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**The network orchestrator as steward:
Strengthening norms as an orchestration practice**

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The network orchestrator as steward: Strengthening norms as an orchestration practice

1. Introduction

Value co-creation is now widely conceptualized as a network (or ecosystem) issue (Jaakkola & Hakanen, 2013; Toth et al., 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Different companies – and not only the supplier company and the customer company - combine their resources to create value (Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016; Sinkovics et al., 2018; Reypens et al., 2016). Several works have already studied the activities that support resource combination (Gadde, 2004; Lindgreen et al., 2012; Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Park & Lee, 2018). In this vein, the Network Orchestration perspective (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006; Natti et al., 2014; Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013; Perks et al., 2017) offers an interesting viewpoint. Network Orchestration has been defined as ‘the set of deliberate, purposeful actions to create and extract value from the network’ (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). Orchestration practices comprise different activities¹ for ‘formulating’ the network, ‘directing and managing’ the value creation and value capture processes (Batterink et al., 2010; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Natti, 2018). Among these orchestration activities, not only are there ‘brokerage’ activities - those that strive to bring together actors (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006; Doz et al., 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013), there is also a set of orchestration activities that rather aim at *aligning* the behaviours of the different actors (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013; Perks et al., 2017). Yet, the literature has paid limited attention to this specific subset of orchestration activities that specifically aim at strengthening common norms between business actors. By norms, we refer here to what North (1990) describes as

¹ Practices are considered as activities taking place within social systems. Emphasis is put, when using this concept, on the contextualization, repetition and routinization of these activities (Giddens, 1984; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007). In this paper, because we do not focus, for instance, on how practices emerge, transform or diffuse (as in works attached to the ‘theories of practice’) we will use the term ‘activities’ and ‘orchestration activities’ rather than ‘practices’ or ‘orchestration practices’. We thus consider activities as *simply* sequences “*of acts directed towards a purpose*” (Hakansson & Snehota, 1995, p. 52).

the “shared rules of the game” that are “taken for granted” (Scott, 2008). Mouzas and Ford (2009) refer to these norms as the ‘constitution’ of a business network. These norms are necessary to the functioning of a business network: in their absence, “the possibility of business taking place between actors would be severely constrained” (Mouzas & Ford, 2009, p. 495).

Our objective is to contribute to a better understanding of those orchestration activities that specifically aim at strengthening common norms among business actors. To support this objective, our research questions are: 1/which types of common norms exist between actors of a business network? 2/ through which activities are these common norms strengthened? and, 3/ which actors conduct those orchestration activities.

Our article is structured as follows: Following our introduction, we present the theoretical cornerstones that underpin the topic, paying attention to how the literature has dealt with the role of common norms in business networks. Subsequently, we put forward the case of the French Electrical Equipment (E.E.) distribution network. Section 4 presents our findings and identifies common norms in the E.E. sector and roles played by B2B distributors. In section 5, we discuss our findings. The final section presents the theoretical and managerial contributions of our work.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Common norms in business networks

Different perspectives and approaches by different marketing scholars have dealt (more or less directly) with the idea of common norms between business actors.

The works on relational norms (Ivens, 2004; Ivens & Blois, 2004; Ott & Ivens, 2009) provide a first interesting perspective. As Ivens and Blois (2004) recall: “It is accepted that norms represent shared expectations” (p. 256). Indeed, norms define “rules of behaviour”, i.e. how

a “behaviour is appropriate” (Heide & Wathne, 2006; Vesalainen et al. 2020). Then, the norms that regulate an exchange become something that business actors have in common. Depending on the authors, the list of relational norms that can be considered as such may vary. Ivens (2004), Blois and Ivens (2006) describe up to ten relational norms. Yet, for Paulssen et al. (2016) for instance, “three norms have particular relevance in relational exchanges: solidarity, reciprocity, and flexibility” (p. 5867). Whatever the nature and number of norms considered, their importance for the ‘working’ of a business network is central. They provide the “principle of right action binding upon the members of a group” (Macneil, 1980, p. 38); they may manifest in the form of a shared identity (Paulssen et al., 2016); they bring goals into alignment (Stephen & Coote, 2007). They allow the business actors of a network to initiate and develop exchanges without ‘having to think out exactly the terms of an exchange at each point in time and in each instance’ (Ivens & Blois, 2004, p. 241).

More recently, the institutional perspective adopted by a growing number of marketing scholars (Husmann et al., 2020; Michel et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2017; Storbacka et al., 2019; Vargo et al., 2015; Wieland et al., 2016) has introduced ‘institutions’ (laws, rules, norms, beliefs, values and so on) as building ‘shared meanings’. Kantola and Järvinen (2012) for instance state that institutions “explain connections that create a sense of common purpose” (p. 270). Institutions structure reality by prescribing “shared meanings and possible actions” (Zucker, 1983, p.2). They are the rules according to which actors in a business network will coordinate and then co-create value (Wieland et al., 2016). Institutions are considered as ‘shared-rules of the game’ (North, 1990). Therefore, an institution (whether it is a law, a formal rule, a norm, a standard or a belief or value), as a ‘taken for granted rule’ (Scott, 2008; Edvardsson et al., 2014) creates some commonality between business actors.

2.2. Orchestration activities defining norms of actions

Network Orchestration is the process of ‘assembling and managing an inter-organizational network to achieve common goals’ (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013; Perks et al., 2017), in which the role of ‘orchestrator’ is accepted by the other network members (Müller-Seitz, 2012). By role we mean here, in accordance with Anderson et al. (1998), ‘what the actors intend, how they construct meaning in their situation and how they want to change it’ (p. 172). A role expresses activities ‘as emanate from the creation of sense-making processes that characterise each actor's own intentions and interpretations’ (Anderson et al., 1998, p. 172). Network Orchestration, as a process, acknowledges the role of a ‘lead firm’ as influencing other firms, but at the same time recognizes this influence as being limited; orchestration practices cannot be controlled by a single actor (Perks et al., 2017). Rather, Network Orchestration is more about *collaboration* between different actors of a business network (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). However, Network Orchestration is not *only* an issue of activities that ‘create value together in a network’, but also an issue of activities for value creation *through collaboration*. Collaboration cannot be imposed on network actors who might only be influenced through ‘discreet direction’ (Natti et al., 2014) or the ‘spurring’ of their interest (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013). Paquin and Howard-Grenville (2013) insist on the idea that ‘orchestrators’ in a network not only ‘plan and organize’ activities or ‘connect’ actors, but they are ‘uniting ideas’ around ‘common goals’ and ‘defining norms of actions’. Perks et al. (2017)’s position is similar to that of Paquin and Howard-Grenville (2013) in that they evoke Network Orchestration as also a question of “developing common goals, spurring actor interest and engagement, and/or defining norms of action” (p. 1625).

Insert Table 1 about here

Different authors have identified several types of orchestration activities. Table 1 presents the various orchestration activities discussed by scholars, wherein we identify those aiming to establish common norms between business actors. In creating this table, we paid attention to orchestration activities that have been described with reference to the “*common*”, “*shared*”, and “*joint*” goals or representations that were to be reinforced or developed among actors of a business network.

2.3. Conceptual framework

Based on the concepts discussed in the previous sections, we propose the following model (see Figure 1). It presents, in an integrative way, the different concepts we are using and how they connect one with the others.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We introduce the three parts of our model as follow.

. The general phenomenon (1) we are looking at is *network value co-creation* that we consider the widely shared vision of value creation among scholars. Research has put into evidence that, in a business network, different companies – and not only the supplier company and the customer company - combine their resources to create value.

. Our model (2) also builds on research on ‘norms’ and considers, along with several authors, that norms - as shared expectations - are defining rules of behaviour and, as such, are necessary to the functioning of a business network: they are organizing exchanges between business actors. In our model, norms are organizing the exchanges that allow resource combination.

. Finally, our model (3) also builds on different works on orchestration activities that consider purposeful activities of business actors to create and extract value from the network. Our model *introduces*, among the general set of orchestration activities, the concept of ‘specific orchestration activities’ that aim at “developing common goals, spurring actor interest and engagement, and/or defining norms of action”.

We propose to develop this initial model in two directions: the one of the types of common norms that exist between actors of a business network, and the one of the nature of the activities through which these common norms are strengthened.

3. Context of the Study and Research Methodology

3.1. Case description

The French Electrical Equipment distribution network provides an excellent empirical setting for observing orchestration activities at work and the emergence of new rules. Indeed, the Electrical Equipment (hereafter EE) sector is under profound reshaping because of exogenous factors such as the energy transition, the digital transition and the population getting older. In addition to that, new competitors are entering - Google and Amazon Business - who could be in position to redefine the rules of the game within the network. Thus, different actors, different strategies, different business models... co-exist in the EE sector. Potentially, because of that variety of behaviours, the issue of how *together* actors may co-create value can be raised.

The Electrical Equipment network counts many categories of actors, among which manufacturers, distributors, and installers (electricians).

- *Manufacturers* of electrical equipment are mostly concerned with the manufacturing of power distribution, distribution transformers, industrial controls, energy management, and so on. Most manufacturers are leading players operating in the global electrical equipment

industry, such as General Electric, Siemens, Schneider Electric, Legrand, Hager, ABB, Philips Lighting, etc. The French market is oligopolistic: Schneider Electric and Legrand dominate.

- The French EE *distribution* market is characterized by an oligopolistic structure. The two leaders represent 75% of the market, whereas the remaining 25% is held by independent distributors. While the leaders rely on a generalist positioning, they tend to become multi-specialists according to the segmentation of their customer portfolio and the change in customer demand. The independent distributors try to differentiate with niche markets, where they offer high technical value.
- *Installers* (electricians) install and maintain electrical equipment for industrial, commercial and domestic purposes. This activity relates to a very heterogeneous population, since it includes very small companies, fewer than 10 employees (95% of them installers), and very large groups with well over 1000 employees. Installers are specialized according to three segments of construction: industrial / residential / tertiary sector. Small installers work mainly in the residential sector, whereas industrial and tertiary sectors are largely dominated by major construction companies.

Until the mid-1990's, distributors of electrical supply were mostly small firms with a strong local reputation. From the mid-1990's, the two leaders absorbed a lot of small actors, becoming very large groups that were generally considered logistics specialists. Today, the rules of the game are evolving since the electrical sector is facing profound change due to energy transition, digital transition and the entry of the GAFAM into the fray. The balance of power between manufacturers, distributors and installers is being reshaped.

3.2. Data collection

This work is based on an in-depth abductive analysis of the French Electrical Equipment distribution network (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Our initial objective was to understand the role of the French distributors of Electrical Equipment in the change management process within their network of relationships. Thus, we considered the in-depth case study as the most appropriate for studying such an emergent process (Weick, 1979; Eisenhardt, 1989). During a six-year study we carried out 54 face-to-face interviews and conducted 14 participant and non-participant observations. We used semi-structured interviews to capture actors' different representations of their network, and to gain access to respondents' meanings (Van Maanen, 1979). To enable data saturation, we interviewed respondents from seven levels of actors within the network: energy providers, manufacturers, distributors, installers and installers' trade unions, DIY stores, individuals and architects. Key respondents were identified through snowball sampling (Coleman, 1958). For observation purposes, we attended three conferences organized by electricians' trade unions that brought together manufacturers, installers and contractors in the tertiary sector. We eventually presented the results of the study during two round-table discussions bringing together respondents and other practitioners from the EE sector in order to improve the managerial impact of our findings. Table 2 shows this multi-level approach to data collection.

Insert Table 2 about here

3.3. Data coding

All collected data was coded using Nvivo under Gioia methodology (Gioia et al. 2012). Our choice of an abductive research with a systematic combining approach greatly determined our coding process. Systematic combining is indeed a 'back and forth' process between empirical observation and theory. In this process, the researcher has a preliminary analytical framework

called “preconceptions” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 555) which evolves along with the fieldwork and back to theory. This was the same for data coding. Some a priori codes arose from the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) - ‘*Network*’, ‘*Role of distributors*’, and ‘*Resources of distributors*’, for instance. Some others came from certain theoretical analysis grids: questioning the existence of commonalities within the network, we investigated the orchestration activities of the EE network. Thus, we created the codes ‘*Collaboration*’, ‘*Positive perception of Partnership*’, ‘*Vision of the network*’ ‘*Commitment*’, ‘*Shared interest*’, ‘*Interdependence*’, ‘*Trust*’, and ‘*Information sharing*’ without presuming any prevalence in the interviews. The codes related to common norms were induced from the empirical data.

Insert Table 3 about here

4. Findings

4.1. Four representations are shared by all actors of the network

From our data we have identified four common norms that emerge among the actors of the network. These four dimensions can be considered as ‘taken-for-granted rules’ shared by the actors of the EE network, as those rules support the collective action within the network.

4.1.1. End-user centrality

End-user centrality means that all actions in the EE distribution network should be undertaken in order to achieve customer satisfaction through the fulfilment of the end-user’s usages. This norm is present in all interviews and communication materials of the EE network. All actors insist on the importance of understanding the usages of the end-user. Indeed, among the codes created in NVivo, the code ‘usages’ is the one with the highest

frequency (242) and the largest number of respondents (39). All levels of actors advocate the importance of focusing on end-users. Sometimes actors legitimate themselves through the focus on customers: *“there is no secret: in this business the customer is the one who makes decisions, not us!”* (Manufacturer); *“I have succeeded in finding new usages which are very smart and expected. It is precisely with the idea of value-in-use that I have convinced architects and now they understand the benefits of home automation”* (Installer). Manufacturers are aware of the importance of focusing on the end-users with a view to facilitating the use of products: *“When we deal with more complicated solutions on large industrial sites it has to be easy for the user”* (Manufacturer). Some manufacturers even make reference to a ‘value-in-use’, while admitting the difficulty of defining it properly: *“The key in smart building is the value-in-use that I can provide end-users with”* (Manufacturer); *“For years we thought that people would love lighting scenarios, but in the end it's only a gadget: no one has the same need”* (Manufacturer).

For large distributors, the network should start thinking in terms of ‘use’ and not ‘products’:
“The alpha & omega at the heart of our supplier relationship of tomorrow will be the customer and not the product!” (Distributor). Distributors insist on the fact that now the EE distribution network should create value for the final customers (end-users) and not only for direct customers: *“here is my key message: the new entrant in the relationship between distributors and manufacturers is the customer. The final customer. Because he/she has the needs”* (Distributor). For some distributors it seems that value-in-use has become the new norm. From this perspective, products are only considered as a basis for creating value-in-use: *“We don’t have to bother the customer with all the technical notions. We just want to understand how he behaves”* (Distributor).

Paradoxically, the installers are not that comfortable with the focus on end-users, or more specifically, on value-in-use. Even if they have direct access to the end users, they consider

themselves as technical experts and not as service providers. So, for them it appears rather complicated to go beyond the product itself: *“I think that most of our clients are not able to speak the B to C language with their clients”* (Distributor). For some installers, the focus on usages is meaningful only for specific new markets such as home automation: *“For you, it's different; you work in an emerging market where everyone does whatever they want, we don't even know the protocol that you use”* (Installer). Many installers even perceive end-users as threats because, with the Internet, customers develop basic technical knowledge about the products, and compete - in some ways - with the installers: *“The customer is much more informed than the installer! In 80% of the cases he runs straight to the web to check prices”* (Installer). Yet things are changing since new generations of electricians are more willing to focus on end-users and value-in-use: *“You have the younger generations who are settling down, there is a generational aspect at play, if the service suits them and facilitates their lives...”* (Installer).

4.1.2. Inclusivity

End-user centrality as a common norm leads to another: the idea that every actor should contribute to creating value with the end-user. This vision that we call ‘inclusivity’ is shared by all actors, according to our data. The network actors refer to in the data always appears as an inclusive space. Yet this has not always been the case. According to respondents, the EE distribution network used to be rather static and hierarchically organized around the manufacturers’ marketing strategy, with distributors having no say in this marketing strategy: *“The distributor had no influence over our marketing strategy, no influence at all. He was even snubbed by us in every aspect”* (Manufacturer). But the perspective is changing: *“We need to respect everyone’s margin when building our pricing. The pie must be fair for all.”* (Manufacturer). Manufacturers seem to be particularly sensitive to value-sharing as a signal of inclusivity in the EE network: *“When wealth is not shared properly within a network, you*

can kill the whole business. When you adopt a market perspective, you need to integrate the different margins of installers, distributors and manufacturers. All margins must be balanced” (Manufacturer).

Distributors also support this vision of an ‘inclusive’ network of actors: *“It’s our role for the sake of the network to develop the potential of the whole network in terms of expertise” (Distributor). “Our job within the market is to guarantee a good market for everyone” (Distributor). Along with manufacturers, fair ‘value sharing’ is mentioned: “Of course we will build together this ability to coordinate our network and develop its technical expertise. I will do my part of the job. As a consequence, since we share the effort, we should also share the cost” (Distributor). Commitment and respect are also mentioned: “We choose you [manufacturer] as a top brand for the segment, but we need you to show strong commitment to us” (Distributor). “Without mutual respect everyone focuses on their own interest. And we conclude a distribution deal, not a partnership one” (Distributor).*

This ‘never alone’ vision also has an impact among distributors themselves. Larger distributors do not want to play against the smaller ones: *“The role of large companies like us is to aggregate some start-ups because we are not good at all activities. We are like whales attracting smaller fish which clean the whale’s back: new start-ups take care of our weaknesses, we guarantee them funding and they guarantee us exclusivity for a certain time, during which they develop solutions. Thanks to us, they have access to the market that they wouldn’t have had before and they provide us with an agility that we can’t have because of our size” (Distributor).*

In a rather similar way, installers also refer to the necessity of the ‘inclusive network’: *“Everyone must agree on how to increase the size of the cake, otherwise we’ll all fail” (Installer). “There are certain things that are worth trying because if they succeed, I think there will be a collective benefit” (Installer). And again, fair value sharing is mentioned:*

“There is a pie and slices for the different actors of the sector. Some tell themselves ‘I’ll get a bigger slice’. Or we may all consider that it is our interest to have a bigger pie for all of us (...) we need to agree on how to enlarge the pie otherwise it won’t work” (Installer).

4.1.3. Collaboration

The previous shared vision emphasized the idea that no actor in the network wants to replace another one and that every actor has its role in the value to be created for the end-user. The third common norm that we discuss in this section is a little bit different since it refers to a shared vision of processes that should be adopted to work together. Thus, we consider that the ‘collaboration’ common norm deepens the ‘all together’ norm. Collaboration is indeed one of the central words in the interviews: within NVivo, ‘collaboration’ has a frequency rate of 347. There seems to be a call throughout the entire EE network for more coordination and a strong belief that collaboration really pays off, especially in terms of information sharing. Some actors concede that, because of past adversarial manufacturers/distributors relationships, such coordination could be tricky. Yet, they call for more coordination in the network: *“Information sharing between manufacturers and distributors just doesn't exist. We need to collaborate more if we want to get it all together, otherwise we will kill each other in a very effective way”* (Manufacturer).

Distributors share a similar vision and urge for partnership in the face of the GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) threat: *“Digitalization and the speed of technology freeze one another’s positions, and remind everyone within the network there is no way without true partnership”* (Distributor). *“We need to sit around the same table to analyse markets so that we know how to address them together”* (Distributor).

Installers also value collaboration with distributors: *“Both worlds have to collaborate and work together, or train themselves in order to achieve collaboration”*. Some installers

already rely on strong partnerships to develop their value proposition: *“We used to have supplier/customer relationships with distributors. Now we have developed partnerships and we have more enlightening and more constructive interactions”* (Installer).

4.1.4. A ‘common enemy’

There is a strong consensus in the EC network on the threat that GAFAM (and, more generally, actors considered ‘pure players’) represent. Respondents emphasize the power of GAFAM, who are seen as competitors with a cash flow that no actor within the electrical equipment network can even dream of: *“GAFAM have such huge cash flow reserves that they can fail 20 times. That’s their big advantage”* (Manufacturer).

It is interesting to notice that the common norm of collaboration we identified before is again referred to: *“The risk for traditional distribution is to consider GAFAM as kind of ghosts and that they will never enter the marketplace. We should instead sit around the same table because GAFAM will enter anyway. We should develop collaborative solutions that complete one another”* (Manufacturer).

This fear of new entrants is shared by all actors within the network. New entrants can be Amazon Business or Alibaba or any kind of specialized distributor acting as a marketplace. Sometimes distributors don't even know who their competitors will be in the future: *“The point with the Internet is that you don't know who you will face tomorrow”* (Distributor). In terms of sales, distributors mainly fear that Amazon Business or Alibaba will take the lead on commodities, that's why they really want to develop their services in order to differentiate from the competitors: *“We propose more and more services and we need to accelerate this approach because thanks to that we will build barriers to entry which protect us”* (Distributor). For installers the fear is mostly of becoming a subcontractor of Amazon Business or Alibaba: *“The closer to the end-user, the bigger the temptation to skip some*

actors. You'll always need someone to install the products. But you can keep the intelligence of parameters for yourself and prevent others from being able to build their prices" (Installer).

Regarding the solution to the threat of new entrants, there is a consensus between the different actors within the EE distribution network. Indeed, they all claim for more anticipation and more coordination (see previous section): *"The way for manufacturers to protect themselves from decreasing margins when working with Amazon or people like that is precisely to strengthen their bonds with distributors. It's the only way to preserve 100% traceability and keep good margins"* (Distributor). Some manufacturers are even willing to adopt a common marketing strategy: *"We need to stop our solo marketing. We do our marketing, distributors do their marketing. Collaboration is the sole key"* (Manufacturer).

In the following section we will discuss the role played by the B2B distributor in the EE network and question their ability to strengthen the common norms, as suggested by our data.

4.2. The B2B distributor as an orchestrator.

With the perspective of a network sharing common norms, the role played by the B2B distributor in the network must be discussed. The data points to a lot of expectations regarding the roles of distributors of electrical supplies. Indeed, our data shows that distributors take on their position in order to potentially orchestrate collaborative relationships within the EE network. If the *position* (Anderson et al., 1998) of B2B distributors is easily described as one of the actor occupying a 'middle space' (Rosenbloom, 2007) between manufacturers and professional customers (Gadde, 2014; Gripsrud, 2004), their *role* corresponds to what they 'intend' to do (Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 1998). Data analysis allows identification of four new roles played by distributors: 1/ The role of integrator, 2/ The role of customizer, 3/ The role of facilitator, 4/ The role of

responsibility promoter. These roles reveal the potential to strengthen the common norms we identified in the previous section, thus making the distributors appear as potential orchestrators of the network.

4.2.1. The role of integrator

Because of the large assortments distributors are coming up with, and the scale of services they are developing, they are in a position to integrate different products. They can for instance bundle together different products from different brands, and make them communicate with one another through a protocol they develop, thereby transforming products into an integrated offering: *“We don't have the expertise to make an energy diagnosis or to build a financial offer. Yet we have concluded agreements with companies acting either in the financial or in the energy management sector. We have concluded service agreements with some service providers. Now that allows us to propose a catalogue of services to our clients with many possibilities”* (Distributor).

Not only is this role of integrator developed by the distributors, it is also ‘accepted’ by other actors in the network: *“The two main distributors have evolved a lot. They have trained their teams; they have structured their processes. They have created specialized sales teams. Now they are able to carry out their own technical studies”* (Manufacturer); *“I think that everything distributors are currently doing is right – they have real strategic planning, deep thinking, they have the resources - they are taking the right directions. Service providing - that's a good idea”* (Installer).

By doing so, distributors strengthen the ‘inclusivity’ common norm. The multiplicity of products and brands offered by all manufacturers gain value through the integration created by distributors.

4.2.2. The role of customizer

Because of their proximity to installers and their marketing efforts to understand end-users, distributors are in a position to ‘customize’ their offering for different types of customers. The range of services they propose (training, technical support, information, maintenance, etc.) constitutes the adaptive part of value proposition in relation to installers and the end-user: *“In the service catalogue you find the basic service, but after that there is a scale of on-demand services for which the client agrees to pay according to the level of services he wants”* (Distributor). What drives the customizing process is the variety of customer experiences: *“There is not only one client experience but as many client experiences as there are clients. We need to move from a ‘buffet’ to a ‘piecemeal’ approach”* (Distributor).

By playing the role of ‘customizer’, distributors are strengthening the ‘end-user centrality’ common norm. The whole network is in a position to address the variety of end-users’ behaviours because distributors can bring an additional level of customization to the table.

4.2.3. *The role of facilitator*

Distributors see themselves as facilitators not only for their clients but also for their suppliers. Indeed, having developed the service expertise, distributors enable manufacturers to focus on product innovation, and installers on scaling the value of their installation: *“We try to shape some services that facilitate the lives of our clients. We educate installers and manufacturers; we try to make them aware that solutions exist and we try to sell those solutions. It's a complete approach in which we are no longer thinking just as products providers, but from the perspective of partnership agreements with service providers”* (Distributor). Again, not only is this role of ‘facilitator’ created by the distributors themselves, it is also largely acknowledged by other actors in the network. Manufacturers emphasize the professional attitude distributors have nowadays in their relationships: *“Just have a look at the relationship they have with their own clients; they set themselves up as true pros, they really intend to bring something new. They don’t want to be dependent on manufacturers anymore.*

They have their information systems which have evolved, and also the design of their local branches, because they want ... the human dimension is still very important. They organize many trade shows too.” (Manufacturer). Installers highlight the efforts of distributors to support them in all dimensions of their work: *“Distributors, they don’t want to sell cardboard boxes any longer, they want to support!”* (Installer).

By assuming the role of ‘facilitator’, distributors influence the strengthening of the ‘collaboration’ norm. They promote collaboration between the network actors to build a strong end-user experience. At the same time, being a facilitator contributes to strengthening ‘the end-user centrality’ norm: collaboration is justified first and foremost in regard to the value created for the end-user.

4.2.4. The role of responsibility promoter

Finally, distributors seek to play an increasing role. This role is linked to the ‘responsibility’ distributors want to show towards their partners and to the common future of the network. In our data, many words are used to describe the role of distributors: technical advisor, supporter, coach, team leader, and so on: *“We do have this approach of trying to enrich the whole network but not in a commercial sense”* (Distributor). *“I think that one of the next up-and-coming roles of the distributor will consist of reassuring installers on legal issues; we need to somehow be a firewall for legal issues”* (Distributor). *“I have in mind some installers who tell us: ‘if you haven’t been there, I would probably never have dared to go for this new sound system and video surveillance market”* (Distributor).

Again, not only is this ‘responsibility’ sought by the distributors themselves, it is also acknowledged by other actors of the network who emphasize its protective value: *“The distributors somehow protect the manufacturers: if Siemens and ABB don’t manage to*

penetrate the French market, it's thanks to the distributors. There is an important partnership” (Manufacturer).

In developing this ‘responsible role’, the distributor contributes to the strengthening of several common norms, in particular network inclusivity, collaborative governance and also the ‘common enemy’ (with the strong protective dimension of this role).

What B2B distributors seek to do in the EE network (their roles) can thus be understood through the different activities described in the previous sections. These new roles are not only consciously taken on by the distributors, they are also widely accepted by other actors in the network: *“I think that the Trade Association of Distributors of Electrical Equipment has a role to play because it creates a bond between manufacturers, distributors, installers, and so on....” (Manufacturer).* *“They [The distributors] are in position to define the rules of the game now” (Installer).* By assuming these roles that strengthen the common norms of the EE network, B2B distributors become orchestrators of the EE network.

5. Discussion

5.1. Strengthening common norms in the network

In this study, we have focused our interest on common norms that certain orchestration activities appear to strengthen. Indeed, we have argued that, among the orchestration activities that various scholars have described, some have a specific status: they aim to reinforce the ‘uniting’ (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013) of business actors by strengthening common norms. Common norms, defined as representations shared by every actor of a business network, are central because they provide the rules according which actors in a business network will coordinate amongst themselves and then co-create value. Through analysing the case of the EE network, we have identified four representations that the different actors of the network largely share: end-user importance, inclusivity of the network,

the common enemy and the collaborative approach. We propose to consider these four shared representations as four ‘norms’ of this business network. By doing so we comply with the definition of a norm as given by Ivens and Blois (2004). Considering these representations as norms emphasizes their ‘shaping’ value (Kjellberg & Hangelsson, 2006). As norms, these shared representations have the potential to influence the behaviour of different actors of a business network. They fulfil an important objective of orchestration activities; that of ‘aligning’ actors in the value-creation process.

5.2. New roles opening in new orchestration activities

In addition to highlighting the common norms of the EE network that potentially have the power to align actors of the value co-creation process, our work also allows for a better understanding of how these norms are strengthened. Our findings contribute to identifying four roles that B2B distributors in the EE network are assuming. We suggest that these roles should be seen as a means to reinforce the common norms of the network. By assuming the role of integrator, customizer, facilitator and responsibility promoter, the B2B distributor gives more strength to the four common norms. For instance, by being a *facilitator*, the B2B distributor strengthens the ‘*inclusivity*’ norm by facilitating mutual understanding amongst actors. No installer feels excluded from the network because of a lack of technical expertise: the B2B distributor may supply them with ad-hoc training. No manufacturer feels excluded from the network for being too technology-or product-oriented: the B2B distributor may offer complementary services facilitating the use of the product. We thus suggest that B2B distributors, because they choose to assume new roles in the EE sector, could be considered as specific network orchestrators. The new roles they conduct comprise activities that facilitate the sharing of common representations between all members of the network, thus becoming common norms. In turn, these common norms facilitate the alignment of actors in the network.

5.3. Resources supporting roles

We have suggested seeing the new roles assumed by B2B distributors as strengthening common norms among actors of the networks, thus leading eventually to alignment of the latter. Here, an additional aspect of our findings in connection with the notion of resources emerges. If distributors are in a position to assume the four roles that we have described – integrator, customize, facilitator, and responsibility promoter - it is because they possess specific resources. On the basis of our findings, we organize B2B distributors' resources into two broad categories. The first category of resources is directly dependent on the specific *position* of B2B distributors. We propose to refer to them as 'structural' resources in accordance with RBV (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 2001). B2B distributors are those business actors of the 'middle space' (Rosenbloom, 2007) *between* manufacturers and business customers. This position allows for: proximity to the end-user (more so than for manufacturers because distributors are further upstream in the value chain); access to a variety of products and brands (greater variety than installers have, since they are further downstream in the value-chain). The second category of resources we consider deals with customer orientation of B2B distributors. Our findings mention the different efforts made by B2B distributors to collect, disseminate and use customer information. We refer to these resources as 'cultural' ones, in accordance, again, with RBV. They do not depend on the 'middle space' position of the distributors, but rather on a specific culture developed – or not – by certain distributors. Thus, it is because those resources are available to the B2B distributors (either due to their position or their cultural choices) that B2B distributors can assume their roles. In turn, those roles reinforce common norms among actors of the network, thus contributing to the orchestration of the latter and the resulting value co-creation.

Below (see figure 2), we summarize our view of the EE network dynamics, and consequently enrich our initial framework (see 2.3.)

Insert Figure 2 about here

5.4. Calling them network stewards

So as to better encapsulate the changing status of the B2B distributor in business networks from ‘box mover’ (Pardo & Michel, 2015) to ‘orchestrator’, we propose the term ‘steward’, as used by Rangan (2006) and Rangan and Bell (2006). The author(s) define the term ‘channel steward’ as having “the ability to craft a go-to market strategy that simultaneously addresses customers’ best interest and drive profits for all channel members” (Rangan, 2006, pp. 42-43). By adopting this term, we want to emphasize the specificity of the orchestration activities that the steward is taking on: the strengthening of common norms in the business network. Yet, we suggest using the term ‘network’ in place of ‘channel’, thereby designating B2B distributors as ‘network stewards’ rather than ‘channel stewards’. This allows us to clearly position the term relative to the ‘network orchestration’ phenomenon. In addition, using the term ‘steward’ to emphasize the new role of distributors resonates well with the tradition of stewardship in the management literature. For instance, Hernandez (2012) insists on the idea that stewardship is about collective and wider interests and she insists on the steward’s sense of responsibility and obligation, which echoes with our findings.

6. Contributions, limitations and further research

In this study, we have focused our view business actors’ orchestration activities. We have developed a view not on orchestration activities ‘in general’ but on those specific activities that allow different actors to ‘unite’ for the value co-creation process. In particular, we have argued that the ‘uniting’ of business actors relies on the strengthening of common norms that we consider here - in accordance with an institutional perspective – as ‘shared rules’ of the game. We have put forward different propositions in our discussion as to how resources, roles

and norms connect and therefore contribute to the value co-creation process. We therefore believe that our work contributes to the research in four different ways.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Firstly, we complement the perspective of value co-creation developed by the various network orchestration works. Building on the works initiated by Dhanaraj and Parkhe (2006) and extended by Paquin and Howard-Grenville (2013), Natti et al. (2014) and Perks et al. (2017), we discuss a specific aspect of network orchestration - the one concerned with activities that contribute to influencing common norms to align business actors. In so doing, we contribute to building a more integrated perspective of value co-creation in business networks where different levels of the value co-creation phenomenon are connected. The micro-level, as emphasized by Perks et al. (2017), deals with the activities of actors; the meso-level refers to the level of interactions between actors, and the macro-level relates to the 'institutions' driving exchanges for resource integration.

Secondly, we contribute to the trend initiated by several scholars of 'bringing' institutional theory to the business marketing field (Palmer et al., 2015; Yang & Su, 2014). In our work, 'norms' are a category of institutions. They enable the coordination necessary for the value co-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). We think that institutional theory offers more than a way to discuss the structure / agency debate and can help scholars address certain business marketing issues. As business networks are complex systems where each network actor influences and is influenced by other network actors, the use of institutional concepts is an opportunity to expand our knowledge on how different influences in a business network cohabit in the value co-creation process.

Thirdly, our work contributes to refocusing attention on specific actors of a business network: the intermediaries. The field of distribution in business marketing can be considered as a

rather overlooked one (Gadde, 2014; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Pardo & Michel, 2015). More specifically, in recent years the distribution issue has often been raised as an issue of disintermediation due to the increasing role played by technology (Nordin et al., 2015, Rossignoli et al., 2015; Tay & Cheliah, 2014). Business to business distributors have rarely been identified as specific actors in a business network occupying a specific position – a ‘middle space’ (Rosenbloom, 2007) – that provides them with specific resources. Our work, in line with works by Gadde (2016), deals precisely with this renewed view of intermediaries as active parts of network dynamics.

Finally, our work introduces the concept of steward as offering the opportunity to emphasize specific orchestration activities. Though not a brand-new concept in management literature, it has rarely been used in business markets studies, except in works by Rangan (2006) and Rangan and Bell (2006). It has the potential to focus attention on specific activities of business actors and could stimulate further research.

6.2. Managerial contributions

Managers may find our findings helpful in formulating their strategies as well as implementing them.

Firstly, our study has demonstrated that common norms that contribute to value co-creation in business networks are strengthened by a series of activities. Managers, when they consider their relationships with customers, suppliers and other business actors usually focus on general factors of relationship quality like satisfaction and commitment and they take decisions about what they have to do to reach satisfying levels of relationship quality. As common norms are contributing to value co-creation, we thus invite managers to also include the strengthening of common *norms* as one of their strategic goals. In addition, our results have suggested that the different activities developed for sales, marketing or purchasing

purpose are not only ways to improve relationship quality, but also to strengthen common norms. We thus encourage managers to consider – or reassess - the different *activities* they are carrying out (or supporting) *also* relative to their potential to strengthen common norms. For instance, a manager may consider that ‘training teams’ is an element of customer satisfaction. This manager should also consider this as an activity to strengthen the norm of ‘inclusivity’, thus an incentive for business actors to contribute all to the value co-creation process.

Secondly, our findings suggest that developing an end-user orientation for any actor in a distribution network is an important step in the value creation process. As our findings show, not only is end-user orientation a strong antecedent for better value-proposition, it is above all a strong means to *work out the alignment* of different actors. Practitioners should understand that even if different actors of a distribution network have different (and sometimes contradictory) goals, they may all share a common goal that is the satisfaction of the end-user. Rather than seeking an impossible convergence of all the interests of their companies, managers in a distribution channel should rather have their companies focus on one ‘common’ goal: the satisfaction of the end-user.

Thirdly, so as to build an agreement around the idea of the satisfaction of the end-user, managers should seriously consider the sharing of information between the different actors of a distribution network. Our findings show the importance of using technological means not just to exchange data, but also in those situations where people ‘sit around a table’. Managers should consider any occasion to meet with their ‘partners’ - whether it is in the context of a trade association, an inter-branch union, a convention, or a commission - as one aspect of building a ‘steward network’.

Finally, our findings also promote the idea of collaboration, particularly cooperation between members of a distribution channel. Managers should learn to refrain from using the power

positions of their companies to impose their views. Stewardship supposes that actors voluntarily share a common goal. Rather than saying that a company is a leading player in the market (because of its size; the brand it owns, etc.) a manager should rather concentrate on explaining how the company contributes to the value created for the end-user.

6.3. Limitations and further research

Our research deals with an emerging phenomenon. As such it conveys several limitations that may offer good opportunities for further insightful study.

The first limitation is related to the geographic scope of our research. Indeed the scope of this study is limited to France and should be extended to other countries to see whether there are some similarities in the network orchestration mechanisms from one country to another. We know that the characteristics of the EE distribution network vary a lot in Europe: generally speaking the market of EE distribution is far more atomistic in Italy or Spain than in France. As a consequence one cannot hypothesize the similarities of common norms among different countries.

The second major limitation is a sectorial one. We have only studied one sector. The French EE distribution network may be specific and the common norms that we have observed could be totally sector-specific. The EE sector is shaped by forces that could be different in nature and intensity in other sectors. Resources available to a business actor to support his role may also differ from one sector to another. For instance, we may hypothesize that the fresh food distribution network, due to the perishability of products, the weaker impact of digitalization (food cannot be digitalized) may reveal other types of common norms.

Finally, another limitation of our work lies in the absence of measure of our concepts. While relying on the notion of ‘strengthening’ common norms, our work did not provide any precise measure (or indication for measuring) what is a ‘strong’ norm Vs what is a ‘weak’ norm. For

example, we have not investigated what makes a difference between a strong ‘end-user centrality’ (one of the four common norms we highlighted) and a weak ‘end-user centrality’ by providing, for instance, a measure scale.

In response to certain limitations mentioned above, a first avenue for further research could be the development of more cross-sectional works. A cross-country study would be appropriate to observe the link between the dynamics of a network and certain national institutions. A cross-sectional study of different industries would allow to take into account the variety of sectorial dimensions influencing the activities of business actors. In both cases, these additional research works could allow the identification of new common norms that have potential to support value co-creation in business networks.

Secondly, our work has contributed to further investigate the relationship between a macro-level (the one of common norms) and a meso-level (the one of the business actors and their activities) in the network dynamics phenomenon and the value co-creation process. Further research could bring the reflexion even further by integrating a micro-level: the one of individuals (managers). This level is all the more important that ‘role’ depends on how managers make sense of their network. We thus encourage further research aiming at integrating the concepts of sensemaking (Henneberg et al., 2010) and network pictures (Abrahamsen et al., 2016; Henneberg et al., 2006).

Finally, another promising avenue for research lies in the *acceptance* of the orchestration activities. Our work has particularly highlighted the elements in favour of this acceptance. Yet, as in any social process there can be resistance strategies against orchestration activities. Some actors of a distribution network may choose to not behave according to the ‘collaboration’ common norm around the stewardship of the distributor. As ‘norms do no more than increase the probability of one type of action occurring within the choice set available’ (Ivens & Blois, 2004, p. 241), they do not prevent from cheating or opportunism. A

group of actors may strive for developing competing orchestration activities to foster different norms within the business network. Consequently further research might be done about this resistance phenomenon to investigate how norms orchestration practices can be challenged and how the co-creation value process can be then affected.

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Figure 1 – Orchestration activities, common norms and value creation

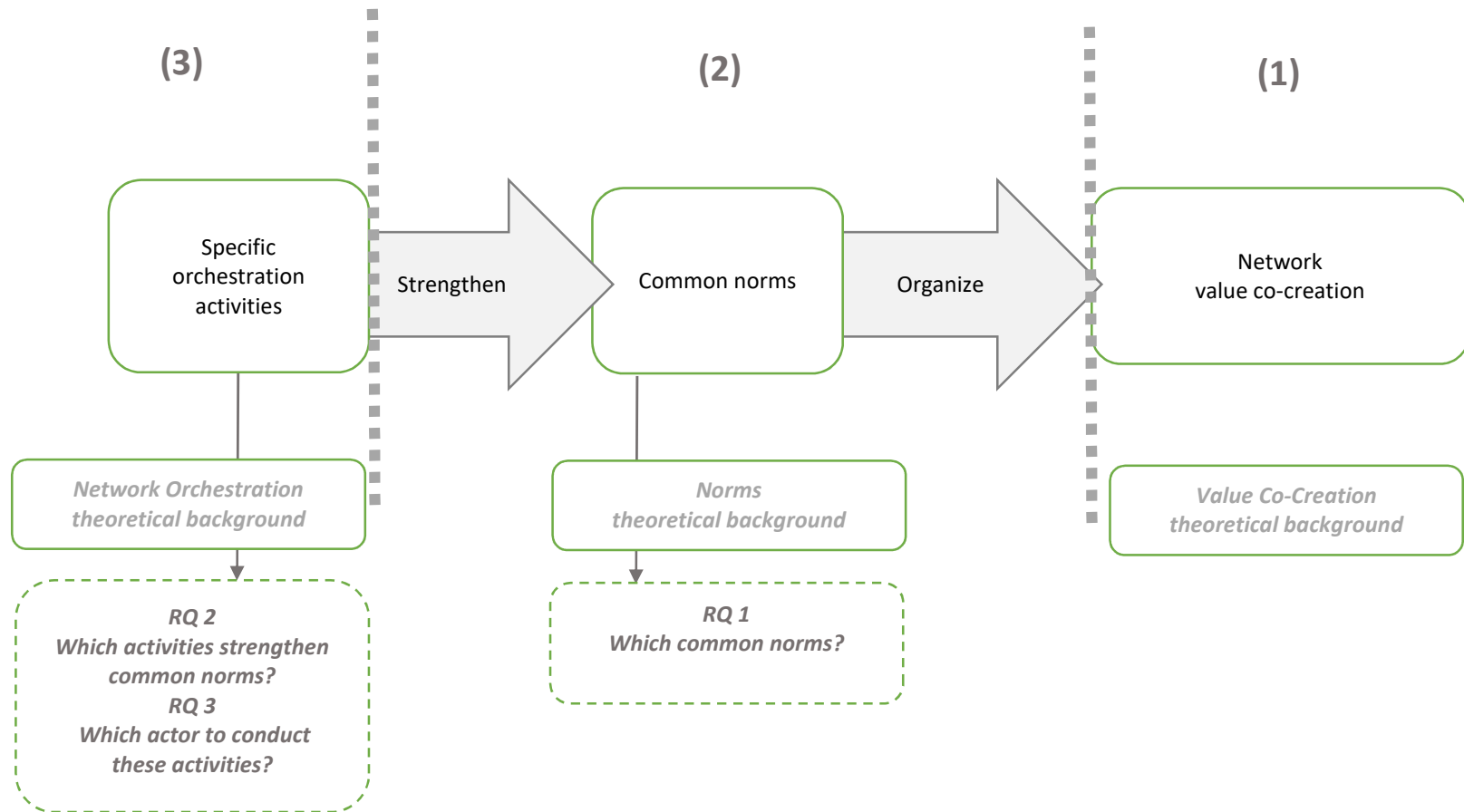


Figure 2 - Main dimensions of the EE network dynamics

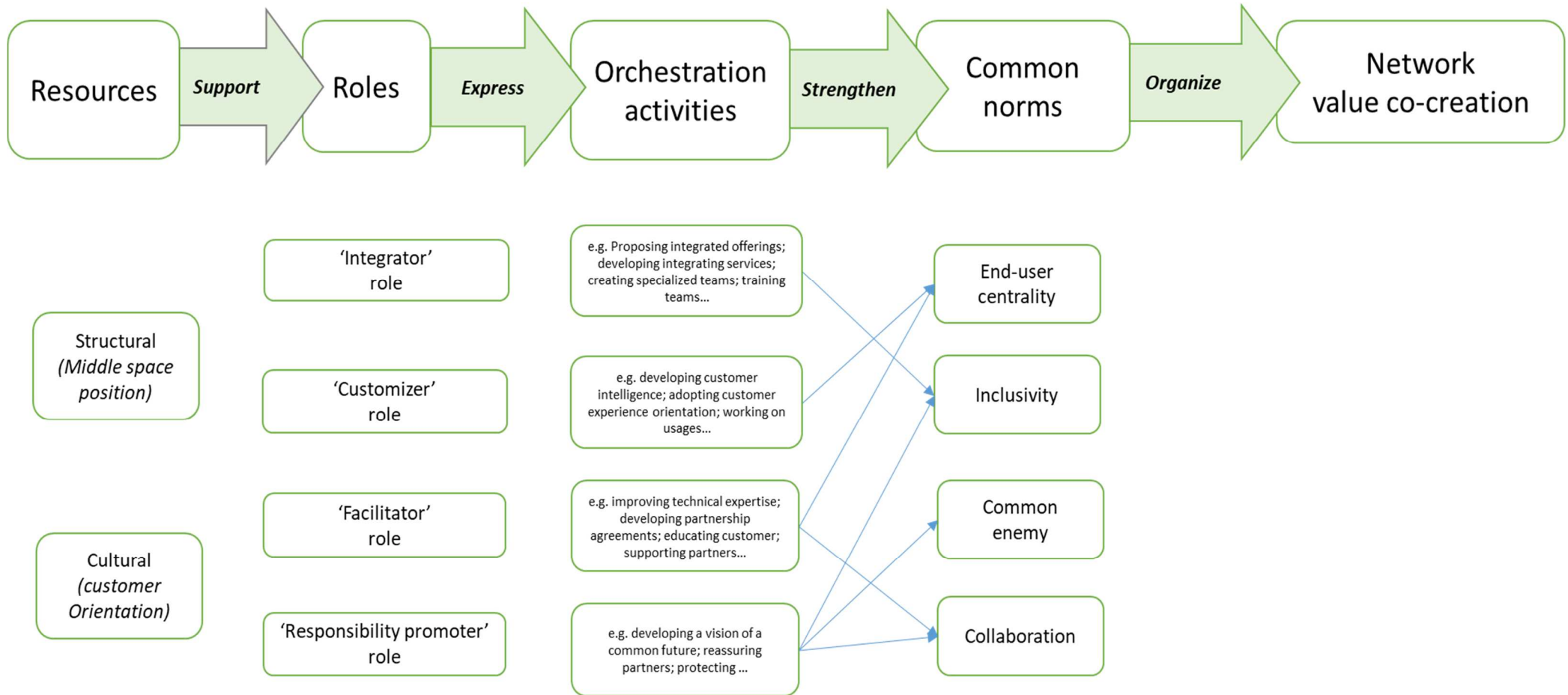


Table 1 - Identifying common norms within orchestration activities

	Identified orchestration activities	Activities aimed specifically at developing / strengthening common norms	
		Orchestration activities containing the idea of developing / strengthening common norms	Nature of the common norms (authors' emphasis)
Dhanaraj & Parkhe (2006)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managing knowledge mobility 2. Managing innovation appropriability 3. Managing network stability 	Within the 'Managing knowledge mobility' category of orchestration activities	<p>... "reinforcing a common identity among network members." (p. 662). "...common identity among network partners is essential" (p. 662).</p>
Ritala et al. (2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge mobility 2. Innovation appropriability 3. Network stability 	Within the 'knowledge mobility' category of orchestration activities	<p>"...[achieving] a shared understanding of common interest and goals" (p. 576).</p>
Moller & Svahn (2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exploration of future business opportunities 2. Mobilization for application 3. Coordination for dissemination 	Within the 'mobilization' category of orchestration activities	<p>"... [bridging] different communities of practice." (p. 455). "...[developing] a sphere of jointly-held knowledge" (p. 455).</p>
Batterink & al. (2010)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Innovation initiation 2. Network composition 3. Innovation process management 	Within the 'innovation process management' category of orchestration activities	<p>"...showing people the common goals in order to get them back together" (p. 64).</p>
Nambisan & Sawhney (2011)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managing innovation leverage 2. Managing innovation coherence 3. Managing innovation appropriability 	Within the 'Managing innovation coherence' category of orchestration activities	<p>"... [sharing] cognition among the network entities" (p. 44). "... [connecting actors] through shared vocabulary, common representation and interpretation schemes..." (p. 44).</p>
Partanen & Moller (2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine the value-creation activities for the end customer 2. Determine the value-creating system 3. Determine the core company objectives and analyze the target activities 4. Compare resources and capabilities with the target activities 5. Analyze the delegated 	Within the 'determining core activities' and 'negotiating with partners' categories of orchestration activities	<p>"... [indicating] how compatible the objectives of potential partners are with the hub of the company's objectives." (p. 485).</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Conduct preliminary partner assessment 7. Negotiate with partner candidates 8. Launch inter-firm collaboration 		
Paquin & Howard-Grenville (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engagement 2. Connection 3. Co-development 	Within the 'engagement' category of orchestration activities	"... [communicating about] he network's activities and their collective promise." (p. 1626)
Nätti et al., (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitating knowledge mobility in the network 2. Promoting network stability 3. Focusing on network appropriability 	Within the 'promoting network stability' category of orchestration activities	"...[strengthening] common identity among actors" (p. 175). "...improving the common image and/or common vision of the network" (p. 175).
Gawer & Cusumano, (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a vision 2. Build the right technical architecture 3. Build a coalition around the platform 4. Evolve the platform 	Within the 'build a coalition' category of orchestration activities	"... [sharing] the vision" (p. 429).
Perks et al. (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Envisioning 2. Inducing innovativeness 3. Legitimizing 4. Adjusting with network 	Within the 'envisioning' category of orchestration activities	"... developing and communicating a shared vision" (p. 118)
Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Nätti (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promoting mobilization 2. Promoting network stability 3. Ensuring knowledge mobility 4. Ensuring innovation appropriability 5. Setting the agenda 6. Coordinating 	Within the 'promoting network stability' category of orchestration activities	"... [facilitating] common identity building." (p. 71)
Reypens, Lievens & Blazevic (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Connecting 2. Facilitating 3. Governing 	Within the 'facilitating' category of orchestration activities	"... [ensuring] stakeholders had common cognitive representations of the project" (p. 16) "... [achieving] a common orientation among stakeholders" (p. 17)

Table 2 - Empirical material used

	Interviews	Duration (in hours)	Number of transcribed pages	Observation notes
Distributors	22	27.5	698	8 visits to distributor agencies 2 trade shows 22 interview notes
Manufacturers	13	12.3	393	1 showroom visited 10 interview notes
Installers	10	12.3	259	1 showroom visited 3 professional conferences 10 interview notes
DIY stores	3	2.2	92	3 interview notes
Energy providers	3	3.1	81	3 interview notes
BIM architect	1	2.6	40	1 interview notes
Round-table	1	3.5	43	
Focus Group	1	1.9	45	1 interview notes
TOTAL	54	65h	1651 pages	14 in situ observations

Table 3: Coding hierarchy and frequencies of codes

Code Name	Code definition	Number of respondents	Number of frequencies
Category 1: Shared representations of a common future			
Theme A: End-user centrality			
<i>Value-in-use</i>	Vargo and Lusch (2004a)	29	114
<i>Exchange value</i>	Economic value	26	69
<i>Hedonistic value</i>	Symbolic value	18	29
<i>Social value</i>	Value created for the whole network	26	55
<i>Usages</i>	Usages of installers and end-users	39	242
<i>Emergence of the end-user</i>	Role of the end-user in the EE network	28	122
Theme B: Inclusivity			
<i>Interdependence</i>	Awareness of the interdependencies within the EE network	24	73
<i>Shared Interests</i>	EE actors' perceptions of their common interests	36	172
<i>Vision of the network</i>	Perception of the impact of change on the EE network	36	222
<i>Network</i>	Perception of the importance of the network to EE actors	35	190
Theme C: Need for collaboration			
<i>Collaboration</i>	All mechanisms enabling the collaborative approach in the EE network. Mix of cooperation and coordination efforts (Gulati et al. 2012)	20	133
<i>Cooperation</i>	"Joint pursuit of agreed-on goals in a manner corresponding to a shared understanding about contribution and pay-offs" (Gulati et al., 2012)	21	96
<i>Coordination</i>	"Deliberate and orderly alignment or adjustment of partners' actions to achieve jointly determined goals" (Gulati et al., 2012)	34	118
<i>Positive perception of partnership</i>	Positive attitude from EE network members towards partnering	41	166
Theme D: A common enemy			
<i>The GAFAM's threat</i>	Perceptions of competition created by new entrants, including GAFAM	29	136
<i>Energy transition</i>	Any concerns regarding energy performance regulation	18	65
<i>Digital transition</i>	Any concerns regarding the digitalization of the society	15	59
<i>Big data and data mining</i>	Perceptions of the impact of Big Data on the EE network	17	55
<i>BIM</i>	Perceptions of the impact of Building Information	9	24

Modelling on the EE network			
<i>IoT</i>	Perceptions of the impact of IoT on the EE network	16	88
Category 2: The B2B distributor as an orchestrator of collaborative relations			
Theme E: The new roles of EE distributors			
<i>Distributor's role</i>	Roles of EE distributors as defined by themselves and all other actors of the EE network	38	207
<i>Distributors' integrated offering</i>	The way EE distributors create their assortment	23	118
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Legitimacy of distributors in the EE network	27	87
<i>Distributors' responsibilities</i>	Distributors' perception of their responsibilities towards the EE network	28	114
<i>Willingness to steer</i>	Expresses the willingness of distributors to orchestrate the EE network	28	152
Theme D: Potential for Network Stewardship			
<i>Trust</i>	Distributors' ability to stimulate trust among EE network members	30	161
<i>Commitment</i>	Distributors' ability to stimulate strong commitment from EE network members	18	89
<i>Power balance</i>	Power balance between manufacturers, distributors and installers	33	221
<i>Information Sharing</i>	All practices aimed at sharing information among EE network members	15	41
<i>Rewards</i>	Distributors' ability to appropriately reward their partners among the EE network	24	88