

Chapter 7

Frameworks for a Consumer's Group Knowledge Representation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses three main objectives: (1) the contribution to the body of literature of consumer behaviour demonstrating that consumer groups' knowledge (i.e., two-person dyads, families, peer or friendship groups, teams, and other social units) is relevant for study by consumer researchers; (2) the development of an integrated conceptual representation of consumer's group knowledge including the influence of collective variables on decision making process; (3) the investigation of scientific inquiries regarding the role of advanced technologies in relation to conceptual representation. The approach introduces a new framework applicable both as a tool for enhancing the understanding of consumer's group knowledge, and as a useful guide to future research on consumer knowledge as a whole. The content discussed herein attempts to establish the building block toward the development of a theory of consumer's group knowledge. The study offers direction toward a potential path that could evolve into an established theory regarding consumer's group knowledge in the marketplace.

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INTRODUCTION

For both researchers and practitioners, consumer's knowledge is a critical factor in creating competitive success over time. Competitive advantage, particularly in the last two decades, is no longer measured solely by the amount of resources that are readily accessible or by material production. Having exclusive access to consumer's knowledge can become an integral part of the firm's core competencies. It is commonly acknowledged that intangible resources such as consumer's knowledge can lead to firms being more flexible and thus more competitive in Business System (de Vita, Mercurio & Testa, 2007). To remain economically viable, a firm must constantly meet the needs and wants of consumers while providing superior services and products more effectively than its rivals. Consumer's knowledge though allows firms to strategically place themselves in a better position than their competitors in providing these services. Constant access to new knowledge provides the firm with flexibility to create new products or services or innovate on current products, services, and processes.

Thus, understanding what consumers know has been a topic of enduring interest for scholars of marketing science (Deshpande, 1983; Peter & Olson, 1983; Wilkie & Moore, 2003).

A growing body of literature published over the last three decades attests to the importance of consumer knowledge as an area of investigation that deserves merit and continuum in the field of scientific research. This same literature, however, also suggests that consumer knowledge is extremely complex and that traditional measures may tap only a portion of its richness (Myers, Greyser & Massy, 1979; Pfeffer, 1993; Summers, 2001; McInnis, 2004; Levy, 2006). Consumer's knowledge, in fact, includes several schools of thought (consumer culture theory school, transformative consumer research school, social cognition school, motivation research school and

behavioural decision theory school) and several disciplinary approaches.

An analysis of published literature reveals that over the past several years the emphasis was substantively on attitude toward choices among a set of close substitutes. Particular emphasis was evident in assessing the practical importance and the impact of marketing mix elements, specifically, price, promotion, and, (mass) advertising. Theoretically, instead, the dominant paradigm has been borrowed from the field of psychology (cognitive and social in particular) and, to a lesser extent, economics. Nevertheless, the evolution of consumer's knowledge shows that a "theory of consumer" (Teas & Palan, 1997; Summers, 2001) is still not available and scholars' struggles swing from a very ambitious goal of building a comprehensive theory to a less aspiring one of developing theories.

Within the scope of consumer's knowledge, the first part of this chapter discusses how scholars develop the knowledge of a single consumer and the knowledge of a group of consumers in their field of research through published literature on consumer knowledge and on organizational behaviour. In analysing the context it becomes evident that there is a gap in the consumer's knowledge literature. Although published literature recognizes the importance of the consumers as a source of knowledge, it fails to recognize the importance of a "group of consumers" as well. Indeed scholars have not generally included a group of consumers as a level of analysis.

Over the years, several articles published in top tiers management journals have focused primarily on intra - individual behaviours, especially cognitive processes measured accurately by studying the performance of individuals in purchasing goods for consumption (Bagozzi, 2000). There have been only a few analytical attempts to determine if interpersonal interactions of a consumer's group do influence consumer behaviour (Bagozzi, 2000; Briley & Wyer, 2002; Thomas-Hunt, Ogden & Neale, 2003; Cummings, 2004).

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