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Editorial

Network & Systems theory suggestions to service research

Francesco Polese · Cristina Mele

Service research appears to be in a creative and constructive momentum, highlighting traces of radical innovation among numerous stimuli as the one suggested by network and systems theories.

Service is intrinsically relational by engaging numerous actors within co-creation processes (Payne et al. 2008; Mele et. 2011; Grönroos and Ravald 2011; Pels et al. 2012); hence research dealing with the governance and behavior of this dense pattern of relationships may stimulate the valorization of network studies (Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Capra 1997) with their prolific traditional mainstreams in management and marketing research. Moreover service is increasingly coupled with the notion of systems and research on ‘service systems’ –composed of heterogeneous entities interacting with a shared goal– is revealing growing interest worldwide (Mele and Polese 2011).

The notion of service system suggests that actors are connected by value propositions within value chains, value networks, or value-creating systems, hence actors are undoubtedly embedded in complex service systems, acting in socio-economic contexts in order to achieve desired outcomes and performances (Gummesson and Mele 2010; Ng et al. 2012, VV.AA. 2011). Service research calls for network and systems research and is approaching the study of complexity from a governance and management perspective in order to face the dynamics characterizing markets nowadays (Gummesson et al. 2010).

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Much of the use of the word 'system' in literature merely describes interconnectedness of entities and actors, but does not effectively adhere to systems thinking principles (von Bertalanffy 1956; Beer 1972), which often disrupt the traditional management and marketing thinking. In order to properly interpret and manage service systems, we need to deepen our understanding of the concepts of service, service systems and complex service systems, and consequentially adopt insights derived from network and systems thinking which are intrinsically illuminating to issues emerging when facing complexity (Barile 2009; Mele et al. 2010).

When dealing with complex service systems, the key issue seems to be one of emergence. Systems thinking offers general interpretative approaches to face the open, dynamic and emergent nature of service systems, which may generate complexity (Barile and Saviano 2011). By adopting a systems perspective, however, the service system is no longer considered as complex in itself, as complexity characterizes the conditions that decision makers have to face in managing such systems (Golinelli et al. 2012).

This research ground is one of the scientific pillars of the 'Naples Forum on Service', which has stimulated this special issue. The forum was first organized in 2009, followed by the 2011 edition and now the "2013 Naples Forum on Service" is rapidly approaching (updates on www.naplesforumonservice.it). The forum is based upon three scientific pillars, specifically represented by S-D logic (Lusch and Vargo 2006; Vargo and Lusch 2008), Network & Systems Theory (Gummesson 2008; Golinelli 2010) and Service Science (Maglio and Spohrer 2008; Maglio 2011). Focusing on the understanding and management of complexity characterizing service exchanges, the 'Naples Forum on Service' is strongly committed to research integrated methodologies; hence dialogue and debate engender vigorous discussions and the discovery of collaborative research approaches. Goal of this special issue, therefore, is to foster research on Network and Systems, with a specific focus on their possible contribution to service research, in order to improve understanding of marketing decision-making in conditions of complexity.

In this context, the first paper of this special issue is reserved to "An Introduction to the Viable Systems Approach and its Contribution to Marketing", written by Sergio Barile, Jaqueline Pels, Francesco Polese and Marialuisa Saviano. The authors propose the Viable Systems Approach (vSA) as a perspective from which to develop an interpretative framework for governance in conditions of complexity. By interpreting business and social organizations as viable systems, vSA offers general reference schemes to deal with the systemic nature of service and service systems management and its related conditions of complexity.

In their contribute titled "Innovation management in networked economies", Håkan Håkansson and Per-Ingvar Olsen observe how, according to business network research, service-dominant logic and service systems thinking, business behaviour is fundamentally based upon an interactional interpretation of value creation. This assumption stimulates the coupling of value creation and innovation, built upon systematic managerial efforts as the main driving force within multi-functional, managerial networks capable of directing business behaviour toward its goals while also managing the complexity, extendedness, ambiguity and multi-contextual challenges across the many complex interfaces.

The third paper of this special issue, “A Service-Based Systems View of Cultural Heritage” is written by Sergio Barile, Massimo Montella and Marialuisa Saviano. The authors highlight the need to focus on an anthropological, rather than idealistic, concept of culture to overcome a traditional ‘Goods-Dominant’ logic, which is especially persistent in Italy, and to broaden the range of cultural value enhancing the merit quality. With this focus they propose a conceptual framework that, through the lens of the Viable Systems Approach, integrates the Service-Dominant logic, the Many-to-many and the Service Science proposals for addressing the change in perspective from a reductionist, goods-based to a systems service-based management approach to cultural heritage.

With a paper titled “S-D Logic and CSR: the management of social capital for the value creation in SMEs”, Alessandra De Chiara underlines the importance of stakeholders relationships in order to accomplish value co-creation, according to Service-Dominant logic and Corporate Social Responsibility approaches, as well as the importance of the management of social capital. Within this relational nature of firms the author underlines the crucial role of social capital, and the consequent social ‘responsible’ behaviour, as determinant for long lasting performances of Small and Medium Enterprises.

We hope the special issue focus on network and systems theory will be intriguing for many researchers, especially for the papers within cross-disciplinary approaches, which have led authors to contribute to the topic with an original and insightful attitude. Despite the challenge of integrating various cultures, models, approaches and perspectives, we sense that there is a gradual convergence towards a holistic framework in management and marketing research. Systems and network may be the base of future research directions in management and marketing. Still, efforts ought to be placed in this direction, and we invite researchers worldwide to join this open research community to contribute to service research advances.

Francesco Polese and Cristina Mele

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