigm during its breakdown (Eckberg *et al.*, 1979), an episteme operates unconsciously and develops perpetually (Bevir, 1999). We think that it is these ideological and unconscious characteristics that distinguish episteme from other metalevel theories and make it perhaps the timeliest concept to understand relevance in today's chaotic and unpredictive world. As Bevir (1999, p. 347) notes, "episteme is a fundamental code governing the way in which people understand, and act in, the world." Why is it then important to discuss the becoming of a certain episteme?

As strange as it might seem, it is argued that knowledge in the social sciences is self-fulfilling (Gergen, 1973). By reinforcing a certain approach for a long enough time (from one academic generation to another), an episteme may lose its capability to question the very basic assumptions. Chia and Holt (2008, p. 472) make the following painful observation: "even where social context and influence is accepted…, theories, concepts, and ideas are believed to represent accurately and comprehensively the actual goings-on of managerial reality." Episteme drifts away from the original phenomenon (originally justifying its existence), and the concepts conveying the in-built *raison d'être* of the episteme eventually replace the actual phenomenon. What this means is that theories no longer represent practice; they intervene in it (Tadajewski, 2006). Thus, the concepts developed to study and understand a phenomenon become the phenomenon. According to Ghoshal (2005, p. 77):

> […] whether right or wrong to begin with, the theory can become right as managers—who are both its subjects and the consumers—adapt their behaviors to conform with the doctrine.

This phenomenon can be considered even more broadly than Ghoshal suggested, as not only managers but also scholars become the unconscious victims of episteme; scholars simply yield to the status quo (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2022). In the following, we will investigate the different epistemes visible in B2B marketing and how they have contributed to the evolution of the B2B marketing research field.

2.1 Epistemes in business-to-business marketing

There are several examples of strong research strands within B2B marketing. These strands have shaped our understanding of what is generally accepted as the scientific interpretation of various phenomena under the B2B marketing umbrella. To understand how these strands emerged and shaped scholarly and practitioner thinking, we need to review the history of B2B marketing briefly. The extant literature has approached the history of B2B marketing from at least two perspectives:

1. research areas and theories evident in journals publishing B2B marketing research; and
2. historical stages and geographical differences in the spread of B2B marketing thinking.

Starting with the research areas evident in B2B marketing, there are a few literature reviews available synthesizing the B2B corpus. In their literature review of B2B marketing research, Reid and Plank (2000) found seven research areas: strategy, organizational buying and purchasing, marketing sciences, product, pricing, channels and promotion. In a similar vein, LaPlaca and Katrichis (2009) identified six broad B2B marketing research areas: buyer behavior, sales management, marketing relationships, innovation and new product development, marketing strategy and channels of distribution. In their bibliometric research of the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, Valenzuela-Fernandez *et al.* (2019) identified the most frequently used keywords in the journal between 1992 and 2016. The ten most used keywords were business marketing, industrial marketing, business-to-business marketing, trust, relationship marketing (RM), satisfaction, education, relationships, commitment and dependence (Valenzuela-Fernandez *et al.*, 2019, p. 88). Möller (1994, p. 353) identified four metatheoretical research approaches to interorganizational marketing exchange: transaction cost, political economy, interaction and network. He viewed these research approaches as partly independent and partly overlapping. For example, the interaction approach included scholars deriving their constructs either from social exchange theory or from the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group)-related theories. These research areas, keywords and metatheories seem arbitrary in relation to the epistemes in B2B marketing. However, as we will illustrate in the following, when combined with their historical prevalence, these research areas, keywords and metatheories become eloquent.

The first signs of B2B marketing date back to the 1890s and to the writings of Ely (1884) and Wanamaker (1899), while noteworthy contributions have been made primarily from the 1980s onward (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013). There are different interpretations of the historical development stages of B2B marketing. Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013) synthesize the history of B2B marketing into three stages: little theoretical development (prior to the 1950s), economic theory dominance (until the 1980s) and behavioral theory dominance (1990s onwards). Vieira and Brito (2015) offer a more fine-grained analysis by identifying four stages in the development of B2B marketing research: genesis (1956–1984), early development (1985–1995), consolidation (1996–2003) and maturity (2004 onwards). What most researchers seem to agree is that the criticism toward the economic perspective favoring lowest costs, homogenous products and rational decision-making led to the emergence of B2B marketing as its own field in the 1970s (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017). At this point, B2B marketing in Europe and North America started to drift apart, both creating their own preferred scientific approaches and identity (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013; Möller and Halinen, 2022).

According to Möller and Halinen (2022), mainstream North American B2B marketing thinking developed into four streams:

1 the managerial marketing stream;
2 the marketing science stream;
3 the channel research stream; and
4 the RM stream.

Most of the B2B research areas, keywords and metatheories discussed earlier stem from mainstream North American thinking (LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009). Furthermore, Tanner (2021) identifies three historical and partly overlapping eras in the development of North American B2B marketing thinking:

1 research focusing on organizational buying (from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s);
2 research focusing on RM (from the late 1980s to the late 1990s); and
3 research focusing on service-dominant logic (from the early 2000s onwards).

In Europe, the divergence from mainstream North American B2B marketing thinking occurred in the 1980s following the so-called interaction approach developed by the IMP Group simultaneously in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, especially Scandinavia (Kleinaltenkamp and Jacob, 2002). According to Möller (2013), the interaction approach, or industrial network approach as it is also known, resulted from disciplinary amalgamation between resource dependency theory, social exchange theory and transaction cost economics. Meanwhile, B2B marketing scholars in Germany developed IMP thinking by morphing network thinking, social exchange theory and new institutional economics (Kleinaltenkamp and Jacob, 2002). Over time, two different streams of IMP research emerged:

1 the interaction approach; and
2 the network approach (Möller and Halinen, 2022).

Looking into the development of B2B marketing in North America and Europe, we can see epistemes developing and morphing inside epistemes. In North America, the science-based research approach with quantitative methods has remained mainstream, but there are signs that qualitative methods are slowly becoming more acceptable (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010). In Europe, different research traditions and research groups started emerging under the IMP Group, such as the International Network for Project Marketing and Systems Selling (Skaates *et al.*, 2002). It has also become evident that IMP scholars have diverging ontological and epistemological assumptions influencing the interpretation of the key B2B marketing phenomena and the way research is conducted. Some IMP scholars view business relationships as changing largely due to external pressure from the surrounding structures, while others consider internal processes and individuals pivotal in driving change in business relationships (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, some IMP scholars consider networks as emergent structures, while others stress their active management (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2020). These epistemes within epistemes make it difficult to speak about an overarching B2B marketing field. As Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013, p. 295) point out, the development of B2B marketing as a discipline has been an evolutionary process, including "turbulent transitions with emphasis shifting from on one theoretical base to another". Similarly, Möller and Halinen (2022, p. 292) identify deeply rooted cultural and paradigmatic differences between the North American mainstream (NAM) approach and the European IMP approach, leading to "almost diametric research interests, worldviews, and attitudes to knowledge construction". Given the fragmentation of the field and its diverse epistemic perspectives, is there a shared understanding of what defines the relevance of B2B marketing research? We argue that to answer this question, we need to examine the role of performativity in defining the relevance of B2B marketing research.

3. Relevance in the business-to-business context

The concept of performativity originates from the work of Austin (1962), where it relates to the ability of language to perform an action and initiate change in practice. Performativity has been discussed in consumer marketing at some length (Mason *et al.*, 2015; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008), but in B2B marketing, its use is more rare. Performativity is an essential concept when attempting to determine the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research, as it determines whether B2B scholars should aim to develop "theories and tools that can be picked up and put to work by marketing practitioners" (Mason *et al.*, 2015, p. 1) or whether it is acceptable to conduct research and develop theories primarily for fellow scholars. The latter option is often referred to as a non-performativity standpoint (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016). Performativity relates closely to the theory-praxis gap in scholarly research, which has received increasing attention in marketing (Fehrer, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2020; Kumar, 2017; Wieland *et al.*, 2021) and in B2B marketing more particularly (Gummesson, 2014; Möller and Halinen, 2022; Tanner, 2021; Tzempelikos, 2022). In the following, we will briefly synthesize the recent articles discussing B2B marketing relevance.

Tzempelikos (2022) finds four reasons for the loss of B2B marketing relevance:

1 too sophisticated language used by scholars makes their work unappealing for practitioners;
2 too much emphasis on quantitative modeling and narrow approaches that do not capture the complexity of business practice;
3 too theory heavy education applying outdated textbook knowledge without practical insights; and
4 too slow pace of research that warrants research outdated before it is even published.

Gummesson (2014) views goal incongruity as one of the main reasons why B2B marketing practitioners and scholars continue to diverge: practitioners are expected to generate revenues and profits to be promoted, while academics are expected to publish and be cited by their colleagues. Consequently, B2B marketing practitioners and scholars have low intrinsic motivation to collaborate. Tanner (2021) proclaims that B2B marketing scholars ignore the trends and topics that attract practitioner attention, and therefore, B2B marketing research is uninteresting for practitioners from the start. Möller and Halinen (2022) approach relevance from the standpoint of the divide between the two mainstream traditions in B2B marketing: NAM tradition and the IMP group tradition. They suggest that both traditions could increase their relevance, but with different recipes: NAM researchers could address more complex strategic issues by lessening their over reliance on quantitative modeling and reductionism, while IMP researchers are encouraged to branch out from single case studies toward more comparative research settings. Furthermore, Möller and Halinen (2022) recommend that these two research traditions to overcome their cultural barriers and conduct more interdisciplinary research jointly.

We think that while these insights into B2B marketing relevance are very useful in understanding why practitioners and researchers are drifting apart, they seem to overshadow the question of relevance in B2B marketing research. Generally, relevance can be defined as "the fact of being valuable and useful to people in their lives and work" (Stevenson, 2010, p. 3896). However, what is then relevant research, and for whom, in the realm of B2B marketing? In this study, we assume a performative-phenomenal standpoint (Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019; Spicer *et al.*, 2009), meaning that B2B marketing research should first and foremost be anchored to an empirical phenomenon with potential insights and "eureka" moments for both scholars and practitioners. However, how unique is the empirical phenomenon of B2B marketing compared to consumer marketing, and why is performativity so crucial in B2B marketing? Perhaps the best way to probe these questions is to consider the unique characteristics of B2B marketing.

3.1 Unique characteristics of business-to-business marketing

According to Tanner (2021) and LaPlaca and Katrichis (2009), organizational buying behavior was the original inflection point that differentiated B2B marketing from consumer marketing. Indeed, the involvement of a buying center or decision-making unit makes the buying decision process exceptional in B2B marketing (Johnston and Bonoma, 1981). In organizational buying, a single sale can reach billions of dollars, which is a very different scenario compared to an impulsive purchase of chewing gum or other fast-moving consumer goods (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017). This makes buyer–seller relationships in B2B settings much more complex and longer-term than those in B2C settings (Håkansson and Shenota, 1995). Furthermore, business relationships are embedded in organizational histories, institutionalized norms and industry rules, which require sensemaking skills and an ability to foresee the future in light of the past (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023; Granovetter, 1985; Medlin, 2004). Therefore, companies use highly educated and trained professionals to negotiate sales (Anderson *et al.*, 2008; Johnston and Bonoma, 1981), which can take years to materialize (Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2001). Consumer marketing settings are more likely to involve emotional decision-making than B2B marketing settings (LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009). It is also typical that in a B2B setting, especially in project business, there are only a handful of companies capable of bidding for a multibillion contract (Tikkanen *et al.*, 2007), leading to a market where buyers and sellers know each other well and some by their first names. This takes us to the second inflection point distinguishing B2B marketing by Tanner (2021), i.e. customer relationship management.

The relationship that marketers have with their end customers is very different in B2B and B2C settings. In the B2B market, companies have a limited number of potential customers, and each customer relationship can contribute significantly to company turnover and continue for decades, making their maintenance and care critical (Hadjikhani, 1996). In contrast, a company selling chewing gum operates within a "faceless" market where each consumer is merely a drop in the bucket (Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2000). While there are other distinguishing characteristics of B2B marketing (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1997; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Tanner, 2021), we believe that two of the most significant characteristics that need to be accounted for when discussing relevance in B2B marketing research are organizational buying behavior and temporally and socially embedded business relationships.

Next, we develop a set of axioms that define the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research with the aim of bridging the theory-practice divide (as outlined in Table 1) based on our previous discussions. Importantly, our intention is to apply axioms akin to their use in philosophy, where they refer to a "proposition laid down as one from which we may begin" (Blackburn, 1996, p. 47). In this sense, axioms can be defined as a "statement or proposition that can be accepted without proof or evidence and that may therefore occur as a premise but not the conclusion of an argument" (Colman, 2003, p. 95). Our work is future-oriented and intentionally open-ended, with the aim of sparking ideas, fostering discussion, and even provoking controversy regarding the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research. In fact, our axioms can serve as suggestions or a "playbook" for envisioning relevance in B2B marketing research.

4. Four axioms of relevance in business-to-business marketing research

4.1 Axiom one: relevance of business-to-business marketing research is practice oriented

Assuming the performative-phenomenal standpoint means that B2B marketing is inherently related to solving customer problems; B2B marketing should strive for the "connection of the firm with its customers and other stakeholders" (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009, p. 1). Without an understanding of this practice-driven problem space, B2B marketing loses its *raison d'être*. In the B2B context, practitioners are highly skilled and educated professionals who will not take marketing concepts and theories at face value (Anderson *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, research in B2B marketing needs to incorporate both scholars and practitioners (Kumar, 2017; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Nenonen *et al.*, 2017). As Dewey (1938, p. 499) writes, "Any problem of scientific inquiry that does not grow out of actual (or "practical") social conditions is factitious." To that end, B2B marketing scholars should not isolate themselves from practitioners when setting in motion new research projects and developing new theories. Organizational purchasing and business relationships happen in organizations ingrained in

Table 1 Four axioms of relevance and their implications for B2B marketing research

Axioms	Implications
1. The relevance of B2B marketing research is contingent on its ability to explain practice. Unlike some other fields that have their own general theories (although RM and IMP-related theories provide broad research approaches), B2B marketing instead centers around developing and applying mid-range theories to solve complex managerial problems (Brodie, 2017; Drucker, 1954; Möller, 2013)	Theory development in B2B marketing should involve a dialog among its various stakeholders. Practitioners serve as "sounding boards" with the capacity to alert scholars if their ideas become too arcane and impractical. Therefore, even the most abstract conceptual work primarily targeting scholars can benefit from dialog with practitioners (Guercini and Medlin, 2020)
2. The relevance of B2B marketing research is temporal and contingent on the predominant circumstances (Blumer, 1954; Chomsky, 1995; Moorman *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, when circumstances change, knowledge must be reviewed	B2B marketers need to keep up with the changing marketing environment and seek to capture the emerging phenomena (Naudé and Sutton-Brady, 2019). However, a deeply ingrained episteme can distract scholars from detecting these changing circumstances (Foucault, 1980)
3. The relevance of B2B marketing research is relative to the needs of its stakeholders (Lilien, 2016; Möller, 2017). It is important to cater to the knowledge, practice and emotional needs of these stakeholders (Bloom *et al.*, 1971) and match them with specific outlets	Different outlets can be used to reach specific stakeholders. For example, conceptual work in B2B marketing could (and perhaps should) primarily target scholars through academic journals (Möller, 2017; Yadav, 2010). Similarly, work in more accessible and digestible form could target specific practitioners through bridge journals (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2016)
4. The relevance of B2B marketing research is contingent on its ability to unite various strands rather than segregate them (Reid and Plank, 2000). These research strands have deeply rooted epistemic underpinnings that influence their interpretation of relevance. Therefore, cross-fertilization between strands is advisable for broader contributions beyond subspecialties and for reaching wider audiences (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014)	Various strands may offer complementary (or contradictory) insights into similar phenomena, making knowledge exchange between them useful (Möller and Parvinen, 2015). For example, scholars in project management and project marketing have sought to cross-fertilize their findings (Cova and Salle, 2005; Skaates and Tikkanen, 2003)

Source: Author's own work

organizational histories and routines (Håkansson and Shenota, 1995). Therefore, scholars should seek new innovative ways to interact with practitioners, collect data on site and validate that their research is applicable to business reality. Buying large data sets from distant countries, then analyzing these data sets and finally publishing results without setting foot in the organizations and meeting the managers that the research scrutinizes should be avoided, as it is against the very ethos of solving customer problems (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, conducting research from the distance of the university "ivory towers" distances scholars from business practice and diminishes their credibility among business practitioners. As LaPlaca and Katrichis (2009, p. 17) observe, a typical reaction to theory among B2B marketing practitioners is: "that may be true in theory, but you don't know my business." Clearly, B2B marketing scholars need to "know business" and stay close to managers. Practitioners can be considered "sounding boards" with a capacity to alert scholars should their ideas become too abstract and far removed from practice. Sometimes, however, academics write papers that are more geared toward academics than practitioners. There are, of course, papers that deal more with academic than practical challenges, such as systematic literature reviews, method papers and conceptual work. However, even the most abstract conceptual work targeting scholars primarily benefits from dialog with practitioners (Guercini and Medlin, 2020).

4.2 Axiom two: relevance of business-to-business marketing research is perishable

The correspondence between the theory and the real world is momentary at best and requires constant updating (Blumer, 1954; Chomsky, 1995; Moorman *et al.*, 2019). The B2B marketing environment is under continuous change, and therefore, the relevance of B2B marketing research is perishable. The explanatory power of B2B theory is not absolute but relative to the predominant circumstances. As time passes, these circumstances might change in such a way that the theory no longer captures the phenomenon. In B2B marketing, these circumstances are in constant flux as new technologies and business models disrupt the market. For example, for years, "stuck in a middle" (Porter, 1980) was considered the least unfavorable market positioning. However, companies such as Ikea have proven that with new technologies, it is possible to differentiate and price 20–30% below the competition (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005). Consequently, various B2B marketing stakeholders need to work together to make sense of these changes and to revise the theory (Naudé and Sutton-Brady, 2019). For example, the war in Ukraine and the European Union and US-led sanctions against Russia have had a widespread influence on the global economy (Åslund and Snegovaya, 2021). Sheffi (2022) points out that bottlenecks created by raw material and semiconductor shortages in global supply chains are the new normal and that companies are increasing inventories rather than applying lean practices. What kind of influence will this new normal have on organizational purchasing and business relationships? Will businesses favor more transactional relationships than long-term partnerships during a period of instability? These questions point to the need for scholars to stay close to their phenomena (Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019). A deeply ingrained episteme can, however, distract scholars from detecting changing circumstances (Foucault, 1980). A healthy dose of self-critique (Chomsky, 1995), metatheoretical reflection and constructive feedback from various B2B marketing stakeholders, including managers, economic and government thinkers, policymakers, educators and students, can help scholars to renew their thinking.

4.3 Axiom three: relevance of business-to-business marketing research is relative

B2B marketing research needs to be valuable and useful to educators and students, scholars, managers, economic and government thinkers, policymakers and society at large (Lilien, 2016; Möller, 2017). Consequently, the relevance of the research is relative to the needs and perspectives of these stakeholders. These stakeholders expect to learn and gain unique insights from marketing knowledge. These needs may relate to state-of-the-art knowledge, practical everyday guidance or emotional inspiration (Bloom *et al.*, 1971). The need to fulfill the needs of a broad B2B audience necessitates that scholars convey subspecialized knowledge in a lucid and digestible form. Indeed, according to Mora Cortez and Johnston (2017), merely 2.31% of practitioners consume more than one marketing journal article per year. In essence, scholars need to ask what various B2B marketing stakeholders can learn from a subspecialized phenomenon such as network pictures (Henneberg *et al.*, 2006) or sleeping relationships (Hadjikhani, 1996) associated with the IMP research strand. What does this then mean for publishing? We suggest that scholars use a wider variety of outlets to reach specific stakeholders. While conceptual work in B2B marketing could (and perhaps should) primarily target scholars through academic journals (Möller, 2017; Yadav, 2010), bridge journals (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2016) could be used to reach specific practitioners with more lucid and digestible content.

4.4 Axiom four: relevance of business-to-business marketing research is scattered

Despite efforts to build a general theory of marketing (Hunt, 2010), most of the marketing corpus reflects mid-range theories (Brodie, 2017; Nicholson *et al.*, 2014; Peters *et al.*, 2013). B2B marketing comprises numerous research strands and subspecialties, as discussed earlier (LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Reid and Plank, 2000; Tanner, 2021; Vieira and Brito, 2015). In this sense, B2B marketing research is scattered among these strands. Various strands may offer complementary (or contradictory) insights into similar phenomena, and therefore, knowledge exchange and cross-fertilization between them is useful (Möller and Parvinen, 2015). Project marketing scholarship, an offshoot of the IMP Group, offers an interesting example of knowledge exchange: project management and project marketing scholars have successfully cross-fertilized their findings in the past (Cova and Salle, 2005; Skaates and Tikkanen, 2003). Another successful story can be found in the cross-fertilization of ideas between the IMP Group and international business strands that have both adopted the "relationship atmosphere" concept and applied it to their specific contexts (see, e.g. Ha³kansson, 1982; Hallén and Sandström, 1991). The scattered nature of B2B marketing knowledge challenges scholars to think about how their work extends B2B marketing knowledge beyond their subspecialty. Asking these broader questions is beneficial, as it forces B2B marketers to step out of the comfort of their subspecialty and reach out to a wider audience to see how relevant their insights are. As pointed out by Alvesson and Sandberg (2014), practitioners and the public are seldom interested in marginal contributions to subspecialized areas. Therefore, being able to articulate the value of the research to the other research strands of B2B marketing (discussed earlier in this study) is a litmus test for the relevance of the research.

5. An action plan for revitalizing business-to-business marketing research

5.1 Learning and temporal dimensions of relevance

There have been several attempts to seize the different dimensions of relevance in marketing from the point of view of managers, scholars or other stakeholders (Jaworski, 2011; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Varadarajan, 2003). In this study, we focus on relevance from the perspective of B2B marketing research, building on its unique characteristics (see Section 3.1). B2B marketing professionals are highly educated and trained (Anderson *et al.*, 2008; Johnston and Bonoma, 1981). However, the embeddedness of business relationships (Granovetter, 1985; Ring and Van De Ven, 1994) means that emotions and knowledge entwine intricately with social action and interorganizational histories. Therefore, in the following, we seek to morph the four axioms into an action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research comprising learning and temporal dimensions (see Figure 1). The learning dimension of relevance relates to performativity and how easily the theories and tools of B2B marketing can be put to work. To reify performativity in the B2B marketing context, we link it to the different aspects of learning (Bloom *et al.*, 1971). Thus, B2B marketing research should be performative, bringing about cognitive (thinking), behavioral (acting) or emotional (feeling) effects in the target audience, including educators, students, scholars, managers, economic and government thinkers, policymakers and society at large (axioms one and three).

The temporal dimension of relevance corresponds to the perishable and scattered nature of B2B research within the changing marketing environment (axioms two and four). We propose three temporalities of relevance: past, present and future (Medlin, 2004). As discussed previously, B2B marketing professionals operate in complex interorganizational settings where knowledge is embedded deeply in organizational histories and cultures and is being interpreted and reinterpreted constantly (Granovetter, 1985). Therefore, managers need an ability to move mentally backward and forward in time to foresee the future in light of the present and past (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023). As a combination of these two dimensions, nine types of relevance appear (see Figure 1). Consequently, when a strand of B2B marketing enhances or diminishes its usefulness, it can be traced to these nine relevance types.

5.2 Nine different relevance types

The relevance types 1–3 (thinking) relate to and opportunities to understand important facts and concepts about the B2B marketing phenomenon. Ideally, new conceptualizations enable more accurate and meaningful interpretations of the real world (i.e. type 2) and reinterpretations of the past (i.e. type 1). Conceptual innovations enable scholars and practitioners to rethink their underlying assumptions of B2B marketing (Yadav, 2010) and envision new types of B2B marketing phenomena (i.e. type 3). The relevance types 4–6 (acting) refer

Figure 1 A conceptual framework (an action plan) for revitalizing B2B marketing research: two dimensions of relevance (learning and temporal) and nine different relevance types

Thinking	1 Reinterpret the meaning of an institutionalized phenomenon	2 New interpretations of current B2B marketing phenomena	3 Discover and envision new types of B2B marketing phenomena
Acting	4 Reinterpret one's own and other's past decisions and behavior	5 New ways to interpret and enact B2B marketing activities	6 Reinvigorate B2B marketing's role in organizations and society
Feeling	7 Capable of change through B2B marketing knowledge	8 Inspired by B2B marketing knowledge and being a marketer	9 Empowered by renewal of B2B marketing knowledge
	PAST ← Reinterpreting the past	**PRESENT** Seeing the presence	→ **FUTURE** Envisioning the future

Source: Authors' own creation

to practical skills and learning how to do something in practice. For B2B marketing research to be useful, it should help the various users of this knowledge learn new ways to interpret and enact B2B marketing activities (i.e. type 5). Even more so, this knowledge should enable them to reinterpret their own and others' past decisions and behavior (i.e. type 4) and also help them to look forward and reinvigorate B2B marketing's role in organizations and society (i.e. type 6). Relevance types 7–9 (feeling) have to do with emotions and their entwinement with social action in B2B marketing. From a broader perspective, B2B marketing research can be considered relevant when it positively impacts a person's values and interests. This means that B2B marketing research needs to inspire people and strengthen their identity as marketing scholars, students or practitioners (i.e. type 8). Mason, Kjellberg and Hagberg (2015) talk about "agential effects", referring to the capacity of theories to empower practitioners. Indeed, people should be able to look back and not only reinterpret various events and actions but also feel capable of change with the help of B2B marketing research (i.e. type 7). Indeed, when industry practices change at a rapid pace, theories and concepts need to keep up and help people make sense of the new reality, reinforcing their confidence in B2B marketing (i.e. type 9). When knowledge stagnates, critical thinking and reflection are necessary to keep the strand on a favorable trajectory (Alvesson and Spicer, 2019).

5.3 Maintaining relevance through reflection and dialog

As we have learned from the previous examples, an episteme can create a subspecialized "bubble" that distracts scholars from detecting changing circumstances. Individual reflection provides a way to "burst the bubble" from the inside, whereas dialog with various B2B marketing stakeholders is a way to surface any discrepancy between theory and practice from the outside. Indeed, there is a constant tension between "breaking in to and breaking out from a research community" (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2022, p. 49). This tension plays out in the knowledge development between the various B2B marketing stakeholders. Klag and Langley (2013) note that knowledge development requires a continuous interplay between empirical data and theory. They refer to this dialog as the process of "conceptual leaping" involving two intertwined steps, i.e. "seeing" and "articulating." According to these authors, seeing is associated with making sense of the existing social world, whereas articulating involves conveying this emerging understanding to the broader public to obtain "meaning and relevance beyond the specific context of their development" (Klag and Langley, 2013, p. 150). While it is possible to make "conceptual leaps" in silos, scientific impact and innovative ideas are more likely to occur through teamwork and pairing atypical knowledge with conventional knowledge (Uzzi *et al.*, 2013). We insist that it is possible to maintain relevance and to keep reinventing theories, concepts and industry best practices; however, this requires constructive dialog between B2B marketing scholars and the various marketing practitioners. Whether relevance can be maintained without a backlash against the core underlying beliefs of an episteme is a difficult question that will be discussed in the following.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 A performative-phenomenal standpoint

This conceptual study aimed to explore the importance of relevance and its epistemic underpinnings in B2B marketing research. Consequently, the following two questions were proposed:

(1) What characteristics contribute to the definition of relevance in B2B marketing research?

(2) How/why do different strands of B2B marketing maintain or lose their relevance?

To answer these questions, this study adopted a performative-phenomenal standpoint (Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019; Spicer *et al.*, 2009), meaning that B2B marketing research should first and foremost be anchored to empirical phenomena with potential insights for both scholars and

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practitioners. The challenge for B2B marketers is to keep up with the changing marketing environment. As Ployhart and Bartunek (2019, p. 495) point out, "Many organizational problems and phenomena are not new, but they have changed as a result of cultural, societal, technological, and economic changes." Thus, when business practices evolve, concepts must be adapted, new concepts must be created or old forgotten concepts, more insightfully explaining the phenomenon, must be brought back. According to Gummesson (2001, p. 46):

> When we find a gap between our perceived reality and the reality suggested by received theory […] We should propose that theory be changed and challenge the mainstream paradigm in a constructive way.

What was once a breakthrough idea could turn into dead weight and inertia after a while.

It is nonetheless acknowledged that the performative-phenomenal standpoint is not embraced by all scholars. Some advocates of performativity (see, e.g. Jacobi *et al.*, 2015) would point out that the value of theories is not in their capacity to truthfully capture business practice but to be used by practitioners for whatever reasons. In that sense, a concept retains its value as long as it creates action, no matter how far it is removed from the original phenomenon. From the performative-phenomenal standpoint, this appears to be rather carefree *laissez-faire* thinking. The approach taken in this study has been to advocate B2B marketing research and theory development as a dialog between its various stakeholders. Practitioners are "sounding boards" for scholars, and vice versa. As postulated by Kant, "Practice without theory is blind; theory without practice is empty" (Becker, 1954, p. 387).

6.2 Theoretical contributions

This study makes three main contributions to B2B marketing research. First, this study contributes to the literature grappling with the theory-praxis gap (Brodie, 2017; Möller, 2017; Möller and Parvinen, 2015; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Nenonen *et al.*, 2017; Varadarajan, 2003) by suggesting four axioms that define the characteristics of relevance in B2B marketing research (Table 1). These axioms were then morphed into an action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research comprising learning and temporal dimensions, resulting in nine different relevance types (Figure 1). B2B marketing research should be performative and help various stakeholders reinterpret (past), enact (present) and envision (future) B2B marketing phenomena. When value is created neither for practitioners nor scholars in terms of benefiting their thinking, practical skills or emotions, research has lost its relevance.

Second, this study elucidates the demerits of silo thinking in B2B marketing, referring to each strand protecting its own territory and downplaying other overlapping strands to maintain favorable positioning (Becher, 1989; Moorman *et al.*, 2019; Tett, 2015). Silos prevent scholars from seeing beyond their subspecialty. This outlook results in marginal contributions that are hardly interesting and not understandable to stakeholders outside the subspecialty. The focus should be on articulating the emerging understanding to a broader B2B marketing audience beyond the original context (axiom four). Indeed, the argument made in this article is that silos are the main reason why different strands of B2B marketing lose their relevance. Scholars adjust their own thinking rather than call into question fundamental beliefs of an episteme (Alvesson and Spicer, 2019). However, this kind of thinking is hardly constructive. Theories and concepts are expected to capture often dynamic empirical phenomena and will endure to have historical value when they no longer yield explanatory power (Grönroos, 1997; van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte, 1992). Replacing current concepts with new ones, bringing back old concepts or borrowing concepts from other fields are not easy tasks. These processes are very messy (Abbott, 2010). As Gieryn (1983, p. 781) insightfully notes, "Science is no single thing; its boundaries are drawn and redrawn in flexible, historically changing and sometimes ambiguous ways." It is the unconscious nature of episteme (Foucault, 1980) that renders it highly pervasive. B2B marketers need to outsmart the episteme in which they are deeply ingrained.

Third, this study points to the need for B2B marketers to theorize about the theory itself and to envision future theories, i.e. to immerse themselves in metatheoretical reflection (axiom two). This is now more important than ever, as "the practice of marketing is changing faster than the research published in marketing journals" (Moorman *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Scholars need to be willing to treat their own work critically and revisit their old ideas as time passes and circumstances change. Indeed, Noam Chomsky, perhaps the most esteemed social scientist of our times, entirely reorganized and repositioned his work after years of metatheoretical reflection (Chomsky, 1995). Furthermore, the boundaries of various strands of B2B marketing may become entangled in unprecedented ways, leading some strands to lose and others to maintain or increase their relevance (see Section 2.1). As such, the dichotomy between theory and practice is ever-changing and dependent on the predominant circumstances. Scholars should have awareness beyond their subspecialty and acknowledge how the business environment and the various strands of B2B marketing congruently shape B2B marketing relevance. This broader awareness and dialog among the various marketing stakeholders (axioms one and three) provides the catalyst to revitalize B2B marketing research. Indeed, the central argument put forward in this study is that our understanding of relevance is contingent on the epistemic beliefs and assumptions of the research strands with which we affiliate ourselves (see Section 2.1).

6.3 Practical contributions

As mentioned above, B2B marketing thrives on customer problems, making it one of the most managerially applicable business disciplines (Drucker, 1954). However, practitioners and academics are continuing to diverge (Brown, 2005; Jaworski, 2011; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017). The following implications are raised to bring B2B marketing academics and practitioners closer together. First, practitioners should reach out more to B2B marketing scholars for their expertise. In many countries, there is a large "invisible" boundary between universities and businesses, causing the latter to prefer to work with marketing consulting companies rather than with universities. According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data, only 3.5% of large firms in Australia collaborate with universities, similar to the values of 31.3% in the UK, 34.9% in France, 43.2% in Germany and 70% in Finland (Guthrie *et al.*, 2017). Clearly, there is more room for B2B marketing scholars and practitioners to work together.

Second, practitioners should aspire to have a more active role in B2B marketing research. Concepts and theories should be developed interactively and iteratively between marketing scholars and practitioners through the steps of "seeing" and "articulating" (Klag and Langley, 2013). Continuous dialog enhances the correspondence between the theory and the real world. It also ensures that the marketing phenomenon under scrutiny is relevant and rigorously investigated. Practitioners should also challenge scholars to keep up with the rapidly changing marketing environment. Scholars may be unaware of these changes or too comfortable in their subspecialized epistemic "bubble" to challenge the status quo. Practitioners can provide a voice of reason should the knowledge appear too arcane and impractical (Brown, 2005; Kumar, 2017; Nenonen *et al.*, 2017).

Third, the action plan for revitalizing B2B marketing research presented in Figure 1 can help B2B marketing practitioners and scholars develop concepts together. It is typical that the concepts and narratives that are currently trending and accepted within the marketplace do not necessarily correspond with those adopted in academia. Buzzwords such as XP (customer experience) or SoLoMo (social, local and mobile) appear "fluffy" to most scholars. Placing these concepts in Figure 1 elucidates how much they can stimulate thinking, acting and feeling. For example, would the Buzzword XP help B2B marketing scholars discover and envision new types of B2B marketing phenomena (i.e. type 3), or would the concept of a network picture (Kragh and Andersen, 2009; Ramos *et al.*, 2012) allow B2B marketing practitioners to reinterpret their past decisions and behavior (i.e. type 4)? Furthermore, it helps to determine whether these concepts are likely to stand the test of time by enabling temporal analysis. Concepts should help B2B marketing scholars focus on essential, practically meaningful, theoretically deep and strategically timeless solutions to customer problems. To that end, old concepts are not necessarily bad. For example, the concept of "marketing myopia" (Levitt, 1960) is now more pertinent than ever, as it is during market disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine that the significance of customer orientation and B2B marketing's broader role in organizations becomes obvious.

6.4 Directions for future research

This study identifies four opportunities for future research. First, future research could conduct systematic literature reviews on various strands of B2B marketing (LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009; Möller and Parvinen, 2015; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Reid and Plank, 2000; Vieira and Brito, 2015) and their epistemes (see Section 2.1) to unearth the unconscious and taken-for-granted nature of relevance and to compare and contrast their viewpoints. It would be especially valuable to learn from successful dialog between academics and practitioners.

Second, an interesting future research avenue has to do with identifying and reinvigorating B2B research strands at risk of becoming obsolete. Marketing is a great example of a discipline that has witnessed several research strands with strong epistemes that have spoken to a specific period in marketing, but over time, the research has become saturated and has lost its innovativeness and relevance. For example, RM (Payne and Frow, 2017; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) has had an unparalleled impact on mainstream marketing beyond its original roots in B2B and services marketing (Grönroos, 1997). However, recently, the volume of RM articles has stagnated, even though relationships are now as pertinent as ever (Brodie, 2017). Similarly, service-dominant (S-D) logic is tapping into institutional theory (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2016) to keep the strand trending. The conceptual framework of relevance in B2B marketing research (Figure 1) could be used as a "protocol" or "playbook", indicating how the academy goes about reinvestigating B2B research strands, their epistemic underpinnings and relevance. This approach could make scholars and practitioners alike more aware of the pervasiveness of an episteme (Foucault, 1980).

Third, an avenue for future research relates to the collaboration between scholars and practitioners to stimulate more relevant B2B marketing research. Recently, authors such as Nenonen *et al.* (2017), Brodie (2017) and Möller (2017) have called for more attention to the collaborative theorizing processes between scholars and practitioners, and this article fully supports this future research avenue. The B2B marketing environment is continuously evolving, creating possibilities for developing new insights and strengthening the correspondence between the theory and the real world. Indeed, scholars should "constantly seek to understand and document emerging phenomena" (Naudé and Sutton-Brady, 2019, p. 34). Practitioners are at the forefront of the changing business and therefore in a perfect position to inspire new perspectives on old problems or to discover new marketing phenomena. Gummesson (2014) encourages the use of more case study research to bring research closer to business practice and to address the complexity of B2B marketing phenomena. Other qualitative methods, such as action research and self-ethnography (Eriksson, 2010), could be used to paint a more accurate *in situ* picture of what is actually happening in marketing practice.

Fourth, it is quite axiomatic that marketing practitioners do not have the time or patience to cowrite colossal journal articles with academics. Therefore, future research could investigate "hybrid" forms of collaboration between academics and practitioners, such as copublishing research findings and elaborating on their practical value in webcasts and podcasts. As an example, Marketing Week has its "Marketing Week Meets" podcast that features both academics and marketing executives. In a similar manner, one of the world's leading enterprise resource planning software suppliers, SAP, has its podcast series, "SAP Partner Podcast," connecting its technology experts with its customers to discuss their changing needs and potential future solutions. Given the recent developments in B2B marketing practice, education and job listings toward digital solutions, it seems logical to have more novel theorizing processes between academics and practitioners and new outlets for these insights.

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