

Chapter 1

Developments in Studies on the Relationship between Firm and Consumer: A Structurationist View

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to present a conceptual framework that can be useful to both practitioners and scholars to study social relations and interactions between company/brand and consumer, and how such a dynamic can affect—and be affected by—the reference context/network. This approach, based on the Structuration and the Viable Systems theories, can give us indications useful to researchers and practitioners alike. From an academic point of view, the approach proposed helps to overcome both the current epistemological debate, that has mainly affected social theory, regarding atomism versus holism, and the limits of most marketing models and empirical studies (network approach) focusing on the study of relations among players at the same level of analysis. Following a more operative perspective, however, it provides practitioners with a useful tool to intercept and profile individuals/potential consumers, using contextual analysis. The chapter contributes to the latest and most popular developments in marketing and consumer behaviour science, such as the S-D logic and the network approach. The methodological and interdisciplinary effort is aimed at presenting a conceptual framework that develops according to a three-step pattern and is based not only on the above-mentioned studies, but also on the Structuration Theory and the Viable Systems Approach. The objective of the work is to represent different levels of relationship—micro and macro—that a social player establishes with other actors and with reference suprasystems, this way providing and receiving influences in terms of both mental patterns and social practices.

The representation of such trends leads to the definition of isomorphism, affected by the conditions (either adaptive, coercive, or normative) on which the relationship between the company/brand and the individual is based.

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The framework is the result of the structurationist perspective that allows one to highlight, as more authoritative scholars have already done, the subjectivity of market vision and therefore the limits of a strategic analysis based on segmentation, targeting, and positioning, and the incompleteness of the market system, now seen as a context of co-creation of meaning and value rather than a mere economic exchange. The use of multilevel analysis techniques is therefore needed in order to define appropriate competitive strategies and operational tactics, as it is paramount for both researchers and practitioners to know what variables (economic, social, anthropological, etc.) affect the behaviour of individuals during the selection and/or purchase process.

The framework proposed provides both practitioners and researchers with a more structured model describing the dynamic existing between companies/brands and individuals/consumers and its effect on the players involved and on their reference contexts. According to such an approach, the company needs to lay down contextual behaviour plans that will allow communicating with the individual on the basis of an adequate knowledge of both his/her profile and the contextual influences affecting his/her behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to provide scholars and practitioners with a conceptual framework that can help analyzing the economic and social dynamic involving businesses and consumers.

The formulation of the framework will take into account not only the relations existing among the players considered and the development in learning processes and social practices caused by such relations, but also the influences that the players produce towards, and receive from, their reference contexts (Webster, 1982; Olkkonen, et al., 2000).

We think that such conceptual effort constitutes a different interpretation of the co-creator relations already modelled by other theoretical approaches like the S-D logic, the SCM or the Network Approach. Those theories, while considering the relationship between actors aimed at value co-creation, represent the actors themselves as nodes in a network, all displayed in a position of similarity characterized by structural equivalence (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983).

Those models tend therefore to describe the type of relation, either strong or weak, linking the

players, and represent such dynamic at the same level of analysis (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010). Furthermore, scholars like Anderson et al. (2008), Araujo et al. (2008), and Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) have developed suggestions that markets are co-created (performed) as actors engage in market and/or social practices (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2008).

Such studies are therefore milestones in marketing and management research when it comes to the evolution of the object of exchange. They argue in fact that it is no longer a mere product/function/service, but rather the opportunity for social players to establish links and relations aimed at the mutual co-creation of the value they are after (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000; Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994; Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Grier & Deshpandé, 2001).

These considerations confirm the thesis stated by most industrial economists and in particular by Geroski who, defining markets and their boundaries, argues that

... A market exists whenever someone can dream up a set of needs that can be profitably served through production and trade, and that means that

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