

Thesis abstract

Progressing business model research towards mid-range theory building

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The concept of a business model became prominent during the dot-com boom of the 1990s from which time scholarly research in both electronic commerce and in mainstream management and information systems burgeoned. The driving force behind much of the scholarly activity is the need for enterprise leaders to understand how their existing businesses can adapt and thrive in the marketplaces that have been transformed by Internet based commerce. These requirements extend from information systems issues, to marketing, to entrepreneurship and strategic management. Business model research has grown from several perspectives and has resulted in competing conceptualisations of the business model being formed.

In this thesis an overall plan for progressing business model research towards mid-range theories is proposed. The plan is based on a comprehensive analysis of existing business model research and draws on meta-theory from the more mature social and natural sciences. The overriding theme of the thesis is bringing order to the research domain at both a holistic and component level.

At the holistic level a theoretical framework is derived from accounting, management and information systems meta-theory that

identifies exiting business model research and reveals gaps in the research. The theoretical framework permits research to be analysed according to the conceptual focus of the research (focus on the concept itself or on the relationships between the concept and some other phenomenon), the purpose and components of the research and, with respect to empirical research, in relation to its direction of reasoning. Complementing the theoretical framework is a business model research schema, which is derived from the natural sciences. The business model research schema ties together conceptual and empirical research and recognises the need for both inductive and deductive empirical research. Furthermore the business model research schema promotes the need for generalisations on which to base mid-range theories of business models.

The holistic analysis of existing business model research points to two major requirements; a reference model that serves as a tool to evaluate existing (and to develop new) business model frameworks and a general classification scheme for business models. In order to design a general classification scheme for business models a hierarchically structured, all-purpose business model framework is required.

The reference model guides the development of a hierarchical business model framework which is constructed using the modelling principles of the object-oriented paradigm. The object-oriented paradigm is used in the computer sciences for information systems modelling, design and programming and provides the means by which complex problems can be addressed through hierarchically structured modelling principles and conventions. Taxonomical research is applied to the task of designing a theoretically sound classification scheme for business models.

In summary, the contribution of this thesis is to analyse the existing business model

research and to progress the research towards mid-range theory building. This will be achieved through the development of a business model framework reference model, a taxonomically sound, hierarchically structured business model framework and an original classification scheme of business models.

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