

CXB2B: A Multi-dimensional Scale for Customer Experience in B2B Services — Scale Development and Validation

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1. Abstract

Understanding and managing customer experience is pivotal in marketing, yet it's often approached through a business-to-consumer lens. This perspective overlooks the unique dynamics of B2B interactions, where buying behaviours and relational intricacies differ markedly. The existing literature, therefore, lacks a rigorous framework for capturing customer experience from a customer-centric, relational viewpoint in B2B settings, particularly concerning its influence on relationship quality (Gounaris and Almoraish 2024).

This manuscript seeks to bridge this gap by proposing a structured approach to understanding customer experience in the B2B context. It presents findings from three distinct studies. Initially, a qualitative study generated potential scale items, followed by a quantitative phase focusing on refining and purifying the scale. The final quantitative phase involved validating the scale against measures of relationship quality.

Our research has identified four primary dimensions of customer impressions: two cognitive (factual and sagacious) and two affective (emotional and social). The study investigates how these dimensions of customer experience collectively shape the perceived quality of business relationships, offering a detailed understanding that aligns with the complex nature of B2B interactions.

Keywords: Customer Experience; Business-to-Business; relationship quality

2. Key contributions

Previous research (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019; Witell et al. 2020; Kuppelwieser and Klaus 2021; Lundin and Kindström 2023) has not fully addressed customer experience (CX) measurement, despite its recognised impact on company's performance. Consequently, there's a gap in a relevant framework to understand and manage CX in the B2B context.

Our research significantly contributes to this gap. We identified four distinct types of impressions forming CX in B2B interactions (Gounaris and Almoraish 2024): two cognitive ("factual" and "sagacious") and two affective ("emotional" and "social"). This classification aligns with literature on cognitive and affective influences on experiences (e.g., Shimp et al. 2015; Gentile et al. 2007; Bagozzi et al. 1999), enriching understanding of CX in B2B settings.

Our findings lead to two pivotal contributions: First, we offer a framework to define and measure CX in B2B service delivery, focusing on the relational perspective. This framework illuminates the diverse impressions that shape CX, aiding future research in exploring CX at different stages of the B2B customer journey. Second, our study expands CX literature by empirically delineating key components that form B2B customers' experiences with their suppliers.

Practically, our empirically validated framework offers insights for practitioners. Primarily, it challenges the adequacy of relying solely on internal records for understanding CX, highlighting the discrepancy between recorded data and actual customer impressions. Moreover, it emphasises the necessity of recognising and addressing the diverse impressions customers form throughout their journey. Ignoring these can obscure vital facets of CX management. Suppliers are thus urged to meticulously assess CX from their customers' perspectives, tailoring their approach to each journey stage. Utilising the four identified impression types, suppliers can better gauge and enhance CX, fostering a positive relational dynamic. This approach, while demanding, is justified by the substantial influence of CX on relationship quality, advocating for continuous vigilance and improvement in CX management.

3. Necessity of a Scale for B2B Customer Experience

The Marketing Science Institute highlights the management and orchestration of customer experience (CX) as pivotal areas warranting scholarly scrutiny. The profound influence of CX on an organisation's financial health underpins the scholarly impetus to rigorously investigate CX, examining its antecedents and its ramifications on organisational performance (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019; Kuppelwieser and Klaus 2021; Gahler et al. 2023). The context of customer experience assumes critical importance across the spectrum of product-based and service-based offerings. Scholarly inquiries have systematically addressed these domains, duly acknowledging the distinct peculiarities inherent to each (Brakus et al. 2009; Grewal et al. 2009). Notably, the sensory dimensions of customer experience assume amplified significance in certain instances, particularly within the domain of tangible goods, contrasting starkly with scenarios involving intangible service offerings.

Remarkably, the discourse surrounding customer experience (CX) management predominantly revolves around the B2C milieu, as evidenced by existing literature. There exists a notable dearth of research probing into CX within the B2B sector, a gap that is particularly conspicuous (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019; Gao et al. 2023). This oversight is unexpected, especially considering the voluminous nature of transactions and interactions characteristic of the B2B sector in contrast to B2C. Furthermore, the influence of experience management on aspects such as customer loyalty—which, owing to factors like inertia, can significantly bolster a B2B supplier's performance—assumes greater prominence in the B2B context (Avlonitis and Gounaris 1999; Verhoef 2003; Palmatier et al. 2008). Additionally, it's crucial to acknowledge the stark contrast in the organisational buying behaviour (OBB) as compared to individual consumer patterns (Coviello et al. 2002). This distinctive aspect of OBB

necessitates a detailed approach to managing and understanding the intricacies of such a subjective concept as CX in a B2B setting.

While there have been some exploratory endeavours into the realm of CX over time, the breadth and depth of these investigations have often been constrained. Initial inquiries predominantly focused on CX within the narrow confines of the new product development phase (Petersen et al. 2003; Magnusson 2009). Such a perspective, though insightful, overlooks the myriad of interactions between the B2B supplier and customer that occur outside the ambit of 'innovation' projects, many of which are not inherently collaborative in nature. On the other hand, a segment of the research sought to cast a wider net by examining CX's influence on customer behavioural tendencies and the potential it creates for supplier upselling (Bolton et al. 2008). However, this approach often falls short due to its dependence on objective metrics derived from company records, such as the "response time" to customer grievances. This method neglects the inherently subjective nature of CX (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The perception of such experiences, including the responsiveness to complaints, varies markedly across individual customers. Moreover, relying solely on objective data fails to capture the full spectrum of CX, particularly overlooking those customers who choose not to articulate their complaints or those who do not have grievances in the first instance. The inaugural endeavour to explore CX within a scholarly context was undertaken by Lemke et al. (2011). Despite its frequent citation in academic circles, this study has not achieved extensive acclaim within the domain of B2B literature. This limited recognition may stem from the study's broad approach, which did not distinctly focus on CX within the B2B sector. Instead, the research adopted a 'hybrid' methodology, aiming to encapsulate the concept of 'experience' for customers across both B2B and B2C sectors, despite the intrinsic disparities between these two realms."

A subsequent investigation by McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) reinvigorated the discourse on CX in the B2B realm by adopting a subjective lens for CX conceptualization. The principal merit and contribution of this research lie in its acknowledgment of CX's inherent subjectivity, tailoring its measurement tools to reflect this perspective, a novel approach within the B2B context. However, the study delineates CX based on two expansive categories: 'cognitive' and 'emotional' impressions. While the theoretical underpinnings for these dimensions are extensively derived from normative and empirical studies within the B2C sector, this approach raises certain limitations. The study's framework, while pioneering in the B2B field, overlooks potentially significant elements of experience, such as 'social experience,' which holds pertinence in B2B settings from a relationship marketing standpoint (Schakett et al. 2011; Paulssen and Roulet 2017).

Face validity similarly emerges as a pivotal issue in another contemporary study by Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021), which essentially replicates an earlier work (Klaus and Maklan, 2012). This replication, rather expectedly, predominantly relies on the original instrument, applying the same metric to both individual consumers and B2B clients. This approach, echoing the limitations seen in Lemke et al.'s (2011) research, neglects the specific details and

Organizational Buying Behavior (OBB) peculiarities crucial for accurately delineating CX in a B2B framework. Lundin and Kindström's (2023) research explore into the ramifications of digitalization on B2B customer journeys, offering valuable insights. However, the study's reliance on a single-case study methodology could potentially hinder the broader applicability of its conclusions.

The extant body of literature is notably deficient in a robust framework and a precise scale for CX that is firmly anchored in scholarly research, particularly one that elucidates the formation of various impression types during service interactions and retains its applicability for B2B suppliers in characterizing, quantifying, and orchestrating the CX they deliver to their clientele. Addressing this lacuna is paramount as it would not only augment the pertinence of academic investigations but also empower industry practitioners to refine their CX management strategies (De Keyser, 2020). Concurrently, from an academic perspective, bridging this gap would afford scholars a deeper and more comprehension of CX, its measurement modalities, and the ramifications of CX management, especially during the critical service delivery phase, a quintessential segment of the B2B customer's journey with service providers (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020).

Our study narrows its focus to B2B services to specifically examine CX elements unique to product usage, primarily in straight and/or modified rebuy situations. This approach aims to methodically explore CX in the B2B context, recognizing that B2B clients often have repeated interactions with service providers, leading to varied customer journeys (Zolkiewski et al. 2017). We acknowledge that in scenarios where B2B clients benefit from a mix of goods and services, some aspects of the B2B customer experience may be less visible, posing challenges to the development of theoretical frameworks and reliable metrics for assessing such experiences (Gummesson & Polese, 2009).

4. Theoretical ground for the CX scale

In the wake of reviewing the prevailing literature on customer experience in B2B, we are now poised to investigate the theoretical foundations that inform our CX measure. This necessitates an initial investigation of OBB, followed by an examination of the impressions engendered by the supplier in the B2B customer throughout this journey.

Two principal frameworks underlie OBB (Woodside and Ferris-Costa, 2006). The inaugural framework is rooted in the rational choice theory, striving to shed light on the cognitive processes and reactions at different junctures of the OBB, while acknowledging the employment of no compensatory rules in the decision-making continuum (Brown et al., 2011; Korhonen et al., 2008). Consequently, emotions are incorporated into the model elucidating the decision-making paradigm. The subsequent framework is anchored in behavioural theory, aiming to elucidate the identities involved in a procurement scenario, their cogitations and sentiments during the progression, and the manifestation of these elements in organizational decision-making. Both frameworks concede the importance of integrative mechanisms that fuse cognitive and emotional dimensions of OBB. Hence, the perceived CX ought to

encapsulate both cognitive and emotional impressions that arise from the interplay between the B2B client and its supplier, resonating with the insights proposed by McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019).

In this research, the emphasis on cognitive impressions is crucial. Beyond physical interactions, less in delineating the ambit of this research, the significance of cognitive impressions is pronounced. Beyond tangible interactions, which hold diminished relevance in service-oriented scenarios, the scholarly discourse outlines the pertinence of mental engagements as pivotal cognitive impressions. Illustrative of such indicators are the supplier's competence in adhering to timelines and budgetary constraints (Gounaris 2005a). These signals foster cognitive perceptions grounded in the tangible and factual interactions occurring during the service exchange between the client and provider (Shimp et al. 2015; Barends and Rousseau 2018). Consequently, the emergent, factually-oriented cognitive perceptions will henceforth be referred to as the perceived factual experience of service delivery.

Nevertheless, suppliers may not consistently yield objective, fact-based manifestations; nonetheless, the client is necessitated to engage cognitively, assimilating such indicators and appraising the supplier's proficiency in fulfilling the anticipated service (e.g., Gentile et al. 2007; Verhoef et al. 2009). Instances may encompass the service provider's aptitude in comprehending and adapting to client requirements or the supplier's propensity for innovation and problem-solving (Gounaris 2005b; La et al 2009). We term this category of cognitive perception as sagacious experience, acknowledging the mental exertion (and strain) the client invests in forming cognitive impressions that, however, hinge on the client's subjective interpretation of the supplier's outputs.

This bifurcation into 'factual' and 'sagacious' experiences is both pivotal and pertinent. Despite their shared cognitive nature, it is improbable that 'factual' and 'sagacious' impressions emanate from identical stimuli. This distinction bears considerable weight from a CX management standpoint and should not be disregarded.

Whilst 'factual' and 'sagacious' perceptions arise from the supplier's efficacy in service delivery, a pivotal aspect at this juncture is the personal interaction between the customer and the supplier, fostering emotional dynamics and consequently, additional emotional perceptions (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019), notably crucial in the B2B service sectors. Factors like the perceived "safety" of one option over another or the level of transparency in the business relationship are affective elements that sway the B2B purchaser's ultimate decision (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007). This is attributed to the fact that, particularly in B2B services, the customer's valuation of service is often ordinal rather than cardinal (Pham et al. 2015).

In the relevant literature concerning emotions, the term 'affect' is predominantly used (Bagozzi et al 1999), facilitating the differentiation between two distinct affective states: a fleeting, short-term state commonly termed as 'emotion', and a more enduring state, referred

to as 'mood', which is deeply ingrained and persists over a more extended duration (Fisher 2000).

For example, perceptions tied to the atmosphere and emotional climate created during the service interaction are crucial for comprehending and interpreting Organisational Buying Behaviour (OBB). As organisational decision-makers aim to resolve specific company issues, their purchasing decisions are influenced by transient emotions like feelings of 'safety,' 'satisfaction,' or 'relief' when considering different options (Coviello et al. 2002; Korhonen et al. 2008; Ballantyne and Aitken 2007). These fleeting emotional states, termed 'emotional experiences,' significantly impact the choices made by buyers.

Apart from these short-lived emotions, enduring emotions also play a critical role in B2B interactions. These longer-lasting emotions often stem from social interactions between the supplier and buyer (Kiely 2005), influencing factors such as wallet share, cross-buying tendencies, and supplier loyalty (Paulssen and Roulet 2017). Contrasting with transient emotions, these socially-rooted affects, known as 'social experiences,' are time-resistant, founded on a web of social connections and reciprocity (Paulssen and Roulet 2017).

Just as with cognitive perceptions, it's improbable for transient and enduring affects to arise from the same stimuli. Thus, recognising the varied nature of affective responses elicited by service delivery in B2B contexts is paramount."

5. Scale development

Step 1- Items generation and initial purification

An extensive examination of existing literature laid the groundwork for an initial conceptual framework of CX, identifying possible dimensions such as factual, sagacious, emotional, and social responses. In line with the scale development guidelines suggested by Churchill (1979) and DeVellis (2021), a qualitative research methodology was employed to pinpoint items capable of yielding a reliable measure for these identified CX dimensions. To this end, 28 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with key decision-makers involved in the purchasing processes of various Scottish firms. This interview format is lauded for its capacity to elicit detailed and profound insights (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019). Recognizing the inherent limitations of this method, a cautious yet judicious approach was adopted, utilising the key informant technique, a method previously leveraged with success in scholarly research (e.g., Walsh et al. 2015).

Participant inclusion in the study was contingent upon fulfilling three specific criteria: 1) Possessing the authority to make decisions; 2) involvement in the implementation of a project by a professional service provider; and 3) engagement with the supplier's team during the service provision phase. To ensure the recency and clarity of their service experience, participants' projects must have been concluded at least one month prior to the interview, disqualifying any ongoing projects. A diverse array of companies across various industries, including but not limited to healthcare, manufacturing, leisure, IT services, and engineering,

were approached to locate participants meeting these criteria. Interviews were conducted on a rolling basis as suitable participants were identified. Analysis of the interview transcripts proceeded concurrently with participant recruitment until the point of information saturation was reached after the 28th interview, following Boyd's (2001) methodology.

The comprehensive interviews yielded themes that resonated strongly with the four primary dimensions identified from the relevant literature. Analysis of the transcripts revealed 27 distinct descriptors characterizing CX during service delivery. To ensure content and face validity, as per Netemeyer et al. (2003), these descriptors were evaluated by 10 judges—comprising five marketing academics for content validity and five marketing managers for face validity—using a 5-point scale (where 1 signified “strongly not representative” and 5 denoted “strongly representative”). These judges were external to the study, uninformed about its objectives and the derivation of the descriptors. This evaluation process resulted in the identification of 20 descriptors with a rating of “4” or “5”, each encapsulating a unique facet of the four key impressions underpinning CX. The alignment and refinement process continued with five experienced marketing Ph.D. students, enabling the assimilation of three additional descriptors from the unmatched seven through extensive discussion and clarification. This culminated in a refined set of 23 distinct items, each reflecting one of the four dimensions of CX.

Step 2- Scale refinement and purification

Subsequently, a quantitative investigation was initiated to scrutinise the factorial composition and psychometric attributes of the nascent CX scale, derived from the 23 items identified in the preceding qualitative phase. This phase entailed surveying a random cohort of 400 Scottish enterprises, distinct from the 28 involved in the qualitative segment. The selection criteria for participation mirrored those of the qualitative study, with prospective respondents being approached telephonically to validate their eligibility and secure their consent. Out of the 400 approached, 237 enterprises fulfilled the prerequisites and consented to partake in the study, constituting the effective sample. These participants were briefed about the study's intent via email, assured of confidentiality, and furnished with a link to the questionnaire. Prior to dissemination, the survey instrument underwent a pretest focusing on its language and intelligibility, involving a select group of 10 part-time MBA students.

The survey yielded 146 completed responses, translating to a participation rate of 61%. The ratio of responses to the number of CX measure items stood at 6.34 (146/23), surpassing the minimum threshold of 5 recommended for such analyses (Hair et al. 2014).

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the data vindicated the structure posited by the initial qualitative inquiry, with individual items demonstrating anticipated loadings on their respective factors, thereby affirming the measure's structural integrity. Crucially, the sequential and meticulous methodology—comprising literature review, in-depth interviews for item generation, and an independent survey for measure refinement—corroborates the

face (nomological) validity of the CX measure in the context of service delivery, aligning with the principles set forth by Churchill (1979) and DeVellis (2021).

Step 3- Scale validation

An additional quantitative inquiry was undertaken to corroborate the validity of the scale items. This phase commenced with a vast, randomly assembled initial pool of 1,000 UK enterprises. The criteria for participant eligibility remained consistent with the preceding phases. Out of this extensive pool, 447 qualified enterprises consented and partook in the study. A subset of 187 responses from these participating entities was utilised to scrutinise the construct validity, encompassing aspects of reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity, through the employment of confirmatory factor analysis CFA (please see Table 1).

The outcomes of the CFA, inclusive of the composite reliability index, affirmed both the convergent and discriminant validity, in addition to the reliability of the CX metric. The criterion for establishing convergent validity was met when the shared variance accounted for 50% or more of the total variance. Meanwhile, discriminant validity was ascertained when the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded the squared correlation between that construct and any other construct within the model, adhering to the guidelines posited by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 1 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					
	Provided high-level reports and presentations	0.80					
Sagacious Experience	Adaptive to customer needs and requests	0.89	0.93	0.68	0.59	Yes	Yes
	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	Friendship with the supplier's management is welcome	0.67	0.90	0.75	0.05	Yes	Yes
	Because of our business, the supplier invites us to attend social events	0.92					
	We enjoy each other's company in a social setting	0.97					
Emotional Experience	Pleasure (from the encounter climate)	0.61	0.94	0.71	0.59	Yes	Yes
	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					
<p>AVE = Average Variance Extracted = $\Sigma(\text{standard loadings})^2 / \Sigma(\text{standard loadings})^2 + \Sigma \epsilon_{ij}$; Conv = Convergent Validity (AVE > .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: $\chi^2/\text{DF}=2$, CFI = 0.92, and RMSEA=0.06</p>							

Step 4- Assessing the predictive validity of the CX measure

The remaining 260 responses were subjected to structural equation modelling (SEM) to evaluate the predictive validity of the CX measures concerning relationship quality, encapsulated by trust, commitment, and satisfaction. The assessment of the customer's trust in the supplier was anchored on the scale advocated by Sharma and Patterson (1999). Commitment was gauged using a pertinent measure from the same study, while Eggert and Ulaga's (2002) research informed the measure for customer satisfaction. These three scales collectively constituted the composite measure of relationship quality. This led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

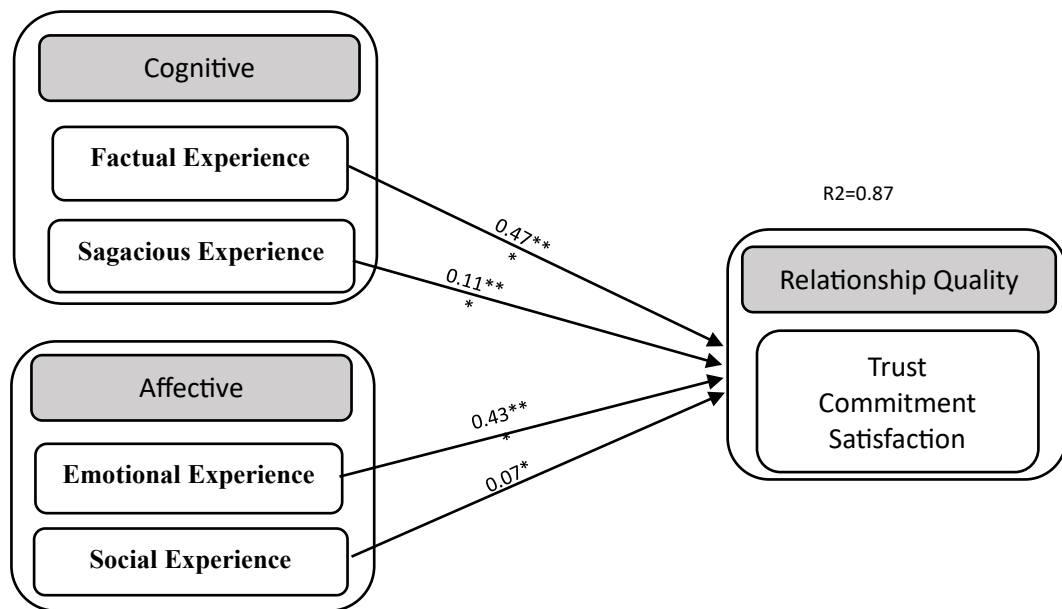
H1: CX significantly influences relationship quality, as manifested in the supplier's trust and commitment and the customer's satisfaction with the relationship.

H1 garnered full support, with the analysis substantiating a notable association between the four impressions and the customer's perceived quality of the relationship, as depicted in figure 1. The predictors of relationship quality account for 87% of its variance and, therefore, the error variance of relationship quality accounts for 13%.

Building on the preceding discourse, we propose the following definition of CX: *“From a relational standpoint, CX embodies a multi-dimensional construct, encapsulating factual, sagacious, emotional, and social impressions derived from a customer's scrutiny and appraisal of the service provider's performance. These impressions significantly influence the quality of the business relationship.”*

Given this insight, it's imperative for practitioners to remain vigilant and committed to continuous enhancement. The demonstrable impact of CX on relationship quality highlights the merit of this dedication. Practitioners are, therefore, encouraged to promptly leverage the four types of impressions outlined in this manuscript. Evaluating their performance against these impressions can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of their efforts in fostering a positive CX within a relational framework.

Figure 1: SEM to test CX predictivity



Level of significance: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.000$; ns=not significant

$\chi^2/df = 2$; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.06

6. Common method bias (CMB)

Despite rigorous precautions in designing the second study, we conscientiously examined the potential for common method bias. Initially, Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003) was employed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) across all constructs, which indicated no significant concern as the explained variance did not surpass 50%. Nevertheless, the adequacy of Harman's single-factor test has been questioned by some academics (Podsakoff et al. 2003). In response to these reservations, we proceeded with a more robust procedure by incorporating a Common Latent Factor in the measurement model prior to analysing the structural model. This subsequent analysis did not reveal any notable common method bias (Afthanorhan et al. 2021), as evidenced by the minimal discrepancy (less than 0.20) between the estimates derived from the models with and without the common latent factor.

7. Limitations and future research

This study makes significant contributions to the current understanding of CX, yet it's important to recognise its limitations and opportunities for further research. The subjective nature of CX calls for a deeper exploration of how cultural and microenvironmental factors

influence the four identified impression types during service delivery. This variation across cultures and business contexts suggests the need for replicating this study in diverse settings to enrich our understanding of CX dynamics.

Another limitation is our methodological reliance on key informants within the B2B context. The B2B sector involves a broad spectrum of stakeholders, each contributing to the overall buying behaviour. Integrating these varied perspectives to accurately depict relationship quality is challenging. Although our study offers a robust CX measure, capturing the multifaceted experiences of all stakeholders requires a more detailed approach and adaptable tools.

Moreover, this research lays the groundwork for future studies by establishing an empirically validated CX measure for service delivery in existing relationships. Future research could expand this to include various procurement tasks or customer journey stages, like exploring new suppliers or assessing proposals. This would enhance the scope and applicability of our CX measure, offering valuable insights into CX's complexities across different contexts and stages in the customer journey.

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