

B2B customer journeys: Conceptualization and an integrative framework

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ABSTRACT

Marketing practitioners and consultants have widely adopted the concept of customer journeys for use in analyzing contemporary B2B customer behavior, but despite this concept's potential, research on B2B customer journeys remains in its infancy. This study conceptualizes the B2B customer journey by synthesizing research on customer journeys, B2B purchase processes and buying centers, and business relationships. The study contributes to the extant research by explicating the conceptual underpinnings and core elements of the B2B customer journey, as well as by providing a novel, customer-centric definition of the concept. The developed conceptual framework for B2B customer journeys connects the concept with goal-oriented buying and usage center members, placing equal importance on the purchase and usage stages of the journey and acknowledging its iterative nature and embeddedness in relationships. Thus, the conceptualization offers a comprehensive, up-to-date perspective on B2B customer behavior that is applicable in diverse areas of B2B marketing, such as customer experience management, digital marketing, sales, service management, and service design.

1. Introduction

Customer journey has become a key construct for analyzing contemporary customer behaviors within various research streams, such as customer experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), digital marketing (Terho, Mero, Siutla, & Jaakkola, 2022), sales (Toman, Adamson, & Gomez, 2017), service management (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021), or service design (Lievens & Blažević, 2021). Marketing scholars increasingly argue for the usability of the journey concept for understanding customer behavior from the perspective of the customer (Anderl, Becker, von Wangenheim, & Schumann, 2016; Edelman & Singer, 2015), to help sellers develop and steer their sales and marketing efforts in a customer-oriented way (Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Specifically, the customer journey describes an individual buyer's path to purchasing and accessing offerings, comprising touchpoints throughout the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of the process (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013).

The customer journey concept is considered particularly useful in describing purchase processes in contemporary digitalized markets, where buyers are less reliant on sellers because of their almost unlimited access to information from digital sources (Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali, &

Pascucci, 2019; Steward, Narus, & Roehm, 2018). The journey concept can enrich and broaden traditional research on organizational buying (see Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Johnston & Bonoma, 1981a, 1981b; Sheth, 1973; Webster, 1965) in two important ways. First, the concept is inherently customer-centric: it can offer a contextual and dynamic understanding of individual organizational members' purchasing paths, which are composed of diverse touchpoints, some of which are outside the seller's control (Edelman & Singer, 2015). The journey concept acknowledges that the purchasing path is seldom linear; more commonly, it is a complex and customer-steered process (Srinivasan, Rutz, & Pauwels, 2016) in which buyers navigate through versatile and increasingly digital and social touchpoints from search to purchase and beyond (Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich, & Rudolph, 2019; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022). Second, the journey concept can offer a broader and more comprehensive view of the customer's process, integrating the pre- and post-purchase stages of buying into a balanced whole (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). Therefore, it provides an effective perspective for marketers to understand the experiences of customers on their paths to reach their goals during long and complex journeys (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

However, despite its promise, research on customer journeys has focused on consumer contexts, and B2B customer journeys remain

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poorly understood. Thus far, only a handful of studies have discussed B2B customer journeys, noting that the special features of the B2B buying context may hamper the applicability of existing consumer-focused journey conceptualizations (Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). In contrast to consumer contexts, B2B purchases involve multiple professionals who are at least to some degree governed by formal rules and procedures, and driven by various organizational and individual goals (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981b; Lewin & Donthu, 2005; Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, & Wilson, 2016). Thus, new research that addresses the role of the buying and usage center in customer journeys is needed to expand the application domain of the concept to B2B contexts. Furthermore, existing B2B studies have typically approached journeys from a narrow perspective, for example, by considering only particular types of touchpoints (e.g., Marvasti et al., 2021; Steward et al., 2018), digitalization of journeys (Lundin & Kindström, 2023) or capturing journeys from a particular marketing perspective, such as customer experience, sales, or digital marketing (e.g., Marvasti et al., 2021; Rushtolkharhu, Toukola, Aarikka-stenroos, & Mahlam, 2022; Toman et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017), and the “big picture” of B2B customer journeys has remained unclear. Thus, academic B2B marketing research still lacks a comprehensive understanding of B2B customer journeys.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to conceptualize B2B customer journeys. We accomplish this task by synthesizing the literature on customer journeys, B2B purchase processes, and buying centers, as well as business relationships, and developing a conceptual framework of the B2B customer journey. The study makes three contributions to extant research knowledge. First, the paper is among the first to offer a focused analysis of what the customer journey concept entails in the B2B context, providing a novel definition of the B2B customer journey as “a combination of buying and usage center members’ intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships.”

This definition situates the concepts of the buying center (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981b) and the usage center (Macdonald et al., 2016) within customer journeys and highlights their relevance in contemporary B2B marketing. Importantly, the offered conceptualization broadens the scope of most journey frameworks by placing equal importance on the purchase and usage stages of the B2B customer journey and acknowledging its embeddedness in business relationships. Second, this study provides much-needed conceptual clarity regarding the B2B customer journey concept by explicating its conceptual underpinnings and core elements, as well as relating the concept to close constructs of the buying process and customer relationships. Third, we conclude that the offered B2B customer journey conceptualization has the potential to build common ground for the various disconnected research perspectives that could leverage the B2B customer journey concept, such as digital and content marketing (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016), customer-centric sales models (Toman et al., 2017), customer experience management (Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017), and service management (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021).

Our theorization proceeds as follows. First, we develop the B2B customer journey framework through conceptual analysis. Given that existing research offers a rich body of research addressing organizational buying and customer journeys, we make use of these insights and perform a conceptual theory synthesis that aims to offer “a new or enhanced view of a concept or phenomenon by linking previously unconnected or incompatible pieces” (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). Such a synthesis can contribute by summarizing and integrating extant knowledge of a concept or phenomenon, thereby transforming previous findings through a novel higher-order perspective (MacInnis, 2011). Conceptual work can comprehensively outline the theoretically and practically relevant determinants of a phenomenon and thus provide a starting point for subsequent empirical research (Hulland, 2020). We synthesize research on i) customer journeys, ii) B2B purchase processes

and buying centers, and iii) customer relationships, all of which offer complementary insights that can be used to conceptualize B2B customer journeys. Following the conceptualization, we illustrate the developed B2B customer journey framework with an example and discuss its implications for business practitioners. The article ends by providing theoretical contributions and highlighting the novelty value of the article to extant research knowledge and outlining its implications for future research.

2. Foundations for understanding B2B customer journeys

A thorough understanding of B2B customer journeys requires consideration of the special characteristics of business markets. In the research on customer journeys, the examination of the B2B context is still very scant; thus, this research must be supplemented by literature that offers insights into the key premises of this context. To form the conceptual foundations for the B2B customer journey concept, this study draws from research on i) customer journeys, ii) B2B purchase processes and buying centers, and iii) business relationships (Fig. 1).

The general customer journey literature delineates the key elements of customer journeys. This research stresses the importance of understanding individuals’ unique goals and value experiences through a myriad of direct and indirect touchpoints with suppliers and their offering. In turn, the research on B2B purchase processes and buying centers provides deep insights into B2B buying as a type of group decision-making directed by the buying center. Lastly, research on business relationships offers insights into the relational context of B2B exchange, acknowledging that business markets are typically characterized by a limited number of actors and long-term relationships.

2.1. Customer journey research

Much of the contemporary research knowledge on customer journeys comes from customer experience studies, predominantly those addressing consumer contexts. The customer journey can be generally defined as the individual buyer’s path to purchasing and accessing offerings, comprising the series of firm- or offering-related touchpoints with which customers interact during their purchase process (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Halvorsrud et al., 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rawson et al., 2013). This mainstream journey research also offers general building blocks for the B2B customer journey concept, as discussed below.

First, this literature enables an understanding of the structure and composition of customer journeys: extant conceptualizations suggest that holistic journeys become easier to comprehend when they are divided into *stages*, such as the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) or pre-core, core, and post-core service encounters (Voorhees et al., 2017). In service-intensive

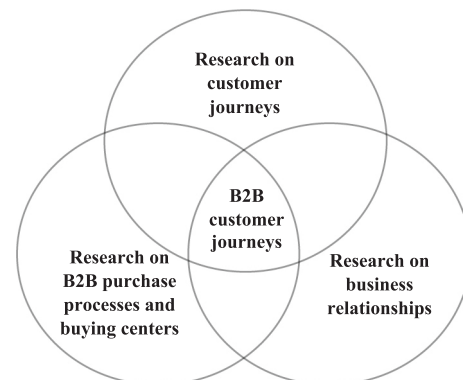


Fig. 1. Research contributing to the conceptualization of B2B customer journeys.

Table 1
Key research related to the B2B customer journey.

Article	Purpose	Method	Key contributions	Shortcomings in understanding B2B customer journeys
Lemke et al. (2011)	To propose a conceptual model of customer experience quality and its impact on customer relationship outcomes	Empirical, qualitative, 40 interviews in B2B and B2C contexts	Divides the touchpoints customers encounter during their journeys into three distinct classes: communication, service, and usage. Argues that experience quality during these touchpoints drives value in use	Focuses on customer experience evaluations in journey touchpoints rather than analyzing journeys as such
Toman et al. (2017)	To examine how sales should address B2B customers who are overwhelmed with choices and information	Conceptual paper based on consultancy insights	Proposes a four-step managerial sales framework to make buying easier for B2B customers. This framework maps the journey, identifies barriers, designs solutions, and tracks customer progress. Emphasizes a customer-centric view of the buying process and divides the buying journey into manageable phases	Focuses on the ease-of-buying perspective to understand and manage journeys. Contributes little insight into multi-actor journeys from the perspective of customers' goals
Zolkiewski et al. (2017)	To critique the adequacy of efforts to capture the complexities of customer experience in a B2B context using input-output measures	Conceptual paper based on a literature review	Introduces a strategic customer experience management (CEM) framework to capture the complexity of B2B service interactions and offers a reconceptualization of the B2B customer experience	Focuses on measuring customer experience. Notes the need to consider the variety of multi-actor customer journeys in B2B but does not offer insights into how to achieve this goal
Steward et al. (2018)	To examine the increasing use of online customer reviews in B2B decision-making journeys	Large-scale qualitative study of B2B buyers and two field experiments	Studies online reviews as social touchpoints in B2B customer journeys. Indicates that buyers aim to resolve differences in reviews rather than dismiss negative reviews Shows that even positive internal reviews prompt exploration to confirm that relational bias is absent	A rare customer-focused empirical study that provides insights into the role of social touchpoints in buying journeys. Does not help in understanding customer journeys on a broad scale
Steward, Narus, Roehm, and Ritz (2019)	To review OBB research and link the customer journey concept to the buying behavior research stream	Literature review	Demonstrates that the B2B customer journey represents an evolution of earlier OBB research Notes that the journey concept can capture the impact of technology on the buying process and the role of digital technologies in mapping and modeling customer journey across touchpoints	Presents the B2B customer journey as an OBB research continuum but provides few insights into what the customer journey concept entails in the B2B context
Witell et al. (2020)	To espouse the utility of CEM in B2B settings on the grounds that interactions are also experienced in B2B contexts	Conceptual paper based on a literature review	Develops a comprehensive framework that characterizes CEM in B2B, building on the two key dimensions of relationship control and customer entity. Identifies key challenges concerning relationship expectations and actor integration. Highlights customer journey stages, multi-actor roles in relationships, and touchpoint controls as central areas of B2B CEM	Focuses on customer experience management. Notes multi-actor roles, customer journey stages, touchpoints, and relationships as central challenges for CEM. However, the study does not focus on understanding B2B customer journeys.
Grewal and Sridhar (2021)	To introduce the role of social influence structures in B2B buying journeys	Commentary	Introduces a formalized view of social influence structures in the B2B customer journey within buyer and seller firms using three new concepts: <i>n</i> -ad social structure, <i>m</i> -hierarchy social structure, and primary-support (<i>p</i> -s) social influences	Focuses on the social structures of the buying center in B2B buying but does not consider broader B2B customer journey perspectives
Marvasti et al. (2021)	To propose a machine learning approach to infer the stages of the B2B buying journey by observing the online browsing behavior of buyer companies	Modeling study based on simulated and real datasets	Demonstrates that observing buyers' online behavior allows the buying stages to be estimated with high accuracy using hidden Markov models	Focuses on digital touchpoints from the supplier perspective and lacks a broader view of complex multi-actor B2B customer journeys
Lundin and Kindström (2023)	To explore how digitalization influences B2B customer journeys	Singe-case study	Identifies three key dimensions of B2B customer journeys that are influenced by digitalization: the digitalization of touchpoints, the change of roles in digitalized journeys, and the digitalization of the overall journey process.	Explores the role of digitalization in B2B customer journeys. Discusses the special characteristics of B2B customer journeys but does not provide a comprehensive conceptualization of the construct

contexts in particular, the phases of service delivery and consumption form a major part of the customer's overall process with the provider because the realization of services often involves both parties (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). Furthermore, journey studies increasingly suggest that journeys can be considered *recurring cycles with loyalty loops* rather than linear processes (e.g., De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, 2015; Kranzbühler, Kleijnen, Morgan, & Teerling, 2018; Siebert, Gopaldas, Lindridge, & Simões, 2020), extending the focus from purchase decision-making to long-term iterative processes.

Second, customer journeys are described as comprising different types of *touchpoints*, which are defined as episodes of direct or indirect interaction with the brand or provider (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham, & Klaus, 2020; Rawson et al., 2013). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) distinguish between brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and external touchpoints, and Lemke, Clark, and Wilson (2011) divide customer touchpoints into three distinct classes: communication, service, and usage. According to Witell et al. (2020, p. 422), journey touchpoints in a B2B context encompass “all verbal and nonverbal incidents that a business customer experiences, either consciously or unconsciously, related to a supplier firm”. A key observation is that sellers typically have only limited control over many touchpoints, especially those involving customers' social interactions with peers or other customers concerning the vendor (De Keyser et al., 2020; Kranzbühler, Kleijnen, & Verlegh, 2019). Journey research has further demonstrated that some touchpoints are more critical for outcomes than others (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Rawson et al., 2013). For example, attribution modeling has allowed firms to determine which touchpoints with digital content contribute to sales (Anderl et al., 2016; de Haan, Wiesel, & Pauwels, 2016; Kannan, Reinartz, & Verhoef, 2016; Li & Kannan, 2014; Li, Kannan, Viswanathan, & Pani, 2016). Such studies have paid particular attention to the composition and order of touchpoints in terms of their relationships to customer responses (Kuehnl, Jozic, & Homburg, 2019), including understanding multi-channel touchpoint effects on brand consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015), the interdependence of traditional marketing mixes and online sales metrics (Srinivasan et al., 2016), and online clickstream conversion rates for purchase transactions (Anderl et al., 2016). Lastly, many studies highlight the role of smart technologies in improving the journeys in contemporary business (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Rustholkarhu et al., 2022).

Third, this research heavily emphasizes an *individual's subjective perspective*. Journey touchpoints are understood as triggering customer experiences, that is, sensorial, affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral responses and reactions that are subjective to the customer's unique situation and context (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Thus, this research acknowledges the subjective experiences that individuals have throughout the process of purchase and usage, reflecting experiential value perceptions that are ongoing and iterative, as opposed to the linear, cognitive evaluation of isolated encounters (Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012). Furthermore, customers' responses to various stimuli along the journey as well as their evaluative outcomes are affected by situational variables, especially the *individual goals* that buyers aim to accomplish during their journey (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). The journey then illuminates the customer's processes of moving toward their higher-order goals, acknowledging that they draw on multiple resources to accomplish them (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Epp & Price, 2011; Hamilton & Price, 2019). The customer's higher-order goals are met through setting more specific lower-order goals (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020) that reflect individual purchase tasks.

To date, only a handful of studies have focused specifically on B2B customer journeys (see Table 1 for a summary). A close inspection of B2B customer journey research enables us to pinpoint the journey features that are considered unique to the B2B context. First, because the B2B customer is an organization, the B2B customer journey is a complex

entity that involves multiple intertwined paths by diverse organizational members, driven by their partly uniform but sometimes partly conflicting goals (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). For example, organizational buying is formally driven by collective organizational goals, which are often related to quantifiable financial outcomes (Terho, Eggert, Ulaga, Haas, & Böhm, 2017). However, in practice, purchases and their assessment are also influenced by the individual goals of the persons involved, which range from job ease to uncertainty reduction, personal reputation, and social comfort, stemming from individuals' idiosyncratic preconceptions, past experiences, and expectations (Huber & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020; Macdonald et al., 2016). Second, studies have highlighted that B2B customer journeys are often characterized by long usage processes and embeddedness in long-term business relationships (Rustholkarhu et al., 2022; Witell et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of understanding the post-purchase stage of the journey and the potential influence of relationships on the journey.

However, our review also indicates important gaps in extant knowledge on B2B customer journeys. Although studies highlight the special nature of organizational, multi-actor B2B customer journeys, they fail to reach agreement regarding how the key elements of the buying center should be considered when conceptualizing B2B customer journeys. Furthermore, existing research has primarily focused on specific, often narrow, aspects of B2B customer journeys. For example, journey studies have zoomed in on social structures, buying ease, measuring the B2B experience, social touchpoints, observing buyers' online behavior, or digitalization of B2B customer journeys. Comprehensive analyses of the key constituents of the B2B customer journeys as a whole remain missing. Existing studies also pay little attention to the potentially cyclical nature of journeys (e.g., De Keyser et al., 2020) or “loyalty loops” (Siebert et al., 2020) in the B2B context, symptomatic of overlooking the post-purchase stage that has a potential impact on subsequent journeys. Lastly, although these studies highlight the importance of the relational nature of B2B exchange, existing B2B customer journey models offer little insight into how relationships can affect journeys.

Next, we address the identified shortcomings by complementing the general customer journey literature with insights from B2B purchase processes and buying centers, as well as business relationships research.

2.2. Research on B2B purchase processes and buying centers

The notable body of research on B2B purchasing can arguably provide rich insights for a closer understanding of the nature and key characteristics of B2B customer journeys. We review literature related to organizational buying behavior (OBB), buying and usage center research, and purchasing and supply management (PSM) research to advance the conceptualization of B2B customer journey.

The OBB literature can enhance understanding of B2B customer journeys by providing in-depth information about the stages of B2B customer journeys, as this research has explored in detail buying processes in different buying situations. Specifically, Cyert, Simon, and Trow (1956) studied business decisions under uncertain conditions, observing the difference between structured repetitive and unstructured non-repetitive purchase decisions, and Webster (1965) extended this research by identifying the central uncontrollable and controllable factors influencing B2B purchasing decisions. Importantly, these studies identified the key elements of the organizational *buying process* by dividing buying decision-making into more detailed steps of (1) problem recognition, (2) assignment of organizational responsibility, (3) the search process, and (4) the selection, which arguably holds true still today. Later research has highlighted that the post-purchase *usage process* represents a critical aspect of buying from the customer perspective, including offering deployment, use and maintenance (Biggemann, Kowalkowski, Maley, & Brege, 2013; Macdonald et al., 2016; Smith, Maull, & Ng, 2014; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). Similarly in the

customer journey literature, Grewal and Sridhar (2021) distinguish delivery/install/setup, usage/consumption, and maintenance/repair/resolution and disposal steps in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey.

OBB research has also shown that the nature of the buying process depends heavily on the *buying situation*. The BUYGRID model (Robinson, Faris, & Wind, 1967) represents perhaps the most influential framework for analyzing and understanding industrial buying situations. This model identifies buying situations based on eight phases of buying and three buying classes—the new task, modified rebuy, and straight rebuy—that notably affect the nature of the buying process. Further, studies have shown that purchase tasks range from routine and low priority to strategic and complex, where the customers' buying approach depends on situational characteristics, such as purchase importance, task uncertainty, extensiveness of choice, and perceived buyer power (Bunn, 1993; Robinson et al., 1967). Overall, this research indicates that the nature of B2B customer journey will vary according to the complexity of the purchasing situation, for example, in terms of the prevalence and duration of journey steps and the composition of the buying center, and that a new journey can sometimes be a direct continuum from an earlier customer journey (c.f., Bunn, 1993; Robinson et al., 1967).

Organizational buying has been conceptualized as joint decision-making, and studies have distinguished between different organizational roles in the buying process, including influencers, deciders, buyers, gatekeepers, and users (Sheth, 1973; Webster Jr & Wind, 1972a, 1972b). In this context, the *buying center* refers to all members of an organization who become involved in the buying process for a particular product or service (Robinson et al., 1967). The buying center research has provided insights into the key dimensions, structures, and interaction patterns of the buying center, including vertical and lateral involvement, extent, connectedness, and purchasing manager centrality (Bonoma, Zaltman, & Johnston, 1977; Johnston & Bonoma, 1981a, 1981b). Later, Macdonald et al. (2016) broadened this research domain to include users and defined the *usage center* as the group of people who would use a solution. Usage center members play a central role when customers assess purchased solutions' value-in-use and quality, and value-in-use evaluation includes both individual and collective perspectives and goals, while collective goals can be cross-functional or inter-functional (Huber & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020; Macdonald et al., 2016). Given that perceived value-in-use influences future buying decisions, supplier firms must understand how their solution and its usage support the achievement of both *collective* and *individual customer goals*.

Research on PSM can further augment classic buying research in marketing, reflecting the most recent developments in purchasing (Wynstra, Suurmond, & Nullmeier, 2019). The PSM stream offers insights into purchasing as a strategic function that manages supply activities and allows organizations to reach their goals (Wynstra et al., 2019) by managing a firm's suppliers (Day, Magnan, & Moeller, 2010). The PSM literature highlights that organizational *purchasing goals* vary notably between purchases from mere price minimization of commodity purchases to broader optimization of total cost of ownership, facilitating organizational value creation, and the attainment of long-term competitive advantage through supply decisions in their most sophisticated form (see Kähkönen & Lintukangas, 2018; Schütz, Kässer, Blome, & Foerstl, 2020; Svahn & Westerlund, 2009).

As firms increasingly view purchasing as a way to facilitate organizational value creation, many B2B suppliers have switched their focus from offering products to a service perspective (Smith et al., 2014). As supply agreements increasingly involve suppliers offering sophisticated combinations of products and services, purchasing faces a greater share of performance uncertainties than buying product offerings alone (Spring & Araujo, 2009). The need to manage performance uncertainties has accelerated contracting for availability as a strategy for procuring complex performance (Caldwell & Howard, 2014). The increasingly collaborative approach to purchasing means that suppliers and

customers increasingly share mutual post-purchase touchpoints as suppliers fulfill the availability promises. As servitization and contracting for availability emphasize outcome over output (Caldwell & Howard, 2014), the *coordination and collaboration in post-purchase customer journey touchpoints* become increasingly important.

The PSM literature also highlights that digital technologies are reshaping organizational buying on several fronts. Companies are transforming their supply chain operating models as they participate in the “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” also known as Industry 4.0. This revolution comprises the digitalization of the industrial sector, which will partly automate purchase processes but will not abolish PSM functions that need to acquire new skills and capabilities (Hahn, 2020). As Industry 4.0 has the potential to increase transparency across layers in the supply base and between suppliers and customers (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018), new types of *digital touchpoints* in B2B customer journeys are likely to grow in contemporary business. For example, technologies such as artificial intelligence, RFID, and machine-to-machine communication are widely reshaping customer journeys, requiring a broader outlook than a mere digital communications perspective (see Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Technologies can impact customer journeys, for example, by altering or automating customers' established buying and usage processes, or by introducing new touchpoints such as new information flows provided by RFID-technologies (Allal-Chérif, Simón-Moya, & Ballester, 2021; Osmonbekov & Johnston, 2018).

In summary, research has outlined many seminal aspects of B2B buying: the key steps of the buying process from need recognition to the usage of the offering, insights on how buying situations affect the nature of buying processes, the need to consider the diverse goals and roles of individuals comprising the buying and usage centers, the need to understand organizational value-creation goals related to purchases, the increased role of post-purchase coordination and collaboration in today's business, and that the role of new technologies in shaping customer journeys.

2.3. Research on business relationships

Business exchange in B2B markets is typically characterized by a limited number of interconnected business actors embedded in long-term buyer–seller relationships (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Håkansson, 1982). The importance of relationships can be understood in terms of resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), which postulates that business firms ultimately depend on one another's unique resources, which can, in turn, be activated in interaction with other actors, forming the basis of business interactions and exchange relationships (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Further, social-exchange theories provide additional insights into the relational context by explaining the development of inter-organizational relationships based on the reinforcing elements of social and economic rewards (see Bagozzi, 1975; Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001; Möller, 1994). Based on a classic Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group's “interaction model,” three relational levels can be distinguished for customer journeys: domains of interaction, relational atmosphere, and environment (Håkansson, 1982; see also Ritter & Gemünden, 2003).

First, this research highlights that B2B customer journeys are often embedded within long-term business relationships resulting from a series of interactions between suppliers and customers; this means that *relationship history* matters for customer journeys. Specifically, research on business relationships has noted that short-term exchange episodes regarding products, information, or financial or social elements form the smallest building blocks of relationships (Håkansson, 1982). The interaction actions, episodes, and sequences then affect relationship development and, ultimately, build relationships in the long term (Halinen, 2012; Holmlund, 2004). These cumulative interactions have two important implications for relationships. On the one hand, the quality of prior short-term exchange episodes steers relational development in a

positive or negative direction (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). On the other hand, as time passes, the parties often adapt their exchange processes, gradually routinize the exchange episodes, and institutionalize the involved actors' roles and responsibilities, potentially building relational bonds between the parties (Håkansson, 1982; Holmlund, 2004). Indeed, firms often make notable adaptations and investments to access external partners' resources and make the relationships work, which influences future business exchange (Ross Brennan, Turnbull, & Wilson, 2003). As the interactions forming journey touchpoints with a certain supplier are affected by the interaction history, the bonds and routines formed affect B2B customer journeys.

Second, business relationships have an *atmosphere* relating to the power and dependence, cooperation, and expectations of the parties (Håkansson, 1982). A strong body of relationship marketing research has shown that trust and commitment are the major constructs within the atmosphere that define the nature and development of business relationships in the long term (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Specifically, commitment and trust drive cooperation, reduce the propensity to leave, and reduce functional conflict and uncertainty in a relationship. Relationship commitment is driven by termination costs, relationship value, and shared values, whereas trust is primarily affected by communication and opportunistic behavior (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). B2B customer journeys thus take place in the context of relationships, and the atmosphere of the relationship can have an influence on the course of the journey.

Lastly, studies have shown that business relationships do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are characterized by interconnections with *other relationships* (Anderson, Hakansson, & Johanson, 1994). This means that one particular business relationship may influence other relationships (Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004; Terho & Halinen, 2012). For example, a relationship with a certain supplier may mean that the customer depends on a particular technology, which might limit the customer's possible future partners. Overall, the decision to develop a certain relationship may have notable implications for other relationships, highlighting that efforts to understand B2B customer journeys might, in some cases, benefit from the consideration of connected actors and other journeys.

In summary, customer journeys take place in an exchange context characterized by long-term relationships between a limited number of potential suppliers and customers. Here, the history and atmosphere of business relationships can affect the course and nature of the B2B customer journeys: any relationship decision is difficult to evaluate in isolation because one business relationship decision can, in many cases, influence other connected relationships. Arguably, B2B customer journeys should be understood in this relational context.

3. Synthesis: a framework for B2B customer journeys

Theoretical concepts lie at the heart of theory building. Consequently, we conceptualize and develop a conceptual framework for B2B customer journeys. Ulaga, Kleinaltenkamp, Kashyap, and Eggert (2021) highlighted the role of foundational premises in defining new concepts. Foundational premises refer to statements identifying and defining concepts that are at the core of a theoretical perspective or the delineation of a phenomenon. These premises can be derived either empirically or by synthesizing and adapting existing theories (Ulaga et al., 2021). In this research, we create the foundational premises of B2B customer journeys by synthesizing the key insights derived from the three research domains discussed in the previous section. The next sections i) specify the core elements of B2B customer journey, ii) define the concept, and iii) delineate it from other close concepts. We employ customer journey research as the basis for the conceptualization, helping to identify the key elements of the customer journey. In turn, research on B2B purchase processes, buying centers, and relationships informs the framework regarding the special characteristics of B2B context.

3.1. Core elements of B2B customer journeys

Our review highlights that a central premise of customer journeys is their process nature, involving stages from pre-purchase to post-purchase. Furthermore, recent studies have indicated that journeys comprise recurring cycles with loyalty loops, where usage stages may initialize a new journey (e.g., Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Siebert et al., 2020). B2B customer journeys start from a new buying situation or from prior journeys, when customers reassess that a straight rebuy or a modified rebuy is a sufficient approach to fulfill new needs. *Thus, we conclude that B2B customer journeys can be divided into iterative purchase and usage stages, and the usage stage may reveal a new need and trigger a new journey.*

The existing literature also enables us to identify more detailed steps within the purchase and usage stages of the customer journey. Traditional B2B buying research has modeled the purchase process using four to seven steps (Steward et al., 2019). Aligning prior buying process models and their steps (e.g., Robinson et al., 1967; Sheth, 1973; Webster, 1965) with the journey literature (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021), we delineate that *the purchase journey can be divided into four steps of need recognition, information search, comparison of alternatives, and selection.* In terms of the post-purchase stage, existing studies (e.g. Biggemann et al., 2013; Grewal & Sridhar, 2021; Tuli et al., 2007) lead us to state that *the usage journey can be divided into four steps of offering deployment, usage, maintenance, and reassessment.*

Our review further highlights that organizations do not embark on a single journey, but an organizational customer comprises various buying and usage center members whose individual paths partly overlap (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). These paths are driven by shared organizational goals as well as individual goals (e.g. Kähkönen & Lintukangas, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2016). The fulfillment of collective and individual goals drives B2B customer journeys, and purchasing and usage paths are seldom linear (Herhausen et al., 2019; Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Srinivasan et al., 2016). In summary, *B2B customer journeys comprise a set of intertwined individual paths taken by buying and usage center members, driven by organizational and individual goals.*

Previous customer journey research (e.g. Lemke et al., 2011; Marvasti et al., 2021) has noted that the journey concept focuses on customer interactions related to a vendor or their offerings during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints. Our review highlighted both direct touchpoints where customers interact with representations of the brand/offering that are controllable by a supplier, and indirect touchpoints where customers interact with representations of the brand/offering that are beyond the supplier's control (e.g., De Keyser et al., 2020). Recent research also notes that technologies and digitalization can have a notable effect on the nature of these direct and indirect touchpoints (see Lundin & Kindström, 2023). In summary, *B2B customer journeys comprise interactions related to the purchase and usage of offerings across multiple indirect and direct touchpoints.*

The foundational research on B2B purchase processes and buying centers has established that the buying situation has a bearing on the buying approach (e.g. Robinson et al., 1967; Sheth, 1973). The purchasing situation is likely to affect the complexity of the B2B customer journey so that complex purchases involve each step of the process in a thorough manner, whereas in simple purchases, the purchase stage may be shorter and some steps may even be skipped. Thus, we note that *the buying situation is likely to drive the complexity of the customer journey.*

Lastly, business relationship research indicates that B2B customer interactions are often embedded in the context of long-term relationships (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Cannon & Perreault, 1999) and are affected by the relational atmosphere as well as bonds and routines (Håkansson, 1982; Holmlund, 2004) formed during previous interactions. For example, trust between a supplier and customer is likely to affect interactions at touchpoints, as trust may reduce the customer's cognitive effort (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Further, the customer may

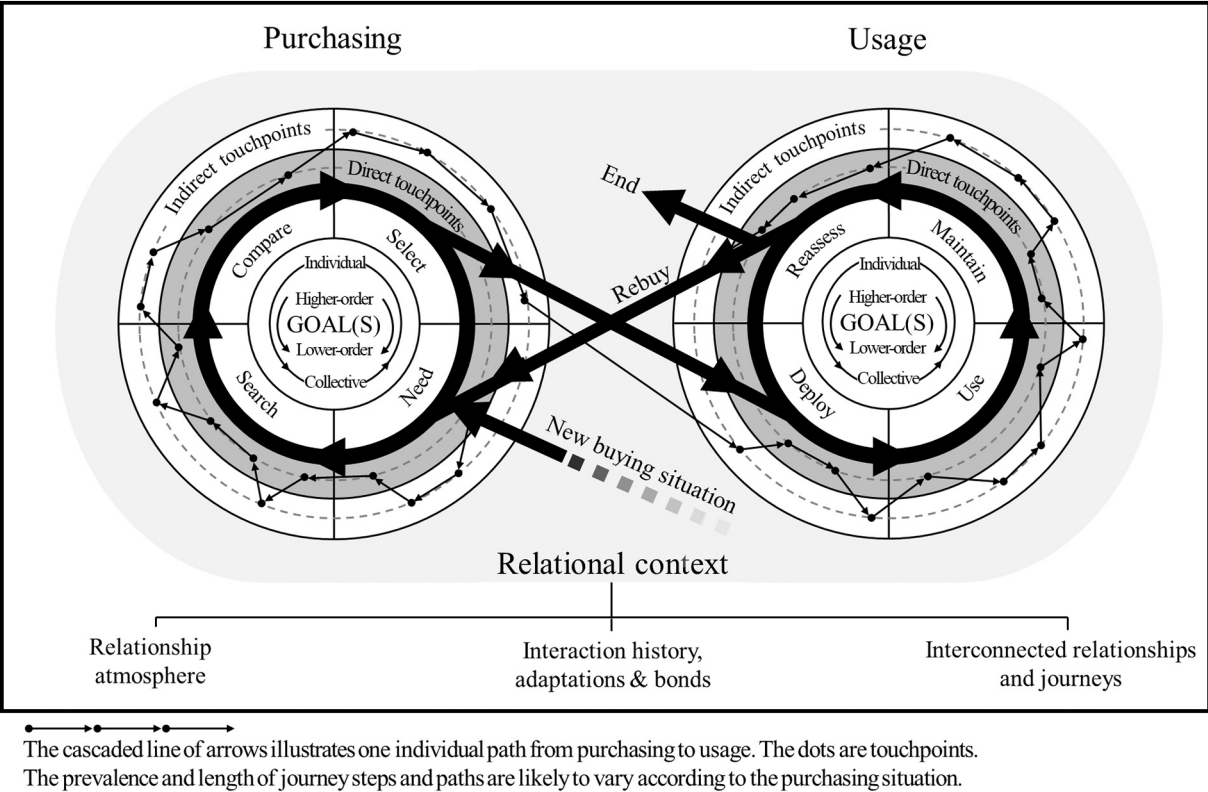
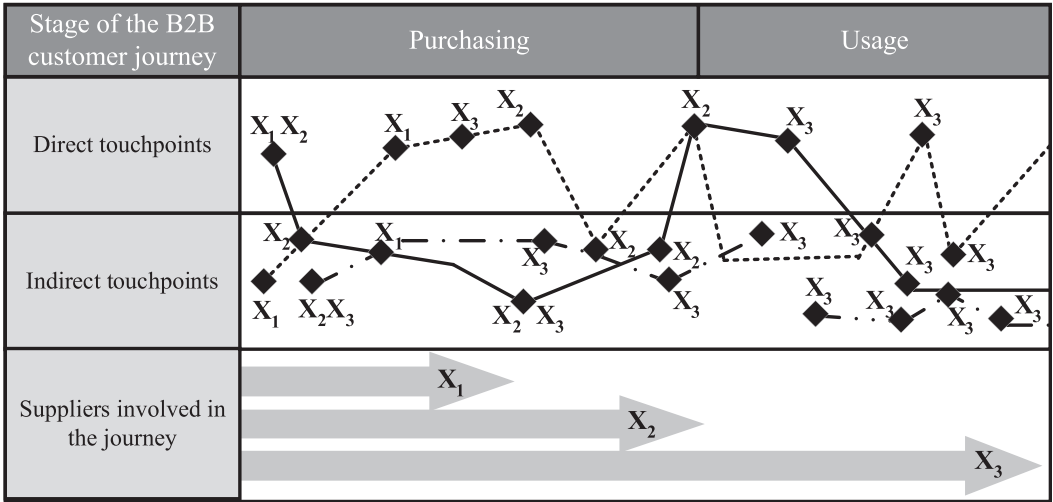


Fig. 2. The B2B customer journey.

have several ongoing journeys with a single firm and across a portfolio of suppliers (Steward et al., 2019). Therefore, B2B customer journeys are affected by the relational context and other interconnected customer journeys.

3.2. Definition of the B2B customer journey

Building on these core elements, we propose the following definition: the B2B customer journey refers to a combination of buying and usage center members' intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships.



Lines refer to individual employees' paths comprising the B2B customer journey

Diamonds refer to journey touchpoints

Letters with superscripts $X_1 X_2 X_3$ refer to suppliers present in one touchpoint

Fig. 3. Zooming in on individual buying center and usage center members' paths.

We further provide a conceptual framework that captures the essence of the B2B customer journeys by synthesizing the above-discussed core elements of the conceptualization (see Fig. 2).

The framework depicts the key journey stages and steps related to purchase and use, involving individual paths by various buying center and usage center members. As individuals engage in different touchpoints at different stages of the journey, no single individual is necessarily involved throughout the entire B2B customer journey (Witell et al., 2020). Interactions at journey touchpoints, as well as the course of the entire journey, are affected by the relationships and interaction history between the customer and the supplier (Ross Brennan et al., 2003). Given that purchases addressing organizational and individual goals tend to recur, the process is depicted as an infinite loop, in which

Table 2
Defining the elements of the B2B customer journey.

B2B customer journey elements	Definition	Remarks
Customer journey	A combination of buying and usage center members' intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships.	- The B2B customer journey relates to a specific purchase, typically involving multiple potential suppliers. - A customer may have multiple ongoing journeys with one supplier.
Customer journey stages and steps	The purchase or usage related phases that a customer organization goes through when moving along the journey	- The B2B customer journey comprises purchasing and usage stages that can be further divided into more detailed steps (e.g., need recognition, search, usage, maintenance). - The number and length of steps are likely to differ depending on the purchase situation and the parties' relational history.
Individual path	A customer journey from the perspective of one individual	- Individual paths by various buying and usage center members differ according to their roles and individual and organizational goals. - A certain individual may be involved only at a certain stage(s) or step(s) of the journey.
Touchpoint	Points of interaction between the customer and the brand/firm	- Direct touchpoints refer to customer's interactions with representations of the brand/offering that are controllable by a supplier. - Indirect touchpoints refer to customer's interactions with representations of the brand/offering that are beyond the supplier's control.
Supplier perceived customer journey and sub-journeys	A customer journey and its specific parts from one supplier's perspective	- As customers independently steer their journeys, a supplier can never attain a complete picture of a journey. - Suppliers can divide customer journeys into specific sub-journeys to understand and manage particular stages (e.g., purchase journey, usage journey, website usage journey, maintenance journey, guarantee claim journey).

the usage stage ends with a reassessment that may initiate a new purchase cycle. We acknowledge that while the framework depicts a general B2B customer journey, the prevalence and nature of various stages, steps and paths are likely to vary notably according to the buying situation. The purchase tasks may range from routine and low priority to strategic and complex. These situational factors are likely to affect both the presence of specific -steps and their thoroughness, as well as the complexity and dynamics of the buying center (Bunn, 1993; Robinson et al., 1967).

The conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 2 further acknowledges that the B2B customer journey comprises several individual paths. To better understand these dynamics, we must zoom in on the framework (see Fig. 3).

As Fig. 3 depicts, buying or usage center members may interact with several supplier firms or their representatives during the customer journey. These individual paths are likely to involve both direct and indirect touchpoints. Direct touchpoints are those that can be designed and controlled by the vendors, such as their corporate website, advertising, and sales personnel, whereas indirect touchpoints are beyond the supplier's direct control, for example, maintenance managed by a third-party partner, or supplier-related reports and customer reviews at an external review site or discussion forum (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Witell et al., 2020). As per our proposed definition, these paths together comprise the organizational B2B customer journey, which looks different from different suppliers' (S1, S2, S3) perspectives.

Table 2 provides a summary of the elements and their definitions that are at the core of our B2B customer journey framework to provide clarity and support for the future usability of the conceptualization.

3.3. Differentiating the B2B customer journey concept from close constructs

When defining new constructs, it is essential to distinguish them from other close concepts. We note that the B2B customer journey is a customer-centric marketer concept that helps in understanding the stages, steps and touchpoints that a customer organization's buying and usage center members go through when buying and using a certain offering. Thus, the customer journey is, above all, a conceptual tool for marketers to use in understanding purchase and usage in customers' terms rather than a concept to be used by buying organizations. The B2B customer journey framework depicts a journey that encompasses a customer organization's interactions with all relevant suppliers related to the purchase and usage of a certain offering. Although suppliers can apply the developed framework to guide their customer journey analysis, we note that one supplier's view of a customer journey will inevitably remain incomplete, because suppliers can only obtain data and insights from some of the touchpoints (cf. Fig. 3).

Furthermore, we differentiate the B2B customer journey from the “buying process” or “path to purchase” by a) placing equal emphasis on the purchase and usage stages of the offering; b) emphasizing not only seller-controlled, direct touchpoints but also uncontrollable, indirect touchpoints; and c) emphasizing diverse individuals' perspectives related to the purchase and usage of the offering. Lastly, we acknowledge that the B2B customer journey differs from *customer relationships* by focusing on the purchase and usage of a certain specific offering, whereas a customer relationship concerns all business exchanges between a customer and supplier. In the organizational context, purchases are often embedded within a long-term customer relationship, and the customer may have several ongoing purchase and usage processes with one supplier simultaneously. For example, a ship engine supplier might have a ship owner customer who has 20 ships with engines from the supplier and, currently, two ship projects in planning. This means that the customer has 22 ongoing customer journeys related to the supplier that involve a large number of individuals across the buying and usage centers. It is likely that the pre-purchase stages of the customer journeys for the planned ships are heavily affected by the other journeys and the

customer relationship, but each journey is likely still quite different from the others because the engines are in different life-cycle phases.

4. Case illustration

We illustrate the B2B customer journey conceptualization with an example of hypothetical customer journeys by a firm called Alpha-Mobile. The firm is on its way to launching a new wireless base station product portfolio for a new customer segment and needs microprocessors for its new offering, which it sells to telecommunication operators. Our example focuses on the steps of the usage stage of an earlier journey (J-1) that have influenced a new journey (J), covering the purchasing stage of the new journey until the selection step. However, we do not describe the selection step in detail, as the selection between suppliers is impacted by many factors, such as pricing and how supplier agreement negotiations proceed, which are not important in understanding the usefulness of the conceptualization and would lengthen our example too much. We then discuss at a more abstract level the insights that the conceptualization provides to the Alpha-Mobile example, as well as the theoretical relevance of the proposed customer journey framework as well as its broader managerial implications.

4.1. Alpha Mobile's customer journeys – an illustrative example

Alpha-Mobile plans to enter a new market segment, and its buying center and usage center share a collective higher-order goal: winning a high market share in the new market segment with a new product portfolio and reasonable product sales margins. It is considering changing its supplier of microprocessors because the usage center members have had several negative episodes with their current supplier, S1. In addition, entering the new market segment requires state-of-the-art microprocessors that have especially low power consumption; thus far, it has not bought these types of microprocessors. Due to the concentrated nature of microprocessor markets, there are only a handful of feasible alternatives that Alpha Mobile considers, in addition to its current supplier, S1, namely suppliers S2 and S3. The selection of a new microprocessor supplier is a strategic decision, because changing the supplier later would cause significant delays, and Alpha-Mobile's market entry window will be closed within the next two years. In addition to time pressure, the product portfolio requires cutting-edge microprocessors; otherwise, the products will not be competitive. This requirement underscores the importance of making the right decision. Alpha-Mobile's buying center mainly includes business-oriented decision makers, who are reinforced by a sourcing category manager and a senior technology expert. Although the sourcing category manager and senior technology expert funnel the requirements of the usage center, only the senior technology expert belongs to both the buying center and the future usage center. The usage center will be highly homogeneous, consisting of 10 software and hardware engineers.

Although the collective higher-order goal of winning a high market share in the new market segment is shared between all individuals in the buying and usage centers, they have differing lower-order goals. Most buying center members emphasize the goal of entering the new market as soon as possible, but the usage center members are keener on developing ultra-high-quality devices that will provide them with recognition among their peers (individual goal). Additionally, as many usage center members have experienced poor service with the existing supplier S1 during their earlier journey (J-1), the availability of high-quality post-purchase customer care has become an important goal for them, stemming from the individual goal of job ease. Due to the tensions triggered by the differing goals, Alpha-Mobile goes carefully through the steps from need to selection during the customer journey (J).

Various Alpha-Mobile employees have both direct and indirect touchpoints with each of the three suppliers. Supplier S1 has frequent meetings with Alpha-Mobile's personnel at its facilities and industry conferences. As S1 has been selling microprocessors to Alpha-Mobile for

a decade, it knows the key buying and usage center members and has their email addresses in their databases. This allows S1 to monitor digital touchpoints, such as website visits, opened digital newsletters, and the activities of Alpha-Mobile employees on social media platforms. In turn, buying center and usage center members at Alpha-Mobile are only partly familiar with suppliers S2 and S3. These suppliers have fewer touchpoints with Alpha-Mobile, and both are attempting to increase their contact databases with inbound marketing. In particular, S2 has been able to successfully identify and connect with several of Alpha Mobile's buying and usage center members through content marketing, where blogs and gated white papers require an email address before their download is possible. S2 also reaches many of Alpha Mobile's key individuals through a weekly email newsletter that highlights its technology and customer care vision. S2 tracks Alpha Mobile's content engagement patterns with marketing automation technology: recently, it has monitored high opening rates of its newsletters, triggering automatic alarms in the marketing automation software system that leads its salesperson to contact the senior technology expert of Alpha-Mobile. However, Supplier S3 is not yet aware that Alpha-Mobile has begun a new search step in its journey.

Alpha-Mobile also has many indirect touchpoints with each of the brands (S1, S2, and S3) through industry discussion forums that many Alpha-Mobile employees visit frequently to search for information, such as how microprocessor architectures are evolving. Additionally, some Alpha-Mobile's software engineers visit industry events to meet their peers and share best practices regarding software development for different microprocessor architectures.

Due to the long-term relationships that Alpha-Mobile has with S1, most buying center members trust them, and the various relational bonds are strong. However, the usage center members have had several negative episodes with the technical support center of S1. The tension is further increased by many recent negative reviews on social media platforms regarding the support capabilities of S1, which contrasts with the more positive reviews regarding S2 and S3. A senior technology expert recently joined Alpha-Mobile, and she knows S2 well from her previous role in another firm, where the superior technical support provided by S2 convinced her. During the customer journey (J) of Alpha-Mobile, S1 will face serious competition from S2 because both suppliers seem to be otherwise commercially feasible options. S1 and S2 thus have a head start in comparison to S3, and S3 may play a role in the customer journey only because Alpha-Mobile uses it to bargain with S1 and S2. However, all suppliers have a chance to be selected if they perform the right actions.

4.2. Reflection on the case example: value of the B2B customer journey conceptualization

The short illustration of Alpha Mobile's customer journeys (J-1 and J) highlights the diverse buying and usage center members' iterative journeys, composed of diverse touchpoints, some of which are outside the seller's control. Table 3 provides a structured summary of the key elements of the B2B customer journey conceptualization in the illustrative Alpha-Mobile case, and highlights the value of the proposed conceptualization vis-à-vis existing research on customer journeys. The table also outlines the managerial relevance of the conceptualization by presenting questions evoked by the framework to managers in supplier firms.

Table 3 highlights the complexity of B2B customer journeys by exemplifying the impact of multiple buying and usage center members with diverse organizational and individual goals, and the resulting collection of individual paths that may take place at different stages of the overall journey. Whereas prior studies have acknowledged most of the customer journey elements, academic research has lacked a conceptualization that covers all these key elements of a B2B customer journey. The suggested conceptualization proposes conceptually robust and concrete ways to capture B2B customer journey characteristics,

Table 3
Applying the B2B customer journey conceptualization to the case example.

Element	Alpha-Mobile example	Value of the conceptualization	Questions for suppliers
Buying and usage center (BC, UC)	Due to the strategic nature of the purchase, the BC has many members that hold diverse organizational roles. The UC is homogeneous, consisting of 10 engineers. One individual belongs to both the BC and UC. Earlier experiences of the UC and new needs of the BC have prompted the new journey.	Customer journey research has largely focused on journeys by individuals. The new conceptualization highlights that both BC and UC members' paths should be considered, as they comprise diverse individuals with distinct expertise and goals. The size and diversity of BC and UC affect the complexity of customer journeys. UC may play a key role in triggering new customer journeys.	Who are the key BC and UC members for specific types of customer journeys? How well do we know the customer organization's buying and usage center members? How might UC's previous experiences affect new journeys? How can we use our existing UC and BC member contacts to attain a timely view of the customer journey?
Collective and individual goals	Alpha Mobile's collective higher-order goal is to enter a new market segment with a cutting-edge product portfolio to win a higher market share. A lower-order goal shared by most BC members is fast market entry, but the UC members emphasize the goals of ultra-high-quality devices and good technical support. These goals stem from UC members' individual goals of peer recognition and job ease. These diverse and partly conflicting goals create tensions.	Prior research has noted that a singular customer journey is an overly simplistic concept in the B2B context, but lacked means to understand the complexity of B2B journeys. The developed conceptualization suggests that collective versus individual, and higher versus lower order goals are likely to drive the overall customer journey as well as individual paths. The more diverse and conflicting these goals are, the more difficult the journey is for the supplier to comprehend and facilitate.	Do we understand the key BC and UC members goals and motivations for certain customer journeys? Can we use customer research to develop buyer and user personas based on typical individual goals? Is it possible to segment customer journeys based on key goals? Can we influence customer goals? How can we facilitate customer goal attainment along customer journeys?
Customer journey stages and individual paths	Due to the strategic nature of the purchase and negative experiences with existing supplier S1, BC members go through all steps from need recognition to information search, supplier comparison, and selection. One individual is involved both in the purchase and the usage stages.	Prior research on customer journeys has paid little attention post-purchase steps or multiple individual paths. The developed conceptualization highlights the purchase and usage stages as equally important elements of the B2B customer journey. These stages include steps, the number and depth of which are likely to differ depending on the complexity of the purchase task. Usage stage can be critical for future journeys.	Which steps does a particular customer journey include, and which steps does the customer skip? Which steps are the most critical from the supplier's perspective? Which individuals are critical in particular steps? How can we identify new customer journeys in the early steps? How can we create a loyalty loop by helping to initiate a new customer journey at the end of the journey?
Direct touchpoints	Current supplier S1 knows well the key BC and UC members allowing them to be in direct contact with various individuals at Alpha-Mobile. S2 and S3 have fewer direct contacts with Alpha-Mobile, but both are attempting to increase their contact base with inbound marketing. In particular, S2 has been successful in gaining access to Alpha Mobile's key individuals.	Prior research has typically examined touchpoints from one supplier's perspective. The developed conceptualization notes that the customer journey is likely to include direct touchpoints with several suppliers simultaneously. The number of touchpoints with one supplier can differ notably depending on the relationship history. Suppliers can build new touchpoints through marketing actions, but this is a challenging task, as customer journeys often have poor visibility to suppliers, especially in the early steps.	What are the key direct touchpoints for different BC and UC members at different steps of the customer journey? How should we influence these touchpoints? Can we redesign or establish new touchpoints that add value to the customer?
Indirect touchpoints	S1 is able to monitor its indirect digital touchpoints with Alpha-Mobile with the help of marketing analytics. Some BC and UC members' frequently visit industry discussion forums and events to search for information about different suppliers and their technologies. The nature of the information searched is affected by the BC and UC members' goals. S1 has many negative reviews on social media regarding their level of service, whereas S2 and S3 have attained more positive reviews.	Prior research has noted the relevance of indirect touchpoints but has focused on one supplier and one individual as the customer. The developed conceptualization highlights the need to identify and monitor the indirect touchpoints that are relevant for diverse BC and UC members.	What are the key indirect touchpoints for different BC and UC members at different steps of the customer journey? What opportunities do we have to find or monitor indirect touchpoints? Could some indirect touchpoints be turned into direct ones?
Relational context of journey	Only a few potential options exist in the market. S1 has a decade-long relationship with Alpha-Mobile, and most of the BC members trust the firm and the relational bonds are strong. However, the UC members have had several negative episodes with the technical support center of S1. Alpha-Mobile is less familiar with suppliers S2 and S3. A senior technology expert recently joined Alpha-Mobile, and she had positive experiences with S2 in her previous position.	Prior customer journey research tends to consider journeys in isolation, given little attention to prior journeys and relationships. The developed conceptualization argues that the relational history with a certain supplier, as well as prior customer journeys and interconnected relationships, may have a significant influence on a specific customer journey.	Which ongoing relationships and prior journeys could affect the customer journey? Do they strengthen or weaken our position, and can we influence that? Do the established contacts and interactions help identify or facilitate new journeys? If no relationship exists, how can we identify and connect to key individuals?

which have been discussed mostly at an abstract level in prior literature.

Table 3 also illustrates the customer-centric insights that the developed framework can offer to managers. The framework acknowledges the multiple supplies involved, and the relational context of the B2B customer journey, which explain suppliers' differing views and depth of understanding on the customer journey. Our case example illustrates how supplier S1 has the best understanding of Alpha-Mobile's customer journey but is challenged by the negative experiences of Alpha Mobiles' usage center members during the prior customer journey with S1, further amplified by online reviews. In addition, S1 might have situational blindness that hampers understanding that Alpha-Mobile has started a new journey (J), as S1 could consider that Alpha-Mobile would continue on its old journey (J-1) and simply proceed to the straight rebuy. This blindness, together with negative user experiences, may lead S1 to overlook factors that are essential when Alpha-Mobile searches for new microprocessors. S2 has been able to make connections with Alpha-Mobile's buying and usage center members and is effectively communicating its technical support excellence, which resonates with Alpha-Mobile's usage center members. S3 is a prominent actor in the market, but it has not been able to form wide connections with Alpha-Mobile's buying and usage center members. Further, it has become aware of the microprocessor customer journey (J) later than its competitors, which puts the firm in a reactive position. In summary, the customer journeys are important but ultimately very challenging to understand from the supplier perspective, and even in the best cases, suppliers are likely to attain only a partial picture of the whole customer journey. The full B2B customer journey picture is an aspect that previous customer journey studies have neglected.

5. Contributions and implications

5.1. Theoretical contributions

The customer journey has become one of the predominant concepts for business practitioners to use in understanding contemporary customer buying behavior. However, academic research on the journey concept has predominantly focused on consumer contexts, leading business scholars to call for new journey research that considers the characteristics of B2B business (Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). This study is among the first to offer a focused analysis of what the customer journey concept means in the B2B context. We conceptualize the B2B customer journey by synthesizing existing customer journey research with research on B2B purchase processes and buying centers and research on business relationships. In doing so, we make three substantial contributions to the extant research.

First, this study develops a conceptual framework and definition of B2B customer journey as “a combination of buying and usage center members' intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships.”

This definition broadens the extant understanding of B2B customer journeys in several ways: it places equal emphasis on the purchase and usage stages of the journey, viewing these stages as interconnected, continuous loops in which the usage stage has the potential to start a new journey. The conceptualization anchors the B2B customer journey to the buying center (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981b) and usage center (Macdonald et al., 2016) and highlights the need to consider both the individual and collective goals and paths of their members as determinants of the journey. While some previous studies have noted that B2B customer journeys are complex due to several participating individuals (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021; Zolkiewski et al., 2017), very few prior studies have made an effort to systematically analyze journeys taken by collectives rather than individuals (Hamilton, Ferraro, Haws, & Mukhopadhyay, 2021). The developed conceptualization also highlights that B2B customer journeys should be seen as embedded in a relational context characterized by interaction history, a relationship atmosphere,

and other interconnected journeys and relationships. Together, these considerations provide the big picture regarding B2B customer journeys, which has remained absent thus far because most existing studies have taken a narrow view, for example, by considering only particular types of touchpoints (e.g., Marvasti et al., 2021; Steward et al., 2018).

Second, this conceptual study provides much-needed conceptual clarity regarding the B2B customer journey concept by explicating its conceptual underpinnings and core elements. Specifically, this study distinguishes three areas of research as the conceptual underpinnings of the B2B customer journey concept: i) the customer journey, ii) B2B purchase processes and buying centers, and iii) business relationships research. Synthesizing these perspectives enables us to inform customer journey research using the central characteristics of B2B exchange, and to advance research on organizational buying and relationships by further clarifying the conceptual connections between the customer journey, the buying process, and customer relationships (Steward et al., 2018). We argue that the B2B customer journey is conceptually broader than the buying process because the former includes individual buying and usage center members' offering-related paths from purchase to usage. Furthermore, the B2B customer journey differs from the customer relationship by limiting the focus to the purchase and usage of a certain offering and clarifying the notion that a B2B supplier may have several ongoing customer journeys with a single customer taking place in the context of the business relationship. Altogether, the customer journey concept can update and broaden traditional academic buying behavior models (Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Johnston & Bonoma, 1981a, 1981b; Sheth, 1973; Webster, 1965) that are anchored to the transaction (Steward et al., 2019) and tend to explain what the marketer can easily see, although many of the interactions steering contemporary buying decisions do not appear on the seller's radar. The developed B2B customer journey conceptualization offers a customer-centric, comprehensive, and dynamic view of individual organizational members' complex, goal-oriented paths (Edelman & Singer, 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019), and integrates the pre- and post-purchase stages into a balanced whole (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021).

As its third contribution, this study offers a universally applicable conceptualization of B2B customer journeys, which is suited to a broad range of marketing tasks in which suppliers require deep insights into the touchpoints and steps that customer buying and usage center members go through during the process of purchasing and using a certain offering. Existing business marketing studies have touched on journeys from diverse marketing perspectives, but common ground remains lacking. The framework developed in this paper should be comprehensive yet general enough to be equally applicable across various marketing perspectives dealing with journeys. Thus, it helps to build common ground for various disconnected research domains related to customer journeys, including but not limited to digital and content marketing (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016), customer-centric sales (Toman et al., 2017), customer experience management (Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017), service management (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021) and service design (Lievens & Blažević, 2021), and omni-channel marketing (Hayes & Kelliher, 2022).

5.2. Managerial implications

Overall, the developed B2B customer journey conceptualization and framework highlight the need to understand customer journeys by analyzing and mapping the collective and individual goals of both buying center and usage center members because their unique value experiences are crucial to buying and relational continuity. These goals shape every journey. Although the ultimate target of suppliers can be a transaction or series of transactions, we believe that being aware of customer goals and mapping the customer's journey holistically around these goals provides marketers with rich insights into why transactions either take place or do not, as our hypothetical examples illustrate. This knowledge helps managers grasp the overall picture and use the insights

to plan holistic marketing. Overall, our framework offers a structured approach for understanding B2B customer journey as a whole, but also offers a starting point for distinguishing critical sub-journeys such as purchase journey, usage journey, website usage journey, maintenance journey, and guarantee claim journey. It further highlights the importance of understanding and managing the paths of individual buying and usage center members, which may not necessarily be in sync. Thus, we advise companies to construct journey maps that consider individual paths as pieces of a larger puzzle: the B2B customer journey.

While all customer journeys are arguably different, they share similar characteristics. A marketer can work for a company that has only a few substantial customers, a company that has thousands of small customers, or a company that has several large customers and thousands of small customers. The implications of the developed framework differ in each case. A company that has only a few customers must keep them, or revenues will drop dramatically. In these cases, we advise companies to make a customer journey map separately for every customer and look carefully at how customers entering the reassessment step can smoothly be moved to the selection step, which is simply a reselection, by investing in the right type of customer experience strategy. A company with thousands of smaller customers will benefit from segmenting its customer base and designing customer journey maps for every segment. By doing so, the company can manage its journey portfolio with reasonable marketing resources. A company with a mixed customer base should map the journeys of its largest customers individually and find ways to segment the smaller customers and design journey maps that serve each segment. Instead of segmenting customers and their journeys based on existing methods (Mora Cortez, Højbjerg Clarke, & Freytag, 2021), we want to augment these approaches by considering higher- and lower-order common goals of customers. A car manufacturer and a wireless base station equipment supplier may have surprisingly similar usage centers in terms of their goals.

5.3. Limitations and implications for future research

The key limitation of this study is the lack of primary empirical data. The conceptual synthesis draws from a rich body of existing research, which means that the framework is not void of empirically derived knowledge, but the connections it proposes should be empirically analyzed next. Future research should build on our conceptual work and refine and validate the developed framework through empirical research. Furthermore, as our aim was to build a general framework, we could not include much of the detailed insights offered by the studies in the three research areas from which we drew. Future studies could zoom in on some particular aspect of the journey to generate more nuanced insights. We invite more research to specifically address the usage stage, as it remains less studied. Managing paths and touchpoints related to end-of-life management, for example, decommissioning, product recovery and return, and recycling, would be of importance, especially as companies are trying to transition to sustainable and circular business models.

We noted that some of the elements of the B2B journey framework are likely to vary notably according to the buying situation. As our study was delimited to developing a general framework, future research should explore different types of B2B customer journeys, and, for example, develop a robust typology or taxonomy of B2B customer journeys and examine contingencies for particular journey characteristics. Purchasing situations or classes (Webster Jr & Wind, 1972a, 1972b) would be a natural starting point for such typologies. Researchers could identify key determinants that can be used to differentiate between journeys of different natures, which can help managers cluster the myriad of potential journeys into entities that are more manageable.

Another delimitation was our focus on the journey itself, refraining from discussing customer experiences, which is often of interest in customer journey research. We believe that the framework of B2B customer journeys provides an actionable starting point for research

focusing on the management of B2B customer journeys to perfect the customer experience. We highlight the key determinants of B2B customer journeys, including buying and usage center compositions, their diverse individual and collective goals, customer journey stages and steps, types of touchpoints, and the relationships in which individual paths are embedded. Future research could study how firms can analyze, design, and manage these aspects to facilitate sales, customer relationships, and positive customer experiences. More research is also needed to examine the interrelationships between individual paths within the customer organization, such as whether particular stakeholders are more influential in affecting others' paths, as well as what drives such influence.

The developed B2B journey framework indicates that management efforts should focus on the diverse paths of individuals in customer organizations. Thus, future research should address B2B firms' opportunities to manage the complexity of journeys, potentially with the help of marketing analytics (Rustholkarhu et al., 2022). We call for research on the micro-level segmentation of buying and usage center members, that is, building buyer and usage personas (Kusnitz, 2021), journey mapping, and quality assessments (Anderl et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021; Zomerdijs & Voss, 2010). Future efforts should elucidate ways of analyzing customer behavior based on interactions in direct and indirect touchpoints (Marvasti et al., 2021), the role of relationships in journeys, and the unique experiences of individual customers during complex journeys. Further, the role of smart technologies in improving the journeys in contemporary business should warrant more research attention (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Rustholkarhu et al., 2022). Future research should also explore how firms should integrate these individual-level insights into an organizational-level view.

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