Nonprofit marketing research: developing ideas for new studies

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Abstract
The field of nonprofit marketing has progressed considerably. However, the field has often been discordant and fragmented. Progressive streams of research in nonprofit marketing, in which connected incremental increases in our knowledge have been lacking. In order to provide a unifying framework which researchers can use when planning a research program, this paper presents a holistic model of research knowledge development. The purpose of this paper is to help researchers find useful research topics and to develop research programs that will make meaningful contributions to the field. Developing a nomological net is presented as a foundational means of establishing the proposed study's contribution to the extent literature. It is key is depicting the inter-construct influences acting on the focal outcome variables. The goal is to develop research that have greater theoretical significance and practical implications.

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Introduction

Research in nonprofit marketing is both interesting and valuable to society. It is interesting because of its differences with commercial marketing and the diverse topics available to research scholars. Nonprofit marketing is valuable to society because the more we can add to our knowledge of marketing for nonprofit organizations, the more enriched society becomes; quality of life in communities increases (Andreasen 2012; Wymer, Knowles, & Gomes 2006).

At the inception of nonprofit marketing scholarship, the marketing research community viewed the new field as simply applying commercial marketing concepts into a nonprofit organizational setting (Andreasen 2012). However, the value of this research was often questionable. Nonprofit marketing researchers found that simply borrowing constructs and scales from commercial marketing was problematic. The problem was that much of prior marketing research had weak validity and had little relevance for noncommercial contexts (Jacoby 1978; Wymer 2013).

For example, many of the early marketing concepts and scales applied only to large commercial organizations. Marketing researchers had often inadvertently developed their studies with large consumer products corporations in mind. Therefore, not only was the external validity of this body of research weak, but the construct validity of this body of research was often also weak (Wymer 2013; Wymer & Alves 2013). Constructs that should have applied to any marketing organization (or marketed entity) and their measurement scales were found not to be valid in many types of organizations (for example, small businesses, charities, intellectual property, political organizations, social movements, and so forth). Marketing researchers who remained in this corporate commercialized paradigm carried on as usual. Marketing scholars in nontraditional areas, however, had to adjust the choice of the constructs they used, how those constructs were defined, and their construct measures in order to conduct valid and useful research. Nonprofit marketers had to redefine poorly conceptualized constructs and had to develop valid scales to measure those reconceptualized constructs (Wymer 2013).

Let us consider the most basic marketing idea: its purpose. The purpose of marketing is to attract and retain support for the marketing organization or the marketed entity (compare to Sheth 2002). This is a parsimonious way to describe marketing and yet it applies across contexts. The nature of the desired support may vary, depending on the type of marketing organization (Wymer, Boenigk, & Möhlmann, 2015). For example, a consumer products company, supporters may be customers, and the desired support from them may be purchases of its products. For a charity, supporters may be volunteers or donors, and the desired support may be donations or hours volunteered. For a political organization, supporters may be voters, donors, and volunteers.

The nature of the relationship between a marketing organization and its supporters may differ, hence the broader terms supporter and support rather than customer and sales. A business may sell products to customers who exchange money for marketed products or services. This is an exchange relationship, characterized by an economic transaction (Rupp, Kern, & Helmig 2014). A charity will ask individuals to support its work through donating or volunteering. This is a value exchange relationship in which individuals can express or act in accordance with their values (Wymer 2013).

Even though the relationship between a business and its supporters (customers) is different from the relationship between a charity and its supporters (donors, volunteers), one similarity shared by marketing organizations is the need to communicate to target audiences. Marketing organizations communicate with target audiences (potential supporters) to increase brand familiarity and to stimulate brand preference, ultimately hoping to influence brand choice (Helmig & Thaler 2010). The purpose of marketing tactics, like communications, is to ultimately attract and retain support from targeted supporters or potential supporters. The brand object may differ by context (consumer product, charity, political party or politician, novelist).

The nonprofit marketing literature, like most prior marketing research, is fragmented and inconsistent. Rather than developing a consensus on important marketing constructs and relationships, researchers often define constructs to suit their research contexts and adapt their scales accordingly (Wymer 2013; Wymer & Akbar 2017). Rather than incrementally adding to our knowledge of nonprofit marketing, researchers often pursue disparate topics in an episodic, sporadic manner. A progressive program of research in which researchers agree upon the conceptualization of the constructs they use and how to measure them is needed to advance the nonprofit marketing discipline (Wymer 2013). The purpose of this paper is to present a general framework which may help nonprofit marketing research develop more progressive and integrated programs of inquiry.

Nonprofit marketing research

It is a good idea to depict the development of a research study using a figure of the nomological network or net. The nomological net is a representation of the constructs of interest to the researcher and their inter-relationships (Nomological Network 2021). The most general framework is depicted in Figure 1. Although this is quite simple, it can be confusing. An antecedent in one study can serve as a mediator in another study, depending upon the scope of the researcher's inquiry. Mediators often serve as consequents in other studies. The position of a construct in its nomological net depends upon the set of construct relationships a researcher chooses to investigate (Preckel & Brunner 2017).

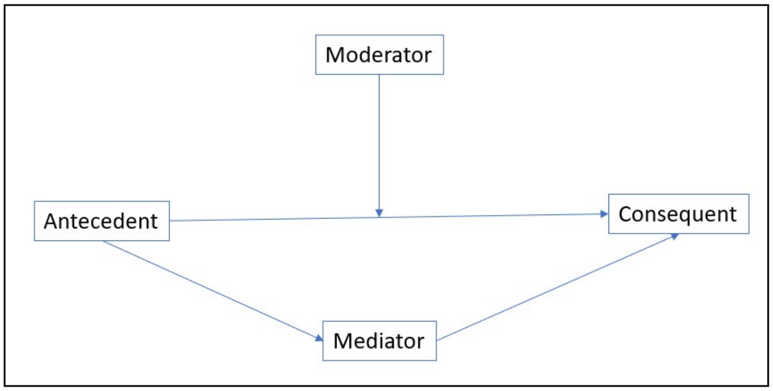

Fig. 1 Basic nomological net

The purpose of a research study is to learn more about the relationships among a set of constructs. The simplest relationship is the cause and effect relationship. A change in the antecedent construct causes or influences a change in the consequent or outcome construct. Obviously, then, the change in the antecedent must occur prior to the change in the consequent. Also, there must be sound reasons for believing that the antecedent influences the consequent. The argument or reasons given for suspecting that the antecedent influences the consequent is made using a theoretical argument and is supported by circumstantial evidence from prior research. The argument leads, deductively, to a prediction or hypothesis that a change one construct causes a change in another construct (Bryman 2016).

There is a direct cause and effect relationship between the antecedent construct and the consequent construct. If a mediator is present in the study's nomological net, then there is an indirect relationship between the antecedent and consequent, mediated through the mediator construct. This means that a proportion of the influence of the antecedent on the consequent is explained through the antecedent's influence on the mediator and the mediator's subsequent influence on the consequent (Baron & Kenny 1986).

A moderator construct interacts with the antecedent's influence on the consequent. The moderator is not influenced by the antecedent, but the moderator influences the relationship between the antecedent and consequent. The moderator's influence on the antecedent-consequent relationship is usually conceived in terms of polarity and magnitude (direction and strength) (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister 2006).

Many studies' nomological nets are more complex than the simple model in Figure 1. There can be multiple moderators and mediators, which can have their own inter-relationships. There can be multiple antecedents and consequent constructs. Figure 2 depicts a somewhat more complex nomological net. In Figure 2, the nonprofit organization and its brand are synonymous. Marketing researchers are primarily interested in attaining support for their brands. When supporters are deciding which charity to support (through donating or volunteering, for example), marketers want *their* organizations (brands) chosen. Hence, brand choice is the desired outcome or consequent construct. The nonprofit's mission and its clients serve as the antecedent construct in the example depicted in Figure 2. There are three sequential mediators: brand strength, brand experience, and brand preference. There is one moderator, value congruence, which is presented as influencing the antecedent's effect on brand strength. The researchers have a burden to show that their study contributes to the literature (fills a gap in the literature), adding knowledge by examining a previously unexamined inter-construct relationship. The researchers also have a burden to provide compelling arguments, using theory and prior research, to support their predicted relationships (hypotheses). The researchers will also have to select an appropriate sample of their target population. They will have to defend their choice of analytical methods, validate their measurement model, and test their structural model.

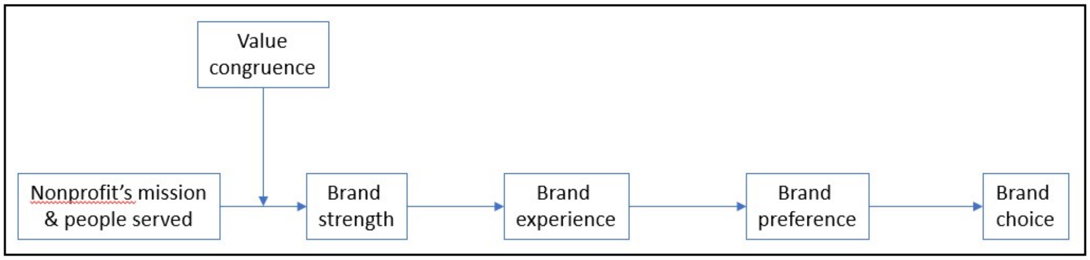

Fig. 2 Nonprofit supporter brand choice

Although the preceding review of research design and methodology is somewhat simplified, most poor-quality research has failed in some aspect of the prior discussion. Research may be judged in the review process to be poor quality because it does not contribute to the literature, or the methods and procedures were not conducted properly (Aguinis & Vandenberg 2014). The purpose of this paper is to help researchers develop research studies and programs of research that make contributions to the field.

With this introduction completed, the purpose of this article will be more directly addressed in the following sections. This article is intended to benefit researchers by helping them to develop programs of research that will make a stronger contribution to the literature. It is also intended to help researchers plan a progressive program of research.

Consequent or outcome constructs

Researchers are usually interested in the relationships among constructs that precede the consequent or outcome construct(s). Often, insufficient thought is given to the selection of outcome constructs, which should be given greater consideration. The purpose of marketing is to attract and retain support (a desired outcome). For a nonprofit organization, that support may be related to the donating or the volunteering behavior or behavioral intentions of a target audience.

A weakness in some prior research is the limited use of outcome constructs (Wymer & Rundle-Thiele 2016). Often, a researcher will limit the number of outcome constructs to one or two. This is unfortunate in cases in which several outcome constructs could have been used. Instead of learning about just the influence of an antecedent on intention to donate, the research could also have learned about the influence of that antecedent on intention to make a bequest, intention to volunteer, word of mouth (WOM) referral intentions, and so forth. A simple means of enhancing the contribution of a research study is to increase the number of relevant outcome constructs.

In responding to the need to include a greater number and variety of outcome variables, Wymer & Rundle-Thiele (2016) reported a study in which the influence of supporter loyalty on donating outcomes (donation recency, donation frequency, annual donation amount, and last donation amount), volunteering outcomes (average monthly time volunteered, volunteering recency, volunteering frequency), organizational citizenship outcomes (volunteer recruitment participation, donor recruitment participation, event attendance, fundraising engagement), and bequest intentions. Not only does enlarging the pool of appropriate outcome variables produce more interesting results, it more fully accounts for the influence of the antecedents in benefitting the organization, enhances our knowledge discovery, and adds to our understanding of the stewardship implications of investing in marketing.

Outcome construct level of abstraction

Figure 3 depicts different levels of abstraction that are often used in research as outcome constructs. Ultimately, researchers are interested in the influence of their upstream constructs on actual supporter behaviors or behavioral intentions. For example, with respect to donation behaviors, researchers might use donation amounts, donation frequency, length of time since last donation, how long the individual has been a donor, and so forth. Measuring actual behavior requires that the sample consist of individuals who have engaged in the target behaviors. Marketers may be interested in predicting the actual behaviors of current supporters or they may be interested in predicting the behavioral intentions of potential supporters.

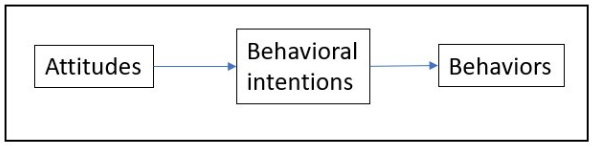

Fig. 3 Outcome levels of abstraction

Based on the premise that behavioral intentions are reasonable predictors of actual behaviors (Webb & Sheeran 2006), researchers often use behavioral intentions as their focal outcome constructs. The behavioral intentions that are measured usually depends upon the chosen influencing antecedent constructs. Some examples are intention to donate, intention to volunteer, intention to leave a bequest, WOM intentions, intention to become member, intention to request additional information, and so forth. When using behavioral intention constructs, the disadvantage is the use of a substitute (intentions) for the desired outcome (actual behaviors). Measuring actual behaviors, however, has its own disadvantages. Samples of supporters may not be easily obtained and measuring actual behaviors may require individuals to recall or estimate their behaviors, the accuracy of which can be influenced by memory recall or social desirability bias.

Researchers sometimes use attitudes as outcome constructs. Attitudes influence intentions which influence behaviors (Ajzen 1996; Bagozzi 1981). The appropriateness of using attitudes as outcome constructs often depends upon the focal antecedents. For example, if a researcher is interested in examining the effects of different manipulations of a charity advertisement, attitudinal constructs might be appropriate choices for consequents (outcomes). One disadvantage of using attitudes as outcome constructs is that the researcher has added one additional layer of abstraction between the antecedent and the outcome of greatest interest, the actual desired behavior (Ajzen & Cote 2008). A problem that is not unusual in research is finding attitudes placed at the same level of abstraction as behavioral intentions or even actual behaviors. If measuring both attitudes and behavioral intentions is desired, then it would be useful to place the attitudes upstream of the intentions, perhaps as mediators.

Organizational citizenship behaviors

One type of outcome construct that is often overlooked in nonprofit marketing research is organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB's). OCB's are extra-role behaviors that benefit the organization in some way (Hoffman et al. 2007). For a donor, behaviors unrelated to donating that benefit the organization in some way are examples of OCB's. Donors may recruit volunteers. They may volunteer for special events. They may promote the nonprofit organization by their WOM referrals and their positive comments about the organization to others. There are many ways a donor could contribute nonfinancially to the nonprofit organization. These constructs may be of interest to practitioners, they may not have been examined in prior research, they may add to the study's significant findings, and they may add to the explained variance of the data (Wymer & Rundle-Thiele 2016).

Antecedent constructs

Antecedents are the causal factors that influence the desired marketing outcome consequent variables. Mediators and moderators, in contrast, are useful in helping to better understand the causal influence of the antecedents on the outcomes. The antecedent may have a direct effect on an outcome, and the antecedent may have an indirect effect on the outcome through a mediator. The effect of an antecedent on an outcome or mediator can be altered by a moderator. Moderators alter the strength or polarity of the antecedent's influence on a downstream construct (Hair et al. 2018).

Antecedent constructs typically come from two categories: organizational attributes or tactical variables. Organizational attributes include characteristics that distinguish one organization from another organization (Molina-Azorín et al. 2020). For example, the degree to which an organization is marketing oriented or brand oriented (an antecedent) may influence the degree to which the organization communicates with its current and potential supporters (mediator), which, in turn, influences supporter (donors and volunteers) retention (outcome variable). Other organization-related antecedents include the type of nonprofit organization, the type of clients it serves, its mission, its leadership style, and so forth (Apaydin 2011; da Silva et al. 2020; Napoli 2006).

Tactical variables include those marketing activities that are under the control of the organization. These variables include a variety of communication-related variables (Abdullah, Putit, & Teo 2014). Charity advertising has been a popular research stream which includes topics like the type of appeal used in the ad, message framing, the characteristics of celebrity endorsers, and so forth (Lee, Seo, & Yoon 2020).

One cannot, however, categorize a variable as an antecedent simply because it is a communication variable. The position of a construct in a study's nomological net is dependent upon the scope of the research design. A construct that is an antecedent in a study with a narrowly defined scope may serve as a mediator in a study with a more broadly defined scope (Jagacinski 2020). The idea of the narrowness or broadness of an inquiry is depicted in Figure 4.

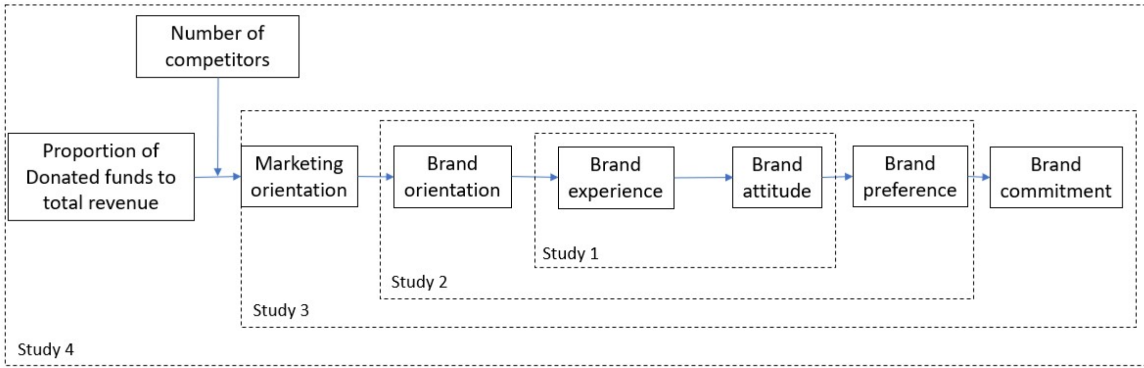

Fig. 4 Broadening scope of an investigation

The example presented in Figure 4 shows that Study 1 includes brand experience as an antecedent and brand attitude as a consequent. If Study 1 had been published in the literature, a researcher could contribute to this literature by broadening Study 1 to Study 2 by adding brand orientation as an antecedent and brand preference as a consequent. Hence, Study 2 replicates and extends Study 1. The antecedent and outcome constructs in Study 1 have become mediators in Study 2.

Study 2 is broadened by adding marketing orientation (antecedent) and brand commitment (outcome) to include in Study 3. An antecedent and moderator are added to the nomological net of Study 3 to describe Study 4. If none of the construct relationships had been examined in prior research, then the scholar could investigate Study 4 in one study or conduct four investigations in a progressive manner (Studies 1-4).

As mentioned earlier, the outcome variables usually desired by marketers are manifested in supporter behaviors or their behavioral intentions. This is not described in Study 4 in Figure 4, which presents brand commitment as the outcome variable. It would be better still to use outcome variables which reflect supporter behaviors that are influenced by brand commitment, whether behavioral intentions or actual behaviors.

When researchers are exploring new topics that will contribute to the extent literature, it can be helpful to draw a nomological net of prior research and then consider how the prior literature can be extended. It can be useful to look for other influences on previously researched constructs. In Figure 4, researchers could assess Study 1 and propose unstudied influences on brand experience. They could also examine the influence of brand attitudes on supporter behavioral variables.

Mediator constructs

Ultimately, research is an attempt to use scientific methods to learn more about the relationships among a set of constructs of interest. Nonprofit marketing researchers are typically interested in learning more about how to influence target audiences in order to attract and retain their support. New ideas for research that adds new knowledge to the existing literature can often be found by examining the influence of a mediation construct (Summers 2001). Mediation effects that account for a substantial proportion of the explained variance in the data can make substantive contributions to our knowledge. Often the influence of a construct on an outcome variable is indirectly accounted for through the antecedent's influence on a mediation construct. In other words, an antecedent's influence on an outcome is explained through its effect on the mediator and then the mediator's subsequent effect on the outcome.

Brand experience and brand preference are two mediation constructs which have been under-researched in the prior literature (Wymer 2013). Learning more about the influences on brand experience and brand preference would help nonprofit marketing researchers to learn more about how to attract and retain support (desired outcomes for nonprofit marketers). Brand strength is an important mediation construct which has also been under-researched in the prior literature (Wymer & Casidy 2019). Other potential mediators include brand identification, a variety of attitudinal variables, support commitment to the organization, supporter trust in the organization, supporter loyalty to the organization, and the perceived risk of supporting the organization.

Referring to Figure 4, ideas for potential mediators can often be found by investigating the mechanism through which an antecedent variable influences an outcome variable. Also, the researcher can investigate potential influences on a known antecedent, placing the antecedent from a prior study into a mediation role of a new study. When proposing a new mediation relationship, researchers must develop sound argumentation for predicting the new relationship, often supported from theory or relevant findings in prior research.

Moderator constructs

Moderators influence the relationship between two other constructs. Moderator variables may change the strength or direction of a relationship between two constructs (Hair et al. 2016). Learning more about how a moderator influences an inter-construct relationship can contribute to our knowledge. Referring to Figure 4, Researchers may propose potential moderators for any of the inter-construct relationships depicted using the horizontal arrows. In Figure 4, one moderation effect is predicted. The degree to which the proportion of donated funds to total revenue of an organization influences its level of marketing orientation is influenced by the number of competitors an organization faces in attracting and retaining support.

Moderators are typically measured as categorical or continuous variables (Wymer 2017). Significance testing of categorical moderators uses a multi-group analysis in which the mean scores of sub-groups are tested for significant differences. Significance testing of interval variables usually is accomplished examining the significance of an interaction effect (Hair et al. 2016).

Because the influences on inter-construct relationships is so diverse, many potential moderators are possible (Haug et al. 2012). Gender and empathy have been used as moderators in prior research (Bekkers 2010; Paulin et al. 2014). Individuals' attitudes toward charities in general has been used as a moderator to help understand audience responses to some charity ad manipulations (Wymer, McDonald, & Scaife 2014). A sense of moral obligation to help others has also be used as a moderator (Warner, Wohl, & Branscombe 2014). An individual's value congruence with a charity's mission has been found to be a useful moderator in nonprofit marketing research (Wymer & Drollinger 2015). Given the prevalence of social media, researchers are examining the potential moderation effects of social media ratings and comments on supporter attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors (Feng, Du, & Ling 2017). Another potential moderator is a charity's rating from a charity watch-dog organization and its influence on individuals' willingness to donate (Agyemang et al. 2019).

Discussion

A thoughtful and disciplined approach in developing research programs can lead to research studies that make meaningful contributions to our extent knowledge. Disappointments in research findings and journal submission reviews can be reduced (Wymer 2013). With the careful development of a nomological net when developing a research study, prior research on a topic can be more easily identified, literature gaps become more salient, and the contribution of a study can be more strongly supported.

To illustrate a typical problem that can be avoided, researchers sometimes erroneously argue that testing a known relationship in a different context contributes to prior research. They may argue that because a construct relationship has not been studied in a specific country, for example, testing that relationship using a sample from that country contributes to prior research (Wymer 2017). This is not a strong argument. In Figure 5, Study 1, represents this idea. Researchers note that the antecedent-outcome relationship depicted in Study 1 has not been tested using a sample from Country X. They conclude that retesting the relationship with a sample from Country X adds to our knowledge of this relationship. Since the nomological net from prior research and the proposed study are the same with respect to inter-construct relationships, no new knowledge is discovered. Retesting a relationship from a prior study using a different sample is a replication or the retesting of a previously tested relationship from the literature (Wymer 2017). While there is value in replications, scholarly journal editors often prefer not to publish them.

Instead of developing a study which replicates prior research, perhaps researchers could develop a study which adds to our knowledge or contributes to prior research. For example, if instead of assuming that collecting a sample from Country X will contribute to the literature because data has not previously been collected from Country X, researchers may find a construct which describes a meaningful cultural difference (such as individualism versus collectivism) between Country X and the country from which data was previously collected. This cultural difference construct may then be positioned as a potential moderator (See Figure 5, Study 2). Hence, instead of a replicating prior research (no contribution), researchers can extend (rather than replicate) prior research by examining the moderating influence of the cultural construct (a contribution).

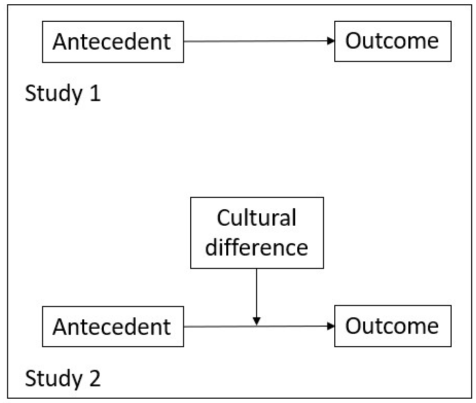

Fig. 5 Contextual difference

The development of a nomological net as proposed in this article helps guide researchers in planning research inquiries which are more likely to contribute to prior research. Researchers can use their nomological nets in their journal submissions to clearly communicate the gap in the literature their study is filling (their study's contribution). A figure of the nomological net early in the paper communicates to the reader the purpose of the study and the focal construct relationships that are predicted, the hypotheses that are being tested.

It is recommended in this article that researchers draw a nomological net that represents prior research in their area of interest. From this, researchers can propose new construct relationships that will extend the findings of prior research. Developing a set of construct relationships that extends prior research is the foundation for conducting a research study that contributes to prior research.

Once researchers have developed a nomological net that contributes to the literature, other issues should be considered. Each construct should be properly defined. Valid scales for each construct should be developed or found from prior research and adapted when necessary (Wymer 2013). Researchers who forgo presenting their nomological nets, forgo defining their constructs, and fail to clearly present their measurement scales will face greater challenges in attaining more favorable reviews from their journal submissions.

Managerial implications

There is nothing as practical as a good theory (Lynch et al. 2018; Yorks 2005). When nonprofit marketing researchers deepen our understanding of how inter-construct relationships influence desired outcome variables, practitioners can employ marketing tactics that will more effectively generate the support the need for their organizations. It is important that managers not only what tactics to use, but that managers understand the theoretical relationships among the variables represented in the tactics they use for the outcomes they want. A more sophisticated managerial understanding of the various theoretical approaches found in academic research can add the appropriate managerial implementation of knowledge discovery from research (Lynch et al. 2018). When researchers discover new knowledge, practitioners have access to new and more nuanced knowledge about how and why their implementation efforts may succeed or fail (Nilsen 2020).

The managerial usefulness of scholarly research is dependent upon its quality (Jacoby 1978). Poor quality research offers little practical benefit. Hence, papers that discuss how researchers can improve the quality of their research has theoretical as well as practical implications. Carefully developed nomological nets, properly conceptualized constructs, valid measures, and appropriate evaluation of the measurement and structural models all work toward improving the quality of our theories about inter-construct relationships. Managers can use these theories to guide their decisions about which marketing variables to manipulate to enhance their effectiveness in attaining their desired marketing outcomes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to present a general framework to help nonprofit marketing research develop more progressive and integrated programs of inquiry. When researchers are purposeful about the development of the nomological nets they examine, the foundation for a research inquiry that contributes to our knowledge has been laid. Of course, other facets of the research endeavor must be sound to provide quality research findings that are valid.

Other facets of a theoretically and practically useful research study include effective explanations for the predicted inter-construct relationships, proper construct definitions, valid construct measurement, appropriate sampling, and proper data analysis. Even it all these facets are performed exceptionally well, if the nomological net is not well conceived, the value of such research has been weakened. Developing a well-constructed nomological net enables researchers to develop research inquiries that make stronger contributions to the extent scholarly literature. It is also useful in helping researchers develop a progressive research program.

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