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Research paper

## Individual actors and embeddedness in business-to-business interactions

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## ABSTRACT

Individual actors are hardly ever considered in business-to-business marketing literature. This paper uses Service-dominant Logic and Neo-institutional Theory as the bases for twelve case studies. These case studies provide a better understanding of how individuals who represent firms make sense of the social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs of the network (i.e. institutional logics) where they are embedded and how the business interaction is shaped by those influences, through the individual behaviour.

This paper makes two main contributions. First, we develop an empirical model of how individuals consider the institutional logics of the network in interactions with suppliers. Second, we present three patterns of individual behavior in interactions, different from what is often assumed by business-to-business researchers. Managerial contributions are also pointed out.

### 1. Introduction

Individual actors are almost absent from business-to-business literature. Let us take, for example, a look at the relationship between individual actors and business interaction or networks, two of the main concepts of business-to business literature.

Interaction is “an economic process through which all of the aspects of business, including physical, financial, and human resources, take their form and are changed or transformed” (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009, p. 33). Interaction between two businesses can be analyzed by studying how two organizational actors interact or by focusing on how specific resources, products, activities or individual actors interact (Håkansson et al., 2009). However, as emphasized by Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola, and Snehota (2014) and La Rocca, Hoholm, and Mørk (2017), few studies explore the influence of individual actors in the interaction process.

The network approach, widely accepted in business-to-business literature, builds on the premise that firms maintain interdependent relations with several other actors in order to prosper. When taking this approach, researchers consider that a business phenomenon is embedded in a specific network and, therefore, the phenomenon in question cannot be understood without considering its networked context (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

Research carried out through the network lens brought to light the

influence exerted by social network phenomena on business interactions. In particular, Service-dominant Logic (SdL) researchers concluded that interaction towards value creation is coordinated through social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs characterizing each network, or ecosystem to use SdL parlance (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2013; Chandler & Lusch, 2014; Edvardsson, Kleinaltenkamp, Tronvoll, Mchugh, & Windahl, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). However, there is a lack of works explicitly addressing how this phenomenon unfolds. Several Service-dominant Logic researchers identify this gap and assert the importance of addressing it as a research topic (e.g. Akaka et al., 2014; Chandler & Lusch, 2014; Edvardsson et al., 2014; Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2011, 2016).

The research goal of this study is twofold. First, we aim to understand how individual actors representing firms in business-to-business interactions are influenced by the social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs of the ecosystem where they are embedded. Second, we examine how business interactions are shaped by those contextual influences, through the individuals' cognition and behaviour.

To reach the research goal, we build on SdL, already mentioned, and Neo-institutional Theory (NiT) literatures to propose a conceptual framework and a rival explanation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2009; Yin, 2011). The latter theory is useful as the aforementioned social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs are part of institutional logics. Neo-institutionalists are focused on how broad sets of

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interrelated social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs formed over time at the most macro-level of societies affect and are affected by organizational and individual behaviour (DiMaggio, 1997; Scott, 1987; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). A set of interrelated social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs is an institutional logic and the several institutional logics together form a cultural framework (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

After the conceptual framework, we collected data and analyzed twelve embedded case studies from multiple business-to-business settings. An empirical model arose from the comparisons among cases and between cases and the conceptual framework and rival explanations.

Our study makes several contributions. First, we develop an empirical model of how individuals consider the institutional logics of their ecosystem in interactions with suppliers. Second, we present three different patterns of individual behavior in interactions which go against the general assumptions about human behavior in business-to-business research. In addition, managerial contributions are pointed out.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background of the research. In section 3, we describe the research method; and in Section 4, we present a detailed analysis of the collected data. In Section 5, we discuss the findings and in Section 6, we conclude by summarizing the main findings, presenting the theoretical and the practical contributions of the research, and proposing avenues for future studies.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Service-dominant logic approach to business relationships

In 2004, Vargo and Lusch introduced the conceptual basis for SdL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Based on work by the Nordic School, this service-centred logic embraces concepts like “relationships” and “exchange processes”. Specifically, it argues that the use of competencies constitutes “service” regardless of its material or immaterial form (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). SdL arises as a theoretical framework that offers a perspective of value creation between a firm and its customer through a service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008b).

Service, written in the singular in order to highlight its distinction from services in the traditional sense (Lusch, 2006), is defined as the “process of using one’s resources for the benefit of another entity” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, p. 2). Knowledge and skills are the most important operant resources in SdL while goods that take on a central role in the traditional perspective are considered operand resources and assume a secondary role in this framework. According to SdL, individuals carry out exchange processes with the purpose of acquiring the benefits provided by specific knowledge or skills, while goods are just ways to transmit those operant resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This perspective on resources depends heavily on the resource-based view of the firm, resource-advantage theory, and the competencies theory (see Madhavaram & Hunt, 2008 for a detailed identification of theories supporting SdL).

Value, as seen through the SdL lens, is grounded on three premises. The first is that value cannot be one-sided. Instead, value can only be cocreated between the customer and the firm (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2016). The second one is that value is different for each party involved in the process of cocreation as value has a phenomenological, or experiential, nature (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). From a “Goods-dominant Logic” perspective, value is embedded in goods by its producers and is determined by the “value in exchange.” SdL departs from this approach to value by defining it as the result of the beneficial application of resources perceived by the customer – “value-in-use” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Value-in-use depends on the individual’s perception which makes value idiosyncratic and experiential (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). The third premise holds that value is also driven by the networked context in which individuals are

embedded because the collective social perceptions present in a context influence, at least in part, the individual’s perception (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Therefore, suppliers cannot create value but they can make value propositions and when these propositions are considered by buyers, they engage in value cocreation through resource-integration and reciprocal service provision.

Over the last few years, SdL has undergone significant changes in its premises to accommodate an increasingly wider scope and purpose: from a marketing theoretical framework that focuses on value cocreation between a firm and its customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) through “a general theory of markets” (Vargo, 2011), or “an emerging school of thought within marketing and management” (Edvardsson et al., 2011), to “a more holistic, dynamic, and realistic perspective of value creation, through exchange, among a wider, more comprehensive (than firm and customer) configuration of actors” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, pp. 5–6). In this paper, we focus on two recent developments in SdL, namely the networks where value cocreation occurs (i.e., service ecosystems) and the role of social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs in value cocreation.

In its initial formulation, SdL started by dealing with dyadic processes of exchange that were traditionally between a firm and its customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Yet, recent research has adopted a systemic perspective where the cocreation of value occurs within service ecosystems (Ballantyne & Varey, 2008; Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Vargo, 2011). A service ecosystem, or a “system of service systems,” has the potential to represent the interrelationships among different types of actors and along different levels of context in a single framework (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Vargo & Akaka, 2009). This framework is defined as “a configuration of people, technologies, and other resources that interact with other service systems to create mutual value” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 11). Specifically, SdL sees service ecosystems as a networked context comprising three levels: (1) micro-level, (2) meso-level, and (3) macro-level. Above each of these three levels, there is a meta layer. Direct service-for-service exchange between individual actors occurs at the micro-level. This dyad is the basic form of service. The meso-level emerges from the micro-level to frame the indirect exchange that occurs through serving one actor that in turn serves another actor. At the macro-level, a complex service occurs as the result of the synergies from multiple simultaneous direct and indirect service-for-service exchanges. The connection between the levels is made through a bottom-up aggregation effect but also through a top-down filter effect (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Lusch & Vargo, 2014). Additionally, the meta layer is also considered in order to introduce time and replication features to the ecosystem as “replication, especially of institutions, paradoxically creates dynamically changing contexts at the same time that it also introduces stability to the system” (Chandler & Vargo, 2011, p. 44).

Throughout time, social construction theories have increasingly supported the SdL approach to value cocreation, such as Giddens’ (1984) Theory of Structuration and Granovetter’s (1985) Theory of Structural Embeddedness. As a consequence, social constructionism’s most relevant contribution to the current SdL literature is its focus on social rules, norms, procedures, values, and beliefs (e.g. Akaka et al., 2014; Edvardsson et al., 2014, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2011, 2016; Wieland, Koskela-Huotari, & Vargo, 2015). Vargo and Lusch (2016) assert that value cocreation is coordinated through social institutions and understanding how this phenomenon unfolds is a current goal to service researchers.

### 2.2. Human nature and human behavior in business relationships

The business-to-business literature often assumes the existence of human nature but spends little time discussing it (Guercini et al., 2014; La Rocca et al., 2017). Yet, the conceptual starting point in understanding a social phenomenon requires the clarification of the basic assumptions about individuals’ nature and behaviour, especially when

the research object is directly related with these assumptions, as is the case.

In a paper about the interaction behaviours of individuals and the interplay between cognition and behaviour, [Guercini et al. \(2014\)](#) identify individual rationality as occurring between “the vision of the economist” and the “bounded” rationality. Individuals, according to the former perspective, “pursue their interests guided by quantifiable incentives” ([Granovetter, 2017](#), p. 3) and their behaviour is driven exclusively by individual cognition. The stereotype of the “homo economicus” is still present in economic theory, but the low explanatory power of this reductionist perspective of human nature often leads economists to consider additional assumptions ([Granovetter, 2017](#)). Through traditional sociological lens, in turn, individuals are seen as “boundedly” rational since cognitive processes have several limitations such as incomplete knowledge of their environment, limited “computational capabilities,” and limited time ([Guercini et al., 2014](#)). Moreover, neoinstitutionalists consider that behaviour results from both rational calculations and non-rational premises held by the individual. Further, they consider these non-rational premises as schemas (i.e., patterns of thought or action that organize categories of information and the relations among them) that enter into routine and become rote. These schemas are driven by the cultural framework that comprises several institutional logics, and they help individuals by facilitating their assessments and decisions ([DiMaggio, 1997](#); [Scott, 1987](#); [Thornton et al., 2012](#)).

Contrary to what happens in economics where it is assumed that individuals are independent from their social context, in sociology, individuals are seen as the result of their social environment and are guided by social influences from their closer networks but also broader indirect influences as well ([Granovetter, 2017](#)). Specifically, NiT sees individuals and their actions as social constructions. This view was proposed by [Berger and Luckmann \(1967\)](#), a seminal reference in this research stream. Another key influence is [Granovetter's \(1985\)](#) theory of structural embeddedness. This theory views organizations and individuals as embedded in industries, professional groups, or national societies. These contexts “penetrate the organization, creating the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action and thought” ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1991](#), p. 13). Therefore, to understand the action outside the societal context in which it is embedded is not possible. On the other hand, these influences are also felt in SdL where the adoption of the concept of the service ecosystem, together with the constructionism-inspired assumption of structural embeddedness of all actors, has elicited the importance of institutions in co-creating value ([Edvardsson et al., 2014, 2011](#); [Vargo, 2011](#); [Vargo & Akaka, 2012](#); [Vargo & Lusch, 2016](#); [Vargo, Wieland, & Akaka, 2015](#)).

The differences in the assumptions concerning the relationships among actors, organizations, or individuals and their networks give rise to the central debate in neoinstitutional literature: the agency versus social structure debate. On the one hand, the research stream proposes that actors have a limited degree of intentionality (i.e., agency) and, therefore, tend to comply with institutional pressures (i.e., social structure). This perspective was particularly present in early neoinstitutional studies (e.g., [DiMaggio & Powell, 1983](#); [Meyer & Rowan, 1977](#); [Zucker, 1977](#)). On the other hand, a different stream assigns autonomy, free-will, and creativity to actors that thus, enables them to depart from institutional pressures or even make use of social structures to their own advantage (e.g., [Binder, 2007](#); [Delbridge & Edwards, 2013](#); [Ferreira, Caruana, & Cohen, 2015](#); [Hallett, 2010](#); [Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)).

Recent Service-dominant Logic literature, acknowledges that humans have limited cognitive abilities which are bridged with the use of institutional logics and that behavior is deeply dependent on the ecosystem where the individual is embedded ([Thornton et al., 2012](#); [Vargo & Lusch, 2016](#)). Also, it has been stressed in recent papers the importance of social structures in explaining value cocreation (e.g. [Akaka](#)

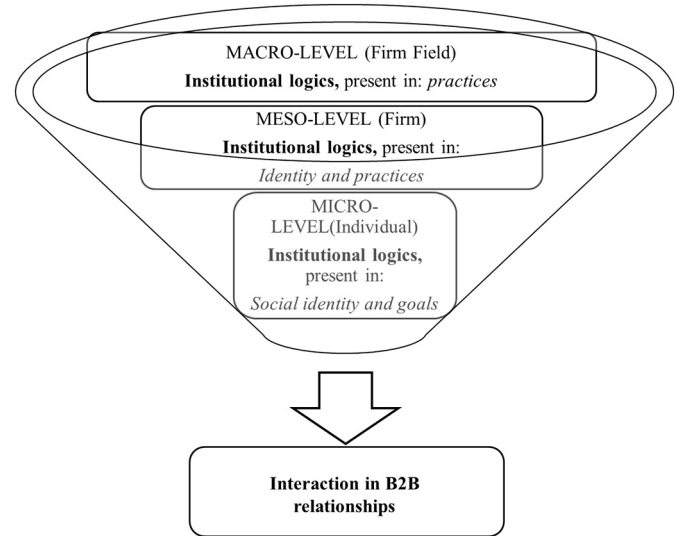


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

et al., 2014; [Edvardsson et al., 2014, 2011](#); [Vargo & Lusch, 2011, 2016](#); [Wieland et al., 2015](#)).

### 2.3. Conceptual and rival frameworks

Building on the SdL and NiT literatures review, we develop a conceptual framework to examine how individuals who represent firms make sense of the institutional logics present in their ecosystems and how that shapes business interactions.

This conceptual framework ([Fig. 1](#)) uses the ecosystem's approach: the individual is at the micro-level of analysis, the firm which the individual represents is at the meso-level of analysis, and the industry (including main stakeholders) is at the macro-level of analysis.

Furthermore, as proposed by [Thornton et al. \(2012\)](#) and as followed by most of neo-institutional researchers, we adopt the interinstitutional system of the “contemporary capitalist West” society that comprises the institutional logics of family ([Chung & Luo, 2008](#); [Greenwood, Díaz, Li, & Lorente, 2010](#)), community ([Almandoz, 2012](#); [Greenwood et al., 2010](#); [Marquis, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2011](#)), religion ([Ferreira et al., 2015](#)), state ([Ferreira et al., 2015](#)), market ([Greenwood et al., 2010](#); [Pache & Santos, 2013](#); [Thornton, 2002](#); [Thornton & Ocasio, 1999](#)), profession ([Thornton, 2002](#); [Thornton & Ocasio, 1999](#)), and corporation ([Fligstein, 1987](#); [Fligstein & Freeland, 1995](#)). While the research commonly accepts that institutional logics present at the macro-level of the ecosystem are embodied in an industry's shared practices (e.g., [Friedland & Alford, 1991](#); [Scott, 2013](#); [Thornton et al., 2012](#); [Thornton & Ocasio, 2008](#)), [Thornton et al. \(2012\)](#) argue that at the meso-level, institutional logics are enclosed in the firm's identity and practices. Furthermore, human behavior is accepted in neoinstitutional literature as guided by the individual's social identities (i.e., the several groups with which he or she identifies him or herself) and goals ([Thornton et al., 2012](#)).

Further, in [Fig. 1](#), we assume the deterministic perspective of institutional logics over human agency as this is not only still the dominant perspective in neoinstitutional literature but also in the business-to-business literature. In other words, individuals who represent firms will act in accordance with the institutional logics present in their industry and their firm regardless of their own guiding logics. The reasoning is that their behavior is expected to be constrained by the institutional logics ruling their social context. However, the voluntaristic perspective (i.e., individuals as intentional actors) is herein considered a rival framework to the one presented in order to provide an alternative explanation.

### 3. Method

As presented, we examine how institutional logics shape the action of embedded individuals in business interactions. Based on the SdL and the NiT, we develop a conceptual framework of how multiple institutional logics interact at the individual level that lead to action towards suppliers.

Then, we develop multiple case studies in business-to-business settings. In the next subsections, we briefly characterize the research setting and explain how we collect and analyze the data.

#### 3.1. Research setting

In business-to-business relationships, a service exchange is commonly addressed by teams where each individual has a specific role. This relationship raises the question of which member of the team is best suited to perform the buyer's role. In a service exchange, the buyers are those who play roles “involving planning and decision-making, troubleshooting, novel sequences, dangerous or difficult situations and overcoming habitual responses” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 89).

Also, the present research focuses on two specific situations in the buyer/supplier interaction, namely, the supplier's selection and the troubleshooting situations that involve suppliers.

Since different logics lead to different actions (Ferreira et al., 2015; Jones, Maoret, Massa, & Svejnova, 2012; Pache & Santos, 2013), our objective is to represent all institutional logics in the set of cases studied. Thus, we select the firms based on the research scope and the criteria used by neo-institutional researchers to identify each one of the institutional logics. The initial sample of eight cases (cases from A to H) comprises at least two firms that embody the same institutional logic in order to achieve literal replication while also allowing for a theoretical replication against the remaining cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 2009). The market logic is present in all of the eight cases since all of the firms have commercial purposes (Greenwood et al., 2010; Pache & Santos, 2013; Thornton, 2002; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Cases E and H hold the family logic (totally owned and managed) (Chung & Luo, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2010) while cases A and F represent corporate logic, common in larger firms (Fligstein, 1987; Fligstein & Freeland, 1995). Firms in cases B and G have community logic as they both have a particular connection to their geographical location (Almandoz, 2012; Greenwood et al., 2010; Marquis et al., 2011), while firms in cases C and D have salient profession logic that is related to a specific expertise (Thornton, 2002; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

Despite these efforts, we had no access to firms holding the religion and the state logics (Ferreira et al., 2015). Still, we found the state logic in two of the cases at different levels of analysis.

The sample dimension follows Glaser and Strauss's (1967) criterion of theoretical saturation. This saturation is reached when no further categories are identified based on the examination of new cases, which happened in this research.

Furthermore, the sample of twelve cases was drawn from across a variety of business-to-business exchange relationships (Cannon, Achrol, & Gundlach, 2000). A characterization of the actors considered at each level of each ecosystem is provided in Table 1 (actors considered at the macro-level of analysis) and in Table 2 (actors considered at the meso- and micro-levels of analysis).

#### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

In order to gain access to data, we ensured the anonymity of participants and confidentiality of the data. The data on the three units of analysis were collected through three sources: secondary sources (e.g., documentation of the addressed firms, documentation of competing firms, industry studies), semi-structured interviews with the individuals, and the observation of the phenomenon under study (e.g., decision-makers' interactions in daily routines with other members of

its work team, dialogues between decision-makers and service supplier, the particular language of actors in the natural setting of each firm) (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012; Yin, 2009). Documentation was the main source to gather data concerning the institutional logics present at the macro and meso-levels of the ecosystems. The semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide structured according to the literature review. These interviews were the main source of data for the individuals' institutional logics and their actions regarding their suppliers. Also, the use of three sources of data collection allowed for triangulation.

The data analysis comprised of two stages. In the first stage, all twelve cases were analyzed in order to select the cases according to the theoretical criterion (Eisenhardt, 1989). During the second stage, the data analysis of the selected cases followed a mixed approach that comprised of the description of each case through a replicable structure of variables from the literature. We presented the cases' length and excerpts from the cases that illustrate the logics in Table 3. Next, we analyzed the variables across cases and their comparisons in order to find similarities and differences among them. Third, we made a recursive comparison between the broader patterns and the literature (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2009; Yin, 2011).

According to the theoretical criteria (Eisenhardt, 1989) described in Subsection 2.3, we identified for each case the shared practices among the industry and stakeholders, the firm's identity and most salient practices, and the individual's social identity and goals. After that, we were able to compare data with the interinstitutional system model.

Thornton and Ocasio (2008), Thornton et al. (2012) developed the interinstitutional system model as an “ideal-type” framework that they based on the previous work of Friedland and Alford (1991) and Weber's concept of an “ideal-type” framework (Weber, 1978). This framework provides a pattern for each of the seven logics it comprises (i.e., a definition of several dimensions to each one of the seven logics) and enables pattern matching between the data and an “ideal-type” logic (see Reay & Jones, 2016 for an explanation of the analytic techniques to capture institutional logics based on qualitative data). Examples are provided in Table 3.

### 4. Case studies analysis

As mentioned, the analysis of the case studies comprises two stages. During the first stage, we attempt to validate the presence of the institutional logics that we assume exist based on theory and then we identify additional logics that prescribe action at the three levels in the twelve ecosystems. The institutional logics are summarized in Table 3.

During the second stage, we compare the degree of divergence between the institutional logics at the individual level and those at the higher levels to the logics prescribing action. Three broad patterns of behavior emerge in this analysis.

The first pattern is present in cases A, B, C, F, and I where the dominant logics are common to the three levels of analysis and the same repertoire of logics is used by the individual in the suppliers' selection and in troubleshooting situations. In this case, we cannot determine the origin of the institutional logics that prescribe the individual behavior. Yet, in the remaining cases, some kind of conflict between the logics that support the individual and those supporting the firm or between the individual's logics and the logics found at the macro-level occurs.

A second pattern is present in cases D, E, G, H, J, and M where individuals' identities and goals are supported by institutional logics that we do not find in their industry (i.e., the profession logic of Mr. D; family logic of Mrs. G, corporation logic guiding Mr. E, Mr. J, and Mrs. M; and the family and corporation logics of Mr. H). These individual's logics influence the selection of suppliers, guide action inside the firm (e.g., Mr. E's initiative of establishing formal work procedures in the firm), give ground for the opposition to other logics (e.g., Mr. D' criticism of the bureaucratic process of approval within the firm's group),



**Table 1**  
Description of the case studies (macro level of analysis).

Case Study	Industries (embedded unit of analysis)				Customers				Suppliers				Additional Relevant Actors
	Number	Dimension	Competition scale	Type	Frequency of exchange	Origin	Number	Type	Frequency of exchange	Origin	Number	Frequency of exchange	
A	Small number	Large firms	Global scale (most of them)	Firms	From episodic to permanent	Portugal (mostly)	Large number	Firms	From episodic to permanent	Portugal (mostly)	Small number	Permanent	Portugal (mostly)
B	Large number	Large firms	Global scale	Firms	From frequent to permanent	England, Angola, Mozambique and Portugal	Small number	Firms	From frequent to permanent	Portugal, Netherlands and France	Small number	From frequent to permanent	Portugal, Netherlands and France
C	Large number	Small firms	Global scale	Firms	From episodic to permanent	Europe, Middle East, North America and Asia	Small number	Firms	From episodic to permanent	Europe and North America (mostly)	(not available)	Episodic	Europe and North America (mostly)
D	Small number	Large firms	Global scale (most of them)	Firms	From episodic to frequent	Portugal (mostly)	Small number	Firms	From episodic to frequent	Portugal (mostly)	Small number	Permanent	Europe
E	Moderate number	Small firms	Global scale	Firms	Episodic	Portugal (mostly)	Large number	Firms	Episodic	Portugal (mostly)	Moderate number	Frequent	Portugal (mostly)
F	Small number	Medium firms	National scale	Firms and individuals	Episodic	Portugal	Large number	Firms and individuals	Episodic	France, Germany, USA, China, Japan, Spain and Portugal	Large number	From episodic to frequent	France, Germany, USA, China, Japan, Spain and Portugal
G	Large number	Micro firms	Local scale	Firms and individuals	Episodic	Specific city in Portugal	Small number	Firms and individuals	Episodic	Portugal	Small number	Episodic	Portugal
H	Large number	Small firms	Global scale	Firms	From episodic to frequent	Europe, Asia, America	Large number	Firms	From episodic to frequent	Europe, Asia and America	Moderate number	From frequent to permanent	Europe, Asia and America
I	Moderate number	Small firms	Global scale	Firms	Episodic	Portugal, Spain, France and Switzerland	Moderate number	Firms	Episodic	Europe	Large number	From episodic to frequent	Europe
J	Moderate number	Medium firms	Global scale	Firms	Episodic	Sweden, Middle East and some African countries	Moderate number	Firms	Episodic	Portugal, Spain, France, Portugal, Spain, France, Sweden, Middle East and some African countries	Large number	From episodic to frequent	Europe
L	Small number	Large firms	Global scale	Firms	From frequent to permanent	Portugal, Spain, Brazil, France and Croatia	Small number	Firms	From frequent to permanent	Portugal (mostly)	Small number	From frequent to permanent	Portugal (mostly)
M	Small number	Small firms	Small firms operate at a national scale	Firms	Episodic	Portugal (mostly)	Moderate number	Firms	Episodic	Europe	Moderate number	Frequent	Europe

Notes. Number of competitors: Small number = less than 10 players at the competition scale; moderate number = between 10 and 25 players at the competition scale; large number = more than 25 players at the competition scale.  
 Dimension: Micro firms = less than 10 employees; Small firms = between 10 and 49 employees; Medium firms = between 50 and 249 employees; Large firms = more than 250 employees (Portuguese Labour Code, Lei n° 7/2009, art° 100).  
 Number of customers: Small number = less than 50 customers; moderate number = between 50 customers and 500 customers; large number = more than 500 customers.  
 Frequency of exchange between the firm and the service customers: Episodic = less than three exchange moments per year per customer; Frequent = between three and eleven exchange moments per year per customer; Permanent = more than eleven exchange moments per year per customer.  
 Number of suppliers: Small number = less than 10 suppliers; moderate number = between 10 suppliers and 100 suppliers; large number = more than 100 suppliers.  
 Frequency of exchange between the firm and the suppliers: Episodic = less than three exchange moments per year per supplier; Frequent = between three and eleven exchange moments per year per supplier; Permanent = more than eleven exchange moments per year per supplier.

**Table 2**  
Description of the case studies (meso and micro levels of analysis).

Case Study	Firm (Embedded unit of analysis)				Decision-maker (primary unit of analysis)			
	Age	Number of employees	Yearly turnover (euros)	Ownership and management	Age	Gender	Years in the firm	Role in the firm
A	2 <sup>a</sup>	[250, 500[	[50.000.000, 100.000.000[	non familiar	50–70	Male	2 <sup>c</sup>	Executive director
B	11	[0, 10[	[0, 1.000.000[	non familiar	30–50	Male	11	CEO, partner and founder
C	5	[10, 50[	[1.000.000, 5.000.000[	non familiar	30–50	Male	5	CEO, partner and founder
D	11 <sup>b</sup>	[50, 250[	[5.000.000, 25.000.000[	non familiar	30–50	Male	25	Executive director
E	38	[10, 50[	[0, 1.000.000[	familiar	30–50	Male	1	CEO and partner
F	43	[250, 500[	[5.000.000, 25.000.000[	familiar	50–70	Female	27	CEO and partner
G	40	[0, 10[	[0, 1.000.000[	familiar	30–50	Female	1	CEO and partner
H	12	[10, 50[	[5.000.000, 25.000.000[	familiar	30–50	Male	12	CEO, partner and founder
I	24	[50, 250[	[1.000.000, 5.000.000[	non familiar	50–70	Male	24	CEO, partner and founder
J	50	[50, 250[	[1.000.000, 5.000.000[	familiar	30–50	Male	2	Executive director
L	2	[0, 10[	[0, 1.000.000[	non familiar	30–50	Male	2	CEO and partner
M	14	[10, 50[	[1.000.000, 5.000.000[	non familiar	30–50	Female	8	Executive director

Notes Number of employees: the classification follows the Portuguese Labour Code, Lei n° 7/2009, art° 100.

<sup>a</sup> The foundation date considered was the merger date. The founding firms was both more than 30 years old before the merger.

<sup>b</sup> The foundation date considered was the splitting up date of the original firm which operated as a single firm for more than 30 years.

<sup>c</sup> Mr. A is in A&Firm since it's beginning. Moreover, he worked in one of the founding firms for about 4 years before the merger.

and shape the social interaction (e.g., Mr. H strategy to exert influence on service suppliers and customers through “close friendship”). Furthermore, in some cases, these logics that arise from the micro-level of the ecosystem end up being adopted by firms as a consequence of individuals' influence inside the firm (cases E and G). Yet, the data indicate that the degree of integration of these logics arising from the micro-level in the firm's identity, goals, and practices is related with the individual's power within the firm and inversely related with the authority of macro-level logics. For example, in case D, the dominant industry logic is supported by formal rules that limit the scope of action of any other logic, especially conflicting micro-level logics. This is a plausible reason for the discreet use Mr. D makes of the profession logic.

Case L, which depicts conflicting logics based on divergent goals between the individual and the firm, presents a distinct pattern of behavior. While the firm expects to maintain activity and grow, Mr. L who is guided by the dominant market logic and as an entrepreneur is also guided by a market logic, wants to sell his share of the firm for the best price. Despite being guided by self-interest, Mr. L's action towards service suppliers, for example, assumes a long-term orientation and entails creative solutions in trouble-shooting situations.

## 5. Findings

We analyze how individual behavior unfolds in specific supplier/customer interactions within business-to-business ecosystems through a systematic comparison of the cases, data and the literature. Specifically, based on the analysis of conflicting logics, we are able to propose a model for the influence of institutional logics present at the ecosystem's three levels on business interactions (Fig. 2).

At the meso-level, all firms in the current research operate within industries characterized by plural institutional logics. Pache and Santos (2013) point out that in these complex ecosystems, firms tend to progressively embody the industry's logics that prescribe “what constitutes legitimate behavior” and that provide “taken-for-granted conceptions of what goals are appropriate and what means are legitimate to achieve these goals” (Pache & Santos, 2013: 973). As a result, what we observe is that firms are constrained by the main institutional logics of their industry and that this adaptation to their ecosystems is a demonstration of the firm's isomorphism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Surprisingly, we identify institutional logics present in E&Firm and G&Firm's identity and practices that are not prescribed by industries E and G, respectively, but rather by Mr. E and Mrs. G. These findings are a demonstration of how porous these multilevel ecosystems are as institutional logics are not only “inherited” from superior levels but also can be captured from the individual level of the ecosystem (Chandler & Vargo,

2011; Lusch & Vargo, 2014; Scott, 2013).

Cases D, E, G, H, J, and M show the existence of conflicting logics with prescriptive power at the micro-level of the ecosystem which diverges from the conceptual framework. It does relate to the latest neoinstitutional stream of research that argues that individuals embedded in businesses contexts are not constrained by the dominant logics of the industry. In addition, individuals also make use of their own logics that prescribe their identity and goals (Binder, 2007; Ferreira et al., 2015; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011).

Furthermore, data from case L provides insights that also do not fit with the conceptual framework. Nevertheless, it fits the rival explanation that in daily activities, individuals pick logics and scripts that are most suitable for each situation, such as the audience and personal objectives and preferences, regardless of the institutional logics that dominate the ecosystem where they are embedded (e.g., McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011). In addition, the NiT literature on entrepreneurs supports our data regarding how individuals can blend and segregate categories of different institutional logics in an innovative way (Thornton et al., 2012). Finally, Thornton et al. (2012: 93) assert that “actors with low levels of individual commitment to existing logics and schemas are more likely to depart from prevailing logics and to rely on alternative logics.” This assertion provides a plausible explanation for Mr. L's action.

## 6. Conclusion

This study intends to shed light on the influence of human action in business-to-business interactions. We conduct multiple embedded case studies and are able to propose a model of the influence of contextual institutional logics on individual behavior during business-to-business interactions. Below we elaborate on each of these findings and discuss our contributions to the literature and to practice. In addition, we present the research limitations and suggest avenues for future research.

### 6.1. Main insights

Our research clearly illustrates individuals' embeddedness in their ecosystems. In other words, it shows that individuals in representation of firms are influenced by institutional logics present in all three levels of their ecosystem as they identify and make use of the dominant logics in their business ecosystem. In addition, individuals also make use of their own logics, even if these logics are in conflict with the firm's or the industry's logics. Furthermore, some individuals not only use

**Table 3**  
Institutional logics observed in the case studies.

Cases	Institutional logics					Excerpts from the case studies and the institutional logic identified
	Family	Community	State	Market	Profession	
Industry A				✓	✓✓	<p>“One particular feature of the industry is the importance given to normative standards or the (...) internationally agreed best practices (...)” related to the activity and seen as a way to gain legitimacy”. [Profession logic]</p> <p>“The price is mentioned in several documents as important to the competitiveness of these firms”. [Market logic]</p> <p>“Some players operate at a global scale while others operate at a national level. However, they all have large organizational structures”. [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“A&amp;Firm results from the merger of two of the largest Portuguese firms operating in the same industry for more than three decades. This fusion occurred two years ago with the purpose of creating a new firm provided with (...) a long history of quality and credibility in the market, (...), an essential reference in the sector of [activity], with a sophisticated and complete range of services and skills to serve its customers”. [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“The formal established goals for this large firm aim to ‘provide return on investment, create value and increase the assets of customers’, ‘professional development [of employees]’, and to ‘sustainable economic growth of the firm.’” [Market logic]</p> <p>“All procedures are strongly influenced by several normative standards adopted and they are periodically audited in order to ensure ‘continued compliance and sustained evolution of the management systems.’” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Thirty years ago, Mr. A started his carrier after graduating. For more than twenty five years he played similar roles related with sales activities in different firms” [Profession logic]</p> <p>Mr. A values his long experience ‘working both in multinational firms and in reputable Portuguese firms’ which provides him expertise and justifies his position in the firm where he has a great number of the firm’s employees under his supervision.” [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“The industry offers operant resources-based propositions. Some of them are ‘open source’, developed by open exchange and collaborative participation.” [Community logic]</p>
A&Firm				✓	✓	<p>“High technological skills are required in the industry”. [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Price is important particularly since there are competitors whose proposed solutions involve a very low or no financial cost to beneficiaries. Alternatively, firms often propose solutions which embody increasing operant resources to compete with those”. [Market logic]</p> <p>“The firm was founded based on the idea that technology can contribute to the reduction of the negative human impact on the planet.” [Community logic]</p> <p>“In the future, this micro firm expects to operate at a global scale in a ‘mass market’, following an open-source model”. [Market logic]</p> <p>“To achieve this goal, it is necessary, according B&amp;Firm, to have a group of experts doing ‘new product research’.” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Mr. B started his carrier after graduating and worked as an expert in a different firm for about five years. Those years were very important to Mr. B as they allowed him to ‘gain experience.’” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Mr. B began to disagree with his first employer’s practices: ‘the idea that many of the things I did could be done differently began to grow and I felt displaced. As a response to the idea of ‘democratization of new technologies’ and B&amp;Firm arose.” [Community logic]</p> <p>“Mr B faces a dilemma: to pursue with the current activity or ‘to be taken over by a giant firm’ and he added: ‘I do not mind at all. I could be retired in ten years!’” [Market logic]</p> <p>“Price is important particularly since there are competitors who resort to geographical markets where operant resources are less expensive.” [Market logic]</p> <p>“Alternatively, firms often propose solutions which embody increasing but also distinctive operant resources (e.g. professional ‘experience’) to compete with those.” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“In the future, C&amp;Firm aims to ‘create value through the firm’s products’ since ‘the product allows us to increase the revenues in a way that does not involve the increase of the cost’s structure while (...) in order to create additional services, additional costs are needed.” [Market logic]</p> <p>“The firm’s activity unfolds around a particular technology, in which the firm founders are experts.” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“I was the first person who joined the project [the firm] after its founders and at the time, in 2000, it was a firm completely dedicated to [a particular technology around which C&amp;Firm unfolds its activity]. Now it seems a trivial thing but in 2000 it was not. It was certainly the first in Portugal and one of the first in the world focused on [the particular technology mentioned]!” [Community logic]</p> <p>“Mr. C first job provided experience and opportunities: ‘This firm ended up being very successful as in 2008 it was bought by [a multinational firm]. I worked there [in the multinational firm] for three years, here [in Portugal] and in [the multinational firm headquarters].” [Market logic]</p> <p>“The industry is highly regulated in Europe.” [State logic]</p> <p>“Firms operate at a global scale” [Market logic]</p> <p>“The number of firms in the industry has been decreasing through mergers and acquisitions processes.” [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“After a significant change in the industry’s regulatory framework, the original firm, operating for 30 years, was reorganized and became a group of firms ‘united in a group logic’, since 2011. D&amp;Firm is one of those firms.” [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“The group has the mission of ‘contributing to social welfare’ through its activities and each firm in the group has a specific task in achieving that mission” [State logic]</p> <p>“To be recognized as ‘an international reference’ among inspectors is also a group goal, shared by all firms” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Mr. D presents himself as a professional expert who has been upgrading his competences over time” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“After graduating, Mr. D started his professional carrier, 20 years ago, in the company that gave rise to D&amp;Firm. He worked in different departments and different positions” [Corporation logic]</p> <p>“In Portugal, the industry has multiple, relatively homogenous dimension units and most of them are familiar firms” [Family logic]</p> <p>“These players’ service is recognized worldwide for their ‘technical skills’ in resource creation and integration” [Profession logic]</p> <p>“Price is more important to national beneficiaries than it is to foreign” [Market logic]</p>
Mr. A					✓	
Industry B	✓			✓	✓	
B&Firm		✓		✓✓	✓	
Mr. B		✓✓		✓✓	✓	
Industry C				✓✓	✓	
C&Firm				✓✓	✓	
Mr. C	✓			✓✓		
Industry D			✓✓	✓		✓
D&Firm			✓	✓	✓	
Mr. D				✓✓	✓✓	✓
Industry E	✓			✓✓	✓	

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Cases	Institutional logics					Excerpts from the case studies and the institutional logic identified	
	Family	Community	State	Market	Profession		Corporation
E&Firm	✓			✓	✓	✓	<p>"E&amp;Firm was established in 1978 with the aim of providing the income necessary to support its founder's family and it still fulfils that function" [Family logic]</p> <p>"Throughout the years, the firm 'has been keeping up with technological changes in terms of production and also in the development of the more appropriate products.'" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"Presently, the firm is working in order to establish formal procedures." [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"Mr. E is one of the founder's sons and he is currently taking over the management of the organization." [Family logic]</p> <p>"Mr. E was a lecturer and he was preparing his PhD thesis before undertaking his current role" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"According to Mr. E, 'we actually accomplish the implementation of a product management model that would allow anyone in the firm's management to be focused on other aspects than critical operational tasks.'" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"There are few firms operating in Portugal and they 'are the same in the last twenty years.'" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"The exchange's price and the ability to adapt operand resources to what providers need are pointed as fundamental to firms' success" [Market logic]</p> <p>"Concerning the future, F&amp;Firm expects 'the stabilisation of the market in the coming years and subsequent market growth.'" [Market logic]</p> <p>"F&amp;Firm has several facilities all over the Portuguese territory and one abroad and has about 250 employees" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"Mrs. F is very proud of her path within the firm" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"According to Mrs. F, 'I want the company to continue to be recognized as competent people and as efficient service.'" [Market logic]</p> <p>"Firms act locally since the industry is comprised by many, typically micro or small firms. Hence, some of them try to adapt their activity to the surrounding community" [Community logic]</p> <p>"Professional skills are critical in this industry's service provision." [Profession logic]</p> <p>"The firm is a family business, 'passing from generation to generation'." [Family logic]</p> <p>"G&amp;Firm's goal is 'to achieve an adequate [specific service] for each case'." [Profession logic]</p> <p>"Mrs G is very attached to the firm since 'I grew up here in this [firm's facilities] (...) because I always liked to see my father working and to help here.'" [Family logic]</p> <p>"Mrs G also defines herself through her profession" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"An important feature of this service ecosystem is that resource integration varies greatly from country to country mostly due to differences in national rules concerning the operand resources involved in the process." [State logic]</p> <p>"The industry is part of a complex and global network of exchange" [Market logic]</p> <p>"The firm's goal is 'to contribute decisively to the development of [beneficiaries] business as a partner you can trust' through 'best products with very competitive prices We seek to answer with quality, professionalism and dynamism to the new challenges that this market provides us.'" [Market and profession logics]</p> <p>"Mr. H attributes his expertise to his trajectory in the family business" [Family logic]</p> <p>"In addition, Mr. H also defines himself through his academic record from a young age" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"Mr. H is more explicit in relation to the company's objectives and he posits: 'what we're wanting to do right now is increasingly focus on exports; try to reach more countries and target customers outside of Portugal and we will invest this year on diversification (...)'" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>I&amp;Firm and E&amp;Firm are competitors. The description of organizational-field E practices is common to both cases.</p> <p>"I&amp;Firm 'aims to be a solid firm and a reference in its activity, (...) Customers are the firm's primary concern and the reason to focus in their needs (...)'" [Profession and market logics]</p> <p>"Mr. I presents himself, in a very detailed manner, as someone who gave up a professional career to be close to his family and support them" [Family logic]</p> <p>Like I&amp;Firm, also J&amp;Firm and E&amp;Firm are competitors. The description of organizational-field E practices is also common to this case.</p> <p>"Each area is managed by each one of the three founder's descendants." [Family logic]</p> <p>"J&amp;Firm 'calls itself the leader in this market segment [in which it operates]'" [Market logic]</p> <p>"In 2004, the firm began working with foreign beneficiaries and has been adapting its practices to respond to beneficiaries' expectations. In order to do this, the firm has "created a technical design department" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"Mr. J presents himself by recourse to the roles he played in previous firms during his professional career" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"L&amp;Firm's competitors are few, long established, large firms that have grown through the acquisition of other firms" [Corporation logic]</p> <p>"the service beneficiaries are specific organizations that value price" [Market logic]</p> <p>"In the future, L&amp;Firm wants to increase sales 'in the markets identified as priority markets.'" [Market logic]</p> <p>"Its activity unfolds around a particular technology" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"As an entrepreneur, Mr. L thinks 'that in ten years, [L&amp;Firm] will be bought by one of the large [firms operating in the service ecosystem]'" [Market logic]</p> <p>"Smaller players arise and disappear often quickly." [Market logic]</p> <p>"M&amp;Firm is presented as 'an integrator of global solutions in [a specific service], customizable and adaptable to customers (...)'" [Profession logic]</p> <p>"The firm is pursuing new geographical markets" [Market logic]</p> <p>"Mrs M started her carrier 10 years ago in M&amp;Firm's industry after graduating and she is working at the firm for 8 years. Although she values her academic record, Mrs. M is even more proud of her progression within the firms where she worked." [Profession and corporation logics]</p>
Mr. E	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Industry F				✓		✓	
F&Firm				✓✓		✓	
Mrs. F				✓		✓	
Industry G		✓		✓	✓✓		
G&Firm	✓			✓	✓		
Mrs. G	✓				✓		
Industry H			✓	✓✓			
H&Firm				✓✓		✓	
Mr. H	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Industry I	✓			✓✓	✓		
I&Firm	✓✓			✓	✓		
Mr. I	✓✓			✓✓	✓		
Industry J	✓			✓	✓		
J&Firm	✓			✓	✓		
Mr. J						✓✓	
Industry L				✓		✓	
L&Firm				✓✓		✓	
Mr. L				✓✓		✓✓	
Industry M				✓✓		✓	
M&Firm				✓✓		✓	
Mrs. M					✓	✓✓	

Note. ✓ institutional logic present; ✓✓ dominant institutional logic.



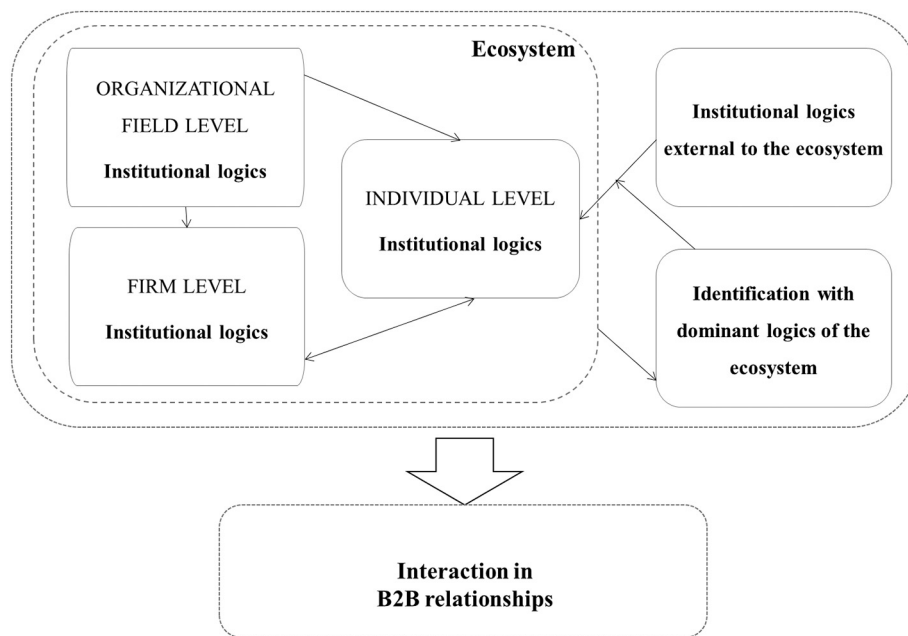


Fig. 2. Empirical model.

institutional logics available in the ecosystem but they also use external institutional logics in an idiosyncratic way by recombining elemental categories of different institutional logics. While in both cases, institutional logics are used as tools for agency, in the latter case, these tools are innovative and unique to the individual.

The research also shows that while there are cases where individual actors seem to be compelled to comply with the institutional pressures of the industry or the firm, in most cases individual actors show a high degree of intentionality and their institutional logics play a central role in interactions. However, all the individuals studied are perfectly aware of the institutional logics that exist in the ecosystem where they are embedded, regardless of its complexity. Furthermore, they are also capable of assessing the power relationships among institutional logics within the ecosystem. This knowledge works as a toolkit, and in some cases, this toolkit is further enhanced with institutional logics coming from different ecosystems of which individuals are or have already been embedded. Within the range of institutional logics at the individual's disposal, he or she chooses which one to use in order to achieve his or her goals at that moment in time, regardless of whether those personal goals are aligned with firm's goals or not. These insights find support in the recent neoinstitutional literature which is used in this research as a rival explanation (e.g. Binder, 2007; Ferreira et al., 2015; Greenwood et al., 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Pache & Santos, 2010, Pache & Santos, 2013).

### 6.2. Theoretical contributions

The paper makes two theoretical contributions. First, it addresses how the institutional logics present at three levels of the network (i.e. industry, firm and individual level) affect business interactions and proposes an empirical model of how individuals consider the institutional logics of their ecosystem in interactions with suppliers. This model goes against the deterministic perspective of institutional logics over human agency, which is the traditional perspective in NiT, and stresses the complexity of influences between the three levels of the network.

Second, it contributes to reducing the literature on the influence of individual actors in the interaction process gap. Specifically, we conclude that, contrary to what is often assumed by business-to-business researchers, individual actors not always comply with the prevailing

institutional logics in the firm or the industry. Three broad patterns of individual behaviour are pointed out which reinforce the relevance of going “below the surface of the supplier and customer as two organizations” (La Rocca et al., 2017, p. 101). Furthermore, these insights call into question the general assumptions about human behaviour in business-to-business research.

### 6.3. Managerial contributions

From a practical point of view, the present research offers a description and analysis of multiple institutional logics combination which could be useful to managers interested in characterizing their own ecosystems.

Also, this research brings to light new arguments to managers and shareholders regarding the importance of aligning the individual's goals with the firm's goals as the misalignment could have important implications to the firm, especially if the individual is a decision-maker.

### 6.4. Limitations and avenues of future research

This research follows the multiple case study method as the research purpose is to reach an understanding about how individuals who represent firms make sense of institutional logics present in their particular environments and how they turn this understanding into action on behalf of the firm. In this sense, our concern is to propose a framework that could be transferable to ecosystems different from the ones studied (i.e., analytic generalization) (Yin, 2009). Hence, we selected cases in order to meet literal and theoretical replication criteria (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 2009) as described in the method section. For this reason, we believe that our findings are transferable to any business ecosystem in a “contemporary capitalist West” society (Friedland & Alford, 1991) that comprises the logics of family, community, state, market, profession, and the corporation (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012).

Despite our best efforts, we had no access to firms with religion logic. Even in a posterior analysis, contrary to what happens with state logic which was eventually found in two cases, religion logic could not be analyzed. However, institutional complexity in the cases under scrutiny leads us to believe that the conclusions are not affected by this limitation.

For those who, like us, see individuals as actively embedded in ecosystems, we hope that this study triggers the relevance of considering the individual level of analysis in business-to-business marketing research as “behavior exists only as the behavior of one or more individual human beings” (Weber, 1978, p. 13) and “collectivities [such as firms] must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (Weber, 1978, p. 13).

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