

How Do Platforms Empower Consumers? Insights from the Affordances and
Constraints of Reclame Aqui

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How Do Platforms Empower Consumers? Insights from the Affordances and Constraints of Reclame Aqui

Consumer feedback platforms are sets of Web 2.0 applications that offer consumers tools to provide feedback on their market and consumption experiences. Prior research connects these platforms with notions of consumer empowerment. However, beyond broad characterizations, we currently know little about the specific means by which platforms affect empowerment. Elements of empowerment identified in extant studies include voice, choice, justice, inclusion, catalysis, and consciousness-raising. Our study investigates how platforms facilitate and constrain consumer empowerment. We research a popular Brazilian consumer feedback platform as engaged more-than-human netnographers and conduct depth interviews with twenty-one of its consumer and corporate users. Our findings suggest that affordances are key mechanisms through which platforms create opportunities for, as well as constraints upon, the elements of consumer empowerment. Affordances provide opportunities for consumer choice, voice, justice, and inclusion, but platforms' economic considerations limit those opportunities in theoretically and practically important ways. Our results suggest that earlier studies of empowerment online may have been overly general, exuberant, and normative. They also draw us to question the nature of collective action and the workings of consumer power in the age of the platform, opening spaces for further investigation.

Keywords: affordances, activism, choice, consumer empowerment, platforms, power

How Do Platforms Empower Consumers? Insights from the Affordances and Constraints of Reclame Aqui

Digital platforms are changing the world. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018, 2) argue that “platforms have penetrated the heart of societies—affecting institutions, economic transactions, and social and cultural practices”. Platforms and their algorithms affect consumers, markets, consumption, and consumer culture, often in profound but opaque ways. One important way they affect consumption is by providing consumers with functions that allow them to provide qualitative and quantitative feedback about their consumer experiences and share it with others. For example, Amazon Reviews, Facebook Ratings & Reviews, and Google My Business offer feedback functions in which consumer can comment upon and rate a variety of companies, locations, products, and services.

There also are a variety of dedicated and specialized platforms that provide consumers with opportunities to review and rate their experiences, offering praise and recommendations as well as complaints and warnings. Platforms with names like Yelp, TripAdvisor, TrustPilot, and the Better Business Bureau are likely familiar to many readers. We call these *consumer feedback platforms* and define them as Web 2.0 applications that provide consumers with tools allowing them to provide publicly accessible feedback on their market and consumption experiences. Although the importance of consumer feedback and word-of-mouth had been recognized long before the internet (e.g., Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987), its effects have been multiplied dramatically by the availability of platforms that make its creation and distribution “much easier and more effective than ever before” (Gregoire, Salle, and Tripp 2015, 174).

Prior studies and theories connect the presence of online consumer feedback to a variety of important notions, often relating them positively to notions of increased consumer participation. For instance, Bickart and Schindler (2001) viewed internet forums and bulletin boards as a force that provided consumers with increased information access and choice, as well as novel options to impose market sanctions through the exercise of voice and exit (Hirschman 1970). Later, in a study of two popular early consumer feedback platforms, Ward and Ostrom (2006, 226), depict those who post online complaints as a type of online activist, “consumer protesters”, who attempt to “realize the power of many consumers, acting in unison, to affect firms who ignore lone customers”.

However, not all depictions are positive. In her study of off-label uses of Yelp!, Kuehn (2017) asserts that these platforms present an example of “commodity activism” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012), a type of protest that has been co-opted and depoliticized by its association with business. Yet some consumer feedback platforms seem to effect transformative change. The South American platform Reclame Aqui, our paper’s investigative site, initiated a campaign to raise awareness of politicians’ personal use of air miles that resulted in federal regulations being passed restricting their use (Pezzotti 2019). In a prior high profile case, the platform’s customer service complaint records led to a powerful online retailer being banned from selling in its largest market (Xavier 2011). Far from a coopted organization, the Reclame Aqui platform seems to have a long history of empowering Brazilian citizens and consumers.

Paradoxically, consumer feedback platforms are theorized both to empower and disempower. On the one hand, these platforms are said to empower consumers through providing them with increased choice, information, reputational reporting, or the power of collective protest (Baka 2016, Bickart and Schindler 2001, Labreque et al. 2013, Ward and Ostrom 2006).

On the other hand, they are held to disempower consumers by technologically depressurizing and coopting their resistance (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012, Kuehn 2013, 2017). Our investigation began by asking a simple question: do feedback platforms empower consumers? Developing that question led us to a more nuanced query about the meanings and mechanisms of empowerment: how do feedback platforms empower and constrain consumers? To answer these questions, we must first conceptualize consumer empowerment in a way that encapsulates prior formulations and translates them into the contemporary world of platforms.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT AND PLATFORMS

Empowerment and Consumer Empowerment

In its most general sense, empowerment is considered to be a process in which people either assert, or are provided, ways to gain “control over the factors which affect their lives” (Connelly et al., 1993: 300). Empowerment implies a strengthening or enabling, the granting of abilities, rights, or authority to perform some acts or fulfill some responsibilities. Some conceptions of empowerment, such as those of Labreque et al. (2013, 258), McShane and Sabadoz (2015), Shaw, Newholm, and Dixon (2006), and Zimmerman and Warchausky (1998, 6), emphasize awareness of sociopolitical environment, enacting changes to the status quo, or upsetting current power balances. However, in most other general conceptions, empowerment is considered a process in which a person gains more freedom, capacity, or control without needing to engage in any sort of activist system change.

Consumer empowerment is a more specific case that considers empowerment within the institutional domain of consumption, as with Adkins and Ozanne's (2005, 154) general definition of consumer empowerment as "the ability to exert power and influence in the market". Although linked to the market, consumption occurs in and is affected by multiple domains. We therefore conceptualize consumer empowerment as the strengthening of people's abilities, rights, or authority to consume or otherwise fulfill their responsibilities as a consumer. This definition leaves open the specific nature of consumers' actions and responsibilities, thus remaining open to the variety of consumer behaviors affected by enhanced or diminished abilities, rights, or authority. This variety of actions is reflected in the complexity of extant conceptions of consumer empowerment, which we will now examine in additional detail as we attempt to extend them to the case of consumer feedback platforms and their various functions.

Synthesizing and Relating Conceptions of Consumer Empowerment to Platform Functions

Introducing the Six Elements. For the purposes of this investigation, we have synthesized extant research on the topic to derive six of the most important conceptions of consumer empowerment and then related them to the topic at hand: platform functions. In Table 1, we present the six conceptions as six elements of consumer empowerment—choice, voice, justice, inclusion, catalysis, and consciousness-raising—define them in the second row and provide citations that link them to relevant literature in the third. Although most researchers focus upon only one of these consumer empowerment conceptions, some recognize the complexity of the notion and offer multiple conceptions, and their different ideas have been included in our model as separate conceptual elements. Then, in order to relate these elements to the central focus of

our investigation, we offer examples of related platform functions in the table’s fourth row (please see Table 1). The remainder of this section explains these six conceptions and links them to platform functions.

Table 1: Elements of Consumer Empowerment

Consumer empowerment element	Definition	Representative concepts and citations from extant literature (not exhaustive)	Examples of platform functions related to the element (not exhaustive)
Choice	Providing increased consumption choice and the increased ability to exercise or make better consumption choices through greater access to relevant consumption related information and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watheiu et al. (2002) • Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford (2006, p. 1014) • Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder’s (2006, 966) “consumer sovereignty” model • Harrison, Waite, and Hunter (2006) • Pires, Stanton, and Rita (2006) • Brennan and Coppack (2008) • Labreque et al.’s (2013, 259) “demand-based power” • Broniarczyk and Griffin (2014) • McShane and Sabadoz (2015, p. 544) “consumer choice” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing better access to consumption related information through search functions • Furnishing sorting and filtering options that make information more relevant to the particular consumer’s needs • Offering more complete information than other alternatives • Providing information more quickly than other alternatives
Voice	Enabling expression, complaining, word-of-mouth, or other forms of public resistance or reporting, and the attempt to change the behavior of an organization using these tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cova and Pace (2006, 1090) • Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder’s (2006, 966) “cultural power” model • Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) • Huppertz (2007) • Labreque et al.’s (2013, 259) “information-based” and “network-based” power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling the easy creation of consumption related user-generated content • Furnishing the ability to associate particular consumption related user-generated content with a company, making it more like to be seen by the

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McShane and Sabadoz (2015, p. 544) “consumer voice” • Melancon and Dalakas (2018, 157) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • company at its actual and potential customers • Providing an audience for the public display of consumer related word-of-mouth content
Justice	Emphasizing consumption outcomes and furnishing the ability to enforce fundamental consumer rights such as providing redress, providing service to vulnerable consumers, providing safe products, or providing acceptable levels of quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harland (1987) • Adkins and Ozanne (2005) • Henry (2010) • Larsen and Lawson (2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering a forum for reporting consumption outcomes to appropriate organizations or agencies • Furnishing the ability to communicate directly to or negotiate directly with appropriate organization or agencies for rights enforcement • Providing functions to submit claims and documents for compensation or redress
Inclusion	Opening up structured opportunities for consumers to evaluate consumption related outcomes and potentially affect organizations, markets, or systems through these evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder’s (2006, 966) “discursive power model” • Baka (2016) • Grabosky’s (2017) “meta-regulation” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering function that structure consumer evaluation data • Aggregating evaluations of consumer ratings of consumption outcomes • Offering reputational indices based on consumer ratings • Publicizing reputational ratings • Providing forms allowing consumers to search for, filter, and apply to be included in class action lawsuits
Catalysis	Affording individual consumers with the ability to join together into small or large groups, or organize collective action in order to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zimmerman and Warchausky (1998) • Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson (2006, 1053) • Ward and Ostrom (2006, 220, 227-8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling consumers to search for and find others with similar consumption related issues

	effect change in organizations, markets, or among other consumption related factors or actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labreque et al.'s (2013, 259) "crowd-based power" • Grabosky's (2017) "mobilization of mass action" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling consumers with similar issues to initiate consumer-to-consumer communication • Providing tools that enable consumer organization, such as online meetings • Providing formal and information guidelines for regular communication, self-organization, and protest mobilization
Consciousness-Raising	Increasing consumers' awareness of the connections between their own consumption and marketplace behaviors to wider social and/or environmental issues (e.g., human rights, globalization, pollution, species extinction, employment inequity, climate change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zimmerman and Warchausky (1998) • Shaw, Newholm, and Dixon (2006, 1051-3) • Pires, Stanton, and Rita (2006) • McShane and Sabadoz (2015, 549) • Kuehn (2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing communication and connection resources focused on consumption consciousness-raising efforts • Offering communication forums for alternative modalities of consumption (e.g., DIY, grow your own, co-operative, re-use, fair trade, local currencies, community-supported options) • Publicizing alternative modalities of consumption

The Six Elements of Consumer Empowerment

Choice. Perhaps due to its impact on people's ability to consume, choice has been "a particularly dominant conceptualization of consumer empowerment to date" (McShane and Sabadoz 2015, p. 544). Scholars such as Wathieu et al. (2002), Shankar et al. (2006), and Broniarczyk and Griffin (2014) espouse the idea that consumer empowerment comes from providing an increased ability to exercise consumption choice, often through greater access or better use of information. In the realm of platforms, consumer empowerment through choice is

enacted through providing more effective, accessible, or extensive search functions for consumption related information.

Voice. Consumer voice “is often treated as important to empowerment” (McShane and Sabadoz 2015, p. 544) and is related to self-expressive, as well as complaining and negative word-of-mouth behaviors (Huppertz 2007; Labreque et al. 2013; Melancon and Dalakas 2018; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Voice empowers consumers by enabling these behaviors as well as other forms of public resistance and reporting, which can be linked to attempts to change an organization’s behavior. In the platform realm, consumer voice is provided by functions enabling easy content creation and both far-reaching as well as targeted distribution.

Justice. Consumer justice manifests empowerment through a concern for consumer rights, equity, and protection (Harland 1987, Henry 2010, Larsen and Lawson 2013). Broadly, consumer justice empowers by providing opportunities to impel or compel redress regarding concerns about service, safety, quality, access, or other consumer rights considerations. Platforms can help provide consumer justice by allowing consumers to report outcomes to appropriate enforcement agencies or providing other effective ways for consumers to remedy rights violations.

Inclusion. Empowerment also manifests through providing consumers with standardized, managed, and collective opportunities to respond and meaningfully affect the reputation of market actors (Baka 2016, Grabosky 2017), such as with the ability to join a class action lawsuit. Inclusion is thus more structured and outcome-oriented, as well as less expressive, than voice. It

is not self-organized by consumers themselves, like catalysis, but provides a type of empowerment that is structured by others. Platforms offer consumers opportunities for inclusion when they enable them to join other consumers in coordinated evaluations or actions (e.g., suing, signing a petition) in ways that matter to marketplace actors.

Catalysis. Catalysis relates to Labreque et al.'s (2013, 259) notion of “crowd-based power”, whereby consumers gain their own ability to pool, mobilize, and structure themselves and their own power, without the pre-structuring of another agent (such as a lawyer). For example, Ward and Ostrom (2006, 220, 227-8) see customer feedback platforms as phenomena that empower individual consumers by allowing them to self-organize. Catalysis could be provided by platform functions such as searching, finding, communicating with, and joining other consumers in self-organized attempts to effect change.

Consciousness-raising. Other researchers emphasize the role of consciousness-raising in consumer empowerment. For example, McShane and Sabadoz (2015, p. 549) conclude that “empowerment entails consumers linking their consumption to greater social issues (e.g. human rights, environment, well-being, etc.)”. Thus, empowerment is said to occur as consumers’ gain awareness of connections between their own consumption and wider social or material issues. Platforms can help enact consumer consciousness-raising by providing people with a range of relevant communication and connective resources.

Customer Feedback Platforms and Consumer Empowerment

Platform elements enable and constrain empowerment. As noted above regarding consumer voice, Labreque et al. (2013) link complaining and negative online word-of-mouth to individuals' self-expressive goals. They further theorize that consumers "voicing praise and complaints on review, anti-branding, or boycott sites" are an "information-based power" based on self-expression that "enables empowerment" (261-2) and raise the possibility that individuals can influence markets (259). However, Labreque et al. (2013, 262) also note that "platforms limit the range of expression through restrictions on the types and amounts of content that can be produced", and that information-based power creates a paradox "in which consumer empowerment is balanced by some level of disempowerment". Noticing a similar paradox, Kuehn (2013, 609) also finds that platforms such as these "promise new possibilities for democratic governance" and "accountability", yet "these affordances are delimited by the structural inequalities of digital networks, their commercial contexts, and their site architectures". In another study, Baka (2016, 157-8) notes both that the general public has been empowered by reputation-affecting consumer feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor, and also that their consumer experience is affected by the platform's various exclusions and its "mysterious algorithm" that eliminates ostensibly fraudulent reviews.

Knowledge gap relating platform functions with consumer empowerment. How do feedback platforms empower consumers? Labreque et al. (2013), Kuehn (2013, 2017), and Baka (2016) offer general acknowledgments of the role of platforms' constraints on expression, affordances, site architectures, and algorithms in the provision and limitation of consumer empowerment. However, beyond these broad characterizations of their importance, we do not know how these platforms affect consumer empowerment. A key concept is the affordance.

An affordance perspective on consumer empowerment. The concept of affordances originated in the field of ecological psychology and is now widely used in computer science and communication to identify and analyze mechanisms at work in technology platforms, as well as by Borghini, Sherry, and Joy (2020) to study consumers in retail settings. Gibson (1986) defined affordances as “action possibilities”. Affordances are potentials for behaviors that arise from the relationship between an object (e.g., a customer feedback platform) and a goal-oriented actor or actors, and they are associated with achieving an immediate concrete outcome (Bygstad, Munkvold, and Volkoff 2016; Strong et al., 2014). The concept of the affordance describes the mechanisms between platform and users, while still also holding them as distinct actors with potentially disparate interests (Bygstad et al, 2016, p. 86). Affordances provide a conceptual means for bridging relatively technocentric and realist approaches of computer scientists with the relatively anthropocentric and constructivist approaches of social scientists (Roberts 2017). Recently, they formed the centerpiece for an institutional theory based information studies conception of how technologies enact social change (Faik, Barrett, and Oborn 2020). With these important theoretical concepts regarding empowerment, consumer empowerment, and affordances now in place, we detail our methods and investigative site.

METHOD

Sites of Empowerment: Research Contexts

Cultural and technocultural contexts. Brazil has a population of 211 million and a GDP of 1.84 trillion dollars (The World Bank, 2019). It is one of the largest emerging markets in the world, the ninth largest economy, and was ranked 96th out of 180 in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index of 2017 (Transparency International, 2018). The

country lived in a military dictatorship from 1964 to 1984 and recently had its eighth presidential election. Over the last four years, Brazilian Federal Police carried out one of the largest corruption investigations in the world, an operation that exposed the high level of corruption that financed and articulated policy for decades, involving all levels of the executive and legislative branches of government alongside some of the largest companies in the country.

Along with this corruption, the country has experienced an intense privatization of public services since the 1990s (Fontenelle and Pozzebon 2018, 11). This privatization produced mixed outcomes for the Brazilian consumer. On the one hand, it expanded and improved services that inefficient public companies had been failing to provide. On the other hand, it led to largely ineffective regulatory agencies, many of them lacking enforcement mechanisms or good practices for preventing fraud and corruption (Anuatti-Neto, Barossi-Filho, and Carvalho 2003; Ribeiro 2019). The notion of consumer rights is thus relatively recent in Brazil, dating to the 1990s. Access to justice and regulatory organs is still a difficult and slow process, and consumers generally know little about their rights. As well, recent economic and political crises have generated very low confidence in the country's government and institutions (Edelman, 2017).

In terms of technology, Brazilian consumers have wide access to social media and digital communication devices and services, with 92% of the Brazilian population owning or having access to smartphones (IBGE 2018). There is also the formidable presence of Reclame Aqui, the consumer feedback platform originally created by Mauricio Vargas in 2001 after he had an unresolved problem with an airline. Currently, Reclame Aqui's operations include and integrate a website (which houses the full platform), a Facebook page (with more than 1 million followers), a WhatsApp number, a LinkedIn profile, and a Twitter profile. With over 18 million registered consumer users (more than the populations of Austria and Switzerland combined),

Reclame Aqui (RA) is the largest Latin American consumer feedback platform. Reclame Aqui is an excellent site for our case study for three reasons: (1) it is situated within the combination of Brazilians' advanced technology usage with low-trust consumer sentiment, (2) it is the product of a neoliberal political climate, and (3) it is different from other platforms, offering us a rich empirical context with some important functional variance that can be compared to prior research on Yelp, Amazon Reviews, and TripAdvisor. Thus, the site allows us to seek a comparatively nuanced and more global understanding about the ways in which a specific platform provides and constrains consumer empowerment.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection and communication operations. The goal of our research is not merely to provide a detailed portrayal of consumer interactions with RA, an important consumer feedback platform, but also to interpret the role of its functions in relation to our conceptual understanding of the six empowerment elements and their affordances. This interpretation requires adaptive data collection. Our focal procedure is rigorous netnography that closely follows Kozinets' (2020) proscriptions on data collection, interpretive and analytic integration, and communication. Two of the authors have been active members of the RA platform for over seven years and conducted structured observation and engagement of Reclame Aqui from September 2016 to May 2020. As digital participants and observers, we engaged with the platform by posting questions and complaints, creating reviews, checking reputation indices, and reading posts, comments, and replies. We kept detailed immersion journal notes on our engagement and took

multiple screenshots of the platform and its interfaces. This focused data collection yielded 319 pages of double-spaced printed data (see Table 2 for data details).

To provide the lived experience and perspective of consumer and business users of the platform, we also conducted 21 depth interviews focused on platform usage. The interviews were devised as a way to peer into “platform phenomenology” (Rogers and Moore 2020) during which consumers and business users reflected on their knowledge and use of, and feelings about, the platform. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and ranged from 45 to 90 minutes with an average length of about one hour. Seventeen of the interview participants were current registered RA users with at least one year of experience on the site and the other four were executives from companies that are RA clients (See Web Appendix 1 for additional information). All participants were recruited by a combination of snowball and convenience methods. All translations from Portuguese into English are by the authors from original data and its transcripts.

The method is an adaptation of netnography that treats the RA platform as an agentic and key social actor alongside business and consumer users. Inspired by “more-than-human netnography” that uses multi-method qualitative social media research to observe, record, recognize patterns, examine, and explain “how technology platforms facilitate particular forms of interaction” (Lugosi and Quinton 2018, 290), it offers detailed visual and verbal descriptions of platform functions. The communication of the data in this more-than-human digital netnography is centered on explanation of a local digital social ecosystems. Screenshotted figures in the paper are commonplace because the interpretation relies heavily on the translation of the functions visually present within these screenshots into the abstract categories of affordances and consumer empowerment that yield theoretical insight.

Table 2: Dataset Details

Duration spent collecting data	Sept 2016-May 2020 (45 months)
Data source	Quantity of saved/stored data (pp = double-spaced 12 pt-font printed pages; am = audio recording minutes; vm = video recording minutes)
Reclame Aqui website	75 pp
Reclame Aqui Facebook page	174 pp
News websites	36 pp
YouTube videos	65 vm
Immersion journal notes	34 pp
Depth interviews with Reclame Aqui consumer users (n = 17)	870 am; 594 pp
Depth interviews with Reclame Aqui/Obvio corporate client users (n = 4)	210 am; 116 pp

Data analysis and interpretation. We used inductive research and interpretive data condensation procedures from Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) in order to identify useful patterns in our dataset. To construct and develop conceptual categories and relationships, we held regular meetings in which we presented, discussed, and debated findings. Our interpretation included new categorizations that occurred as a direct result of the review process and the ensuing author team deliberations, as well as additional online data collection and interviews during which we sought confirming and disconfirming evidence for our emerging theoretical propositions. We considered a range of different readings and negative cases, such as those where the platform seemed to limit or disempower consumers. The resulting theorization was emergent.

Ethical procedures. Online data was collected from public portions of public sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reclame Aqui. When presenting verbatim in the paper, we translated, paraphrased, and checked back-translations of messages in popular search engines, and then pseudonymized messages. All interviewees provided informed consent and signed university approved consent forms. Because of its central importance as context and the low potential for harm resulting from its divulgence, we disclose the name of the platform and provide screenshots of its interfaces and functions. With this accounting of our research sites and procedures complete, our paper now turns to a description of findings.

FINDINGS

Platforms, Network Effects, and Affordances

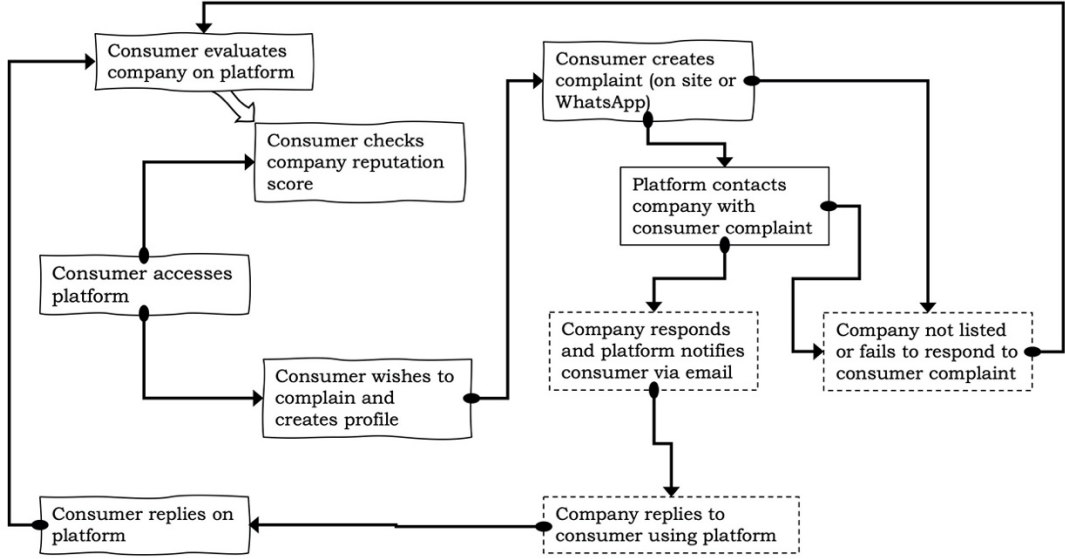
About Reclame Aqui. Reclame Aqui, whose name means “Complain Here” in Portuguese, began as a consumer complaint platform in 2001, and it currently receives about 7.3 million consumer complaints per year (Martins 2019). Reclame Aqui discloses that, after using the platform’s resources, an average of 76% of these grievances are eventually reported solved by consumers. Reclame Aqui’s most popular feature, however, is not its complaints function but its consumer-generated customer satisfaction ratings of over 120,000 registered companies operating in Brazil. Every day, more than 600,000 consumers access the platform using a variety of different devices in order to access those ratings. The platform addresses long-standing issues in Brazilian consumers’ customer service experiences. Yet, as Reclame Aqui’s founder and controlling shareholder, Mauricio Vargas, often communicates, although every company has

problems, ‘the good companies work to solve them’ (Martins 2019). So, despite some companies having large numbers of complaints lodged against them, they can still earn good reputation ratings if they maintain a relatively high complaint solution and service feedback rates. The fact that a company with a high number of complaints can also have a good reputation score seems somewhat contradictory, but it is a good place to begin understanding how the platform must balance its users’ competing needs.

Processes, network effects, and platforms. In order to understand how Reclame Aqui facilitates and constrains consumer empowerment, we must first conceptually situate it within the general principles of platform function so that we have a general understanding about why consumer feedback platforms operate the way they do. Reclame Aqui works as a platform that connects consumers and companies. Figure 1 presents an overall customer feedback process of Reclame Aqui, which we subsequently will detail and analyze. This is a complete process, but many consumers will only complete the first step (checking company reputation) or may not complete all the steps. Overall, the process begins with a consumer accessing the RA platform to check a company’s reputation or to create a complaint. If a complaint is created, the RA platform contacts the company. With 120,000 companies registered on the platform as members, most complaints are handled with pre-existing accounts and the company is provided an opportunity to use the platform to answer the customer complaint or communicate that they have solved the problem. If the company is not a member, the customer has the opportunity to find an email contact for the company. The process finishes with the consumer scoring the company about the complaint’s outcome, which feeds into the platform’s reputation system, which is accessible to

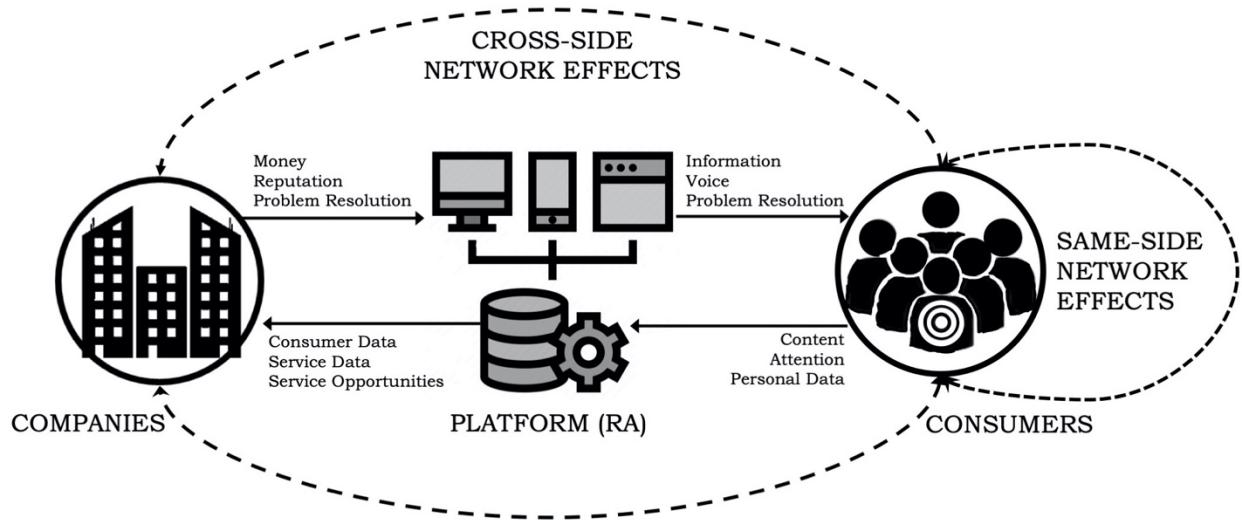
other consumers. Reclame Aqui is a feedback platform that also extends into a reputation index and a customer service channel.

Figure 1: Consumer Feedback Process on Reclame Aqui



Platforms are combinations of software technologies on which are built other applications, including Web 2.0 applications. The underpinning business logic for all platforms is the same. Network effects magnify the ability of individuals to form connections, and utility and value follow. Because there are strong network effects with Reclame Aqui, the utility and value that it offers will increase in proportion to the number of clients it contains and the amount of information they have to offer (Eisenmann 2007; Gawer and Cusumano, 2014; Tiwana 2014;). Technically speaking, and as represented in Figure 2, Reclame Aqui is a good example of a platform with strong same-side and cross-side network effects, traits it shares with North American sites like Google, Facebook, Uber, Airbnb, and Amazon (Tiwana 2014).

Figure 2: Network Effects of Reclame Aqui's Consumer Feedback Platform



Same-side effects. The value that Reclame Aqui provides to consumers increases the more consumers are present on the platform, which is the same-side effect illustrated in Figure 2. In the figure, the curved arrow surrounding consumers indicates that network effects favor gathering larger groups of consumers. There are two reasons for this. First, a large number of consumers are necessary for the platform's brand reputation rankings to be representative and thus useful. Second, sufficient numbers of consumers are necessary for a critical mass of complaints to have weight with companies. To appeal to consumers, Reclame Aqui communicates, advertises, stages public relations events, and posts in ways that promote the platform not only as an ally and advocate for Brazilian consumers, but as an agent of empowerment.

Official communications posted on the platform often hold up Reclame Aqui as consumers' ally in battle against the common enemy, disrespectful companies, as with the following statement. "Remember that we always warn you about sites that do not respect the rights of consumers. We will be here cheering for YOU!" (Post on RA Facebook page, July 2017). These

communication appeals fit well into the current Brazilian cultural milieu of mistrust of business and government. “The Brazilian consumer feels that big companies can do whatever they want, they don’t trust them. The feeling is that if you complain to them, you won’t succeed. So, it’s not worth it, it just gives you a headache. And this willingness to do nothing leads companies to continue doing what they’ve always done: whatever they want, without worrying about consumers at all. This ends up perpetuating things in an almost institutionalized manner” (“Flavio”, personal interview, October 2019). Flavio’s comment expresses a frustration with the current state of affairs for consumer in Brazil, one where companies do “whatever they want” to consumers, and consumer react with apathy. We heard many similar statements of anger and frustration in our consumer interviews and saw numerous related statements posted online.

Responding to this frustration, the platform has staged public relations events to publicly reward companies who react to consumers’ complaints on the platform and to shame unresponsive companies. For example, in April 2016, the platform hosted a “Revenge Dinner” for the executives of companies with the worst evaluations. At the event, executives were invited to a restaurant then deliberately and comically mistreated by actors pretending to be waiters. Then, each executive was presented with heavy stacks of paper: hardcopy printouts of their company’s customer complaints. The event was filmed and edited by a professional agency, then posted to Reclame Aqui’s Facebook pages, where it garnered almost a million likes. Comments on the page express consumers’ sense of exultation and retribution mixed with gratitude towards the platform. “I’ve never felt so good watching a video and sharing it, congratulation for those involved, we should spread this sensational material all over the world! I just wanted to be able to see the frustration of the hypocrites portrayed. Thank you! (“Teo”, RA YouTube site, April

2016). As Teo's comments indicate, he is able to reach his goal, a shaming of corporate executive, through the social media posting of this Revenge Dinner event.

A phenomenology of customer satisfaction and successful member recruitment. These branding communications and events were recruitment successes. The company began in 2001 with 23 consumers posting. People in Brazil signed up for free memberships on the platform en masse between 2007 and 2013, as its holding company invested in marketing and provided more effective customer service conflict resolution. By 2020, it had over 18 million registered users, and its clout was recognized throughout the country by businesses, the press, and government. In interview after interview, participants related stories about how companies had ripped them off, selling them broken furniture or food with insects in it and then refusing to answer or make it right. In case after case, participants told us how their complaint on Reclame Aqui was answered and they received either a new product or monetary compensation. Veronica's recounted experience of herself as a frustrated and outraged customer who gains nearly instant satisfaction after using the platform, is typical of these stories.

“What surprised me was the speed with which I managed to resolve my problem using Reclame Aqui. I bought a jar of jam and when I opened it was moldy, despite the fact that the package was sealed. It's difficult to just complain with the company's customer service department because its personnel don't believe what you say, , , , Then I posted a complaint at Reclame Aqui and the company promptly attended me and sent a person to my home with four jars of jam for me. [Because of Reclame Aqui, Brazilian companies begin to show] an interest in building customer loyalty. That goes beyond a purely legal issue, it is a matter of establishing a relationship. . . . Many times, these companies show

me indifference, mistreatment, they discredit me as a person and as consumer, they do not pay attention to my complaint. . . Reclame Aqui solves this!” (“Veronica”, personal interview, November 2019)

These stories were not surprising, because we had already experienced numerous happy endings of our own using the platform. But they were additional evidence to support RA’s reports of 5.5 million consumer complaints successfully solved per year via the platform. As we read the texts of unsolicited Facebook posts, we can discern their appreciation and emotionality: “I wouldn’t know how to live anymore without the protection of Reclame Aqui. I live a thousand times better, more confident and calmer.” (“Eduardo”, RA Facebook post, November 2016); “My feelings toward Reclame Aqui are lots of love and gratitude, always” (“Maria”, RA Facebook post, June 2017).

We used projective stimuli in our interview to encourage consumers to use metaphor and comparison. After a projective exercise, “Renata” claimed that she views RA as “half Robin Hood, half militia, sort of like ‘the system didn’t give me a chance, it didn’t work, it oppressed me, so I decided to take an alternative path [using the platform] and now I’m going to have a voice’” (Renata, personal interview, September 2018). Renata’s comparison to Robin Hood relates to a heroic advocate of the downtrodden, and her comparison to a militia (and to having a voice) relate to empowerment. Whether through comparisons like these, or the use of words such as “protection”, “love”, and “gratitude” in the verbatim above, consumers like Renata are indicating that they deeply believe that RA is on their side in the fight against evil companies who rip them off, then ignore, and insult them. With over 600,000 consumers checking the site’s company ratings every day, and an average of 15,200 consumer complaints successfully settled every day, it is no wonder that RA was able to create a strong same-side network effect and grow

its base of consumer users. But how exactly did an independent customer feedback platform in Brazil manage to achieve this?

Cross-side effects. As important as the platform's same-side network effects are, the cross-side effects are even more important to its success. In Figure 2, cross-side effects are the oval curved dotted arrows that connect consumer and companies. RA's cross-side effects are more of a challenge than the same-side ones because they flow from the platform's status as a type of specialized "market intermediary" (Bessy and Chauvin 2013) who puts two different economic actors into contact with one another at a time in which their interests are opposed. Consumers want refunds or replacements, but it is in the best (short-term) interests of companies to ignore them. Yet RA's cross-side network effect is that the value it presents to consumers is directly dependent on the number of companies who have registered, have profiles, and respond on the platform's other side. Without companies involved and motivated to solve their problems, the large aggregation of consumers means less than it does when companies are present and interested. An interview with "Vitor", an executive from a client company that is active on RA, emphasizes the point that the platform's real power for consumers derives from its dual-sided relationship with companies. "At first, consumers would use Reclame Aqui purely for catharsis, just to say bad things about the company which gave them poor service. But it was only when the companies actually joined the platform that Reclame Aqui became able to solve consumers' problems" (personal interview, October 2019). The opposite is also true, since the threat (or potential benefit) for companies is enhanced the larger the number of consumers that is present on the platform. As Figure 2 illustrates, there is a flow of resources between companies, the

platform, and consumers. The platform can only operate effectively by meaningfully managing these flows so as to meet at least some of the needs of both consumers and companies.

Our analysis indicates that it is in the platform's interests as intermediary to maintain a situation in which they can (1) attract and satisfy large groups of disgruntled consumers as well as, (2) to maintain the attention and involvement of a large number of the companies that have dissatisfied those disgruntled consumers. This is the paradoxical challenge of the platform. To optimize customer service channel responses, it must attract and keep enough aggrieving companies active on the platform in order to be able to empower consumers. RA must manage a balancing act between aggrieved consumers, allegedly oppressing companies, and their own intermediary role that facilitates, moderates, and channels flows of communication and resources between them. One of the ways it achieves this is by serving consumers and companies with two operational sides (one a non-profit and the other a for-profit holding company) as well as communicating different messages to the two sides that appeal to their different needs while simultaneously finding ways to serve both their needs.

Appealing to business. About seven years after its initial founding, with little financial success to show for its main investor's efforts, the managers of the platform seem to have discovered that cross-side network effects were the key to its business model. In 2008, RA's founder established another firm, a for-profit holding company named Obvio Brasil that promptly acquired the non-profit, began raising capital, and invested in its future. As part of its new business model, Obvio would become the corporate arm of the platform, reaching out to businesses to join the platform, take charge of their customer service problems, and improve

their corporate reputation. A personal interview with an executive from a client company of the platform lays bare its strategy.

“They [Reclame Aqui] sell services to companies in a very intelligent way, as it is invisible to consumers how they make money. The first contact that they had with us was not a business contact, but a contact to strengthen customer relations. We had a lot of complaints in Reclame Aqui because we had very little contact with our consumers in other ways, so Reclame Aqui was the way people talked to us. We are working on this, so our communications through Reclame Aqui have been decreasing. At one point they contacted us by email saying: Hey, you are a company that is improving in your index scores. They started talking about a prize, the “Best Company to Consumers”. They set up a rating system [and] in the last vote, more than five million consumers voted. They obviously sell a media kit together with this and you can reach these people right on their platform. So, that’s how they do a business deal with a company like us.” (“Roberto”, personal interview, October 2018)

According to Roberto, his company had a significant prior need for the type of customer service contact and information that the platform provided. His comments also indicate that the platform has changed his company’s behavior towards consumers (“we’ve been working on this”). Finally, his comments indicate his understanding that the actual revenue sources of the company are intentionally kept “invisible to consumers”.

Providing additional insight into companies’ motivation to join the platform, another executive, “Marlon” related that “when our main competitor entered [joined the platform], we felt obliged to join as well” (personal interview, October 2019). These are examples of the platform’s same- and cross-side network effects in action. Marlon’s verbatim suggest that, as the

platform grew and its effects became stronger, companies joined it because of competitive pressures.

Successful decoupling. Even when we revealed the platform's corporate services to our consumer participants in interviews, most consumers were surprised but sympathetic. For example, "Ana" offered her understanding of the terms of the platform's compromise. "Reclame Aqui needs the consumers, their complaints and the companies, and they [the customers and companies] need Reclame Aqui. One feeds on the other" (Ana, personal interview, August 2018). This statement reflects the reality of the platform: in order to work effectively, Reclame Aqui must divide its two oppositional sides, companies and consumers, and then signal to each of them that it is working in their interests. As well, consumers like "Francisco", quoted below, were well aware that RA has access to their personal data and was likely selling it and using it to sell market intelligence. However, he felt that this was a fair bargain considering the total benefits the platform provided.

"I see Reclame Aqui as a completely exempted, independent, transparent, totally impartial portal where you will complain and search for information from users and that helps you pressure the companies if you have any problems. If Reclame Aqui is keeping this data in some way, I don't see any problems if they use our information that is already public, they are just doing curatorial work that someone else could do. If we lived in a perfect world, the market would be efficient, as companies would compete to provide the best service possible for the consumer; the consumer having his money, would buy from the company that was best for him. And the other company was going to try to be better. As we live in a world that sometimes the company not only does not try to be the best but

ends up harming the consumer, we, consumers, have to defend ourselves, and Reclame Aqui can certainly help us with that.” (Francisco, personal interview, October 2019)

By thus using a careful “decoupling” strategy that keeps its for-profit corporate consulting and information business largely hidden from the more rebellious and angry consumer feedback side of the platform, Reclame Aqui achieves a semblance of balance between them. As Tilcsik (2010, 1474) notes, this type of “decoupling enables organizations to gain external legitimacy while also maintaining the internal flexibility with which it [sic] can address practical considerations”. In the case of RA, its decoupling strategy allows the platform to be perceived as a legitimate source of empowerment by consumers, the press, and government. At the same time, the platform can be seen by companies as a valuable corporate reputation service. All the while, RA is taking care of business and addressing the practical considerations of making money for its for-profit holding company. Since embracing a business model based on its cross-side network effects, the platform has been growing steadily in size and value. The platform’s founder recently boasted that no less an authority than Merrill Lynch had valued it at \$500 million (Reclame Aqui 2019).

Affordances of the Platform

Affordances for empowerment. Understanding Reclame Aqui’s status as simultaneously a network, a platform, and a business intermediary draws our attention to the importance of balancing the goals of aggrieved consumers with the aims of those who wronged them in order to serve them both, creating value for platform that can be monetized as customer service related online services. This economic need for balance shapes the kinds of consumer empowerment

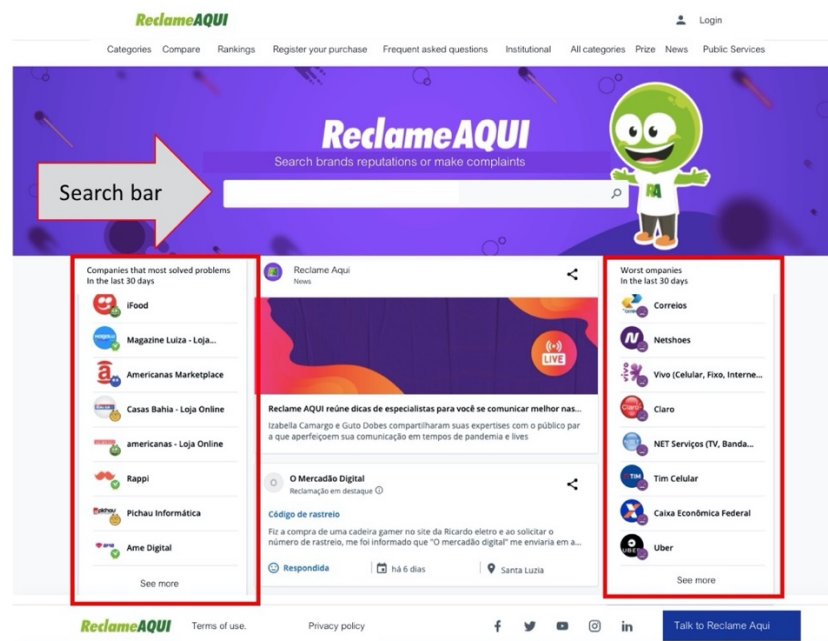
related affordances that the holding company Obvio invests in so that the Reclame Aqui platform can offer them. As noted above, affordances are possibilities for action that arise from the relationship between an object (e.g., a platform, a platform function) and a goal-oriented actor (Bygstad et al. 2016; Strong et al., 2014). The following sections explain how the platform helps users realize consumer empowerment goals by offering platform functions that enable affordances. In particular, the findings relate certain Reclame Aqui functions to particular aspects of consumer empowerment, while also limiting them in order to continue to exploit the customer feedback platform's cross-side effects. These effects contribute to its network strength and Reclame Aqui's ability to monetize it. Drawing on prior research on platforms, we identify four empowerment-related affordances in Reclame Aqui: discovery, narration, contact, and meta-voice.

Discovery Affordances

Platform features. Given that affordances are “action possibilities” (Gibson 1986), our analysis focuses on the particular possibilities for consumer action afforded by certain of the RA platform's functions. The first type of affordance that Reclame Aqui offers to its consumer users is a “discovery” affordance, which has also been termed an “exploration” affordance in prior literature (Bernardi 2016, Gretzel 2018, Merolli, Gray, and Martin-Sanchez 2014, Troncone et al. 2015). Figure 3 shows the homepage of the RA platform's website. The homepage's visual styling features Ervilho, the platform's mascot string bean. Ervilho is next to a search bar that allows consumers to search companies or brands by name, which we highlight with an arrow.

Below that are links of recent news about RA and the rankings of the best companies (the ones with the highest percentage of consumer problems reported solved) and the worst ones. People can click on a company's name to open its page and see more details about it, including the company's reputation index score and corresponding emoji, recent complaints etc. This information is publicly available to all visitors to the platform, including non-registered consumers. The discovery-related functions are the most popular and most used feature of the site, with over 600,000 consumers using them every day. Although consumers' complaint posts are publicly available, the only option for searching them is to scroll through them from the most recent to those in the past. RA claims that complaints remain on the site forever, but that it only uses complaints posted in the last three years to derive the company reputation index.

Figure 3: [Translated] Screenshot of Reclame Aqui Homepage Highlighting Discovery Affordances



Goal achievement. The discovery affordance offers consumers the ability to search and sort through the customer service ratings and complaints relating to 120,000 different Brazilian businesses. This ability is obviously related to the empowerment goal of extending and informing consumer choice. “Renata”, one of the users of the site, told us that “Reclame Aqui creates value for society. . . . because, as a consumer, I gain access to information compiled on a single platform, and I don’t have to find information spread all around, like I had to do before Reclame Aqui” (Renata, depth interview, October 2019).

As this interview quote explains, providing a simple, accessible, and extensive ability to search for reputation information about Brazilian companies offers all consumers (even those who are not registered on the site) a source of choice-based empowerment. One source of value is that the information is found on a single platform. The discovery affordance does not provide companies with goal fulfilment, but it does provide them with a source of visibility and a chance to display their names, contact information, and reputation index through the platform to seven different consumers every second. However, because this is a consumer feedback platform and not an advertising server, the information provided about them is user-generated and not entirely under their control.

Limitations. The main limitation on the discovery affordance is that it is constrained to information provided to the platform by both parties. If companies refuse to respond, or force consumers to deal with them outside the platform, the companies are given a low rating. When this happens for an entire industry, the ability to meaningfully inform consumer choice is impaired. According to Gamero (2018), the four main cell phone companies in Brazil failed to respond to more than 223,000 complaints made by consumers on the RA platform in 2017. In

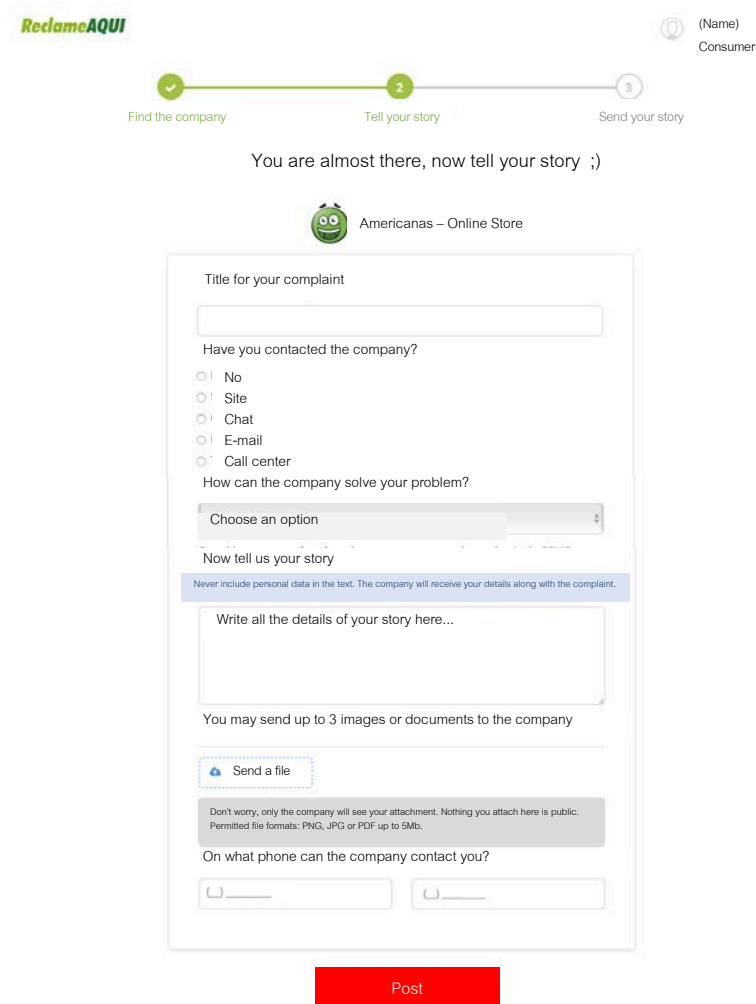
2007 and 2008, two of the four companies responded, but company spokespersons say that the volume of complaints increased so much that they abandoned their efforts shortly afterwards. As a result of their inaction, the four cell phone companies all have a “not recommended” reputation and possess low scores on the website that range between 1.79 and 2.85 (on a 0- to 10-point scale). Thus, if consumers want telecom services (which are arguably essential), the platform offers them little meaningful information to inform their choice because the major players in the industry refuse to use it.

Narration Affordances

Platform features. Narration affordances offer the “value of shared experiences and the emotionally cathartic role they play” (Bernardi 2016, 4; Josefsson 2005; Merolli et al. 2013; Merolli et al. 2014; Troncone et al. 2015). For Merolli et al. (2015), who studied the therapeutic affordances that social media presented to people with chronic pain, narration centered on “social media’s ability to foster shared experiences of illness” by, for example, recording stories having to do with chronic pain, or learning from others’ experiences. In the case of Reclame Aqui, the narration affordance pertains to sharing experiences relating to poor customer service from particular companies, educating others, as well as complaining directly in a way that can be seen by companies. In its FAQ, the platform offers advice to consumers regarding how to make better or more effective complaints. Recommendations include: (a) “avoid going face-to-face with customer service at the height of your stress”, (b) “do not write a book...be direct and objective”, (c) “beware of bad language” and, (d) “open a complaint on Reclame Aqui [because] the

platform is one of the most efficient ways to solve consumer problems today” (RA website, April 2018).

Figure 4: [Translated] Screenshot of RA Complaint Interface, Highlighting Narration Affordances (complaint posted to the public)



Although anyone can go online to the RA platform and use its search functions, only registered users can publicly post complaints (see Figure 1). These complaints must be made on the RA web-site’s platform, and not through Facebook, WhatsApp, or other platforms. To make the public complaint, the consumer needs to have his or her registration up to date on the RA website so that the platform can verify the user. To register, consumers must provide their real

name (no pseudonyms or anonymous posts), email address, birthday, and identity number (similar to a social security number in the USA). In addition, the consumer must electronically consent to the platform's Terms of Use agreement. As well, the company subject to the complaint must also be registered (the consumer can register it if it is not).

If a user enters a company's page and clicks on the "make a complaint" icon, the site will prompt them to register or log in. Once the user is logged in, the site opens a page where she or he can create a complaint about the company. Figure 4 shows the various forms containing space for the complaint title, some information about user's previous contact with the company and how he or she wants the problem to be solved, and a place to write the story. The user has the option of attaching up to three images or document files and to provide a phone number, which only the company will be able to access. After the user submits it, the content of the complaint will be reviewed for compliance with the platform's terms of use. After review, the complaint may be either rejected or posted on the platform. If the complaint is accepted, it is publicly posted on the platform. It is also sent directly to the company, if they are registered or a contact for them could be found and entered.

Goal achievement. The narration affordance provides functionalities for consumers to be empowered with voice, while also creating an environment that is not hostile to companies. The following quote from an interview demonstrates the narration affordance's ability to help consumers achieve self-expressive and cathartic goals.

"Sometimes you are frustrated, and you somehow want to punish a company, but your hands are tied. You are at your house, angry. You want other people to know about your irritation. Then, you use Reclame Aqui to alert, to guide people about companies. . . . When I

enter its website, I am full of anger, wanting to complain, but I don't see myself as an actor in this process. I see Reclame Aqui as an intermediary between me and the company, because it has a louder voice than mine. When I complain individually, I don't have the same strength as when I complain in Reclame Aqui. I see it as a booster of my complaint, actually. Without this kind of platform, I see myself as a little ant, and with this platform I feel like I'm wearing a suit of armor, ready to battle for consumer rights.” (Flavio, personal interview, October 2019)

With his evocative language, Flavio uses a range of metaphors and images to express the isolation, anger, and sense of helplessness he feels prior to using the platform. His goals are related to personal expression, but he also mentions an imagined public of other consumers whose behavior he wants to “alter” as he ‘guides people’ about which companies to avoid. He wants to “punish” companies and the platform’s narrative function empowers him with voice. Flavio compares himself to a tiny insect, “a little ant”, who is diminished, but then, through the affordance of narration, gains “a suit of armor”. This is because, according to him, the platform is not only providing him with a place to express his voice, but it is also adding to and amplifying it.

On the RA YouTube site, the platform’s founder states that “In Brazil around 27% of reviews of products and services are false. There are platforms that let companies post only positive reviews, and there are companies that hire people just to make false reviews” (Reclame Aqui 2019). By positioning itself as a different kind of site, and emphasizing its own legitimacy, RA suggests that both consumers and companies can trust the complaints and ratings that it provides. Identity verification plays an important role. When individuals have their identities verified,

companies understand that their complaints have been vetted by the platform. For consumers, sharing their actual identities likely encourages them to take more personal responsibility for complaints than if they were posting anonymously. These identity functions empower the platform and its company users, rather than consumer complainants.

Providing insight into the goals of some of the other parties served by the platform, some company representatives protest against RA on its own company reputation page on the platform. One of these posts addresses RA and chides “You need to make a counterpoint between the truths and lies told by consumers, because you are often being more of a villain against companies and without them your website wouldn’t exist. More ethics and responsibility when mentioning names of third parties here” (posted on RA Website March 2020). One of the important ways that the platform manages this uneasy balance between providing consumers with voice and offering a fair environment to companies is through providing limits on the narration affordance.

Limitations. In order to gain access to the narration affordance, consumers must do several things. These include surrendering their personal information to the platform, submitting to a thorough identity verification process (similar to that accompanying a credit card payment), and abiding by the platform’s conditions, some of which soften their ability to fully express their anger and outrage. The Terms of Use agreement explains that the user authorizes the sending and use of his or her registration (i.e., personal) data by RA and “by partner companies” and “other users, who will be able to use them [the data] without restriction”. Thus, the conditions yield a valuable stream of personal data for the platform, its partner companies, and other users. Many of RA’s users seem to think it is worthwhile trading off their personal information for greater

benefits, as “Talita’s” statement illustrates: “I don’t care how Reclame Aqui uses my personal information. I worry that the companies improve the way they treat consumers, that they change their policies. So, if my information reaches companies or other consumers in any way, I really don’t see a problem. I think you are actually contributing to the improvement of the market” (personal interview, November 2018).

Before being published to the platform, all complaints are evaluated by a Reclame Aqui team, who may remove any content that they deem offensive. For example, “pejorative terms (e.g. ‘crime’, ‘injured’)” can be edited automatically by the platform. The site communicates these rules as a necessary avoidance of anarchy and lawlessness: “This is a policed complaint space, not a free-for-all. In addition, when a claim violates the Terms of Use, both companies and consumers may contact us requesting moderation of inappropriate content” (RA website, December 2016). Although negativity and obscenity are strictly “policed”, the platform does allow the use of emotionally loaded terms such as “disrespectful”, “unethical”, and “abusive”. Some consumers resent the editing of their complaints, and post complaints on RA’s reputation rating section of the platform (e.g., “I posted a complaint on this website, but apparently you can’t talk about certain companies without having the platform censor your words.”—posted on RA website, February 2020). However, users who read the Terms of Use carefully may notice that it includes a liability waiver that holds the consumer solely responsible for any losses, damages, or even “criminal sanctions” resulting from his or her post (see Web Appendix 2).

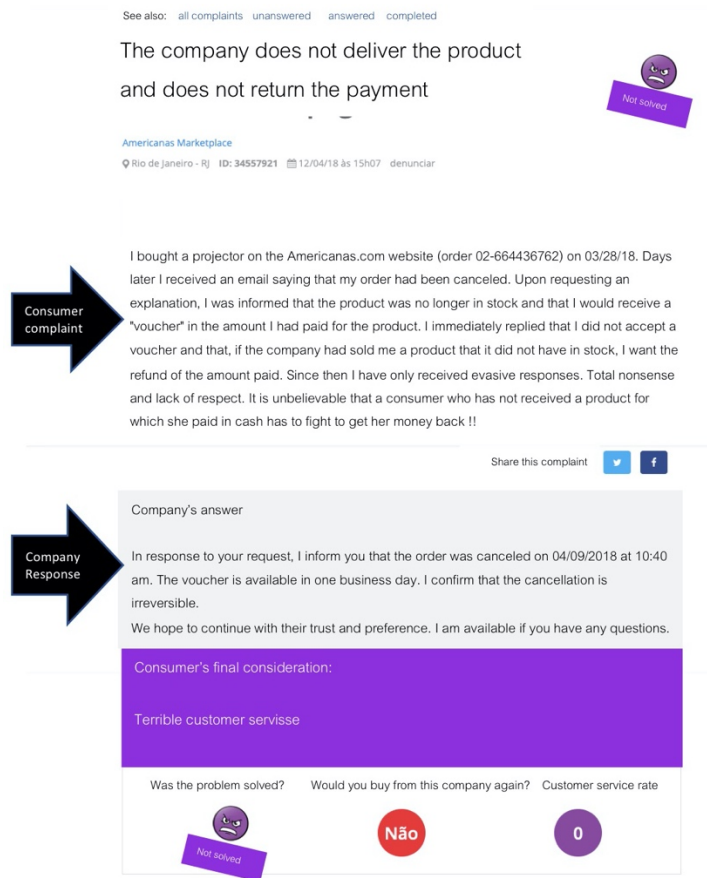
Interestingly, the terms of service also forbid the platform user to “submit, post or transmit by any means, protests, political or religious messages” in their public complaints. The platform thus expressly mentions “protests” (such as a boycott against a company) or ‘political messages’ (such as encouraging others to complain to the government about an issue or company). As well,

because of the platform's focus and function, it is very difficult for consumers to make broader claims about things such as the need to protect the Amazon forest or to fight against corporate corruption. Nevertheless, over the course of our research, we posted several activist types of complaints about companies such as Cargill (who has been denounced by Greenpeace) and Zara (for its use of child labor) on the RA website and as replies to existing posts on the RA Facebook page, with each of our posts calling for boycotts. In every case, RA allowed us to post the messages without changes. However, the message received no responses and no engagement from other customers. We interpret this to indicate that the site is not built in a way that encourages catalysis or consciousness raising. Other consumers had limited ways to respond to our messaging (on Facebook they could have responded, but may have been invisibly moderated). And, apparently, had we been successful in initiating a boycott of an irresponsible firm like Cargill, we could have been held financially responsible for the damages that it may have caused.

Contact Affordances

Platform features. Contact is a slight variation of the established “association” affordance relating to “opportunities to establish connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between contents” (Gretzel 2018). In RA, it is limited to establishing contact only with certain specified organizational operatives, such as designated customer service personnel (see Figure 5) and is thus given the more limited term *contact*, rather than the broader one, *association*.

Figure 5: [Translated] Screenshot of RA Platform highlighting the site’s contact affordance



After the customer posts the complaint, they receive an email from RA saying that the post was published. The email also informs them about the average number of days the company takes to respond. Recently, the email has ended with a note from RA reminding the customer that, according to “internet laws”, the customer is “responsible” for what they post on RA. On the company side, the platform sends a direct message containing the complaint to registered companies. With unregistered companies, contact is attempted. However, if the customer had entered wrong information about a company when they registered it, it is unclear if the platform would be able to establish contact correctly. Actual contact thus does not seem assured for companies that are not registered on the site.

If and when the company responds, the customer is notified, and a complaint protocol is opened in the system. The example in Figure 5 only has one round, but customers and companies can correspond multiple times on the company's RA page, going back and forth to share information or negotiate. Once the process is complete, or after enough time has elapsed that the customer has given up or become frustrated, they can evaluate the company's response to their complaint. All of this activity is visible on the site.

Goal achievement. The contact affordance provides functionalities for potentially achieving the goals of the two involved parties: the customer and the company. In her interview, "Marina" related a story about the delivery of damaged furniture and her many attempts to solve the problem. After she discussed the broken furniture and the company's attempts to ignore it, she relates the success she achieved after making her RA complaint and going a few rounds with the furniture company to get it repaired. Then, she reflects on the entire situation. "It is ridiculous. Often, they [companies] will only resolve your case at the time that it goes to Reclame Aqui or is posted. They [companies] are not being proactive in solving the customer's problem before taking on the job. In Brazil, you usually are not treated like a customer, you are a hostage, right?" (personal interview, August 2018).

Consumers like Marina want their grievances successfully settled. If the furniture was broken when it arrived, they want it fixed or replaced. If the cake had bugs in it when they opened the package, they want their money back from someone. The contact affordance provides the functions through which customers may be able to effectively seek justice, a chance to redress their complaints or to receive better service from a company. RA's contact related functionalities provide disgruntled customers with an opportunity for justice (which, like all affordances, is not

always realized) by allowing them to report the outcomes of their exchanges to appropriate personnel and departments within the offending companies, who can then make the situation right.

On the companies' side, contact is an affordance that may help them achieve their own goals. First, the company does not need to search social media for random complaints but can find them all in one central location. Second, the company can verify the user, ask for documents, and try to ensure that the complaint is legitimate. Companies' responses also show that they desire a positive reputation score. "As your case has already been solved, now it's your turn to help us to improve our service every day. Answer our assessment, it is super-fast and very important for us" (quote from a response to a complaint about an e-commerce company on RA, received by an author, July 2019).

Customer ratings of companies are essential to calculate the companies' reputation index and they are also an important perceived sense of consumer power. As our research showed, consumers consider rating to be an important form of reciprocation, and beneficial to the other consumers who use the platform, a type of local gift economy. "Fernanda", for example, stated that "I always rate the company after the process is concluded in Reclame Aqui, because I think it is important for other consumers to know about this company" (RA Facebook page, March 2019). Moreover, "Dominique" considers rating companies to be "a way of giving back, contributing to the network that Reclame Aqui provides to consumers" (personal interview, October 2019). However, many consumers told us that they rarely give a company the highest rating, even if they courteously and swiftly solved their problem. "It is a pity that companies only listen to consumers and give them effective attention when they publish the situation in RA! It shouldn't be like that, but this is the reality. Therefore, I think that these companies never

deserve to receive a rating of five stars, even if they have solved my problem. They should know better” (“Cecilia”, RA Facebook page, September 2018). Consumers like Cecilia are aware that their ratings can also be a way to punish the companies that force them to complain on RA.

One of our interviewed businesspeople explained that their company uses RA’s metrics to measure its customer service responses and that employee’s compensation and bonuses are partly based on these numbers.

Limitations. In prior literature, association affordances have been conceptualized with a wide degree of flexibility in terms of connection parameters, often facilitating connections between a range of users. For instance, consider the expansive possibilities for making Facebook “friends”, linking to LinkedIn “connections”, or building Twitter “followers”. However, there is no such openness in many corporate CRM portals, and there is no such openness in Reclame Aqui. The purpose of the platform’s affordance is not to facilitate communication between members on the consumer side. Rather, its purpose is to facilitate one particular consumer member reaching out with a particular complaint about a particular product or service to a particular corporate member (or potential corporate member) of the platform.

RA also makes it very clear to consumers that it does not have the power to obligate a response from companies. It has 18 million consumer members, and this certainly gives it some clout with a range of different companies, such as those in the competitive retail and e-commerce areas. Yet, as the following correspondence indicates, some companies do not respond to RA-generated requests for contact and thus the platform’s potential for empowerment remains unrealized.

“I am disappointed with Reclame Aqui, I have already posted two complaints about [cell phone company] and nothing happens, the company hasn’t even answered me. Do I need to complain about Reclame Aqui on the Reclame Aqui website?” (Joao, posted on RA Site, 23 October 2018)

“Hi Joao, how are you? As we mentioned on the phone, your complaint is important to alert other consumers and to serve as evidence of an attempted solution if you need to go to court. Reclame Aqui is a website that allows the consumer and the company to talk to each other to try to solve the problems that arise during a product purchase or service contract. As soon as complaints are published, companies are automatically notified and, from that moment on, responses depend on them. :) Unfortunately, we cannot guarantee that the company will respond to or resolve your request. If your problem has not been solved, we suggest that you look for a government agency to help you. We count on your understanding, and please let us know if you have any questions. You can always count on us!” (RA reply posted on RA Site, 23 October 2018)

As this exchange between a disgruntled cell phone customer and the RA customer service staff indicates, the most important limitation of the contact affordance’s ability to help consumer achieve their goal of justice is that its achievement lies in the hands of the companies being contacted. The platform provides an opportunity for contact, and all registered companies are “automatically notified” by its software applications. But some companies do not respond to these contact requests. Among these are the small oligopoly of telecom companies who fail to

respond to customer complaints and have not joined the platform. The only recourse for consumers in these cases, as the message indicates, is to seek help from a government agency.

Finally, the contact affordance limits lines of communication to the platform. Once the process of contact is initiated, consumer and company must correspond only through the platform. That correspondence becomes public. There are no emails to be exchanged, no phone numbers to be given. Reclame Aqui must maintain its status as the go-between, the professional intermediary who controls not only the conversation, but also the data and the context of the resolution.

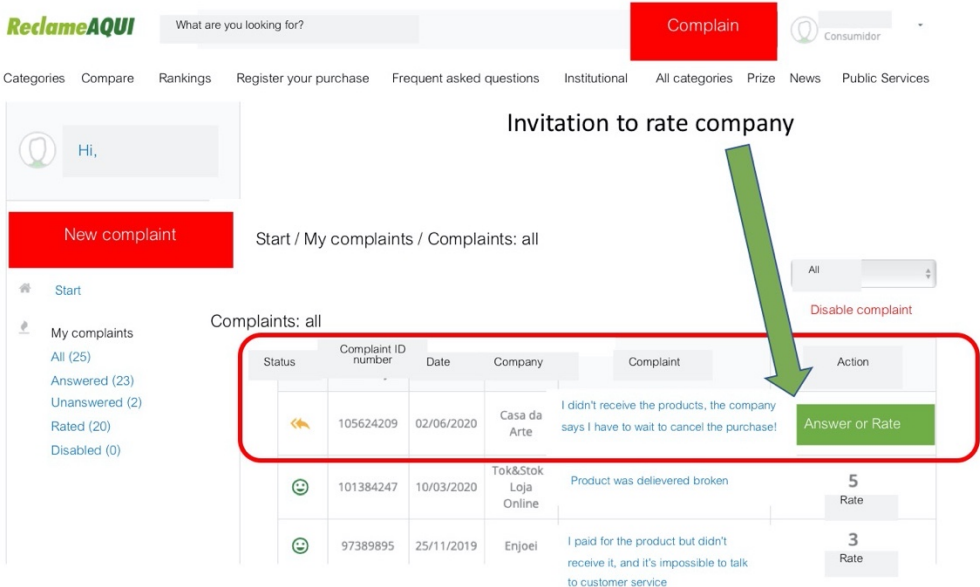
Meta-voice Affordances

Platform features. The affordance of “meta-voice” in which users can offer reactions such as commenting, sharing, or liking the content, actions, or presence of other users, is common in studies of social media (Chen 2011, Gray, Parise, and Iyer 2011, Gretzel 2018, Majchrzak et al. 2012). In the case of RA, the meta-voice affordance is more formal, restricted, and narrow than it is with many other platforms. It relates to the ability of a consumer to officially rate a company on their response to a particular complaint on a quantitative eleven-point scale (0-10), as dictated by the platform. The official nature of the rating is important, because the platform requires the consumer to have already used functions relating to narration and contact, and to have already identified themselves and been verified. Only after completing these steps, and either receiving or not receiving responses and redress from the company, will the consumer be invited to submit their company evaluation through an online link. The consumer evaluation is the function, and its contents will subsequently become aggregated into an official RA rating that ends up being used

as a reputation index across the platform. It also can serve as a basis for government remedial action (as with the aforementioned case against online retailer Americanas.com in 2011) and awards such as the Brazilian ‘Academy Awards of Customer Service’, seals of approval.

With the meta-voice affordance, consumers have a chance not only to have their say by making the complaint, but to make an additional mark on a company by rating them. Companies with very low scores might even be shamed by RA by being included in embarrassing public relations events like the Revenge Dinner.

Figure 6: [Translated] Screenshot of RA meta-voice affordance, highlighting invitation for the consumer to provide company rating



Goal achievement. The platform’s meta-voice affordance opens up a structured opportunity for consumers to achieve inclusion through judging customer service-related outcomes and thereby potentially affecting organizations, markets, or systems. In interviews, several consumers stated words to the effect that they believe companies “are a little afraid of Reclame Aqui” because of its control over their reputation ratings (Flavio, personal interview, August 2018). In another interview, “Marina” explained that Reclame Aqui was an “alternate type of regulator”

that had emerged because “we don’t have a system of government in Brazil that protects us, or agencies that could regulate important aspects of our life” (personal interview, September 2018). One of the key elements of this fear, and the regulatory mechanism of the site, is the ability its meta-voice affordance provides for consumers to assess and affect companies’ reputations.

Our interviews with corporate executives confirm that they consider the evaluations on the Reclame Aqui site to be important to their businesses. Writing on the RA blog, Multari (2018) presents a quote from Soroya Imanari, the telesales manager of NetFarma, the largest online pharmacy in Brazil. The quote indicates how seriously he and his company take these consumer ratings and, in particular, the RA Seal of Approval: “Obtaining the RA1000 seal [the seal Reclame Aqui bestows on the companies with the best reputation on the site] required a lot of focus and dedication. But today we realize that it has followed a natural path, based on the discipline of offering the customer an experience of excellence, towards understanding our customers’ service expectations. We undertook an intensive process of raising awareness across the entire company, making it clear that everyone is responsible for our Reclame Aqui RA1000 seal, as gaining it is essential to show that, together, we can improve our company’s service”.

Imanari’s narrative (and others in the story and from our executive interviews) provides evidence that companies value the output of consumer’s evaluations on the platform as a meaningful indicator of their own customer service successes or failures. NetFarma’s efforts were addressed by forming internal committees, undertaking formal case studies, and carefully using the consumer feedback from RA as a reliable metric to guide the organization’s laborious attempts to improve their customer service. In a personal interview with, “Carlos”, an executive from a different corporate client, he confided his concern that his company sometimes failed to respond to RA complaints and was then evaluated with “a zero score. . . It’s really bad when the

company doesn't answer, we worry about that and we don't want our company to look bad in Reclame Aqui" (personal interview, October 2019). Thus, the use of RA's consumer evaluations helps executives from some companies to manage their businesses, and thereby to achieve their career goals.

Limitations. The meta-voice affordance offered to consumers on RA already contains numerous constraints. It is restricted only to registered RA users who have completed the identity verification, complaint posting, and company connection steps. The affordance offers a more formal, restricted, and narrow set of choices than, say, meta-voice affordances on web, review, or social media sites that allow a more open style of commenting, sharing, or liking (including the RA site's narration affordance). Like the more restrictive numerical or star-based rating systems on sites such as Amazon.com or TripAdvisor, RA's meta-voice affordance limits consumers' evaluations to a single quantitative scale dictated by the platform.

From the company side, their public ratings can be limited by consumers' own responses to the meta-voice affordance. Just as the platform cannot compel a company to respond to a consumer complaint, it also cannot compel a consumer to provide a rating of a responsive company. Because of this, we see companies that we have complained about sending us personal emails through the site, reminding us to "officially evaluate" their service through the platform, such as with the following email from a clothing e-commerce company, sent to one of the authors.

"I've been trying to talk to you a lot, I've tried many times, and I'm even embarrassed to interrupt you, but I really need you to officially evaluate my service on Reclame Aqui. On behalf of our virtual friendship click here below: 1) visit

[https://www.reclameaqui.com.br/\[company\]-conta/\[company\]-reclamacoes](https://www.reclameaqui.com.br/[company]-conta/[company]-reclamacoes); 2) login and rate.

Also, on behalf of our enhanced virtual friendship: a \$15 coupon for purchases valid for thirty days will be available at the checkout of our website for you to enjoy.”

DISCUSSION

Understanding Platform Empowerment and Constraint

Prior research has identified the connection between empowerment, platforms, and the functions on consumer feedback sites both generally and specifically. Labreque et al. (2013, 258) note that early research “focused on the Internet's ability to empower consumers through increased information access, choice, and options to impose market sanctions through voice and exit” and that more recent “social technologies” introduced sources of power that were more “other-oriented”. They also note that voice-related platforms balance empowerment with disempowerment and “limit the range of expression” by creating constraints (262). Attuned to nuances of politics and governance, Kuehn (2013, 609) finds the Yelp platform’s ability to empower consumers limited by “structural inequalities”, “commercial contexts”, and “site architectures”. In another study, Baka (2016, 157-8) notes that TripAdvisor both empowers as well as limits consumers’ experiences with the platform’s various exclusions and its “mysterious” fraud-detecting algorithm. We use the notion of affordances to develop these conceptual connections into a more explanatory form.

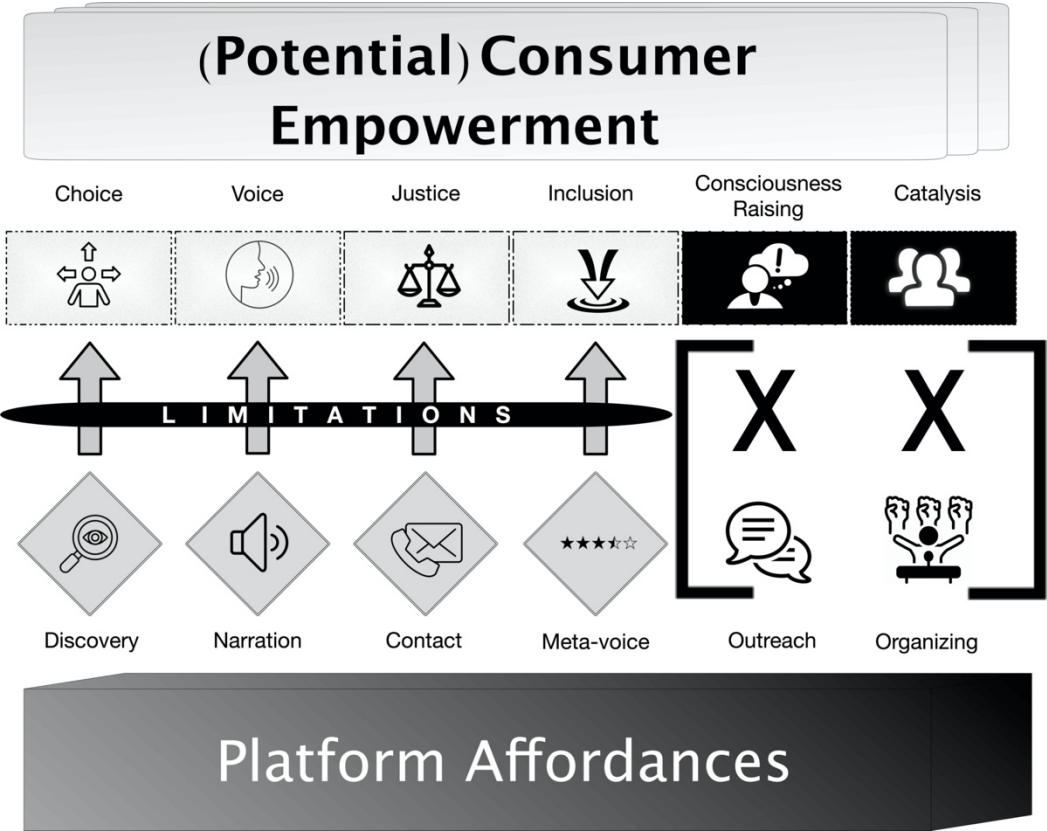
A theory linking elements of empowerment and platform functions through affordances.

As the prior subsection demonstrates, we already know that platforms contain affordances and that affordances can, in theory, provide opportunities for empowerment. Our research question specifically asks *how* a platform both opens and closes off opportunities for consumers to achieve certain kinds of empowerment. The answer requires three parts. First, we must conceptualize what is meant by ‘certain kinds of empowerment’ in the prior sentence. We answer it by explaining the concept’s six distinct elements: choice, voice, justice, inclusion, catalysis, and consciousness-raising. Second, we must focus on the affordances or “action possibilities” (Gibson 1986) of platforms by understanding their underlying economic principles as networks with same-side and cross-side network effects, looking at the range of functions they offer, and examining how consumers use them. Third, we explain how one particular consumer feedback platform, Reclame Aqui, creates opportunities for, as well as constraints upon, the previously theorized elements of consumer empowerment.

The general answer to our research question is that consumer feedback platforms, and all platforms with the potential to affect consumers, affect empowerment through the functions they offer. When these functions allow consumers to reach goals related to empowerment—for example, choice, voice, justice, inclusion, catalysis, or consciousness raising—then the platform can be said to offer a full range of affordances related to empowerment. In this case, RA offers each individual user a discovery affordance that informs choice, a narration affordance that provides them with an opportunity to voice complaints, a contact affordance through which they can seek justice, and a meta-voice affordance that includes their evaluation in an important reputation rating. The connection between these elements of empowerment and the affordances

specifically offered on the RA platform is illustrated in Figure 7, which depicts the central theoretical contribution of this paper.

Figure 7: How Platform Affordances Allow and Limit Consumer Empowerment



As illustrated in Figure 7, the platform’s affordances limit consumers’ goal achievement. Its discovery affordances only work on companies who play along and answer complaints through the platform. In the case of the oligopoly of four telecom companies who control a majority of the Brazilian market, they refuse, are excluded, and thus their low ratings are not particularly useful guides of consumer choice. RA’s narration affordances require registration on the site, and thus the surrender of the consumer’s personal information, which is turned into data and monetized by the platform. RA’s narration affordances also soften and censor consumers’ communications, limiting consumers’ capacity for self-expression. Similarly, protests and

political messages are forbidden by RA's terms of use agreement. Its contact affordance is limited to a pre-approved complaint post connecting the consumer to the customer service department of the company it complains about, and unregistered companies may never actually be contacted. A corporate response, such as redress, can never be guaranteed, so consumers remain at the mercy of companies. RA's meta-voice affordance limits consumers to a single eleven-point scale rating on the relevant area of the platform. For the purposes of visual illustration, we have eliminated many of these particular details from Figure 7. The diagram instead emphasizes the basic nature of the theory through which certain elements of consumer empowerment are presented with the action opportunities presented by RA platform's functions. The diagram's black oval cuts across the black arrows that link empowerment goals with affordances to provide a visual sense of the platform's limitations. On the right side, we depict possibilities for empowerment and affordances, bracketed and on black squares because they are unrealized by the RA platform. Below, we explore and explain some of these missed possibilities, which are present in other platforms and their affordances.

Platform affordances can facilitate or limit consumer empowerment. Many early studies of online consumer empowerment, which were published before the global rise of powerful social media platforms, are exuberant about its possibilities. For example, Carty (2002, 129) optimistically speculated about the potential for "counter-hegemonic movements" among online consumers, concluding that "the Internet provides the resources and environment necessary for cohesive organized resistance to corporate culture across the domains of production (labor issues) and consumption issues (marketing)". Ward and Ostrom (2006) demonstrate a similar optimism, suggesting that the protests of a "lone activist" online could blossom into wider

movements (228). Yet, in the development of Kuehn's (2013, 2017) research, which comes after the rise of social media platforms, we see mounting skepticism regarding their empowerment potential. Instead of enthusiasm and optimism about consumer participation, Yelp is held up as an example of the defanged "commodity activism" of Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), in which the possibility of collective action is "co-opted by capitalist institutions" and thus weakened, compromised and depoliticized (Duvall and Guschwan 2013, 299).

There is a sense in which Kuehn's critique would also apply to RA and other consumer feedback platforms. The same network economies, winner-take-all dynamics, and platform externalities (Eisenmann 2006) that drive Facebook and Google to favor huge user bases also drive RA. Yet Kuehn's (2017) argument must be tempered by two important realizations. First, it is based on an implicit valorization of certain elements of consumer empowerment, namely she considers the provision of choice and the consciousness-raising expression of "lifestyle politics" (220)—which Yelp does offer—to be less important to consumer empowerment than collective action and mobilization. We deliberately avoid making such normative judgments about the relative value of the six elements of consumer empowerment in this article. Instead, we consider consumer empowerment to be a fluid concept and not necessarily a zero-sum game. In the case of RA, consumer users and responsive businesses both empower the platform, while the platform in turn empowers consumers and businesses. Each actor is empowered in different ways, with some limitations in the bargain. But the arrangement works best when both types of actor participate. This result may be instructive to other consumer feedback platforms, which may not involve company participation as directly as RA does.

Catalysis and consciousness-raising on other platforms. The second point which must circumscribe Kuehn's (2017) verdict is that there are many types of platforms, with many types

of affordances and opportunities. In the case of RA, two elements of empowerment were not offered corresponding affordances: catalysis (activist mobilization) and consciousness raising. Even when we tried to post messages calling for boycotts and attempting to raise awareness about the issues surrounding Cargill and Zara, there was no response and, as far as we know, no effect. And there is simply no way—no functionality—for one consumer to contact another consumer or to use the platform to organize anything, as we depict in Figure 7. Although the approaches of McShane and Sabadoz (2015, 549) and Melancon and Dalakas (2018) suggest that consumer empowerment should entail “consumers linking their consumption to greater social issues” such as anti-racism or climate justice, this type of empowerment is not offered by RA—and, in fact, seems to be actively discouraged by the platform’s terms of use.

Research on other consumer feedback platforms finds consumers and others using them for consciousness raising. On Yelp, “many reviews encouraged socially responsible shopping by addressing issues around production, ecology, labor practices and social justice; justice; most did not, however, explicitly articulate these practices as ‘activism’ or speak to a specific campaign or social issue” (Kuehn 2017, 213). Similarly, TripAdvisor (2020) provides consciousness-raising information on its site about topics such as “animal welfare in tourism” and has also backed up its consciousness raising with enforcement by ceasing to sell “tickets to hundreds of attractions that violate our new animal welfare policy”.

Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms are especially useful for mobilization and consciousness raising. For example, Black Lives Matter (BLM) began in 2013 as a grassroots Twitter campaign and grew into a worldwide movement that continues today to raise popular consciousness and mobilize people around anti-racism and social justice issues (Ray et al. 2017). Twitter and Facebook played a crucial role in creating and strengthening the

connections between BLM protesters, developing a sense of collective identity, and coalition building in the BLM social movement (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018).

A growing body of international research has begun linking specific platform affordances to consciousness raising and catalysis. For example, the interactivity, anonymity, and visibility affordances of online support groups “play an important role in fostering individual empowerment and improving public understanding of depression in China” (Zhang, Eschler, and Reddy 2018, 327). The Free Lunch for Children (FL4C) site on Weibo offered similarly empowering affordances such as visibility, connectivity, and interactivity (Zheng and Yu 2016, 308). These affordances were useful for mobilization and consciousness raising: “forming alliances with a wide range of actors to construct and expand networks”, “participant enrolling”, “effective online campaigning”, “agenda setting”, and “discussion and coordination on social media”. Relatedly, Tim et al. (2018) found that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offered connective and visibility affordances for information democratization (consciousness raising), associating, and emergent organization (catalysis) that enabled grassroots environmental movements in rural Malaysia.

Combined with these prior findings, our investigations suggests that platforms are complex and contingent creations of particular social, cultural, and economic conditions. For reasons likely relating to its cultural situation, business model, and/or cross-side network effects, RA chooses not to offer particular affordances that might increase consumer empowerment. However, other platforms may offer any or all of them. These findings may change the way we conceptualize and investigate contemporary consumer activism and collective action.

Consumer Action in the Platform Age

What is collective action today? Has collective social action changed in the platform age? Bobel (2007, 157) has already questioned how important and how definable is a “mobilized solidarity” in collective social action, asking whether it might be sufficient to consider a particular phenomenon a form of collective action if we can identify some sort of a “convergence of individuals in struggle”, however “loose” that convergence might be, and even if social actors do not unite collectively and formally “as activists” (157). Yet we might be stretching the definition of collective action past credibility if we were to call RA a “counter-power” that grants “the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized” (Castells 2007, 239). As Kuehn rightly points out, providing consumers with options for more choice and voice on consumer feedback platforms does not necessarily provide them with opportunities for resistance and protest. However, it may provide them with access to a new type of market intermediary (Bessy and Chauvin 2013) or a meta-regulator (Grabosky 2017)—both of which are novel forms of collective action.

RA’s consumer rating-derived reputation index affects consumer decisions and contributes to a “valuation” function whereby RA is able to maintain its own “Better Business Bureau” type seal (Bessy and Chauvin 2013, 84-5). With access to the information from millions of consumer complaints, the platform can act as a “consultant” by offering reputation and customer service enhancing products and training to corporate clients (100). It also can function as a “legitimatizer” (109) and stigmatizer of companies by publicly rewarding and shaming them using high-profile public relations events.

The reputational effects of platforms may also provide new opportunities. In the case of RA, the meta-voice affordance seems to play an important role in motivating corporate response—as our corporate platform member interviews indicated. Law scholars, computer scientists, and economists have all been theorizing about the importance of public online reputation systems. Invoking Adam Smith, they talk about “reputational information” interacting in the networks of an “information economy” working as a “secondary invisible hand” (Goldman 2011, 53) that provides effective “reputational enforcement” mechanisms (Friedman 2008, 97) and “reputational feedback systems” (Resnick et al. 2000, 45) leading to a “fundamental shift in the balance of power” toward greater consumer empowerment (Cowen 2009, 117). Grabosky (2017, 166) conceptualizes sites that “monitor particular industries or companies” (which would include consumer feedback platforms such as RA) to be a form of “meta-regulation”, where “meta-regulation” represents the notion that “the activity of regulation has many sources other than the state” (Drahos and Krygler 2017, 13). Grabosky considers this type of behavior to be a “mass action” (ibid), but it occurs without mobilization or consciousness raising, and thus is not activism. This is a type of collective action that is limited, constrained, and directed by the platform and is thus something new to the world and to consumer activism.

The ways power works today. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, more of our communication takes place on platforms than ever before. This study draws our attention to the forms of empowerment, the affordances provided by the platform, and the limitations placed on those affordances that affect consumer power. In so doing, it is attuned to the perspective of Shankar et al. (2006) and Darmody and Zwick (2020), who find hegemonic practices in online marketing that promise to empower consumers but actually limit and constrain them. In a

particularly useful passage, Shankar et al. (2006, 1026) use Foucault's work to remind us that "where there is [consumer] empowerment there will also be disempowerment: in such a scenario resistance merely supports domination, 'for it hides the real working of power' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p. 169)". Our study reveals how the workings of this empowerment process are localized in consumer feedback platforms, and how the dance of power and disempowerment is interwoven with their functions, design, architectures, and algorithms.

The platform algorithms that determine many consumer related decisions, such as whether or not we get loans, which school we can enter, and the costs of health insurance, may conceal the real workings of economic power as they reinforce discrimination (O'Neil 2016). In our study, we focus more upon the presence and absence of affordances in consumer feedback platforms than on the hidden workings of algorithms. Nonetheless, there are many consumer empowerment related topics, such as self-quantification and the use of credit scores (DuFault and Schouten 2020), or the structural effects of racist algorithms on consumers' experiences (Benjamin 2019) that may benefit from combining an approach that studies affordances—which are based on functional elements of platform that we can study—with an awareness of algorithms—which, because of their opacity, are more difficult to investigate.

In this paper, we see how power works through the suppression of affordances that would offer particular kinds of empowerment. RA closes off certain kinds of empowerment, such as the catalysis that would enable mobilization into collective and self-directed action, because it does not offer functions for unstructured peer-to-peer communication or individual identification that would lead to interactivity and visibility affordances. Yet it is also important not to demonize these platforms. RA, for example, provides consumers with access to remediation and a form of justice that its users find immensely satisfying. As Rogers and Moore (2020) state, platforms are

complex social actors whose effects on power are often indefinite and ambiguous. We also agree with Annany and Crawford (2016) that even the most thorough technical analysis of a platform's functions, algorithms and affordances cannot sufficiently establish its political or public accountability. As our communication and ability to connect are increasingly intermediated by platforms and algorithms, researchers, consumers, and policy makers would be wise to consider the subtle, often nearly invisible, affordance-backed ways that they facilitate, alter, and limit different elements of empowerment, including consumers' collective ability to act.

Limitations and future research. This paper conceptualizes the mechanisms of consumer empowerment based on the study of a single consumer feedback platform. Like all studies that induct from single sites, the results must not be taken as universal principles but, instead, viewed as findings that are strongly shaped by their context. We conceptualize RA's Brazilian context to be one in which neoliberal politics and "state capitalism" (Musacchio and Lazzarini 2014) have been nationally embraced for almost three decades. Technology and social media also have been widely adopted. Corruption and distrust have left consumers expressing widespread dissatisfaction with both government and industry, and technology use has led to an eagerness to embrace neoliberal technological solutions such as RA. Through a process of gradual adaptation since 2001, in a story we do not have the space to tell here, RA met the needs of this environment by offering and tailoring various functions into discovery, narration, contact, and meta-voice affordances.

The particular elements present and affordances offered may be very different for consumer feedback platforms in other countries, such as for Choice in Australia or TestFreaks in Sweden. For example, Denmark's Trustpilot platform uses a paid membership model and offers

affordances tilted in favor of consumer interests. Ripoff Report is an American site that encourages consumer to organize online and find legal representation for class action lawsuits. Its affordances consequently encourage a legally directed form of consciousness-raising and catalysis. The dynamic landscape of contemporary platforms presents consumer researchers with a panoply of novel and relevant opportunities to investigate and theorize about their social, economic, and cultural effects, as well as the characteristics they hold in common and that differentiate them.

HOW DO PLATFORMS (DIS)EMPOWER CONSUMERS?

With the actions of many consumers around the world limited by the coronavirus pandemic, technologically-mediated communication the norm, continuous ecological disasters, and people around the world using social media platforms to organize and take to the streets to protest, our paper's combined investigation of empowerment and the role of platform activism may be especially timely. We find that certain functions and affordances offered by platforms can strengthen people's abilities, rights, and authority to consume. Other functions constrain them. Platforms therefore hold considerable and growing power over the actions and responsibilities of consumers and citizens. We also find that market intermediary platforms like RA, Yelp, and Facebook are shaped by the need to balance the interests of their corporate users or customers with those of their consumer users in order to maintain the same-side and cross-side network effects that allow them to run as profitable businesses.

Many of the most important examples we have of platforms being used to empower consumers and citizen-consumers tend to come from new democracies such as Malaysia and

Indonesia, countries that are experimenting with them as sites of participative democracy and citizen empowerment (Tim et al. 2018). The political institutions in many established nations may be dominated by business interests and their money, leaving consumers largely unprotected by their governments, similar to the situation we find in Brazil. Our research might contribute to a conversation about how to involve regulatory agencies and public investments to improve the empowerment capacities of platforms. With functions that enable choice, voice, justice, inclusion, consciousness-raising, and catalysis, consumer-citizens would have tools at their disposal to redress a variety of social and economic wrongs through enacting protest, coordinating for change, demanding more responsible and far-sighted governance, and making better consumption decisions. Our findings thus draw attention to the importance of governance structures in the contemporary consumer platform context.

With these notions, our paper introduces consumer researchers to the field of “digital civics” that investigates the “role that digital technology can play in reconfiguring citizen participation”, raises “awareness of the various power relations at play”, and imagines the models of governance that such an engagement might foster (Vlachokyriakos et al. 2016, 1097-8). Our paper can be construed as a contribution to digital civics focused in the consumer sphere, investigating the role of technology in participation and seeking to raise awareness of the power relations at play in platform affordances. By considering alternative platform formats such as non-profit, membership, public ownership and operation, and marketized-commons platforms (Wilkins, Nuseibeh, and Levine 2019), future research might take additional steps towards the ultimate digital civic goal of imagining alternative forms of consumer feedback platform governance for the transformative consumer research purpose of individual and social betterment.

Further investigation of a variety of platforms in a variety of contexts might begin to inform these transformative efforts. They might tell us whether or not consumer feedback platforms substitute for consumers' self-organizing protests or political advocacy for stronger consumer protections. They might inform us whether consumption is an arena for meaningful clicktivism (Halupka 2014) or whether consumer feedback is merely another neoliberal mirage that shifts attention, responsibility, and power away from public institutions. In an intriguing move that deserves further study, RA recently began offering Brazilian citizen-consumers opportunities to complain about public services and place pressure on political institutions, hinting at the close links between consumer –or citizen-consumer—complaints, feedback platforms, and political change.

Prior research about the role of platforms has found that its various affordances, algorithms, and legal policies shape the tools available to, and experiences of, its users (Benjamin 2019, Tufekci 2017, van Dijck et al. 2018). We hope that future researchers will build on our conceptualization of consumer feedback platforms, our empowerment framework, our more-than-human methodological approach, and our affordance-related theorizing to continue examining the many important ways that platforms affect consumers and the world.

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