

Creation of Customer Knowledge in a B2B-Centred Innovation Ecosystem: A Single-Case Research

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Abstract: This study examines how B2B customer knowledge is created and managed within an innovation ecosystem, addressing a gap in prior research that has largely overlooked ecosystem-based perspectives on B2B customer knowledge creation. Drawing on knowledge management literature, particularly the knowledge-creating theory of the firm, and B2B marketing research, the study explores customer knowledge creation as an inter-organizational phenomenon. The research adopts a qualitative single-case study design focusing on a Finnish innovation ecosystem in its early development stage. Empirical data consist of semi-structured interviews supplemented with meetings, presentations, and field notes collected between 2025 and 2026. The focal company is a micro-enterprise developing a new B2B product concept. The findings indicate that B2B customer knowledge creation varies across different phases of new product development and occurs through two main processes. The first, externalization-based customer knowledge creation, involves transforming tacit knowledge held by B2B customers and end users into explicit knowledge through pilot projects, experimentation, and digital communication tools. The second, internalization-based customer knowledge creation, takes place primarily in the early stages of product development and relies on the firm's own expertise, prior experience, and market-related knowledge rather than direct customer involvement. The study highlights the importance of distinguishing between B2B customers and end users, while emphasizing that both play crucial roles in knowledge creation within innovation ecosystems. It also suggests that effective customer knowledge creation can occur without long-term relationships, enabled instead by shared goals, cognitive proximity, and digital interaction.

Keywords: Customer knowledge management, Knowledge management, Ecosystem, innovation ecosystem, Single-case research, B2B company, Inter-organizational relationships

1. Introduction

Ecosystems have attracted increasing attention from both knowledge management (KM) scholars and practitioners. The ecosystem concept is widely regarded as particularly well suited to addressing the unpredictability and complexity of contemporary business environments. Accordingly, both the conceptual focus and empirical approaches in KM research have increasingly shifted toward ecosystems in order to address the distinctive challenges associated with managing knowledge in such contexts (Gomes et al. 2021).

Existing studies have generated important insights into the role of KM in ecosystems. Research on KM in ecosystems has emphasized how heterogeneous knowledge is dispersed across a large number of firms and organizations (von Krogh & Geilinger 2014). Within such collaborative arrangements, knowledge management becomes increasingly complex (Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999), and the coordination and management of dispersed knowledge constitute a major challenge for ecosystems (Gomes et al. 2021).

In particular, innovation ecosystems are of interest from a knowledge management perspective. Multiple interactions among actors provide timely access to knowledge and resources that would otherwise be unavailable, thereby making relationships loci of innovation (Powell et al. 1996). An increasing focus on the role of B2B customers and the opportunity to examine customer knowledge creation as an inter-organizational phenomenon (Sihvonen, Luoma, & Falk 2021), holds particular promise for advancing research on B2B customer knowledge management. However, current scholarship offers limited guidance on how this challenge should be addressed. Specifically, research on B2B customer knowledge management within innovation ecosystems remains underdeveloped, and their decision-making rights within innovation ecosystem,

This gap persists despite extensive scholarly work on intra-organizational customer knowledge management, which has widely acknowledged the benefits of managing customer knowledge (see, e.g., Gibbert, Leibold, & Probst 2002; García-Murillo & Annabi 2002). In addition, research on knowledge creation has proposed influential models explaining how firms co-create knowledge with customers (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998). Nevertheless, this body of literature tends to implicitly or explicitly conceptualize the customer as an individual actor. Moreover, the innovation ecosystem as a contextual setting for B2B customer knowledge management has remained largely overlooked within the KM-in-ecosystems literature.

To address this knowledge gap, this study focuses on the management of B2B customer knowledge within the context of innovation ecosystems. The aim of the research is to provide an initial conceptualization of B2B customer knowledge management in such settings. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following

research question: How can B2B customer knowledge be managed in innovation ecosystems? In doing so, the objective of the study is to contribute to the early theory development of knowledge management in ecosystem contexts.

An innovation ecosystem refers to the “alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize” (Adner 2017, p. 40). An innovation ecosystem comprises both production-side (upstream) activities and customer-side (downstream) activities (Kapoor 2018). As downstream actors, B2B customers form a demand-side pooled interdependence with the focal firm, which enables decision-making rights with respect to the integration of the complements with the focal offer of the firm (Kapoor 2018).

This research draws on the KM literature in two key respects. First, it builds on the emerging body of work on KM in ecosystems to position the customer knowledge management perspective within this field. Second, it draws on the knowledge-creating theory of the firm (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995), which is particularly relevant given the study’s interaction-based view of knowledge creation as a foundation for knowledge management. In addition, the business marketing literature is used to conceptualize and characterize B2B customer knowledge.

Empirically, the study adopts a qualitative research design and employs a single case study of a Finnish innovation ecosystem in its emergence stage. Data are collected through thematic interviews conducted within the focal company and analyzed using data-driven content analysis. The purpose of the empirical investigation is not to empirically validate a predefined process, but rather to illustrate how B2B customer knowledge is created and managed in practice. Overall, the study offers initial insights into B2B customer knowledge creation within innovation ecosystems and provides a foundation for further theoretical development.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, a conceptual clarification of B2B customer knowledge and the inter-organizational creation of B2B customer knowledge is presented. Next, the research methodology is described, including the data collection and analysis procedures. This is followed by a presentation of the empirical findings. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the study’s conclusions and implications.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 B2B Customer Knowledge

The role of customer knowledge and its management has attracted growing interest within the business marketing literature. B2B marketing research emphasizes the importance of clearly distinguishing between the concepts of the *customer* and the *user*. The term *customer* is commonly used to refer to individuals who are responsible for making purchasing decisions and acquiring B2B offerings, although they do not necessarily use the products or services themselves. By contrast, *users* are individuals who actually use and consume a B2B firm’s products and services in their everyday activities (Paschen et al. 2019).

Studies make a clear conceptual distinction between different types of knowledge. *Customer knowledge* refers specifically to knowledge related to purchasing decisions, including what is purchased, how purchasing decisions are made, and why certain choices are preferred. By contrast, *user knowledge* relates to insights derived from the usage of an offering and includes users’ experiences, attitudes, values, as well as their future needs and expectations (Paschen et al. 2019).

Sihvonen, Luoma, and Falk (2021) identify a customer knowledge creation process comprising two distinct modes of managing customer knowledge: the use of *market intelligence*—defined as the generation and dissemination of customer- and market-related information and responsiveness to that information—and *customer involvement*, which refers to actively engaging customers in the innovation process.

2.2 Creation of B2B Customer Knowledge

Knowledge creation scholars have proposed influential models explaining how firms create knowledge within industrial districts (Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999) and through interactions with customers (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998). These models identify three distinct types of inter-organizational relationships—initiation, encounter, and intimacy—which differ in terms of both the intensity and the purpose of interaction (Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999). Building on these premises, and recognizing that the original models implicitly conceptualize the customer as an individual rather than as an organization, this study extends the framework to an inter-organizational context in which the customer is understood as an organizational actor.

At the initiation level, relationships with customers are characterized by unstable and discontinuous market transactions and occasional exchanges (Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999). Because relationships at this level

rely primarily on explicit knowledge, firms seek to create customer knowledge through a three-step process that emphasizes the use of customers' explicit knowledge (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998), as illustrated in the figure below.

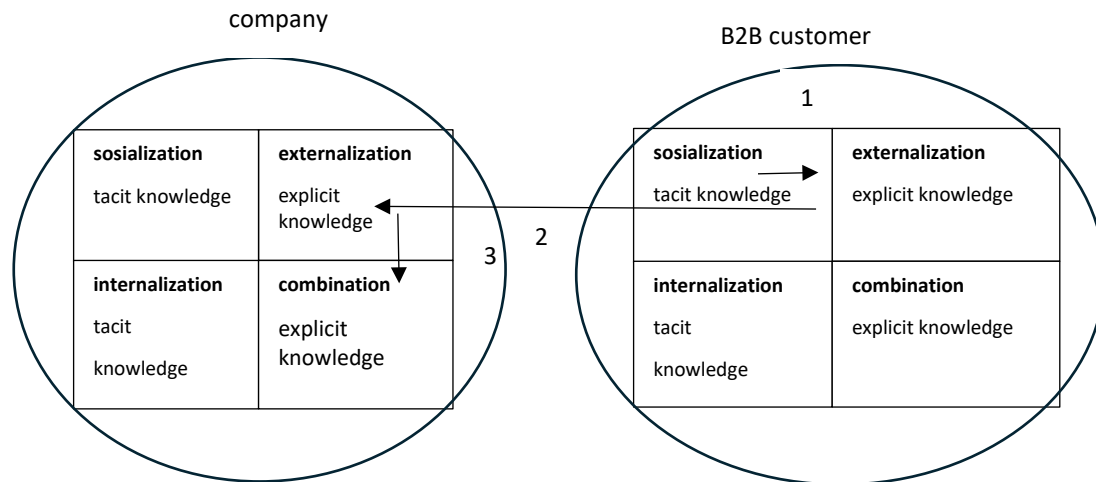


Figure 1: Initiation level relationship: Using the explicit knowledge of B2B customers (applied from Nonaka, Reinmoeller and Senoo 1998)

The first step in this process involves customers articulating and communicating their tacit knowledge. Subsequently, the firm collects this knowledge in explicit form through multiple communication channels (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998). In the final step, firms integrate, edit, and systematize the absorbed explicit knowledge to create new customer knowledge (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998).

The second level is characterized by an *encounter-type* relationship, in which transactional exchanges evolve into more collaborative and reciprocal relationships between the firms involved (Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999). At the encounter level, organization–customer interaction places particular emphasis on supporting customers in the externalization of their tacit knowledge through joint activities and dialogue (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998), as illustrated in the following figure.

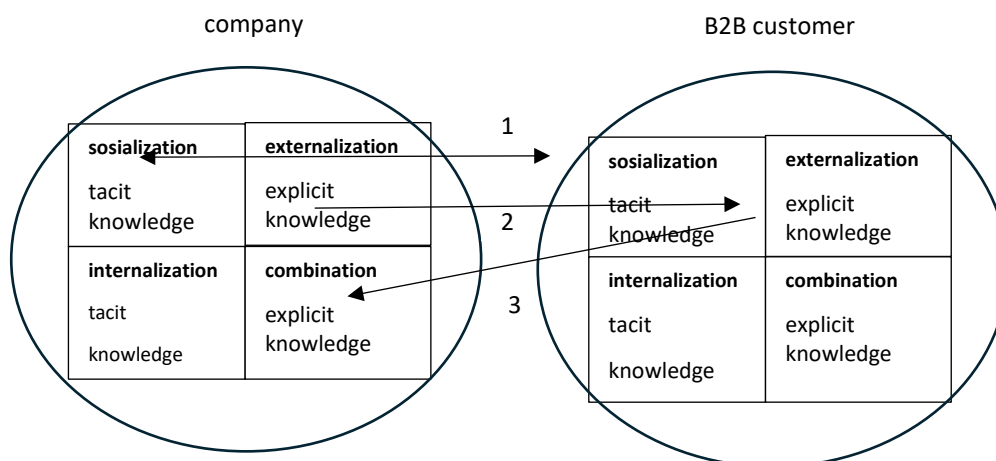


Figure 2: Encounter level relationship: Helping customers to externalize their tacit knowledge (applied from Nonaka, Reinmoeller and Senoo 1998)

At this level, the knowledge creation process comprises three distinct steps. First, firms seek to understand customers' tacit knowledge through socialization, which involves shared experiences and close interaction. Second, firms encourage customers to externalize their tacit knowledge, thereby transforming it into explicit forms. Finally, firms collect, integrate, and disseminate the explicit knowledge generated through these interactions (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo 1998).

The third relationship type is referred to as *intimacy*, in which a firm seeks to establish a cognitive partnership with its customer. The following figure illustrates the intimacy-level relationship between firms.

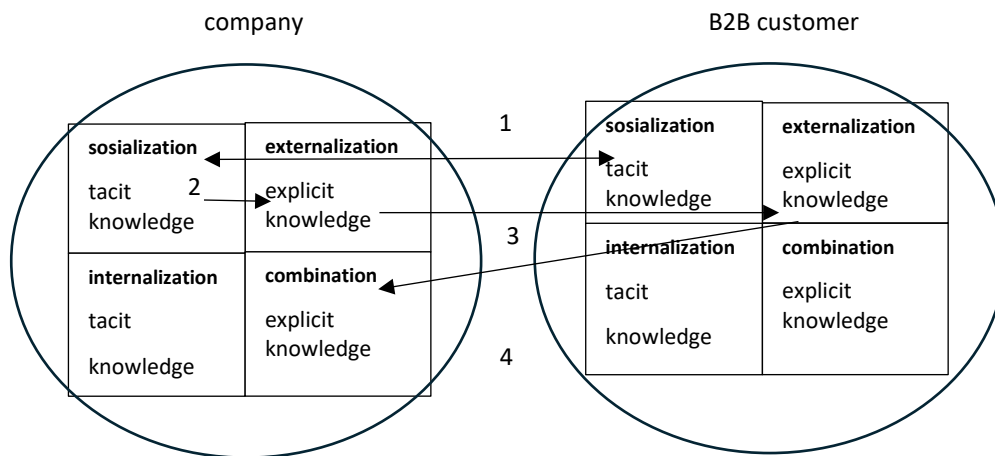


Figure 3: Intimacy level relationship: Externalizing shared hidden knowledge (applied from Nonaka, Reinmoeller and Senoo, 1998)

In the intimacy phase, firms exchange tacit knowledge with their partners through the sharing of experiences. Subsequently, tacit knowledge is externalized within the organization and then further externalized toward customers through the generation of hypotheses based on this tacit understanding, which are tested against customers' knowledge and experiences. Finally, customers and firms engage in the combination mode of knowledge conversion, followed by internalization (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo, 1998).

The theoretical framework outlined above thus provides a useful analytical lens for examining customer knowledge creation between firms and customers when the customer is conceptualized as an organization rather than as an individual actor.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach due to the exploratory nature of the research question and the limited extent of prior research on the subject. The study was conducted empirically using a case study research strategy, which enables an in-depth understanding of a complex and emerging phenomenon (Yin, 2003, p. 4). Given that understanding an ecosystem as a multilateral structure requires a deep level of contextual knowledge (Adner, 2017), this approach is well suited to capturing context-dependent insights and holds strong potential for contributing to theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Case selection plays a crucial role in qualitative case research (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case selected for this study is an emerging Finnish innovation ecosystem currently in its early stages of development. The ecosystem was initiated at the beginning of the previous year and is coordinated by a regional university. Such openness supports theory building by enabling the emergence of novel concepts (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A single firm operating within an innovation ecosystem was selected as the source of knowledge for this study. The company was involved in the early stages of product development, which allows the management of customer knowledge to be expected as an integral part of the firm's operations (see Sihvonen, Luoma and Falk, 2021). The firm is a micro-enterprise and has been operating for less than two years. It is a science-based firm.

Recognizing that case study research typically benefits from the use of multiple sources of evidence to enhance richness and credibility rather than relying on a single data collection method (Yin, 2003, p. 83), this study employed several complementary data collection approaches. The primary data source consisted of two semi-structured, individual interviews. The interview protocol was organized around key themes, including new product development, B2B customer knowledge creation practices, and the contribution of the innovation ecosystem to customer knowledge creation. The interviews were conducted remotely in June 2025 and March 2026, with an average duration of approximately 65 minutes. The second interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using data-driven content analysis, with the aim of identifying empirical insights into B2B customer knowledge creation within an innovation ecosystem context.

To mitigate the risk of a one-sided organizational perspective, additional sources of empirical material were utilized, including informal discussions, formal meetings, presentations, and field notes, which fell within this timeframe from May 2025 to April 2026. The triangulation of these data sources enhanced the depth of understanding of the focal firm and contributed to the generation of rich and contextualized empirical data.

4. Results

To achieve early commercial success in the new business area, the company has initiated product development activities. At a later stage, partner companies are expected to complement the product with their respective contributions. The primary customer for the product under development is an organizational customer.

In the early phase of product development, the company developed a competence-based product independently from the partners, drawing strongly on its own core expertise. Knowledge concerning product-related features was obtained from scientific research. Information about the need for the product was derived from studies addressing the problem that the solution seeks to address. In addition, the company drew on its own expertise and prior experience in product development.

The company actively sought to leverage customer knowledge held by partner companies, as customer knowledge creation was not perceived as a particular strength of the focal company. This perspective is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

"I don't see it as a strength of ours, and I have also thought that maybe it's not even worth spending my time on it. That's actually how I've operated—trying to get involved in teams where I can focus on what I'm good at, and where the team as a whole has the necessary pieces in place."

Knowledge sharing with future partner companies took place openly through Microsoft Teams discussions, Teams presentations, and telephone communication. In addition to business-related knowledge, information was shared regarding organizational customers, including customer types and countries of operation. Knowledge sharing was facilitated by the companies' shared goal of establishing a joint start-up company in the future.

Product-related decisions were deliberately made without consulting customers during the initial phase of development. Knowledge was not acquired from customers due to the negative prior experiences in product development as illustrated by the following statements:

"At the beginning of our current business, we used customer-driven design as an ideology. We fully adopted that approach when we started developing the products. However, the customers were simply unable to say anything meaningful. In the end, no one really provided anything useful, even though we conducted numerous interviews with organizational decision-makers responsible for purchasing."

"We made decisions about the product without asking any consumers what they wanted."

"We did not interview end users either—ordinary people who would actually use the product—because they do not make the purchasing decision. The purchasing decision is made by experts within the organization."

As product development progressed to the concept phase, the company considered it important to acquire knowledge about organizational customers and sought to increase its understanding of B2B customers and to learn from them. The company also recognized the importance of gaining some understanding of end users' everyday behavior to support product development.

According to the company, advancing product development required an understanding of the organizational customer's purchasing decision-making process, as well as knowledge about the individual responsible for making the purchasing decision. Identifying the appropriate decision-maker and fostering their interest in the product being offered were perceived as particularly important.

During the concept phase, the company considered it important to acquire knowledge directly from end users as well. The company was particularly interested in obtaining general information about end users, as well as insights related to product usability and end users' expectations toward the product.

In order to increase customer understanding, the company carried out a pilot experiment in collaboration with a public organization. This provided an opportunity to test the product concept in a real-life environment. The company's objective in the experiment was to test a technology-related component of the product and its functionality with end users. In the early stages of product development, the company perceived that it is

essential that something concrete could be presented to customers to support knowledge collection. The public organization, in turn, aimed to advance its goal related to the well-being of its own customers through the experiment. In the jointly conducted pilot, the role of the public organization was to recruit end users for the experiment and to distribute the devices being tested to them.

During the pilot, the company had the opportunity to acquire knowledge from this potential organizational customer and from the end users. Also, the potential customer organization had an opportunity to acquire knowledge from the end users and the company. General information on the experimentation before starting the piloting was exchanged in a meeting conducted via Microsoft Teams, in which senior management from the potential customer organization's line of business also participated in the initial phase.

Thereafter, information exchange between the organizations was mainly based on interaction between the employee representing the potential customer organization and the company throughout the pilot. The meetings were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Also, email was used to share actual knowledge. After the pilot ended, the employee from the potential customer organization and the company representative held a feedback discussion addressing the pilot and the observations related to the concept and anonymous end users, who were involved in the experimentation.

In addition, the company provided the management of the potential customer organization with a summary of results related to the end users. However, within the potential customer organization, knowledge about how the information produced by the pilot related to the organization's set objectives remained largely with the employee who worked for the pilot.

The company obtained knowledge about end users through an employee of the organization that facilitated the practical pilot, who interacted directly with the end users. In addition, the company collected end-user-related information through technology that generated data on end users' behavior during the pilot. Further insights into end users were obtained from anonymized written questionnaires focusing on general behavioral patterns completed by the end users. As part of the pilot, the company also provided end users with personalized feedback based on their individual results from the tested product concept.

The pilot generated valuable knowledge for the company regarding the usability of the product concept, the functionality of the product, and areas requiring further refinement at the concept stage. Based on the assessment grounded in customer knowledge, the company concluded that the product concept required additional development.

The current way of acquiring customer knowledge was guided to some extent by prior experiences in collecting B2B customer knowledge. The prior method is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

"We conducted something like alpha testing internally within the company first. We included questionnaires to identify those whose work involves activities that the product would be suitable for. Then we took it to partner organizations for testing—something like a clinic. We went on site and observed what they liked."

Based on the preceding description, the following preliminary findings can be derived. First, the creation of B2B customer knowledge appears to vary across different phases of the new product development process. Second, B2B customer knowledge is created through two main mechanisms: 1) the externalization of the customer knowledge base of B2B customers and end users, and 2) internalization-based B2B customer knowledge creation.

The findings further indicate that the focal company manages B2B customer knowledge primarily by externalizing the customer knowledge base of B2B customers and end users. Figure 4 illustrates the knowledge interactions among the focal company, potential B2B customers, and end users involved in the process.

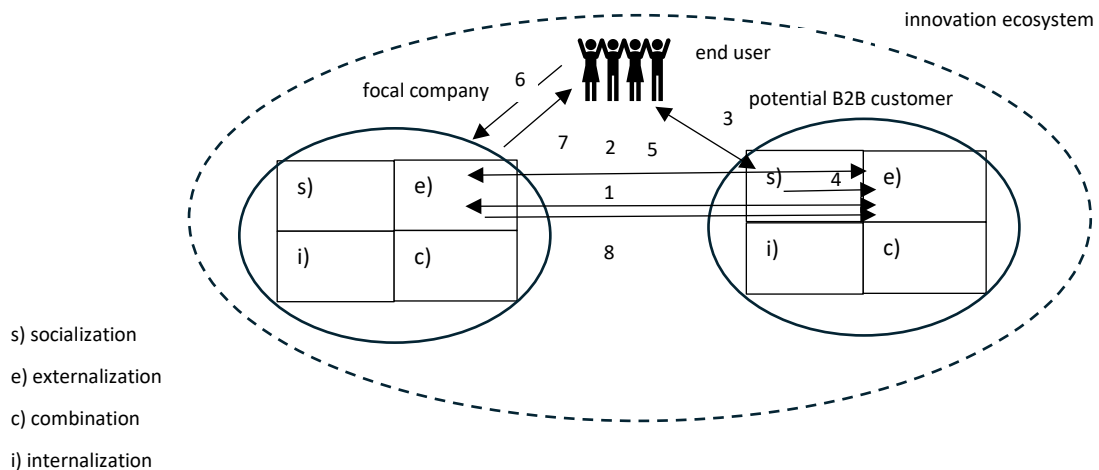


Figure 4: Externalizing of customer knowledge base of B2B customer and end users (by author)

The process of *externalizing the customer knowledge base* of B2B customers and end users appears to involve several interrelated sub-processes between the focal company and the potential B2B customer organization, as well as between the focal company and the end users, and customer organization and the end users. The key processes within the potential customer organization were primarily reciprocal in nature.

Knowledge was shared both with organizational management (1) and with an employee who played a central role in the experimentation activities (2). In addition, employees' tacit knowledge, derived from direct interactions with end users, was externalized by the employee (4) and subsequently shared with the focal company in anonymized form (5), thereby protecting end users' identities. The focal company further disseminated a synthesized summary of this anonymized end user knowledge to the potential customer organization's management (8).

Knowledge flows between the focal company and the potential customer organization occurred primarily through digital communication channels, namely Microsoft Teams and email. In addition, the employee of the potential customer organization shared knowledge directly with end users. The focal company both collected knowledge form (6) and disseminated (7) to end users by means of technology-enabled devices and paper-based questionnaires. Interestingly, although the focal company regarded knowledge related to the B2B purchasing process and organizational decision-making as highly important, this type of knowledge was not acquired during the process. Furthermore, the knowledge generated through experimentation appeared to remain largely unused at the organizational level within the potential customer organization.

The second process emerging from the data is referred to as *internalization-based B2B customer knowledge creation*, which is described in the following figure.

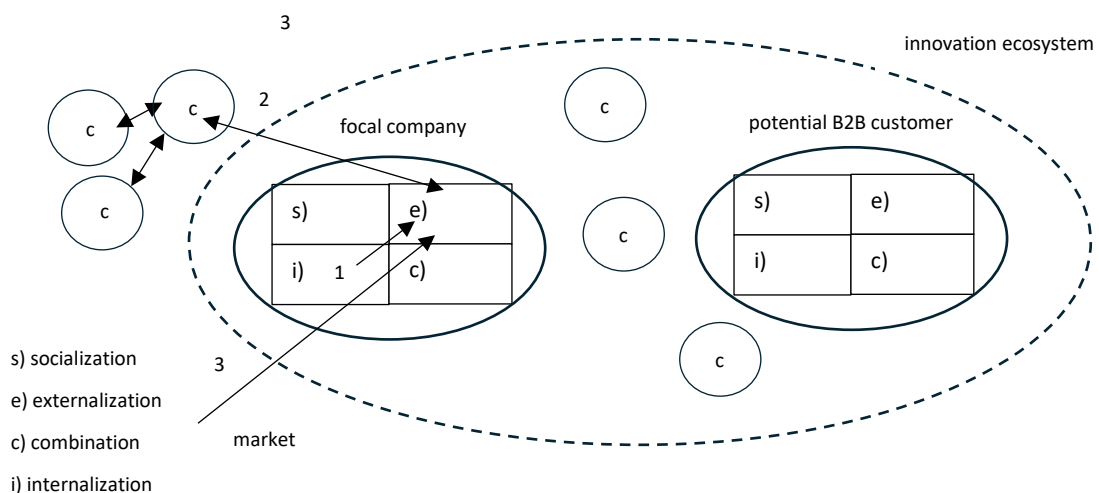


Figure 5: Internalization-based B2B customer knowledge creation (by author)

The defining characteristics of *internalization-based B2B customer knowledge creation* were that the process took place prior to the concept development phase of the new product. A key feature of this early-stage development of the competence-based product was that customer input was not used as a starting point. Instead, the creation of customer knowledge relied primarily on the focal firm's own expertise and prior experiences, particularly its earlier assessments regarding the limited benefits of customer knowledge in product idea generation and process initiation.

Knowledge related to B2B customers—specifically concerning potential customer types and countries of operation—was shared with prospective partner firms located outside the ecosystem. Through these interactions, the focal company acquired relevant market-related information associated with the potential demand for the product under development.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper began with the observation that B2B customer knowledge creation within innovation ecosystems remains a poorly understood phenomenon. Accordingly, the study addressed the question of how such knowledge is created inter-organizationally within innovation ecosystems. Drawing on insights from the business marketing and knowledge management literature and employing a single-case study approach, the research provides an initial description of the B2B customer knowledge management process.

The findings suggest that the primary process of B2B customer knowledge creation is the *externalization of the customer knowledge base* of B2B customers and end users. A central idea underlying this process is that the focal company actively facilitates the externalization of customers' hidden knowledge (see also Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999). However, unlike prior research, which emphasizes the importance of close and sustained interaction (*ibid.*), this study indicates that such a process can also take place at a distance through the use of diverse technology-enabled communication tools, even after only brief interaction.

In this context, socialization- or intimacy-type relationships were not essential for inter-organizational knowledge creation. This finding is further supported by evidence from the internalization-based B2B customer knowledge creation process, which revealed that critical knowledge was shared between firms despite the short duration of their relationship. In such cases, knowledge sharing appeared to be driven less by shared history or geographical proximity and more by cognitive proximity between company representatives and a shared vision regarding the joint start-up, which facilitated effective inter-organizational knowledge exchange.

Aligning with prior business marketing research (see, e.g., Paschen et al. 2019), the findings indicate that *B2B customers* and *end users* should be clearly distinguished from one another in the context of knowledge management (cf. Corno, Reinmoeller, & Nonaka 1999). However, in contrast to the findings of Sihvonen, Luoma, and Falk (2021), this study suggests that B2B customer knowledge creation in inter-organizational new product development involves not only B2B customers but also end users in a crucial role. One explanation for this distinction may lie in the innovation ecosystem as the research context, where knowledge is distributed across multiple interconnected actors and value creation depends on their interdependencies.

The findings further highlight the potential of B2B customers to provide access to end users. This observation resonates with earlier literature suggesting that, as downstream actors, B2B customers are connected to end users further downstream and can therefore serve as important gateways to market needs, particularly in the early phases of innovation ecosystem development (Rodríguez-Romera et al. 2026).

This study aims to contribute to the emerging literature on knowledge management in ecosystems by proposing a conceptualization of B2B customer knowledge creation and thereby advancing theory development in this field. It should be noted, however, that the conceptualizations and descriptions presented are preliminary in nature. Future research could continue by exploring the phenomenon from the perspective of different types of companies, as well as in other business relationships and innovation ecosystems. Furthermore, the literature-based concepts could be further developed. In addition, the research extends the inter-organizational knowledge creation literature by illustrating how B2B customer knowledge processes unfold within innovation ecosystems. Finally, the study contributes to business marketing research by offering new insights into B2B knowledge management.

Several managerial implications can be derived from the findings, both from an innovation ecosystem and a firm-level perspective. From an innovation ecosystem management standpoint, understanding how B2B customer knowledge is created within the ecosystem is of critical importance. In particular, managers need to

focus on enabling interaction between focal firms and B2B customers in ways that foster shared understanding and enhance innovation potential, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of the innovation ecosystem.

From the perspective of an individual firm, understanding what types of interaction are required to gain access to relevant B2B customer knowledge is crucial for supporting intra-organizational innovation. Active engagement in events and activities that facilitate B2B knowledge interaction is therefore essential. Moreover, identifying B2B customers who are closely connected to end users may be strategically important, as this can provide indirect access to valuable end user knowledge. Finally, adopting a knowledge management mindset throughout the organization is critical for enhancing the utilization of B2B customer knowledge and, ultimately, for improving firms' innovation outcomes.

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Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research. The research followed ethical guidelines for the data collection with the semi-structured interviews as follows: the discussion on the interview guide (study purpose, interview process description, interview questions) was held before the interviews and agreed that the verbal guide was appropriate. Informed consent and the transcription were recorded. The interview data was anonymised and securely stored.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence (M365 Copilot) was used to refine the language of the manuscript. The ideas, interpretations, and results of the research are solely those of the author.

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