



A dynamic, relational approach to B2B customer experience: A customer-centric perspective from a longitudinal investigation

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Customer experience
Business-to-business
Empirical
Mixed Methods
Longitudinal
Panel Data

ABSTRACT

Understanding the formation and dynamics of B2B customer experience (CX) is a key priority for marketing academics, with a notable gap necessitating empirical investigation. To address this gap, two studies were conducted. The first utilizes a mixed-method approach to generate and empirically assess a CX measure, with a specific focus on impressions during the service delivery stage from a relational perspective. The second using longitudinal data explored the impact of past impressions and specific supplier offerings on current customer impressions. The authors identified four types of impressions: two cognitive (factual and sagacious) and two affective (emotional and social) and highlighted that certain aspects of past impressions negatively impact the present. The paper further elucidates how the technical and functional components of the supplier's offering shape customer impressions, confirming the functional elements' impact on the affective impressions of the customer's perceived CX and influencing the perceived relationship quality.

1. Introduction¹

Managing customer experience (CX) remains a key priority, mainly because of the profound implications for a company's bottom-line performance. This explains why academics are prompted to continue focusing on studying CX and its drivers (e.g., Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef, 2008; Szymanowski and Gijbrecchts, 2012; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021). The management of CX is equally important for both manufactured goods and services, so past investigation has attempted to address both contexts while recognizing certain idiosyncratic differences between the two contexts (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, 2009; Grewal, Levy, and Kumar, 2009).

While the contextual distinctions between business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) experiences are notably sparse (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019), B2B transactions surpass B2C in volume. Moreover, the impact of experience management on B2B suppliers—driving customer satisfaction, loyalty, and subsequent performance—is markedly more substantial (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999; Verhoef, 2003; Palmatier et al., 2008). Importantly, organizational buying behavior (OBB) significantly diverges from consumer behavior (Coviello

et al., 2002; Gandhi, Jamjoum, and Heider, 2019). Attempting to extrapolate consumer-centric experiences or adopting 'hybrid' measures may not effectively address this void in B2B literature (Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021; Lemke, Clark, and Wilson, 2011).

To fill this void is important because of the impact CX has for the supplier of B2B customers, especially since B2B customers' experience index ratings significantly lagging behind those of retail customers. McKinsey & Company reports that in cases where B2B suppliers have undertaken broad transformations of their customer-experience management, client-satisfaction scores grow, cost to serve decreases between 10 and 20 percent, while revenue also grows by some 10 to 15 percent (Maechler, Sahni, and van Oostrum, 2016). In one case, McKisney reports that the executives of an IT services provider realized that customer satisfaction was increasingly becoming a way to stand out from its lower-cost rivals, but its net promoter scores were much lower than those of its peers. To respond, the company launched a customer-experience transformation, addressing various customer experience-process dimensions. After 12 months, its negative net promoter score had turned positive, and a year after, the company was outperforming the industry average.

In spite of the profound effect CX management can have on B2B

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¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of the two anonymous reviewers and the journal's Associate Editor in improving this manuscript through the review process. We fully enjoyed the dialogue, and we are in full appreciation of the constructive feedback.

suppliers' performance, in the pertinent literature, it is possible to find only sporadic efforts addressing this priority. In some instances, both the framing and the measurement relied on proxies and objective measures using the supplier's own records (e.g., Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef, 2008). However, CX is a subjective notion (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). It follows that different B2B customers have "experienced" differently what suppliers recorded, which results in a certain -unknown-error of approximation and, by implication, of relevance (Moorman et al., 2019). Other efforts attempted to address the subjective nature of CX through the development of an aggregated approach to CX framing and measuring (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). However, B2B customers face different types of purchasing situations ("new tasks" vs. "straight" and "modified-rebuys") that reflect the buying organization's familiarity with the purchasing task while also manifesting different types or levels of interaction and exchanges between the customer and the supplier over time. Both condition the length of the customer's journey and how customers actually experience the interaction with the supplier during individual or repeated exchanges. These conditions explain why OBB is complex (Coviello et al., 2002), suggesting the need first to frame and measure B2B customers' CX in view of this complexity before seeking to derive an aggregated conceptualization and a measurement.

This challenge is important for two reasons. CX reflects upon the impressions to which the suppliers expose their customers during an exchange. The formation of such impressions is the outcome of a dynamic interplay between past and concurrent impressions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The latter is also informed by several conditions specific to the OBB stage within the customer's journey. To anatomize this process is also important for assessing the impact that time has in the formation of CX for B2B customers (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020), making a finer and more pragmatic approach to CX management possible. Second, understanding, framing, and measuring CX through a step-by-step, bottom-up approach that draws on specific stages of the customer's journey comes with the potential to (eventually) derive an aggregate measure for CX that is properly addressing the complexity of the OBB. Such measure can be easily decomposed to its constituents, which suppliers can monitor and manage, if necessary. At the same time, academics researching other related fields, such as "customer centrality", would also benefit from having this (Ulaga and Eggert, 2018).

Clearly, this can only be a long journey, of which the findings from a broader investigation within the professional services context pave the way, while looking specifically at the service delivery stage for straight/modified rebuys. By focusing on professional services, we eliminated the components of CX associated with product usage. By focusing on straight and/or modified rebuys we can address the dynamics in forming the CX impressions from a relational perspective over time. This is because a new task may or may not lead to further business in the future. New tasks represent purchases with which the buyer has no previous buying experience (Zimmerman and Blythe, 2017). Thus, for new tasks, the relational aspect is by definition weaker, if present at all (De Boer, Labro and Morlacchi, 2001). This relational element is crucial in order to measure the impact of time and the dynamic interplay between the different impressions upon which CX reflects for existing suppliers. Finally, the focus specifically on the service delivery stage of the customer's journey allows studying CX while the interaction between customers and suppliers culminates (Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

Within this well-specified context, this manuscript addresses four research questions: (1) What are the B2B customer's impressions upon which CX reflects when faced with a straight/modified rebuy during the service delivery stage? (2) What are the dynamics between these impressions as a result of time (past customer experiences)? (3) What drivers, other than time, account for the shaping of CX in this context? and (4) What are the relational consequences for the B2B supplier from delivering a positive CX? To answer these questions, two different studies were ran. The first relied on a mixed-method approach to answer the first question. The second involved a longitudinal investigation using

panel data aiming to answer the remaining three questions. Answering all these four questions allows for making the following specific contributions: (1) To define and measure CX in the context of B2B service delivery from a relational perspective. This allows for a refined acquisition of the different impressions upon which CX reflects in this (specific) stage of the B2B customer's journey, thus allowing future researchers to focus on understanding and measuring CX at other stages of the B2B customer's journey. (2) The CX literature is expanded by providing empirical evidence that charts key drivers, including 'past experiences,' in shaping B2B customers' experiences with their suppliers. Importantly, it advances our understanding of how the functional components of a supplier's offer play a role in shaping affective impressions (social and emotional), which, in turn, represent the value that B2B customers derive from interacting and conducting business with a specific supplier. (3) B2B suppliers receive specific, realistic, and relevant insights they can use to manage better what their customers experience while interacting with them in the real world.

2. Distinguishing customer experience from other relevant notions

Dictionaries define experience as an "event or occurrence that leaves an impression on someone." Two components emerge from this definition. The first is the singularity of "an event": one event associated with a single impression. The second is the reference to the "impression" this single event reflects upon and what drives the formation of such impressions. "Singularity" suggests that just one exposure suffices to form an experience. However, the singularity of an event does not rule out the possibility of repeated exposures between the same entity (recipient) and the source from which impressions are generated. In business, this makes perfect sense, especially from a relational perspective. Sellers first generate an experience for the buyers; if buyers decide to maintain this relationship with the seller in the future, more experiences will emerge as a result of repeated singular episodes over time (Chenet, Dagger and O'Sullivan 2010). The CX literature has clearly acknowledged this and has conceptualized experience as an impression that accrues over time (Verhoef et al., 2009; Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello, 2015). The CX literature has also distinguished between CX and other notions that are affiliated with CX. Customer engagement, for instance, comes with dimensions that appear relevant for CX (Brodie et al., 2011). Nonetheless, customer engagement is an opportunity for the customer to interact with the provider, either directly (purchasing behavior) or indirectly, e.g., through feedback (Kumar et al., 2010; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Engagement is thus an antecedent to CX. Likewise, service quality should not be confused with CX as the quality of the offering ought also to be considered as an antecedent to CX because the customer's perception of the service quality will inform the formation of the customer's experiential impressions (Mittal, Kumar, and Tsiros, 1999; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

CX management is pivotal in marketing due to its connection with 'value' (Abbott, 1955). Economic theory identifies two value types (Gupta, 1960): 'value-in-use' and 'value-in-exchange.' Recent scholars, including Chandler and Vargo (2011), Eggert et al. (2019), and MacDonald et al. (2016), highlight the importance of emphasizing 'value in use' within the customer's context where perception plays a crucial role. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding that customer value encompasses not only monetary or functional benefits but also social and psychological ones derived from interactions with a supplier (Grönroos, 1984; Doyle, 2000; MacDonald et al., 2016). It follows that for the interaction between the two parties to be valuable to the customer, the experience during such interactions should generate impressions of this kind. Consequently, CX is distinct from the customer's 'value,' with CX serving as its antecedent (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). The same is true for other related notions, such as commitment or trust, that inform the relationship marketing theory and represent the consequences of CX (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Having drawn the conceptual distinction of CX from other related notions, reflecting on how these impressions emerge is worthwhile. In general, any customer interacts with a seller, but at the same time, the customer will also interact with other customers/stakeholders in a broader nexus of social relationships. For instance, in the services marketing literature, the disconfirmation paradigm has already made a case for this (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). In the B2B context, this interaction occurs among the buying center's members (see Johnston and Bonoma, 1981; Lord and Gupta, 2010; Cabanelas et al., 2023). During this interaction, the buying center's participants exchange opinions and their subjective perceptions of their individual impressions with the supplier. Arguably, the resulting CX for each member will be the outcome of this member's direct interaction with the supplier and what every other buying center member has shared. Hence, to explore the formation process through which impressions and CX emerge, it is necessary to consider both the direct and the indirect (through social interaction) interchanges that take place. However, before addressing the complexity in the formation of CX from this social interaction, it is first necessary to establish a measure for assessing what impressions each buying center member acquires from directly interacting with the supplier.

3. Customer experience and the B2B context

Understanding CX is crucial in the B2B context due to its profound implications for the supplier-buyer relationship. Monitoring how customers experience the offerings allows suppliers to enhance company performance and foster customer loyalty (Coviello et al., 2002). The professional nature of B2B purchasing tasks, coupled with unique context-specific conditions (Bonoma and Shapiro, 1983; Buvik, 2001; Crittenden, Crittenden, and Muzyka, 2002), necessitates a dedicated investigation into B2B CX.

In the past, some sporadic efforts to conceptualize and assess CX in the B2B context have appeared in the literature. Usually, this was part of investigating the collaboration between a supplier and a customer during the development of a new product (e.g., Petersen, Handfield, and Ragatz, 2003; Magnusson, 2009). But "innovation" does not propel every opportunity the customer has to interact with the supplier; neither is an innovation project necessarily collaborative. During the last 15 years, some scant attempts to move beyond such a confined scope have been recorded in the most influential marketing journals, all of which could be classified into two groups.

On the one hand, we have efforts to study CX more broadly but do so in the B2B and B2C contexts simultaneously, but using the same measure for both context, in what could be described as a "hybrid" approach (e.g., Lemke et al., 2011; Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021). Arguably, such a hybrid approach cannot sufficiently address the distinct characteristics that exist between the two contexts. The authors from one such study have actually conceded this (Lemke et al., 2011 pp.854–856). On the other hand, we have efforts that focus solely on the B2B context but have tried to objectify the measurement of the subjective impressions the supplier generates for the customer (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In one instance, for example, secondary data on the supplier's "response time" to the customers' complaints served to approximate the customer's experience with the supplier (Bolton et al., 2008). However, because CX is subjective, different customers will experience differently what the supplier's records have recorded: some customers experience a response "within 24 h" as "satisfactory;" for other customers, the same experience could easily be "unsatisfactory." Such efforts, relying on secondary/objective data to measure a subjective notion, are clearly missing face validity because the approximation error cannot be accounted for (DeVellis, 2016).

In summary, the significance of CX in the B2B context, with its profound relational and performance implications for suppliers, necessitates a distinct investigation. The unique characteristics of B2B interactions demand dedicated attention. The existing literature has yet to

adequately address the specific impressions driving B2B customers' CX formation. This highlights a crucial gap, emphasizing the need for focused exploration and understanding within the B2B framework.

In Fig. 1, we offer a visual summary of the conceptual framework underpinning this study to address this question. Mindful of the concerns associated with past efforts, we investigate CX from a relational perspective. One that is subjective and dynamic in nature. In the following section, we develop the specific research hypotheses that emerge from this framing.

4. Research hypotheses

4.1. Perceived CX and impressions

The broader theory regarding OBB underpins our study and framework for conceptualizing what impressions customers form while interacting with their suppliers during the service delivery stage of the customer journey. Two major paradigms underpin OBB (Woodside and Ferris-Costa, 2006). The first follows a rational choice paradigm providing insights into the cognitive mechanisms and responses during the various stages of the OBB (Crittenden, Scott, and Moriarty, 1987; Wenstøp, 2005; Korhonen et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2011). The second follows a behavioral paradigm seeking to address who gets involved in a buying situation and their thoughts and feelings during the process, allowing the incorporation of affects in the understanding of organizational behaviors and choices. As such, according to the OBB theory, perceived CX should then reflect on cognitive and affective impressions that emerge during the interaction between the customer and the supplier (Korhonen et al., 2008). Hence, a preliminary working definition of CX would echo that of McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019): "During the delivery of a service, perceived CX represents the outcome of recurring events that leave both a cognitive and an affective impression on the customer as a result of the customer's encounters and interaction with the supplier."

However, the pertinent literature suggests additional types of impressions, such as the "sensorial" or the "social" (e.g., Schmitt, 2003; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Albeit not all types of impressions appearing in the CX literature are equally relevant in the B2B context (Schakett et al., 2011; Paulssen and Roulet, 2017), a more comprehensive approach to defining CX for B2B customers would appear to be necessary to include, for instance, the social ones that are of relevance for the B2B customer (Schmitt, 2003).

Moreover, B2B customer's journey is structured. It involves several specific stages such as "problem recognition," "evaluation of alternative suppliers," "(service) delivery" (in services), or "post-purchase evaluation" (Robinson et al., 1967; Witell et al., 2020). So, different parameters account for the impressions the supplier generates during each stage (Witell et al., 2020). The OBB theory also suggests that the customer's familiarity with the purchasing task ("straight rebuy," "modified rebuy," "new task") is responsible for the length and the time it takes to complete each stage (Steward et al., 2019). The customer's familiarity reflects the customer's learning behavior and expertise with a supplier's ability to deliver what the customer is expecting (Bonney et al., 2022). "New tasks" do not represent relevant cases regarding learned behaviors or expertise. Such tasks are usually associated with the adoption of innovation and are not as common as the other two (Ferguson, 1979; Grewal et al., 2015). Hence, the continuity of the relationship with the supplier is not necessarily relevant for "new tasks." In such cases, the investigation of the dynamics in forming the impressions underpinning a relational approach for CX can be irrelevant. In contrast, "straight" and "modified" rebuys are associated with the relationship between customers and their suppliers, thus providing the proper grounds for studying the dynamics in the formation of CX in the B2B context.

Hence, to frame and define CX in the B2B context as a relational construct, it is necessary first to define a) the part of the customer's journey during the purchasing decision and b) the nature of the purchasing task this journey represents. This study focuses on the service

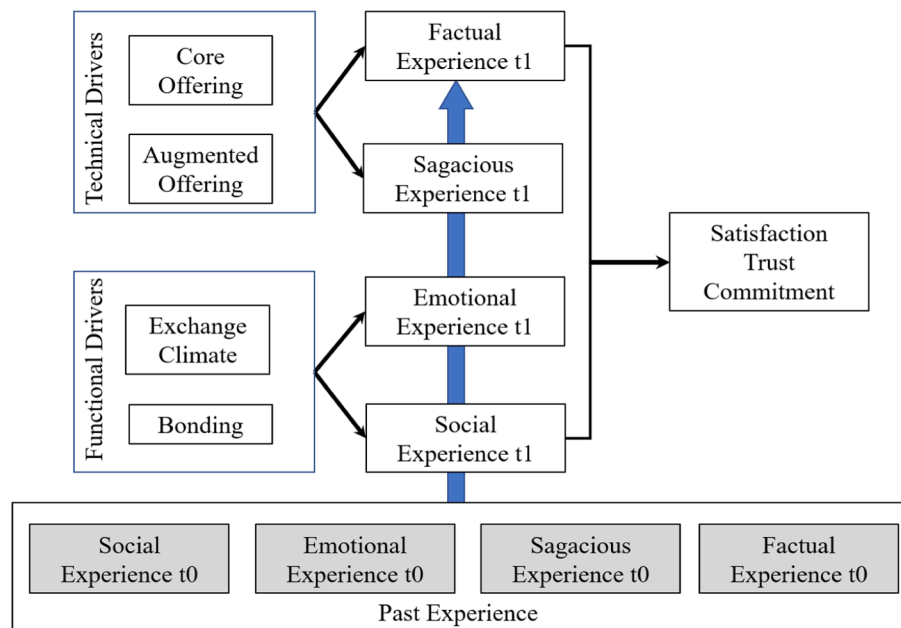


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

delivery stage for straight and modified rebuys because this allows the investigation of the dynamics in the formation of experiential impressions for B2B customers during this specific stage, while observing the main principles of OBB and the varying significance of different stages of the customer's journey have in informing these impressions or the customer's subsequent behaviors (Roy, Sreejesh, and Bhatia, 2019).

In this framing, cognitive impressions are clearly important. In addition to the physical experiences (less relevant for services), the extant literature identifies *mental* experiences as important manifestations of cognitive impressions (Tedeschi, 2013). Examples of the cues generating such impressions include, for instance, the customer's perception of the supplier's service quality (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), including the supplier's ability to meet deadlines or to stay within the customer's budget (Gounaris, 2005). Such cues generate cognitive impressions based on the evidence and facts as they emerge during the service delivery encounter (Shimp et al., 2015; Barends and Rousseau, 2018). Henceforth, we define the resulting, facts-based, cognitive impressions as reflecting the "perceived *factual* experience" that emerges for the B2B customer during service delivery. Suppliers, however, cannot always produce such objective manifestations. Yet, the customer needs to get cognitively involved to process cues from the supplier that are subjective both in framing and assessing (Gentile, Spiller, and Noci, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009). Examples, for instance, include the supplier's ability to understand and adapt to the customer's needs or the supplier's "openness" and "creativity" in exploring and finding solutions for the customer (Brennan, Turnbull, and Wilson 2003; La Patterson, and Styles 2009). *Sagacious* impressions henceforth capture the customer's experience resulting from the mental strain in forming cognitive yet not fact-based experiences. This distinction between "factual" and "sagacious" impressions, which the extant literature is missing, is important and relevant because although they are both cognitive, given the lack of objective manifestations, sagacious and factual impressions are unlikely to share the same set of drivers.

Another important parameter during the service delivery stage is the interaction between the customer and the supplier at the individuals level. This interaction allows for emotional mechanisms to generate important emotional cues that produce emotional impressions for the customer (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). The degree of "safety" associated with the choice of one supplier instead of another, or the sense of transparency governing a (business) relationship, are examples of such

impressions (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). These are important impressions because, in many cases, the customer's perceived value is ordinal rather than cardinal (Pham et al., 2015). The prevalent term in the pertinent literature on emotions is "affect" (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer, 1999). This allows distinguishing between different affective states: the transient, short-lasting ones (actually referred to as "emotion") and those which arise with deeper roots (referred to as "mood") and which have an impact over a longer period of time (Fisher, 2000, Lazarus, 1991).

Examples of transient emotions include the vibes and the affective state during the service delivery stage. As professional problem-solvers, buyers and/or decision-makers engage with a purchasing task because of their role's expectation: to provide a solution to a specific "problem" the company is facing (Coviello et al., 2002). Such transient affects as feeling "safe," "content," or "relieved" with their choice will unavoidably emerge during the service encounter, bearing their full weight to the choices they make (Korhonen et al., 2008; Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). This type of affective impression represents what we call '*emotional experiences*' to capture the transient affective impressions B2B customers form during service delivery. Long-lasting emotions will also emerge during this stage (Kiely, 2005). OBB has relied on such affections to explain, for instance, share-of-wallet, cross-buying behaviors, or loyalty (Paulssen and Roulet, 2017; Chang et al., 2012). These kinds of affects emanate from the social interaction between the two parties and are resistant to time because they are grounded on a nexus of social links and reciprocity (Paulssen and Roulet, 2017). The customer's impressions emerging from these types of affects is what we call "*social experience*." Making this distinction between the transient and longer-enduring affects is again important because it is also unlikely they will both originate from the same types of drivers.

Following the above discussion, a finer working definition of CX for the B2B customer (during the service delivery stage for straight/modified rebuys) is possible. H1 below echoes this definition while putting it into the testing for empirical validation.

H1: During the delivery of B2B services, perceived CX will reflect on both cognitive ("factual" and "sagacious") and affective ("emotional" and "social") impressions the supplier generates for the customer.

4.2. The dynamics of CX formation over time

Although the literature in CX overwhelmingly concedes that experiences accumulate over time (Verhoef et al., 2009; Kumar, Bhagwat, and Zhang 2015; Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehnl, 2017), this relationship between the past and the present experiences lacks empirical validation. In spite of lacking empirical evidence, the disconfirmation paradigm provides the theoretical grounding for a direct relationship between past and present expectations (Oliver 1977, 1980). The expectation-disconfirmation theory has served as the underpinning paradigm for an enormous number of empirical studies in Marketing (for instance, Wirtz and Bateson, 1999, Niedrich, Kiryanova and Black, 2005). Normative work has also established the relevance of the expectation-disconfirmation theory in relation to service encounters (Walker, 1995). Hence, we can reasonably expect that the four different types (factual, sagacious, emotional, and social) of impressions underpinning CX during the service delivery for “straight” and/or “modified” rebuys will directly interact dynamically over time.

However, this is not necessarily entirely the case. Because both factual and sagacious experiences represent impressions emanating from the customer’s cognitive perception of the service delivery, we can expect that both types of cognitive impressions associated with the past (*factual* and *sagacious* in t_0) will jointly impact both the cognitive CX impressions (*factual* and *sagacious* in t_1) in the present, for instance, through learned mechanisms and behaviors (Feng and Krishnan, 2022). Moreover, following the *primacy-of-effects* theory (Lazarus, 1984), since cognition influences the formation of affects, past cognitive impressions of CX will dynamically interact and inform the formation of affective impressions in the present. On these grounds, we investigate the following hypotheses:

H2a: The cognitive impressions (factual and sagacious) of CX from the past will significantly influence the cognitive impressions of CX in the present.

H2b: The cognitive impressions (factual and sagacious) of CX from the past will significantly influence the affective impressions (emotional and social) of CX in the present.

However, because affects can be either transient or longer-lasting (Collins, 1990), it is unlikely that impressions reflecting upon transient affects from the past will bear any significant impact in the present. Such a significant impact will be limited to the impressions reflecting upon the longer-lasting affects from the past. Work addressing the cognitive barriers associated with organizational change (Reger et al., 1994), how memory works over time (Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2007), and how individuals form and reform their attitudes over time (Edwards, 1990) support this argument. On the other hand, one could argue that past emotional experiences could make the buyer more alert and inclined to become a more active “seeker” and “screener” of the entire encounter in the present. Hence, we investigate the following hypotheses:

H2c: The affective impressions (social and emotional) of CX from the past will significantly influence the cognitive impressions (factual and sagacious) of CX in the present.

H2d: The affective impressions (social and emotional) of CX from the past will significantly influence the affective impressions of CX in the present.

4.3. Supplier-specific drivers of CX impressions during service delivery

In addition to time, the supplier’s service constituents are also important in shaping CX during service delivery. The supplier’s service offering consists of two components: the “technical” and the “functional” (Grönroos, 1984). The former encompasses operation-related elements, such as, for example, the supplier’s delivery performance, the support the buyer receives during the delivery, and the price or the degree to which the supplier adapts the offer to meet the customer’s needs (Morgan, 1990). The supplier’s ability to manage such operations-related components of service delivery is, in general, an important driver of CX (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). Further, it is

possible to classify the technical components of the service into two types: the “core elements” of the technical component (or points of parity), capturing the aspects of the service that the customer expects all suppliers will deliver, and the “augmenting elements” (or points of differentiation), capturing the elements of the offering that differentiate what one supplier offers that is different from what competitors offer (Keller, 2000). B2B customers rely on both technical aspects of the service to choose alternative suppliers (Evangelidis and Van Osselaer, 2018) because they are objective manifestations of the service performance that customers can cognitively assess (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). On these grounds, we investigate the following hypothesis:

H3: Both types (core and augmenting) of the technical elements of the service offering will impact the formation of the customer’s cognitive impressions (“factual” and “sagacious”).

On the other hand, the functional component of the service is not an objective manifestation. This component regards the situational conditions and relational dynamics that emerge between individuals from the two organizations during service delivery (Grönroos, 1984). Albeit a softer constituent of the supplier’s overall offering, the functional component is clearly also significant for the B2B customer (Morgan, 1990), although only in theory (Verhoef et al., 2009). This lack of empirical evidence is possibly because of the difficulty of objectively quantifying or approximating the functional elements. However, this has been clearly identified as a research priority for quite some time (e.g., Grewal et al., 2009). From the OBB perspective, it is possible to classify the functional component into two types: the climate of the encounter during the service delivery and the effort to bond with the buying organization and key decision-maker (Bagdoniene and Zilione, 2009).

The climate reflects the shared sense people develop while working together, dealing with policies, procedures, or challenges, such as, for example, the sharing of information and/or technology in anticipation of an “excellent outcome” (Schneider, White, and Paul 1998). Hence, a transparent and shared climate is key in shaping the customer’s perceived “emotional impressions” of the supplier (Andersen and Kumar, 2006; Bowen and Schneider, 2014). Bonding has also been recognized as an important factor to consider in B2B, and in relation to the choices buyers make (Schakett et al., 2011), customer loyalty (Lilien, 2014), or the supplier’s ability to increase cross-selling opportunities (Paulsen and Roulet, 2017). This is because bonding functions as a control mechanism (Hirschi, 1969), which increases the customer’s dependence on the supplier (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Jones, Mothersbaugh, and Beatty, 2000), while strengthening the relationship between the two firms (Wilson, 1995; Rodríguez and Wilson, 2002). On these grounds, we investigate the following hypothesis:

H4: Both types (exchange climate and bonding efforts) of the functional elements of the service offering will impact the formation of the customer’s affective impressions (emotional and social).

4.4. Perceived CX and relationship quality

The supplier’s approach to value delivery can be short-term (focusing on an individual transaction, even if repetitive) or long-term (focusing on the relationship between the two organizations in the long run); the latter has set the grounds for the development of the relationship marketing theory (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 1997), which remains a profound and influential theory in Marketing despite some recent concerns regarding the implications of a “strong relationship” between the supplier and the customer (see Oliveira and Lumineau, 2019). Notably, such claims remain theoretical and have no empirical validation. The scope of our investigation is not to answer this question. We look at relationship quality merely to confirm the predictive validity of our suggested measure since the literature on relationship quality recognizes three key pillars upon which relationship quality grounds: trust and commitment to the supplier, and satisfaction from the relationship (Grönroos, 1990; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1995;

Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). In the literature, all three are identified as consequences of the experience the suppliers deliver for their customers (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Thus, the better the CX, the higher the B2B customer will perceive the quality of the relationship with a supplier. On these grounds, and to address the predictive validity of our measure, we test the following hypothesis:

H5: CX is a significant antecedent of the relationship quality (as reflected in trust and commitment to the supplier and satisfaction from the relationship) the supplier offers to the customer.

Fig. 2 visually summarizes the five hypotheses we are testing as part of this investigation.

5. Research design and method

Data from two studies inform this investigation. The first served three objectives: (a) to derive a measure for CX and test the factorial structure of the measure; (b) to help identify what facets of the supplier’s technical offering are core or augmenting elements of the supplier’s offer to the customer; and (c) to explore what drives the formation of the cognitive and the affective impressions of CX. To achieve these objectives, study one relies on a mixed-method approach. Study two also served three objectives: (a) to independently validate the scale for measuring CX the first study produced; (b) to assess the impact of past experiences on present CX; and (c) to examine the drivers and the predictive validity of CX. A panel of B2B customers and a longitudinal research design underpin this second study. The design for each study is explained separately. Fig. 3 summarizes the scale development process.

5.1. Study one

Study one comprised two stages. Following an extensive review of the pertinent literature, an initial conceptualization of the potential impressions (factual, sagacious, emotional, and social) upon which CX during service delivery reflects. As recommended in the literature (Churchill, 1979; DeVellis, 2016), a qualitative investigation ensued to explore the face validity of these four components and identify items that could produce a valid measure. In total, 28 semi-structured in-depth

interviews with decision-makers involved in the purchasing decision from different Scottish companies were run. This type of interview is effective in providing rich insights (McCracken, 1988), which explains why other researchers in the field have also used the same approach (McCull-Kennedy et al., 2019). Ideally, the authors would have wished to record the views of additional participants of the buying center, not just the decision-maker. However, this could have easily compromised the compatibility of methods between the first and the second study because collecting panel data from more than a single participant from each company in the panel is a very risky design. The literature does not advise how to treat this dilemma best; so, mindful of the limitations associated with this choice, we took the conservative yet prudent route and employed the key informant approach, which has been successfully used in the past (e.g., Walsh et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2001).

Eligibility for selection and participation was subject to participants meeting three conditions: 1) Have decision-making authority; 2) have been involved in the delivery of a project from a provider of professional services, and 3) have liaised with the supplier’s team during the delivery of the service. At the time of the interview, the project could not be ongoing. It should have also been completed nearly or about a month ago to allow participants to have a fresh memory of their overall experience with the service supplier. Companies from different sectors were randomly called to identify eligible participants, including health, manufacturing, leisure, IT services, engineering, and so on (see Appendix, Table A1). Eligible and willing participants were interviewed as they were identified. Transcripts were produced and analyzed before moving on to identify more participants until saturation of information (28th interview) was achieved (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Boyd, 2001).

The in-depth interviews produced themes that aligned very well with the four main components that emerged from the review of the pertinent literature. The transcripts helped to identify a total of 27 descriptors for CX during the service delivery. For content and face validity (Netemeyer et al., 2003), all 27 descriptors were presented to 10 judges who comprised five marketing academics to assess content validity and five marketing managers to help in assessing face validity, using a 5-point evaluation scale (ranging from 1= “strongly not representative” to 5= “strongly representative”). None of the judges were involved in this

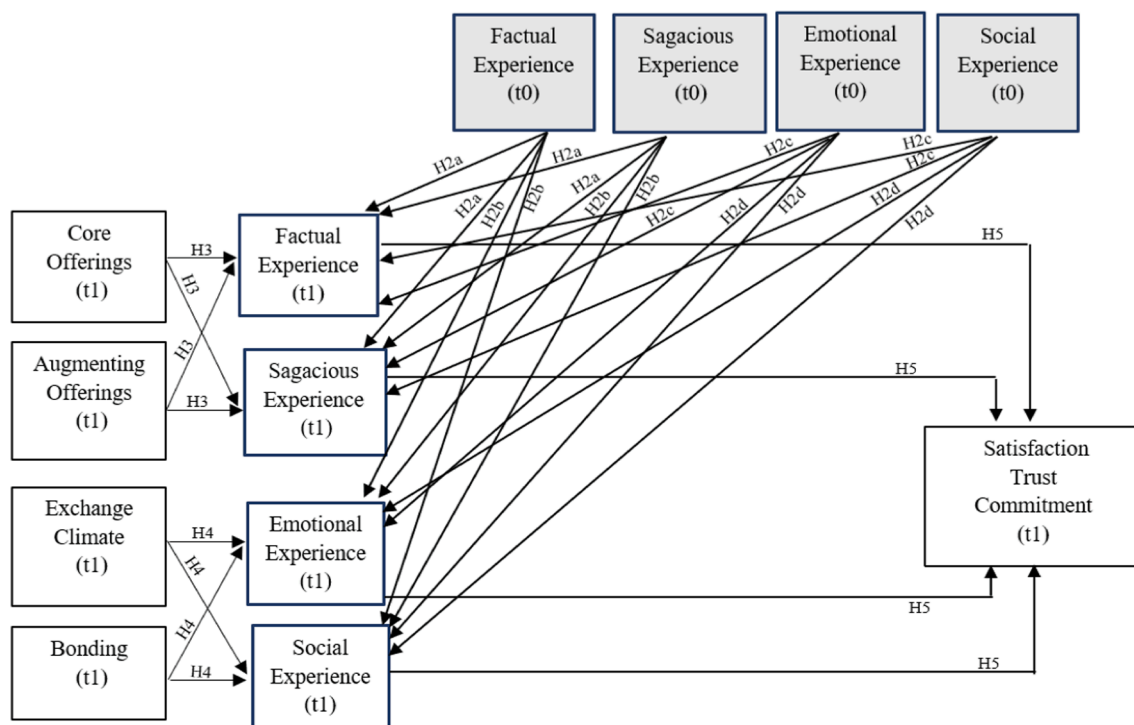


Fig. 2. Hypothesized model.

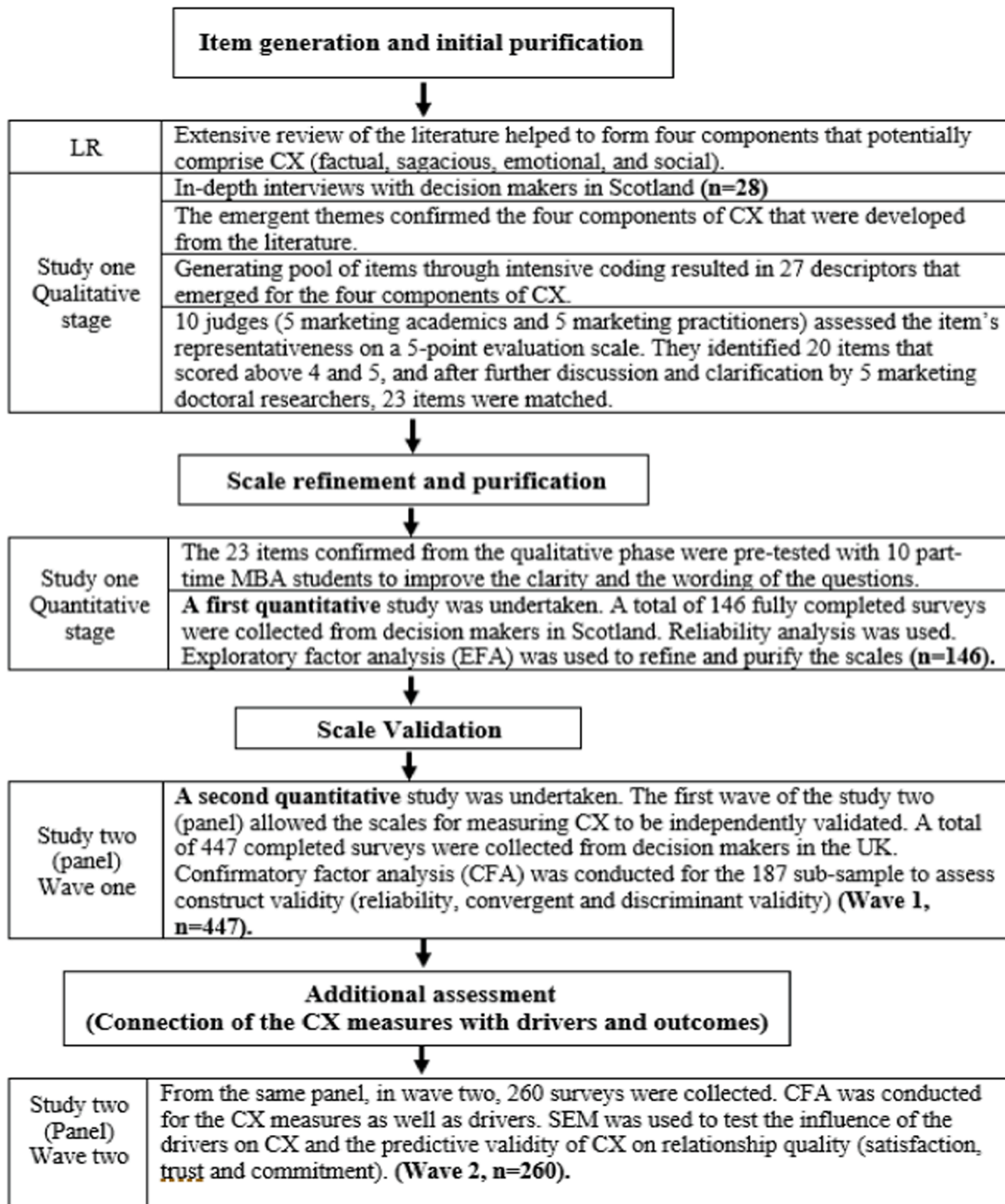


Fig. 3. Scale development process.

study. All of them were unaware of the goal of the investigation or the process through which these descriptors were produced. From this procedure 20 items with a score of “4” or “5” were identified, each capturing a unique aspect of the four impressions upon which CX reflects. Five senior marketing Ph.D. students served a final round of judgment, allowing us to match three of the seven unmatched descriptors through further discussions and clarifications and eventually derive 23 unique items capturing the four facets CX.

Using exactly the same method, we also processed the responses of the interviewees upon being asked to identify different components of the supplier’s offering and classify them into core and augmenting ones.

The results (see Appendix, Table A2) revealed that *technical quality*, *delivery performance (in meeting deadlines)*, and *price* represent elements of the supplier’s core offering. *Reputation*, *innovation*, *adaptation*, and *service support* were considered points of differentiation that augment the overall offering. The functional outcomes from the encounter with the supplier were also explored. The results (also in Table A2) revealed that the *exchange of information* and *technology* reflected the exchange climate aspect of the supplier’s functional offering. The *relational atmosphere* and the *development of personal relations* reflected the bonding aspect of the functional offering.

A quantitative survey (study one, second stage) followed. The aim

was to assess the newly developed CX scale's factorial structure and psychometric properties based on the 23 items the qualitative study had produced. This survey relied on a randomly generated sample of 400 Scottish companies (excluding the 28 from the qualitative investigation). Eligibility for participation was the same as in the qualitative study, and potential participants were again contacted over the phone to confirm their eligibility and willingness to participate. Of the 400 companies, 237 met the criteria and agreed to participate (effective sample). These 237 companies received an email explaining the purpose of the investigation. All participants received anonymity assurances and a link to the questionnaire, which was pretested for wording and clarity with a convenience sample of 10 part-time MBA students. In total, 146 fully completed replies (response rate 61 %) were received. The number of responses to the number of items in the CX measure gives a 6.34 ratio (146/23), which is above the recommended minimum ratio (5) for the analysis (Hair et al., 2014).

5.2. Study two

The second study relied on balanced panel data. Two parameters are key when collecting such data. The first is the eligibility to participate in the panel and response rates. In designing the panel, participants were screened for participation according to the following criteria: (a) to have completed a service project no more than three months ago; (b) to have an ongoing project with the same provider at the time they were first contacted; and (c) there were realistic possibilities that the company was going to need the same or a similar service again in the future for which the same provider could also be considered. This set of criteria enabled us to eliminate "new tasks" and ensure that a relationship with the provider was not an ephemeral one-off. It also allowed the assessment of the effect of CX in the past on the present CX as part of an ongoing relationship. Eligibility for further survival in the panel required the company to have launched another project for which the services of the same supplier could have been (but not necessarily) employed. This allowed us to assess the behavior as a result of CX during service delivery.

In designing the collection of the panel data, the time interval for the data collection is also very important. Past CX starts to fade at some point, and customers treat present CX independently of past CX. Because there is no theory-based rationale for the time it takes for this to happen, we relied on the findings from the in-depth interviews. Given the business volatility (e.g., managers moving to a different company), the majority of the participants (19 out of the 28 interviewees) set this time to the three-month interval (the mode for this question). Anything beyond this time span could mean that customers may treat the relationship with the provider as a "new one." Williams and Podsakoff's (1989) review of longitudinal field methods in management research identifies considerable variation in the temporal intervals used, ranging from one month to a year (e.g., Katsikeas, Skarmas, and Bello 2009). Therefore, based on what the available literature suggests and the insights from the qualitative study, we finally considered a three-month interval appropriate for contacting the panel members and collecting data.

Following this choice, we used the following time intervals: t_0 , launch of the effort to collect the first round of panel data, asking participants to describe their CX in service delivery with the provider; t_1 , three months later, contact surviving participants to collect data on their ongoing experience with the provider, as well as the individual participant's perception of the supplier's technical and functional offering and the participant's perception of the relationship quality with the specific provider (in terms of trust, commitment, and satisfaction).

Mindful of the panel participation attrition threat, the study started with a large, randomly generated, initial sample of 1,000 UK companies. Eligibility for selection and participation in study two required participants to: 1) have decision-making authority, 2) have been involved in the delivery of a project from a provider of professional services, and 3)

have liaised with the supplier's team during the delivery of the service. From the initial sample, 447 eligible companies agreed and participated in the first round (t_0). From this initial sample of 447 companies, 187 either failed to meet the eligibility criteria to enter the next stage of the panel (t_1) or simply did not respond to a second call. We used these 187 responses to validate the scale for CX that study one had produced. This is a legitimate process in terms of best practices for scale development since the second study has produced two independent samples: one comprising 187 companies that only participated in t_0 , and another made up of 260 participants who survived the entire process and produced the data for t_1 . Responses from these 260 companies were used to test hypotheses H2a to H5. Early and late responses during each round of the panel were tracked, and no significant differences were identified.

Aside from the measure for CX (which originally was derived from study one), the extant literature informs the measures in this second study. Specifically, to assess the impact that core technical elements have on CX, the study measured the supplier's *delivery performance*, using the items suggested by Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007); the *quality* of the supplier's output, using the measure suggested by La, Patterson, and Styles (2009); and the supplier's *pricing approach* ("fairness" and "competitiveness") using the pertinent two items from Molinari, Abratt, and Dion (2008). To assess the impact on CX from the technical elements of the supplier's offering that augment customer value, the study measured the *supplier's reputation* using the La, Patterson, and Styles (2009) measure; the supplier's output *adaptation* to the buyer's needs using the Woo and Ennew's (2004) scale; the supplier's *service support* to the buyer using the scale Eggert, Ulaga, and Schultz (2006) have employed; and the degree of *innovativeness* using the La, Patterson, and Styles (2009) measure.

To test the anticipated structure of each measure for the core and the augmenting technical elements, we employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) following the procedure suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), using the responses from the 260 participants that survived the panel data collection effort. We then calculated the buyers' perception of the supplier's core and augmenting technical elements as the weighted average of the original measures, using the standardized beta coefficients the CFA produced as weights. This enabled us to reduce the number of parameters in the model before testing the hypotheses (see Tables A3 - A6 in the Appendix).

Regarding the functional elements, we employed the same approach as above. First, we measured *information sharing* using the scale recommended by Woo and Ennew (2005), and *technology sharing* using the scale employed by Paulin, Ferguson, and Payaud (2000) in order to capture the climate during the exchange. Information and knowledge disclosure and sharing are behavioral manifestations of the climate between the supplier and the customer that only emerge when the climate between the two sides is truly positive and reassuring (Ojasalo, 2001).

Likewise, to capture the supplier's bonding efforts, we looked at the *personal relationships* between individuals from the two organizations, using the scale employed by Stuart, Verville, and Taskin (2012). We also assessed the *relational atmosphere during service delivery* using the Woo and Ennew measure (2005). Next, to measure *relationship quality*, we assessed the customer's trust in the supplier using the scale that Sharma and Patterson (1999) recommend. We also measured commitment using the pertinent measure from the same study, whereas Eggert and Ulaga's study (2002) informs our measure for customer satisfaction. We relied on these three scales to generate the overall measure of relationship quality. Tables A3 - A6 in the Appendix summarize the details of these measures.

In developing the questionnaire, we followed the recommendations of Tourangeau et al. (2000). The pilot testing allowed us to avoid ambiguous terms, eliminate vague concepts, and ensure simplicity, specificity, and conciseness while avoiding double-barreled questions and complicated syntax. Doing so helps reduce the possibility of common method bias when participants complete the questionnaire. Moreover, we also observed the procedures recommended by Podsakoff

et al. (2003) in collecting the data. We allowed for the anonymity of responses in order to minimize any potential social pressures or evaluation apprehension and to please the researcher, which could lead to biased responses. We also assured respondents that there were no right or wrong answers and encouraged them to answer questions as honestly as possible. This approach aimed to reduce the likelihood of respondents editing their responses to align with social desirability or to please the researcher.

6. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

6.1. Common method bias (CMB)

In spite of all the precautions taken during the designing of the second study, and in order to check if common method bias is a concern in our study, firstly, we implemented Harman’s single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) through EFA for all constructs. There was no threat of the presence of a dominant common factor. The variance explained was 42 % which is less than 50 %. However, some scholars believe that Harman’s single-factor test is insufficient (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, we undertook the second procedure, using the Common Latent Factor for the measurement model before moving to the

structural model, and no potential common method bias was found (Aftanorhan et al., 2021). The difference between the estimates of the two models (the model without a common latent factor and the model with a common latent factor) was less than 0.20.

6.2. Perceived CX during service delivery and its components (H1)

The first hypothesis suggests that perceived CX during the delivery of B2B services will reflect on both the cognitive (“factual” and “sagacious”) and the affective (“emotional” and “social”) impressions the supplier generates for the customer. The first step in testing H1 is to generate and validate the appropriate measure for CX. The first study served this purpose, and Table 1 summarizes the results from the qualitative investigation which allowed us to unveil four key themes (along with relevant descriptors) used to describe the four types of impressions upon which CX is expected to reflect.

Table 2 presents the results from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) run for testing the structural integrity of the CX measure reflecting on the 23 items derived from the qualitative stage. The data produced by the 146 companies that participated in the second stage of the first study served this purpose. Table 2 also reports Cronbach’s alpha index for each factor the EFA has produced. Table 2 clearly shows that the individual

Table 1

A summary of the themes and the descriptors that emerged during the in-depth interviews along with illustrative quotes.

Emerg ed Theme	Emerg ed Descriptors (items)	Illustrative Quote	Number and Percentage of Participants With Similar Quotes (n = 28)*
Factual Experience	Met the delivery deadlines	<i>“The key elements in what I would say in experience is people who understand the pressure of deadlines”</i>	23 (82 %)
	Met our budget	<i>“It has to be within the budget”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Met our specifications	<i>“Well, we expect a personal service. We expect a personal experience from, shall I say, the personnel”</i>	21 (75 %)
	Achieved our objectives	<i>“The main elements whilst I’m working with a provider would be my objectives”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Produced solutions that led to increase our company’s effectiveness	<i>“The solution provided by this service provider helped our small firm to successfully achieve the desired results effectively”</i>	18 (64 %)
Sagacious Experience	Provided high-level reports and presentations	<i>“What I liked with her is that she provided us clear and easily understandable reports of high standard”</i>	19 (67 %)
	Adaptive to customer needs and requests	<i>“If they weren’t adaptive you simply couldn’t continue with them”</i>	25 (89 %)
	Be quick in responding to supplier’s needs/requests	<i>“If we have to prompt them, give them a call, find out what has happened or what a delay is about we expect them to put their foot on the gas and give us an answer.”</i>	24 (85 %)
	Be innovative	<i>“Well, we found that, they’ve changed it, tweaked it, done this, which is a good thing.”</i>	22 (78 %)
	Produced innovative solutions and ideas	<i>“Your service provider has to keep moving forward, keep changing, tweaking and improving things. Bring new ideas and introduce new and better ways to do things”</i>	18 (64 %)
	Be up-to-date	<i>“The online-tracking system they used was really cutting edge and we received regular updates”</i>	21 (75 %)
	Demonstrate a good understanding of the challenges the customer faces	<i>“Realizing the problem and understanding all the potential implications was very important to me”</i>	20 (71 %)
Emotional Experience	Help improve customer’s performance	<i>“Soon, it was made clear that their work had a significant impact for us. More than we expected and hoped for.”</i>	21 (75 %)
	Pleasure (from the encounter climate)	<i>“The tone of the meeting and of the conversation is important. It was a warm and friendly climate”</i>	19 (67 %)
	Contentment	<i>“He was honest. Helped to understand what we can realistically expect from them, which made us both satisfied and, yes, happy with our choice to do business with them”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Be transparent	<i>“Transparency is important in business. You want to do business with people who are open and don’t try to hide anything from you”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Relief	<i>“They clearly knew their job. Always on top of any problem, no matter how small or big. When you do business with such professionals, you come to respect them and you stop questioning your choice”</i>	23 (82 %)
Social Experience	Enthusiasm	<i>“We are so pleased to work with him. He was affable and good mannered. Never did or said anything to upset me”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Take away fear (through reassurance to build “peace-of-mind”)	<i>“Working with these guys gave you that peace of mind that you want to feel with your suppliers”</i>	25 (89 %)
	Take away surprise (through honesty and/or transparency)	<i>“Right from the first meeting they laid their cards on the table. They were honest and transparent. This makes you feel that there will be no surprises down the road.”</i>	20 (71 %)
	Friendship with the supplier’s management is welcome	<i>“So, I like to become friends with my suppliers because I like to know a bit about the background and understand them better.”</i>	17 (60 %)
	Because of our business, the supplier invites us to attend social events	<i>“We have received invitation to attend their Christmas party at their offices, which makes you feel as belonging in a broader family”</i>	18 (64 %)
	We enjoy each other’s company in a social setting	<i>“Having a cup of tea and some small talk every now and then after a meeting is good for business!”</i>	16 (57 %)

Table 2
Assessing the factorial structure of the CX scale.

Items	The pattern matrix				Cronbach's Alpha
	Sagacious	Factual	Emotional	Social	
Met the delivery deadlines	-0.092	0.898	0.038	0.024	0.93
Met our budget	-0.172	0.917	0.073	-0.107	
Met our specifications	0.013	0.797	0.140	-0.074	
Achieved our objectives	0.071	0.782	0.077	-0.006	
Produced solutions that led to increase our company's effectiveness	0.138	0.832	-0.071	0.047	0.94
Provided high-level reports and presentations	0.129	0.816	-0.147	0.207	
Adaptive to customer needs and requests	0.818	0.032	0.125	-0.122	
Be quick in responding to supplier's needs/requests	0.801	0.008	0.165	-0.162	
Be innovative	0.984	-0.163	-0.095	0.130	0.88
Produced innovative solutions and ideas	0.926	-0.009	-0.138	0.130	
Be up-to-date	0.801	0.113	0.025	-0.009	
Demonstrate a good understanding of the challenges the customer faces	0.789	0.058	0.010	0.042	
Help improve customer's performance	0.745	0.020	0.227	-0.172	0.95
Friendship with the supplier's management is welcome	0.099	0.011	0.226	0.680	
Because of our business, the supplier invites us to attend social events	-0.009	0.022	-0.103	0.966	
We enjoy each other's company in a social setting	-0.078	-0.001	0.043	0.963	
Pleasure (from the encounter climate)	0.081	-0.119	0.698	0.301	0.88
Contentment	-0.062	0.030	0.971	-0.109	
Be transparent	-0.063	0.025	0.921	0.006	
Relief	0.172	0.091	0.722	0.047	
Enthusiasm	0.107	0.024	0.799	0.023	0.88
Take away fear (through reassurance to build "peace-of-mind")	0.087	0.093	0.753	-0.074	
Take away surprise (through honesty and/or transparency)	0.054	0.068	0.750	0.115	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

items load on the factors as anticipated by the analysis of the qualitative data in stage one. It is also evident from Table 2 that the structure is reliable. Importantly, the entire process so far (review of the literature, followed by in-depth interviewing to generate items, then followed by an independent study to collect data for measurement purification) attests to the face (nomological) validity of the CX measure during the delivery of a service (Churchill, 1979).

Having established the face validity for the CX measure, testing H1 follows by looking for convergent and discriminant validity evidence. For this purpose, we relied on the 187 responses from the participants in the second study (panel data, t₀) who failed to survive the panel collection effort. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix between the four types of impressions upon which CX is expected to reflect. Notably, all correlations are high and significant, reflecting the CX notion (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, and Roth, 2008).

At the same time, Table 4 shows the results from a confirmatory factor analysis, including the composite reliability index. Table 4 showcases the convergent and discriminant validity and the reliability of the CX measure. Convergent validity is established if the shared variance accounts for 0.50 or more of the total variance; Discriminant validity is evident when the AVE for each construct is greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other construct in the model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). On these grounds we accept H1.

6.3. Antecedents and outcomes of perceived CX during service delivery (H2a to H5)

Table 5 reports on the analysis to test H2a to H5. Hypotheses 2a to 2d explore the impact of past CX on the customer's present experience with the supplier. From Table 5, it is clear that H2a is fully accepted. H2a predicted a significant effect from past cognitive impressions on the customer's present cognitive impressions of CX, and the analysis confirmed this in full. It is worth noting that this significant effect is not always positive, which we will discuss in the following section. In contrast, H2b is mainly rejected as the analysis has revealed only one significant effect of past sagacious experiences on present social experience. H2c is mainly rejected since the analysis produced only one significant effect of past social impressions on the customer's sagacious

impressions in the present. Finally, H2d can also be mainly rejected as the analysis has only confirmed the impact of past social experience on present social experience.

Regarding H3, this is also mainly accepted as the results fail to confirm the significance of the effect on sagacious experience coming from the core offering. On the other hand, H4 is fully accepted, confirming the functional elements' impact on the affective impressions of the customer's perceived CX during service delivery. Finally, H5 is also fully accepted since the analysis delivers evidence of a significant relationship between the four impressions and the customer's perceived relationship quality.

7. Discussion, contribution, & implications

Understanding, measuring, and managing CX has been, remains, and arguably will continue to be important in the marketing literature because of the implications for the company's performance. Crucially, past studies in the field (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021) have not addressed the dynamic nature of CX, despite the normative arguments that past experiences influence CX in the present. Subsequently, the literature is missing a relevant framework for studying, understanding, and managing CX in the B2B context. As a result, practitioners from B2B sectors also miss a relevant paradigm to guide them in their endeavor.

We have sought to address this gap in the literature. The key tenets of OBB grounded our investigation and the framing of CX from a relational perspective. To serve this aim, we looked at CX and the impressions upon which CX reflects during the service delivery stage for straight and/or modified rebuys. Given the nature of the purchasing task,

Table 3
Correlation matrix with square root of the AVE on the diagonal.

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1- Factual Experience	0.84			
2- Sagacious Experience	0.70	0.82		
3- Social Experience	0.12	0.14	0.86	
4- Emotional Experience	0.71	0.77	0.21	0.84

Table 4
Assessing the psychometric properties for the CX measure.

CX measures		Estimates	CR	AVE	(Corr) ²	Conv	Disc
Factual Experience	Met the delivery deadlines	0.86	0.93	0.72	0.51	Yes	Yes
	Met our budget	0.81					
	Met our specifications	0.88					
	Achieved our objectives	0.83					
	Produced solutions that led to increase our company's effectiveness	0.85					
Sagacious Experience	Provided high-level reports and presentations	0.80	0.93	0.68	0.59	Yes	Yes
	Adaptive to customer needs and requests	0.89					
	Be quick in responding to supplier's needs/requests	0.87					
	Be innovative	0.67					
	Produced innovative solutions and ideas	0.73					
	Be up-to-date	0.83					
	Demonstrate a good understanding of the challenges the customer faces	0.80					
Social Experience	Help improve customer's performance	0.89	0.90	0.75	0.05	Yes	Yes
	Friendship with the supplier's management is welcome	0.67					
	Because of our business, the supplier invites us to attend social events	0.92					
Emotional Experience	We enjoy each other's company in a social setting	0.97	0.94	0.71	0.59	Yes	Yes
	Pleasure (from the encounter climate)	0.61					
	Contentment	0.87					
	Be transparent	0.83					
	Relief	0.92					
	Enthusiasm	0.89					
	Take away fear (through reassurance to build "peace-of-mind")	0.85					
Take away surprise (through honesty and/or transparency)	0.82						

AVE = Average Variance Extracted = $\sum(\text{standard loadings})^2 / \sum(\text{standard loadings})^2 + \sum \epsilon_{ij}$; Conv = Convergent Validity (AVE > 0.50); Disc = Discriminant Validity = $\text{AVE}/(\text{Corr})^2 > 1$; (Corr)² = highest (Corr)² between factor of interest and remaining factors. CR = Composite Reliability Index. Model fit indices: $\chi^2/DF = 2$, CFI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.06.

different stages of the customer's journey will become more or less important, depending on the customer's familiarity with the purchase and/or the supplier (Doyle, Woodside and Michell, 1979). Straight and modified rebuys capture, by definition, a significant relational engagement between the supplier and the buyer. New tasks, on the other hand, do not always reflect this because new tasks are not necessarily the early phase of such a relationship. New tasks include projects that are unique for the buying organization and will not necessarily generate future relational opportunities for the supplier (Steward et al., 2019; Chatterjee and Prasad, 2003). Hence, the focus of our investigation.

The results from our investigation show that in this specific context, CX for B2B customers reflects on four types of impressions: two cognitive ("factual" and "sagacious") and two affective ("emotional" and "social"). The nature of the supplier's offering (technical and functional) and the amount of personal engagement and interaction between suppliers and buyers in this stage support and justify this finding (Becker and Jaakola, 2020; Witell et al., 2020). For instance, some of the customer's cognitive impressions are facts-based, resulting from the customer's processing of the objective evidence pertaining to what the supplier has offered. Impressions resulting from such evidence are what we now can establish as the customer's "factual experience" with the supplier. However, suppliers do not always have or can produce such objective evidence, yet the customers must go through a cognitive process to assess what the supplier has offered them. This cognitive process results in what we have established as the "sagacious" impressions upon which CX reflects. During the service delivery, people from the two organizations interact with each other. This interaction allows for affective impressions to emerge. Some of these impressions are transient and relevant only for the duration of the interaction, feeding the customer's emotional impressions. Others are longer lasting, feeding the social impressions upon which CX also reflects.

In demarcating the cognitive and affective impressions into their subcomponents, the findings from this investigation are in line with the literature pertaining to the cognitive and affective influences on the customer's overall experience with the supplier (e.g., Shimp et al., 2015; Gentile, Spiller, and Noci, 2007; Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer, 1999). Crucially though, having empirically validated the factorial structure of the four different cognitive and affective impressions customers develop during the service delivery stage allows for portraying how different

drivers, including time, explain the formation of CX. This is important because, as we explain next, these drivers' effect is not always straightforward: our data analysis has produced some interesting results.

Starting with the supplier's offering, this consists of both technical and functional components. The former represents the value customers receive from the supplier's solution and service delivery. This technical component can be further classified into the core and (value) augmenting (sub) components. According to our findings, the core components are responsible only for factual impressions. In contrast, the value augmenting components have a stronger effect on CX, impacting both types (factual and sagacious) of the customer's cognitive impressions. This hardly comes as a surprise. The supplier's core offering represents elements of the supplier's value proposition that match the competition. On the other hand, the augmented offering reflects elements of the offering that allow the supplier to differentiate from the competition (Keller, 2000). From this perspective, it is reasonable to see that the augmented elements of the supplier's value proposition are more important in driving the customer's cognitive impressions. In this regard, this is the first investigation addressing the impact different technical elements of the supplier's offering have on CX in the context of service delivery from a relational perspective. The analysis of our data clearly shows that the points of differentiation (from competition) that come with the potential to augment the value the supplier generates for the customer are more important in generating both "factual" and "sagacious" cognitive impressions.

The functional components of the supplier's offer stand for the value customers receive from interacting and doing business with a specific supplier and the affective side of CX. Regarding this affective side, the results from our investigation show that both the "emotional" and the "social" impressions are subject to how well (or not) the supplier manages the functional elements during service delivery. This finding neatly fits the extant theory. Still, this is the very first empirical study to demonstrate that the formation of both transient and non-transient affects associated with CX is equally subject to different aspects of the supplier's functional offering that bear an immediate (e.g., "encounter climate") but also a longer-lasting (e.g., "bonding") consequence for the relationship between customers and their suppliers. This demonstrates the rather volatile nature of the affective side of CX.

Transient in nature, emotional impressions (e.g., relief, contentment,

or pleasure) emerge as a result of the actual encounter and the interaction between the individuals from the two organizations. Not surprisingly, the functional aspect of the supplier's offer steers, in full, the formation of such transient impressions: The emotional impressions upon which CX reflects depend not only on the climate during service delivery, which comes with a short-term impact but also on the supplier's effort to bond with the customer, which bears longer lasting effects. However, social impressions are predominantly rooted in the social nexus of relationships the provider cultivates with the customers. As such, social impressions have a longer-lasting effect. Still, they also

remain significantly dependent on the transient in-nature components of the supplier's functional offer (encounter climate). In this respect, our investigation is the first to establish (a) the significance of the supplier's functional offer in shaping the affective impressions upon which CX for the B2B customer reflects; (b) the impact of the fugacious components (such as the climate during service delivery) of the supplier's functional offering on the supplier's more strategic attempt to manage the affective impressions upon which CX reflects. If not properly managed or attended to, even by accident, this can harm the supplier's effort to shape the affective impressions upon which the customer's CX reflects.

Table 5
SEM results to test hypotheses H2 to H5.

	Paths	Standardized b	Hypothesis	Outcome
H2	Factual Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	-0.27***	H2a	Accepted
	Factual Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	-0.10*	H2a	Accepted
	Sagacious Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	0.16*	H2a	Accepted
	Sagacious Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	0.22***	H2a	Accepted
	Factual Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	-0.05 ns	H2b	Rejected
	Factual Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.02 ns	H2b	Rejected
	Sagacious Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	-0.01 ns	H2b	Rejected
	Sagacious Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.14*	H2b	Accepted
	Emotional Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	0.07 ns	H2c	Rejected
	Emotional Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	0.08 ns	H2c	Rejected
	Emotional Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	0.03 ns	H2d	Rejected
	Emotional Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.001 ns	H2d	Rejected
	Social Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	-0.03 ns	H2c	Rejected
	Social Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	-0.20***	H2c	Accepted
	Social Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	-0.003 ns	H2d	Rejected

(continued on next page)

Table 5 (continued)

	Social Experience $t_0 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.30***	H2d	Accepted
H3	Core Offering $t_1 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	0.75 ***	H3	Accepted
	Core Offering $t_1 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	0.05 ns		Rejected
	Augmented Offering $t_1 \rightarrow$ Factual Experience t_1	0.19*		Accepted
	Augmented Offering $t_1 \rightarrow$ Sagacious Experience t_1	0.79***		Accepted
H4	Bonding $t_1 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	0.65***	H4	Accepted
	Exchange Climate $t_1 \rightarrow$ Emotional Experience t_1	0.26***		Accepted
	Exchange Climate $t_1 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.17*		Accepted
	Bonding $t_1 \rightarrow$ Social Experience t_1	0.22**		Accepted
H5	Factual experience $t_1 \rightarrow$ Relationship quality t_1	0.47***	H5	Accepted
	Sagacious experience $t_1 \rightarrow$ Relationship quality t_1	0.11***		Accepted
	Social experience $t_1 \rightarrow$ Relationship quality t_1	0.07 *		Accepted
	Emotional experience $t_1 \rightarrow$ Relationship quality t_1	0.43***		Accepted
<p><i>Level of significance: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.000$; ns=not significant</i></p> <p>$X^2/df=1.8$; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.05</p>				

Level of significance: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.000$; ns = not significant
 $X^2/df = 1.8$; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.05.

Another major contribution comes from testing the impact of time as a driver of the impressions upon which CX reflects. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to do so. Panel data allowed us to assess how CX reflects on the customer’s impressions at two different points in time and empirically observe the impact of past impressions in the present. In theory, different layers of past experiences accumulate over time and influence how customers experience their interaction with a supplier in the present. Empirically testing this argument is important in its own right. In doing so, our data analysis produced some counter-intuitive findings. For instance, in line with the pertinent literature (Lazarus, 1984; Edwards, 1990; Reger et al., 1994; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2007), we anticipated that cognitive impressions from the past would significantly affect the affective impressions in the present. This hypothesis was mainly rejected, demonstrating that, over time, the cognitive and the affective impressions form independently of each

other. A possible explanation is the different drivers that explain the formation of the cognitive and affective impressions, respectively. The technical and the functional components of a supplier’s offering are not necessarily related (Grönroos, 1984): the ability to deliver a service that meets the customer’s (cognitive) expectations does not necessarily come with the ability to affectively connect with the customer, especially over time (Gounaris and Venetis, 2002). In this context, the expectation that CX develops through time and layer by layer is not entirely accurate. At least not during the service delivery stage of the customer’s journey with an established supplier and for straight/modified rebuys. B2B suppliers need to attend and manage each set of impressions individually every time they interact with the customer.

Making matters even more interesting, our data analysis also revealed a *negative* effect of the past factual impressions on both the factual and sagacious impressions in the present. At first sight, this

negative effect may appear to be a surprise, mainly because the main body of CX theory has promulgated the opposite. However, this finding becomes less surprising when seen through the prism of such theories as selective attention, learning, and the disconfirmation paradigm (Amsel, 1949; Oliver, 1977, 1980; Rehder and Hoffman, 2005). Decision-makers simultaneously receive a multitude of facts-based cues from the supplier. The perceived proximity of these cues regulates the attention each cue will receive from the decision-maker (Restle, 1957; van Zeeland and Henseler, 2018). B2B decision-makers have acquired the habit (and skill) to contextualize what the supplier offers. Subsequently, they form pertinent impressions (Shah, Kumar, and Kim, 2014), according to their self-perceived role as professionals with decision-making authority (Ellis, 2010). Over time, they internalize past impressions, which become part of what they have learned to expect from their existing supplier (Patterson, Johnson, and Spreng, 1996). In forming the cognitive impressions of CX in the present, cognitive impressions from the past serve as a benchmark. Hence, suppliers must constantly look for ways to improve their technical offering. Failing to do so sends “negative” signals to the customer (e.g., “complacency,” see for instance, Oliveira and Lumineau, 2019). In such cases, the cognitive impressions of CX in the present will contract as a result of the customer’s past factual impressions.

By implication, the claim that CX accumulates over time is arguably misleading as long as this claim implies a process by which positive past experiences enhance the experience in the present. This may be true for the affective impressions but not for the cognitive, facts-based ones. Notably, failing to distinguish between the different types of cognitive (“factual” and “sagacious”) impressions would have masked this important finding.

The additional contribution this investigation has to offer is for practitioners and the implications for CX management emerging from our findings. First and foremost, we deliver a strong theoretical case for looking at B2B customers’ CX from a relational perspective while also recognizing the subjectivity governing the process through which CXs reflect on specific impressions. OBB is far more complex and dependent on the nature of the purchasing task; our suggested framework observes this complexity. This framework received empirical validation from data reflecting the relational context between B2B customers and their suppliers. As such, the first two implications for practitioners from which they benefit from this investigation are: (a) relying on a company’s own records (objective data) to read and understand CX is inapt and misleading because of the unknown discrepancy between what the company has recorded and the actual impressions an exchange has generated for the customer; (b) ignoring the different types of impressions customers develop during the various stages of the OBB (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Witell et al., 2020) is equally inapt and is risking to mask aspects of CX that, as we have shown, are important for the supplier to manage. Hence, suppliers need to toil to frame, understand, and assess CX from their customers’ perspective and do so separately for each stage of the customer’s journey. Under the caveat of staying alert and striving for constant improvements, the positive effect of CX on relationship quality justifies this effort. In doing so, practitioners can immediately consider the use of the four types of impressions we report in this manuscript, against which they can assess how well they perform in generating a positive CX for their customers within a relational context.

Following from the previous discussion, we can now offer this definition of CX: *“From a relational, dynamic perspective, CX is a multi-faceted notion reflecting on factual, sagacious, emotional and social impressions that result from a customer’s assessment and evaluation of the service provider’s core and augmenting offerings, as well as the exchange climate and bonding developed during the business interaction. This evaluation is processed concurrently with impressions from the past the same supplier had generated for the same customer.”*

Practitioners also benefit from seeing how their offering steers their customers’ impressions in this relational context. This allows the

management to focus, for instance, on the augmenting components of their technical offering since this component is particularly significant in delivering positive cognitive (factual and sagacious) impressions. Likewise, positive affective (emotional and social) impressions depend on the functional component (in its entirety) and how they interact with their customers during service delivery. Arguably, many suppliers seek differentiation and a competitive advantage simply by focusing on the core elements underpinning their service delivery. This is proper and necessary, especially since time is not always a friend. But this is merely one side of the coin. The other side in CX management requires managers to pay an equal amount of attention and care to the elements augmenting their technical offering, as well as to the functional component of this offering and how they interact with their customers both during the delivery of their services but also in a broader sense. By doing so, they adopt a more integrated approach to CX management, one that allows them to holistically manage how their customers experience what they have to offer. This requires a significant degree of creativity and innovation on behalf of the supplier, but most importantly, it requires a very customer-centric approach to monitoring and managing CX (La, Patterson, and Styles, 2009).

8. Limitations and directions for future research

Notwithstanding this investigation’s significant contributions, three limitations should be noted. The first is associated with the subjective nature of CX. Because of this, it is reasonable to expect that the impact for each of the four types of impressions upon which CX reflects during service delivery will be subject to effects that emanate from the culture and values or from the broader microenvironment in which the business exchanges take place. The same is also potentially true for the effect that past CX has on current CX. Our data come from a homogeneous, in terms of culture and business practices, environment (UK), preventing us from testing for this. We would therefore welcome future researchers to replicate their investigation in significantly different cultural contexts to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the impressions upon which CX reflects and the mechanisms through which CX develops.

The second limitation is the time span this study has covered. Designing a longitudinal study is a significant challenge. We recognize that having only two CX measures over time can potentially mask the true nature of the relationship between past and present CX or how customers respond to the level of experience the supplier delivers. This may not necessarily be linear. Intuitively, one would be inclined to argue for a saturation point beyond which the impact CX has on relationship quality could begin to fade. Our data do not allow for this analysis neither. Future researchers who may wish to take up this challenge can do so using the measure we report in this manuscript. Doing so could also help to establish the “profit responsibility” of CX management. Marketing management is accountable for delivering sustainable, long-term profitability while dealing with changing customer expectations, preferences, and wants (Moorman and Rust, 1999). The management of CX is not exempted from this principle. Establishing the profit implications of generating “thrilling” or “delighting” CXs is thus a clear direction for future researchers that we would highly recommend.

The third limitation is the focus on the decision-maker (key informant approach) and the exclusion of new tasks. The B2B context is certainly more complex than this, and several stakeholders from the buying center (e.g., “users” or “influencers”) are equally important. Hence, their perspective and experiences are also important regarding CX management. We appreciate that assessing and modeling such stakeholders’ experiences is a great challenge regarding research design. Especially when attempting to factor in the impact of time. But certainly, a task that is required in the future. The same is also true regarding the decision to exclude new tasks. The latter represents a great challenge since, for instance, the buyer is typically open to existing and new suppliers while having no previous experience with the purchasing situation. Charting the CX during the customer’s journey and through the

different stages of the buying process while considering the different members of the buying center and their individual experiences will allow in the future to derive a far more complete understanding of the constituent impressions upon which CX reflects and the drivers of these impressions. However, the first necessary step is to have a valid and reliable measure, and this manuscript has offered this. Future researchers may wish to pick on this challenge.

Another important direction for future research is to continue pressing for further investigation of the role of time in the formation of present CX. In this study, we have relied on a valid paradigm (expectation-disconfirmation theory) according to which past CX will directly impact CX in the present. However, it is equally plausible that this effect is not direct; or not merely direct. For instance, it may be possible that past CX mediates (partially or in full) the formation of CX in the present. As customers gain experiences, their beliefs take shape and form, and there can be a complete change in how they perceive a service encounter and its components. Hence, addressing this possibility is a direction for future researchers we would strongly recommend. At the same time, the sagacious and factual aspects of CX can potentially capture dynamic aspects of experience formation in other stages of the customer's journey that our data cannot capture. To do so, we need future conceptual and method advancements, which the findings from this study can propel.

Finally, it is only sensible to expect that for each buying center member, the impression they acquire will eventually be the product of the interaction with the supplier and their colleagues from the buying center. This is because the different members of the buying center interact during the purchasing task. Exchanges of opinions and perceptions of the impressions the supplier has generated for each member will most likely occur during these interactions, with each member acting as both a recipient and a carrier of impressions. Other situational factors, including the mood of those involved during service delivery from each organization can also be important. Examining the complexity of this intra-dynamic process is clearly beyond the scope of this study because untangling this complexity requires first to obtain a valid and reliable measure, which is what this study has delivered. Thus, we encourage future researchers to use our measure and attempt to address this intra-dynamic process, which will allow unveil aspects of the hazy CX management.

Declaration of competing interest

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

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114606>.

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