

# **Cross-fertilization and Isomorphism: The Role of Consumer Culture Theory, Institutional Theory, and Institutional Semiotics in Business Markets**

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At the 2003 IMP Conference Bernard Cova and Robert Salle called for a re-evaluation of Business to Consumer (B2C) marketing theory by IMP members, and suggested that a fruitful cross-fertilization could occur between recent advances in B2C marketing research theory and methods and prevailing IMP theory and methods (Cova and Salle 2003).

This paper proposes borrowing not only from the B2C research traditions articulated by Cova and Salle (op.cit.) but also from those informing the newly theorised Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). It also proposes a beneficial cross-fertilization from sociological and management research into Institutional Theory, and the theory-informed, methodological tool of Institutional Semiotics (Arnold, Kozinets and Thompson 2001) to suggest new approaches to firms' marketing communications

The discrete contributions that Consumer Culture Theory, Institutional Theory and Institutional Semiotics can offer the B2B marketer are presented. Consumer Culture Theory was integrated with Institutional Theory to provide a new theoretical perspective on the firm's marketing communications. As described by Institutional Theory the benefits of isomorphism between the firm and its stakeholders are shown, and the methodological deployment of Institutional Semiotics is suggested as a means of analysing the firm's marketing communications for environmental isomorphism and to create constituent legitimacy. The paper further illustrates the cross-fertilizing play between theory and method whereby theoretical conceptions of the consumer (Consumer Culture Theory) and firm (Institutional Theory) facilitate an isomorphic methodology (Institutional Semiotics). Finally, our discussion provides the firm's managers with an understanding of the benefits that environmentally isomorphic actions can bring in achieving constituent legitimation through its variant marketing actions.

**Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Institutional Theory, Isomorphism, Institutional Semiotics**

## Introduction

At the 2003 IMP Conference Bernard Cova and Robert Salle called for a re-evaluation of Business to Consumer (B2C) marketing theory by IMP members, and suggested that a fruitful cross-fertilization could occur between recent advances in B2C marketing research theory and methods and prevailing IMP theory and methods (Cova and Salle 2003).

They noted that one such B2C advance considers that experiential (as opposed to functional) consumption is now a central construct in consumers' lives (Firat and Dholakia 1998). This type of consumption has been the result of the growth of services where the good that is purchased is an experienced service encounter. Cova and Salle (p. 6) chart how this active consumption experience has led to an experiential approach to marketing which recognises "the roles of emotions in behavior; the fact that consumers are feelers as well as thinkers and doers; the significance of symbolism in consumption; ... the roles of consumers, beyond the act of purchase, in product usage as well as brand choice, and so forth" (Addis and Holbrook 2001, p. 50).

They further note work done on the codification of consumption experience (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2002), and focus attention on research into the micro-social level of experience which illustrates the interaction between consumers (Bagozzi 2000; Cova and Cova 2002; Desjeux 1996; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Sherry 1995). Such research has frequently deployed qualitative methods such as interpretive research, phenomenological interviews, ethnographic research, discourse analysis and semiotics<sup>1</sup>. It has been suggested that these methods may generally be contradistinctive to the "distinct pattern of methodological preferences, that contribute, *inter alia*, [to the IMP Group], the case study and statistical explorations of networks" (Borghini and Rinallo 2005).

They also draw parallels between B2C and IMP concepts and models. These parallels are between B2C consumer experience as interaction and IMP actor interaction in industrial networks; between B2C post-modern theories<sup>2</sup> of the micro-social tribe and between IMP partner networks; and in the inter-individual levels of interaction with networks viz.: "if we consider the tribe an actor capable of collective action such as are industrial districts or industrial networks, it is possible to incorporate the tribal experience into the company model: customers are co-developers of tribal experiences and tribal competencies that can be mobilised by the company. The recognition that tribes are a source of competencies forces marketers to lower the boundaries of the company (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000): the tribe is not outside the company, it's part of the company network just as the company is part of the tribe" (p.13).

Their 2003 paper attempted to respond to recent calls to "revolutionize" IMP research (Cunningham in Young, 2002, p. 314) in order to create "interesting [research] journeys" (Håkansson in Young, 2002, p. 314). They suggest such a re-evaluation with reference to an updated model of B2C marketing may build IMP theory, and note that the "IMP community is used to search[ing] in other disciplines and research fields ... [for] inspiration for "concepts, models and methods" (p.13).

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<sup>1</sup> These alternative research methods and tools, have been deployed by Borghini, Golfetto and Rinallo (2004); Borghini and Rinallo (2003); Golfetto (2003); Rinallo and Borghini (2003); Rinallo, Golfetto and Gibbert (2005). These IMP researchers have employed ethnographic and anthropological methods, and semiotic/symbolic interpretation tools to enhance our understanding of B2B communication and market practice and forms.

<sup>2</sup> We also note that Arias and Acebron (2001) have perceived the growth in the use of post-modern research methods in consumer research, and have developed a complementary framework for industrial markets viz. socialization, text, chorality and interpretation derived from the consumer researchers, Hirschman and Holbrook (1992).

In a further attempt to contribute to the developing enquiry they instigate this paper proposes borrowing not only from the B2C research traditions articulated by Cova and Salle (op.cit.) but also from those informing the newly theorised Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). It also proposes a beneficial cross-fertilization from sociological and management research into Institutional Theory, and the theory-informed, methodological tool of Institutional Semiotics (Arnold, Kozinets and Thompson 2001) to suggest new approaches to firms' marketing communications<sup>3</sup>.

## Consumer Culture Theory

Previous literature may have presented industrial communications recipients as merely rational actors who operate in a rational choice paradigm with a focus on purchase behaviour,<sup>4</sup> but developments such as customer relationship management, lifestyle and multi-cultural marketing, and the growth of identity brands (Holt 2003) have "brought consumer meanings to the center of managerial concern" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 870) .

Consequently, consumer researchers explore the emotive and symbolic relationships among consumers' personal and collective identities, the cultures created and embodied in the lived world of consumers, and the underlying experiences, processes and structures which create and facilitate such a worldview (op. cit., p. 870). This contextual, symbolic, and experiential perspective means that it is axiomatic that the firm's stakeholders (buyers, suppliers and customers) should be considered active, experiential and emotive consumers of the marketing communications of the firm, and that they interact with and experience the firm in its economic and socio-cultural context (Belk 1987a, 1987b; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). This dynamic, interpenetrating relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings, and the resulting research into such has recently been termed Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, p. 868). CCT denotes "a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material sources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (op. cit., p. 869).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) chart how, for more than twenty years, consumer culture theorists have explored the experiential and socio-cultural environment of a "distributed view of cultural meaning" (Hannerz 1992, p. 16), which analyses how manifestations of consumer culture [such as marketing communication texts] are "constituted, sustained, transformed and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies) and grounded in specific socio-economic circumstances and marketplace systems" (op. cit., p. 869). They also note how consumer culture theorists explore how consumers "actively rework [*co-create*] and transform the symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances" (op. cit., p. 871).

The aims that drive CTT have most generally dictated a qualitative or vivid descriptive methodological approach<sup>5</sup>, with a concentration on field rather than laboratory work, thus occasioning a deviation from experimental, survey, or database modelled methods. In this they illustrate some sympathy with the case study methods utilised by IMP researchers.

Of the four major research programmes which inform CCT, viz. (1) Consumer Identity Projects, (2) Marketplace Cultures, (3) Socio-Historic Patterning of Consumption, (4) Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretive Strategies, it is the latter which offers high relevance to IMP researchers concerned to explore a firm's communications with its consumers. In this fourth research programme consumers are presented as active, interpretive agents of marketing communications, and

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the IMP research cited above the marketing communications of firms has been variously studied by Blythe (2002, 2000); Bunn and Clopton (1993); Gilliland and Johnston (1997); Mantovani (1996); Ripley (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Although, ironically, B2B advertisement content commonly concentrates on eliciting emotional response. See Gilliland and Johnston 1997.

<sup>5</sup> However, multi-method/pluralist approaches have also been deployed to advance the theoretical agenda. See Arnould and Thompson 2005).

research focuses on exploring how “particular cultural production systems, such as marketing communications, systematically predispose consumers towards certain kinds of identity projects” (op. cit., p. 874; McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Studies in this domain frequently draw from semiotic and literary critical theories to analyze the symbolic meanings, cultural ideals, and ideological inducements in marketing communications, and expose the ways in which consumers critically reinterpret marketing communications (Scott 1994).

For the B2B marketing communications manager the institutional context in which their communication texts are processed, evaluated and critically reinterpreted is yet another mediator of meaning. This institutional mediation can be positively leveraged to provide consonance with the receiver’s context and value systems. The theory informing the institutional context is next discussed.

## **Institutional Theory**

Institutional Theory (IT) was initially derived from sociological theory and, latterly, from management theory (Di Maggio and Powell 1983; Handelman and Arnold 1999; Meyer and Rowan 1977). The base constitutive elements of institutions have been codified as comprising: (1) meaning systems and behavioural patterns, (2) representative, constitutive and normative rules, and (3) regulatory processes (Scott 1987). The elements of most interest to this discussion of extensions to IMP theory regarding the firm’s marketing communications concerns the second *rule or norm* based elements of organizations. Representational rules dictate how the organization’s deployment of meaningful symbols represents the norms of the institutional environment. Constitutive rules define the behavioural roles of actors in the environment and enforce their range of action. While normative rules proscribe which actions are desirable for the firm’s actors in order for the firm to successfully mirror the environmental context (Scott 1994).

One key dimension of Institutional Theory, articulated by Handelman and Arnold (1999), acknowledges the meta-narrative of the institutional environment. This institutional environment has been defined as containing “taken-for-granted social and cultural meaning systems, or norms, that define social reality (Di Maggio 1988; Scott 1987, 1994)”. Organizations desiring to achieve a fit or become *isomorphic* with their normative environments agree to prescriptions based on a variety of institutional norms or rules (Dacin 1997). These rules are agreed and adhered to by actors – in this case, firms and their members – “to assure themselves and those around them that their behavior is reasonable” (Di Maggio and Powell 1991).

The adherence to these norms, and their inclusion in the meta-narrative of the institutional environment, sites the organization as an organic and dynamic part of its environment (Perrow 1986). This environment includes the organization’s economic task norms and the cultural-moral norms (Dacin 1997; Scott 1987). As a result, the firm and the environment interpenetrate, and the successful organization will reflect the norms of the environment into which it is immersed. Firms are judged by their constituents according to their adherence with these accepted environmental norms, and those whose performance positively correlates are perceived to be legitimate.

*Legitimation* is a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995). This legitimising creates *institutional isomorphism*, where the firm’s actions reflect the economic and cultural-moral norms of its environment. Once legitimisation occurs the firm is then rewarded with support (Elsbach 1994) by external actors, and by external and internal audiences. As Dacin (1997) notes isomorphism frequently results from “pressures exerted by broader social expectations” (p.50).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This “ isomorphism arising from broadly based sociocultural norms is in some respects related to Zukin and Di Maggio’s (1987) notion of *cultural embeddedness*, wherein shared understandings in the form of beliefs and ideologies serve to prescribe and constrain organizational action” (Dacin, 1997, p 50).

The organization's norms have been conceptualised as two forms: (1) the task, and (2) the institutional form (Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman 2001).

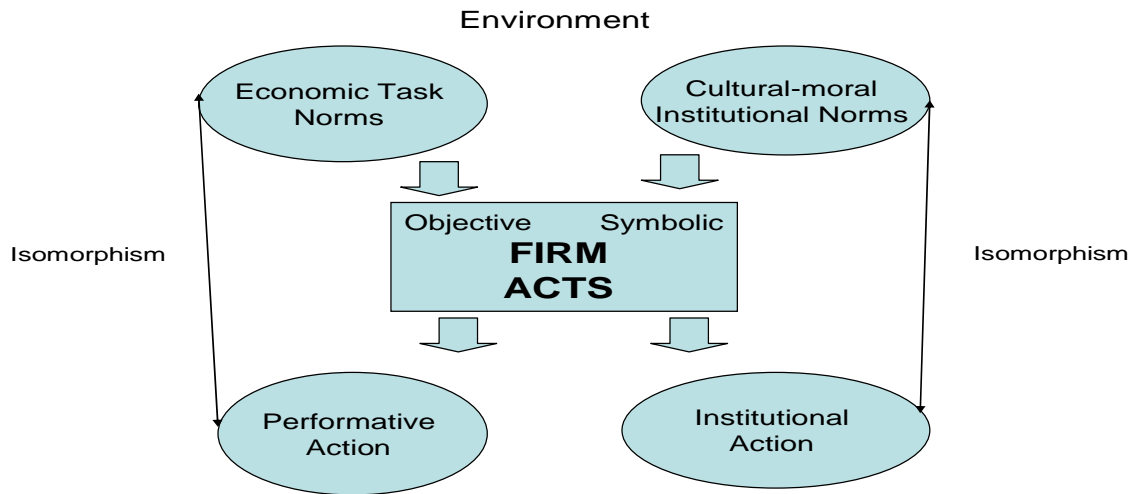


Figure 1: Institutional Isomorphism (adapted from Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman, 2001)

The task norm reflects the firm's normative economic environmental concerns such as competitive pricing, product range and depth, and location. The corresponding *objective* performative actions would ensure that competitive pricing, wide product range and convenient locations were enacted. Adherence to performative task norms could also be perceived symbolically via the employment of symbolic objects, metaphors, icons, slogans and signs in the firm's marketing communications. "*Symbolic* performative action might include the slogan 'Never knowingly undersold' as contrasted to the objective action of having the lowest priced product" amongst a competitor group" (op.cit., p. 247).

The institutional form reflects the community's moral and cultural norms and institutional actions are the product. As previously noted institutional theory recognises the immersion of the firm in its meta-narrative of the environment and, as a consequence, it is interpenetrated by the complex cultural and moral demands of the environment's constituents (Scott 1987). The norms arising from cultural-moral demands usually concern the macro-level ideas of family, community, religion and nation<sup>7</sup>. The appropriate social conduct for a firm is determined by these cultural-moral norms. Consequently, to be successful, firms must be isomorphic with these norms (Di Maggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1997). For example, a firm "involved in community charities and using local workers and national suppliers demonstrates an attempt to adhere to these kind of norms" (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman 2001). The resulting *symbolic* institutional action might be a marketing communications programme promoting a "Made in XXXX" policy, and the *objective* institutional action could be the purchasing of those nationally-made products.

Once the potency of these norms are recognised by marketing managers, they can be leveraged by organizations in their communication of these institutional and task (performative) forms to other actors in the environment. This deployment of normative elements and images in the firm's marketing communications creates isomorphism with consumers who perceive that the firm's values are consonant with their own. As the institutional environment is both symbolic and behavioural then both symbolic objects and actions can be communicated (Berger and Luckmann 1967) and, since adherence to environmental norms is *symbolic* as well as objective (Meyer and Rowan 1977), the firm's marketing communications have "as much a role in legitimating (Suchman 1995) an organisation amongst its relevant constituents, as do the more tangible, specific [e.g. performative] acts" (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman 2001).

<sup>7</sup> This also maps onto Perrow's (1972) definition of the flexible organisation which is "impregnated with community values". p. 191.

Consequently, the theoretical contribution of Institutional Theory and its key constructs of firm acceptance (isomorphism) and survival (legitimation) can be employed, via Institutional Semiotic Analysis, to inform the personal and impersonal information sources and acts which comprise the marketing communications of firms (Moriarty and Spekman 1984)

At this point the intersecting theoretical frameworks of Consumer Culture Theory and Institutional Theory become apparent in their common explorations of the socio-cultural environment of “distributed view[s] of cultural meaning”, their acknowledgement of how marketing activity is “grounded in specific socio-economic circumstances and marketplace systems”, and “the ways in which consumers critically reinterpret marketing communications” (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

### **Institutional Semiotics**

The method that can “unpack the hidden meaning of *symbolic* performative and institutional actions” (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman 2001) and discover the interpretive processes undertaken by communications recipients derives from semiotics. Semiotics, a well-researched method deployed in CCT, “analyzes the structures of meaning-producing events both verbal and non-verbal” (Mick, 1986, p. 197), and concerns itself with the study of signs. These signs, codes, and symbols are the elements that communicate meaning (Zakia and Nadin 1987), and can be deployed in any medium to communicate and exchange messages (Sebeok 1976). It is used extensively in the analysis of B2C marketing communications, services marketing, consumer research, product design and packaging and retail siting (see Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel and Brannen 2004 for an exhaustive citation)<sup>8</sup>.

In order to analyse the semiotic framings of firms' marketing communications, to determine their isomorphic match with the meta-environment, and their potential legitimation by their external actors, an *Institutional Semiotic* framework (developed for retailing by Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman 2001) can be deployed by marketers. This framework, derived from Jakobson's theory of the semiotic constitutive factors in communication (Jakobson 1985, pp. 150-154), analyses the semiotic framing of the sender, the recipient, and the communication text itself. In a full Jakobsonian investigation these factors are then further analysed by context, code and contact dimensions, and conative, phatic and denotative factors.

Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman (2001) Institutional Semiotic method concentrates on the macro-elemental components of Jakobson's theory, i.e. the receiver, sender and content dimensions, and poses three 'grand tour' (McCracken 1988) guiding questions to “interrogate particular communication events structurally” (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman, p. 247). Questions about the receiver concern demographic and psychographic issues to identify who is being addressed and what they are being told to do. Speaker questions interrogate the emotional and rational messaging intended by the sender or firm actor. While content questions attempt to discover the abstract and connotative meanings in the communications text. These latter questions investigate the narratives or “consumer mythology” (Levy 1981) inherent in the marketing communications' use of literary and visual device, the range and meaning of contextual (situational) and inter-textual interplay in the firm's marketing communications texts, and the firm's intended *encoding* and resultant consumer *decoding* of the normative, cultural and moral structures of the marketing communications.

Institutional Semiotics takes as its point of investigation the firm's marketing communications artefacts. These may include the firm's advertising, signage, trade show presentations, internal marketing and the firm's people. It has a commonality with CCT research methods that embrace a similarly inductive approach, such as content and discourse analysis (Zimmer and Golden 1988), projective technique (Myers 1960), and open ended questioning (Jain and Etgar 1976; McDougall and Fry 1974).

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<sup>8</sup> However, as Rinallo and Borghini (2003) have noted, there is a paucity of semiotic research examining marketing communication in B2B settings.

The implementation of Institutional Semiotics is also useful in identifying the de-coded meaning or image in the marketing communications that may not be intended by the firm. In this it can probe further than traditional semiotic methods to discover the reasons for such meaning dislocation because the environmental norms component of institutional theory provides a basis for attributing meaning to the firm's marketing communications artefacts.

However, perhaps the main contribution of an Institutional Semiotic approach concerns the content of the meaning or image. "Institutional Semiotics emphasizes symbolic, institutional acts occurring in response to moral and cultural norms. In contrast, traditional techniques tend more to emphasize objective, performative acts...[but] institutional semiotics does not preclude identification of functional qualities. The emphasis, however, on the symbolic, institutional acts opens up opportunities to capture more of the [firm's characteristics]" (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman 2001, p. 248)<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper described the discrete contributions that Consumer Culture Theory, Institutional Theory and Institutional Semiotics can offer the B2B marketer. It further integrated Consumer Culture Theory with Institutional Theory to provide a new theoretical perspective on the firm's marketing communications. As described by Institutional Theory, the legitimating benefits of isomorphism between the firm and its stakeholders were shown, and managers were made aware how this environmental isomorphism can be evaluated and created for constituent stakeholders through the methodological deployment of Institutional Semiotics in its variant marketing communications actions.

It further illustrated the cross-fertilizing play between theory and method whereby theoretical conceptions of the consumer (Consumer Culture Theory) and firm (Institutional Theory) facilitate an isomorphic methodology (Institutional Semiotics).

In its theoretical acknowledgment of the social construction of meaning Institutional Semiotics shows its intertextuality with Consumer Culture Theory, and with the environmental desirables of isomorphism and legitimation derived from Institutional Theory. The methodological approach of Institutional Semiotics demonstrates a commonality with methods deployed by both theories. Consumer Culture Theory's acknowledged preponderance of qualitative method in which semiotics plays a key part, and Institutional Theory's reliance on rich analysis via interviews and cases.

As Arnould and Thompson (2005) declare in their closing paragraphs, there is a rich tradition of cross-fertilization from other disciplines and methods that consumer culture theorists deploy to enrich, reframe and revitalize core analytic constructs (p. 876). This has been termed 'retexualization' (Thompson, Stern and Arnould 1998). They further note that such cross-fertilization can provide "a fertile intellectual ground for theoretical innovations and advancements" (op. cit., p. 877). Such an approach is entirely isomorphic with calls from IMP researchers such as Cova and Salle (2003) and Borghini and Rinallo (2005) for new perspectives, and for other theories and methods to build IMP theory. This paper attempts just such a small contribution.

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<sup>9</sup> We note the managerial results of Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman's (2001) study in which they discovered that isomorphism with institutional, as well as traditional economic task norms, was important to the firm's consumers. They reported that if institutional isomorphism is not perceived then the "effectiveness of the retailer's economic-oriented action is significantly hindered" (p.260).

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