Explaining the Sales Transformation through an institutional lens

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ABSTRACT

Selling is facing an unprecedented process of change, which has been named the Sales Transformation. Theory is also trying to define this phenomenon, by approaching it mostly from a micro-sales perspective, in a normative approach. Some scholars have recently asserted that a more holistic view of selling is needed, which also includes the role of institutional alignment in the transformation. Furthermore, many studies in this area remain theoretical with limited extensive empirical evidence. In this work, we adopt an S-D Logic lens and define the Sales Transformation as the process of change in institutional alignment that is affecting value co-creation at an ecosystem level. Through the analysis of 138 in-depth interviews across the service ecosystem, we will describe Sales Transformation as the effect of two main higher-level mechanisms: Integration of institutional work-in-space and the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. Each mechanism contributes to the creation, disruption, and maintenance of cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions, which in turn modify value co-creation processes. Our study also revealed the relevant effects of cognitive institutions in determining institutional alignment as well as the importance of the activity of non-selling actors for Sales Transformation.

1. Introduction

In recent history, sales have made unprecedented progress, becoming the subject of renewed interest within both the scientific community and among management experts. From a managerial point of view, sales are increasing their strategic importance and offering companies new opportunities for value creation. In the managerial debate, this phenomenon is known as the Sales Transformation and is caused by different elements. First, the complexity of customer relations has grown, shifting the balance of bargaining power from suppliers to customers, which require measurable and convincing evidence regarding the ability of sales to add real value to the customer's business (Lambert & Enz, 2012). This has made the purchasing process even more complicated, lasting up to 5 months and involving an average of 6.4 interlocutors (Miller Heiman Group, 2019).

Second, new digital technologies such as cloud computing, e-commerce, social CRMs, and artificial intelligence are dramatically changing the way companies interact with customers, even in complex B2B systems (Mele, Spena, & Peschiera, 2018; Nenonen & Storbacka, 2018). An increasing number of companies are revising their sales models to effectively integrate digital interactions with human-based ones (Lenka, Parida, & Wincent, 2017). As a result of these factors, the sales profession has radically changed in recent years, placing stressful demands on experienced salespeople (Lacoste, 2018), who have become key in identifying new ways to co-create value (Marcos-Cuevas, Nätti, Palo, & Baumann, 2016).

In parallel to the evolution of managerial practices, the focus of academic research has progressively moved from a transactional perspective to a relational one based on value or value-based selling (Anderson, Kumar, & Narus, 2008). Much of this research, though, has concentrated on micro-salesperson variables (e.g., salesperson-firm, salesperson-sales manager) or has emphasized dyadic level perspectives (salesperson-buyer), still very managerially oriented. However, according to Hartmann, Wieland, and Vargo (2018), the deep change in the market and social contexts is leading organizations to rethink the role of sales, converging on a new theoretical foundation for selling that better explains the processes and roles of selling in value co-creation through market exchange.

Today, a more topical focus on holistic and systemic thinking is spreading throughout the study of selling which increasingly recognizes the phenomenon and its outcomes as being cocreated (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Wieland, Hartmann, & Vargo, 2017) in a non-linear (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2017) networked (Snehota & Hakansson, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2008) and systemic fashion (Edvardsson, Kleinaltenkamp, Tronvoll, McHugh, & Windahl, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Such growing recognition has arguably highlighted the complexity of the context of transformation, and thus the need to "zoom in and

zoom out to understand phenomena at all levels (aggregation) of interest" (Vargo & Lusch, 2017: 50). This means unpacking the definition of context which can be viewed as including everything from small (e.g., a buyer–seller or salesperson-sales manager dyad) to large (e.g., industries, markets, or societies) sets of actors and the reciprocal links between such actors.

Furthermore, as selling and value creation unfold over time and are embedded in broader social systems (Hartmann et al., 2018), scholars are stressing the importance of understanding how institutions can both enable and constrain value co-creation and selling within the ecosystem (Wieland, Koskela-Huotari, & Vargo, 2016). A view of selling as a process of institutional alignment is rapidly spreading to explain the mechanisms through which institutions confront and align with an effect on value co-creation (Ranjan & Friend, 2020).

In order to comprehend the Sales Transformation, it is therefore no longer sufficient to observe micro-aspects of phenomenon but to discover its determinants at a higher level. A deeper understanding of the phenomenon is needed, which illustrates the role of cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions in such change as well as the different actors involved (Rapp, Gabler, & Ogilvie, 2020). Now, empirical evidence that illustrates the presence and interaction at multiple levels of analysis in studying selling is very preliminary, with most works being conceptual (see Rapp et al., 2020; Hartmann, Wieland, Vargo, & Ahearne, 2020; Wang, Schrock, Kumar, & Hughes, 2020; Ranjan & Friend, 2020).

In this study, we define the Sales Transformation as a change in how selling co-creates value in context by aligning different institutions at the ecosystem level. We aim to develop a mid-range theory that explains the Sales Transformation as a systemic and holistic process of change determined by fundamental modifications in institutional arrangements. In particular, we will analyze how cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions have modified becoming expressions of institutional work at the different levels of the service ecosystem.

We developed an empirical study including 138 interviews with suppliers, customers, distributors, industry experts, intermediaries, association representatives, and customers from different industries, to capture the complexity of the service ecosystem and obtain a rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Our study will contribute to explaining the Sales Transformation by demonstrating how institutional work confronts and aligns cognitive, regulative, and normative institutions at the different levels of the service ecosystem and how this in turn affects the value co-creation process through selling. The study will reveal that there are important latent drivers of institutional work for Sales Transformation which have not been considered until now. It will also highlight that change in certain institutions can have a stronger effect in the alignment process for Sales Transformation and that non-selling actors are relevant for the Sales Transformation as well. Overall, we provide empirical support for the complexity of the Sales Transformation process that exhibits the importance of adopting a systemic view on selling (Vargo & Lusch, 2017) that observes the phenomenon at different levels.

The research will also contribute to managerial practice. Recent significant investments in training, sales technology, and sales and marketing support have delivered negligible returns. Sales leaders have become frustrated, with only 25% of companies believing they can adapt their sales development plans to changing environments (Sales Management Association, 2017). In other words, companies appear quite disoriented in approaching the Sales Transformation, and their investments are often disconnected and not part of a systematic plan. Until now, companies' strategies have mainly managed the Sales Transformation as a set of micro-level actions, seen as detached.

The article is organized into six distinct parts. The first section explains how selling and value co-creation are interwoven while Sections 1.2 and 1.3 introduce the role of institutions and institutional work for value co-creation and selling, respectively. The second part presents the methodology of the research followed by the main findings (Section 4)

and the discussion of results (Section 5). The paper ends with conclusions, future research, and managerial implications.

2. Literature background

2.1. Evolution of selling and value co-creation

The debate on the role of value creation for selling is not new. Haas, Snehota, and Corsaro (2012), for instance, identified the role of salespeople in value creation in specific areas including jointness, balanced initiative, interactive value, and socio-cognitive value. More recently, Kienzler, Kindström, and Brashear-Alejandro (2019) stated that value-based selling is a multi-component sales process that requires balancing managerial actions among individual and organizational factors, where salespeople's learning orientation has the greatest impact on the use of value-based selling.

Salespeople are increasingly co-creating value by adopting sophisticated adaptive consultative business approaches, which consist of the ability to modify sales behaviors during customer interactions, based on their perceptions regarding the nature and state of the sales situation (Franke & Park, 2006). Adaptive selling is important if we consider that markets are firmly characterized by customers with heterogeneous needs, complex products and services, an elevated information requirement, and a high perception of risk in relationships. The role of sales in value co-creation has been further highlighted with the advent of digital technology: as business buyers have better access to information and become more prepared, sales need to challenge the customer's value idea, giving it back its shape and offering the client a unique perspective (Weinfurter & Donlon, 2016). Due to digitalization, salespeople are often involved in value co-creation in the last phases of the purchasing activity (Sharma & Iyer, 2011) if not totally substituted by automated adaptive selling (Hunter, 2019).

Nevertheless, this micro-view of the relationship between selling and value co-creation adopts a mostly normative approach. For this reason, it has recently been strongly criticized, especially by scholars from the S-D Logic who propose a more holistic view to which selling and value co-creation unfold over time, are embedded in broader social systems (Hartmann et al., 2020) and take place across matrices of interlinked actors and institutional processes (Paesbrugghe, Rangarajan, Hochstein, & Sharma, 2020; Hartmann et al., 2018).

From this perspective, the sales process can be viewed as an episodic, non-linear exchange involving a myriad of stakeholders (see Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005), which are internal and external to both the sales (Bolander, Satornino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015; Plouffe, Bolander, Cote, & Hochstein, 2016) and customer organizations (Friend & Malshe, 2016) and operate across functions and boundary-spanning interfaces (Singh et al., 2019). These actors can be people (e. g. consumers, managers, employees), organizations (e.g. firms and suppliers), or both (Beirão, Patrício, & Fisk, 2017; Letaifa & Reynoso, 2015). Selling, therefore, is not limited to business settings but can be found in any context in which value is co-created.

2.2. Value co-creation and institutional work

The service ecosystem perspective suggests that actors are guided in value co-creation by institutional arrangements (Siltaloppi, Koskela-Huotari, & Vargo, 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Institutions are socially created schemas, norms, and regulations. They represent routine ways of thinking and acting that are (partially) shared and that both, enable and constrain human behavior (North, 1990). In other words, institutions consist of "rules of the game" that enable actors involved in value creation processes to interact in an organized way and coordinate interactions at various levels, including the micro, meso, and macro levels (Scott, 2014). Institutional work is socially embedded because actors do not exist independently of (social) contexts and institutions do not exist independently of other institutions.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) define this institutional work performed by actors as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (2006: 215). It takes place through the interpretation, modification, and accommodation of institutions and institutional arrangements. These institutional arrangements consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative elements (Scott, 2004), which frame their actors' behaviors through schemes, norms, and rules. The first, cognitive institutions, require "shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and create the frames through which meaning is made" (Scott, 2014: 63). They include the beliefs, opinions, and ideas that individuals hold and take for granted. In this case, institutional work is designed to undermine core assumptions and beliefs that stabilize institutions to alter abstract categorizations in which the boundaries of meaning systems are altered.

Second, the normative institutions refer to rules that are generated from the norms and values that lead actors to perceive social benefits or restraints. Therefore, the actors abide by such rules because they perceive social benefits that generate an internal commitment. These values and norms constitute precise standards to which existing behavior or structures can be compared to and then evaluated. In this situation, institutional work includes actions aimed at disrupting institutions by disassociating the practice, rule, or technology to reconfigure moral foundation and actors' belief systems.

Third, regulative institutions contain formal rules, such as legal rules, conventions, and certain formal regulations that enable or constrain the actors' behavior. Regulative institutions are often connected to sanctions to ensure that actors' behaviors conform to specific standards. For such reason, they mainly exhibit behavior guided by self-interest. The institutional work translates into actors going through state apparatuses to disconnect rewards and sanctions from sets of practices, technologies, or rules; actors reconstructed rules through this overtly political work.

Institutions are not stable in their nature; rather, they change over time, are constantly contested and challenged. Jarzabkoski (2008: 623) asserts that "institutions guide actions, yet this relationship is not deterministic, as actors remain acknowledgeable, reflexive agents who have the capacity to choose to act otherwise, thus either sustaining or modifying institutions through their actions." Through interactions, actors behave in a manner that allows for the persistence of institutions or, conversely, changes to them (Orlikowski, 1996). Institutional change, therefore, stems from the activities of diverse, spatially dispersed actors and their mutual involvement in multiple interactions (Hardy & Maguire, 2008).

Stability is the result of the constant and purposeful reconsideration of existing institutions in terms of their ability to support the processes of resource integration. Institutional change then entails an evolutionary process in which institutions influence actors' behavior, which in turn may affect existing institutions (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). In terms of time frame, institutional work may occur in a relatively short interval or proceed over a long period of time. Furthermore, it can happen progressively, that is through imperceptible changes, or unexpectedly, thus determining changes that strongly impact existing patterns (Dacin et al., 2002).

As effect of institutional work, institutional alignments are always imperfect and temporary because the nested nature of institutional arrangements results in continual incompatibilities. These alignments often result in frictions and incompatibilities within and among institutional arrangements that span regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements, which often provide the conditions for institutional change (Scott, 2013). Actors' institutional inconsistencies "resolve over time into shared conceptions of problems and solutions in social systems." (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009: 145).

Summing up, institutional alignment is related to systemic processes that entail ongoing negotiations, experimentation, competition, and learning among a multitude of systemic actors, including salespeople, as

the next section will better explain.

2.3. Sales Transformation through an institutional lens

Hartmann et al. (2018) underscore the relevance of salespeople and other actors fostering resource integration and value creation by participating in institutionalization processes. Sales is thought to play a progressively important and complex role as processes increasingly become nested within overlapping institutional arrangements and performed among multiple groups of actors. The inherent sources of tension embedded are contingent upon their ability to align the institutional arrangements of actors that facilitate exchange and value co-creation (Hartmann et al., 2018). For instance, by determining reciprocal expectations of salespeople and buyers involved in resource integration, institutions reduce the uncertainty of such interactions and, consequently, the cost of cooperation and collaboration, thereby increasing the effectiveness of value co-creation processes.

In a traditional view, salespeople are those actors creating new institutions and transforming existing institutional arrangements, such as the notions of persuasion and negotiation suggest. Recent works, however, indicate that the behaviors of selling actors may not necessarily be the main determinant of the institutional arrangements of buying actors, as frequently stated in the literature (Hartmann et al., 2020). Surely, adopting a service ecosystem perspective increases the range of activities and the number of actors considered to be involved in selling. Institutional work always involves multiple actors who, iteratively and nonlinearly, lead to sometimes temporal or other times more stable alignments in their institutional arrangements (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). Studying Sales Transformation, therefore, implies considering the systemic processes that encompass ongoing negotiations, experimentation, competition, and learning among a multitude of systemic actors. Such confrontation often results in friction, tension, and alignment within and among institutional arrangements that span regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that are key to value co-creation through selling. Alignment in elements such as written or oral contracts, relational norms, perceptions of solutions, shared conceptions of acceptable business practices are therefore important as they facilitate service for service exchange and resource integration (Hartmann et al., 2018).

As service ecosystems are governed by shared institutional arrangements, the Sales Transformation is shaped by changes that happen in various institutional arrangements at the same time (Kleinaltenkamp, Corsaro, & Sebastiani, 2018), which makes the whole process less linear than the literature often presented. However, in selling literature, cognitive, regulative and normative institutional pillars have been examined implicitly and atomistically, with an overemphasized role of the regulative one (Hartmann et al., 2018): "Not surprisingly, much work on selling and buyer–seller relationships have focused on regulative elements that can be monitored and sanctioned, such as formal contracts that often define responsibilities, measures, and compensations....It is, therefore, necessary to view selling and institutional alignment holistically, instead of only addressing institutions in somewhat disparate subcategories." (: 5). That interesting point is also a view shared by Creed, DeJordy, and Lok (2010) according to whom institutional work in selling has often been associated to the creation and disruption of institutions, leaving out the maintenance.

The literature available lacks a deep understanding of the Sales Transformation in terms of the alignment of institutional arrangements—namely, how regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions are being modified as part of changes in the selling process aimed at value co-creation. This study will explore the Sales Transformation phenomenon by observing the changes in cognitive pillars (categories, typification, and schemas), normative pillars (social and relational norms), regulative pillars (laws, regulations, and contracts) and in combination, as part of the institutional work that led to value co-creation through selling. The rules governing the sharing of these

resources are of increasing interest for researchers (McColl-Kennedy, Vargo, Dagger, Sweeney, & Kasteren, 2012) as mechanisms of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation among actors engaged in value creation processes through selling.

To do that, as suggested by recent literature, we zoom out to a higher level which accentuates the idea that selling takes place in societies with unique contexts (Hartmann et al., 2020; Ranjan & Friend, 2020). We do not limit our research to a micro-level perspective, as in previous literature, but we position our contribution as a mid-range theory that falls between micro theories and general theories which explain "a subset of phenomena relevant to a particular context" (Brodie, Saren, & Pels, 2011: 80). This increase in complexity has spurred a recent wave of academic work aimed at numerous calls for research to more robustly understand how this complexity impacts different aspects of the selling process (Hartmann et al., 2018; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014; Seriki, Nath, Ingene, & Evans, 2020).

In response to the call towards more holistic and systemic views to explain selling and sales related phenomena (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020), we adopt such an outlook to examine broader social structures and argue that recognizing their overlapping and nested nature is important to understanding change in selling.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach

In this study, we adopted a discovery-oriented, theory-in-use inquiry to understand the Sales Transformation through an institutional lens (Johnson, Matthes, & Friend, 2019). Due to the explorative nature of the study, we applied an inductive research approach, according to which the elements of the conceptual core of the framework emerged gradually over the course of the research.

The unit of our analysis is the service ecosystem which, by applying a *meso*-paradigm, integrates the micro and macro research-related topics (House, Rousseau, & Thomashunt, 1995): "The multilevel paradigm refers to a way of thinking: considering management phenomena in context and looking for driving variables not only from the focal unit of analysis but also from levels above and below." (Mathieu & Chen, 2011: 632).

We, therefore, applied a qualitative method which is particularly appropriate to adopt with a systemic perspective of selling. This method promotes rich and thorough descriptions of significance, both complex and multifaceted, well suited to in-depth exploration into a systemic phenomenon.

We started from the perspective of selling companies and then extended the analysis to include multiple actors to consider "the context at different levels of analysis to generate a deeper, richer understanding of critical phenomenological patterns and to gain a more holistic view" (Rapp et al., 2020: 231). In the micro-level we referred the analysis to a company, such as studying the relationship between internal functions. At the *meso*-level we mainly considered the relationship between the buyer and seller, while at the macro-level, we referred to relationships at an ecosystem level, which includes industry development. As underlined by Chandler and Vargo (2011), this broader view does not diminish the importance of focusing on the buyer–seller dyad but rather, it highlights that fully understanding value co-creation practices requires looking at the involved institutional elements from different levels of aggregation because dyads are always embedded in broader social systems.

Our analysis thus moved across these levels to capture both the holistic view of the phenomenon and specific effects in context (i.e., individual-level outcomes versus systems-level outcomes), and to understand how these elements interrelate with each other, as suggested by Rapp et al. (2020).

Table 1
Interviewed selling actors in supplier companies.

Company	Role of informant
Automotive replacement	Sales Director
Salesforce Italy	CEO
Digital intelligence company	CEO
Sei Laser	Sales Director
Coffee producer	Business Developer
Candy company	Trade Marketing Manager
High precision tools producer	Sales Director
Beverage company	Sales & Marketing Manager
Tire company	Salesperson
Airplus	Sales Director
E-pharma	Sales Channel Director
Chemical components company	CEO
Energy distribution system	General Director
Wika	Sales Director
Reputation Institute	Vice President
Bank	Sales Director
Scalo Outlet Milano	Chain Manager
Hotel chain	CEO
Oil & gas industry	Sales Contractor
Oil & gas company	CEO
ICT security company	Sales Director
Logistic service company	CEO
Orogel	Trade Marketing Manager
Pressure control system company	Sales & Marketing Director
Business performance company	Sales Director
Publishing company	CEO
Selligent	Managing Director
Meat industry company	Trade Marketing Manager
Luxury automotive company	Customer Success Manager
Mechatronics industry company	Business Developer
Components for industrial plant company	International Trade Manager
Logistic service company	Sales & Marketing Director
Alcohol beverage industry	Sales & Marketing Manager
Sports equipment industry	Digital Marketing Manager
Beverage company	Sales Director
Reseller products for infants	Customer Value Manager
Insurance company	Sales Director
Fitness chain	Sales Director
Accelerating connection company	Managing Director
DNVGL	Sales Director
High precision tools company	Sales Director
Consumer food industry	CEO
Gattinoni	Sales Director
Akamai	Sales Director
Salesforce	Country Leader
Connexia	CEO
Travel agency	CEO
Consortium	Channel Manager
Paper company	Growth Executive
Logistic delivery company	CEO
Production chain association	President
Sausage company	Sales Director
Pressure mechanism systems	General Director
Luxury hotel chain	Customer Success Manager
Chinese digital platform for sales	Marketing Manager
High precision machinery company	Country Leader
Business service company	CEO
Buttons industry	Business Developer Manager
Luxury furniture company	General Manager
Outsourcing service company	CEO
Displays company	Solution Architect
Packaging machine industry	Bid Coordination
High precision tools	Key Account Executive
Systems for pressure measurement company	Channel Manager
Telco company	Bid Manager
Perrigo	Sales Director
Digital intelligence company	CEO
Food industry	Trade Marketing Manager
Shopping mall	Sales Director
Food industry	Trade Marketing Manager
Tire company	Salesperson
Vagheggi	Sales Director
Outlet center	Sales & Marketing Manager
Optimization processes software industry	Key Account Manager

Table 1 (*continued*)

Company	Role of informant
Trucks service industry	Growth Manager
Chemical company	Business Developer
BtoB service company	CEO

Table 2

Interviewed non-selling actors in the service ecosystem.

Company	Role of informant
Fast fashion clothing	Consumer
Ropes company	Purchasing Manager
Dale Carnegie	Head of Training
Association for Brand Industry	President
Airspace company	Head of Procurement
Platform for rewards system	Founder
Heavy vehicles for agriculture	Internal Layer
Finance company	HR Manager
Sales Transformation Hub	Founder
National Association for Industrial Distribution	Network Manager
Trade fair company	Organizer
Beauty products	Wholesale Buyer
Food & beverage industry	Consultant
Consortium for heavy metals	Buyer
Packaging company	Buyer
Fashion industry	Buyer
Credit collection company	Call Center Head
Retail grocery chain	Buyer
Job service	HR Manager
Frozen food company	Brand Manager
University research center	Deputy Manager
Italian Association for International Trade	President
Automotive service industry	User
System integrator	Country Manager
Layer	Company Mediator
Consortium for controlled origin products	Deputy Director
Coffee machine company	Chief Communication Manager
Technology vendor	Buyer
Sustainable clothing company	Social Media Manager
Component industry	Buyer
Hardware company	Head of Procurement
Online marketplace	Marketing Managers
Leading football team	Marketing Manager
Association for Industrial Distribution	President
Market research company	Consultant
Retail clothing chain	Customer
International exchange promoter	PR Manager
Telecommunication services	Customer
Fast moving consumer goods company	HR Manager
Business school	Marketing Professor
Sales specialized consultancy company	Head of Marketing Research
Insurance bank	Chief Security Manager
Fashion industry company	CIO
Food machinery company	Buyer
Job agency	People Development
Pharmacy chain	Owner
Banking company	IT Manager
Travel insurance company	International Communication Manager
University	Head of Sales Research Institute
Start-up accelerator	President
Confectionary industry company	International Product Manager
Private consortium for DOP products	International Communication Manager
Furniture industry	Digital Marketing Specialist
Toy industry	Insight Manager
Domestic appliances	CRM Manager
Clothing industry	Consumer
DNVGL	Marketing Manager
Start-up company	Founder
Telecommunication company	Head of Network

3.2. Data collection

In 2019–2020, interviews were conducted as part of a vast project on Sales Transformation financed by IULM University. We carried out interviews with 138 key informants from different actors in a service ecosystem. We started interviewing 82 people who held different roles in supplier companies from various industries (see Table 1 for company details and positions). As our goal was to obtain a holistic view of the Sales Transformation, other 56 players like associations, various intermediaries, buyer companies, consumers, and others (Table 2 for company details and positions) were interviewed about their relationship with the focal supplier companies.

The informants were selected by asking respondents from the supplier company for the contact information of the key players connected to them. These interlocutors were considered key informants capable of discussing the Sales Transformation process, which has both strategic and operational implications. In 8 cases the interviews were not reported and analyzed because the informants were considered to lack the knowledge necessary to discuss the topic under investigation. Companies and respondents' names are not displayed for privacy reasons.

The interviews focused on the main changes within the sales context during the previous 3 years. This included questions regarding the main challenges faced, the implications generated, the actors involved, what tensions they created, and how they were potentially resolved. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain both retrospective and real-time accounts of those people experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest. The capacity to connect processes to contextual levels and points in time was also underscored as processes "become comprehensible if connected to a spatial and temporal setting" (Halinen, Törnroos, & Elo, 2013). Events can sometimes be so influential that they produce changes over time and influence subsequent events (Beeler, Zablah, & Johnston, 2017).

Two other researchers were involved in the data collection to avoid having the main research become too close and essentially adopting the informant's view, thus losing the higher-level perspective necessary for informed theorizing (Gioia et al., 2012). We also revised the interview protocol as the research progressed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis involved a detailed coding process that identified the major themes of the research objectives in the study. We transcribed interviews and applied a process for coding them (Creswell, 2009; Johnson, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The first step was open coding. A list of elements, events, and practices was created stemming from the narratives of the participants in our study. Researchers discussed the identified categories to ensure consistency and assigned meaningful quotations to the categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and then searched for similar codes. For instance, we used the code 'Enable social CRMs to coordinate multiple views in the ecosystem" to synthesize "*Our CRM has revolutionized the markets because it works as social media does, even if it was meant for B2B. Around an issue, which could be for instance a business opportunity or a specific event, different people can contribute information in any form they like". We then merged similar codes and developed the 12 first-order categories in terms of value co-creation processes so that they mirrored our informants' "concepts-in-use*" (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

In the second step, axial coding, we organized open codes into initial sets of categories reflecting the beginnings of the framework. Open codes were further analyzed to uncover the core phenomenon and other variables influencing them (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In this process, we went back and forth between data and existing theory and linked emerging themes to past literature (Gioia et al., 2013). We then clustered overlapping and complementary first-order categories into second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013). In our case, the twelve value co-creation processes were grouped according to their relationship with
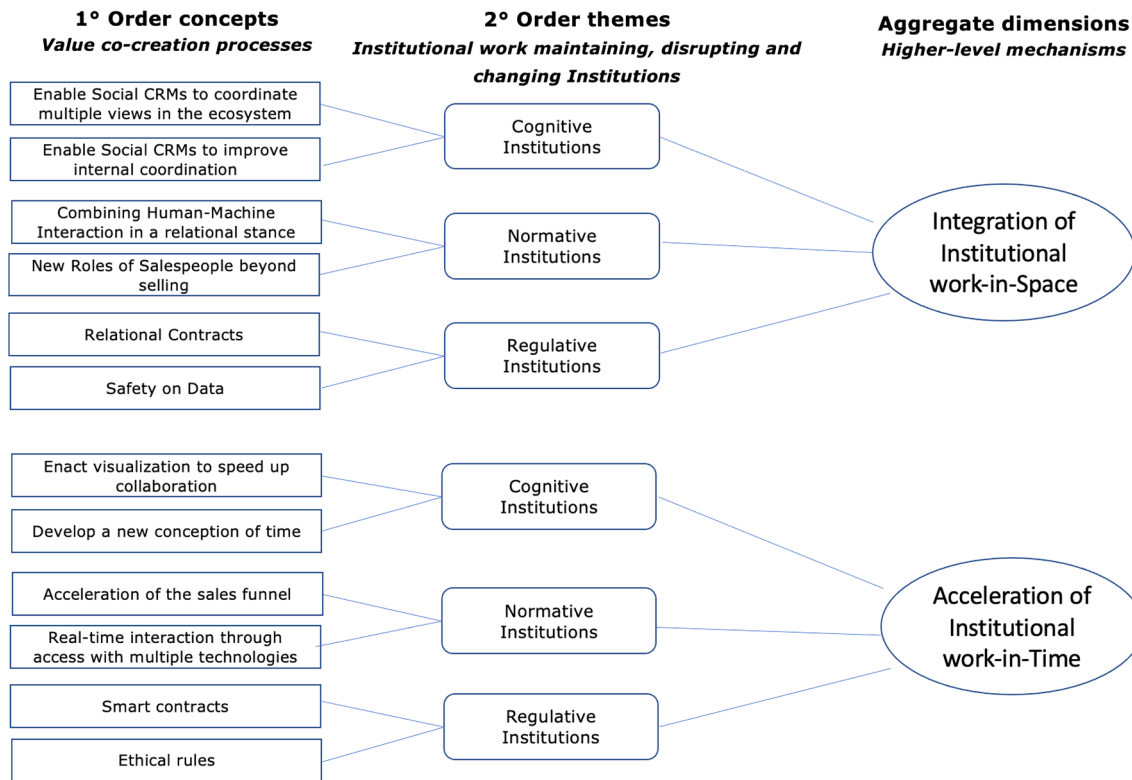
1° Order concepts
Value co-creation processes

2° Order themes
Institutional work maintaining, disrupting and changing Institutions

Aggregate dimensions
Higher-level mechanisms

Fig. 1. The coding process.

institutional work in terms of cognitive, regulative, or normative elements. For example, the first-order categories 'relational contracts', and 'safety on data' have been clustered into the second-order theme 'regulative institutions' as they are the effect of institutional work that touches upon formal rules and sanctions.

In the third step, through selective coding, we classified the results into more specific frameworks. We unified the second-order themes around core categories and further explain them to integrate and connect the categories (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Gioia et al., 2013). In other words, we matched the second-order themes with the practical insights derived through the study and reiterated this process until we were able to develop stable aggregate dimensions at a higher level of theoretical abstraction (Zeithaml et al., 2020). These aggregated dimensions represent two higher level mechanisms which we labelled as Integration of institutional work-in-space and Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. For instance, the second-order themes 'acceleration of the sales funnel' and 'real-time interaction through access with multiple technologies' were aggregated into the higher-order dimension 'Acceleration of institutional work-in-time' as they reflect how institutional work acts on the time aspect of maintenance, disruption, and change of cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions (see Fig. 1).

Ideas emerging from the initial rounds of data collection and analysis were also tested in later rounds to assess conceptual robustness and practical accuracy. In line with Charmaz (2000) recommendations, this recursive movement between data collection and data analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached, and no new themes emerged from additional data collection. When agreements about some codings were low, we revisited the data, engaged in mutual discussions, and developed understandings to arrive at consensual interpretations. Data were presented through interviewed people's quotes to narrate an informative story focused on new concept development and theoretical discovery. Further quotes to the presented findings have been included in Table 3 and Table 4 in the Appendix.

4. Findings

4.1. Integration of institutional work in-space

Our findings have shown that the Sales Transformation is determined by two main mechanisms, the first of which is the Integration of institutional work-in-space. This mechanism acts on institutional work by integrating and aligning cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions. In bringing the institutions closer, frictions and tensions can emerge between them which lead to their emergence, change and disappearance, with an effect on value co-creation. The integration mechanism happens in context, more specifically in a contextual space dimension and therefore shapes institutional work in the interaction space.

Institutional work exerts its effects on value co-creation through selling in terms of processes such as the coordination of multiple views internally and externally to the service ecosystem, the integration of human–machine interaction in space, new interactions created by changing roles of salespeople, as well as the different interaction patterns reflected by new contracts and data protection rules.

4.1.1. Cognitive institutions affecting value co-creation in-space

4.1.1.1. Enable social CRM to coordinate multiple views in the service ecosystem. In recent years, collaboration in the service ecosystem has been boosted by the diffusion of new technological tools such as social CRMs. Compared to traditional CRMs which, in the past, were mostly used as an internal data repository or to coordinate sales teams, these new solutions have allowed for wider connections throughout the entire ecosystem.

A peculiarity of these systems is that they support the integration among different and disseminated information in the network. Take for instance a discussion on a new prospective customer. Various parties that include distributors and suppliers for example, instead of just the salespeople, can contribute to assigning a sense to specific data or

information about that prospect. Compared to the past, there are new forms through which this information can be expressed: a text, presentation, link, voice message, picture, graph, and many others. The effect is that the joint object, for instance a commercial opportunity, assumes a collective meaning through the involvement of different actors, often dispersed in space, across the ecosystem.

> "Our CRM has revolutionized the markets because it works as social media does, even if it was meant for B2B. Around an issue, which could be for instance a business opportunity or a specific event, different people can contribute information in any form they like." (CEO, Salesforce Italy).

Organizations get stuck when they can't escape the beliefs and assumptions they have about markets, customers, and competitors, and the way their business works. Therefore, confrontation is fundamental to managing the Sales Transformation.

Artificial intelligence is also part of the process of meanings enactment at the base of these new social CRMs. It can collect all the information, even if it is in different formats, and translate it to dashboards that are intelligible for all the parties who have access to such information. The quality and 'transversal' nature of these visual aspects is increasingly important because it facilitates the alignment of different ideas and conceptions regarding the same piece of information by actors who can be very different from each other:

> "The dashboards that our system provides were already very effective as they were created by an information designer to be very immediate and clear. We have now taken a step forward and can personalize the dashboard for those who access the system." (CEO, digital intelligence company).

As indicated by the previous quote, the personalization of how data is visualized is a very significant step that has further boosted coordination. The artificial intelligence technology can translate and adapt information to the player accessing it, for example, a marketing or sales manager, communication manager, a supplier, or a distributor.

The effect of these technologies has been to make coordination between actors in the ecosystem easier and more fluid, as well as to incentivize new connections. This is even more important due to the growing complexity of the business ecosystems of companies and the strong interconnectedness among people. The CRM has indeed allowed to overcome some space barriers and better enter into contacts with other actors abroad, as expressed by the Sales Director of Sei Laser, a company for whom it has been much easier to develop a project with a partner in China, especially considering that they do not use Skype.

Furthermore, salespeople and other players also feel closer to each other and are changing their language as an effect of stronger collaboration. As mentioned by many managers, a new narrative is spreading, even in B2B, that is much more factual, plural, and shared.

> "I am losing the tendency to speak in terms of 'our company' in favor of 'we': I tell stories that are more inclusive and parcipitory, they tell something about the internal value chain." (Business Developer, coffee producer).
> "I include more actors in our story-telling to explain that our products not only generate benefits for the customer, but for the wider community, including the environment, the local territory, the social community, and the employees." (Trade Marketing Manager, candy company).

4.1.1.2. Enable social CRMs to improve coordination inside the company. Technological developments, increased customer sophistication, and the proliferation of sales channels are modifying the traditional journey, requiring a more intense collaboration between marketing and sales. For instance, according to the Trade Marketing Manager of a food industry company, they do not collaborate much with salespeople as they don't

understand marketing terminology. He thinks that they simply seek growth in their field and are only interested in selling and getting their commissions. On the other side, the sales director of a tire company asserted that he is not interested in being aligned with his colleagues from the marketing department because he knows his own field better than them.

In the past many companies did not reach high integration as marketing and sales do not define common goals and coordination. Furthermore, not having common KPIs limited the development of a common understanding of the two functions as a unified one by both teams.

> "I have always argued that we should have a global sales-marketing director who integrates these two functions, but this is not the case. It is a typical defect of German companies. I don't think our CEO attributes much importance to marketing." (Sales Director, high precision tools producer).

Nevertheless, the contemporary CRM has not only better integrated actors in the external ecosystem, but in the internal one as well. This has led to limiting much of the friction and improved integration between the pure marketing vision (which often remains outside the commercial logic) and the pure sales vision (which just as often remains outside the market analysis aspects) towards a new image that integrates the two.

> "The CRM we are going to implement will be the starting point of everything. The customers will be in there and anyone will be able to look at a customer from any angle, including marketing. With Microsoft Dynamic we can have a single tool that goes from the lead to the sales part to the numbers part and so on." (Sales Director, Airplus).

One effect of the development of a shared understanding, is that both marketing and sales started to think more in terms of value rather than turnover. They realized that to generate value in a relationship higher collaboration and integration was needed, even more so with the spread of digitalization and the increased fluidity of interactions.

> "There is no differentiation between sales and marketing because everything revolves around value. If a company wants to implement a customer-centered logic then the flow towards the customer should be unique." (Consultant, food & beverage industry).

In summary, the widespread adoption of CRMs in recent years has supported the integration of data between functions inside the company. The higher such integration is and the stronger the opportunities to align ideas, conceptions, and understandings among functions are, then the more we will start to see the traditional view of siloed departments disappear.

4.1.2. Normative institutions affecting value co-creation in-space

4.1.2.1. Combining human–machine interaction in a relational stance. It became apparent during our research that B2B selling functions are further introducing practices aimed at combining physical interaction with technologically mediated ones when dealing with other parties in the ecosystem. Integration is, therefore, happening between the physical and digital space, becoming a widespread social practice thanks to the perception of collective benefits and the enhanced opportunities offered by technology.

> "We have a tool called WIKA customer portal, which feels like a complete e-commerce platform dedicated to the customer. We try to take advantage of all the novelties that digital is providing us, but at the same time providing a mix of traditional sales and digital sales is best." (Sales Director, Wika).

The purchasing practice is changing too. Buyers asserted that when involved in non-complex purchases, they seek experiences like those

they have as consumers that include simplicity and immediacy. For this reason, face-to-face interaction with the sales is often postponed during the last phases of the purchasing funnel.

> "I buy stuff on Amazon, organize holidays by myself, use food delivery almost every day…. Therefore, when I search for information, support, or purchases from a company, I expect that they provide a modernized system, regardless of B2B or not. This is something we all now expect." (Buyer, packaging company).

Also, managers affirmed that in the past, they preferred to meet salespeople in-person because this led to having a more positive personal dialogue with the customer at the start of the sales process. Nevertheless, especially when the company is organized in branches, it is much easier to make video calls.

Interesting evidence then demonstrates that a better human––machine integration could also generate benefits in the daily work of salespeople. The interviews indicated that automation is currently perceived as being more relevant in decreasing corrupted selling time (time dedicated to administrative activities or with low added-value) so that they can focus more on developing relationships in the ecosystem. This influences sales, but also the other functions in the company.

It is undeniable, however, that there is also some rigidity caused by this very change toward an increased use of technology in both company interactions and within the service ecosystem. Automation and artificial intelligence are key for Sales Transformation processes but in many cases the problem is not technology but people who resist the change in their role. For instance, the CEO of a luxury hotel chain stated that they were pioneers in implementing frontline IBM service robots, but customers could not understand their role. He had the impression that they looked nice rather than being useful.

> "We organized a service in the shopping mall where customers could leave their bags in the shops, and we would deliver them to their homes so they would not have to carry them on public transportation. Shops were not happy with being part of this change. They focused more on their increased effort in changing the process than the enormous advantage in terms of customer experience." (Chain Manager, Scalo Outlet Milano).

4.1.2.2. New role of salespeople beyond selling. When we interviewed business customers, we noticed that they were less seduced by salespeople, looking for a more equal relationship with brands. This led to rethinking the managerial approaches that have been very successful in the past. Above all, there is the 'challenging sale' or the idea that the customer, now more informed and anchored to their beliefs, should be challenged to influence their preferences. Many salespeople interviewed reported often using this approach they learned in their training course.

> "Customers are becoming very arrogant, they think they already know the solution that is best for them, and the supplier is just a means to reaching this goal. For this reason, I prefer to challenge them." (CEO, oil & gas company).
> "Buyers are very informed nowadays. They are not interested in what you want to tell them. I am frequently a bit strong in my approach, a bit like a coach is when they want to urge you to action." (Sales Director, ICT security company).

The 'challenging sales' paradigm has had a significant impact on sales communication, especially the inter-personal one that occurs between a commercial figure and the customer, be it a consumer or corporate buyer. Therefore, many players within the ecosystem are now distancing themselves from this perspective, as they are noticing a dramatic change in customer behavior and, more broadly within the social and business context. This change requires that salespeople develop new skills and an approach more oriented toward perspective-selling rather than challenging sales. In the contemporary era, the challenging approach seems to be losing strength, together with all those forms of sales communication that are too commercial and aimed at the so-called fast sale:

> "We don't want to be managed or corralled into whatever the salesperson in their organization has in store for them." (Buyer, retail grocery chain).
> "Understanding perspectives will be more important because customers want to be understood. I sincerely listen to them, experience their pain, understand their world, and their system of thinking." (Head of Marketing Research, sales specialized consultancy company).

If we then project it to the ecosystem level, the sales force appears to increasingly act as an intermediary which influences and shapes the customer's cognitive processes through interactions, often in a holistic way that goes beyond the characteristics of the product. By combining and integrating knowledge, the seller creates space for new values within which to place the customer's needs. Such a process implies finding ways to connect the dots and transform them into opportunities to develop the business and at the same time, create value for the customers.

In this sense, alignment is not always easily achieved. Some actors tend to remain stuck in the past and in the traditional role of salespeople, while others are embracing the transformation of the role and competencies of salespeople and often mention the idea of developing skills that cross their traditional context of interaction:

> "We must abandon the idea of sales with price lists. Our sellers have transversal skills, making them into nutritionists, marketing professionals, logistics service consultants, producers, etc." (Trade Marketing Manager, Orogel).

This change had an impact also on how salespeople are recruited, abandoning the tendency to employ people who had experience in the same industry. According to the Sales Director of a Business Performance Company they prefer to employee new salespeople from other industries as they have a fresh perspective and can learn our approach without resistance.

> "I can think of a person who in the first 12 months of joining their new company, in a new field, was able to sell more than an entire mid-sized country team had achieved that year in the same company!" (HR Manager, fast moving consumer goods company).

A further very interesting aspect we observed on the changing role of salespeople, was that they are not just users of new technologies but are becoming buyers of them too, exerting a strong influence in the purchasing process. Quite a long-standing ideology is that the only buyer of technology is the CTO (chief technology officer). While there is still a place for that view, there is no doubt a large percentage of purchases now being driven by other departments, like marketing and sales, who can see the value of a technology in context and understand what it can bring in terms of market share or new sales. The management of sales automated technology thus not only requires engineering skills but is more often requiring an in-depth knowledge of procedures related to customers and other partners in the ecosystem, which IT and ICT people often lack.

> "As a technology provider, our target is not just the IT department, as it was in the past. Now processes are so complicated that the real benefit is for marketing & sales directors." (Managing Director, Selligent).

4.1.3. Regulative institutions affecting value co-creation in-space

4.1.3.1. Relational Contracts. Change is also influencing the more formal regulative aspects of relationships both at dyadic and ecosystem

levels and particularly in contractual forms. Often the contractual aspects have been a disincentive in the attempt at collaboration since they have been focused more on the value sharing aspects. Companies understand that their suppliers are key partners in reducing costs, increasing quality, and driving innovation; leaders regularly talk about the need for strategic relationships with shared goals and risks. But alignment is complicated and when contract negotiations begin, a contradictory mindset and transactional contract approach often prevail.

"However, heavy negotiation tactics not only impart a false sense of security (because implementation costs are too high to invoke the clauses) but also foster negative behavior that underlies the relationship and the contract itself." (Country Manager, system integrator).

When joint plans crash and value has been destroyed for everyone, it is not clear whom this burden should fall on, generating a question of fairness that undermines just what is needed now, trust. Therefore, value destruction seems to undermine relationships in a very strong way, generating further ambiguity especially when more actors in the ecosystem are involved.

"It is easy to talk about collaboration when things go well; the problem is when a collaborative project fails, and value is destroyed. Are we sure that its effects are well distributed among parties? I can tell you when things do not go well friendships often end." (Company mediator, Layer).

Recently though, new contractual forms called 'relational contracts' or 'network contracts' are emerging, which try to regulate collaboration and include more parties in the agreement. For example, the Insight Manager of a toy company affirmed that they signed a new agreement with a chain of supermarkets that have to send them weekly sales data and will support the company every week in defining the best in-store selling strategy.

Conflicts occur when commercial intermediaries see brands as just wanting to have a better position on the shelves. With the new contracts they have shown that they are supportive not only in selling a specific product, but are supportive of the entire category, providing benefits that both retailers and other companies can use.

"When we founded the Consortium, we tried to be innovative and implement new types of contracts whose clauses were flexible and anchored to certain contextual conditions so that companies did not feel the pressure of short terms goals but were keen on investing in long term projects with the other participants, such as the open platform for signaling counterfeiting." (Deputy Director, consortium for controlled origin products).

Contracts are not only changing between customers and suppliers or at a collective level in the ecosystem but inside the company as well. For instance, salespeople 'performance is not only based on the turnover generated and marketing' one on customer satisfaction but new key performance indicators have been introduced in their contracts which provide economic incentives if joint goals are reached.

"I now receive a percentage also based on the number of events I've organized together with marketing people, the number of meetings that are jointly attended, the measurement of the quality of the customer experience, things like that." (Customer Success Manager, luxury automotive company).

4.1.3.2. Safety on data. The increased tendency to collaborate and to integrate data, especially in the ecosystem, is posing new concerns about the use of data and data protection. Nearly all e-commerce companies use email marketing systems to send commercial offers and profiling systems to study the preferences and purchasing choices of their customers to increase their sales skills and develop targeted offers. With the

rise of interaction points between parties and the practice of sharing ideas, the need for new rules regarding data safety has emerged that are progressively modifying the trade-off between control and trust.

"Two years ago, we conducted a survey that found 46% of respondents used an internally managed e-commerce, while only 18% was managed by third parties. People did not trust third parties to manage their data but hopefully, this will change as more regulation is set in place." (International Trade Manager, components for industrial plant company).

"When a customer service representative calls me to sell me something, I want to know exactly how they got my data. In most cases, they end the call by hanging up." (Customer of telecommunication services).

The new norms distinguish between data from first, second, and third parties, assigning them specific rules on sharing this data and procedures when moving the data from one level to the next. These rules have also changed the way companies transfer data to their partners or vice versa, which is very prominent in the case of joint market research for marketing & sales purposes. According to the Head of a Research Institute, for instance, to conduct market research in the past, the main practice was to use the company's database of contacts. The company would download the information, send it to the researchers, who would then send out the survey to all the contacts. In this way, research centers could do amazing extensive research; but with the new rules, this is no longer possible, and it has generated some tightness and has incentivized elusive practices.

Tensions are then generated because on the side there are smarter contract and on the other side there are more formal regulations on who can access the CRM data within the company and with which level of authority.

"I can no longer access all the information. It now depends on your role and you can only see the information that is relevant to accomplishing your task." (International Product Manager, confectionary industry company).

"I carefully selected a sales automation system which helps us monitor user access, starting with how people log into our company account to what they can see." (Sales & Marketing Director, logistics service company).

4.2. Acceleration of institutional Work-in-time

Acceleration of institutional work-in-time is the second mechanism that, together with the Integration of institutional work-in-space, is strongly contributing to the Sales Transformation. Differently from the first, however, it acts more on the time dimension of the service ecosystem, leading institutional work to happen at a different velocity. This speed depends on how institutions are challenged and contested by influencing the alignment process through which they are maintained, changed, and disrupted. Acceleration of institutional work-in-time, therefore, influences value co-creation in terms of dimensions, such as faster agreement from actors through visual elements, the acceleration of the sales funnel, and the spreading of smarter contracts especially as an effect of digitalization.

4.2.1. Cognitive institutions affecting value co-creation in-time

4.2.1.1. Enact visualizations to speed up collaboration. An interesting element of acceleration that emerged from the study is the use of visual insights and representations. We have already seen that digitization has drastically increased the number of touchpoints and, therefore, the number of subjects with which the vendors interface. These subjects are often heterogeneous in terms of their objectives and visions. The use of visual elements to support other forms of communication can accelerate

coordination among different ideas and thus speed up the decision-making process.

When considering the digitalization process, we realized, from speaking with the various actors, that there are tensions related to the overload of information which can make it long and complicated to be cognitively processed.

> "I am always in a hurry and very distracted so yes, I notice images more than words." (Consumer).

Salespeople often invest too much time in integrating scattered pieces of individual cognitive visions. Misalignment, for instance, often happens when more parties are involved in complex purchases for appropriation of co-created value, as when parties do not understand each other well this leads to a sense of inequity and disparity.

The sharing of representations should favor the velocity of adaptation and render interaction less conflictual and more productive.

> "The best practices of our clients around the world demonstrate the importance of metrics for both sales reps and managers, that are established upfront and use both leading and lagging indicators. In doing so, every team member understands the most important activities and following phases are much faster." (Consultant, Food & beverage industry).

In many cases, these visual elements summarize a complex set of information that are generated in real time, allowing for very contextual decisions.

> "I struggled many years with resellers because they would send us back the sales data every two weeks if we were lucky. Now that we have finally managed to interface our CRM, I can see selling data in real-time." (Sales Director, automotive replacements).

Among the visual tools that are spreading in both social and business contexts there are videos that made communication faster and more immediate not only for marketing purposed, but more and more for sales too.

> "Nowadays when you meet a customer, they keep their laptop open and check their mobiles every two minutes. The real difficulty is to capture their attention immediately, otherwise, it's a lost cause. It is very difficult to recover afterward. Starting with a video we observed is particularly effective to capture attention" (Sales & Marketing Manager, alcohol beverage industry).

4.2.1.2. Develop a new conception of time. Thanks to technology, opportunities today are often multiplied but they are not all equal in the use of company resources, particularly time. People interviewed mentioned that their lives are moving faster than in the past, and they are obligated to better organize processes and focus on priorities to avoid feeling overwhelmed. In many cases, for instance, technology has generated new touch-points but salespeople do not have time to manage the new contacts.

> "This year we started using an app during public events that facilitated a meeting between buyers and sellers in a streamlined way and made everyone's time more productive. Every meeting could only last 20 min." (PR Manager, international exchanges promoter).

This is not only the effect of a change in the business modes of interaction, but more of a transformation at a societal level. According to the managing director of an edge platform provider, 52% of users expect an e-commerce website to load in less than two seconds, 30% in less than a second, and 18% immediately. 58% of them abandon the website if this didn't happen. The user, no matter if a consumer or business buyer, considers the loading speed a proxy of trust.

But if on the one side opening an ecosystem lever was a great opportunity to combine resources and generate new value, many people struggle to prioritize which relationships to invest in:

> "I offered to develop an innovative project for free, for the Centro Marca association, where all I would need was access to their retailer base to distribute the survey. They declined even though they recognized the potential because they had no time to manage it. This would never have happened in the past." (Manager, university research center).

Consequently, new practices are spreading. Managers start talking in terms of relationship portfolio and its management to maximize the effectiveness of resources invested, not only in economic terms, but also time.

4.2.2. Normative institutions affecting value co-creation in-time

4.2.2.1. Acceleration of the sales funnel. "I appreciate that when meeting on Teams, we tend to get straight to the point as no one wants to make online interactions complicated. But this is also beneficial for further in person interaction as I have noticed we tend to be more effective." (General Director, energy distribution system).

The management of the sales funnel is very transforming in the last years, where the problem is not (or not only) closing the deal but managing the length and articulation of the process around us. According to DNVGL's Sales Director it is essential to create channels that allow you to respond quickly and be decisive and efficient on the market. Being faster than your competitors on certain topics is the winning key and we are living proof of this.

In this regard, business proposals that remain in a "no decision" state are undoubtedly a significant threat to the management of the sales pipeline, especially considered the changing conception of time highlighted in the previous paragraph. Managers estimated that 'no-decision' states generate losses higher than the deals that are won by competing companies. Consequently, the practice of "losing fast" is spreading which is the ability to know how to lose quickly and then identify new opportunities in the shortest possible time. The interview data highlighted the importance of understanding the buyer's funnel and challenging a client's inactivity to move forward and accelerate the funnel, even at the risk of losing the account.

> "What I say to young people in our company is be experienced and expect to lose but do it quickly!" (CEO, consumer food industry).
> "I noticed that some salespeople procrastinate when making calls to customers because they are afraid of receiving a no! A no today, could be a yes in the future and things and people change so quickly." (Sales Director, Gattinoni).

Qualifying business opportunities better than in the past is how to improve and speed up the sales funnel:

> "The third thing which I realized over the years, and this is only after a certain degree of maturity, is how to qualify an opportunity and how to say *no* to some opportunities. This is really confusing for a salesperson because we're always optimistic and we always want to engage. Opportunity qualification though, is something which I learned and am now teaching other sales team members. As I am the owner of the P&L the cost of sale is deducted from my cost center" (Key account executive, High precision tools).

But these new practices based on 'fastness' of exchanges, also generate friction between managers as well as between consumers and brands. It is as if, on one side, they want to operate in an accelerated context due to digitalization while, paradoxically, they continue to assign a higher value to personal interaction than in the past. They also know that to build a trusting relationship requires time, attention, and focus. This duality is posing new challenges which are not yet solved as it seems that there is not a prevailing collective mindset on the best way to interaction.

4.2.2.2. Real-time interaction through access with multiple technologies.
Real-time interaction is a current a modern aspect of business in consumer markets, thanks to e-commerce and sharing platforms. However, we found it very interesting that this was common in B2B as well. This change has been strongly driven by the changing expectations of customers. Sales managers are realizing their responsibility in contextualizing the customer's new values to the customer's specific needs and situations

> "We have noticed that customers expect an even more immediate response when they contact us on social media rather than via email" (CEO, Travel Agency).
> "Customers today value suppliers that provide them with the right information, through the right channels, designed to make the purchase process easier. This gives customers a playbook to foresee and deal with buying obstacles they might otherwise fail to manage." (Sales Contractor, oil & gas industry).

Being mobile promotes contextualization as it makes it easier for salespeople to update the CRM instantly instead of having to wait until they return to the office or according to a fixed timetable. Through mobile access, physical interactions can be represented in the digital space in near real-time. For instance, a sales director can geo-localize in real-time where their sales accounts are and if the customer service receives a request for support, they can find the one closest to them.

Nevertheless, some salespeople feel pressure from multiple and simultaneous interactions. When technology overload exists, it becomes a demand on the job leading to increased stress and decreased performance. Again, in the Sales Transformation process it seems that there is not yet a balance which allows salespeople to leverage on the new means of interaction, while in many cases the increased speed is undermining their performance rather than improving it.

> "Sometimes I have the feeling I'm going crazy. I can be working on an offer when I start receiving loads of email notifications, incoming phone calls, messages via Whatsapp, and calendar notifications about upcoming events." (Growth Executive, paper company).
> "I have to be careful about using multiple devices because I tend to get increasingly distracted and can only focus for a limited time." (Consumer).

4.2.3. Regulative institutions affecting value co-creation in-time

4.2.3.1. Smart contracts. Smarter contracts are needed with the spread of the value-in-use logic which is leading to dematerialize the product in favor of the service it provides, strongly affecting selling practices. An interesting example is of a pressure control system company which invested in selling the use of their machines rather than the property. Surely this is generating new challenges for sales and marketing people since it is very difficult for them to communicate value-in-use concept.

> "We decided to not only sell our machinery but many tools you can make with them. We had to change all of our contracts based on this subscription model." (Country Leader, high precision machinery company).
> "Digital platforms are no longer intended just for selling to the end-user. It will soon become indispensable in business between companies creating a self-service sales model which has established the need for new rules." (Marketing Manager, Chinese digital platform for sales).

With the spread of operators who offer their services in-part or exclusively via the internet (banks, insurance companies, telcos, etc …), it is possible to digitally sign contracts in compliance with the law. Selling has become somewhat easier for many managers interviewed.
Interesting is that increasingly companies are considering blockchain to track processes in the value chain, and they judge it very smart also

from a contractual point of view. Blockchain allows for platforms that do not need to be controlled by a central authority but are public and open-sourced. Activities investing in the blockchain range from branding to sales, to the organization of the purchasing process. According to the President of a production chain association, blockchain preserves the network of ecosystem platforms while protecting participants against the privacy and censorship risks of non-blockchain-based platform solutions.
This type of technology is increasingly used in B2C and B2B and removes the perception of mistrust within the ecosystem. Benefits include offering faster, cheaper trading and guaranteed contractual compliance.

> "The beauty of blockchain is that transactions are public, auditable, and tamper-free. Once a contract is signed, it is available forever and we can confirm the details at any time allowing for interactions between users that are not limited by commercial contracts." (Marketing Manager, DNVGL).

At an ecosystem level, the use of blockchain has solved some issues related to the cost of trust, which as we have previously seen, can be high when the resource integration is uncertain or when more actors are involved. This last issue can lead to the need for higher coordination and potential misalignments. Managers, for instance, reported a growing implementation of the blockchain technology in stores to track and cement the relationship between the different actors in the ecosystem that contributed to the product or service. According to the sales director of a sausage packaging company, blockchain technology allowed them to trace the value chain of meat which involved many players from farmers to stuffers. It was certainly worth it for them as the end consumer only needs a smartphone to learn about the entire chain, making the process of building trust in the brand much faster.

> "Communication that is managed at the point of sale by technology is very popular with young people. Blockchain applications, for example, through the simple scanning of QR codes enable a participatory and inclusive branding narrative, telling the product's supply chain story." (Wholesale buyer, beauty industry).

But there are also some parties in the ecosystem which are more skeptical about the use of such contracts, which generates tension. In some cases, in fact, the process that led companies to start selling through the platform was very fast, and they were not completely satisfied with the fee negotiated with the platform owner through the payment service system.

> "Involving the customer in the supplier process is wonderful as it generates involvement. However, the risk is that they lack some crucial skills and information so if they are not satisfied…whose fault is it?" (Customer Success Manager, luxury hotel chain).

4.2.3.2. Ethical rules. In the previous sections, we have seen that digitalization is profoundly changing the nature of transactions. Human-less transactions are growing in number and frequency and will need a completely different and more affordable recipe for building trust compared to today's solutions. People we interviewed mentioned a higher relevance of ethical issues in dealing with each other. In the past, especially in B2B, this was mostly left to the common sense of people, but it is now a part of the contractual aspect. In the case of smart contracts, the process of building trust and resource integration is quicker.
The CEO of a business service company declared that if they had more trust, many conflicts would not happen. It is a cultural problem. They are always afraid that the other person is smarter than we are. In his opinion, as a supply chain, they need to gain trust through facts, and they need rules to promote ethical behavior.

"Since consumers are most interested in transparency about the products they buy, this requires higher transparency in business relationships. For instance, there are now more specific rules about the use of our industrial designs. It happened in the past that we developed a project design for a customer, and then he took it to a Chinese supplier to produce it at a lower price." (Business Developer Manager, buttons industry).

Ambiguity in ethical issues something that can slow down business processes because you need time to collect information and understand what caused certain problems. Clearer and more stringent ethical rules in contracts have had the effect of boosting trust within the ecosystem. This increase in trust has also sped up the relational processes. According to the head of procurement in a hardware company, relations with partners are based on the correctness, completeness, and transparency of negotiations, by predicting the circumstances that could affect the established relationship. In the occurrence of unforeseen events, all companies try not to exploit the needs or weaknesses of the other party and expect the same behavior from their partners.

"After the development and sharing of our ethics code with our partners, I perceived a higher level of alignment. It is not necessary to give further explanation and we can dedicate time to making the business work." (Head of Network, telecommunication company).

The presence of ethics is particularly felt in B2B where most of the selling activities do not happen through a free negotiation but through tender specifications. Tensions have therefore been lessened than in the past where there were more ways to influence public tenders and made the bargaining process very long. Nowadays though, with everything online, and each parameter clearly measured, it is much more transparent.

"Gone are the days when you applied for a tender and then had to maintain a super low price just to get it while it would be impossible to realize the work at that cost. People don't try anymore as you can really damage your reputation in the market." (Bid Coordination, packaging machine industry).

5. Discussion

Different scholars are trying to explain the important process of change that selling is facing (Moncrief, 2017; Lacoste, 2018; Beeler, Chaker, Gala, & Zablah, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). However, many of these studies have adopted a micro-perspective of observation and a normative approach, which does not capture the complexity and holistic nature of the phenomenon. More recently, a new lens of observation has been applied, which considers the role of institutions in generating a new theoretical foundation for selling (Rapp et al., 2020; Hartmann et al., 2018; Hartmann et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Ranjan & Friend, 2020).

To interpret the Sales Transformation, this study has adopted an S-D logic narrative (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which argues that value co-creation is enabled and constrained through endogenously generated, shared institutions between multiple actors. The Sales Transformation can, therefore, be interpreted as aggregate levels of institutions and phenomenological views on value, which are largely driven by differences in institutions rather than products (Akaka & Vargo, 2015). The starting consideration of our study was that a deep understanding of the Sales Transformation in terms of how institutional work affects and changes value co-creation process was still missing, with many studies being mostly theoretical and extensive empirical studies quite limited (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Paesbrugghe et al., 2020).

By interviewing 138 different individuals in the ecosystem, our research has empirically shown that the Sales Transformation happens through the activity of two higher level mechanisms, the Integration of institutional work in-space and the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. The two mechanisms jointly lead to confrontation and alignment

of cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions which drive changes in value co-creation processes through selling. In line with recent work by Wang et al. (2020), we highlight that Sales Transformation cannot be interpreted as a linear phenomenon but rather as a holistic one, where conditions of uncertainty related to the space and time context lead to multiple and intertwined influences. Next sections will discuss the systematic nature of the Sales Transformation in terms of the higher-level institutional mechanisms, their effects on cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions as well as the role of actors in the whole process.

5.1. Mechanisms that explain the Sales Transformation as institutional work in the service ecosystem

The two mechanisms that explain the Sales Transformation are the Integration of institutional work-in-space and the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. These mechanisms affect institutional work in the ecosystem and thus influence creation, disruption of institutions at different levels, with an indirect impact on value co-creation processes. Jointly, integration and acceleration are an expression of the role and relevance of the context in describing the Sales Transformation (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Chandler & Vargo, 2011), involving both space and time dimensions with different levels of interactions in the service ecosystem (see Ranjan & Friend, 2020).

As for the mechanism of integration, due to digitalization, the number and type of touch-points in the service ecosystem has multiplied, generating higher interconnectivity among actors. The search for an alignment among multiple actors now in contact has led the ecosystem to organize itself around new patterns of exchange. For instance, technologies such as modern social CRMs have changed cognitive institutions allowing to co-create common images of business opportunities, and this in turn has enabled collaborative projects which would have not happened otherwise (normative pillar).

Integration of institutions also happened at the *meso*-level, where regulative institutions have been created in terms of novel contractual forms to regulate value co-creation. The goal is to limit tensions between customers and suppliers in-line with new norms shared within the ecosystem that boost collaboration and attempt to better coordinate it. At a micro-level, instead, the shared belief about the role and competences of salespeople (normative institution) is disappearing in favor of more transversal skills that include new activities such as data analysis, value measuring, and boundary spanning. The study has provided empirical support for the fact that the activities carried out by salespeople go much further than selling (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011).

Our research has also revealed that Sales Transformation is determined by the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. At the ecosystem level, institutional work has been accelerated by the velocity of business interactions due to both technological advancements and the need to have better use of time and to clearly identify priorities. At a *meso*-level, such acceleration has changed the importance of trying to win a deal with respect to the time this process absorbs. The concept of *losing fast* has spread to customers and suppliers avoiding a reciprocal waste of time in a context where digitalization has led to more frequent touch-points. This has influenced normative institutions, as interactions happen more often in real-time with the buyer expecting an offer almost immediately after the sales meeting and suppliers requesting a quick response from customers regarding their offers. At the micro-level, accelerated institutional work related to normative institutions has influenced the management of the company sales funnel changing it dramatically, with some phases becoming completely automated. This finding confirms results by Restuccia and Legoux (2019), according to whom the speed with which business relationships develop has increased dramatically, leading to accelerated interactions and reshaping service exchanges and value co-creation practices. At the same time, our study also shows that tensions and incompatibilities are not yet resolved: on the one side there is the increasing automation and digitalization, on the other side the actors' attempts to maintain the focus on personal-human based relationships.

5.2. Role of cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions in the Sales Transformation

In recent debates that are looking at new theoretical foundations of selling, scholars are wondering whether some institutions are more influential than others in explaining value co-creation through institutional alignments. Until now the regulative pillars have been considered dominant (see Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987), also calling for more research on how they are interrelated (Hartmann et al., 2018). We have empirically observed that institutional elements influence each other and that they are the cognitive institutions that are very relevant in shaping change by influencing other institutions at all the service ecosystem levels. In literature the importance of visual representations and symbols in value-co-creation has been underlined (Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2006; Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2015), considered as boundary objects that support the actors' coordination and thus bridge different contexts (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2013; Corsaro, 2019). For example, we refer to the opportunity to have a shared place of interaction for multiple actors thanks to modern social CRMs. They are no longer just internal repositories of data but rather have a more proactive role in aligning and coordinating the thoughts and views of different and often heterogeneous actors who now have access (i.e., macro-level). The interaction is supported at the meso level by the increased application of visual elements which, on the one side are enacted by actors themselves to explain their ideas, and on the other side are also generated by the system itself using artificial intelligence and machine learning to synthesize the different information. However, such knowledge has not yet applied to the sales environment, where we have seen that the diffusion of digital touch points has led to the need for more immediate and concise sales communication. This new cognitive institution has affected the normative one by diffusing relational social practices that are less conflictual, less opportunistic, and more open toward reciprocal communication and collaboration, especially when interacting with people from different roles and cultures (An, 2014).

Further interconnections among cognitive institutions and normative/regulative have been observed in our study. For instance, increased recognition and stabilization of the idea of selling actors crossing company and industry boundaries is then modifying the normative practice of preferred employees coming from the same industry in favor of professionals that join in adding experiences across the ecosystem. Regulative institutions have also influenced by changes in the common cognitive ideas and schemes spreading across the ecosystem. An example, the increasing recognition at a collective level of the importance of collaboration and data sharing in the service ecosystems have led to move from extremely value-sharing oriented contracts toward new regulative institutions in terms of novel contractual forms and relational agreements (*meso*-level). These contracts are flexible in adapting to changing economic and social conditions and incentivize a less opportunistic attitude. This has also boosted the creation at an industry level of new regulations on data protection and data (macro-level) and new ethical codes (micro-level) which have contributed to reducing ambiguity (Munoz & Mallin, 2019) and speeding up collaborative processes. Blockchain technology, often applied for the tracing of products and services along the entire value chain, then represent a new regulative institution which has influenced a normative one by boosting a diffused sense of trust in business transaction; the actors accept such rules because they perceive social benefits and therefore commit with them (Scott, 2014).

At a micro-level, two cognitive institutions are being modified. The first is the contrast between marketing and sales. Past literature has widely discussed that the two functions are characterized by heterogeneity in terms of vision and goals, where salespeople are still not involved enough in marketing strategies and are accused by marketing people as acting like lone-wolves (Malshe & Al-Khatib, 2017; Claro & Ramos, 2018). An improved collaboration between marketing & sales began in recent years, but often on a temporary basis (Malshe, Johnson,

& Viio, 2017). This is no longer possible in an ecosystem where the multiplication of touchpoints has made developing a unique relational flow toward each customer or stakeholder in the ecosystem crucial. It requires a much higher integration and alignment between marketing and sales funnels to avoid being perceived as disconnected by recipients. The change in cognitive institutions subsequently gave way to the creation of new normative institutions in terms of novel roles for existing cross-functions such as the Sales & Marketing Manager, the Customer Success Manager, or the Customer Experience Manager (micro-level).

An interesting finding was how the change in cognitive institutions and the diffusion of a new mindset in selling (see Kaski, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018) affected a normative institution by weakening the diffused practice of challenging sales. Even the literature asserted that buyers were more informed and tended to stick with their ideas which therefore needed to be challenged by the salesperson, often through strong and persuasive approaches (Osmonbekov, Adamson, & Dixon, 2019). In our study, we instead observed that softer methods such as perspective selling, are more effective in boosting new resource integration and value co-creation. This change has of course generated tensions with the previous practice of 'challenging sales' but it has slowly been overcome the more the collaborative mindset becomes diffused within the ecosystem (*meso*-level).

5.3. Role of actors in the Sales Transformation

Our study has given empirical sustenance to the fact that many actors, not only salespeople, participate in the shaping of value co-creation practices by creating, maintaining, and disrupting the institutions that enable and constrain them. We, therefore, agree with Zietsma and McKnight (2009) who revealed that institutional inconsistencies not only occur between buyers and sellers but involve more players within the ecosystem. More generally there is the call for a contextualized effort to identify how specific actors can participate effectively in selling (Hartmann et al., 2020). Scholars are starting to ask if some characterizations of salespeople engaged in institutional work are more important than others and, whether this importance is contingent on specific factors or influenced by a change in communication (Rapp et al., 2020; Delpechitre, Gupta, Zadeh, Lim, & Taylor, 2020).

Coherently with the relevant impact of cognitive institutions in the Sales Transformation, our study has revealed that some actors involved in the change process of these institutions are quite influential. We refer, for instance, to non-selling actors such as association representatives, intermediaries, through leaders, consultancy companies, and researchers. One common element that we notice in these actors is their ability to gain a broader view of change and to diffuse it through their communication activities. In many cases, indeed, selling actors were still inward-focused, concentrated on their straight selling activities, and exhibited difficulties in understanding the wider change in the ecosystem. For instance, some salespeople seemed very anchored to price negotiations when dealing with customers. As change was spreading throughout the ecosystem and becoming more normative, many of these salespeople overcame their resistance, while others have remained more isolated or left the system entirely. We provided empirical evidence that the behavior of selling actors alone may not be as influential in changing the institutional arrangements as the enactment of new value co-creation practices (Hartmann et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, we also noticed that among salespeople, some appeared to be more influential than others, especially in contributing to changing prevalent mindsets among people. These individuals come from industries that made a transition toward a more service-oriented logic in terms of adding service to traditional product-based offers as well as changing their business model around a value-in-use logic. We can explain this contextual element by saying that the servitization process has inevitably brought about a drastic change, especially for B2B traditional manufacturing companies which for many years have been used to focusing on product-centered marketing and sales strategies
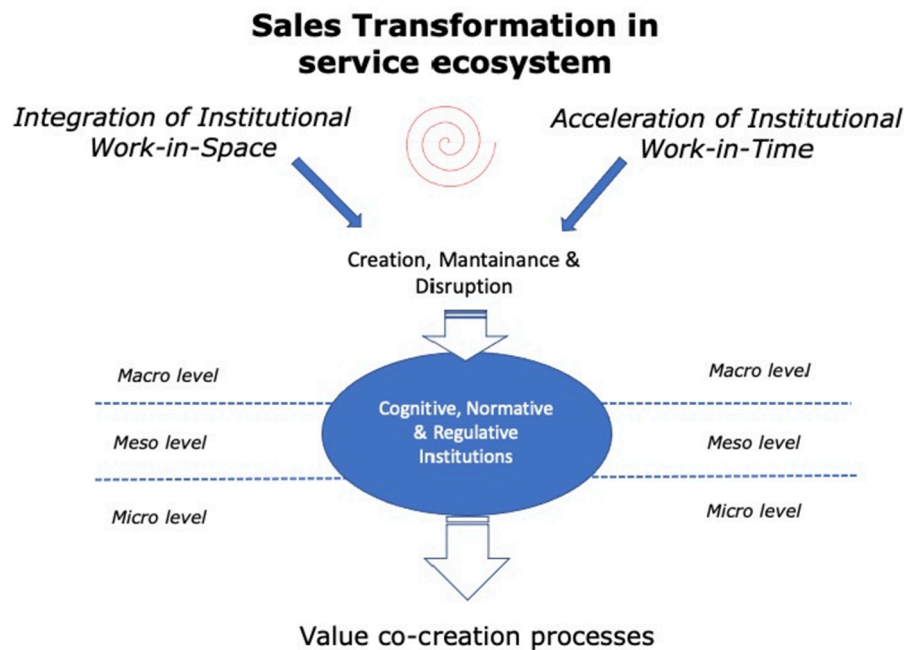
Fig. 2. Sales Transformation in an Institutional lens.

(Kohtamäki, Parida, Oghazi, Gebauer, & Baines, 2019). Change was an issue of survival for these salespeople, especially for the emergent competition from foreign countries. Therefore, by going in a servitization direction the salespeople became pioneers in shaping the new selling practices which progressively became more consolidated throughout the entire ecosystem.

A further observation regarding the role of actors within the Sales Transformation is that, compared to the past, salespeople are not only just selling, but they are becoming buyers too. This is because sales and marketing automation are becoming indispensable for their jobs and more sophisticated than in the past. It follows that the IT (Information Technology) officer is no longer the only decision maker in the process, but sales and marketing managers are being included. This aspect can be reconnected to preliminary research on the duality of business actors, as providers or users, in combining resources depending on the context of interaction (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010).

It is then interesting how non-selling actors are contributing to selling. We have surely seen that marketing and customer service people in a company are increasingly engaged in the process of selling. However, this happens even within the ecosystem. For instance, suppliers are realizing that the more they contribute to the success of their customer, the better their benefits. In the past this commitment was mostly limited to the quality of the purchased items, dispatch time, and financial conditions, while now they tend to share more information with their customers which is also useful to salespeople in approaching their final customers. Similarly, distributors are becoming much more important for selling, as they are trying to overcome past attritions on margin distribution and thus not only heavily negotiating with salespeople, but also searching for solutions that drive value to all parties involved. As for consumers, in the shaping of new interaction patters between technologies and human-based ones (Bitner, Brown, and Meuter (2000)), they are particularly relevant in influencing sales' behavior as friction is happening between the search for speed and simplicity through technology, and the persistent need for stronger human touch and engaging relationships.

A final point of interest is that the new role of salespeople does not only see them involved in creating value through hard selling (Guenzi, 2003), but it is allowing them to co-create value by involving non-business actors. It is the case of universities, which were not part of their activity and mainly in contact with human resource and marketing people. Salespeople were mostly removed from this process as they were seen as those who were only interested selling and not into academic research and teaching, while they have now also understood the importance of indirect relationships on their performances.

In summary, limiting the perspective of analysis to selling actors could be a barrier in explaining the Sales Transformation phenomenon and, more broadly, in developing a new theoretical foundation for selling.

Fig. 2 illustrates the Sales Transformation interpreted through an institutional lens in service ecosystem.

6. Conclusions and future research

A Sales Transformation process is occurring, making it important to understand its effects and implications (Moncrief, 2017). This change is not only affecting the role and skills of the commercial function but modifying value co-creation in the service ecosystem overall. While well-known among managers, the Sales Transformation phenomenon remains quite ambiguous and has not yet been clearly described at a theoretical level (Lacoste, 2018). Extant theory then, mostly focused on the perspective of the selling company, therefore very oriented toward explaining the new behavior of salespeople. Rather, we have conceptualized Sales Transformation as a more holistic process that happens within the ecosystem, implies different levels of analysis, and involves multiple actors. According to Hartmann et al. (2018), it is necessary to view selling and institutional alignment holistically, as the adoption of a holistic perspective can highlight situations in which ruptures within and among the institutional elements create opportunities for change and bring about new solutions. The debate in this area is recent and a stronger empirical grounding is required.

This paper has highlighted the importance of interpreting the Sales Transformation through an institutional lens in service ecosystem. We have identified two main mechanisms that are driving the Sales Transformation: Integration of institutional work in the space and the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. We have shown how they act on institutional work by aligning cognitive, regulative, and normative institutions at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the ecosystem, as well as how this alignment modifies value co-creation processes. Through the explanation of the Sales Transformation phenomenon, our study is therefore contributing to developing a new theoretical foundation for

selling (Hartmann et al., 2018).

Future research should attempt to explore the contextual dimensions of the Sales Transformation by studying the connection between Integration of institutional work-in-space and the Acceleration of institutional work-in-time. The Sales Transformation not only involves acting to bring institutions closer but can also influence and, in some cases, orchestrate the time-related aspects of institutional work. We indeed suppose that the continued expansion of the space of interaction, in many cases driven by technology, could affect the time-related aspects of institutional work and vice versa, i.e., the interdependence between the two mechanisms in contexts could be non-linear and not proportional too, deserving further investigation.

In our results we also noticed institutions –cognitive, normative and regulative– are not equal in shaping resource integration and value co-creation. More specifically, we have highlighted those cognitive institutions are particularly influential over normative and regulative ones. This aspect deserves further empirical support to understand if there are boundary conditions under which this happens and, relatedly, if some patterns of institutional work can be identified in which one or the other pillars results prevalent as well the effects on value co-creation processes.

Lastly, recent studies were already calling for more research on the role of actors in institutional work for selling. We have empirically disclosed that non-selling actors have an important role in determining change in selling, and we expect this phenomenon to be amplified in the future. Future work in this direction could, for instance, classify the non-selling actors and identify different modalities through which they contribute to selling, as well as which resources are activated and integrated.

7. Managerial implications

Many companies realize that a transformation is underway but do not know how to deal with it. Despite years of championing transformation initiatives, too many sales organizations still struggle with lackluster performance. One of the main reasons that has led to the failure of sales enablement programs aimed at managing transformation, has been the lack of a systemic view of the phenomenon (De Cent, 2018), as we presented in our study. Understanding the mechanisms and processes that underlie the Sales Transformation can guide sales executives.

The managerial implications of our research can be expressed at various levels. The first includes a change in the competencies of salespeople. The salespeople of the future will be 'hybrid' figures who combine soft and hard skills and have an in-depth knowledge of customer processes, operations and are empathetic while at the same very granular in measuring value. As managers think about the future, they must consider that salespeople will be acting in a larger ecosystem which will require more transversal competencies including the ability to understand the complex environment surrounding the company and the minute details within and be able to move from one to the other with ease.

The future sales force will act as integrator in a broad sense, influencing and shaping clients' cognitive processes through interaction, often in a holistic manner, by going beyond the characteristics of the products and considering the business, cultural, and social contexts jointly. The participation of a broad set of actors involved in dialogical interactions and institutional processes both internally and externally highlights the need to develop tools and processes that systematically integrate and manage the communication flow among these actors. Given the importance of cognitive institutions and the related actors involved, it follows that sales communication should change too, perhaps including new storytelling supported by concrete data and results which also include a plurality of service ecosystem actors.

The ability to generate intelligence in context will be a further key sales competence for the future. The proximity to the customer and the availability of new and sophisticated technology makes the sales force a reliable source of contextual intelligence.

At a company level, the need for more integration between marketing, sales, and customer service (Banerjee & Bhardwaj, 2019) is no longer optional but mandatory, and companies, therefore, should establish real and concrete rules to boost this collaboration. These functions should formally have joint goals, participate in mutual meetings, carry out job rotation activities, and implement KPIs to measure the performance of common initiatives. Most importantly, they should work on the same funnel rather than on different ones.

Moreover, when solving tensions in the process of the Sales Transformation, managers should consider not only their sales team but also the role of the other actors in the ecosystem. Many firms are already recognizing the need for broader alignment processes between internal and external actors throughout the service ecosystem. We agree that considering the relational complexity that digitalization has generated, sales teams should re-imagine the traditional approach to collaboration to build a stronger ecosystem and cross-channel interaction (Plouffe, 2018). New forms of interaction between the sales force, channel partners, and other actors in the service ecosystem are part of the process of integration. This also implies the use of technological tools to support information sharing, the availability of cross-channel sales dashboards as well as the integration between physical and virtual sales.

Finally, the speed of change is also an issue to be more aware of in the future. The challenge of the future for managers, however, is not to be fast at all costs, but to strategically understand which processes to accelerate and which to decelerate, in parallel with new combinations of human and digital interactions.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix

Table 3
Additional quotes to the finding section referred to the Integration-in-Space mechanism.

Institutional work	Integration-in-Space	
Cognitive	Enable Social CRMs to coordinate multiple views in the service ecosystem	"B2B companies are often missing real customer, market, and competitor research, operating with the belief that *We already know everything*. Now that engagement with other parties is much easier, they are starting to change their mindset." (Key Account Executive, high precision tools). "Some organizations adopted the philosophy *-if it worked for the competition, it would work for me -* but this is not paying off anymore as your competitors are not just confrontation points. People that joined our online community of practice discovered a world they had not considered at all until now." (Buyer, component industry) "I was really impressed when I saw we could get daily dashboards on the trends of marketing directly from the

Table 3 (*continued*)

Institutional work	Integration-in-Space	
		system." (President, National Association for Industrial Distribution).
		"Our CRM is built around the traditional sales network and is not very connected. I am now following a very innovative course on Sales Transformation, and when I think of my company, I realize we are in the Stone Age." (Sales Channel Director, e-pharma).
		"Now we have a marketing automation system that is not integrated with most other business tools. It does its sales work, but it is not integrated, for example, with customer care." (CEO, chemical components company).
	Enable Social CRMs to improve internal coordination	"Digitalization has facilitated the alignment between sellers. We don't need to update as much on the budget but on forecasting the business processes of an organizational and procedural nature on e-commerce. However, I do not understand why e-commerce is assigned to digital rather than retail functions. You cannot work in a structured way, with customers there is little talk of sell out." (Sales Director, Perrigo).
		"We can personalize the dashboards with respect to your personal characteristics, such as the learning style, as there are people who capture information better through pictures, while others need text that explains logical flows. Of course, this is only possible by assessing in advance the learning style of the person and registering the information in the system." (CEO, digital intelligence company).
		"As sustainability is becoming increasingly important for all companies, salespeople in the future have to be able to communicate these new values otherwise marketing investments will not reach the customer." (Marketing Manager, leading football team).
Normative	Combining Human-Machine interaction in a relational stance	"When we started to work with a customer-centric logic, we invested in building a connected experience everywhere." (Trade Marketing Manager, food industry).
		"We added technology or machines in the sales process since we understood it was crucial with the rapid pace of development of intelligent machines in sales interactions. However, for our advisor, this is not immediate, and they are posing some resistance." (HR manager, Finance Company).
		"We all talk about omnichannel strategy, but then I am very curious to know how many are really investing in the integration of physical and digital channels, which makes the concept of an omnichannel experience still quite distant in B2B environments." (Network Manager, National Association for Industrial Distribution).
		"We think that when we combine the digital and the human interaction in the service experience, the effect is not a sum but a multiplication." (Vice President, Reputation Institute).
		"During my master's program, I was used to developing projects by being connected virtually. We would only meet in person for the final presentation, so it is very natural for me now. I do not perceive any particular barrier." (Buyer, fashion industry).
	New roles of salespeople beyond selling	"Especially young people (as they often use e-commerce) do not completely trust what brands say. This confirms the importance of a much more concrete approach to brands than in the past. Salespeople should be part of a more plural, shared, and participatory brand narrative." (Brand Manager, frozen food product company).
		"I always say that it would be enough to walk in the shoes of a buyer for two days to be able to really help them. Unfortunately, salespeople tend to be too self-focused." (Sales Director, Vagheggi).
		"If your goal is to sell, the customer will perceive it and become irritated. If your goal is to build relationships, then selling will become a natural evolution." (Head of Training, Dale Carnegie).
		"We trained both salespeople and buyers to use more KPIs and specific metrics to measure value. They have to be more precise than in the past and this also helps them to communicate better." (President, Association for Brand Industry).
		"Much like sales enablement, suppliers must focus on what we call *'buyer enablement'*. By combining empathy with deep industry and customer knowledge, suppliers can develop and deploy information that is specifically designed to help buyers to buy — just as they do to enable sellers to sell more easily." (Head of Procurement, airspace company).
		"As soon as I understand that the front office personnel are trying to persuade me, I become very agitated and find an excuse to leave the shop." (Customer, retail clothing chain).
		"If a company manage to train new salespeople at this stage, it will have success. If instead they are linked to the old schemes, then they won't." (People Development, job agency).
Regulative	Relational Contracts	"Marketing & Sales Automation systems provide large data capabilities for scouting external information and integrating it with internal ones. It is time for contracts that promote such integration without always supposing that the other party will use your data for opportunistic reasons." (Founder, platform for rewards system).
		"We use data that specialized companies give us. There is a data exchange problem, we have important sell-out data exchanges, but they stop there." (Sales & Marketing Manager, outlet center).
		"In practice there are no limits due to inadequate technological systems, the problem is the opportunism diffused in the value chain. The relational contracts we are studying with a legal studio in Milan try to promote collaboration and softly disincentivize opportunism." (Purchasing Manager, ropes company).
	Safety on Data	"Platforms used without requiring the end-user to make any payments or to undertake any legal obligations except for very general obligations such as the prohibition to tamper with the platform or to violate the intellectual property rights is important in the platform." (CEO, BtoB service company).
		"When you extract data from your CRM, especially third-party ones, you have to be sure that you have the right to use them." (CRM Manager, domestic appliances).
		"The more connected we are with suppliers, customers, and distributors, the higher the risk of a cyberattack. For this reason, we now have stringent procedures on data storage and how to manage them in the case of an attack." (Business Developer, mechatronics industry company).
		"If we want to transfer data to our partners, we now have to check that the customers have signed the GDPR documents, which allow us to share with them these data." (President, start-up accelerator).
		"When buying a CRM or marketing automation, it is important that it is created in a way to always be compliant with the law because it is not something you can monitor, it has to be the provider to define restrictions on what you can do." (IT Manager, banking company).

Table 4
Additional quotes to the finding section referred to the Acceleration-in-Time mechanism.

Institutional work	Acceleration-in-Time	
Cognitive	Enact visualization to speed up collaboration	"B2B e-commerce offered important opportunities to improve visualization, as showing a picture of a dress is much more challenging than a pressure measurement system." (Channel Manager, systems for pressure measurement company).
		"By going digital we have eliminated many dispersions of time that were previously present." (Marketing Professor, business school).
		"Since most of the value generated by a relationship is intangible it becomes a question of finding illustrations able to represent this intangibility and include the judgments of management regarding the value outcomes." (Bid Manager, telco company).
		"In this process the customer is an integral part of the context and is put in a position to concentrate on what he sees, finding an impactful visualization and thus generating a one-to-one approach." (Sales Director, beverage company).
		"Customers only give you one chance to catch their interest, you will not have another chance." (International Communication Manager, private consortium for DOP products).
		"Technology can provide insights for businesses, providing much more sophisticated analytics not only at the company level. It is vital for us to quickly visualize the progress in the entire value chain. This is a big change compared to the electronic spreadsheets of traditional CRMs." (CIO, fashion industry company).
		"We often find that the individual responsible for tracking these measurements is undefined, and, as a result, measurement does not happen." (Customer Value Manager, reseller products for infants).
		"We try to surprise customers, that's the only way to catch their attention. For instance, we are an industry leader in the chemical sector, but we are now also selling to banks and insurance services." (Business Developer, chemical company).
	Develop a new conception of time	"The crisis has led us to rethink the importance of time, and to have a better work-life balance in our life. As technology can help to save time, we are all happy with that." (User, automotive service industry).
		"After a workshop, I always get tons of new contacts on LinkedIn, and many people writing me personal messages in the chat. Everyone is always offering me something, but I often don't have time to reply." (President, Italian Association for International Trade).
		"Compared to the past, I notice that people write shorter emails, very concise. And even presentations include visual insights that simplify and make communication more immediate. It seems that we are all realizing the value of every single minute of time." (Founder, start-up company).
		"We have created an internal motto: *'if it works it is already obsolete'*. It makes us begin to think about how to do things differently." (Sales director, fitness chain).
Normative	Acceleration of the sales funnel	"Contacts are facilitated by technology and are necessary if we are to succeed in an environment where data and knowledge are proliferating so rapidly." (Social Media Manager, sustainable clothing company).
		"I understand that artificial intelligence will be the future and can strengthen the relationship with customers, but we are still doing nothing about it." (Shopping Mall Sales Director).
		"Today we talk about touchpoints, even online, with the final consumer. The final consumer has changed in recent years so, the whole supply chain is forced to change for the customer." (Founder, Sales Transformation Hub).
		"It is essential to devote as much time as possible to negotiations and the client relationship. Automated systems that provide a fast and suitable service are fundamental." (Sales Director, Akamai).
		"I had a problem with the configuration of a pressure measurement. I went on the supplier's Facebook page and started chatting with the customer care representative. I did not know whether it was a human or a computer but when I eventually called the customer care service they already knew about my problem and were able to provide suggestions to solve the issue." (Buyer, food machinery company).
		"Every meeting is transcribed by an artificial intelligence assistant and shared with sales, marketing, and customer service. This is great as it was perceived to be a waste of time and everyone hoped not to be the one to have to do it." (Call Center Head, credit collection company).
	Real-time interaction through access with multiple technologies	"Mobile technology, for instance, has helped to create the so-called culture of immediacy: Customers write me on WhatsApp and expect an immediate response. That's crazy!" (Trade Marketing Manager, food industry).
		"Sometimes I feel controlled because I know that my boss is geo-localizing me. I know that the goal is to better organize our work and be faster in reaching customers, however It makes me feel a bit weird." (Salesperson, tire company).
		"We can meet buyers, sellers, promotors, and visitors needs much faster now during trade fairs using matching apps. People already input their needs into the app so when you are close to someone with similar needs you receive an update message." (Organizer, trade fair company).
		"Nowadays, companies can connect every app, employee, partner, product, and device to its customers using the power of social, mobile, and cloud." (Country Leader, Salesforce).
		"Automated technologies should enable new forms of interaction between [the] sales force, channel partners, and other actors in the inter-organizational network and provide suggestions on how to act now, as well as predictive (what will happen) and prescriptive (what to do) indications." (CEO, Connexia).
Regulative	Smart contracts	"By simply scanning the QR code on the product I can learn all about the value chain. The problem is that I do not have time to read all of it but the graphs at the beginning are very useful." (consumer, clothing industry).
		"Blockchain can be used as a *'backbone'* in the entire legal industry and we can leverage blockchain to create more efficient systems, decrease legal costs, and ensure that people get the services they need." (CEO, logistic delivery company).
		"Three months ago, we implemented a technology that prepared offers in an automatized way. Of course, I have to revise to check they are compliant with legal rules but before adopting this tool I was spending hours every week that I can now dedicate to selling." (Sales Contractor, oil & gas industry).
	Ethical rules	"Now the ethical aspects are part of the contractual agreement, the selection of suppliers and external collaborators as well as the determination of purchases are based, with objective evaluation and with declared and transparent methods, on the analysis and comparison of quality, price or remuneration, service, timeliness and assistance, in respect for the principle of freedom of competition". (Bid Manager, Energy Industry).
		"The European Commission also published a draft Regulation on prompting fairness and transparency for business users of online intermediation services (the Online Platform Regulation) which (when implemented) will require

Table 4 (*continued*)

Institutional work	Acceleration-in-Time
	certain information to be included in the online platform providers" (Marketing Managers, online marketplace). "What I look first when I buy clothing is if it respects the environment; I would like also to have more information on its ethical behaviours in particular with respect to employees but looks impossible to gain this. Sometimes it looks at glassdoor platform." (Consumer, fast fashion clothings).

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