

Chapter 2

Beyond the Business Model Canvas Universe: A Critical Exploration of the BMC Language

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ABSTRACT

The business model canvas (BMC) has become the leading way to visualize business models and an omnipresent global language in management practice and education. This chapter draws on critical entrepreneurship research and applies semiotics to conduct an analysis of the BMC language and to explore what entrepreneurship narratives unfold in the BMC. The analysis shows that the BMC language (re)emphasizes an established view of business models with an underlying planning perspective and an individualistic understanding of the (male) entrepreneur in a traditional business context. In addition, the BMC language stresses a non-critical, bright side of entrepreneurship where value is transmitted from entrepreneurs to waiting customers. The suggested semiotic method and the presented analysis of the BMC can be used by managers and educators to reflect on what the BMC universe offers in terms of, for example, disruptive and digital perspectives, and thus the consequences for logics in new business models.

INTRODUCTION

The business model canvas (BMC) (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) (see Figure 1) has become the leading way to visualize business models (Täuscher & Abdelkafi, 2017), both in managerial practice and in education (O'Neill, 2015). Fritscher and Pigneur (2015, p. 88) state that since the book *Business Model Generation* was published in 2010, “teaching of the BMC has been adopted by managerial and entre-

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preneurship courses in over 250 universities” and “the book itself has been translated into 29 languages and sold over 1,000,000 copies.” Due to its prevalence, this visual representation has formed the basis for an omnipresent global language (Huang-Saad et al., 2016) on business modelling. To become a global phenomenon is also the intention behind the BMC, as the authors argue that they offer a “simple, relevant, and intuitively language” (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010, p. 15).

This chapter problematizes the BMC language in light of how the model is considered a one-size-fits-all perspective in business modelling. This is done by adopting a critical entrepreneurship approach to explore how the language used in the widely adopted BMC corresponds to the characteristics of, for example, digital and disruptive business models. More specifically, the chapter examines the alphabetical and pictorial writing that forms the BMC language used to develop business models in managerial practice and educational settings all around the globe. Overall, the chapter discusses how the BMC model frames in what ways users can think and talk about new business models. Hereby, the chapter opens the BMC as more than a functional tool and addresses that the act of creating new business models also consists of directing the implications of norms, rules, and objective conditions that become part of constructing a social reality of entrepreneurial action (Higgins & Elliot, 2011). Therefore, it is important to investigate shared meanings (Higgins & Mirza, 2010) because they steer the questions we ask about entrepreneurship (Blenker et al., 2011) and inform about which values are imposed in business modelling. The present chapter proposes that the language used for business modelling has wider consequences for how we socialize people to business and organizations and for the logics with which students are addressed in for instance business and management education. Business model knowledge therefore has implications for both managerial practice and education.

The chapter can be understood as a reflective contribution that feeds managers’, consultants’, and students’ consciousness about the implicit values inherent in the BMC language and how such values might affect thinking and acting in relation to business modelling in the sense that it contributes to the development or limiting of new business models. It is well known that the language used (intentionally or unintentionally) affects the way we think and act (Gartner, 1993; Ribi re, 2008), and from a constructivist point of view language helps to naturalize specific narratives. In order to recognize narratives in the BMC model and discuss how the meanings that unfold from these narratives might affect the omnipresent understanding of what a business model is, a semiotic step-by-step method is presented as a tool to deconstruct the symbolic system that constitutes the BMC. The results of the analysis are then discussed from a critical entrepreneurship stance. Thus, the work contributes to business model research with a critical analysis of the BMC. The question in focus is: *Which business modelling logics can be interpreted from the BMC language based on narrative patterns in the model?*

The chapter is written in a qualitative tradition and, in line with pragmatic constructivism, the chapter opens towards new questions (James, 1907) that can be new concepts various actors in practice can reflect on, use, and develop further (N rreklit, 2013).

Below is a brief review of studies discussing the BMC’s pros and cons in relation to its usefulness in business development. This is followed by a presentation of contemporary critical entrepreneurship research and an introduction to the semiotic approach and the step-by-step method used to analyze the BMC model. Subsequently, the analysis is presented and, based on the analysis, solutions and recommendations are suggested together with further research directions. Finally, the conclusion is given.

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