

# Balanced centricity: a joint institutional logic within open collaborative ecosystems

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to examine the change of institutional logics in actors' practices within crowdfunding platforms, seen as open collaborative ecosystems.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research follows an abductive approach, wherein data collection and analysis, and the search for complementary theories, constitute parallel iterative processes. A main case study was carried out, complemented by an expert panel.

**Findings** – Balanced centricity (BC) as the main institutional logic in crowdfunding platforms delineates actors' practices (aims, resources and behaviors) into four issues: the development of an open and collaborative community; the overcoming of resource limitations; the changing roles of actors; and the co-creation of mutual (societal) value.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study context limits the results. The COVID-19 crisis put all actors in the medical field into an extreme situation in which they had to maximize their potential to achieve a common aim. Once the crisis has passed, further research should address whether BC is maintained as actors' institutional logic.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers a unique perspective on BC as an institutional logic that impacts actors in collaborative open ecosystems.

**Keywords** B2B, Actors, Institutional logics, Service ecosystem, Balanced centricity

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Customer centricity is a key institutional logic in marketing (Latinovic and Chatterjee, 2019; Ulaga, 2018; Shah *et al.*, 2006). To widen the focus, Gummesson (2006, 2008a, 2008b) proposed the concept of balanced centricity (BC), wherein “all the stakeholders have the right to satisfy their needs and wants” (Gummesson, 2008a, p. 17). Recent studies propose adopting the service ecosystem lens to address BC (Groven *et al.*, 2021). A service ecosystem is:

[...] a spontaneously sensing and responding spatial and temporal structure of largely loosely coupled, value-proposing social and economic actors interacting through institutions, technology, and language to (1) co-produce service offerings, (2) engage in service provision and (3) co-create value. (Vargo and Lusch, 2011, p. 185)

Most scholars investigate the individual agency-shaping service ecosystem although recognizing the role of multiple actors in value co-creation (Mele *et al.*, 2018; Glover *et al.*, 2021). Hawa *et al.* (2020, p. 54) called for research to understand those cases in which the initiative is not that of a single agent but rather comes from a “joint agency” affecting service interaction (Klimas and Czakron, 2022; Grandstrand and Holgersson, 2020) and resource integration (Shi and Shi, 2022). As Nenonen *et al.* (2019b, p. 617) note, investigating a larger

ecosystem of relevant actors means “recogniz[ing] the institutional arrangements governing their behaviors.”

This seems to be the case with the sharing economy (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018b), defined as “traditional, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping, redefined through technology and peer communities” (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, pp. 159–160). Breidbach and Brodie (2017, p. 762) considered the sharing economy as “represent[ing] an entirely new context that is characterized by technology-enabled actor-to-actor (A2A) service ecosystems.” A closely related concept is the “collaborative economy” (Leick *et al.*, 2022, p. 18), denoting “platforms through which individuals share resources.”

Because of the emergent state of this phenomenon, there is a need for a better understanding of the institutional logics in these open contexts. The present paper aims to contribute to improving the understanding of BC as an institutional logic in a

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collaborative open ecosystem (Fehrer *et al.*, 2020; Hawa *et al.*, 2020). We examine BC with respect to the development of the active role of actor-to-actor (A2A) and actor-for-actor (A4A) relationships (Koskela-Huotari and Sitaloppi, 2020; Polese *et al.*, 2017; Wieland *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, we pose the following research question (RQ):

*RQ1.* How does BC, as an institutional logic, affect actors in collaborative open ecosystems?

We have adopted an abductive method (Dubois and Gadde, 2014; Gummesson, 2017). This approach is considered useful for managing changing contexts, and combines theoretical and empirical data. Abductive reasoning provides researchers with the flexibility to design a nonlinear, nonsequential and iterative process through which results based on the literature can be reconceptualized, as suggested by the empirical findings.

Following Rubalcaba *et al.* (2012) and Tronvoll (2017), we consider the appropriate unit of analysis for this study to be the open ecosystem; from this perspective, we select crowdfunding platforms as the empirical setting for this study (Quero *et al.*, 2017; Quero and Ventura, 2019). Recent research on crowdfunding has noted that “the unique structure of these networks blends social and business networks and comprises a complex array of closer and more distant network relationships” (Fehrer and Nenonen, 2020, p. 449). This area is currently experiencing a huge growth, in both the academic (Butticè and Ughetto, 2021; Shneor *et al.*, 2020) and professional fields (Shneor *et al.*, 2020; Ziegler *et al.*, 2021), and, during the COVID-19 crisis, has made remarkable progress in its adaptation to meet urgent demands for action (Radjwa *et al.*, 2020; Saleh *et al.*, 2021, 2020). However, there is a lack of any unifying conceptual framework for enhancing our understanding of crowdfunding and for providing managerial guidance and directions for further research (Kaartemo, 2017).

Our main contribution lies in highlighting crowdfunding platforms not as an alternative mode of finance but as open collaborative ecosystems (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b) in which actors share the same institutional logic – BC. Such a logic affects actors’ practices in four issues: the development of an open and collaborative community; the overcoming of resource limitations; the changing roles of actors; and the co-creation of mutual (societal) value.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: first we review the literature on BC and institutional logics. Then, we describe the research methodology and present findings. Finally, we offer some theoretical and managerial contributions as well as limitations and avenues for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Balanced centrality

Gummesson (2008a) developed the concept of BC with the intention of recognizing all stakeholders’ needs. Later, Gummesson and Mele (2010) introduced a parallel concept, that of multiparty stakeholder centrality, to go beyond the supplier–customer dyad, and proposed that a complex host of interests has to be taken into account in the analysis of value co-creation. The stakeholder marketing perspective stresses the need for further research on this topic (Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015).

Initially, this view was not widely recognized in the marketing literature. Only a few authors explicitly recognized that service provision requires BC as opposed to focusing on only one specific actor (Letaifa *et al.*, 2016; Quero and Ventura, 2015). Recently, however, the growth of the collaborative economy has brought new open business models (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018b), and more research has begun to embrace this perspective (Baker and Nenonen, 2020; Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Marciel and Fischer, 2020).

Such a theoretical lens emphasizes that the work of all actors is responsible for evolution and innovation (Chandler *et al.*, 2019). Actors’ interactions are part of the co-creation of service provision – “the integration of resources in collaborative activities” (Groven *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). The complex, interwoven nature of multiple actors’ roles and behaviors is well defined, and the A4A perspective emphasizes actors’ resource integration in an open, balanced context (Alexander *et al.*, 2017; Polese *et al.*, 2017). In a collaborative context, actors consistently cooperate to develop a collective strategy that increases their overall competitiveness (Marciel and Fischer, 2020).

A few scholars address BC as an indicator of network or ecosystem well-being (Groven *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, as Groven *et al.* (2021, p. 1) highlighted, “balanced centrality describes a situation in which all network actors’ interests and needs are fulfilled simultaneously, which increases both individual actors’ and overall actor–network well-being” (Table 1).

In summary, the BC concept seems to fit the increasing demand for research on the question of how to fulfill actors’ needs by co-creating beneficial outcomes for all actors, considering their changing roles (Koskela-Huotari and Sitaloppi, 2020; Wieland *et al.*, 2016), as well as their increasing responsibility for building and managing the ecosystem (Marciel and Fischer, 2020). We focus on the collective as the manager of the ecosystem (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016) and creator of new structures (e.g. open platforms) (Möller *et al.*, 2020; Fehrer *et al.*, 2018a).

### 2.2 Service ecosystems and open platforms

Service ecosystems are complex networks that are sustained by reciprocal service provision between multiple actors in dyads, triads and many-to-many networks that are interconnected by multiple resources (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Lusch *et al.*, 2010; Russo Spina and Mele, 2020).

The ecosystem perspective has been proposed to consider the fact that actors develop active roles in exchanging resources simultaneously, and by creating and destroying institutions (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016; Wieland *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, multiple actors – such as firms, customers, suppliers and others – all contribute to value co-creation and ecosystem viability (Gummesson *et al.*, 2019). Recent literature has highlighted the need for research regarding resources, proposing that the interplay among actors can result in improved management of resources (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Peters (2016) introduces the term “heteropathic” to describe the emergent resource integration or “homopathic” for the summative process and outcome. In these processes, resources differ in quality or quantity with actors exchanging them for complementarities or redundancy (Gummesson and Mele, 2010).

Table 1 Concepts containing BC perspective in the literature

Concept	Author, year	Quotation
Balanced centrality	Gummesson (2008a, p. 17)	"All the stakeholders have the right to satisfy their needs and wants"
	Gummesson (2008b, p. 328)	"It means that long-term relationships and well-functioning markets should build on the needs and wants of many stakeholders: customers, employees, suppliers, intermediaries, the media, governments and more"
	Letaifa <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 1934)	"Services require a balanced centrality instead of focusing on one specific actor (i.e., local or global, supplier or customer, firm or individual"
Multiparty stakeholder centrality	Groven <i>et al.</i> (2021, p. 1)	"Balanced centrality describes a situation in which all network actor's interests and needs are fulfilled simultaneously"
	Gummesson and Mele (2010, p. 194)	"Going beyond the supplier-customer dyad and applying a multi-party network and systems perspective we find that numerous stakeholders contribute to value and expect value in return"
A2A	Hillebrand <i>et al.</i> (2015, p. 411)	"The marketing discipline should move away from its rather restrictive focus on customers toward a view of marketing that acknowledges the interrelatedness of stakeholders"
	Vargo (2009, p. 377)	"In this service ecosystem view, all actors are both providers and beneficiaries ("producers" and "customers") and the B2B versus B2C distinction vanishes; it's all B2B. That is, the customer is just another node in the larger ecosystem and the actor-to-actor transaction serves as a platform for further value creation in that larger context"
	Vargo and Lusch (2016, p. 8)	"Value co-creation [is the result of] the actions of multiple actors, often unaware of each other, that contributes to each other's wellbeing"
	Brodie <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 173)	"... need to broaden the conceptual domain of customer engagement not only from the focal subject of customers/customers to a general actor-to-actor perspective but also from the firm-customer dyad to relationships among multiple actors in service ecosystems"
	Chandler <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 87)	"These efforts should not only be directed toward potential customers but also toward other private, public and market-facing actors"
A4A relationships	Polese <i>et al.</i> (2017, p. 1041)	"The A4A relationship involves actors integrating their resources and acting with the aim to obtain value by providing benefits to them and to other parties involved in their context"
Systemic perspective	Storbacka <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 3016)	"... this means that managerial practices have to change to incorporate a systemic view"
	Wieland <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 211)	"... seemingly distinct actors such as firms, customers, suppliers, other stakeholders and even non adopters of a solution, contribute to value creation and market (re)formation in a fundamentally similar way"
	Alexander <i>et al.</i> (2017, p. 344)	"Service ecosystem actor's multi context view reflects the complex interwoven nature of multiple actors roles and behaviors, which resonates well with existing marketing thought (e.g. many-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, etc.)"
	Fehrer <i>et al.</i> (2018a, p. 558)	[The systemic perspective of platform business models] "responds to the challenges in contemporary business environments that might have been overlooked, due to the lack of analysis of systemic interdependencies between versatile actors and new actor roles in peer-to-peer interactions"
	Marciel and Fischer (2020, p. 41)	"The collective strategy in which peer firms consistently cooperate among themselves and with other actors to develop markets in ways that increase their overall competitiveness"

Crowdfunding platforms can be seen as open service ecosystems that form around “continuously emerging, non-hierarchical collaborations among peers” (Fehrer and Nenonen, 2020, p. 450). This means that informal ties form spontaneously and serendipitously. Research has identified seven kinds of actors in the crowdfunding context: creators, or the creative core (A1; Ordiani *et al.*, 2011; Belleflamme *et al.*, 2012; Burtch *et al.*, 2013; Quero and Ventura, 2015, 2019); platforms (A2; Ordiani *et al.*, 2011; Quero and Ventura, 2015, 2019), financing customers (A3; Ordiani *et al.*, 2011; Belleflamme *et al.*, 2012; Burtch *et al.*, 2013; Quero and Ventura, 2015, 2019); nonfinancing customers (A4; Quero and Ventura, 2015, 2019); investors (A5; Belleflamme *et al.*, 2012); experts (A6; Belleflamme *et al.*, 2012; Burtch *et al.*, 2013; Quero and Ventura, 2015, 2019); and crowdfunding associations (A7; Crowdfunding Professional Association).

During the pandemic, some authors called on the scientific and professional community to share problems through open platforms around the world (Chesbrough, 2020), identifying collaborative work that other authors label collective engagement; connecting it with an institutionalization perspective (Kleinaltenkamp *et al.*, 2021; Mele *et al.*, 2021).

The collaborative economy has brought new scenarios that allow (and demand) new structures to create value (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b). Specifically, crowdfunding platforms have been studied as a case of good practice because of their ability to improve critical capabilities (Fehrer and Nenonen, 2020). As Sharma (2021, p. 2245) notes “joint participation benefits society, and more so in responding to a pandemic or emergency.” This perspective holds that institutional logic affects actors’ roles and resource integration and considers the high level of freedom present in joint participation due to the nonhierarchical nature of organization (Fehrer and Nenonen, 2020).

### 2.3 Institutional logics

Institutions have been seen as a means to provide stability and meaning to social life through the specification of norms, rules and cultural–cognitive beliefs (Scott, 2014). They are a “set of material practices and symbolic constructions which constitutes [social life’s] organizing principles, and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate” (Frieland and Alford, 1991, p. 248). Scholars have emphasized the social construction patterns of these practices, through which individuals produce and reproduce their activities, set time and space and provide meaning to their social reality (Russo Spena *et al.*, 2016; Jaakkola *et al.*, 2019).

Institutions are “the prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, markets, firms and governments” (Ostrom, 2005, p. 3). In this view, they are deep structural rules that guide actors’ perceptions and actions (Geels, 2012). Scott (1995) identified three institutional pillars:

- regulative institutions, manifested by the existence of rules, laws, and sanctions that constrain and regularize behavior;
- normative institutions that define what is appropriate, what the goals are and the way to achieve them; and
- cultural or cognitive institutions, referring to culturally supported practices that are taken for granted.

Within service-dominant logic, “institutions represent the ‘rules’ of resource integration and coordinate actors’ efforts to make joint value co-creation possible” (Koskela-Huotari and Vargo, 2016, p. 169). Specific attention has been given to the analysis of how actors holding different institutional logics can take joint action and overcome the constraints (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2019). As Edvardsson *et al.* (2014, p. 296) note, “institutional logics matter as they ultimately enforce and shape actors’ behaviors”.

Scholars have recently highlighted the need to better understand institutional logics shaping practices that take place in open, changing service ecosystems, and to study the interplay between actors as a source for ecosystem evolution (Fehrer *et al.*, 2020). Institutional work seems to spur the emergence of collaborative engagement platforms (Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2022). We examine BC as an institutional logic capable of affecting actors in collaborative open ecosystems.

### 3. Method

The research followed an abductive approach, wherein data collection and analysis, and the search for complementary theories, constitute parallel iterative processes. The researchers moved back and forth between theoretical concepts and field observations to improve their understanding of both the theory and the data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014). This approach follows that of systematic combining – that is, a “non-linear path-dependent process of combining efforts with the ultimate objective of matching theory and reality” (Dubois and Gadde, 2014, p. 1279). We focus on a single-case study – the crowdfunding platform GoFundMe – because it enables in-depth analysis of a service ecosystem, as a societal unit (Aal *et al.*, 2016; Baron *et al.*, 2018; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the COVID-19 context has served as a stimulant for the appearance of new, disrupting behaviors from actors, thus demanding more research.

The following brief background of the case helps to justify its selection as a case study. By early March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to shock and overwhelm governments and public health organizations around the world. Although governments were seeking ways to solve problems related to COVID-19, and even before the World Health Organization (2020) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic on March 11, 2020, crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe were already working to connect enterprises, startups, researchers, investors and many other actors to provide rapid answers to the developing problems (Igra *et al.*, 2021). This not only related to obtaining funds, but also required a high level of efficiency in terms of managing resources. The period of time under study spans March 11, 2020, to March 11, 2021. Special attention has been paid to the first six months of the pandemic, in which crowdfunding platforms like GoFundMe maximized the intensity of their activities.

#### 3.1 Data collection

Data collection developed in two phases, to acquire contextual knowledge (i.e. the case study) and expert knowledge (i.e. the panel). The first phase aimed to focus on the open platform, GoFundMe. Primary data were obtained through five semi-structured interviews with two managers of the platform. Then,

we analyzed internal documents and publicly available communication material. Secondary data guided us to set the context of the topic. We also combined information drawn from newspapers and scholarly journals identifying GoFundMe as a leading crowdfunding platform in the context of COVID-19. The immediacy of the phenomenon under study meant that most of the information was obtained from medical reviews and Web pages. Triangulation of multiple sources allowed robustness and quality to be enhanced (Yin, 2014).

In the second phase, we conducted expert interview panels with two primary experts on crowdfunding (the director and cofounder of the Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance, and the academic director of the Agder University Center of Entrepreneurship and leader of the Nordic Crowdfunding Alliance). These experts were deemed to have the knowledge and capacity to give a time perspective to the research by comparing the COVID-19 situation with that prior to the pandemic. The experts were contacted after an in-depth analysis of their experience, regarding their knowledge of the topic and their contact with both the academic and professional environments. Preliminary contact was made to ensure that they had a sufficient understanding of a proper interpretation of the questions to be addressed, as well as having the knowledge to answer regarding the specific context of COVID-19. The semi-structured questionnaire was sent in advance, as we were looking for a thoughtful and well-argued answer.

We collected data until saturation was reached and no new information emerged. The limited period of time under study made it possible to observe trends on the information until they became redundant. At this point, we considered the process to be complete.

### 3.2 Data analysis

We analyzed our data using open axial selective coding (Scott and Howell, 2008). The open data coding process relied on thematic analysis, which takes “raw data and raises it to a conceptual level” (Gummesson, 2017, p. 205). One of the two researchers performed a process of manual coding, assigning a unique code to each document in the research (starting with Doc, followed by a number, in the case of written texts and Ex-in, followed by a number, in the case of expert interviews). Both researchers analyzed the text to identify primary categories and seek a preliminary understanding of the findings. Categories were then linked and organized in a process of axial coding to understand the central phenomenon and its patterns. The researchers discussed the results and then presented the findings at an international workshop to obtain external feedback (Creswell, 2014).

## 4. Findings

In the crowdfunding context, the institutional logic before the COVID-19 crisis was reflected in a triad among three actors: the platform, the backer and the agent proposing an idea or project. We were unable to detect BC in this context, because the focus was on the backer as the main actor and the core of all decisions, with the platform acting as a mediator in the triad. However, the COVID-19 crisis prompted extremely urgent demand for resources, and the health ecosystem within Europe

and the USA were unable to respond quickly enough to meet specific needs, such as for masks, respirators and other devices. In this changed context, the crowdfunding platforms took on a new role. The medical sector found that they could use these platforms to enable the efficient exchange of resources, solving problems in a way that traditional sources were unable to do and involving actors with a higher level of freedom.

Online crowdfunding, because of its accessibility and outreach, has in recent years become a powerful tool to help finance medical treatment and research. (Doc 10)

COVID invited everyone with the sense of mission that created an alignment [...] and I think that the technology enabled that to happen in a way that I think pushed the boundaries and shifted institutional logics. (Doc 1)

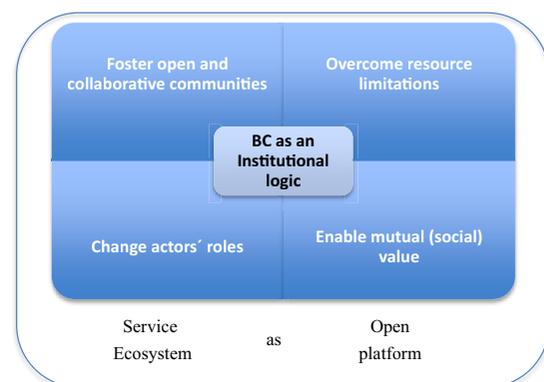
By removing the backer from its position at the core of all decisions and putting the COVID-19 crisis in its place, a vision of service ecosystem emerged in which all actors exchanged and integrated resources in an open and spontaneous way. In this context, the institutional logic of BC affects actors' crowdfunding practices in four issues: to foster open and collaborative communities, to overcome resource limitations, to change actors' roles and to enable mutual (societal) value. The four characteristics of BC institutional logic are depicted in Figure 1. We explain how these characteristics are evidenced in the COVID-19 medical crowdfunding context in the following sections.

### 4.1 Balanced centrality to foster open and collaborative communities

GoFundMe evolved from a triad to a many-to-many space with multiple actors, including university researchers, startups, enterprises, public and private agents and so on. In this way, GoFundMe very rapidly came to be considered as a virtual space able to foster a collaborative process in which actors could interact with others who had the capacity and desire to be engaged. A sense of collective engagement and urgency spurred actors to change their practices of resource integration and value co-creation. A higher decentralization of decisions in favor of the community emerged, connecting actors and resources to enable collaborative behavior.

As we navigate the global COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world have continued to show up to help others—raising money for PPE for frontline workers, education supplies needed for remote learning, unemployment relief, and more. In an incredible display of global generosity, donors raised over \$625 million for COVID-19 relief on

Figure 1 BC institutional logic in crowdfunding open platforms



GoFundMe in just six months. The data behind the donations during the pandemic displays an overwhelming message of support: We're all in this together. (Doc 4)

There is a collaboration that emerges, that begins to define the direction everyone begins to move in because there is a higher purpose [...] But yet what is so interesting because of technology, there is no Winston Churchill [...] it's not centralized, it's very decentralized, that's for the social movement [...] there is a kind of no center, it really, really is a very organic equal system. (Ex-in 1)

#### 4.2 Balanced centrality to overcome resource limitations

The open platform enabled actors to increase their access to resources. Thus, crowdfunding not only became a way of raising money to finance specific projects but also enabled several kinds of resources to be exchanged and integrated, such as ideas, stories, knowledge, solutions and relationships. Comments were a special resource because they encourage the community to sustain the project. The open platform provided a common space for actors to obtain the quantity and quality of resources with unexpected outcomes, which emerged from the collaborative effort of all actors. Thus, the capability of the ecosystem to reach challenging purposes increased.

Definitely, equity-based crowdfunding was challenged during the crisis. What is really interesting is the non-equity segment of crowdfunding. There was much more around, I would say social relationships actually, and if I take a look at the restaurants again, they were able to generate cash by selling vouchers for future meal redemptions or coffees at the coffee shop, whatever it is [...] pre-selling products was a very interesting trend [...] it would be very difficult for those small businesses to do that without the network of actors provided by the crowdfunding platform. (Doc 2)

It started in early- mid-March with campaigns primarily for frontline medical workers and PPE but then, as you saw, as shelter-in-place orders took effect you could see more campaigns for employee relief and for small businesses and then, over the last few weeks it's moved into food security, rent relief and mental health. So, we have seen an incredible diversity of campaigns really for every aspect of response to the crisis. (Doc 10)

#### 4.3 Balanced centrality to actors' changing roles

Actors' roles changed because of their actions. The formal division of labor and responsibilities dissolved, and the COVID-19 crisis accelerated the configuration of a decentralized structure, changing actors' roles under a BC logic. No single provider, intermediary, donor or actor performed the new roles of storyteller, helper and facilitator. The context challenged actors to maximize their contributions to the ecosystem, moved by a common objective. The traditional "role" that the ecosystem used to assign to each actor was blurred in favor of getting the best result for the whole ecosystem, as we can see from the comments from experts:

I don't think there is a formal division of labor and responsibilities. But the principle is that all stakeholders benefit from engagement in crowdfunding and co-create value for other stakeholders. (Ex-in 2)

I think COVID in many ways was an accelerator of trends that were already under way rather than introducing perhaps some new behaviors [...] I think there is a case to argue that there was already some shifting going on: less hierarchical organization structure, more decentralized; all it's done [is] accelerated that in many many ways and I think that's having an impact in many different areas beyond crowdfunding. (Ex-in 1)

#### 4.4 Balanced centrality to mutual (societal) value

GoFundMe aimed to bring about positive change and to empower people to help each other through giving. Donors

often empathize with specific projects and have a positive attitude toward social help; thus, the perceived emotional return lies not in future financial gains but in engaging in projects that align with their values. Societal value represents the common aim to engage actors to exchange and to integrate resources in a mutually beneficial environment. In this sense, the provider–beneficiary dyadic perspective is removed, and societal benefit is now at the core. The comments from the documents highlight the power of societal value to maximize the value of resources in an extremely urgent situation. For example:

Crowdfunding activity likely serves as an early signal for emerging needs and societal sentiment for communities in acute distress and these signals could be used by governments and aid organizations to guide disaster relief and policy. (Doc 8)

Crowdfunding platforms responded to the social challenge by introducing very rapidly, with a tremendous agility, services needed by the equal system around the platform [...] beyond the traditional boundary of providing finance [...] to be able to solve the societal problem, the boundaries have really stretched. (Doc 1)

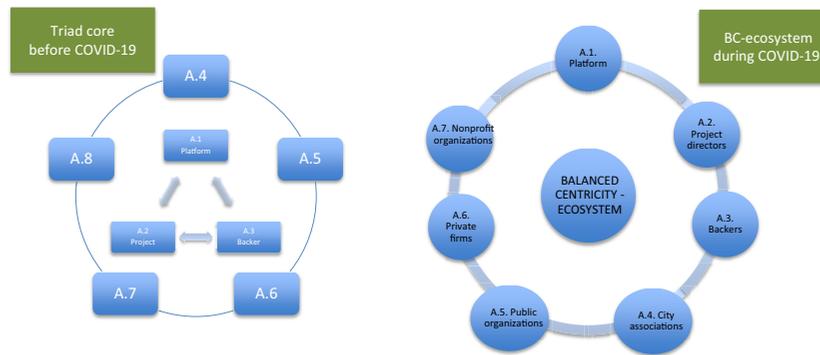
## 5. Discussion

The present paper analyzes the institutional logic that underlies actors' roles and practices in new collaborative service ecosystems such as crowdfunding platforms. These platforms are an emerging phenomenon in the sharing or collaborative economy that have gained momentum during the pandemic (Saleh *et al.*, 2020; Igra *et al.*, 2021). We affirm that, in the context under research, BC can be considered an institutional logic.

Figure 2 depicts the different processes related to the opening of the platform to involve all actors in the crowdfunding context. Before the COVID-19 crisis, using the crowd to develop research and other medical solutions was already a growing trend (Lublóy, 2020). Crowdfunding platforms performed around a triad of backer–platform–demand (fundraiser) (Shneor *et al.*, 2020; Sitaloppi and Vargo, 2017; Quero *et al.*, 2020). The unexpected COVID-19 crisis promoted a change. As Nenonen and Storbacka (2020, p. 265) posited, "the current crisis offers opportunities that go beyond improving the state of the organization." Indeed, it can be the basis for improving actors' positions in the service ecosystem. The medical sector has found a great opportunity with crowdfunding platform, such as GoFundMe, where it has found a right space in which to develop its capacity to the maximum, managing an ecosystem of needs and solutions. During COVID-19, the platform GoFundMe experienced an unprecedented rate of new projects aimed at facing urgent needs unsolvable with traditional processes and tools. Actors lacked the needed resources and their resource integration processes stopped, with a high detrimental effect in value co-creation (Igra *et al.*, 2021)

However, the crowdfunding platform allowed new efforts to be enabled and new communities to be built. The connection among actors and the way they exchanged and integrated resources can be addressed using the concept of BC proposed first by Gummesson (2008a, 2008b), and then by authors such as Hillebrand *et al.* (2015) and Marciel and Fischer (2020).

BC, as the main institutional logic in crowdfunding platforms, delineates actors' practices into four issues: the

**Figure 2** Actors in the service ecosystem before and during COVID-19

development of an open and collaborative community; the overcoming of resource limitations; the changing actors' roles; and the co-creation of mutual (societal) value.

First, BC fosters open and collaborative communities. The open platform flourishes thanks to actors' shared aims and behaviors. The joint institutional logic affects the emergence of a collaborative engagement platform (Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2022). Connected actors are being engaged through a collective vision and effort to ward off a pandemic (Kleinaltenkamp *et al.*, 2021). New forms of community solidarity aggregate around an urgent common endeavor. At a time when other forms of connection are constrained by social distance and epidemic fears, crowdfunding platforms give communities an easy way to be engaged and offer assistance (Igra *et al.*, 2021).

Second, BC enables the overcoming of resource limitations. Thanks to the platform, actors move from a reality perceived as a scarcity of resources to one of resources needed to overcome the crisis and achieve the objectives. This is only possible thanks to the crowd that espouse the values of the project. Interplay among actors can result in improved management of resources (Fehrer *et al.*, 2020; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Thus, resource integration among actors increases because of the higher number of actors and embedded connections as well as the quality and quantity of resources (Gummesson and Mele, 2010). A summative as well as an emergent resource integration occurs (Peters, 2016).

Third, BC facilitates the changing roles of actors by overcoming formal division and enables a processual (and nonstatic) view (Koskela-Huotari and Siltaloppi, 2020). In line with Gummesson and Polese (2009) and Polese *et al.* (2017), these collaborations allow for a break from the B2B/B2C/C2C distinctions. The crowdfunding platform depends on the community of actors such as family, peers and friends. This study adds to previous research on how actors' roles change from an institutional view (Koskela-Huotari and Siltaloppi, 2020). The blurring of boundaries of actors' roles in service ecosystems affects their participation in the co-creation of service and value (Wieland *et al.*, 2016), and represents a change in the institutional logic.

Fourth, BC enacts mutual (societal) value, as all actors in the ecosystem can benefit. Societal value changes in crisis time, highlighting the role of essential services (Russo Spina *et al.*, 2022). A profound change in lifestyle occurs, with higher

demand for primary goods and health service provision. People's quality of life worsens. The crowdfunding platforms represent a potential solution to the challenges posed by shortages of resources, to improve societal values. BC becomes "the glue that enables and constrains value co-creation within social systems" (Wieland *et al.*, 2016, p. 211).

In sum, BC can be seen as an institutional logic that affect actors' values, aims and practices. This view does not mean that all actors are equal but that their achievements depend on a joint effort in a shared endeavor as the crowdfunding context very well exemplifies. BC is an unwritten norm to be adopted exposing openness and cooperativeness to joint co-create value for all the actors in the service ecosystem.

## 6. Managerial implications

COVID-19 crisis challenged the service ecosystem, forcing all actors to exchange and integrate resources to overcome the extreme situation. Framing BC as an institutional logic has interesting managerial implications in open collaborative contexts.

First, open platforms are characterized by highly committed actors who develop their activity in collaborative communities of which they feel part. The design of common strategies should be focused on identifying the collaborative values that can make the open community grow. BC institutional logic can provide the basis to design these strategies from a new perspective, putting the focus on the ecosystem (as complementary to the customer) and improving the resources of every actor to obtain multiplicative (versus summative) effects in the ecosystem. In this sense, the societal value is key to channeling actors' resources in a common direction.

Second, managers need to see the blurring roles of actors and engage those who have the desire and capability to reach joint goals (BC). In collaborative contexts, companies need to engage actors without imposing limits on their entry or exit, depending on their role in the traditional value chain. The scope of engagement lies in their capability to integrate, and match resources for the ecosystem's viability. Managers should be able to orchestrate a community of friends, peers and families alongside traditional providers and customers.

Finally, as actors' values change, practitioners should detect new practices for co-creating value, capturing what is valuable to society and designing consistent patterns. Increasing service

ecosystem viability is closely related to adopting BC as an institutional logic.

## 7. Limitations and future research directions

This paper has several limitations that could be addressed in further research. First, the findings are related to an extreme situation. COVID-19 crisis has imposed stress on all actors in the medical field, who have had to maximize their resources to achieve a common aim. Once the crisis has passed, further research could assess whether actors have maintained BC as their institutional logic under the “new normal.” Second, the investigation focused on one platform only. Other open platforms could be analyzed to discover context-specific conditions of BC as an institutional logic. Third, we primarily considered the platform perspective; however, other actors should also be analyzed. BC requires that each actor is only one of many beneficiaries of the value co-creation process; thus, the views of backers, fundraisers, associations, companies and others could be examined, including details of their specific aims, practices and means of engagement. Fourth, studies could address whether BC can facilitate innovation through institutionalization by breaking, forming or maintaining institutionalized rules regarding resource integration on each level of an ecosystem.

To summarize, further research into BC institutional logics is needed to improve our knowledge regarding the process, to zoom out further and to augment the literature on how multiple engaged parties maintain a balance between different aims. The narrative of BC as an institutional logic requires a language shift (Pels *et al.*, 2022) to express open collaborative platforms in terms of actors embedded in them, representations related to the way to signify them as well as how we make sense of them, encompassing diverse ways of understanding the emergence and evolution of these open platforms (Mele *et al.*, 2015)

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