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Conceptual Paper

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Power asymmetry and value creation in B2C relationship networks

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the problem of power distribution within networks of relationships between companies and consumers (business-to-consumer (B2C) networks) and to examine the ways in which value is created and captured in such structures. To this end, we applied the network approach to multiple theoretical constructs describing collective consumer phenomena, carried over from the field of sociology to management science. Based on the literature and case study analysis, we managed to define a typology of B2C networks consisting of three types: (1) publics – centered around and dominated by a company, with no relationships between consumers themselves, creating value through crowd-sourcing; (2) communities – also centered around a company, but independent to a degree and more focused on consumer-to-consumer (C2C) relationships, creating value through consumer-managed projects; and (3) tribes – where companies serve only as peripheral actors, and their products – as potential symbols of affiliation, with value being created through creation and reinterpretation of the said products' meanings (sign value).

Keywords: B2C relationships, B2C networks, consumer behavior, consumer communities, value creation

JEL Classification: D85, M31, Z13, D26

1 Introduction

As stated by Håkansson and Snehota, “no business is an island” [1989]. This premise – that no organization is capable of acquiring all the necessary resources by itself and thus companies are forced to cooperate with each other, in time giving birth to intricate networks of relationships – served as a basic tenet around which the so-called network approach has been formed. This theoretical framework, in which both buyers and sellers are active actors of a value creation process, has become one of the key concepts utilized by researchers in their studies of business-to-business (B2B) markets.

However, as some researchers have noted, consumers are not really islands either. Individuals, like organizations, are not self-sufficient and exist in the context of their social ties [Granovetter, 1973]. And while for the most part the B2B/B2C (business-to-consumer) dichotomy still holds within the contemporary marketing literature, many authors have emphasized that once clear, differences between the two begin to blur [Cova and Salle, 2006; Wind, 2006] – particularly in regard to consumers' agency. In the early B2C marketing literature, consumers have been seen as passive actors, who only react to the offers put forward by the company (by consuming or refraining from doing so) [Cova and Salle, 2003]. However, thanks to the communication infrastructure provided by technological developments, particularly the internet, they

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have been provided numerous new ways of communicating with companies, with each other, and even participating in the value creation process [Wiecezzycki, 2014]. All this makes the B2C market sufficiently similar to the B2B one for the network approach – a framework that was traditionally applied only to the latter – to become applicable to the former as well.

However, while both markets became close enough to warrant using the same approach in their analysis, they remain different to the extent that the subject of B2C relationship networks deserves its own elaboration. In regard to value creation, it is important to stress that organizations and individuals construe value differently [Priem, 2007], which suggests that networks comprised of both these types of actors should carry out this process in a different way than B2B networks. Moreover, when two different types of actors cooperate in a single network, the power distribution between them becomes a crucial issue. While in the B2B market both sides of relationships are often of comparable size and influence, individual consumers in most cases are weaker than the organizational seller [Brennan, 2012]. This would suggest that B2C networks should be dominated, and the value created within their structures – captured by the corporate actors. On the other hand, there have been several instances in which consumers challenged companies' control in their respective networks and managed to succeed, along with capturing at least some of the value created.

Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate different types of B2C networks – based on the criterion of power distribution – and examine the ways in which they create and capture value. To this end, a critical literature analysis will be carried out, incorporating works from two fields of knowledge – management science and sociology. Theoretical deliberations will be supplemented by empirical examples of different B2C networks.

To achieve the research objective, the paper has been structured as follows: In Section 2, we briefly discuss the assumptions and findings of the network approach. Section 3 is dedicated to the general subject of B2C networks, as well as a detailed analysis of the three identified types – publics, communities, and tribes. To exemplify the theoretical findings, a case study analysis of three B2C networks is carried out in the Section 4. Finally, paper ends with a discussion section and some concluding remarks.

2 Theoretical background – the network approach

The idea of analyzing different phenomena within a wider context rather than by abstracting them from their surroundings has been utilized within many different theories, like the social network theory [Granovetter, 2005], interaction approach [Håkansson, 1982], or network society [Castells, 2009]. A research group that has made a significant contribution to this subject is the IMP Group, which formulated the so-called network approach. Within this theoretical framework, it is assumed that since no company is capable of single-handedly developing every resource and carrying out every process that is required for its functioning, businesses are forced to interact with other actors in the market (mostly companies, but also other organizations, groups, or institutions) to create value. With time, those repeated interactions lead to the development of long-term relationships between actors, and those dyadic ties in turn form wider structures – networks of relationships.

These networks can have an emergent or intentional character. In other words, they can either develop independently, as a sort of by-product of conducting business by companies, or come into existence as an effect of a conscious decision made by the actors that constitute it (usually the focal company, a network's leader). Consequently, there are two separate streams of literature within the network approach, focusing on those types of networks, with the former being covered by the Swedish school [Johanson and Mattsson, 1987; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995], and the latter – by the strategic approach [Jarillo, 1988; Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer, 2000; Möller, Rajala and Svahn, 2005]. It can thus be said that the IMP literature tends to focus either on managing in a network or managing a network [Brekke, 2004].

One of the key contributions of the network approach is the ARA model [Håkansson and Johanson, 1992]. Its importance stems largely from the fact that it maps out the entire ontological makeup of the network approach. It posits that the substance of relationships consists of three different elements – actors, resources, and activities. Actors are entities within the network. They find themselves in a constant struggle

over control within the network, so even though they create value together, their individual goals do not have to match. Resources are comprised of all assets that are controlled by the actors within the network. They include – but are not limited to – materials, human capital, patents and licences, marketing, and financial capital [Fonfara and Hauke, 2009]. They are used by the actors to improve the competitiveness of the relationship and create value [Fonfara, 2012]. Activities are all actions that actors take in regard to resources. They can either transform resources (to increase their value) or transfer them (to carry out a transaction between actors) [Håkansson and Johanson, 1992].

Taken together, these three layers constitute a network of relationships as understood by the network approach. It is on these basic building blocks that the definition of value creation within the framework of the network approach is based, with value being seen as a result of “combining and recombining resources, coordinating activities and connecting individuals within and across businesses” [Ford, Mattsson and Snehota, 2017, p. 30], which is then assessed by the actor based on the difference between the benefits and sacrifices resulting from this process. Consequently, the concept of value is treated as something subjective and incorporating both financial and non-financial elements [Ellegaard, Medlin and Geersbro, 2014].

The three basic elements of the ARA model are also a fundament on which the network approach builds its concept of power. The power of any given actor can be explained as the amount of control they exercise over the resources and activities within the network [Håkansson, 1992]. Thus understood, power serves as a major source of network mobilization and change [Fairhead and Griffin, 2000]. It is also a key factor in determining how much value created within a network is captured by the respective actors [Baraldi and Lind, 2017].

3 Toward a B2C network typology

3.1 Network approach in the B2C context

It is important to note that the theoretical framework of the network approach has been grounded in the distinction between B2C and B2B markets – with its proponents arguing that traditional Kotlerian marketing (where the seller is the only active side of the transaction) while adequate for the former, does not really apply to the latter, since in B2B markets, both sellers and buyers are equally important in the process of value creation [Cova and Salle, 2008]. Due to this assumption of the fundamental differences between both the markets, it was only natural that two separate types of marketing should exist – with the network approach filling the role of the designated B2B marketing.

However, the B2B/B2C dichotomy itself has been criticized from its very inception [Brennan, 2003; Coviello and Brodie, 2001; Pels, 1999; Fern and Brown, 1984]. Furthermore, multiple authors argue that whatever merits this distinction might have had in the past, the recent changes in technology, particularly the development of the internet, empower consumers to such a degree that the differences between both markets (and consequently – schools of marketing) keep diminishing [Wind, 2006; Cova and Salle, 2003]. With the technological infrastructure, consumers are capable of engaging in all sorts of interactions with companies – such as two-way communication, providing and transforming resources in the form of knowledge, skills, and capital, and renegotiating meanings ascribed to brands and products [Wieczerzycki, 2014]. In light of the above, it seems unreasonable to limit the application of the network approach only to the B2B market.

It is important to note that within the B2C marketing literature, there already exist a number of concepts (usually borrowed from sociology) that have been used to describe phenomena akin to relationship networks. Particularly often invoked is the metaphor of community [McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001], with others, such as tribe [Cova and Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 1999] and public [Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016] also being utilized in some publications. However, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no attempts at approaching this subject holistically. The network approach provides an ideal theoretical framework to compare these constructs: examine their structures, the resulting

power dynamics, and their capabilities for value creation. These three aspects are important, because they are likely to be the areas in which B2C networks differentiate themselves from the B2B ones. Individuals and organizations differ in terms of communication patterns and decision-making [Csaszar and Eggers, 2013], so the way they are placed within the structures and how much control they possess determines the functioning of the entire network. Moreover, organizations and consumers differ in the ways they perceive and define value [Priem, 2007]. As stated in the previous section, the value always relies on the actor's assessment, but it is doubly so in the case of B2C networks, which consist of vastly different types of actors – with companies pursuing iA innovation, knowledge, and capital [Hitt, Ireland, Sirmon et al., 2011] and consumers being more focused on much less tangible in-use value [Vargo and Lusch, 2004]. This in turn further impacts networks' activities and goals in the value creation process.

B2C networks face unique challenges not only in regard to value creation, but also in terms of value capture, which is inherently connected with power within the network [Baraldi and Lind, 2017]. As stated in the previous section, control over resources and activities is a source of the actor's power within the network. And despite the aforementioned technological empowerment of consumers, few of them have access to resources on a level comparable to that of companies – which can lead to severe power asymmetry within a B2C network. This in turn can potentially result in all value created in the network being captured by the company [Cova and Dalli, 2009]. While some consumers do not mind the company profiting from their work and are content with only capturing intangible value (such as satisfaction from volunteering for a favorite brand [Cova, Pace and Skålén, 2015]), others challenge the corporate actor in the hope of capturing some financial value as well.

To investigate the power dynamics and value creation processes of B2C networks, we will examine the aforementioned sociological constructs – of public, community, and tribe – and reintroduce them to the grounds of management science using the theoretical framework of the network approach.

3.2 Publics

The type of B2C network, where the company holds the majority of power and control over resources is quite common on the internet (particularly in social media). It is usually comprised of independent consumers centered around a single focal actor – a company. In this sense, they resemble the strategic networks of B2B markets. However, in this type of B2C network, the relationships between participating consumers are rare, if not altogether nonexistent. Most of the links are between the central actor – who serves as a content producer – and the members of their audience. This alienation of consumers within a network is the main source of power of the focal actor – since there are no ties between consumers, it is hard for them to oppose the company collectively.

Considering how common B2C networks of this type are, it may be tempting to follow the vernacular and just describe them using the umbrella term of community. However, this metaphor does not really work – while a community can be centralized, it is a group of people who are connected with each other [McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Fischer, Bristor and Gainer, 1996]. We believe that this type of network can be adequately explained not through the concept of community, but by utilizing another sociological construct – a public.

The term has been introduced to sociology by [Tarde, 1901]. It served as an antithesis to the other, already conceptualized collective phenomenon – crowds. While the latter are strictly physical, deriving their unity from the proximity of its participants occupying the same space at the same time, the interactions and relationships in the former are mediated – mainly through the press in Tarde's time, and now through the internet as well. In other words, such publics are born when a text or other cultural creation starts circulating in the society, and people gravitate toward it, consume it, relate to it, and refer to it [Warner, 2002]. They are based around consumption, rather than interpersonal relationships, which is why they better fit the described B2C networks than the concept of community.

As previously stated, publics are highly centralized networks of relationships. The focal actor, usually the company, is the one that creates content that other actors in the network consume. While most of the time this content is connected with the company's product or service, it also usually revolves around a more

symbolic dimension of the offering – such as the values, personality traits, and lifestyles projected onto it. This can be observed on brand social media channels, where members of the public consume and interact with not the product itself, but rather the company's marketing communication. This communication can also rarely ever be reduced to a mere praise of the product, but rather concentrates on what the particular brand stands for – both in form and the message itself. That is why publics are actual, existing relationship networks, rather than just an abstract sum of transactions.

The relationships within the public are usually highly asymmetrical. Most of the time, the focal actor is the one initiating all interactions, by providing the other actors with content, to which they then react. Their actions may lead to further interactions between both sides, but it is hardly a given. Again, it can be observed on Facebook or Instagram brand pages, where subscribed members react *en masse* to the content, but only a handful of them receive any acknowledgment from the content creating actor, and even fewer are actually able to participate in a prolonged conversation. In this sense, the publics to a large extent follow the modernist vision of the consumer who passively devours the value created by the producers [Firat and Venkatesh, 1995] and of the collective that is based mostly on functional connections (between those who create, and those who consume) rather than emotional relationships between the participants [Fischer, Bristor and Gainer, 1996].

In regard to the control over resources and value creation within a network, the asymmetry of relationships can be seen as even more severe, with the focal actor providing most of the value by creating content, whereas the surrounding actors contribute by providing their attention (which can then be monetized by the focal actor) and sometimes participating in the discourse surrounding the content.

However, there are cases when peripheral actors in publics become more active in regard to creating and transforming resources within a network. The key method of achieving this in publics is crowdsourcing [Howe, 2006]. The focal actor can ask the other participants of the network to pull their knowledge, skills, and creativity together to solve a problem, answer a question, or create something [Kleemann, Voß, G. Günter and Rieder, 2008]. Usually, the tasks undertaken by the peripheral actors are fairly simple – such as coming up with a name for a new product or choosing a new flavor, and so on. Sometimes, however, they require more work and skill, as in the case of creating a fanart regarding the brand or the product. An example of members of the public providing highly sophisticated skills and creating valuable resources to the network can be found in the case of the game developer inXile Entertainment. While developing its next product, *Wasteland 2*, the company asked its fans to participate in the creation of 3d assets needed for the game. It provided the public with concept art depicting the objects that the consumers were to create, as well as some basic requirements regarding the parameters of the 3d models, such as polygon counts, texture resolution, and so on. Based on this information, consumers could create the assets, which would then be uploaded to Unity Asset Store – a digital platform where 3d models can be sold. InXile Entertainment would then purchase the models that met their standards from the consumer who created it [Rose, 2012]. This is also a rare case of actors other than the focal one capturing some of the financial value created within the public-type network, as usually consumers participating in crowdsourcing do not get compensated, and the only value they receive is the satisfaction of contributing to the network [Kleemann, Voß, G. Günter and Rieder, 2008].

There are also rare examples of publics in which reliance on the peripheral actors of the public to provide resources and create value is paramount to the functioning of the entire network. Such publics can be found on livestreaming platforms, where interactions between the streamer (be it a prosumer or a company representative) and the audience are core to the entire experience of the service. Sometimes the peripheral actors' input is reduced to just asking questions to the focal one or donating money to them, but they can also take the form of a game between both sides. Some products made with streaming in mind provide additional features with the sole purpose of fostering these types of interactions between the streamer and the audience. The game *Party Hard* can serve as an example of such a product – it is integrated with the streaming platform Twitch.tv in such a way that it allows consumers to influence the events taking place in the game, by way of popular vote. This can be used to make the particular level easier or harder for the focal member (usually the latter) – for instance, by summoning additional enemies or

creating an unexpected turn of events [Wiczerzycki, 2016]. This sort of rivalry between the members of a public becomes the key part of the entire experience of watching a stream.

A situation in which the inputs from peripheral actors within a public are even more crucial to the functioning of the focal member and the entire network can be observed in the case of AI Dungeon, a text-based game, in which a player cooperates with an artificial intelligence (AI) to create a story. The player decides the actions of the protagonist by typing them, and the AI describes the consequences and plot developments. The inputs from different players are used in the learning process of the AI, so that the way in which it creates stories evolves over time. In other words, the entire network pulls their resources to create value, and the contributions from peripheral actors are not supplementary, but are an indispensable building block of the service itself.

3.3 Communities

As has been established in the previous section, oftentimes companies find themselves in a privileged position at the center of B2C networks, with consumers playing the roles of peripheral actors. However, when relationships start forming between the consumers themselves (so-called C2C relationships), they can lead to the diminishing of power asymmetry between both types of actors. Thus, a second type of B2C network is born, which – due to the existence of C2C relationships – best fits the sociological concept of community, understood as a set of social relations among people [Hillery, 1955], sharing some sense of belonging [Wild, 1981].

For communities of consumers, the unifying trait evoking this sense of belonging is the consumption of the company's products, which is the reason for the central position of the firm (or the brand) within the structure. While McAlexander, Shouten, and Koenig believe that “brand community is customer-centric, [in] that the existence and meaningfulness of the community inhere in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves”, they themselves admit it is a matter of perspective [2002, p. 39], and not the structure itself. While research can be conducted with emphasis on things such as brand culture, ethos, or consumer experience, ultimately for a community to exist, a shared point of reference – the company or brand itself – must exist within a network. This is reflected in the authors' studies, where the communities are always centered around a single brand, such as Harley-Davidson or Jeep [McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002]. Only through shared connections to the brand, all the other relationships and characteristics can emerge. Other authors, such as Muniz and O'Guinn, state this outright, describing brand community as “explicitly commercial” [2001, p. 415] and define it as “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” [2001, p. 412].

It is important to emphasize, however, that by virtue of being comprised of C2C relationships in addition to B2C ones, communities are not as completely defined and dominated by the company taking place at its center, as are publics. These inter-consumer ties lead to a smaller power asymmetry within the network in comparison to publics, as communities are less reliant on the company to function in an everyday context. While they still depend on the company actually delivering the products or services around which the community is centered, and which creates its initial *raison d'être*, for many communities, this offering is merely a starting point in the process of socializing and expressing their creativity by carrying out their own projects and ideas. This highlights two aspects of communities – the relationships that constitute them are both emotional and functional. In sociology, they are referred to as *Gemeinschaft* (archaic or postmodern, personal aspect of community) and *Gesellschaft* (modern, organized, rational aspect), respectively [Fischer, Bristor and Gainer, 1996].

Another important characteristic of community-type B2C network is its superior ability to perform resource-transforming activities, and, as a result, create value for the company and the entire network. Whereas peripheral actors within publics are capable of providing value to the focal actor, their contribution is ultimately limited to generating a plethora of ideas or assets (like artwork). Evaluating and incorporating these contributions are left to the central actor. Communities, on the other hand, are perfectly capable of fulfilling these functions by themselves. For instance, while members of the public would most likely send

their fanart directly to the focal actor, members of the communities would rather share it with each other on an independent hub site. A good example of consumers within community-type B2C networks creating value with little input from the company itself is the case of a modding community centered around the video game, *Warcraft III*. The company behind the game – Blizzard Entertainment – created the main product and provided consumers with tools that allow them to create new maps, units, or even entire game modes. The community organized itself into teams, each coming up with projects of their own. One of the game modes created in such a way – The Defence of the Ancients, or DotA for short – became so popular that it became a part of official tournaments organized by the developer [Blizzard Entertainment, 2005]. Moreover, it gave birth to an entire new genre of games – MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) [Funk, 2013] – with titles produced by professional studios, and a few of them, like *League of Legends*, becoming some of the most popular video games in the world [SuperData Research, 2019]. While consumers are capable of creating value within simpler B2C networks like publics (the aforementioned case of *Wasteland 2*), it is in communities where they can truly thrive, because there they can organize and manage themselves, rather than being managed by the company.

Communities are not only more likely than publics to pull their resources together to create value – they also have a higher chance of actually capturing the value as well. This happens due to the fact that communities exercise more control not only over what they create, but also on how their creations are distributed, promoted, and even priced, allowing them to distance themselves from the company itself, and create brands of their own. One example of such a thing occurring would be the aforementioned modding communities within the gaming industry, many of which monetize their work. This can be done either through charging fellow consumers money for access to the mods, or by utilizing crowdfunding methods. Using services such as Patreon, these communities allow other consumers to become their patrons and support the community by monthly donations. Consumers have also stood up to companies that tried to recapture this value in the past. For instance, Valve – a company owning Steam, a digital distribution platform for video games – tried to introduce a service, in which mod creators could sell their mods. However, the creators would retain only 25% of the revenue, with the company itself taking the remaining 75% cut. This drew heavy criticism from consumers, which in turn prompted Valve to give up on the idea [Prescott, 2015]. Similarly, after the aforementioned Blizzard Entertainment failed to capture the value created by modders when they came up with DotA, the company tried to prepare for similar situations in the future. When the revamped version of *Warcraft III* (*Warcraft III Reforged*) entered the market, its terms of service agreement contained a paragraph giving the company the intellectual property rights for any new map, scenario, or game mode created by the consumers. This, paired with other issues with the product identified by the consumers, resulted in a so-called review-bombing on MetaCritic (a review aggregating site). Consumers not only organized themselves to bring the average score for the game as low as possible (which ended up on the level of 0.4/100), but also actually brought up the ranking of the only title, which was scored even lower – all to ensure that *Warcraft III Reforged* held the title of the lowest scored game on MetaCritic [Tassi, 2020].

3.4 Tribes

As discussed above, both the publics and communities are networks where the company plays the role of the central actor, around which the entire structure is built (even though they differ in the extent of control that the central actor exercises over the network). However, there are also B2C networks in which corporate actors are not so structurally privileged, and their control is limited even further. The lack of a corporate actor at the center means that such networks cannot be comprised of just the fans of the particular brand or company. Instead, the relationships connect actors who share common interests, passions, or values, which then dictate their consumer behavior and product selection. In other words, while in publics and communities the company, brand, or the object of consumption precedes and determines the existence and characteristics of the network, in the case of the third type, it is the other way round – the shared culture and values come before the consumption in a chronological and axiological sense. This type of B2C network fits the definition of another collective phenomenon found in sociology – a tribe.

Tribes have been conceptualized by Maffesoli – a sociologist and postmodernist thinker. He used the term to describe small neo-archaic collectives, for which the source of unity is not the shared territory (as in the case of traditional tribes), but the affectual and axiological similarity of its members [Maffesoli, 1996]. The shared values, opinions, and lifestyles create what Maffesoli refers to as “affectual nebula” – experiencing the other in an organic and emotional way. This being together is mostly ludic in character – in other words, it is not directed toward any particular goal, but mainly serves as a source of pleasure for its participants. The members of the tribe do not serve functions, as in an organized society – they merely play roles that are not really meant to be useful or have any concrete purpose [Knapik, 2011]. This, as Maffesoli calls it as “undirected being together”, is the main thing differentiating a tribe from a community, which is both emotional and functional in character – whereas communities have elements of both *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, tribes display attributes only of the latter. Even when the tribe is centered around values that would suggest the existence of some sort of political agenda or purpose, more often than not, affirming those values serves mostly as a way of manifesting the consumer’s identity as a member of the tribe [Bauman, 1992].

As previously stated, tribes such as B2C relationship networks possess a decentralized structure. Whereas in the case of publics and communities, the company holds the position of a central actor providing the context for the functioning of all other actors within the network; at the heart of the consumer tribe lies not a company, brand, or a product, but a certain philosophy [Mitchell and Imrie, 2011]. The company’s role in such a network is not to dominate it and build all its structures around itself, but rather to participate in the network as one of the members subscribing to this particular way of life and a set of values. For instance, when Gilette ran its campaign against toxic masculinity, it did not really position itself at the center of the entire discourse over the issue – it merely presented its stance and became one of the members of the tribe focused around feminist ethics. For consumers participating in the tribe, products from corporate actors become symbols of membership and tribal identity – thus leading to the creation of what Baudrillard refers to as a sign value – a value derived from the product’s meaning within a social context [Baudrillard, 1981]. For instance, a work of art may symbolize wealth or good taste. On the other hand, brands such as Starbucks and Apple have become almost synonymous with the hipster subculture. Hence, some consumers choose the products of these brands solely for the purpose of manifesting that they identify with this particular tribe and its set of values. Creating sign value is the main mode of value creation within tribes – they rarely engage in creating more tangible types of value, due to the aforementioned lack of goals, direction, and other characteristics of *Gesellschaft*.

Tribes display the lowest (among the three described types) asymmetry of power and control between companies and consumers. While companies and brands can be influential actors within a tribe, especially once they become a symbol of its values, this status is awarded collectively by other actors and can be easily revoked, should the company cease to adhere to the tribe’s defining rules and values. In this sense, it can sometimes be easier for a company to exist outside the boundaries of the tribe and treat its members just as one of the consumer segments, rather than trying to build actual relationships within the said tribe. For instance, vegan consumers can be less demanding and more forgiving toward restaurants that merely add some meatless options to their menus, than in the case of a strictly vegan food joint. Should the company actively positioning itself as a member of the tribe fail to meet its standards, other actors might not only exclude it from the network, but also turn it into an antisymbol, making it really difficult for the company to ever reach this particular part of the market – thus modifying the sign value of company’s products in such a way that it is harmful to the said company. In recent times, there has been no shortage of examples of tribes turning on businesses that tried to participate in them. For instance, when Pepsi Co. launched its commercial with Kendall Jenner, invoking the imagery of Black Lives Matter marches, the consumer tribes engaged in this social movement felt alienated rather than supported by the company, due to its apparent lack of understanding of the movement’s core values. Consumers found it insulting that in the commercial, all it took to end all violence was handing a can of Pepsi to a police officer by a White celebrity [Batchelor and Hooton, 2017]. Similarly, when the Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling tried to become a member of the tribe supporting LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights by announcing that one of the characters – Albus Dumbledore – was gay, the tribe (after the initial enthusiasm) turned against her, once it became clear that the inclusiveness in the Harry Potter universe existed only in the paratext (i.e. the author’s

comments and other supplementary material), and not in the books/movies themselves – including those that were released after the initial reveal by Rowling [France, 2019]. The tribe interpreted it as an attempt to buy into its good graces without showing any actual commitment to the tribe's values through the medium that actually matters – the product itself [Bundel, 2019].

On the other hand, sometimes the sign value-modifying activities of tribe-type networks can reach even those companies that not only exist outside their boundaries, but do not even consider their members to be their target consumers. For instance, the luxury brand Burberry became popular among the consumer tribe of football (soccer) hooligans – to the extent that it became widely associated with this particular tribe, which in turn threatened the brand's popularity among its target high-market segments. In other words, the tribe managed to change the meaning ascribed to the brand it had little to do with, forcing the company into a peculiar relationship. While ultimately Burberry managed to regain control over its image, it still remains a fascinating case and an example of how powerful consumers as actors within tribe networks can be.

4 Case studies

4.1 Casio G-shock public

A model example of public-type network of B2C relationships can be found in the case of Casio G-Shock. G-Shock is a niche brand of hand watches characterized by the unique aesthetics and great durability of its products. The target segments for these watches are people that live an active lifestyle, like travelers and athletes.

For a time, Casio has relied on multiple marketing agencies to carry out marketing communication for this brand. This proved to be less than ideal since the by-the-book and cliché-ridden approach to communication utilized by the agencies, who did not understand the product nor did its audience fail to engage the consumers. Ultimately, in 2016, Casio decided to centralize its marketing communication by moving it in-house, to make it better suited to its audience's tastes [Sproutsocial, 2017].

To this end, Casio utilizes several social media channels – such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. The content published on these pages displays a strong focus on storytelling, presenting the product in a plethora of different contexts through collaboration with artists, sportspeople, pop cultural franchises, and other brands. Such posts, photos, and videos aim to portray the unique relationships these actors share with the brand. Doing more than simply singing the praises of the product, this type of content is interesting for consumers sharing a particular lifestyle and set of interests, thus constituting value in and of itself. This consequently draws consumers to establish stronger, long-term relationships with the brand via these social media channels, by consuming not only the product, but the marketing communication as well, fostering the development of a public-type network of relationships in the process.

It is important to note that this B2C network remains centralized around the brand itself – symbolically, structurally, and power-wise. While the public consists of consumers sharing (at least to some extent) similar lifestyles (thus being members of several separate, tribe-type networks), within the scope of its social media channels all B2C relationships are centered around the G-Shock brand and its products. The relationships within the public are mostly bilateral, connecting individual consumers and the brand, with C2C relationships between consumers themselves being scarce. This is mirrored by the interactions taking place within the scope of G-Shock social media channels – they consist mostly of individual consumers reacting to the content that has been published by the company. The brand, on the other hand, responds to some of those reactions – but not to all of them. Thus, there is a noticeable asymmetry in communication, with the company having a much stronger voice than the consumers.

Power and control within the structure of the network are likewise held mostly by the company. The corporate actor has full administrative control over the social media channels, which means they can publish and delete their contents as they please. The brand creates most of the value within the network, with consumers' main contribution being their attention, which the company then monetizes, converting

it into sales and thus appropriating it. That being said, there have been instances of consumer actors of the network contributing to the value creation process. For instance, the G-Shock Facebook page occasionally showcases photos sent by consumers displaying their watches in different contexts and situations under the hashtag #fanphotofriday. In the past, consumers could also participate in the so-called Tough Test Team initiative by submitting their own ideas on how to creatively test the durability of the product. The company would then pick the most spectacular ones and carry out the testing with the whole process being broadcasted on television. In other words, consumers within the public could engage in the value creation process through structured crowdsourcing initiatives. The control over the said process still lies mostly in the hands of the company, who moderates the creative input from the consumers. Thus, created value is then captured mostly by the company, which uses it in its marketing communication.

4.2 IKEA hacking community

To exemplify the community-type B2C relationship network, we will examine the phenomenon known as IKEA hacking and how the relationships between IKEA and its consumers are shaped around it. IKEA hacking revolves around utilizing IKEA products in a creative way – by combining elements from different furniture to create something completely new and defying official designs. Examples include combining several doll beds into a single bunk bed for cats or turning a couple of children beds, tents, and some other materials into a castle-themed bed which doubles as a playground.

At its core, IKEA hacking is an act of individual use value creation by consumers – with each consumer adjusting the product's utility to his own unique needs. However, as it grew in popularity, people started to exchange their ideas and designs. A multitude of different community hubs rose up organically, with no involvement from the side of IKEA itself. There are dedicated sites, discussion boards, and social media pages devoted to spreading this concept and its different implementations.

Here, the major difference between the IKEA hacking community and the G-Shock public discussed above becomes apparent. While in both cases a network of long-term relationships between consumers and a company has been established using social media, in the case of IKEA it was an organic bottom-up effort, whereas the development of G-Shock public has been actively encouraged by the company itself. Moreover, while symbolically the IKEA brand still remains at the center of the network (similar to the G-Shock public), it exercises a much smaller degree of control over the entire structure and the value creation process. Initially, IKEA displayed a downright hostile attitude toward hacking its products, issuing a cease and desist letter toward one of the big community hubs (namely, ikeahackers.net), once it allowed some ads to display on its page to help maintain it [Yap, 2014a]. Soon, the company issued a statement in which permission to continue with IKEA hacking was given, as long as no financial profits would be made by the hackers in the process [Sullivan, 2014]. However, after the public outcry, the company reached out to the owner of the page and allowed her to continue her work without making any changes – even regarding the ads [Yap, 2014b]. This demonstrates that IKEA's power within the network – at least in regard to value capture – is limited. It is further diminished by the fact that the community is spread out between several different hubs, none of which are actual official IKEA channels. Even if the company decided that it does not want anyone to engage in hacking its products or spreading the idea itself, it would probably be powerless to truly stop them, since it does not own the channels utilized by the community and thus cannot moderate them. In other words, while G-Shock public is dependent on the central actor, the IKEA hacking community will most likely keep existing and do its thing, whether IKEA likes it or not.

It is also worth noting that the value creation process is much less dependent on IKEA as well. The company provides the basic product which serves as a starting point, but the rest is up to the consumers, who design new hacks and maintain several separate communicational infrastructures. Thus, created value cannot be automatically captured by the company (although many companies use community creations to improve the official offering or marketing communication, it usually requires permission from the consumer). Therefore, while the IKEA products remain central to the main idea behind the community, the company as an actor does not play as prominent a role as G-Shock does for its public.

On the other hand, a position of power within the IKEA hacking community is being held by prominent consumer-actors – like the owners of pages serving as community hubs or those who contribute regularly with new ideas and projects. This means that relationships within the network are not limited to the B2C type. While the community collaborates and pulls its resources to create value, there is also a much more pronounced social aspect to it all, with people getting to know each other and bonding in the process. This is the final trait that distinguishes it from the public formed around G-Shock.

4.3 Disney and LGBT tribe

A good example of the characteristics of a tribe-type B2C network can be provided by the case study of Disney and its history with consumers belonging to the LGBT tribe. Disney is a global company, with a mission to “entertain, inform, and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling” [Disney, n.d.]. To do so with consumers hailing from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, sharing different, sometimes mutually exclusive sets of values and beliefs, who thus can find inspiration in widely different things, requires a careful balancing act.

Disney’s rocky relationship with LGBT consumers constitutes a part of this struggle. While in this context the company’s past is not as problematic as its historical portrayal of racial minorities, Disney still received its fair share of criticism for notoriously queer-coding its movie villains by equipping them with stereotypical LGBT traits like effeminacy and flamboyancy (in the case of male characters) or masculinity and brashness (for female villains), which could lead to the audience associating queerness with evil [Martinez, 2015]. That being said, many consumers belonging to the LGBT tribe still harbored positive feelings for Disney. Since 1991, they began organizing annual events at Walt Disney World – the so-called Gay Days. They were not officially endorsed by Disney itself, but the company did not try to discourage this phenomenon either, which garnered the ire of several conservatively oriented tribes. Eventually, Disney took a more proactive approach to building relationships with its queer consumers by officially endorsing and participating in the organization of Magical Pride and Disneyland Paris Pride events in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

A separate way of building positive relationships with the tribe revolved around Disney improving the representation of LGBT people in their stories and other products. Tribe members have long speculated about the sexual orientation of multiple established characters in Disney movies, like Elsa from *Frozen*, or Poe Dameron from the new *Star Wars* trilogy. The entire story of *Frozen* is to this day interpreted by some as a metaphor for coming out. None of those have been officially confirmed, however, with some, like Poe, being downright disproved in *The Rise of Skywalker* movie. For the longest of time, the tribe had to rely on their own reinterpretations of characters included in the fanfiction, fanarts, and other types of fan-made creations to identify with them and achieve some level of representation. When Disney finally included a gay couple in *The Rise of Skywalker*, many media outlets described it as a historical moment. J. J. Abrams, the director of the movie, stated that it was important to him for the LGBT people to feel represented [Vary, 2019]. However, once it became clear that the gay couple were just background characters with a couple of seconds of total screen time, the relationship between the company and the tribe soured. Consumers began criticizing Disney even more after the scene where the aforementioned pair kissed has been deleted from the movie in several countries (like China). Thus, while Disney tried to establish itself as a member of the LGBT tribe and establish positive relationships with its members, it found limited success due to its lack of commitment – likely stemming from the company’s fear of losing its conservative audience.

There are several key differences between this tribe-like network of relationships and both cases discussed beforehand. First, the company is not located at its center. From the tribe’s perspective, Disney is just one of the many different suppliers of content which can be utilized by its members to develop their own collective and individual identities, narratives, and symbolic systems. In other words, the LGBT tribe is focused mostly on the social aspect, to which B2C relationships with Disney and other companies are subservient. On the other hand, Disney wants to establish positive relationships with its members, to reach them as a consumer segment. However, that entails submitting itself to the tribe’s axiology (at least partially). In that sense, consumers in the LGBT tribe display a much greater amount of control in their

relationship with the company than those in the G-Shock public or IKEA hacking community, leading to a much smaller power asymmetry.

The differences in the case of the value creation process are also apparent. While other types of networks participate in the creation of the product or modify it in a physical sense, the LGBT tribe changes the symbolical meaning behind the works of Disney, lending them a level of diversity that the company itself was unwilling to provide. Thus, created value is then mostly captured by the consumers themselves, with the company profiting indirectly – by consumers familiarizing themselves with Disney’s characters through their tribal reinterpretations.

5 Discussion

As can be seen, while the B2C network typology was based on a single variable – the power distribution between the company and the consumers participating within a network – ultimately the respective types of B2C networks identified based on this criterion demonstrated a multitude of unique traits differentiating them. These differences between the three types of B2C relationship networks have been presented in Table 1.

A key thing characterizing B2C networks is the fact that regardless of the position of the corporate actor within their structure, their creation and existence remain largely outside of the company’s control. Tribes can outright precede a company’s existence, since they are based around philosophies and values rather than brands, companies, and products. Communities and publics are born the moment or sometime after the company enters the market, but their existence is not the result of a separate decision of the company – it is more of a side effect of operating on the B2C market or (in the case of publics) its *condicio sine qua non*. In that sense, the B2C networks are similar to the B2B networks as described by the Swedish school of the network approach – this is particularly evident in the case of the IKEA hacking community, which not only developed without the company’s involvement, but also for a time functioned in spite of it. Of course, the company can try to foster the creation of B2C relationships (as in the case of G-Shock public). For instance, it can provide a proper infrastructure – tools, procedures, and routines – to empower consumers [Mazur and Zaborek, 2014] and create virtual places where such networks can thrive. This can take the form of official discussion boards, profiles on social media, and so on. Another possibility is to employ community managers to establish and sustain constant two-way communication between both the sides. Companies can also provide additional content – such as articles, interviews, and photos – which will become another talking point for consumers, thus fostering the creation of the entire network. However, all these actions merely increase the likelihood of such structures forming, rather than directly causing it.

Another point that has to be emphasized is that the types of B2C networks described in this paper do not form a classification in a strict sense – first, it is possible that other forms do exist. More importantly,

Table 1. Comparison between three types of B2C relationship networks

Characteristic	B2C Network type		
	Public	Community	Tribe
Power asymmetry	High	Medium	Low
Position of the company in the network structure	Central	Central	Peripheral
Unifying trait	Consumption of company-produced content	Brand-related consumption and production	Symbols, ways of life, rituals
Character	Modern (<i>Gesellschaft</i>)	In-between modern and postmodern (<i>Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft</i>)	Postmodern (<i>Gemeinschaft</i>)
Main mode of value creation	Crowdsourcing	Community projects	Creation of meaning

however, the described classes are not mutually exclusive. Whether a particular consumer grouping can be perceived as a public, community, or tribe is largely dependent on the perspective applied by the observer. For instance, one of the consumers belonging to the community comprised of fans of a particular movie franchise could also run a YouTube channel with videos discussing the said movies, and turn it into a business of his own, with a public-type network around it – while still remaining an active member of the original community. In turn, this community can be a smaller subnetwork within a larger tribe, or even several of them – based around the values championed by this particular movie franchise, or comprised of fans of this particular genre, or even cinephiles in general. In other words, when trying to identify B2C networks existing on the market, the result would be largely dependent on the chosen detail level of the analysis, and the three described types of network are more of ideal types, rather than classes of logical division.

This is an issue that relates to the concept of network boundaries – demarcation lines and criteria that allow to distinguish those entities that are a part of a network from those that do not [Smith, 2014]. Within the IMP literature stream, they have been defined as “the mental linkages and interfaces between what we conceive as units and the flow of activities, events, and forces that keeps changing and moving them” [Munksgaard, Olsen and Prenkert, 2017, p. 217]. The network boundaries are notoriously difficult to identify [Kawa and Pierański, 2014], with many authors believing them to be purely subjective constructs, defined by the particular purpose they serve [Holmen and Pedersen, 2003; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson et al., 2002]. Such an approach has been put into practice by the Creative Assembly, a game developing company that treats consumer collectives within different social media sites – Facebook and Reddit – as two separate entities, with differing cultures, behavioral patterns, and so on. On this basis, the company has formulated different communication strategies for each of them [Carroll, 2019]. A structure that could be perceived as a single community-type B2C network (“fans of the company”) has been instead divided by the corporate actor into two separate networks – a public based around Facebook page, and a community on Reddit. In other words, how a member of the network or a researcher from outside of the structure defines the network boundaries, determines the number and the type of networks identified. This highlights the importance of defining network boundaries properly – consumers within different networks (and types of networks) can have vastly different goals, needs, and behavioral patterns. Discerning those differences is paramount to establishing and maintaining strong and positive relationships with consumers.

6 Conclusions

As demonstrated, B2C networks can take various forms, and the distribution of power between companies and consumers partaking in them can vary to a large extent, despite the intrinsic advantage held by the companies due to their size and resources. Regardless of the structure and power dialectics between the actors, all B2C networks are capable of pooling their resources to create value; however, the process, nature, and distribution of the created value largely depend on the type of network.

The limitation of the findings presented within this paper revolves around the fact that they have been mostly grounded in the literature analysis and supported by a limited number of case studies based on secondary data. However, this limitation simultaneously points to the possibilities for future research. The theoretical framework of the network approach boasts a number of research methodologies for empirical studies, which could be applied to B2C networks – particularly the network picture method, which would allow to contrast the ways in which the same network can be perceived by different actors – in this context, it would seem valuable to juxtapose network pictures from company’s and consumer’s perspectives.

An important takeaway from this paper is that B2C networks can serve as a valuable tool for consumer empowerment. While companies will most likely always remain privileged within a single B2C dyad due to their sheer size and access to resources, a properly structured network can somewhat level the playing field. On the other hand, from the companies’ point of view, ceding some of the power through a network can be compensated for by gaining access to new resources and activities, allowing them to better meet the demands of the market.

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