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Research paper

Customer referencing as business actor engagement behavior – Creating value in and beyond triadic settings

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ABSTRACT

The rising impact of customer engagement is increasingly evident in business markets. This paper studies customer referencing as an important manifestation of engagement behavior in the business-to-business (B2B) context. To extend extant research, which has thus far examined referencing almost exclusively from the seller's viewpoint, we study how referencing affects value creation in business networks. We explore resources contributed and gained though referencing and the resulting value outcomes for the entire reference triad (the seller, the reference customer, and the prospective buyer). Empirically, the paper draws on an extensive field study conducted in knowledge-intensive business service industries. The results explicate how customer referencing affects value creation within and beyond the triad, by i) enhancing or impairing actors' internal processes; ii) strengthening or damaging relationships between the triad actors; and iii) facilitating exchange in their broader business network. The paper contributes to research on customer referencing by explicating its role in value creation on a network level. As one of the first studies on engagement in the B2B context, this paper contributes to the emerging actor engagement research by analyzing how influencing behavior operates in a business network. These insights can help firms to facilitate exchange in complex markets.

1. Introduction

The dominance of firm-controlled marketing has lessened in recent decades owing to the rising impact of customer-originated influence and advocacy, recently conceptualized as manifestations of *customer engagement behavior*, which refers to customers' voluntary resource contributions to a firm's marketing function beyond those core to the transaction (e.g., Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). The influence of other customers is increasingly acknowledged as a key factor affecting purchase decisions in business-to-business (B2B) markets as well (e.g., Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). Today's business markets are characterized by knowledge and service intensity, technological complexity, and increasing specialization (e.g., Jacob & Ulaga, 2008), which challenges both buyers' and sellers' attempts to present and assess the value potential of offerings (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). Recent industry reports (Cespedes & Bova, 2015), as well as research on industrial marketing (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017), indicate that the use of *customer references* has become increasingly relevant for demonstrating the value of complex offerings, thereby facilitating business exchange.

Customer referencing refers to a set of practices that enables sellers to provide evidence to prospective buyers to evaluate their performance potential on the basis of previous customer relationships (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Helm & Salminen, 2010; Aarikka-Stenroos, 2011). Customer referencing therefore occurs in a *triadic setting,* comprising the reference customer, the seller, and the prospective buyer (Hada, Grewal, & Lilien, 2014; Helm & Salminen, 2010; Salminen, 1997). Academic research on customer referencing has to date predominantly focused on the seller's perspective, examining for example how firms acquire customer references (Ruokolainen, 2005), select and develop referrals and reference cases (Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016; Tomas Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007), utilize these cases in sales communication (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kilian, Greuling, & Hennigs, 2013; Salminen & Möller, 2006), and measure the reference value of customers (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013). Only a handful of studies have addressed the value of referencing from the viewpoint of the prospective buyer (e.g., Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Hada et al., 2014; Helm & Salminen, 2010), and there is virtually no empirical research investigating what reference customers gain, although their engagement in influencing and sharing information with

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prospective customers is key to this phenomenon (Harmeling et al., 2016). Extant B2B marketing literature therefore lacks insight into how customer referencing affects value creation for *all actors* involved in the reference triad.

We argue that this shortcoming can be addressed by analyzing *customer referencing as a manifestation of customer engagement behavior in the B2B context.* Engagement behaviors refer to the customer's extra-role resource contributions that can facilitate sellers' product development and marketing activities (Harmeling et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Through these behaviors, engaged customers can influence the perceptions and/or activities of other actors (Alexander & Jaakkola, 2016), thereby ultimately impacting value creation by the actors (cf. Vargo & Lusch, 2008). For example, an engaged reference customer offers the seller promotional resources and evidence of their offering's value potential (e.g., Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016; Terho & Jalkala, 2017), while the prospective buyer gains resources such as credible information that facilitates exchange between the parties (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is thus to *examine how customer referencing, as a manifestation of business actor engagement behavior, affects value creation in business networks.* More specifically, we pose the following research questions: 1) What kind of resource gains and contributions does referencing entail in the reference triad? 2) What kinds of value outcomes accrue from these resources to the actors in the triad? These questions are answered by conducting an extensive exploratory study in knowledge-intensive business service (KIBS) industries.

The study contributes to extant customer referencing research (e.g., Kumar et al., 2013; Terho & Jalkala, 2017) by explicating its role in value creation for the prospective buyer and the reference customer. Our findings demonstrate how providing and using customer references both gives and takes resources and can lead to positive and negative value outcomes on actor, relationship, and network levels. Studying customer referencing as a manifestation of engagement connects this phenomenon to a broader marketing conceptualization, enabling the study of its role in value creation on a network level. As one of the first empirical studies to examine *business actor engagement,* this study responds to recent calls to extend engagement research beyond consumer markets (e.g., Brodie, Fehrer, Jaakkola, Hollebeek, & Conduit, 2016; Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmann, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016) by examining engagement in multi-actor contexts (Alexander, Jaakkola, & Hollebeek, 2018; Pansari & Kumar, 2016; Vivek, Dalela, & Beatty, 2016). Our findings offer new knowledge on B2B-specific manifestations and value outcomes of engagement behavior and show how such behaviors can also detract from the value created. These findings have important academic and managerial ramifications by providing deeper understanding of the broader role of customers as well as the value implications of referencing; such insight can help firms facilitate exchange in complex markets.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Research phenomenon: customer referencing in B2B markets

B2B marketing research has acknowledged that firms in business markets commonly use selected references from client firms when trying to influence prospective customers (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013). According to Salminen (1997), a *reference* is "the supplier's relationship to its existing/former customer that might be evaluated by the customer in terms of the supplier's product/service, management, and cooperation performance"; it thus includes information that may serve as a contributive resource for actors in the reference triad. Furthermore, Ruokolainen (2005, p. 10) highlights other facets of reference information such as "those verified sales arguments, such as return of investment, user experience and implementation time that are assumed to match with suppliers' new potential customers' business cases."

These insights indicate that reference information creates value by virtue of its signaling effect. According to *signaling theory,* particularly as applied in strategic management research, actors within organizations must often make choices armed with incomplete and asymmetrically distributed information and therefore seek out signals that provide information about unobservable attributes and likely outcomes (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973). Customer references signal that a seller's offering is of high quality (Godes, 2012), thereby reducing the cost of information search and facilitating decision making for the prospective buyer (Kumar et al., 2013; see also Spence, 1973).

Thus, signaling theory suggests that references contain signals relevant to the buyer's decision making. Prospective buyers face information asymmetry because they cannot experience the benefits of the product or service until after adoption. Sellers therefore use references to provide information that is not otherwise available (Connelly et al., 2011). Previous research indicates that using large firms as references is beneficial because it signals seller reputability and trustworthiness to the customer (Kumar et al., 2013). Furthermore, the impact of a customer reference is increased if it signals compatibility between the supplier and the customer or if the prospective buyer identifies with the reference customer through, for instance, similarity in industry or culture (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2011; Kumar et al., 2013; Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). These findings indicate that reference information may convey a range of signals – not only reputability but also strategic or contextual fit – that affect value creation by actors in the reference triad.

Extant research discusses a range of practices through which reference information is delivered. Customer references are typically selected and communicated by the seller, and the reference customer allows the seller to use their name or case in the seller's lists, presentations, websites, and press releases (see, e.g., Salminen & Möller, 2006; Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Aarikka-Stenroos, 2011); these practices can be considered to require a low level of reference customer engagement. Reference customers, however, can also host reference visits and speak at industry events (Jalkala & Salminen, 2009; Kumar et al., 2013; Terho & Jalkala, 2017), implying a higher level of engagement and resource contributions.

Although customer referencing is typically considered to be supplier-driven, many studies acknowledge that reference customers also share their experiences voluntarily or spontaneously in the form of testimonials, referrals, and word-of-mouth (Mason, 2008; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Yavas, Babakus, & Eroglu, 2004). Reference customers may also contribute via reputation building (Helm & Salminen, 2010) through activities whereby B2B parties receive information on past performance through their collegial network (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Nunlee, 2005). These practices require active contributions and engagement from the reference customer. The information shared by actively engaged reference customers is thus not always controllable by the seller, and a clear line between referencing and referrals, recommendations, and word-of-mouth may be difficult to draw.

With regard to the value outcomes generated through customer referencing, the extant literature has focused primarily on those accrued to the seller. Referencing provides sales tools through which sellers can prove their ability to execute what they have promised (Ruokolainen, 2005; Kilian et al., 2013; Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016). Customer referencing enables sellers to signal service quality and the functionality of their technology to prospective buyers and to develop their image (Hada et al., 2014; Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kilian et al., 2013).

A handful of studies have considered prospective buyers. For example, Hada et al. (2014) have shown that buyers rely on references especially when they have uncertainties about the supplier. Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen (2014) found that reference cases and word-of-mouth provide useful information for problem solving in industrial buying. Thus far, insights on prospective buyers are, however, predominantly drawn from empirical research focusing on the seller and therefore reflecting sellers' predictions on value outcomes for customers: references are used to verify the supplier's past/present performance and to demonstrate the value-in-use that may be expected by the customer (Kilian et al., 2013; Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016; Salminen & Möller, 2006). Referencing research has remained largely silent on the value outcomes for the reference customer.

2.2. Engagement as a conceptual lens for studying how referencing impacts value creation

To examine how customer referencing affects value creation in a business network, we conceptualize referencing as a manifestation of customer engagement behavior. In previous literature, engagement has been characterized as an actor's relational bonding that extends beyond loyalty and satisfaction (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Pansari & Kumar, 2016), triggering interactive, extra-role behaviors (van Doorn et al., 2010). In this paper, we define engagement behaviors as comprising interactive resource contributions, such as information, time, and effort, that go beyond what is fundamental to the core transaction (Harmeling et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). An engaged actor may affect another actors' perceptions and activities in various ways, for example, by *influencing behavior* through contributing information in the form of referrals or word-of-mouth or by *co-developing behavior*, in which the customers offer resources or ideas for improving products and services (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010; Sharma & Conduit, 2016).

The engagement concept provides a lens for analyzing how customer referencing affects value creation in the triad of involved actors. We draw on a perspective that sees value creation as occurring through the integration of resources in interactions between actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). While in basic business transactions, sellers and buyers exchange a product or service for financial compensation, engagement induces broader resource contributions by customers that affect value processes and outcomes for themselves, the sellers, and/or other actors in the network (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). As Fig. 1 indicates, the engaged reference customer offers the seller promotional resources (e.g., Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016) that may result in improved sales and enhanced image for the seller (e.g., Terho & Jalkala, 2017). The prospective buyer gains credible information that may result in improved decision making and risk reduction (e.g., Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010).

Fig. 1 outlines a tentative framework for studying how customer referencing affects value creation in the triadic network. Customer referencing functions as influencing behavior (cf. Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014) that triggers resource contributions and gains 1) between the reference customer (the engaged actor) and the seller (the object of engagement), 2) between the reference customer and the prospective buyer, and 3) between the seller and the prospective buyer, affecting the value processes of each party. We use this tentative framework to guide empirical research exploring i) the resources contributed and gained by actors in the reference triad and ii) value outcomes for the different actors in more detail.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and process

This study employs a qualitative research design (Patton, 1989) to explore how customer referencing, as a manifestation of business actor engagement behavior, affects value creation in business networks. We conducted an extensive field study with an abductive research strategy. We used the theoretical framework on customer engagement in triadic settings laid out in Fig. 1 as a starting point, and the conceptualizations and research frame were modified during the process, allowing the emergence of unanticipated empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Reichertz, 2004).

Knowledge-intensive business services were chosen as the context for the study because their features – such as information asymmetry, intangibility, and knowledge intensity – make buying and selling in this industry challenging (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012). KIBS literature indirectly stresses the relevance of customer referencing, because new customers typically utilize the experiences of former customers as trustworthy information sources to reduce risk related to their choice of service provider (e.g. Day & Barksdale, 2003). Thus, this context should include a high prevalence of customer referencing and therefore provide a rich base for investigating related resource contributions and value outcomes. Furthermore, KIBS firms tend to be small and medium-sized, and previous literature indicates that customer referencing is particularly important for these firms (Day & Barksdale, 2003).

3.2. Data gathering

We gathered data in a two-phased field study in which we conducted 76 personal interviews with managers who had been involved in customer referencing in the context of KIBS, either as an engaged reference customer, seller, or prospective buyer (Table 1). The first round of data collection comprised 30 episodic narrative interviews (Dataset 1) (Flick, 2002; Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2013) capturing the phenomenon of customer engagement actualized via customer referencing; these data were gathered by the authors. In episodic narrative interviewing, interviews comprise question-and-answer sections as well as freely produced narrative sections that provide rich, less-structured data for analysis (Flick, 2002). The interviews covered themes including the role of customer referencing in the firm, different activities entailed by customer referencing, and the value outcomes originating from such activities. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 h and was recorded and transcribed.

The second phase of data gathering consisted of structured interviews conducted by auxiliary research assistants (Dataset 2). In this phase, 46 face-to-face interviews were conducted using a thematic interview guide developed by the authors on the basis of the first study phase. The interview guide captured background information and themes related to engagement behaviors and referencing practices, resources contributed and gained, and positive and negative value outcomes. These interviews resulted in structured interview reports (see Flick, 2002) written in a predetermined, structured format.

For both datasets, interviewees were purposefully chosen to enhance the richness of the data: first, we sought maximum variation within KIBS industries to allow for versatility and to improve the generalizability of the findings. This meant recruiting interviewees from different businesses ranging from micro entrepreneurial enterprises to large international firms. Of the total of 76 interviews, 24 interviewees represented micro-sized (< 10 employees); 23 small (10–49 employees); 10 medium (50–249 employees), and 19 large (≥250) companies.[1] Only one informant per firm was recruited to preserve maximum variation. Second, we selected interviewees based on theoretical sampling, that is, on the basis of the expected level of insight they could bring to the developing theory (Flick, 2002). The interviewees represented Northern European firms or branches of global corporations and ranged from CEOs and entrepreneurs to senior managers who were actively involved in buying, selling, or promoting business services and were therefore in key positions with regard to customer referencing (see Appendix 1). The interviews revealed perspectives from every actor in the reference triad. Because many interviewees in both datasets

[1] Organization size division according to http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Enterprise_size.

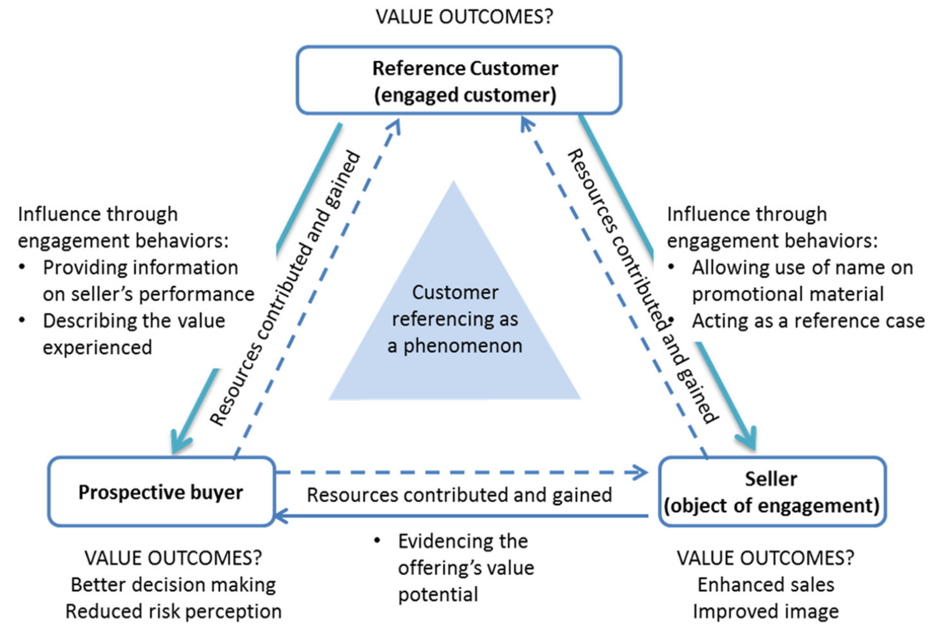

Fig. 1. Tentative framework on how customer referencing as engagement behavior affects value creation in business networks.

Table 1
Overview of empirical data for the study: data types, quantity, and utilization.

Type of data	Quantity	Utilization in analysis and reporting
Dataset 1: Face-to-face interviews conducted by the authors	30 interviews in total: 274 pages of transcribed interviews (2320 min of recorded interviews)	Constructing and developing the categories
Dataset 2: Interviews conducted and reported through structured interview reports by research assistants	46 interview reports in total: 293 pages of interview reports	Revision and validation of results from Dataset 1: • Checking and completing the categorization and gaining saturation • Supportive analysis and examples from various industries

represented small and medium-sized KIBS firms and were involved in many business tasks, they had experience in multiple roles – as sellers, buyers, and reference customers. Each actor was asked to respond to the questions in relation to the roles with which they had considerable experience. Table 1 gives an overview of the two datasets and their utilization in the study, and Appendix 1 provides details on the interviewees' positions and industries.

3.3. Data analysis

Our goal was to derive findings grounded in the data while also keeping within our theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thus, our analysis proceeded via an iterative process typical of abductive research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Reichertz, 2004) by which the theoretical and empirical insights are recursively combined to develop theory. This was done by revising and refining the emerging findings in an iterative fashion both inductively (through data-driven identification) and deductively (through theory-driven identification informed by the existing literature condensed in the theoretical framework outlined in Fig. 1).

The data analysis was conducted through a coding procedure consisting of three phases: First, two authors read the transcribed interviews line by line to identify any reference to resource contributions and gains (RQ1) and resulting value outcomes (RQ2) for actors in the reference triad. Computer-aided data analysis utilizing QSR NVivo was employed because of the large number of interviews and to enable detailed and structured analysis and the identification of theoretical categories (Bazeley, 2007). This phase resulted in an extensive list of recurring themes concerning resource contributions as well positive and negative value outcomes for the three types of actors.

The second step of the analysis was categorization, in which initial categories were grouped and developed into thematic categories, and analysis of relationships between identified resources and value outcomes. Each author first categorized the data independently; the categories were then compared and discussed. This procedure involved considerable revisions to the initial categories in terms of narrowing, relabelling, and integrating overlapping categories; this resulted in the identification of actor-specific resource categories and respective value outcomes (Tables 2–4).

The third step focused on analyzing the domain where value creation occurred – the actor level, relationship level, or network level – using the upper-level categories developed in the previous phase. This analysis summarized the relations between reference triad actors and value outcomes (Table 6) and was used to develop a conceptual framework of the role of referencing in value creation at different levels of a business network (Fig. 2).

The reliability of our findings was enhanced by carefully describing the data collection procedure and establishing a clear chain of evidence from data to interpretations by providing a rich set of quotations from the data to illustrate and support each key finding (Healy & Perry, 2000). Furthermore, we used two independent coders whose analyses were compared and contrasted to improve the accuracy of resources and value outcomes identified and the consistency of categories developed. The use of a software program (NVivo) also improved the formation and development of categorizations, and thereby theory construction and development, as it enabled systematic sorting and searching to find common features and patterns in the data (see Kelle, 2004).

The validity of the findings was enhanced by ensuring that information was obtained from appropriate sources, that is, by carefully selecting interviewees who had extensive experience of customer referencing (cf. Healy & Perry, 2000). We also used three forms of triangulation (Flick, 2004). Researcher triangulation involved two researchers participating in the data coding and categorization; data triangulation was achieved as the study comprises two datasets collected by multiple researchers (the authors and assistants); and theory triangulation was achieved by applying multiple theoretical lenses in the analysis (customer referencing and engagement). In the analysis, the saturation point was achieved during the analysis of Dataset 2 as no new categories emerged, that is, the researchers found no new information pertaining to the topic of study (Creswell, 1998). Finally, external validity, that is, the transferability of the findings, was enhanced by using a broad set of interviewees from different industries and types of firms (Appendix 1) within a carefully defined study context and by using theory as well as previous studies to guide the analysis (Fig. 1) and to evaluate the findings (Table 6) (Eisenhardt, 1989).

4. Results

In this section, we report our findings according to the actor type (reference customer, seller, prospective buyer). Each section analyzes the resources gained and contributed (RQ1) and the resulting value outcomes (RQ2) in parallel.

4.1. Influence of referencing on value creation for the reference customer

The engaged reference customer is the key contributor of resources within the reference triad. Our findings indicate that key *resources contributed* by reference customers include information on the functionality of the seller's offering in their context and access to their social capital and channels. These resource contributions were found to generate a number of positive and negative value outcomes in relation to themselves, their relationships within the triad, and the broader network (see Table 2).

Reference customers indicated that providing information on their use experiences to prospective customers can *strengthen but also damage their relationships in the triad*. By sharing their user knowledge, engaged reference customers can help the seller to gain new business and help prospective buyers to avoid mistakes

> I am happy to share my positive experiences as I also work on sales and know how valuable references are, so I want to also help others to sell better. (International Relations Manager, Consulting)

> A good provider is no secret, and we are happy to let our own network know them. It is important to help others avoid unsatisfactory providers; it is unnecessary to repeat mistakes. (CEO, Logistics)

However, providing authentic information about a seller's performance involves the risk of harming the seller's business and thereby *damaging the relationship*. Acting as a reference customer necessitates some degree of impartiality and objectivity, and often the seller is not involved in the communication between the reference customer and the prospective buyer. This means that sometimes the reference customer expresses some negative insight regarding the seller or their offering. This was considered troublesome by the reference customers:

> What I don't like to talk about is if a project fails completely. It may be also our own fault. It doesn't feel comfortable to share negative things, and it may even lead to juridical issues with the service provider. (Manager, Oil refining and marketing)

By sharing information, the reference customers could *develop the market* in their preferred direction. Sharing information and business cases was considered a way of spreading good practices in the market and facilitating entrance by new providers with novel offerings. This was considered to benefit the whole community in the long run:

> Sharing (reference) information can benefit the whole community. I gladly share my experiences as I believe that it helps others to do better, and it benefits the market and its development. One can pass on good practices to others. (CEO, Construction and engineering)

> Entrepreneurs in a small city support each other, as it benefits us all if the area is successful. That brings new customers to this city and encourages new entrepreneurs. (Partner, Logistics)

At the same time, many interviewees noted that there was a danger that by acting as a reference case, a firm may reveal information that *compromises its market advantage*. Interviewees mentioned that information about good suppliers may be business critical, and acting as a reference hampers their competitive or knowledge advantage as an innovative lead user:

> A risk in being involved in sharing (reference) information is that your own core competences are revealed, and you may lose your competitive edge. (CEO, Construction and engineering)

> An exception [for acting as a reference customer] is such professional services that you want to keep a secret. For example, if you use a consultancy service that you don't want your competitors to use too, you don't talk about it. (Sales and Marketing Manager, Digital and printing services)

The second type of resource contributed by reference customers is their own social capital and channels. The reference customer is to some extent putting themselves on the line and using their own social capital to support the seller. However, they also perceived the social interaction through which referencing takes place as valuable and capable of increasing their own social capital. Sharing experiences with others was considered pleasant, rewarding, and useful and was perceived as creating a sense of community and reciprocity among the actors:

> Interaction and reciprocity are important: when I help others, it is likely that I will receive help in the future. (CEO, Logistics)

> Collaboration has always been important for me, and as an entrepreneur, my best sources of information are a few people that I know well working on similar issues. I spend time with them, and we often share information and experiences. I trust the experiences of these colleagues. It is pleasant to share with experts in the same field. (Entrepreneur, Real estate management)

However, reference customers also reported feeling a heavy responsibility in signaling the quality of the supplier and their offerings and thereby playing an advisory role in other firms' decision making as there was a risk that the supplier might fail. Furthermore, facilitating the supplier's access to other actors in their network sometimes caused a sense of jealousy. Reference customers feared that by helping the seller find new customers, their *relationship may be harmed:*

> If I recommend good providers to others, there is a danger that they get more and better customers and are not that interested in serving us anymore. (CEO, ICT)

> Even if we give recommendations within this industry, we are a bit jealous of our own contact persons. (CEO, HR Consulting)

Reference customers also reported resource gains, most notably information, better service, and promotion of their business. First, many interviewees mentioned that by giving reference information to others, they gained industry-related information in return. Acting as reference customers contributed to *learning* because they were able to reflect on their experiences and the value-in-use they gained

> There is a rule of reciprocity in sharing of information: when you give it, you get it yourself. (Business Development Manager, Manufacturing)

> Discussing your own experiences [on the offering] helps you to get new ideas, to clarify your own perceptions, and gives you a deeper understanding. (Sales and Marketing Manager, Digital and printing services)

Second, the interviewees noted that by acting as a reference case, the reference customer gains extra benefits from the seller, such as favors and flexibility. The resulting value outcomes are better service and a more important position with regard to the seller, which ultimately *strengthens the relationship between the reference customer and the seller*:

> The benefit that we get from the seller is increased flexibility for different things. You are flexible to others, and they do the same for you. That is the biggest benefit. (Leading Engineer, Food manufacturing)

> When the service provider benefits from my recommendation, our firm becomes a more important customer in the eyes of the service provider. They are more willing to serve us well, and our collaborative relationship becomes deeper. (CEO, Shopping mall)

Third, the reference customers discussed the publicity and promotion they receive through sellers. Firms acting as reference customers reported to have benefited from resulting *improved reputation and visibility* in their business network and industry:

> I agree to become a reference customer when I am happy with the service, as this way our firm also gets more visibility. (Sales and Marketing Manager, Digital and printing services)

Finally, the interviewees also highlighted some potential *reputation damage* resulting from the seller's utilization of customer references. The reference customer puts their own reputation on the line when recommending a particular seller, and if the seller fails with the new customer, the reference customer is portrayed as untrustworthy:

> The reference customer gives the recommendation a face, which makes it less likely that they exaggerate or give false information, because if the information is wrong, they will lose face. (Partner, IT)

> There is a danger that other clients don't necessarily appreciate similar things as we do as a reference customer. The risk is also that the outcomes won't be realized the same way for them. (Partner, Marketing and strategic consulting)

Table 2 summarizes findings related to the resources reference customers contribute and gain through referencing as well as the reference customer's value outcomes originating from resource gains and contributions.

4.2. Value outcomes of customer referencing for the seller

Our data revealed several resources that sellers gain through customer referencing and their respective value outcomes. The primary resources gained relate to context-specific customer information about customer experiences and the offering, access to reference customers' tangibles and physical sites, and their social capital, name, and image (see Table 3).

Through reference case stories, sellers gained information about the reference customer's experiences with the seller's service and offerings in their own business context. This information *facilitated internal marketing and development.* Through reference customers, selling organizations gain an intimate understanding of how their product or service functions in the customer's domain. In addition, positive customer experiences were considered important feedback that motivated personnel:

> We have received a lot of feedback from reference customers. [They say that] we have been more flexible than Firm X, or our price–-quality ratio is better. The feedback has been good lately – that makes us feel good and motivates us a lot, as this is one of the smaller firms in this field in Finland. So, it shows that we have done well in competition [against the bigger firms]. (Marketing and Sales Manager, Engineering)

Importantly, a customer's authentic experiences also enable sellers to signal their competence, resulting in *improvement in sales practices:*

> The customer wants to buy technical skills so that they can build a new production line or facility… it may be a totally new industry for them. We have reference cases in China and in Finland, and we can thereby convince them that we know this kind of business and we can plan the facilities for them. When we have done it and get a positive review from the customer, we can use it in the next case. We are selling people's skills here; the only way to do business is through references. (Sales and Marketing Manager, Engineering)

Many interviewees noted that through references, sellers can convince a buyer that they are a suitable partner for their particular need. A previous reference from the specified industry signals that the seller has relevant expertise and thereby facilitates sales argumentation and demonstration efforts, building credibility in the eyes of the buyer. Sometimes references are required to qualify in the tendering process, and they also made it easier to explain what the solution was comprised of, how it was delivered, and what value it could create:

> Each firm and each industry has its special features, and references are the best tool to indicate them. For example, when we started a customer relationship with the Bank Union, an important issue in the background was our previous experience and a reference case in the field of bank advertising. (CEO, Advertising)

> In the marine industry, customers always ask which other actors in ship building use our software. We have a special reference list for this industry where we have removed all other customers… It is also relevant to indicate what size of customers we have served and what kind of ships those firms build, if it is a ship yard or a design firm, and how many software licenses other customers typically have. (CEO, Software)

The interviewees noted that receiving and using this information also affects their relationship with the reference customer. On one hand, using a particular customer as a reference customer signaled trust and valuation to that customer. This was considered to *strengthen the relationship between the seller and the reference customer*, and often led to reciprocal use of the good business relationship as a reference case:

> I can use the name of Firm X, and they can use my name in their marketing. Much of our collaboration relates to confidential stuff, so I double checked if it is okay to put their name on our website. They said, "Of course, that would be an honor for us." (Head Designer and CEO, Industrial design)

However, referencing may also *damage the relationship* between the seller and the reference customer. A potentially negative outcome of gaining and using business-specific data from the reference customer is the risk of leaking information that could potentially harm the reference customer. The sellers noted that they need to carefully consider what information to use, as problems may arise if the seller misunderstands how the customer wishes their name to be used in the seller's marketing efforts:

> If the information (in the reference case) could somehow harm the customer, or is confidential in nature, it is not appropriate to share it. (CEO, Financial services)

> We had a bit of conflict when we wrote about a customer and had

Table 2
Influence of referencing on the reference customer's value creation.

Resources contributed (−) and gained (+)	Positive (+) and negative (−) value outcomes from the reference customer's perspective
− Contributing real business information on the functionality of the offering in own context	Strengthens/damages relationships in the triad: + Sharing knowledge to help others avoid mistakes + Helping the seller gain new business − Risk of harming the seller or prospective buyer's business due to judgment given Develops the market: + Spreading good practices in the field + Giving support to local business branch Compromises market advantage: − Losing knowledge advantage through exposure of confidential information − Losing competitive advantage as other actors adopt similar solutions
− Contributing social capital and informal channels	Strengthens/damages relationships in the market: + Sense of reciprocity and community + Interaction with prospective customers increases social capital − Risk of harming the others' business in case the supplier fails − Jealousy and fear of losing the star position with the supplier
+ Gaining industry-related information from other customers	Facilitates learning: + Learning through reciprocal information exchange + Gaining new ideas through discussing their own experiences
+ Gaining reciprocal favors and flexibility from the seller	Strengthens/damages relationships in the triad: + Getting better service from the seller + Becoming an important customer
+ Gaining promotion by the seller	Improves/damages reputation and status in the market: + Increased positive publicity and image − Appearing untrustworthy

> not remembered to ask for their specific permission. They reacted to that, saying that they didn't know what we would write. That was of course our mistake that we didn't check it, but usually they always want to get publicity… (CEO, Software)

Another important resource identified by the sellers was access to the realized past offering at the customer's site. Some of the highly engaged reference customers agreed to invite prospective customers to visit their facilities, where they could observe tangibles such as the realized outcome of past business relationships (e.g., a newly designed machine) and how the offering functioned in practice (e.g., a new type of welding robot). The reference customer may even provide business-specific data on the impact on their business of using the seller's offering, measured, for example, in terms of improvements to production processes. These resources *facilitated the seller's sales processes* by helping them to concretize the value-in-use that their offering can deliver to the prospective buyer, providing evidence for their sales arguments. The message becomes even more convincing when the customer hears it directly from another customer:

> When we showcase our references that explain how things were done with another customer, the client gets a better idea of it. Stories on other customers are fun, concrete, memorable, and different. (CEO, Industrial design)

Reference visits are often very important. We don't do them too often, but when we do, customers become very convinced when they see how our software plays a big role in someone's business. That's when our reference customer is the salesman. We let the customer speak to the prospective customer. (CEO, Software)

Another critical resource gained through referencing was access to the reference customer's name and image, as well as social capital. Many of the value outcomes discussed by the sellers related to gaining *a better reputation and status in the markets*, which affected the seller's relationships beyond the reference triad. References signal the general performance ability of the seller to the broader markets:

> For us, maybe the most important reference is a well-known customer, their brand. It makes us look convincing if a big company with a lot of resources uses us (CEO, Translation services)

> Through references people learn how well aligned reality is with what a firm promises on their website. This has a major effect on how the service firms' reputation develops among potential customers (CEO/Partner, Market research).

A positive reputation gained through references also facilitates sellers' customer acquisition processes and enables them to find new customers and indicate their position in the market:

> Reputation built by reference customers really is the key to gaining new business. Customers [that have used some other supplier] have heard that we are really good, that it is easy and fast to work with us. Then they want to try us too. That's how it works; references and reputation matter. (CEO, Translation services)

> Through (reference) Firm N, we have gotten new customers, for example an RFID technology company. Firm N is a key reference for us, as it is from the high-tech industry, it is a start-up and we did the design process from user interface to the end; it was a turnkey project. With that case, we can show that we can serve small companies and not only large-sized firms. (CEO, Industrial design)

The data also indicates the importance of reference customers' social capital. Reference customers sometimes shared their experiences voluntarily, outside the planned reference customer role, which fortified positive value outcomes:

> A satisfied customer or unsatisfied customer will share their experiences with another, even in unofficial situations when they don't even mean to. (CEO, Construction and engineering)

> For a knowledge-intensive service company, it is important that particularly people from your industry talk about you. Reference customers spreading positive word-of-mouth are like on-going advertising, only much more effective than paid advertising. (CEO, Financial services)

However, referencing may also *damage the seller's reputation*. The reference customer is an uncontrollable marketing resource that may also spread negative opinions in cases of failed service delivery or a negative personal relationship:

> The perception one has of a firm can very much depend on one particular person. If one person from the customer firm doesn't like that one person in the supplier firm, it can be that she/he tells the whole country about that, and a deal may be lost because the negative tone reflects on the whole firm. And this may happen even if the service as such is perfectly fine and of high quality. (CEO, Construction and engineering)

While sellers predominantly discussed resources gained through referencing, they noted that the collection and use of references in sales also requires time and effort. The seller needs to carefully plan which information to use so that no harm will be done to the reference customer. The seller also needs to handpick suitable reference cases for each particular customer, and maintaining a sufficient portfolio of references was considered to *burden employees*:

> Right now, we don't have any list of references; we just use them as examples in (sales) presentations. We should have better reference cases… We haven't had enough resources to develop and keep up a sufficient set of cases. It is a huge effort. (CEO, Software)

Table 3 summarizes the findings related to the resources that sellers gain and contribute through referencing, as well as the seller's value outcomes originating from resource gains and contributions.

4.3. Value outcomes of customer referencing for the prospective buyer

Our data indicated that the two key resources that prospective buyers gain are information derived from authentic experiences with the seller or their offering and specific business data demonstrating the offering's value creation potential (Table 4).

First, the reference customer's experiences signal the qualifications, fit, and competence of the seller, resulting in *improved buying practices.* Reference cases were considered an important source of authentic information that was particularly useful when firms were similar in terms of their situation, interests, or business area. Gaining access to peers' past experiences contributed to the learning of the prospective buyer, as this information could be stored for later use, helping the buyer to gain insight into different types of services available with less effort:

> Every firm doesn't need to do "trial and error" with different service providers, but they can benefit from others' experiences and save their costs. (CEO, Logistics)

References can be used in a passive way: Even if you aren't immediately going to purchase that service you remember that someone recommended it. (business development manager, manufacturing)

Information on the qualities of sellers gained from reference customers in similar contexts helps the buyer find a trustworthy and well-performing seller that matches their needs, which saves time and other resources in the buying process:

> For example, our new scheduling system was chosen exactly because we had heard that other similar and successful firms have had good experiences on it. It is important that it works for our industry and is suitable for a company of our size. (Partner, Healthcare services)

> Others' experiences help save the time and costs of finding a service provider. (International Relations Manager, Consulting)

Gaining case-specific business data on the functionality of the offering *facilitated the buyer's negotiations with the seller.* Through customer references, prospective buyers could better grasp the potential value-in-use of the offering for them. The reference customer could also give the prospective buyer a realistic understanding of the business practices in the field such as price level and contracting, which reduces insecurities and makes it easier for the seller and prospective buyer to make a deal. These resources also facilitated the buyer's relationship initiations in the market, beyond the focal reference triad. The information received functioned as a signal of what is appropriate in the field, thereby facilitating negotiations:

> You can ask the reference customer about the price level of the service provider and how they determine the prices, unless you just want to take the seller's word for it when you negotiate with them. (Manager, Forest industry)

> We can benchmark other customers' experiences when preparing for the contract, and we also find a "package" that is suitable for us faster. It is easier to negotiate when you get some background information about how they usually act. (CEO, Financial services)

Table 3
Influence of referencing on the seller's value creation.

Resources gained (+) and contributed (−)	Positive (+) and negative (−) value outcomes from the seller's perspective
+ Information about the RC's experiences of the offering in an authentic context	Facilitates internal marketing and development: + Better understanding of the functionality of the offering + Better understanding of needed improvements + Motivating personnel through positive customer feedback Improves sales practices: + Demonstrating fit with the customer's business/industry + Increased ability to raise interest and build credibility in the eyes of the potential customer + Qualifying for the tendering process Strengthens/damages relationships with the RC: + Signaling appreciation towards the RC − Risk of leaking confidential information about the RC
+ Access to the RC's tangibles and physical sites	Facilitates sales processes: + Showing concrete evidence of the offering's functionality + Evidence for sales arguments
+ Promotional resources through access to the RC's social capital, name, and image	Improves/damages reputation and status in the market: + Improved competitive position + Legitimized market position + Clearly communicated positioning + Improved reputation and image + Finding new customers/markets − Risk of the RC sharing negative experiences
− Cost and effort to collect and use references	Burdens marketing/sales people: − Effort to build reference portfolio − Time spent on selecting and customizing references according to buyer needs − Acquiring a first reference customer can be costly

Table 4
Influence of referencing on the prospective buyer's value creation.

Resources gained (+) and contributed (−)	Positive (+) and negative (−) value outcomes for the prospective buyer
+ Authentic information on the RC's experiences with the seller	Improves buying practices + Learning from the RC's experience + Saving time and costs on supplier selection + Facilitating identification and seller/offering that matches with needs
+ Case-specific business data on the functionality of the offering in an authentic context − Effort and resources to critically evaluate and interpret reference information	Facilitates business negotiations + Better understanding of the seller's offering and its value-in-use potential in similar situations + Better understanding of common business practices and price level in the market Reduces perceived risk + Others have tested the service + Evidence that the service works Better/biased decision making + Faster decision making − Lazy decision making; blindly following others' opinions − Relying on overly positive or false information

Another value outcome of case-specific business data discussed by the interviewees was *risk reduction*. The reference customer was considered a guinea pig that had already tested the service and proven that it works. This also meant that it was easier to choose suppliers that might not be the most obvious choice (such as market leaders) but would likely be the most compatible. Some interviewees relied on references, especially when purchasing high-risk, business-critical services:

> On the basis of what you hear from previous customers, you can evaluate if the service offered is worth its price and if the firm's personnel is competent. You learn if they can be trusted and do what they promise. (Marketing Manager, Retailing)

> Especially with regard to IT systems, we consider it very important that other users' experiences show that maintenance works as it should and comes on time, so that these issues would not cause any interruption to our business. (Manager, Forest industry)

> When there is a reference available, you know that you aren't the first one to test the service. You can see the outcomes of it and get information about how the collaboration worked out. (CEO/Partner, Market research)

The interviewees noted that the information gained through reference cases sped up decision making. The reference customer functions as a decision heuristic, a shortcut for making a good decision quickly:

> You get immediately on the right track, without wasting time. You can also rule out bad alternatives easily (Partner, Auditing)

> The earlier you can get information [from reference cases], the better it guides your purchasing process and directs it to the right direction and scale. (Manager, Construction and engineering)

At the same time, the interviewees noted that referencing may also lead to *biased decision making* in which some viable alternatives may be overlooked or the decision may be based on limited or even misinformation. The interviewees explained that blindly following the reference customer's example may lead to negative end results as the same service may not necessarily fit the prospective buyer's situation or need:

> The risk is that one becomes lazy and too easily relies on what others say, without considering different options enough. The outcome may be that you don't get the service provider offering the best quality or price. (Partner, Auditing)

> Of course, there is the risk that you get too blind and don't critically evaluate the information you get [from the reference customer]. (CEO, Sports company)

To avoid biased decision making, *effort and resources* were needed to critically evaluate and interpret the information provided by the reference customer:

> When references come from outside our industry, it is very important to evaluate them carefully and discuss within our own firm how well this would work for us. (CEO/Partner, HR consulting)

Table 4 summarizes the findings related to the resources prospective buyers gain and contribute through referencing, as well as prospective buyer's value outcomes originating from resource gains and contributions.

5. Discussion

To unravel how customer referencing affects value creation in business networks, we first discuss our findings on referencing as business actor engagement behavior and subsequently develop a conceptual framework for its role in value creation in business networks.

5.1. Referencing as a manifestation of business actor engagement behavior

Previous engagement research has acknowledged that through influencing behavior, customers contribute resources beyond what is fundamental to the core transaction through which they can affect other customer's knowledge and perceptions about the firm and its offering (e.g., Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). This study elaborated on one particular form of influencing behavior – customer referencing – that is specific to and relevant for the B2B context. By empirically examining the resources contributed by reference customers, we can provide a more nuanced view of how this type of engagement behavior operates in B2B markets.

Our findings specify the key resources through which reference customers can affect other actors' perceptions and knowledge. First, reference customers contribute promotional resources and social capital by allowing the seller to use their name as an example of a previous, satisfied customer or by actively recommending the seller within their collegial networks. For other actors in the network, this signals the reputability and trustworthiness of the seller (cf. Kumar et al., 2013) and enables transfer of reputation (Helm & Salminen, 2010). In effect, the engaged customer influences others in the business network by ***transferring their reputation to legitimize the seller or their offering*** (Table 5).Harmeling et al. (2016) suggest that a customer's persuasion capital is an important resource that sellers can draw on through engagement, and it relates to the traditional view of reference customers as a co-marketer that boosts the seller's sales efficiency, which is the most typical view taken in customer reference research (e.g., Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013). Our study, however, broadens this perspective by also highlighting other resources contributed by reference customers and detailing the influencing mechanisms of referencing (cf. Hada et al., 2014; Jalkala & Salminen, 2010).

Second, reference customers contribute information on their authentic experiences with the seller, the offering, or the service process in their particular context. These experiences can be provided either directly by the reference customer or indirectly by the seller, for example, in the form of written testimonials. This information signals to other actors the type of customer or business context to which the seller's offering is suited and what business practices are typical, which

Table 5
Influencing mechanisms of referencing as a form of engagement behavior.

Resources contributed by the reference customer	Key signals of the resource	Influencing mechanism of referencing
Allowing the use of name in promotion Using social capital and relationships to promote the seller	The seller is reputable and trustworthy	Transferring reputation to legitimize the seller
Information on experiences with the seller in a particular situation	The type of customer whom the seller's offering suits Common business practices in the field	Conveying authentic experiences to facilitate resource matching and integration in the network
Access to the RC's tangibles and physical sites Revealing case-specific business data	The concrete outcome of the seller's offering The business impact the seller/offering can create	Evidencing the value potential of the seller's offering

reduces buyer uncertainty in a situation where there is information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011). This means of influencing relies on the trustworthiness and credibility of the reference customer's experience (Ruokolainen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2016) and making a complex, ambiguous service tangible. Previous research has highlighted that a person who seems similar to oneself is perceived as more trustworthy (e.g., Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Our findings highlight that in a B2B context, the effect of similarity relates to the prospective buyer's need for context-specific business intelligence that only peer businesses may effectively provide. However, this may have negative consequences if the reference customer's experiences do not resonate with the prospective buyer's situation or needs or if the shared experiences are unfavorable. Ultimately, the engaged customer influences others by *conveying authentic experiences through which they facilitate resource matching and integration between other actors in the network* (Table 5).

Third, reference customers provide concrete proof of the seller's performance or the functionality of the offering in their own context. Reference customers may, for instance, provide opportunities to observe the offering in use or reveal figures or calculations on the effects of the seller's solution. Previous research has highlighted such practices as an important part of reference marketing (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010), and they are also considered key for value-based selling (Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012) and solutions selling (Storbacka, 2011). For buyers, these resources signal the performance ability of the seller or their offering, through which the engaged customer influences other network actors by *evidencing the value potential of the seller's offering* (Table 5).

Interestingly, previous research mostly conducted in the North American business-to-consumer context has found that the effect of a customer referral tends to depend on the potential customer's perception of that referral's objectivity (e.g., Price & Feick, 1984). If the potential customer perceives that the referral is biased and presents an overly positive evaluation of the seller, for example due to monetary compensation, the potential customer typically discounts the information (Hada et al., 2014; Mayzlin, 2006). This could presumably be extended to B2B markets. Our data, collected in the Northern European context, did not feature paid customer references or monetary compensations. This might be due to our focus on voluntary activities on the part of engaged customers, but it is also plausible that the cultural context affects the impact of customer referencing.

5.2. The influence of customer referencing on value creation within and beyond the reference triad

Our findings highlighted the resources gained and contributed through customer referencing, as well as related value outcomes, for the actors involved in the reference triad. Through this analysis it is possible to draw conclusions regarding how value creation is affected by referencing. It is evident that referencing accrues both resource gains and losses for the actors in the reference triad and that these outcomes occur on *different levels* (see Table 6): First, our results reveal value outcomes on the *actor level* through effects on internal business processes, for example, buyers highlighted that referencing facilitated their buying process because reference customers provide credible information that is gained easily and quickly, accelerating decision making. These findings support and develop earlier understandings on how customer referencing contributes to sales and buying tasks (e.g. Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Jalkala & Salminen, 2010;Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). We also identified actor-level negative value outcomes from losing business-sensitive information (reference customer), from the effort and cost of collecting and using the reference information (supplier), and from biased reference information leading to erroneous investments (prospective buyer).

Second, the results show *relationship-level* value outcomes through improved or impaired relationships between the actors in the triad. Engaged reference customers' resource contributions influence how actors interact to integrate resources – how they co-create value. For example, in the seller–prospective buyer relationship, references induce attractiveness and ease negotiations. Reference customers facilitate the initiation and development of relationships between compatible counterparts; they support buyers to find suitable partners and to choose offerings that optimally integrate with their respective value processes and enable sellers to target their messages to matching buyers. Referencing also strengthens relationships between the reference customer and the seller because their images and reputations become intertwined. Referencing can also have negative value outcomes at the dyadic relationship level, for example, the judgment of reference customers may harm the seller or the prospective buyer, especially if it was inadequate in the focal situation. Our study maps the value outcomes in all three types of relationships and thus extends earlier studies that have focused primarily on one dyad at a time (e.g., seller–reference customer in Helm & Salminen, 2010).

Third, the findings demonstrate the *network-level* value outcomes of referencing. Resource contributions by engaged reference customers induce new relationships within the business network and the market, enable industry and market developments, and enhance actors' visibility, reputations, and images. It is noteworthy that these outcomes span beyond the reference triad to business networks in broader markets in two ways: first, referencing alters actors' attractiveness and position in markets by impacting their reputation and competitive positioning; second, it facilitates exchange in the markets by helping actors adopt common business practices and find matching partners. Hence, our empirical analysis extends and elaborates the initial notions (e.g., by

Table 6
Summary of key findings on positive and negative value outcomes of customer referencing at different levels and their connection to previous research.

Value outcomes	Prospective buyer	Seller	Reference customer (RC)
Actor level	• Improved buying practices through better supplier identification and selection • Reduction of perceived risk by proof of offering functionality • Faster decision making • Compromised decision making due to potentially biased information from the RC	• Improved internal marketing and development • Improved sales practices • Burden on marketing/sales people from building and customizing the reference portfolio	• Learning and gaining ideas • Compromised market and competitive advantage through exposure of knowledge
Relationship level	• Improved business negotiations with the seller through better understanding of the offering and business practices	• Improved business negotiations with the buyer though better ability to demonstrate and evidence value-creation ability • Strengthened relationships with the RC • Damaged relationships with the RC in case of information leakage	• Strengthened or damaged relationship with the supplier depending on the nature of review given • Gaining or losing a special position in the seller's business • Strengthened or damaged relationship with the buyer depending on the usefulness of information provided
Network level		• Improved or damaged reputation and status in the market depending on the nature of information spread by the RC	• Increased sense of community and social capital • Market development through supporting good practices and actors • Improved or damaged reputation and status in the market depending on the validity of signals provided
Key connection to previous research on customer referencing (CR) and customer engagement (CE)	Individual actor level • CR: Supports and nuances earlier findings indicating that buying activities are facilitated by customer referencing (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010) • CE: Elaborates earlier findings on the value outcomes that engagement may have for prospective customers (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014)	• CR: Supports the view that sales activities and efficiency are boosted by referencing (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017) but also develops new knowledge by identifying potential negative value outcomes for the seller • CE: Elaborates previous findings that engagement enhances sellers' performance (Harmeling et al., 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2016) by explicating why that happens	• CR: Generates new knowledge on value outcomes of referencing by taking the RC's perspective, which has been previously overlooked • CE: Supports earlier finding that a sense of recognition is a value outcome for engaged customers (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).
	Relationship and network levels • CR: Elaborates existing tentative understanding on the positive value outcomes at relationship and network levels (Helm & Salminen, 2010) • CR: Generates new knowledge by mapping negative value outcomes of referencing for all involved actors at the actor, relationship, and network levels. • CE: Supports previous findings that engagement enhances relationships between engaged customers and sellers (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014) but also brings forth relational risks • CE: Offers new insight into the reputational and status effects of engagement behaviors		

Salminen & Möller, 2006) that the effects and value outcomes of customer referencing may spill over from the dyad or triad.

Table 6 summarizes the key findings on value outcomes of referencing for all reference triad actors (engaged reference customer, seller, and prospective buyer), highlighting the domain where these value outcomes occur (actor, relationship, and network level) and how these results relate to previous research.

Fig. 2 outlines a conceptual framework illustrating how referencing affects value creation in business networks. Our study shows that for sellers and prospective buyers, value outcomes reside predominantly at the actor or relationship level, where reference customers experience fewer value outcomes internally (see also Table 6). This suggests that engaged business actors contribute resources for others, but their value creation is indirect, through status, reputation, and position in the markets.

Our findings resonate with previous conceptualizations in the customer engagement literature (Alexander & Jaakkola, 2016), but they are specific to B2B markets where the actors are simultaneously sellers and customers. Engagement research conducted in consumer settings has found engagement outcomes that are actor specific and different for engagement subjects (consumers) and objects (firms), for example, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and trust (Hollebeek, 2011), compared to enhanced firm performance (Kumar et al., 2010). In B2B markets, more interrelated value outcomes originate from customer referencing as a manifestation of customer engagement, such as improved negotiations and problem solving between actors in a business relationship. Furthermore, our findings highlight how engagement may facilitate the development of the market as a whole, which lends support for Storbacka et al.'s (2016) connection between actor-level engagement and meso-level resource integration patterns leading to macro-level value co-creation.

6. Conclusions and implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study examined how customer referencing, as a manifestation of business actor engagement behavior (cf. Brodie et al., 2011; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010), affects value creation in business networks. It contributes to the domains of customer

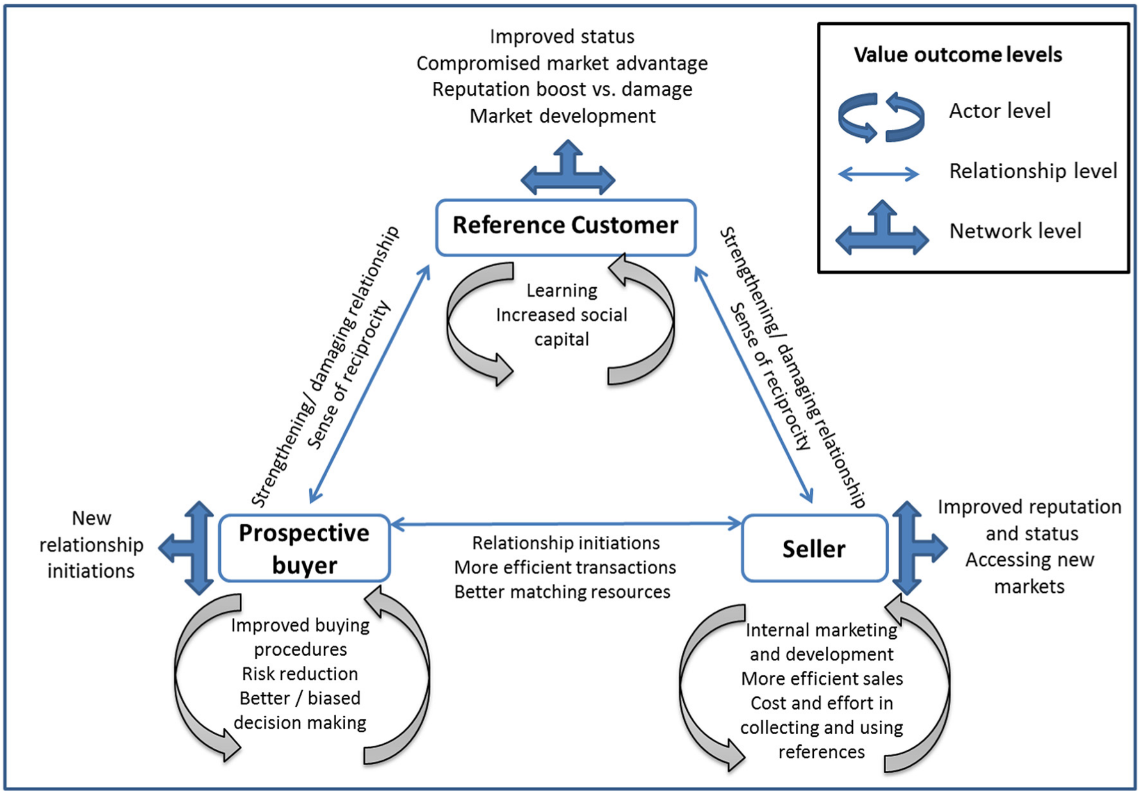

Fig. 2. Influence of customer referencing as B2B engagement behavior on value creation in business networks.

referencing and actor engagement research.

First, this study broadens extant research on customer references by examining this phenomenon through a novel lens of engagement, which highlights reference customers' endogenous viewpoints rather than portraying referencing merely as a seller-incentivized activity. The study expands extant knowledge by i) identifying a range of referencing-induced resource contributions between actors in the reference triad, ii) outlining key positive and negative value outcomes of customer referencing for those actors, and iii) elaborating on where and how such value outcomes emerge at three different levels (actor, relationship, network/market). These findings add to extant industrial marketing and B2B research that has mainly considered references as a sales tool of the seller (e.g., Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). While the benefits of referencing for sellers have been previously identified (e.g., Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017), extant research has not provided focused analysis on how this phenomenon affects value for other actors in the network. This study extends the view by mapping the perspectives of all involved actors and explicates how referencing connects to network-level value co-creation. The viewpoint of the reference customer in particular has been insufficiently understood in previous research; our study examines in detail the role of reference customers as active network actors, experiencers, and contributors rather than just marketing tools for suppliers.

We also provide new insight into reference information as a signal for the network (Spence, 1973). Our findings extend earlier notions on customer referencing as informative signaling that supports both sellers' sales activities and buyers' decision making (Godes, 2012; Kumar et al., 2013) by elaborating on the resources on which signals are based and bringing forth a network view. Because our study brings forth viewpoints of both the sender and interpreter of the signal as well as their interaction, it demonstrates how reference information signals can result in different interpretations with different value outcomes depending on the actor. These findings supplement earlier research emphasizing reputational fit between the reference customer and the seller (Helm & Salminen, 2010) or size of the reference customer as a signal for credibility (Kumar et al., 2013).

Second, we contribute to emerging actor engagement research by exploring a particular engagement behavior and its influence on value creation in B2B markets. The paper explicates how customer referencing affects value creation in the triad by enhancing or impairing individual actors' internal processes, strengthening or damaging relationships between the triad actors, and facilitating exchange in the broader business network by influencing actors' positions as well as business practices. The paper also provides nuance to existing understanding on influencing behavior by specifying how influencing operates in the B2B context. We identified three key mechanisms: legitimizing through reputation transfer, conveying experiences, and providing evidence. These findings contribute to extant research on customer engagement behaviors (Harmeling et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012) and to the emerging research on actor engagement, where empirical studies are still rare (Brodie et al., 2016; Storbacka et al., 2016).

This paper is among the first to discuss what engagement means in B2B contexts. Previous contributions to B2B literature highlight the positive impact of some relationships on others in the network and suggest ways in which existing relationships facilitate creating and establishing new business (Ritter, 2000; Walter, Ritter, & Gemünden, 2001). This paper argues that the concept of engagement offers an overarching framework for the study of phenomena observed in earlier B2B marketing literature. The well-known concepts of trust, commitment, and involvement characterize strong business relationships, but *engagement can be considered as the ingredient in the relationship that triggers interactive behaviors beyond the customer–seller dyad that impact the surrounding business network* (cf. Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).

6.2. Managerial implications

This study suggested that referencing is a manifestation of business actor engagement and mapped positive and negative value outcomes (see Tables 2–4) that serve as drivers and inhibitors for value creation originating from customer referencing. The key implication here is that managers should put effort into increasing drivers for customer referencing by fortifying its positive value outcomes. Respectively, issues that generate negative value outcomes should be diminished to encourage customers to engage in referencing. Some of the identified negative value outcomes of referencing are related to the effort and procedures necessary to build and manage the reference portfolio or the failure therein, resulting in jeopardizing the confidentiality of the reference customer. Firms should, therefore, develop policies to manage their customer referencing practices in a systematic manner.

Our findings also encourage suppliers to utilize customer referencing as evidence of the benefits of their services. With references, service providers can demonstrate their ability to resolve a customer's problem in a workable manner and reduce service complexity and can illustrate the outcome, process, and potential value of an outcome to a potential client. Reference visits allowing the use of physical facilities by engaged reference customers could be employed to a greater extent. However, this study also revealed that the relevance and value outcomes of customer referencing are linked to credibility, which was often fortified by close relationships or interactions between the buyer and reference customers. Therefore, it could be beneficial to put more effort into marketing practices such as social events and reference visits that enable resource interactions and sharing more confidential reference information through one-to-one conversations. This would increase reference customers' positive outcomes such as the willingness to develop markets. Building engagement that manifests in referencing is important, especially as references triggered by monetary incentives may not be equally effective in persuading buyers (see, e.g., Hada et al., 2014). It should be noted that our results are drawn from a context in which paid customer references are rare, and managers operating in other contexts might encounter more customer suspicion of positive evaluations by reference customers, thus hampering the value of customer referencing.

This study also highlighted three key mechanisms through which customer references influence prospective buyers (Table 5). This insight can be used in designing reference programs and portfolios to gain the full benefit of the signaling potential of customer references. For some situations, references legitimizing the seller might be needed, thus calling for a list of reputable customers. Reference customers that are similar to the prospective customer's situation, company size, or industry can be used when the goal is to find the optimal match between business partners and to teach a new buyer about the typical business practices in a given field. When the prospective buyer perceives a high risk, for example due to the novelty of the offering, a customer reference can provide evidence of the business impact of the investment. However, this necessitates gaining case-specific business data from the reference customer, which at the same time increases the risk of harming this relationship.

6.3. Limitations and future research implications

This study was explorative and aimed to identify resources as well as positive and negative value outcomes; therefore, it was not intended to analyze how frequently the identified categories appeared. A selected industry allows for analytical generalization to a particular context, but the relevance and generalizability of these findings to KIBS and other industries should be measured in a further study.

This study was conducted by interviewing business actors in the Northern European context, which may particularly highlight practices of open communication and information sharing. Other research contexts could emphasize different aspects such as price reductions and paid customer referencing. Furthermore, most of the studied firms were small and medium sized; some issues may play out differently in large companies, such as our findings related to reference customers' jealousy of their business partners, or the influence of the business center, which was not highlighted in our study. Due to the broad set of firms covered in our data, it seems plausible, however, that the majority of our findings can be generalized to some extent to other industries and geographical contexts. These findings are likely to apply to contexts high in credence qualities, such as complex products and services that are risky and costly, difficult to evaluate, and create benefits that are only realized after the exchange.

This study reveals several opportunities for further research. First, as mentioned above, there may be cultural differences in perceptions of customer referencing. Therefore, future research should include cross-country and cross-continent comparisons that would reveal such differences.

Second, as this study was exploratory in nature, more structured methods could be applied to study the identified value outcomes in different kinds of industrial and cultural contexts, and the conceptual framework could be developed into a testable research model. Our study indicates, for example, that sensitive reference information can result in both positive and negative value outcomes, and the contingencies for such variation should be analyzed further.

Third, future research could examine the varying impact of customer referencing; this study raises questions about how different means and practices for sharing and delivering customer reference signals affect value creation by different actors. The signaling effect of different resources contributed by engaged reference customers should be systematically examined, as should the influence of different communication channels for customer referencing, for instance, online vs. offline and formal vs. informal.

Fourth, this study suggested that firms of all sizes seem to benefit from and engage in customer referencing. In future studies, firms of different sizes and ages (e.g., start-ups vs. mature firms) and with a variety of strategic orientations (e.g., global vs. local markets; niche vs. mass markets) in different buying situations (new vs. repeat purchase) could be investigated to identify potential contingencies for engaging in customer referencing and its perceived value outcomes.

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Appendix 1

List of interviews

Interviewee's position	Industry
Dataset 1	
Director, sales & marketing	Engineering
CEO	Translation and localization
Press officer	Communication
Managing director	Advertising
Partner, designer	Landscape consulting
Industrial designer	Industrial design
CEO, senior designer	Industrial design
CEO, senior designer	Industrial design
Designer, partner	Design
Project manager	Saw mill
Merchant banking consultant	Bank
CEO	Project consulting
CEO, President	Software consulting
Managing director	Advertising
Head engineer	Food
District manager	Food
Head engineer	Engineering consulting
Entrepreneur, accountant	Accounting
Manager	Electronics manufacturing
Local manager	Merchant bank
Director	High tech
CEO	High tech
Partner, key account manager	Industrial design
Managing director	Promotion and communication
Managing director	Consulting
CEO	Project consulting
Attorney, partner	Legal services
Translator, entrepreneur	Translation services
Managing director	High tech manufacturing
Partner and CEO	Communication
Dataset 2	
International Relations Manager	Consulting
CEO	HR consulting
CEO	Logistics
Manager	Oil refining and marketing
CEO	Healthcare
Partner	Logistics
CEO	Construction and engineering
Manager	Plastics manufacturing
Partner/engineer	Engineering consulting
Entrepreneur	Legal services
Manager	Manufacturing
Partner	Design and retailing
Business develop manager	Strategy consulting
Partner	Advertising
CTO	Software
CEO, Partner	Food
Manager	Software
CEO	ICT
Sales and Marketing Manager	Digital and printing services
CEO	Logistics
Entrepreneur	Real estate management
Business Development Manager	Manufacturing
CEO	Retailing
Partner	IT
Partner	Marketing and strategic consulting
CEO	Advertising

Entrepreneur	High tech consulting
Buying manager	Food production
Partner	Banking
CEO	Financial services
Partner	Healthcare services
Manager	Consulting
Manager	Forest industry
Marketing Manager	Retailing
Partner	Auditing
CEO	Construction and engineering
Partner	Logistics
Manager	Construction and engineering
CTO	ICT
CEO	Sports
Manager	Oil refining and marketing
CEO/Partner	Market research
Managing director	Advertising
Country Manager	HR consulting
CEO/Partner	HR consulting
CEO	Warehousing
Partner and leading expert	Maintenance

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