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Value co-creation: The role of actor competence

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a Service-Dominant Logic lens, recent research within industrial marketing contexts increasingly recognizes the role of operand resources in value co-creation. Incumbent within operand resources is actor competence. Despite this, an investigation into the role of actor competence in value co-creating processes is scant and the competence literature, in general, has tended to concentrate on specialized knowledge and skills based interpretations that potentially restrict our understanding of the construct. To address this gap, this research adopts a phenomenological approach to explore perceived behavioral attributes of competent actors. Findings confirm two broad behaviorally based conceptualizations of competence: 1) extra-role behavior demonstrated through organizational citizenship behavior, and 2) in-role behavior demonstrated through understanding of work, and engagement behavior. To this end, the contribution of this research is twofold. First and from a theoretical perspective, it offers empirical insights into a relational based framework of competency within industrial marketing contexts. Second, and from a pragmatic perspective, this framework may aid managers in developing a broader understanding of actor competence and how such competencies may be enhanced within the workplace to optimize value co-creation.

1. Introduction

The role of individual actors in value creation processes has long been recognized within an industrial marketing context (e.g., IMP Group, 1982). Latterly, much research within this context has viewed such processes through the emergent lens of Service-Dominant (S-D) logic (e.g., Kohli, 2011; Kowalkowski, 2010). Inherent within the S-D logic is the notion of operand and operant resources. Under the Goods-Dominant (G-D) logic historically associated with industrial marketing contexts, operand resources are considered the primary source of a firm's competitive advantage (Kowalkowski, 2010). However, an increasing number of researchers are recognizing the role of operant resources in creating value within such contexts (e.g., Gummesson, 2011; Ueda, Takenaka, Vancza, & Monstori, 2009). Incumbent within operant resources are the competencies (physical and mental) of actors involved in value creating processes. Such competencies are frequently both dynamic and difficult to transfer and hence potentially a source of sustained competitive advantage in their own right (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015).

Despite this, there is limited conceptual understanding of the competence construct particularly within an industrial marketing context where there is an over-reliance on specialized knowledge and skills based interpretations that potentially restrict our understanding

(Sandberg, 2000). Specifically, research into actor competence that manifests in individual behaviors that facilitates value at both the organizational and individual level is identified as requiring further investigation (e.g., Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). This research addresses this gap by increasing our understanding of the role of actor competence in value creation processes within an industrial marketing context. To this end, the contribution of this research is twofold. First and from a theoretical perspective, it offers empirical insights into a relational based framework of competency within such contexts. Second, and from a pragmatic perspective, the framework may aid managers in developing a broader understanding of actor competence and how such competencies may be enhanced within the workplace to optimize value co-creation.

The paper is structured as follows. First, competence as a construct is examined and relevant relational characteristics are identified. Next, the methodology consisting of an empirical investigation drawing on phenomenology is outlined. Thereafter and reflecting the themes identified in our analysis, the findings are presented in three key areas: organizational citizenship behavior, understanding of work and actor engagement. Finally, our discussion of the findings elaborates on the proposed competence framework before conclusions are drawn and directions for future research are suggested.

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2. Dimensions, levels, and roles of competence

The nature of value and its creation has been the focus of much scholarly debate in recent years (e.g., Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In conceptualizing value creating processes, Grönroos and Voima (2013) propose the notion of value 'spheres' and specifically, the relative importance of provider spheres and the roles of internal actors within these (e.g., Grönroos, 2008, 2011; Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). Encompassed within the provider sphere are the firm's operant and operand resources. However, a review of the operant resource literature reveals only a cursory discussion on the role of actor competence (e.g., Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Madhavaram, Granot, & Badrinarayanan, 2014). In order to fully appreciate the potential impact of actor competence on value co-creation, a more in-depth review of the competence construct is necessary.

2.1. Dimensions of competence

Competence, as a construct, is not only nebulous (e.g., Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Weinert, 1999) but subject to differing interpretations dependent upon the underlying epistemological position of scholars (Pate, Martin, & Robertson, 2003). From an organizational perspective, a review of the extant literature identifies three generic approaches to classifying competence: the actor approach, the work-based approach, and the multi-method approach (Sandberg, 2000). Actor based competence is formed through performance and defined as the ability or capability that an individual possesses (Boyatzis, 2008). The work-based approach emphasises work/job descriptions and/or job analysis. Within a multi-method approach, job, actor, and the organizational environment are taken into consideration (Boyatzis, 2008). However, all these approaches assume that the tasks and situations during the execution of the work are fixed and predictable (e.g., Attewell, 1990; Billett, 2001; Blackler, 1993). In focusing on such rational attributes of actors and/or their job performance, this classification may only provide narrow insights into competence, whilst ignoring the complexities and subtleties that may underlie a broader interpretation of the construct (Sandberg, 2000, 2001). Consequently, a growing number of academics are challenging this 'superficial' view and adopting a more phenomenologically based interpretation of the construct (e.g., Sandberg & Targama, 2007; Nätti, Pekkarinen, Hartikka, & Holappa, 2014).

The constructivist perspective views competence as the accumulation of an individual's work experiences (Sandberg, 2000) and their understanding of and interaction with a job (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978; Pate et al., 2003). By adopting such a perspective, the conceptual depth of competence may be expanded to include experiential, relational, dynamic, spatial, and temporal dimensions. An experiential dimension recognizes an individual's sense making of their intra-subjective experiences (Sandberg, 2000; Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). The relational dimension suggests an individual's competence is socially intersubjective (Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012) and necessitates an understanding of relational structures and their fluidity within specific contexts (Nätti et al., 2014). Such experiences are dynamic (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997) as an actor's sense making may be socially relative to their interactions (FitzPatrick, Varey, Grönroos, & Davey, 2015; Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012). An actor's experience is both temporal and spatial in nature. The temporal dimension could be relative to past, future, or current situational factors (Belk, 1975), while spatial dimensions are dependent on the actor's individual and social contexts and the 'stock of knowledge' of their individual lifeworlds (Schutz, 1967) and the interactions within it.

2.2. Levels and roles of competence

Competence may also be analyzed in terms of levels of self-concept (i.e. personal, relational, and collective) and competencies pertaining to

each of these (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The relational aspect of self refers to the relationship between the self and another individual. At a group level, the collective self-concept corresponds to the connection of self with a group (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Within the relationality framework (FitzPatrick et al., 2015), levels of self-concept include 'I', 'Other', and 'We'. The 'I' domain refers to the individual self, the 'Other' domain refers to another person with whom the 'I' is relating, and the 'We' domain refers to the relatedness between 'I' and 'other'. These domains indicate that higher relationality is actualized in direct dialogical interactions characterized by collaboration within the 'We' domain. By adopting such a framework, it is possible to identify an actors competence in the 'Other' and 'We' domains as well as the 'I' domain traditionally associated with the possession of technical skills.

Individual actors have multiple roles and social identities that vary in terms of their nature and characteristics (Wendt, 1994). The management of these multiple roles is both complex and significant for both the individual and the organization (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Within organizational contexts, individuals fulfill roles with an anticipated performance-related outcome that necessitates particular behaviors and actions (Katz & Kahn, 1978). To achieve these outcomes, there must be an understanding of work. Such an understanding refers to the actor's knowledge, skills, and other attributes used in accomplishing work-related outcomes rather than merely a list of role specific attributes (Sandberg, 2000). Through mobilizing these knowledge, skills, and attributes, an actor will identify appropriate behaviors and actions to achieve expected organizational outcomes. Such behaviors and actions are also dependent upon an individual's cognition, consciousness, emotions, and values (Dennis, King, Fiore, & Kim, 2007) and frequently encompass collaborative activity with other actors within a firm. Katz and Kahn (1978) classify roles behavior into two generic categories: in-role, and extra-role behaviors. In-role behavior relates to the organizational expectations of an individual and frequently forms the basis of ongoing performance assessments (Katz, 1964). In an organizational context, the absence of in-role behavior leads to negative consequences such as limited or no financial rewards, lack of promotion and potential loss of a job. These behaviors are defined in advance and recognized by a formal rewards system. In contrast, extra-role behaviors refer to an individual's behaviors not specified in advance for a job role and consequently have no anticipated reward systems associated with them. However, extra-role behaviors may play a key role in enhancing organizational performance.

To summarize, a review of the literature in relation to actor competence and its role in value co-creation reveals only abstract depictions at a macro-level. Detailed investigations of individuals and their associated competencies relative to the firm's operant and operand resources in value creation processes remains scant (e.g., Ranjan & Read, 2014). Consequently, further empirical research at a fundamentally lower level of analysis is required if a more comprehensive understanding of such processes and specifically, the role of actor competence, is to be achieved (e.g., Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015; Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016).

3. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to investigate actor competency and its impact on value co-creation. Given the nature of this topic and its complexities, a phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate. Such an approach is suitable when there is a lack of understanding of a phenomenon and exploratory research can offer the potential to improve our understanding of human behaviors (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, this approach permits an in-depth exploration of actors' interpersonal lived experiences with others and how such interactions contribute to value creation (Patton, 1990; Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998). Given the intensive nature of such an approach, it was imperative to choose an appropriate

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