Chapter 66
Between Physical and Virtual Reality:
The Case of Benetton Brand, *"A Company that is Born From Ideas"*

Annamaria Silvana de Rosa
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Elena Bocci
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a perspective theory, not yet fully developed, that seeks to analyze the connections between "Social Representations and Corporate Communication" (Penz, 2006; Usunier & Lee, 2009). It is divided into two sections. In the first, descriptive section we identified the organizational dynamics of the Benetton Company utilizing structural elements found in the enterprise's literature and documents. The objective was to understand Benetton galaxy's role in globalization and its complex market strategies. Since this was an internal view of the company, data was obtained from internal documents, including the company's publications, such as Global Vision and Colors publications. In order to understand the company from an external perspective, we consulted studies conducted on the Benetton universe that considered the marketing element as interaction between the company and the market (Kotler, 1997; Nardin, 1987; Semprini, 1996; Moliner, 1996; Tafani, 2006). In the second, empirical section, the social representation of the Benetton brand is analyzed using a large sample of Benetton's advertisements, selected as the basis for research to identify the perceptive modalities of advertising messages and at-titudes in Benetton's communication strategies (de Rosa, 1998, 2001; de Rosa & Losito, 1996; de Rosa & Bocci, 2009). In this second section the relationship between social representations and corporate communication will be presented in a dialogical perspective that examines the social discourse "of" Benetton in regard to social issues. We will look at the different phases of advertising campaigns (1992-2008, with special focus on one of the controversial campaigns: Autumn-Winter 1992\1993) and the discourse "about" Benetton. The targets of reference for our research program are considered to be not only recipients of the company's advertising campaigns, but also potential buyers.

SOME STRUCTURAL DATA ON THE COMPANY: FROM A FAMILY BUSINESS, TO AN INDUSTRY, TO A "CULTURAL PHENOMENON"

Established in 1965 as a family business called "*Maglieria di Ponzano Veneto dei Fratelli Benetton*," the Benetton Group transformed rapidly into an industry that reached far beyond Italy's borders. After initially launching itself on the international market, it then positioned its brand globally, not just in terms of financial markets but also in terms of cultural horizons. The Company itself became a "cultural" phenomenon, in fact, a true "case study."

The Benetton Company's adventures were summed up by Luciano Benetton[1] himself in an interview published on July 28, 1992 in United Colors of Benetton: A Global Vision:

"A company that is born of ideas: this is both the Benetton reality and its legend, as recounted on the pages of newspapers and magazines in America, China, Egypt, France, Japan, India, England, Italy, Poland, Spain and Turkey. Yet in an ever more global and competitive market, every new idea must serve as a solid base for further innovation " (Yagi, 1993:10)

The brand's global position was obtained by flexibly combining centralized planning, marketing, production management and distribution systems with the extensive use of information technology.

In step with an economy increasingly oriented towards a globalizing marketplace, on its very interactive website (Figure 1), the company presents a representation of itself as a "global business" based on the following aspects:

- Global product;
- Common approach to the market;
- Standardized image of stores on a world scale via the "select a country" option;

Figure 1. www.benetton.it

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