



**Universitatea  
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# **HABILITATION THESIS**

**Title: INTEGRATING CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN THE  
FOUNDATION OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING - AN  
EXPRESSION OF THE ADAPTATION OF ORGANIZATIONS  
TO CRISIS SITUATIONS**

**Domain: MARKETING**

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The habilitation thesis entitled „Integrating customer loyalty in the foundation of sustainable marketing - an expression of the adaptation of organizations to crisis situations” proposes a foray into the very complex issue of customer loyalty from the position of implementing within the organization specific principles of sustainable marketing and efforts to integrate these approaches in the process of adapting to crisis situations that may characterize the marketing environment at a given time. The thesis addresses the current phenomenon of the large-scale crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic from different angles, being the expression of the candidate's scientific and professional concerns.

The thesis is structured on three chapters that investigate both theoretically and empirically the proposed problem, gradually from general to particular.

Thus, in the first chapter we start from the definition of societal marketing and the presentation of the context in which it appeared and developed. Arguments are made for the gradual evolution towards the current models of approach to sustainable marketing - the promotion of sustainable consumption based on three basic directions - economic, social and environmental. The chapter also develops the evolution and advantages of implementing the principles specific to organic (ecological) marketing, being exemplified the application of these principles with the help of a first research in the economics of the thesis - regarding the perceptions of Romanian consumers towards the role of labels for organic food products. The research results allowed the validation of a conceptual model that explains the interdependencies between the identified variables: interest in food labeling, perception of labeling, decision to buy food and the degree of loyalty to food.

The first chapter of the thesis also clarifies other essential aspects for the implementation of sustainable marketing, addressing the ways to develop competitive advantages based on the intellectual capital of organizations. In this sense, the dimensions and content of intellectual capital are presented and a qualitative research conducted on the managers of SMEs working in the field of biotechnology results are depicted. The research highlighted managers' perceptions of the role of intellectual capital in creating competitive advantages for the organizations they lead.

The chapter concludes with a redefinition of competitiveness in crisis conditions, starting from the literature on the particularities regarding the definition of competitiveness in crisis conditions and reaching the example of ways to measure and identify viable sources for competitiveness in the context of the current COVID 19 crisis. This endeavour was done with the help of a quality research into the form of in-depth interview conducted on a sample of 42 hotel and guesthouse managers in Romania. The exploratory research captured managers' opinions and perceptions in relation to the topics addressed in the interview guide on variables that can measure the competitiveness of tourism firms, sources of competitiveness before and during the pandemic crisis, potential competitiveness strategies for tourism SMEs and attitudes towards cooperation within clusters and the possibility of considering it a viable solution for increasing the competitiveness of tourism SMEs.

The content of the first chapter set the framework for the discussion from the perspective of clarifying the various implications that the sustainable approach to marketing can have especially in the current context, of the manifestation of a crisis of proportions with multiple implications for any economic agent.

Chapter II continues the approach started in the first chapter and presents another important dimension for delimiting the framework necessary for customer loyalty - the need to optimize the degree of motivation and loyalty of staff. Seen as another way to implement a sustainable marketing, the issue of staff motivation and the connection that can be made with the dynamics of consumer behavior is a first topic that deals with Chapter II of the habilitation thesis.

After a brief foray into the content of the main theories of staff motivation, Chapter II presents two researches on the link between staff motivation in services and consumer behavior towards motivation. The first research was a qualitative research, based on an in-depth interview with dentists that highlighted their perceptions of the motivation of medical staff and the

connections that can be made with the behavior of consumers of health services. The second research studied in a mirror the issue addressed in the first, this time from the perspective of consumers of medical services. The research conducted on a sample of 357 people from urban areas who had at least one specialized medical consultation in the last 3 months before the research, revealed consumers' perception of the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of staff, and correlations which can be established between consumers' perception of the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and return to consumption to health care providers or the willingness to recommend the health care provider (physician) to other patients. Using the regression analysis, the research hypotheses were tested and positive correlations were identified between the mentioned variables.

Chapter II also highlighted the link between staff loyalty and customer loyalty, a topic that naturally continued one of the research directions addressed in the author's previous doctoral thesis. The chapter ends with highlighting the involvement of staff in the relationship with customers and the process of co-creation of value in the field of services. This process is also seen as an expression of sustainable marketing, being able to create the necessary premises for long-term customer loyalty.

Chapter III represents the outcome of the journey made in the first two chapters, presenting in three different subsections, essential aspects for delimitating the customer loyalty process within the perspective of the current crisis situation.

Thus, the first part of the chapter highlights the effect of social factors on consumer behavior in the context of a large-scale crisis. The aspects of the current crisis in relation to inter-human relations and unprecedented changes in social factors, specific changes for the pandemic crisis, are highlighted. The crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic has led to substantial transformations in social relations, amid government restrictions that have involved isolation at home and minimizing physical contact in public. These measures, coupled with people's anxiety and distress against the background of the tragic situations that occurred in some families where deaths have been caused by the new virus, led to a reconsideration of the importance of socializing with other members of the membership or reference groups, different from the influence of social factors on consumer behavior.

The first part of the chapter summarizes the results of a qualitative research that investigated the perceptions of dentists to changes in the behavior of consumers of dental health services due to the influence of socio-economic factors. Thus, the influences on the behavior of the consumers of dental medical services of the reference groups (eg colleagues), those of affiliation, etc. were highlighted.

Next, in the second part of the chapter, in order to be able to outline the premises of a coherent effort in terms of consumer loyalty, the broader framework of the particularities of consumer behavior in crisis conditions was addressed. Thus, the ideas related to the attitude towards risk as a particular expression of behavior in crisis conditions were approached. As an example of the highlighted ideas, a research was presented that investigates the behavioral changes of consumers of financial-banking services. The research was conducted in the form of a field survey based on a questionnaire and considered a sample of 738 respondents from urban areas. Starting from the literature in the field related to the TAM model (technology acceptance model), the research proposed a conceptual model with a number of 12 hypotheses regarding the consumption behavior of financial-banking services in the conditions imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic, on the Romanian market.

Using the regression analysis for each advanced hypothesis, the model was successfully validated, highlighting the link between the perception of the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic and the perceived usefulness of the Internet and mobile banking, their ease of use, trust in banks, attitude compared to internet and mobile banking and actual use.

Among the particularities of the consumer in the context of the pandemic crisis were highlighted the propensity for hedonic consumption or for impulsive consumption seen as palliative for the state of uncertainty and anxiety that consumers have. In addition to the

information from the literature, the results of a previous research were presented, which highlighted the factors that determine the hedonic type consumption of clothing products. The regression equations also validated the hypotheses of this research, the hedonic type consumption being an objective reality for many types of products and services, with or without the contribution of the special situation we are going through.

The end of the third chapter represents the outcome of the whole thesis, being approached the issue of optimizing online communication in order to retain customers in the specific conditions of the pandemic crisis. In addition to the literature, a field survey was also conducted based on a questionnaire, which demonstrated the validity of a conceptual model regarding e-loyalty, consumer confidence, accessibility of e-commerce websites and consumer satisfaction. The originality of the proposed model is based on the special importance that the variable accessibility of the website acquires in the context of the new online behavior models developed against the background of the pandemic crisis. Consumers tend to turn the online shopping experience and Internet browsing, in general, into a hedonic consumer experience, able to counterbalance the social pressure and stress that can be overwhelming during an economic and social crisis like the one we face today.

The research is extremely relevant for the specific mechanism of loyalty in crisis conditions, clarifying the causal relationships between the variables considered. In order to complete in an original way the ideas regarding the role of communication on multiple marketing channels in building customer loyalty, a latest research is presented that took into account the perceptions and attitudes of health service consumers towards communicating with Whatsapp mobile media software. regarding the choice of the ENT specialist and the decision-making process for the prescribed drug treatments. The use of these mobile media channels greatly facilitates direct connections between individuals and the real-time transmission of essential information about their own consumer behavior. In the conditions of crisis manifestations, such as the current one, these direct communication channels become extremely important, seen as a support for extremely isolated situations or the need to validate different consumption experiences by members of social groups.

This first part of the thesis proposed a complex edifying approach for a very current issue, connected to the realities of the moment - how to build a sustainable approach to consumer loyalty in the atypical conditions caused by the manifestation of the COVID 19 crisis.

The second part of the thesis includes a professional career development plan. This plan envisages two major directions of action, namely teaching activities and scientific research activities, which aim at achieving personal objectives fully harmonized with the objectives of the educational institutions in which I work.