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PROVE it! A practical primer to positioning theoretically

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ABSTRACT

A key issue when planning and writing up research is explaining what the expected or actual contributions are. It is often particularly difficult to identify what *theoretical* contributions the research hopes to make. When authors submit work for publication, reviewers and editors often ask them to ensure their work “engages with and/or contributes to ongoing conversations” in their target journal. What they are really asking is “what is your positioning? Why does your work belong in this journal?” This paper takes a practical approach to explaining what positioning means, why it is important to identify and position research as fitting into and extending prior work, and what positioning involves. It concludes by providing practical tips to help researchers who are not yet confident authors position their work more theoretically.

> “To be published, you have to have something to say”
>
> Polonsky, Lawson, Uncles, Johnson, Wilkinson and Alpert (1998), p.77.

1. Introduction

It IS important to have something to say but not always easy to identify or express what you have to say clearly – which is why reviewers often lament that a paper’s contribution is not clear (Pinson, 2008). However, it is even more important to find an audience that is interested in what you have to say. Because of this, reviewers, editors and examiners often ask researchers, “what conversation do you want to join?” The two issues (what to say and who to say it to) are inter-related. Thus, authors are asked to explain how their paper’s contribution “advances the conversation it attempts to join” (Dahl et al., 2014, p.iv). Less experienced researchers may be baffled by these statements, not understanding what exactly is being asked for, much less how to go about delivering it. The short answer is that editors, reviewers and even examiners want to know what your *positioning* is. Your positioning explains how your work fits into, and extends (i.e. contributes or adds to) the research area you are working within. This is why it is important to explain as early as possible in your paper (Gregor and Hevner 2013; Pinson 2008) two important things: (1) how your paper relates to the existing knowledge on your topic and (2) how it contributes to that knowledge. As will be discussed later in this paper, it is particularly important to position your work as making *theoretical* contributions if you want to publish that work in high quality journals irrespective of the research paradigm you are working within. However, positioning is relevant to all kinds of research, including more applied research that is focussed on contributing to the practice of marketing. If you are a thesis student you have to position your entire thesis. If you are utilizing the increasingly popular thesis with /by publications format (instead of the more traditional monograph format), you also have to position each paper within that thesis. So clearly, positioning your research is a critical skill to develop and refine, before and after completing your doctoral studies.

Drawing on his experience as an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Eric Arnould published a parsimonious guide to how to get a manuscript to publication standard (Arnould, 2006). In particular, the first paragraphs of his invaluable advice shed light on how to make a paper’s contribution clear (Pinson, 2008). Although it took me many years to teach myself how to put Arnould’s (2006) advice into practice, I have found it invaluable. However, personal experience has shown me that many new scholars need his advice unpacked for them so they can more clearly understand how to implement it. Thus, this paper expands on his advice to explain how to articulate positioning. In doing so, it also extends current work on positioning (e.g. Gregor and Hevner, 2013) and articulating contributions (e.g. Fischer et al., 2017).

Having explained the need for a detailed, step-by-step guide to positioning theoretically, the rest of this paper explains what positioning is, discusses why researchers should aspire to position their work as making theoretical contributions, and presents an illus-

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trated five-step model of positioning before offering practical tips to make one's theoretical positioning more obvious to reviewers and readers.

2. Positioning theoretically

2.1. Understanding what positioning is

As Fernandez (2019) explains, groups of researchers often engage in debates and discussions about particular issues, which often are evident in their publications. These discussions or research conversations evolve over time and rise and fall in terms of their perceived importance. This is similar to how discussions in social situations can change over time. For example, in summer, more people will demonstrate a greater interest in discussing cricket, while in winter, greater numbers of people will be more interested in discussing rugby. If one's local team is on a winning streak, that conversation will get even more popular and more detailed. Potential authors thus need to clearly establish which specific (preferably important and current) conversation *in their target journal* they wish to join and extend. Although an overview of current areas of interest may be found by reading a journal's "aims" on a publisher's website or the editorials in that journal, more specific details on conversations will be revealed only by reading multiple articles in that journal. For example, the *Australasian Marketing Journal* declares it is interested in receiving articles that "enrich and contribute to the advancement of the discipline and the practice of marketing" (Elsevier, 2019). But a close examination of recent issues of this journal will reveal the journal also publishes work related to transformative consumer research (e.g. Fifita et al., 2015) as well as specific topics of interest to multiple disciplines. Examples of these are digital marketing (de Ruyter et al., 2018) and customer engagement (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019). To extend the sports analogy, some consumers might be more interested in discussing team composition while others may be interested in discussing the mistakes of various umpires. New arrivals at a party may listen to existing conversations and figure out how to join them and what added value they could bring, before they speak up. Similarly, you have to get familiar with the relevant work in your target journal to understand how best to fit in with, and extend that work so that your audience will be interested in listening to what you have to say.

2.2. The need to position theoretically

Researchers working to provide marketing practitioners with clear, practical guidelines often do a good job of explaining why those practical guidelines are needed. For example, to guide public policy makers considering adopting plain packaging legislation, Moody et al. (2018) first explained what plain packaging is and the history of how it was introduced, before explaining the need for potential adopters of plain packaging to learn from prior adopters' experiences. They then carefully reviewed the practices, underlying motivations and outcomes of plain packaging in five countries, before making clear recommendations for future adopters of plain packaging.

In contrast to researchers seeking to make contributions to marketing practice, researchers seeking to make theoretical contributions often find it harder to explain the nature and importance of their intended contribution(s). This is why this paper focuses on how to position research theoretically. A theoretical contribution could be viewed as a new or improved coherent explanation of an existing or known result (Deighton 2005). To make a theoretical contribution, a paper must clearly add, embellish or create something beyond existing theory (Ladik and Stewart, 2008). Insufficient theoretical contribution is a key factor for rejecting manuscripts by leading journals, irrespective of research paradigm, methodological choices or discipline. For instance, insufficient theoretical contribution has been cited as one of the main factors for rejecting papers as diverse as interpretive consumer research (Figueiredo et al., 2017) and experimental design studies in information systems (Agerfalk, 2014).

Just describing something new does not lead to making a theoretical contribution. Whetten (1989) advises that merely showing that an old model applied to a new context works as expected, is insufficient for publication. Simply situating your examination of a known phenomenon in a cultural or product context because 'it has never been studied before' is not generally sufficient for publication in reputable journals. This is because research that only summarises a particular phenomenon or context in detail is often viewed as merely descriptive rather than theoretically insightful. Consequently, Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) caution researchers to go beyond mere "gap-spotting" (e.g. identifying phenomena or contexts that have either been overlooked or which have generated inconclusive findings). Instead they suggest that researchers construct research questions that pose theoretical problems that require resolving.

New researchers who are studying a phenomenon, context or problem that has 'never been studied before' may believe that since no clear stream of prior literature exists, they do not need to review any prior work. However, this is incorrect. Instead, researchers must identify and review relevant theories that have been examined with respect to other phenomena and/or contexts and determine how these could be used (and even adapted) to inform and extend their research. This is a strategy that is likely to uncover opportunities for making theoretical contributions. For example, Mahardika et al. (2018) found no literature on Indonesians' unexpected responses to terrorist events. So, they utilized terror management theory to extend research on extraordinary consumption experiences to explain this phenomenon. The need to position is also relevant to more practical marketing research. It is possible that voluntary or required changes in marketing practices can motivate the need for, and/or justify the importance of a particular research study. Similarly, changes in the marketing environment could require that traditional approaches to marketing practice be updated. For example, when single-use plastic bags were removed from supermarkets in New Zealand, supermarkets had to find, explain and market alternatives to their customers. The researcher could position their applied research by first describing what prior research had found about consumers' reactions to restrictions on plastic bag availability (e.g. Little et al., 2019) and then explaining why and how this new legislation poses new practical problems for marketing practitioners that the researcher's study is aimed at solving.

Some researchers who practice traditional grounded theory may also believe they do not need to review the literature. They use the fact that grounded theory involves the induction of theory from data collected (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to rationalize not needing to read prior research, much less having to critically analyze prior work so they can then explain how their work fits in with, and extends it. However, as Russell Belk once said, "an open mind is not an empty mind" (Belk, 2001). Not knowing what has been done before prevents one from questioning what has been done before – and it is questioning assumptions that underlie the existing literature that can generate new theory (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

For example, the desired self was defined by Joseph Sirgy as "how a person would like to perceive themselves" (Sirgy, 1982). This definition does NOT temporally constrain desired self to a future self (i.e. a desired self could also be a self experienced in the present or the past). But a careful review of subsequent empirical research related to desired self reveals that this work has implicitly

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Table 1
Further reading: useful advice from editors.

	Explaining the nature of theoretical contributions	Explaining the need for theoretical contributions	Finding/making/clarifying contributions	Positioning
Agerfalk (2014)		√		
Arnould (2006)			√	√
Corley and De (2011)	√			
Dahl et al. (2014)				√
Deighton (2005)	√	√		
Deighton (2007)			√	
Figueiredo et al. (2017)			√	√
Fischer et al. (2017)		√	√	
Gregor and Hevner (2013)				√
Ladik and Stewart	√			
Pinson (2008)		√		
Whetten (1989)	√			

assumed that a desired self is a future, aspirational self. For example, Schouten's (1991) exposition of self transformations via plastic surgery defines desired self is a hypothetical self (i.e. a self not experienced) even though his own data refers to the case of Kate, whose aim in undergoing surgery is to regain the larger breasts she experienced while pregnant (i.e. a an actual past self rather than a future hypothetical self). Questioning the assumption that desired self is temporally constrained to the future provides opportunities to make theoretical contributions e.g. by comparing experienced desired selves vs. hypothetical desired selves.

Recently, Caleb Warren and Gina Mohr commented on their article on Ironic Consumption in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (Warren and Mohr, 2019). They explained how, after becoming interested in ironic consumption (using a product to reverse its traditional meaning), they "attempted to answer all of the whats, hows, whos, whens, and whys related to this curious phenomenon. Fortunately, a stellar review team helped us focus on two questions: when do observers think that a consumer is using a product ironically, and how do they evaluate the consumer who behaves ironically?" (Oxford University Press, 2019). To be published in this leading journal, they had to move from describing a phenomenon to asking theoretical questions that would provide a theoretical contribution.

Having established the importance of positioning one's research as making theoretical contributions, I turn next to explain how that can be accomplished.

3. The prove model for positioning

Drawing on my own experience as an Associate Editor, a reviewer and an author as well as the relevant literature (particularly Arnould's 2006 paper and the articles by editors of leading journals listed in Table 1), I will explain how positioning can be accomplished using the five-step PROVE model depicted in Fig. 1.

Suppose a researcher decided to study how families utilize and share the private and public places in their homes. They might try to justify their research by explaining the importance of the housing industry to the national economy. They might also document and explain how rising housing costs and/or urban crowding requires that more people share smaller homes. They could even then point out the growth of the sharing economy and its great relevance to contemporary marketing. This type of positioning in manuscripts is quite commonly used, but it is not effective in explaining what this research will contribute theoretically, and why that theoretical contribution is important. As I shall demonstrate, the PROVE model provides a more compelling way to explain how this research fits into and extends the relevant prior research.

Throughout my discussion of the PROVE model, I will refer to Fig. 2, which depicts the annotated example I created to illustrate the PROVE model in action. As the example demonstrates, Arnould's (2006) assertion that a paper can be introduced in 3 or 4 sentences is indeed correct. In the example, the paper is introduced, along with a clear communication of its theoretical positioning and contribution in fewer than 250 words.

3.1. Step 1 – provide the foundation

The first step i.e. PROVIDE involves providing the basis for your work in order to prepare the reader to understand which research conversation your research is going to contribute to. As Arnould (2006) explains, this is accomplished by briefly indicating which research area(s) your research is situated within, identifying the key article(s) (preferably in your target journal) most relevant to your proposed contribution and defining the key concept(s) you will be working with. In the annotated example, the author wants to set the stage for articulating a proposed contribution on how consumers negotiate control over shared possessions they are attached to. So s/he first situates her research within the broader

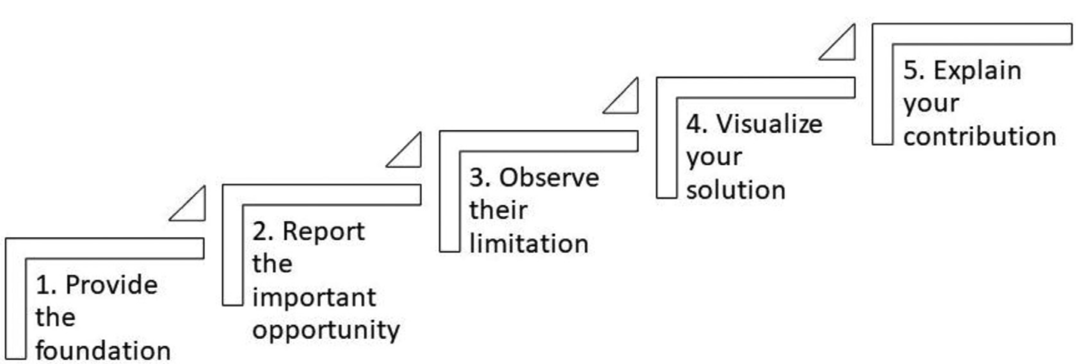

Fig. 1. The PROVE positioning model.

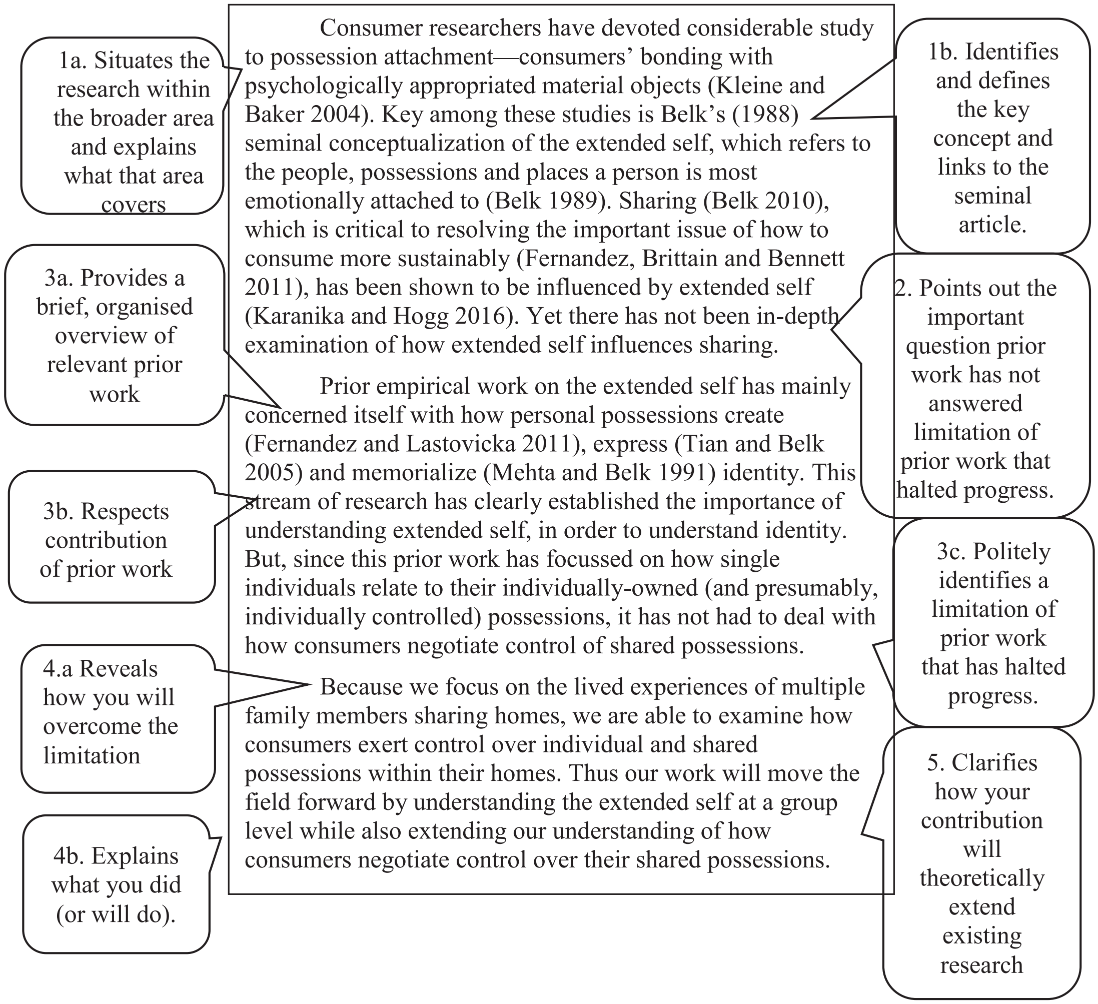

Fig. 2. An annotated illustration of the PROVE positioning model (Fernandez et al., 2011; Karanika and Hogg, 2016; Kleine and Baker, 2004; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Tian and Belk, 2005; Belk, 1988; Belk, 1989; Belk, 2010).

area of possession attachment (which s/he briefly describes) and then identifies and defines his/her key concept of extended self. S/he does this in a way that gives credit to the author of the concept, and links to that author's seminal or original paper on the concept. Thus these two opening sentences which together comprise only 50 words, clearly indicate that the author wants to join the conversation on consumers' relationships with the possessions they are most attached to.

3.2. Step 2 – report the important opportunity

The second step, REPORT, requires describing a research opportunity you have identified in that research area, probably by doing a critical review of that literature (Fernandez, 2019) to uncover the important questions that prior research has not yet answered. This does not involve presenting a full summary of what has been done in all the possible relevant ideas but instead, requires the building of a careful argument about how the present work is needed to extend prior work. As Figueiredo et al. (2017) explain, the gap is not found but instead, has to be constructed. To do this, you have to note that the literature as a whole has not answered that question and/or that one or two key articles have not answered that question in a way that establishes that this missing bit of knowledge is *important*. Early attempts to publish qualitative work often erred by using the economic relevance of the phenomenon being examined to justify the need for the study. For example, my colleague and I conducted ethnographic work at garage sales because we intuited that looking at what people disposed of would shed light on their undesired self. Yet, the opening paragraph of our first submission to the *Journal of Consumer Research* declared "Garage sales are as American as apple pie…" and noted that the 9 million garage sales held annually contributed $19 million to the economy. With the help of the reviewers and the editor throughout the review process, the accepted manuscript opened with "Our research examines consumers selling their meaningful personal possessions to strangers outside their interpersonal networks." As Table 2 documents, the changes in the title of various

Table 2
The title tells the story: moving from contextual to theoretical contributions.

Version	
Initial submission	Buyers as sellers: understanding disposition at garage sales
First revision	Who can buy my memories? Understanding what and how consumers dispossess at garage sales and on-line auctions with the dynamic and shared selves
Second revision	Who can buy my memories? Understanding the disposition of meaningful possessions to strangers
Accepted paper[a]	Three paths to disposition: The movement of meaningful possessions to strangers

[a] Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005).

versions of the manuscript depict how our emphasis changed from describing a context to explaining processes.

During the time our paper was in review process, Price et al. (2000) published their empirical examination of how older people passed on special possessions to family and friends. After reading it with great interest (and some initial panic!), we engaged in deep reflection of how our work differed from theirs, which eventually resulted in our recognition that their work focused on the disposal of meaningful possessions within interpersonal networks, while our work provided insights into the disposal of meaningful possessions *outside* interpersonal networks i.e. to strangers.

Eric Arnould suggests that authors establish the importance of the opportunity they identified by explaining how not addressing this opportunity has prevented "the next steps in the field from being taken" (Arnould, 2006, p.21). This statement helps establish the importance of your research objective. In Fig. 2, we can see that the author links sharing to consuming more sustainably, a concern of increasing importance in many nations. This justifies the importance of her identified opportunity of needing to better understand how extended self influences sharing.

3.3. Step 3 – observe their limitation

The obvious question a reader might then ask is, "if that research opportunity you just pointed out is so important and interesting, why has it not been addressed before?" That is why the third step, OBSERVE, requires you to identify why prior research did not, could not, or did not have to address that opportunity. For example, it may be that prior work looked at how people curate their personal collections of photographs in albums. But given the spread of smartphones, there may be new questions that the prior research in the pre-digital age did not have to answer – such as how do people decide what to share online and what to keep offline. Generally, one may make these observations in relation to a body of work, after conducting a critical literature review of that work.

If a specific paper is key to your work, it may be appropriate to explain what limitation prevented that paper from addressing the opportunity you identified. However, when critiquing a single paper, I would caution authors to avoid being disrespectful of that paper. That prior work's publication is evidence of its authors' efforts. More practically, one of its authors may very well be invited to review your submission or examine your thesis. This is not to say that one should be dishonest, rather that one should be diplomatic in acknowledging the strengths and contributions of prior work and then explaining how it may be extended or built upon to answer new questions and make new contributions. For example, you might make statements noting that even though prior work was useful or contributed in some specific way(s), it also was limited in another way (e.g. it was based only in Western cultures, or purely conceptual, or exploratory, or requires updating because of an important change) and so did/could not or did not have to answer the important question you identified earlier).

In the example, the author first takes the time to provide a brief, organised summary of a number of papers on the key concept, before acknowledging that this work has made a contribution by clearly establishing the importance of the concept. The next sentence neutrally observes the limitation i.e. that empirical work in those papers dealt with individual, rather than shared possessions. This makes the reason that prior work did not uncover ("*has not had to deal with*") how people share control over mutual possessions quite clear to the reader in a way that does not belittle the earlier authors. Given the importance of this aspect of justifying why your work offers something new that is worth publishing I also urge researchers to dig deeply into the work being reviewed, to uncover nuanced limitations rather than simply making generic statements.

Consider the increasingly common situation where prospective authors have conducted consumer research in an Asian or Latin American country. Such researchers often make the claim that their work is needed because prior work is limited because it was conducted only within the "Western" cultural contexts of North America and Europe. For example, suppose the authors wish to conduct and publish research examining possession attachment utilizing a sample of Hindu Indian sitar players because one of the authors is a Hindu sitar player in his or her spare time. A novice researcher might then proceed to review everything that has been written about sitar players, when what is really needed is a critical review of the prior work on possession attachment. Such an analysis of the relevant prior work on possession attachment might reveal that most of it was indeed rooted in Anglophile (English-speaking) contexts. However, a really in-depth review of that work might also reveal that one of the papers looking at possession attachment utilizing a relatively similar empirical context of musical instruments (i.e. Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011) actually included a significant minority of Indian consumers in their sample of guitar players – but did not take the opportunity to make a cross-cultural comparison between the Indian vs. the Anglo consumers. This is a relevant limitation that additionally reveals that the "sitar study" researchers engaged in a deep, critical reading of that prior work. However, even this nuanced limitation is not sufficient. To be compelling, this idea needs to be developed further to explain why this limitation is a problem with respect to the current theoretical research question. For example, the authors could note that an Indian extended self might differ from a Anglophile one due to the pervasive role of religion in India, which is quite different from the separation of church and state found in Anglophile countries (Venkatesh, 1995). This would help the researchers identify and communicate why a study situated within the sitar player context might reveal nuances in possession attachment that prior work in Anglophile contexts could not.

3.4. Step 4 – visualize your solution

The fourth step, VISUALIZE, requires helping readers understand how the authors propose to or did overcome the limitations in prior work that they believe prevented prior research from addressing the current opportunity. This is not as difficult as it may seem, because the earlier step of identifying why prior work was unable to solve the problem has already laid the groundwork for this step. In the example, the author points out that by understanding how groups of family members share homes containing both individual and shared possessions, they will avoid the limitation caused by only examining the case of individuals with individual possessions. When in the research proposal or planning stage, authors should also consider if they could take advantage of any opportunities they have, to do something prior work could not do – i.e. what unique people /knowledge /industries /methodologies do you, your co-authors or your supervisors have access to? It is possible that considering and utilizing these unique advantages could reveal important questions that prior work could not answer. This is likely what Stephen Toulmin meant when he urged researchers to be "… on the lookout for events which are not yet quite intelligible, but which could probably be mastered as a result of some intellectual step which he has the power to take." (Toulmin, 1965, p.110)

3.5. Step 5 – explain your contribution

In the fifth and final step, EXPLAIN, the authors must clearly state the contribution(s) that the rest of their paper will make. In

Table 3
Evidence of the PROVE steps in East et al. (2017).

Step	Corresponding excerpts from East et al. (2017)
1. Provide the foundation	"This paper is concerned with the spread of positive word (PWOM) about brands, an important topic because …Brand users, who have heard their brand recommended, offer nearly twice as much PWOM as users who have not heard it recommended" (p.20)
2. Report the important opportunity	"An early review of diffusion processes noted little progress in this field and called for new insights…into how consumers transit influence" (p.21).
3. Observe their limitation	"There are problems with this [dominant two-step flow] model [of social influence]" (p.20).
4. Visualize your solution	"To address these problems, we propose social amplification as an additional transmission mechanism" (p.20)
5. Explain your contribution	"We propose [the social amplification] mechanism… and support this account with evidence" (p.20)

the illustrative example in Fig. 2, the author does not state their contribution will "describe how people share possessions." Instead she elevates this to a theoretical contribution by linking back to the opportunity identified earlier i.e. "thus our work will move the field forward by understanding the extended self at a group level while also extending our understanding of how consumers negotiate control over their shared possessions."

I have discussed the five steps sequentially for ease of exposition, but in reality the positioning process resembles the publication process in being messy and iterative (Polonsky et al., 1998), rather than tidy and sequential. For example, researchers might already have conducted their empirical work and thus have to find an opportunity and limitation in prior work which their current empirical data can address, rather than design their data collection to address a pre-determined opportunity. As an illustration, suppose some researchers have conducted a longitudinal study on sharing cars. They might then double check that prior relevant work on their topic (of access-based consumption) was not longitudinal, and then promise in their paper, that they will contribute by answering a process-related question (e.g. how consumers grow accustomed to sharing transportation devices) that the prior work could not, because it was not longitudinal. But if they discover later (before successful publication) that a longitudinal study on access-based consumption has recently been published, they would have to go back to the drawing board to decide if their present positioning is still viable or if a new one must be crafted.

Taken together, the five steps of the PROVE model will help researchers discover and communicate more specifically (1) what has already been done, (2) what remains to be done, (3) what has limited prior research from doing what remains to be done, and (4) how the proposed or current research will overcome the limitations of prior work to contribute something important and interesting to what has been done. As Fig. 2 demonstrates, once you are absolutely clear on your position, you can communicate it in relatively few words (the example uses 244 words and less than 1 double-spaced page to do this).

Many experienced authors already intuitively use these steps throughout their manuscript, even if it is not done exactly in the step-by-step fashion suggested by the PROVE model. For example, Table 3 conveys how East et al. (2017) in an earlier issue of this journal included various statements that are consistent with the five different PROVE steps outlined earlier.

4. Practical tips for positioning

Packaging can add significant value to the product, as perfume marketers know! Similarly, there are some simple devices that assist with effective positioning of research. These practical tips have been grouped into three categories according to their purpose: uncovering theoretical contributions, highlighting theory and backgrounding context, and identifying the best possible article-journal "fit".

4.1. Uncovering theoretical contributions

New researchers often ask how they can find opportunities to make theoretical contributions. As a doctoral student, I was given the useful advice to identify mixed findings or questions where either answer would be interesting. For example, it might be interesting to know how income influences sustainable consumer behavior, even if the answer is that the relationship is positive or negative (or even more interestingly if it is u-shaped). John Deighton, who edited the *Journal of Consumer Research* for eight years, advised researchers to "focus on a phenomenon/event whose cause is in question, or which is 'interestingly' unexpected (interesting not just because we neglected or simply failed to predict it, but because prior expectations made the event unexpected" (Deighton, 2007, p.4). Researchers who want to achieve the goal of making theoretical contributions must remember that they need to go beyond *describing* phenomena (i.e. explaining what concepts/variables comprise, and how those concepts/variables are related to one another) to *explaining* phenomena (i.e. using the underlying psychological, economic and/or socio-cultural dynamics to explain why these relationships occur (Whetten, 1989). To do so, researchers must read widely, deeply and above all, critically, to familiarize themselves with relevant theory to help themselves recognize potential opportunities to make theoretical contributions. As Louis Pasteur famously declared, "chance favors only the prepared mind (Pasteur, 1854).

4.2. Foregrounding theory

The second category of practical tips can usefully help authors remind themselves that their work should be positioned as making theoretical contributions as well as communicate this critical distinction to readers of their work. The goal here is to foreground theory and background context. As a start, the title and abstract of the article should include the theoretical concept of interest. Similarly, the overall research objective and the resultant specific research questions should also focus on asking theoretical questions rather than descriptive ones. Thus these questions should go beyond asking descriptive questions (What do people do? How do they do it?) to asking "why" questions (Fischer et al., 2017). The literature review should review work relevant to the key theoretical concepts, not the research context. Calling this section "conceptual foundations" or "theoretical background" will remind the authors of this important distinction. Not only that, the literature review should highlight important questions that have not yet been asked and/or answered by prior work, to set the stage for the subsequent empirical work. If an empirical context is unusual or unique, or otherwise critical to the research, then I recommend that authors start their methodology section with a description of the research context, before proceeding to describe the research methods. This simple strategy will help communicate that the authors understand the distinction between theory and context.

4.3. Identifying the right article-journal "fit"

The third category of practical tips can help authors choose the right journal for their work. Finding the right "article-journal" fit is essential for smoothing the journey to publication. Many researchers view this as simply finding the journal of the highest possible reputation that will publish their work. This is why if they

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are rejected, they may simply send their paper to a journal with a lower rejection rate (Polonsky et al. 1998). However, my own experience includes having work rejected by a higher-tier journal only to have it almost immediately conditionally accepted by a special issue in a mid-tier journal, *and* having work soundly rejected by a relatively unknown journal only to have the same paper relatively easily accepted by a highly respected one. Thus, I surmise that a good article-journal fit is critical to acceptance. I would add that when re-directing a rejected paper elsewhere, it is also important to review the fit of the proposed contribution to the new journal. Additionally, the paper would have to be re-positioned for the target journal, rather than just being re-submitted “as is”.

Obviously, new researchers should, if possible, consult more experienced researchers such as their current or former supervisors, research mentors and professors for advice. However, your existing key references can also suggest where your paper “fits” best. Once again, this is an iterative process – if a reference from Journal X suggests that Journal X might be a good fit, the researchers should then search Journal X’s existing article database to determine what other authors in that journal may have engaged in similar conversations. If the authors are fortunate, one or more of those additional articles may help shape the position and contribution of the new submission. Editorials and journal mission statements can also suggest possible target journals. However, I would caution novice authors against blindly submitting articles to journals with mission statements that state they welcome all kinds of work. Do take a close look at the articles that have been published online (sometimes referred to as “ahead of print”) and in the past year’s issues, as well as the publications of the members of the editorial team. A journal that has published one or more articles with a similar theoretical focus and/or methodological approach to yours, and who has associate editors and/or editorial review board members who share your theoretical and/or methodological interests, is more likely welcome your work, and to have the expertise to help you revise it to publication.

An exception to this rule is the special issue. Special issues are usually announced to encourage work on a topic that a journal would like to welcome to its pages. A special issue that relates to your topic is an ideal target, because the journal is already signaling they believe that topic is important, and they welcome work on that topic, whether or not they have relevant work already in their journal. However, you should still carefully read the call for papers for the special issue, taking special note of the special issue editors’ research (they were, after all, probably selected to guest-edit the special issue because they had pre-existing expertise on the topic of interest), and any papers or researchers mentioned in the special issue call for papers.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The reason it is often so difficult to write the introduction to a paper, thesis or dissertation is that the author(s) may not yet be clear as to how their work contributes. Newer researchers usually focus on finding gaps but then find it difficult to explain how filling one or more of those gaps creates a contribution to their discipline. Consequently, this paper has shown how positioning can help identify and then communicate how a paper contributes. The five-step PROVE model provided a step by step approach that can be used to frame the contribution of a thesis or individual article with respect to the relevant literature. Given the need to make theoretical contributions in order to get published in reputable journals, this paper also provided some practical tips that could assist in communicating that the authors understand the difference between theoretical contributions and describing context or phenomena.

There is an additional benefit of the five-step PROVE positioning model. Before a manuscript is prepared for submission, the model can help the authors ascertain and clarify what contributions they can promise and deliver. Even if researchers are fortunate enough to start their work with a general idea of how they believe their paper contributes, the outcome of successful positioning is to make that contribution more specific and even more compelling to their target audience. The resultant compelling contribution can serve as a unifying theme that ties all the parts of your paper together (Thomson, 2018). Finally, and most importantly, positioning your work as contributing to key ongoing conversations in your target journals will result in a paper that is viewed as having good article-journal fit – this is critical since a perceived poor fit with the journal is a common cause of an article being desk-rejected. Positioning is a skill that may take some time to develop, but is worth mastering because it is invaluable in increasing the probability of successful publication of your work. I hope that my efforts to demystify the process of positioning helps new researchers clarify the contributions *their* work offers the field of marketing.

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