On Business Relationships as Darwinian Systems
An exploration into how Darwinian systems thinking can support business relationship research

av

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Abstract


The demarcation between different traditions in contemporary research on business relationships reflects theoretical and methodological difficulties in the conceptualization of the nature of business relationships and how such relationships evolve. To tackle these problems, this thesis explores the fruitfulness of regarding business relationships as Darwinian systems, which accentuates kinship between Darwinism and systems thinking, and elaborates a treatment of business relationship transmutation as an iterative dynamic process that does not take the existence of business relationships – or the sequence of developmental stages – for granted.

The thesis draws on findings in four essays as well as a stand-alone extended summary. These five parts complete the thesis. The discussion advances the idea that the tenets of systems thinking and of Generalized Darwinism are aligned and can provide a novel explanatory paradigm, although it takes marketing rigor to specify an emergent framework that conceptualizes the nature and evolution of business relationships. The concluding part elaborates the steps required for a more comprehensive Darwinian system theory of business relationships.

A main contribution of the thesis is the exploration of an emergent theoretical composite – new to marketing – that integrates systems thinking, Generalized Darwinism and established business relationship conjectures. The thesis asserts the importance of configurational fit; the interaction between variation-creation and selective preservation to form a full Darwinian story; and the meaning of a logical distinction between manifested characteristics and the underlying instructions directing the former. Furthermore, the firm–relationship–market system hierarchy outlined highlights the business relationship as an emergent organizational form at a level above that of the individual firm, stressing the importance of its dual nature and as an evolving system alike, thus endorsing research to tackle the central theoretical and methodological difficulties of business relationships’ nature and evolution.

Keywords: Marketing, Business Relationships, Systems Thinking, Philosophy of Science, Generalized Darwinism, Evolution.

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