

Actor Roles, their Mental Models, and Influence in the Customer Buying Ecosystem of B2B2C Organizations

Abstract:

This study explores the actor roles within the residential construction industry through the buying ecosystem lens to understand their mental models and influence dynamics. Building on the buying ecosystem lens, the theory of roles as resources, and qualitative insights from interviews with 63 actors, it develops a three-dimensional typology. This typology explains how the actors' roles navigate institutional settings, foster ecosystem well-being and advocate for consumer value. The findings reveal role ambiguities and highlight the critical interplay between actors and institutions in co-creating value. The research underscores a shift from competition to collaboration, offering theoretical insights by linking organizational buying literature and service-dominant logic. Managers are provided with strategies to align resources and enhance marketing strategies through improved understanding of ecosystem interdependencies and various actor roles in the buying ecosystem.

Keywords: Buying ecosystem, B2B2C, typology

Track: Business-To-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management

1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of industrial companies have shifted their business activities and interests beyond their direct customers (Homburg et al., 2014; Wengler & Kolk, 2023). They positioned themselves as B2B2C companies and proactively engage in relationship-building with their indirect customers, extending up to the end consumer, and manage their experience, even though they often do not generate revenue directly from them (Iankova et al., 2019). In a B2B2C organization, the downstream value chain from direct to indirect customers becomes interconnected for the purpose of creating value (Mingione & Leoni, 2020). B2B2C can be viewed as an integration of multistage marketing activities as well as direct customer downstream support (Homburg et al., 2014): In a B2B2C market model, the supplier company (first B) co-creates substantial value with consumers (C). The B2B2C company enables and supports its direct customers (second B) to meet the needs of the consumers (Maurer, 2023). A B2B2C company's marketing and sales strategy must be based on a thorough understanding of various actors' needs and be aligned across multiple market stages (Brotspies & Weinstein, 2019). With the broadened focus on co-creating value with multiple actors, including the consumer, the perspective shifts from the traditional notion of selling an offering 'through' the supply chain to how various actors directly or indirectly benefit from the service-for-service exchange (Meynhardt et al., 2016). Thus, managers need to face the challenge of adequately understanding their market by mapping the company's stakeholders beyond the direct customer before formulating a marketing strategy (Brotspies & Weinstein, 2019).

Researchers have acknowledged that B2B(2C) buying and selling processes often require interfirm interactions and have suggested broadening the perspective of the traditional buying center with the service-dominant logic (SDL) to a buying ecosystem (Ehret et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2022). The buying center concept proposed by Webster & Wind (1972) has been one of the most enduring concepts for understanding the behavioral and psychological factors influencing the organizational buying process. Studies on the buying center have traditionally focused on intra-firm interactions (Cabanelas et al., 2023). However, prevailing megatrends, such as digitalization, globalization, and environmental consciousness, inherently contribute to the contextual complexity and volatility of today's business landscape (Ehret et al., 2024; Zhang & Watson, 2020). Consequently, Wengler & Kolk (2023, p. 220) stress that "more research is therefore required on the question if anything like an *extended, boundary-spanning buying center* really exists or not." Thus, expanding the long-established model of the buying center to a buying

ecosystem lens provides a comprehensive, systemic perspective that recognizes the relational and dynamic nature of marketing phenomena.

Notably, in a buying ecosystem, value is not only created individually, but also collectively. This emphasizes the interconnected nature of value. The actions of one actor can create a spillover effect, which in turn impacts other stakeholders and the overall value created (Meynhardt et al., 2016). This holistic, systemic approach also helps identify potential conflicts and synergies, thereby enabling more effective ecosystem management and overall ecosystem well-being (Frow et al., 2019). In the process of co-creating value with each other, actors simultaneously assume varying social roles. Akaka and Chandler (2011) have advanced the concept of social roles as operant resources (i.e., they can act on other resources). However, scholars have called for a comprehensive examination of the way the social roles assumed by actors impact their actions within a buying ecosystem (Pohlmann & Kaartemo, 2017). Depending on their mental models (i.e., their cognitive frameworks of how they make sense of their context), actors will adapt their behavior toward other actors (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Zeithaml et al., 2020). Mental models act as a filter through which information is interpreted and understood (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995), making them pivotal to understanding practices and influence patterns in the buying ecosystem. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1 How do different actor roles and their mental models influence the value co-creation process in the buying ecosystem?

RQ2 What strategies can B2B2C companies adopt to engage effectively with these actors?

This study synthesizes the roles of the focal actors involved in integrating resources for the purpose of buying, reselling, and using the B2B2C company's offerings based in their mental models. Building on in-depth interviews with 63 actors, a three-dimensional typology of actor roles in the buying ecosystem is developed.

2. Theoretical background

Moving beyond the traditional notion of dyadic relationships between business partners, buying ecosystems encompass a complex system of interconnected, co-evolving actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). The buying ecosystem is a novel term derived from the service ecosystem literature (Ehret et al., 2024). It is a self-organizing system of interdependent actors (such as suppliers, intermediaries, and owner-occupants as end consumers) that integrate resources to co-create value through complex purchasing interactions within a shared institutional framework (Vargo & Akaka, 2012). Buying ecosystems are dynamic and evolve through continuous interactions

driven by the collective goals and shared norms of the actors. Unlike the buying center, buying ecosystems encompass broader, interconnected relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of a single organization and beyond business relationships, reflecting the complexity and interdependence of modern markets. The concept acknowledges the fluid roles of actors (Ehret et al., 2024). In particular, the selling and buying processes become more intertwined, since an actor can assume both the role of ‘customer’ and ‘seller’ with both being beneficiaries in the buying ecosystem (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Describing the buying ecosystem from either the buying or selling perspective simply shifts the actors' perspective.

Value co-creation is governed by actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements. These established formal and informal rules and norms serve to guide the co-creation process and provide the overarching context within which roles are continuously (re)negotiated. While these institutions shape the enactment of roles and how they interact within a buying ecosystem, they are simultaneously influenced by these roles and interactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Over time, social roles emerge through certain repeated activities such as knowledge sharing, engagement, or integration which connect various actors (Akaka & Chandler, 2011). Social roles act as a framework that shape the mental models of actors' disposition and readiness to co-create value (Wajid et al., 2024). Thus, roles consist of practices expected from an actor in a specific position, influencing how effectively they can act within a buying ecosystem. When an actor enacts a role in a way that sets new expectations and creates a new social position, that role functions as an operant resource, meaning it actively influences and changes the buying ecosystem. Viewing roles as changeable and strategic resources allows scholars to see how actors in a buying ecosystem actively shape or reshape the practices of value co-creation, rather than passively adhering to predefined roles. By acknowledging that actor roles are not simply static positions, but dynamic resources that actors can creatively combine and recombine to shape institutions (Akaka & Chandler, 2011). The actor's attitude toward existing institutions (change vs. stabilize) represents the first dimension of the typology. However, actors within the ecosystem can either enhance or hinder institutional alignment and thus value co-creation based on their mental models, which shape their actions and decisions. Role ambiguity and misaligned goals often challenge the overall ecosystem's efficiency, underscoring the need for facilitators to align diverse actors toward collaborative, long-term value creation (Carida et al., 2022). Thus, the typology includes the dimension ‘ecosystem orientation’ to account for the actors' self-interest vs. focus on overall ecosystem well-being. Additionally, the traditional buying processes and the roles associated with them are changing fundamentally (Cabanelas et al., 2023). Buying decisions now involve a multitude of actors that co-create value. Among other factors, this is due to the emergence of

new (online) sources of information that are available to all actors, including the end consumer. The concept of value co-creation is reflected in the idea of “customers creating value *with* the firm, as opposed to the firm creating value *for* customers” (O’Cass & Ngo, 2012, p. 127). This has strengthened the role of the ‘user’ who attributes value to an offering during its usage (value-in-use) (Huber & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020). As a result, a more intricate network or ecosystem of well-informed actors has emerged, with the end consumer being acknowledged as an active participant in the value co-creation process. As the consumer assumes an active role in the value co-creation process, companies are compelled to develop a more integrated view of value, thus the authors add the dimension of ‘advocacy for consumer value’ to the typology.

3. Methodology and Research Context

The residential construction industry in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria (GSA region) and its associated buying ecosystem provides the research context for this study. The industry's project-based nature, characterized by temporary collaborations, presents challenges in coordination, knowledge sharing, and long-term relationship building (Bygballe & Ingemansson, 2014; Poblete et al., 2022). Since the buying ecosystem in the residential construction buildings context is an emerging phenomenon with limited academic literature, this study adopts a discovery-oriented theories-in-use research approach to examine the actor constellations, their roles, and how their mental models unfold in the buying ecosystem (Ehret et al., 2024; Zeithaml et al., 2020). This approach was developed specifically to elicit mental models and is an ideal methodological fit for this study (Zeithaml et al., 2020). Key informants were identified through purposive sampling. To account for a holistic view that reflects the reality from multiple perspectives in the buying ecosystem, various actors within the customer buying ecosystem were interviewed. These included a wide range of stakeholders from the traditional construction supply chain and beyond (e.g., suppliers, retailers, consumers; see appendix 1 for sample characteristics). This is in line with recommendations for further research “considering the complementary view of all the stakeholders contributing to the value co-creation process” (Mingione & Leoni, 2020, p. 92) in a B2B2C context. Hence, the authors develop a typology of actor roles in the buying ecosystem through in-depth interviews with 63 actors within the residential construction industry in the GSA region. Data analysis follows an iterative, abductive approach (Gioia et al., 2013).

4. Findings

The empirical findings highlight the complexities, role ambiguities of industrial companies, and the shifting role of the consumer within the buying ecosystem. By uncovering challenges of

co-creating value in the buying ecosystem, the need for an integrated, systemic approach becomes clear.

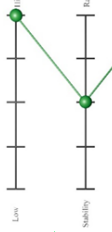
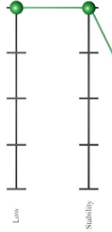
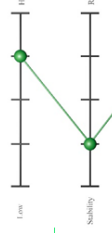
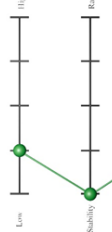
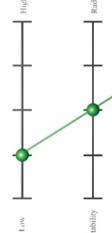
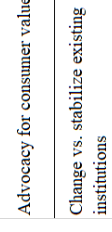
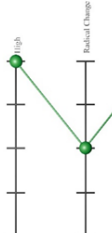
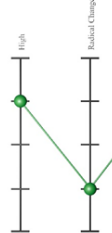
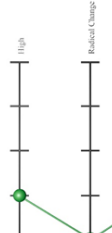
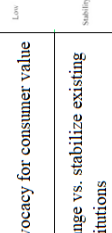
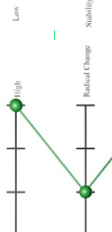
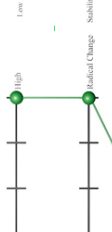
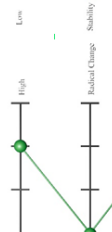
	 Collaborative Facilitator	 Innovative Disruptor	 Systems Integrator	 Conservative Maintainer	 Regulatory Steward
Exemplary quote	"Because we want to make it easier for everyone involved." (I20, wholesale)	"We want to be faster, better and smarter." (I14, supplier)	"You [...] are like the globe and have your feelers out to a lot of experts and you have to get the latest information from all the experts and pass it on to your client in a focused way." (I35, influencer and consultant)	"We're all a little bit in a comfort zone. It still works. And therefore, it will just remain that way." (I10, supplier)	"You always have to find the middle ground between checks and balances." (I42, industry association)
Advocacy for consumer value					
Change vs. stabilize existing institutions					
Ecosystem orientation					
Mental model	Synergy-driven Effective collaboration is key to ecosystem success.	Change-driven Change and innovation are essential for growth.	Efficiency-driven The ecosystem's success depends on seamless integration of actors' resources.	Stability-seeking Through stability and tradition risk can be minimized	Governance-oriented Regulations and standards are essential for ecosystem fairness and integrity
Underlying motivation	Influence expansion May use his or her central position in collaborations to expand influence, gain access to valuable information and leverage relationships across the buying ecosystem.	Market leadership Seeks to shape the market in their favor by setting new standards and practices. This role might leverage disruptive innovations as a way to establish market leadership and reduce competition.	Resource control Strives to attain and secure the central position within the buying ecosystem by optimizing resource integration and ensuring that all resources are managed through their expertise and control.	Self-preservation Aims at maintaining control over accustomed processes and institutions to minimize risk and uncertainty. This role might also resist change to protect existing power structures.	Institutional authority Shapes regulations to benefit its own interests or those of its allies, using regulatory authority to gain political or economic capital.
Examples from the residential construction buying ecosystem	A wholesaler strategically cultivates partnerships across the ecosystem to ensure smooth resource flow and mutual benefit. Their approach is driven by a desire to expand their network and solidify their central role as a key connector in the market.	An innovative supplier disrupts the traditional market by reengineering kitchen appliances, challenging established norms and aiming to reshape the industry through new design possibilities and by setting higher standards.	A prefabricated house provider integrates design and construction processes to deliver cost-effective and timely building solutions, positioning themselves as the go-to provider for streamlined operations.	An installer focuses on adhering to traditional methods and materials, consistently opting for well-established practices that have proven reliable over time.	An industry association works to ensure that all members comply with established safety and quality standards, shaping regulations that benefit the ecosystem.
Strategies to co-create value with this role	1. Co-develop a one-stop shop 2. Develop co-branded educational or informative initiatives (e.g., podcasts)	1. Foster creative exchange (e.g., industry panels) 2. Cooperate in form of innovation hubs	1. Offer technical support for integration 2. Develop modular, easy-to-adapt solutions	1. Consistent Branding 2. Create familiar structures and build common habits	1. Highlight compliance expertise and integrity 2. Introduce standardized compliance tools

Table 1: Overview of the different actor roles in the buying ecosystem and strategies

To this end, the authors develop a typology based on the dimensions 1) advocacy for consumer value, 2) collaboration with other ecosystem actors, and 3) impact on institutions. Five distinctive actor roles within the buying ecosystem are identified: the collaborative facilitator, the innovative disruptor, the efficiency-oriented integrator, the conservative maintainer, and the regulatory steward. Each of the six actor roles in the typology will be explained based on 1) their attitude towards institutions, 2) their ecosystem orientation, 3) their advocacy for consumer value, 4) their mental models and motivations, and, finally, 5) strategies to co-create value with this actor (see table 1). In S-D logic thinking, understanding how to best co-create value with these roles will ultimately positively impact co-creation with the consumer. The findings give a holistic depiction of the buying ecosystem, revealing actor roles, and their mental models.

5. Implications, limitations, and future research

This study provides B2B2C companies and other ecosystem actors with insights on how they could better align resources with other actors in their buying ecosystem. The typology of different actor roles and their influence can act as a tool to categorize the different actors according to their value co-creation efforts with the consumer and their willingness to integrate resources. This way, companies can find and categorize suitable partners for managing the co-creation processes with the consumer.

This study the first study to explore and structure the customer buying process in a B2B2C market model from a buying ecosystem lens. It offers a response to several scholars' call for a multi-actor perspective in SDL research (e.g., Mignione & Lenoie, 2019) by offering a holistic, systemic view to better comprehend the multistage environment of B2B2C companies and how different actors are engaged in the value co-creation processes within it. By linking the buying ecosystem and role theory, the authors demonstrate the impact of actor roles on institutional settings and value co-creation in the buying ecosystem. The resulting typology identifies the actor roles depending on their mental models rather than their social positions, thus setting it apart from other frameworks. The zooming-out to the meta-perspective of SDL offers a promising new lens to study relational ties between the actors and their roles in the customer buying process. The results affirm a shift away from cutthroat competition towards a more collaborative approach that prioritizes cooperation. The restriction to the residential construction industry's ecosystem allowed to control for confounding. However, it may limit generalizability of this study. Other industries might have different constellations of actor roles or should apply other strategies to address these actor roles and should be further investigated.

6. Conclusion

The research revealed that a variety of actor contribute to the overall well-being of the buying ecosystem by assuming distinct roles depending on their mental models, such as the collaborative facilitator or the innovative disruptor. The specific actor role influences the manner in which value is co-created, affecting aspects such as resource integration, institutional impact, and collaboration with other actors. This typology was developed through interviews with a wide variety of stakeholders across the buying ecosystem, and it elucidates the manner in which their mental models and practices influence value co-creation processes, addressing the complexity of multi-actor buying ecosystems in B2B2C settings. For instance, actors with a more collaborative orientation tend to enhance ecosystem well-being by promoting cooperation and efficient resource use, while those with a more individualistic or conservative mindset may resist changes, potentially causing inefficiencies or conflicts. The typology emphasizes that understanding these mental models allows B2B2C companies to engage more effectively with each actor, ensuring that all roles contribute positively to value co-creation and overall ecosystem well-being.

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Appendix

Functional level	No.	%
Top management	33	52%
Middle management	19	30%
Operational staff	4	6%
Self-employed	2	3%
Others (e.g., private clients)	5	8%
Gender		
Male	53	84%
Female	10	16%
Position in the buying ecosystem		
Supplier	28	44%
Distributor	7	11%
Contractor	5	8%
Private clients	5	8%
Retailer (DIY & Online)	3	5%
Architects and planner	3	5%
Consultant	3	5%
Platform provider	2	3%
Installer	2	3%
Industry association	1	2%
Other	4	6%
Average duration of the interview	01:04:58	
Total duration of the interviews	61:43:29	
Number of transcribed pages	1048	

Appendix 1: Sample characteristics of this study