

Marketing as a Luhmanian System

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This study is focused on a twofold observation through Niklas Luhmann's systemic theory (1927-1998). On one side, we see marketing as a methodology/topic in the relentless process of sense and meaning construction by each system through its specific code and program (e. g. science, economics, law, religion, politics). The process of making of sense and meaning can be depicted as communication: (Marketing = Code -> System = Market System). As in Luhmann's words:

«For a theory of autopoietic systems, only communication is a serious candidate for the position of the elementary units of the basic self referential process of social systems» (Luhmann, 1990: 6)

In the *self referential* process marketing is an *allo-referential topic* framed in a self referential and autopoietic process. Therefore marketing can be seen as a mere *thematization* differently shaped by each different system composing that heterarchical constellation (Pitasi, 2011) which describes Luhmann's social system.

The first part of this study attempts to build a systemic hermeneutics of marketing focusing on the above mentioned *allo-referential* thematization in which, for example, religion might thematize marketing as that immoral discipline which tries to turn God and the Church into a mere mass consumption product, while science might be that system which thematizes marketing as an exemplary case of how consumer behavior might be analyzed in the same way as rats behavior in the Skinner 's Box.

The second part of this study tries to draw that distinction (Spencer Brown, 1999) which would allow to shape marketing as a system with its own code and program. Considering Giesler's inspirational attempt to introduce Luhmann's systemic theory in marketing (Giesler, 2003), we try to evolve a much more strategic challenge: a proposal in progress to redefine marketing epistemologically (and ontologically) as a Luhmannian system being featured by an *abstract /empirical code* (which describes the function of the systems to turn empirical, concrete,

physical things, for example a chair, into an abstract, intangible asset as, for example a brand (as already sketched out by Giesler 2003). Nevertheless, this coding function would not be viable *per se* to create systemic meaning: the program is required as the star gate which effectively shapes the meaningful borders of the system. In the marketing system case the program might be globalization meant as the relentless expansion of markets on a planetary scale as the "*Vollendung* (fulfillment) of the whole planet as a net or "*globus*" (Pitasi 2010) in which everything circulates worldwide once turned (*Kehre*) into its intangible and abstract symbol, which represents an unlimited opening to the possible (Schuermann, 1990).

The convergence of allor-eferential thematization of marketing by different systems and of self referential emerging distinctions to shape a specific marketing system can be performed, for instance, by the art system. Indeed, among the heterarchical systems theorized by Luhmann, art (Luhmann, 1990, Luhmann 2000) can be a crucial one both for the thematization of marketing and for structural couplings and interpenetrations between systems, specifically between the art and marketing ones. As a matter of fact the art system let emerge the phenomenon of *dematerialization of art*, which is increasingly evident, in fact, from objects to concepts, to symbols and to brand trends. This is a process that we can observe in Pop Art, but even more clearly with abstract expressionism and conceptual art. The above mentioned phenomenon of increasing abstraction is emerging in complex evolutionary systems of communication in multiple forms (from the real economy to finance, from human resources management to the expansion of intellectual capital formalized in trademarks, patents, licenses, copyrights, etc.) The abstraction of contemporary art reflects a complex emergent phenomenon that can be defined as *Hypercitizenship* (Pitasi 2013) in the sense that the levels of observational and operational expertise (required for a system to evolve autopoietically) are increasingly sophisticated in terms of cosmopolitanism, entrepreneurialism and social autonomy, as compared to the specifics of the art system. As for art and the above mentioned systems, we can depict the marketing system as a fully dematerialized system.

Keywords: *Marketing; Luhmann System Theory*

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