Chapter 9
Consonant, Resonant, and Social Relations between Firm and Consumer

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to propose a conceptual framework, based on an interdisciplinary approach, which integrates the Viable Systems Perspective, Institutional and neo-Institutional Theory and Structuration Theory with the Consumer Behaviour Theory. The reason for this is to show the relational dynamics between the firm-brand and the individual-consumer, and between these and the direct-indirect stakeholder.

The chapter is based on the reflection that the consumption system can be thought of as having two levels. The first is a micro-level, where the consumption system is characterized by the momentum of the creation and maintenance of consonant relationships between the firm-brand and the individual-consumer in order to achieve mutual systemic viability.

The second is a macro-level, characterized by the concept that relationships between firm-brand and individual-consumer influence both direct and indirect stakeholders. Within these relationships, according to Stakeholder Theory, it is therefore very important to consider the reciprocal influences the indirect stakeholder has on and receives from the relationships. The results of these relationships affirm the legitimate conditions on which sustainability requirements (economic, social and environmental) are based. For these reasons the proposed conceptual framework will analyze the firm-brand three-dimensional social role when it is engaged to create and/or maintain and/or guarantee a long term enduring relationship.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will follow a methodological approach, developed by the application of theories from different disciplines, by analogy. This contributes to the evolution of studies on consumer behaviour that encourage practitioners and researchers with respect to their strategies, and to studies on behaviour in marketing and communications with the firm-brand.

Such methodological research effort is dictated by the need to represent consumerism as the result

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5880-6.ch009
of interactive dynamics (social practices) undertaken by social actors (individual and corporate-brand-consumer).

The evolution of the “consumer” phenomenon is represented by relational dynamics, which are based not only on spontaneous interactive relationships, as represented by the more established fields of study, but, increasingly, are influenced by rules and regulations that tend to legitimate or define dominant positions both on the part of the company-brand and by individuals-consumers.

This assumption allows the work to focus on the concept of respect for rules and regulations that permits social actors, business and/or individual, to share values, cultures, rules and standards, in order to make the relationship socially legitimate and thus enduring and essential for mutual survival.

In the present work, the assumption of long-term relationships as legitimized by their relevant contexts, (i.e. responding to social and economic rules and regulations) is used as the basis for an analysis of the macro type of consumerism.

In fact, these long-lasting and legitimate relationships are substantiated in the concept of sustainability, increasingly heard of in academia and civil society. This is no longer understood as a target condition for the enterprise, but as an expression of social actors’ culture and values with continuous and mutual influence. So, it is understood not only as an expression of sustainable production but also of sustainable consumption (Dolan, 2002)

The path presented is therefore useful for the purposes of this paper, inasmuch as it highlights, from a micro point of view, the social dynamics accomplished due to the relationship between firm-brand and individual-consumer and, from a macro point of view, how these relationships influence and are influenced by contexts.

This representation reveals, from the point of view of the company-brand, the increasing demands on management to identify relevant contexts (individuals-consumers, social community, environment, et al.) and to create and manage relationships and influences with them, in order to survive over time with respect to economic, social and environmental dimensions.

**BACKGROUND**

It is increasingly necessary, in studies of marketing and management as well as those relative to consumerism and consumer behaviour, to consider the influences that relational dynamics between the company and the individual provide and receive from their respective reference contexts.

To achieve this objective we will use, by analogy, the principle of *isomorphism* and Giddens’ *Theory of Structuration*. Thanks to these we can represent the differing levels of relationships between social actors, company-brand and individual-consumer, and between these and their reference contexts.

In fact, *isomorphism* is the phenomenon expressed by the aforementioned relational dynamics, i.e. the group of processes resulting from which individuals and social organizations, also affected by institutional rules and norms, tend to express strategies, tactics and behaviours similar to each other.

The phenomenon of isomorphism, in this present work, is depicted by the conditions (adaptive, coercive and normative) necessary for creating and maintaining relationships between the company-brand and individual-consumer, and between these and their reference contexts.

As we shall see, this trend represents the reasons behind the subjectivity of market vision and demonstrates the limits of strategic analysis of segmentation, targeting and positioning, as well as the incompleteness of the market system. These factors become an expression of the co-creation of meaning and value rather than a place in which aseptic economic transactions are carried out.
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