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CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT IN BUSINESS MARKETS

Strategic Roles of Target Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Customer experience management (CXM) has the potential to be one of the most important tools for business-to-business (B2B) firms responding to the increased commoditization of goods and services. CXM holistically extends the traditional ways of differentiation, addresses the shortcomings of relationship management practice, and encourages firms to find new business opportunities along the customer journey. However, there is a lack of conceptual development showing how the strategic goals of CXM materialize into valuable business customer experiences. Therefore, this dissertation presents a study of target experiences, i.e., the different experiences that provider-firms aim for, and their roles in strategic CXM, through which firms aim to create value in business markets. In doing so, it draws attention to service providers' deliberate participation in experience creation while acknowledging the multifaceted nature of customer experience.

This study took an abductive approach, combining various theoretical preunderstandings of the phenomenon with empirical exploration. The empirical research took the form of an explorative field study of 41 B2B firms and their CXM efforts. Data was collected through in-depth interviews structured around the extant literature on B2B CX and CXM, with CX managers as the key informants. Data analysis was performed using an informant-centric coding method; thematic grouping of codes and further conceptual development were aided by the CX literature, different perspectives on value and customer value proposition, and the concept of strategy as an analytical lens.

The findings highlight the different properties of target experiences set by B2B firms that are significant for strategic CXM, including: granularity, or how nuanced the articulated target experiences are; attribution, or which actor's experiences within the customer firm are taken into account; and scopes, i.e., whether target experiences are considered at the touchpoint level, the customer journey level or the level of customer's business. Furthermore, the study delineates providers' CXM activities directed at facilitating CX, understanding CX, and structurally and culturally aligning the organization for CX, thus mapping out CX management in B2B firms. Finally, the findings elucidate the strategic roles of target experiences: they guide CXM actions; promote a shared CX mindset; and help create a beneficial position for the firm in the market. Moreover, the study finds that the granularity of employed target experiences drives CXM into either responsive or proactive cycles.

This dissertation also links the study findings to a general model of value creation, connecting CXM activities of B2B firms to value co-creation processes and discussing target experiences in terms of experiential value propositions. Thus, it provides a new understanding of CX management as an experience-based competitive strategy in business markets.

The present study contributes to the CX literature in three ways: by expanding the discussion on the qualities and especially granularity of target experiences set by B2B firms; by providing a robust and flexible representation of CXM; and by building an understanding of the roles of target experiences in strategic CXM. The study also highlights the link between CXM, target experiences, and value creation, with an emphasis on individual and noneconomic experiential value, thus contributing to the literature on value and value propositions and broadening the scope of value propositions considered in business markets. It also opens up avenues for future research into target experiences and the issues relevant to CXM in business markets.

The findings of this study have important implications for CXM practice. First, the findings suggest that the use of nuanced target experiences can improve the outcomes and accountability of CXM efforts. Second, understanding how a firm can propose experiential value in business markets using target experiences can help B2B firms strategize and balance their resources in the face of a rapidly changing organizational environment. Moreover, in terms of societal implications, successfully implementing CXM can improve the social experience of work: making CX a priority allows for cultivating genuine care in business environment and can improve employee wellbeing. At the national level, the research findings constitute a starting point for the development of viable CX management strategies for international business markets, which can give Finnish B2B service providers a competitive edge.

KEYWORDS: customer experience, B2B customer experience, customer experience management, customer experience strategy, target experience, CX management activities, experiential value proposition

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Yhä useammat B2B-yritykset hakevat kilpailuetua asiakaskokemuksella. Asiakaskokemuksen johtaminen onkin mahdollisesti yksi yritysten välisen liiketoiminnan tärkeimmistä työkaluista, sillä se laajentaa perinteisiä kilpailukeinoja, vastaa suhdejohtamisen puutteisiin ja auttaa yrityksiä löytämään uusia liiketoimintamahdollisuuksia asiakaspolun varrelta. Asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen käsitteellistämässä on kuitenkin vielä puutteita B2B-markkinoinnin tutkimusalalla. Ymmärrystä puuttuu erityisesti siitä, kuinka yrityksen strategiset asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen tavoitteet toteutuvat ja kääntyvät arvokkaiksi yritysasiakaskokemuksiksi. Näin ollen tämä väitöskirja käsittelee tavoitekokemuksia, eli erilaisia kokemuksia joihin palveluntarjoajat tähtäävät, ja näiden tavoitekokemusten rooleja strategisessa asiakaskokemuksen johtamisessa osana arvon luontia B2B-markkinoilla. Näin tutkimus tunnustaa asiakaskokemuskäsitteen monimuotoisuuden ja kiinnittää huomion siihen, miten palveluntarjoaja tietoisesti osallistuu kokemusten luomiseen.

Tutkimus noudatti abduktiivista lähestymistapaa, edeten vuoropuheluna teoreettisten ennakkokäsitysten ja empiirisen tutkimuksen välillä. Empiirinen tutkimus toteutettiin eksploratiivisena kenttätutkimuksena tarkastelemalla 41:n B2B-yrityksen asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen toimia ja tavoitteita. Tietolähteenä käytettiin yrityksissä toimivia asiakaskokemuksen johtajia. Aineisto kerättiin syvähaastatteluilla, jotka rakentuivat olemassa olevan B2B-asiakaskokemuskirjallisuuden ja asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen kirjallisuuden ympärille. Data-analyysissä hyödynnettiin aineistolähtöistä koodausmenetelmää. Koodien temaatitiven ryhmittely sekä käsitteellinen jatkokehitys pohjautui osaltaan myös asiakaskokemuskirjallisuuteen, arvon ja arvolupauksen käsitteiden analyysiin sekä strategian eri ulottuvuuksiin, joita käytettiin analyttisenä linssinä.

Tutkimuksen löydökset korostavat B2B-yritysten asettamien tavoitekokemusten erilaisia, strategisen asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen kannalta tärkeitä ominaisuuksia. Näitä ominaisuuksia ovat: granulaarisuus, eli kuinka yksityiskohtaisesti tavoitekokemus ulottuvuukseen on ilmaistu; kohdistuminen, eli miten asiakasyrityksen sisäisten toimijoiden kokemukset huomioidaan; sekä laajuus, eli rajautuuko tavoitekokemus kosketuspisteeseen, asiakaspolkuun vai asiakkaan liiketoimintaan. Lisäksi tulokset kartoittavat palveluntarjoajien asiakaskokemuksen fasilitointiin, ymmärrykseen ja organisaation rakenteelliseen ja kulttuuriseen yhdenmukaistamiseen suunnattuja toimia, ja siten tukevat systemaattista B2B-

asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen kuvausta ja sen osa-alueiden tarkentamista. Tulokset myös tuovat uutta tietoa tavoitekokemusten strategisista rooleista: ne ohjaavat asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen toimia, edistävät yhteistä kokemuksellista ajattelutapaa ja auttavat luomaan yritykselle suotuisan aseman markkinoilla. Tässä väitöskirjassa empiirisen tutkimuksen tulokset linkitetään yleiseen arvonluontimalliin yhdistämällä B2B-yritysten asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen toimia arvon yhteisluontiprosesseihin ja tarkastelemalla tavoitekokemuksia suhteessa kokemuksellisiin arvolupauksiin. Siten tämä väitöskirjatutkimus tarjoaa uuden näkökulman asiakaskokemuksen johtamiseen kokemuspohjaisena kilpailustrategiana yritysmarkkinoilla.

Tämä tutkimus edistää asiakaskokemuskirjallisuutta kolmella tavalla: laajentamalla keskustelua tavoitekokemusten ominaisuuksista ja erityisesti niiden yksityiskohtaisuudesta; tarjoamalla vankan ja joustavan kuvan asiakaskokemuksen johtamisesta yritysten välisessä liiketoiminnassa; ja rakentamalla ymmärrystä siitä, miten tavoitekokemukset toimivat strategisena osana asiakaskokemuksen johtamista. Tutkimus myös nostaa esiin asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen, tavoitekokemusten tavoitekokemusten, sekä arvonluonnin välisen yhteyden, painottaen yksilöllistä ja ei-taloudellista kokemuksellista arvoa. Tämä edistää arvoa ja arvolupauksia käsittelevää kirjallisuutta ja laajentaa käsitystä yritysmarkkinoilla toimivien arvolupausten ulottuvuuksista. Tutkimuksen tulokset myös avaavat oven tulevalle tutkimukselle tavoitekokemuksista ja B2B-yritysten kannalta oleellisista kysymyksistä asiakaskokemuksen johtamisessa.

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ASIASANAT: asiakaskokemus, B2B-asiakaskokemus, asiakaskokemuksen johtaminen, asiakaskokemusstrategia, tavoitekokemus, asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen toimet, kokemuksellinen arvolupaus

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Катя, aka Kati, aka Katerina

**Ekaterina Panina**

Ekaterina is a Russian-Finnish marketing researcher and entrepreneur excited about socially and economically sustainable business and service development. Her current research interests lie in the topics of customer experience (CX) and CX management in different contexts, from omnichannel retailing to B2B services. She is also interested in customer journey analysis, service and experience design, the influence of experiences on socially beneficial behaviors, and service initiatives within complex ecosystems.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and motivation

Customer experience (CX) management has the potential to be an effective tool for dealing with contemporary challenges in marketing, which explains its attractiveness to practitioners in both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) markets. It has been widely acknowledged by executives that CX management (CXM) offers new possibilities to differentiate their respective firms from the competition and achieve customer loyalty (Klaus & Maklan, 2012, 2013; McKinsey & Co., 2017). Thus, improving customer experiences has become one of the top strategic priorities for firms in both B2C and B2B contexts (Accenture, 2015).

In the academic literature, customer experience has been defined as involving “non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli” (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020, p. 638). This understanding separates the concept of CX from more evaluative concepts such as satisfaction or perceived service quality. CX management, in turn, focuses on tracking and orchestrating customers’ multidimensional responses, such as thoughts, feelings, and motivations, during their interactions with the company and its offerings (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). These interactions take place during a customer’s journey, emphasizing the dynamic nature of customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, the properties that make CX so interesting and promising—specifically its multidimensionality and dynamics—can also make the concept challenging to understand, measure, and use in management practice.

Despite being studied primarily in the retail and consumer service fields, CXM is appearing on the agenda of B2B marketing researchers. Remarkably, the B2B context introduces even more challenges to CX management, with *multiple different, and sometimes conflicting, journeys* within the boundaries of one customer organization (Lemke et al., 2011; Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). With digital technology and business model developments in the consumer sector gradually modifying the buying and selling processes of B2B customers (Steward et al., 2019), B2B marketing practitioners are in search of ways to facilitate valuable on-brand customer experiences throughout the customer journey and beyond.

CX management can be considered a valuable strategy in business markets for several reasons. First, CXM enables firms to respond to the increased commoditization of goods and services (Forbes, 2020). B2B CX goes beyond the outdated 4P-basis of differentiation (product, price, place, promotion), as firms integrate both the emotional and functional needs of customers in their services and ways of doing business. The focus of a CX-centered business shifts from what the company should offer to how it can offer products or services that ensure a valuable and memorable customer experience (Batat, 2022). Focusing on value creation through CXM allows firms to find new business opportunities along the customer journey and facilitate valuable customer experiences, thus differentiating their offerings from others in the market.

Second, CX management also benefits firms that do not struggle with commoditization consequences. Various industry reports and studies show that improvements in CX positively impact customer retention, loyalty, satisfaction, and revenue (Kriss, 2014; Shah et al., 2020). Furthermore, positive word of mouth (WoM) following a compelling CX can have desirable effects such as new sales and upselling. Thus, CXM takes customer-centricity to a new level, combining it with a processual view of relationships and new approaches for understanding the line of events leading to customer satisfaction, retention, and business growth (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Third, CXM addresses some of the shortcomings of relationship management practice, as it has a much deeper and broader view of the customer. Focusing on the customer journey means trying to understand and influence the experiences of multiple actors in the customer firm, rather than building a relationship with a single contact person or a few people in a buying center (Luck, 2022), which results in better business outcomes. Furthermore, CXM is a firm-wide approach, requiring the commitment of all levels of an organization and not just customer-facing functions such as customer support and account management (Walker, 2021). Finally, CX management helps establish a link between CX and revenue, making it essential for sustainable business growth (Luck, 2022).

All benefits considered, it is not surprising that CX improvement has become one of the top strategic priorities of firms in both the B2C and B2B contexts (Accenture, 2015). A recent survey among large B2B firms throughout North America and Europe revealed that CX is increasingly present in B2B organizational strategies, with slightly less enthusiasm in Europe (47%) than in US markets (60%) (B2B International, 2020). Accordingly, this shift in priorities has led to firms reorganizing their business processes, investing in new technologies (Forrester, 2016; Merkle, 2020), and appointing CX managers to lead change within their organizations (Forrester, 2019). However, without deeper insights into its strategic dimension, the potential of CXM may remain unfulfilled.

Indeed, there are several *unresolved problems and paradoxes* that may hinder the practice of CX management, turning it into a mere trend among busybody-marketers and consultants. These challenges include 1) a mismatch between the reported strategic importance of CX and accountability for the effects of CXM on revenues and 2) a lack of a nuanced and differentiating idea of what makes customer experiences with a firm special, which could be integrated into a firm's customer value propositions (CVPs).

“Customers are the ones paying everybody's salaries” is a phrase one can often hear from CX managers who emphasize CX as a strategic priority in their organizations. However, despite realizing the importance of CX, firms are not always ready to invest money in or commit significant resources to CX management initiatives (Hunsaker, 2013), especially in uncertain times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic or wars that Europe and the world experienced in the 2020s and the resulting economic sanctions). Even the repeatedly proven conventional wisdom of investing in marketing when times are tough does not seem to convince some executives.

Accountability challenges may be a reason why some firms are hesitant to keep investing in CX management. A recent study found that although 90% of B2B leaders reported CX as a crucial business priority, a resounding 62% of these companies were not calculating the return on investment (ROI) of their CX efforts and only 20% truly understood how CX could support their overall strategy (CustomerGauge, 2021). These numbers signify the difficulty of measuring CX and attributing financial success to CX management efforts. Indeed, firms often measure CXs using satisfaction measures or customers' willingness to recommend (net promoter score [NPS]), but these metrics alone do not sufficiently reflect the multidimensional and holistic nature of CXs. Furthermore, they are rarely connected to promoting a firm's strategy or competitive advantage, often staying at the level of incremental improvements.

Treating CX as merely a new term for quality or satisfaction undermines the benefits a firm can gain from basing its value proposition on CX and may lead to the commoditization of experiences. A recent Accenture study showed that the best-performing firms are 2.5 times more likely than their competitors to claim that they can make a brand promise directly linked to CX (Shah et al., 2020). This signals the importance of value propositions based on valuable CXs, which integrate both emotional and functional benefits for the customer. Furthermore, understanding and articulating the unique and differentiating experience that a firm wants to facilitate, can help it fight commoditization and compete in business markets (Saarijärvi & Puustinen, 2020).

This research project was motivated by a desire to address the abovementioned challenges and increase the value of CX management efforts in business and society.

The following section discusses how this goal can be achieved with further academic research on CXM in business markets.

1.2 Problematizing the current understanding of CX management in the B2B context

In this section, I highlight several problems and tensions that exist in the literature on CX management in business markets. The reasoning for the same aligns with Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) recommendations for creating interesting research questions. Accordingly, the central arguments that make up the research problem are based on

- the insufficiency of current empirical knowledge,
- the need for thorough conceptual development,
- tensions between relevant perspectives, and
- the insufficient emphasis on target experience (TX) as an object of study.

First, I argue that, to date, the literature *does not sufficiently address CX management in the B2B context* and that the conceptual development of the topic *requires further empirical investigation*. Empirical research on CXM is most prominent in the area of B2C service management, with studies exploring how firms design experience-centric services (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) and manage service experiences through customer, employee, technology, and service processes (Kwortnik & Thompson, 2009). More recently, studies have investigated how organizations manage customer experiences in the context of financial services (Ponsignon et al., 2015) and how the essential dimensions of CX management drive business performance (Grønholdt et al., 2015). A rare empirical study by Homburg et al. (2017) attempted to break down these dimensions and create boundaries for the concept of CX management in both B2C and B2B contexts. Based on the findings, the authors further outlined the elements of an effective journey design in their later work (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Notably, despite gaining traction in business markets, CXM received little attention in industrial marketing research (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Witell et al. (2020) noticed this glaring gap and developed an extensive conceptual framework for the characterization of CXM in business markets. Nevertheless, CX management in the B2B context still needs comprehensive empirical research, as the scarcity of explorative studies means the lack of a foundation on which further research questions, problems, and ideas can be built.

Second, I argue that *understanding CX management requires drawing on broader ideas about strategy and value creation*. Based on conceptual research, CX management has been defined as “the strategy to engineer the customer’s experience

in such a way as to create value for both the customer and the firm” (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 38), thus carrying forward the assumption that value is created from customer experiences. It is clear that an increasing number of researchers recognize CXM as a way to gain a competitive advantage (e.g., Lemke et al., 2011; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009). However, strategy and experiential value creation have been addressed only superficially in CXM research, despite their importance.

Several authors have highlighted the importance of strategically managing touchpoints and journeys (e.g., Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) or aiming for strategically important customer experiences (Zolkiewski et al., 2017) without delving further into what strategy means. Bolton et al.’s (2014) conceptual work was successful in pinning down the strategic dimension of CX management; the authors stated that managing CXs through small details, such as low-cost favors or moments of delight in service situations, may be a differentiating strategy suitable for both B2C and B2B contexts. However, none of the abovementioned works examined CX management through strategic lenses. A recent exception is Keiningham et al.’s (2020) conceptual work; the authors described, in detail, CX’s alignment with a firm’s strategic orientation as a part of CX-driven business model innovation, proving that the use of strategy in studying CX management is a fruitful line of inquiry. Based on this, I argue for further efforts to integrate strategy with CXM study.

CX literature emphasizes that there’s a strong connection between experience and value, suggesting that the competitive advantage sought through CXM is obtained from superior valuable experiences. Studies on B2B CXs conceptualize customer experiences as born in interactions between the customer and the value creation elements of a B2B relationship, such as resources, activities, and context (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Business customers further evaluate these experiences in relation to their personal and organizational goals (Lemke et al., 2011), which results in individual and collective value perceptions (Macdonald et al., 2016). Thus, studies suggest that B2B experiences can be the basis of experiential value (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2016; Österle et al., 2018). However, research has not fully addressed the interaction between experience and value when analyzing CXM in business markets. Eggert et al. (2018, p. 86) characterized value propositions based on CX as a transitional stage between an “inside-out” and an “outside-in” perspective of value, but this conceptualization uses an overly firm-centric approach to experience and follows the logic of value delivery, contradicting the current customer-centric definitions of CX. I argue that to give CXM a fighting chance as a competitive strategy in business markets, one must first empirically explore how firms employ the concept of experience in their businesses and then thoroughly analyze the findings applying the concept of value.

Third, I argue, that the conceptualization and further study of CX is affected by *the tension between the customer-centric and provider-centric perspectives in the CX literature* (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). The customer-centric perspective emphasizes the subjectivity, multidimensionality, and spontaneity of customer experiences (e.g., Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; de Keyser et al., 2020; Hamilton & Price, 2019; Heinonen et al., 2010). From this perspective, experiences are embedded in customers' lifeworlds, created and interpreted by them (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). In other words, customer experiences are dependent more on, for example, the symbolic meanings and goals of the customer as well as other contextual factors rather than a service provider's performance. The provider-centric perspective, in turn, focuses on experience drivers and is centered on the assumption that a company's efforts—that is, the design of its offerings, retail elements, or service encounters—can positively influence CXs (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Patrício et al., 2008; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009).

These two perspectives have differing assumptions (see Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) about the nature of customer experiences. On the one hand, the customer-centric perspective questions the deterministic nature of experience drivers and argues that experiences are complex and personal and thus cannot be predesigned and delivered in the form of packages to customers (e.g., Heinonen et al., 2010; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). It is a valid critique, as the provider-centric perspective often entangles CX with service/product elements or evaluative outcomes, such as quality or satisfaction. On the other hand, this perspective's claim that CXs cannot be managed is of little practical help if taken to extremes. Evidence shows that some actions, design elements, and personnel behaviors are better determinants of positive CX than others (Berry et al., 2006; Bitner, 1992; Kuehnl et al., 2019). Taken together, the differing views about CX give rise to an important question: Is there a way to consider the complexity of CX without compromising on the viability of efforts to influence it?

With this dialogue, we arrive at a new assumption ground (see Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011): a firm cannot guarantee the creation of particular experiences as a result of its actions but can facilitate experiences through stimuli that are in its sphere of influence (see also Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Furthermore, firms play a role in CX formation that's independent of their intentions, as the stimuli encountered by customers would inevitably contribute to their experience. However, this also means that there must be a difference between firms that deliberately attempt to influence CXs and those that do not. Firms that deliberately attempt to facilitate CXs must have an idea of the kind of CX they want their customers to have, which serves as an aim for their managerial action. The assumptions above reveal a need to study service providers' deliberate participation in experience creation by combining a

firm-centric view of strategic goals and actions and a customer-centric view of the nature of CX that could inform those goals.

Fourth, the extant research has generally *accepted creating positive experiences or avoiding negative experiences as the main aim of CX management*, which flattens the CX concept and makes it indistinguishable from its evaluative outcomes, such as quality or satisfaction. I believe that this is due to *insufficient focus on the intended experiences or target experiences*, i.e., the experiences that firms intend their target customers to have (Roth & Menor, 2003; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Ponsignon et al., 2017). Because realized customer experiences can differ drastically from initially intended ones (Heinonen et al., 2010), research into target experiences may be dismissed as unnecessary. In this dissertation, however, I argue that *target experiences* are a worthwhile object of study in their own right.

Target experiences are mentioned in the literature on service design research and experience design practice (e.g., Clatworthy, 2012; da Motta-Filho, 2017; Ponsignon et al., 2017). However, the focus is primarily on developing TXs and using them in the design of a service offering rather than studying their strategic role in organizations, potentially influencing CXM and concretizing customer-centricity in everything the firm does. Despite the importance of concrete experiential goals being mentioned in passing (e.g., Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Berry et al., 2002; Bolton et al., 2014), no research has examined the properties of TXs in the B2B context. Indeed, it is important to focus on the properties and roles of target experiences, because assuming that “positive” CX creation is the only strategic goal for CX management robs the CX concept of both its managerial relevance and academic potential. Ultimately, research on TXs can bridge the divide between the customer-centric and provider-centric perspectives to better understand strategic CXM.

1.3 Research purpose, questions, and design

The present study was conducted to explore the CXM efforts of B2B firms, focusing on the target experiences set by providers as an object of study. The main objective was *to understand the roles of target experiences in strategic CX management for creating value in business markets*. More specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the nature of target experiences in the B2B context?

RQ2: How do B2B companies strive to manage customer experiences?

RQ3: What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?

To answer these research questions and fulfill the research purpose, I built a project suitable for abductive theorizing, i.e., for developing the required understanding in the dialogue between the extant literature and empirical findings. This project is mapped out, along with an outline of the dissertation, in **Figure 1** (p. 29). The literature streams considered for this study and the empirical research design are briefly described below, following which the role of the extant theories and empirical findings for each research question are explained in further detail.

This dissertation builds upon several literature streams. First, the rich literature on CX and industrial marketing is used to understand CX in the B2B context (Chapter 2). Second, relevant knowledge on CX management and target experiences is drawn from service design and management, relationship marketing and management, and multichannel integration and journey management literature (Chapter 3). Third, the dissertation works with theories around value, value creation, and customer value propositions (Chapter 4). Finally, Mintzberg's (1987a) classic work is used to capture different perspectives on strategy that work as an analytical lens (Chapter 5).

The empirical research took the form of an explorative cross-sectional field study with guiding assumptions originating from a pragmatic constructivist paradigm. Single individual in-depth interviews were conducted with CX managers representing a total of 41 firms from diverse B2B service industries in Finland (31 firms) and other Northern European countries, namely Denmark (4), Sweden (3), Norway (1), Germany (1), and Russia (1). The chosen firms formed a nonrandom purposive sample. The interview themes were built around the central elements of CX management (see Chapter 3). The analysis was performed with the whole dataset, following a data-driven method for initial coding and an abductive approach for further theorizing. The research project lasted 4.5 years; data collection rounds took place between August 2018 and May 2021, and the data analysis was completed in May 2022.

To answer the first research question, I reviewed the extant CX literature and developed a working definition that addresses the main specificities of B2B CX (Chapter 2). This conceptualization reflects the customer-centric perspective on customer experience, which is rarely used in CXM research but is imperative for understanding the composition of TXs. I obtained initial insights on target experiences from the extant literature on CXM (Chapter 3). The empirical field study, in turn, revealed a variety of TXs set by B2B provider firms, validating the theoretical assumption that ideas about intended experiences indeed exist within organizations (Section 7.1). Following the customer-centric understanding of CX, the analysis revealed that target experiences present in the B2B organizations differ in their granularity, qualitative dimensions, experiencing actors, and scopes.

To respond to the second research question, I approached CXM as an arrangement of activities, which, as detailed in Chapter 3, was an outcome of a review of CXM literature and bordering approaches. Empirical work and abductive theorizing resulted in a framework of general CXM activities as well as findings specific to the B2B context. Analyzing and articulating the main components of CXM allowed for further investigation into the roles of TXs within this management approach.

To address the third research question, I utilized the findings of the empirical field study and the extant knowledge about target experiences (Chapter 3). The different meanings of strategy (described in Section 5.1) inspired the questions that guided me in analyzing the roles that TXs may play in strategic CX management.

Finally, to achieve the purpose of this dissertation, I positioned the findings of the empirical study within a broader framework of the value creation process that is described in Chapter 4. The chapter addresses the concept of value and theories of value co-creation, emphasizing the role of CX as a stage in the customer value creation process. The chapter also discusses the formation of CVPs, allowing for a subsequent reflection on the empirical findings around the strategic roles of TXs. The links between the empirical findings of this study and the value creation process are articulated in Chapter 8.

To reiterate, this study focused on CX seen by managers as a source of competitive advantage and a driver for their CX management strategies. The aim was not to compare target experiences with realized B2B experiences but to highlight CX managers' ideas about B2B CX in view of their firms' strategic goals and to investigate how these ideas mobilize their firms into action. Indeed, the guiding assumption of this research project was that ideas can move the world.

1.4 Key contributions

This study contributes to the literature in four major ways. First, it recognizes the different types and characteristics of target experiences used by B2B service providers, thus *deepening the understanding of the kinds of experiences B2B companies aim to provide to their customers* and offering a fuller view of the aims of CX management. The provider-centric perspective is integrated with the currently prevalent customer-centric understanding of CX to present a valuable framework for understanding B2B CX, further contributing to the literature on customer experience.

Second, by identifying and presenting the activities involved in B2B CX management, this dissertation *provides a robust empirical basis for conceptualizing CX management in the B2B context*, addressing the need for empirical research on this phenomenon. The activity-based framework is flexible enough to be used in further research with multiple theoretical approaches. The findings from the

comprehensive empirical research in the B2B context further contribute to understanding CXM generally.

Third, based on an analysis of the roles of target experiences in strategic CXM, this dissertation provides valuable insights into *how target experiences influence CX management activities, affect strategic positioning, and aid in the dissemination of a shared perspective*, resulting in cultural change. These findings make a strong case for considering target experience a valuable object of study, as they show that CXM may be responsive or proactive depending on the granularity of employed target experiences. In addition, analyzing target experience roles through different dimensions of strategy made a more robust case for characterizing CXM as a strategic approach.

The fourth main theoretical contribution of this dissertation is that it specifies the *connections between CX management, target experiences, value propositions, and value co-creation*. Based on the empirical investigation and a posteriori theorizing, target experiences are proposed as a basis for experiential value propositions, thus characterizing CXM as an alternative, experience-based competitive strategy in business markets.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the research findings also have intriguing *implications for CX management practice and business at large*, revealing ways to improve the outcomes of CXM efforts, which in turn can result in wider societal benefits. First, using nuanced target experiences to guide CX management and develop CX-centric mindsets should produce better and more traceable CX outcomes. Furthermore, understanding how CXM can be approached operationally and thus used to create experiential value in business markets can help B2B firms strategize and balance their resources in a rapidly changing organizational environment. Making CX a priority can also improve social experience of work by cultivating genuine care in business environment and improving employee wellbeing. At the national level, the research findings may be seen as stepping stones toward improving the competitive advantage of Finnish B2B firms. Considering the importance of international business markets for the Finnish economy, mastering CX management and CX-based differentiation can be an advantage for Finnish businesses and facilitate growth in the country's welfare.

1.5 Outline of the dissertation

The reporting strategy chosen for this dissertation is a balance between an abductive research strategy and the traditional linear structure of a monograph. **Figure 1** (p. 29) demonstrates how chapters addressing the study's various theoretical and empirical elements make up a coherent whole.

Customer experience management has been defined as a “*strategy to engineer the customer's experience* in such a way as to create *value* both to the customer and the firm” (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 38). The literature review is structured around this definition, emphasizing the four crucial elements upon which this study is built: CX, CX management, value, and strategy.

The literature review begins with Chapter 2, which delves into the nature and characteristics of customer experiences, presenting CX from a B2B customer’s perspective; notably, this dissertation takes a firm’s perspective on the issue in other respects. In addition to describing the characteristics of B2B CX from the customer’s viewpoint, the chapter presents the benefits of studying B2B CX from the managing firm’s viewpoint.

In Chapter 3, state-of-the-art knowledge related to CX management, specifically target experiences, is reviewed. Arguments are presented for defining the scope of CXM in B2B markets based on firm’s related activities. The chapter also introduces target experiences as a vital object of study primarily neglected to date.

Engaging with the portrayal of CXM as a strategic approach to creating value, Chapter 4 focuses on the various perspectives on value and value creation and the formation of CVPs in relation to CX. The chapter is a result of theorizing based on abductive logic: as topics surrounding value gained prominence in the data analysis of this study, I realized the need to further investigate the concept of value theoretically. The conceptual understanding built in this chapter is subsequently used to reflect on the empirical findings in the Discussion chapter, which is also the reason for its special spot in **Figure 1**.

To conclude the literature review, Chapter 5 explores the concept of strategy to give meaning to CXM as a strategic approach. The chapter culminates with a presentation of the initial theoretical framework.

Chapter 6 establishes the methodology applied in this research. Specifically, it describes the philosophical approach and progression of the explorative cross-sectional field study that served as a basis for theorizing and presents the evaluation of the quality of the study. Following this, Chapter 7 reports the study findings, unraveling the constructions formed during the analysis. Chapter 8 unites the different findings into a synthesized framework and discusses their significance in terms of the value creation process (introduced in Chapter 4). Finally, Chapter 9 outlines the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this study, provides direction for future research, and discusses the limitations of the study.

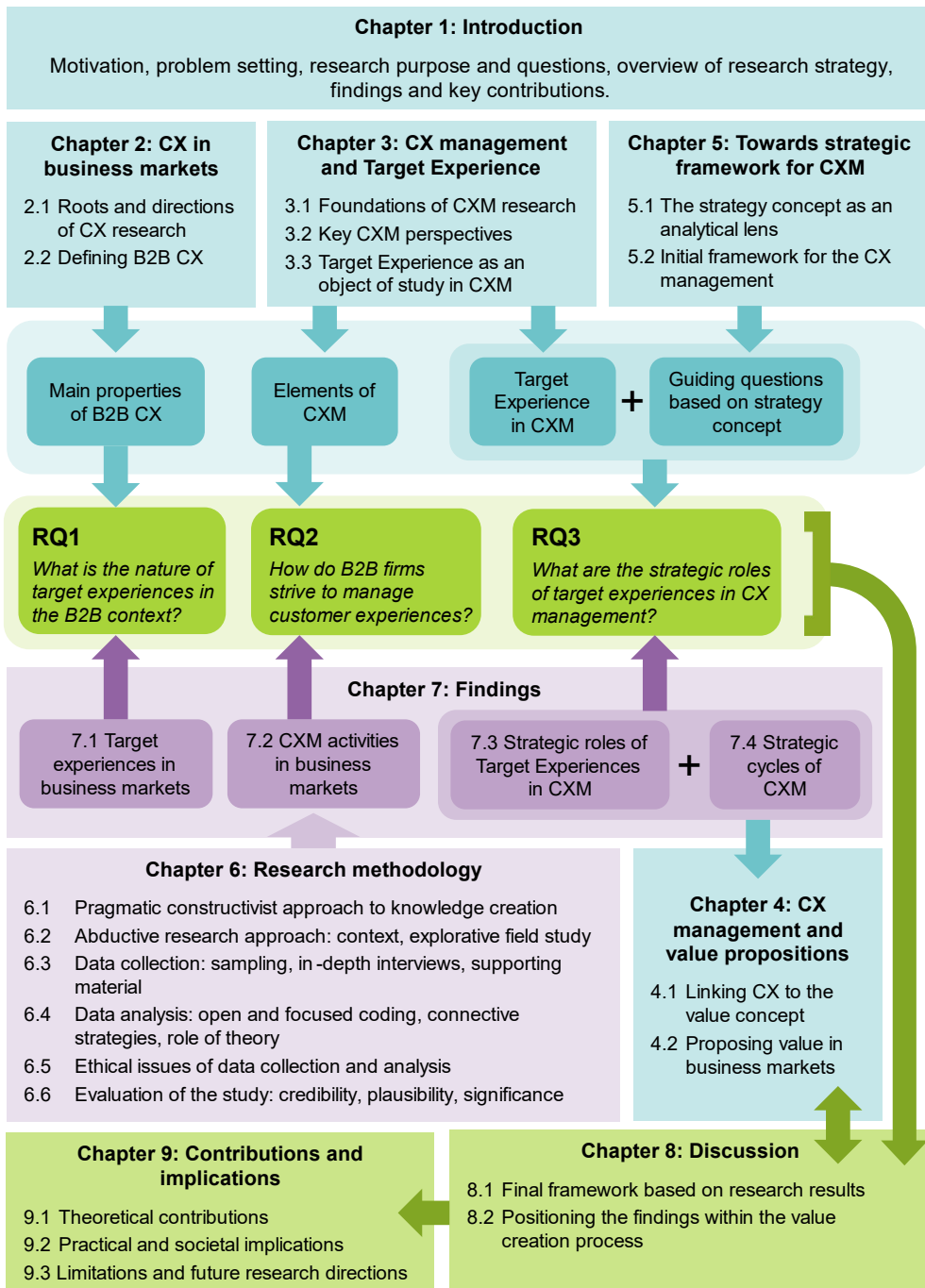


Figure 1. The structure of the research project and outline of the dissertation

2 Customer experience in business markets

For more than a decade, marketing practitioners have been using the concept of customer experience in their efforts to strategically manage a wide array of customer interactions and bring their firms toward a customer-centric way of thinking (e.g., Edelman & Singer, 2015; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Schmitt, 2010). This gives rise to an important question: What makes the concept of CX so special that it finds itself on the strategic agenda of many ambitious firms? (B2B International, 2020; Forrester, 2019). The current chapter investigates the roots and directions of customer experience research and the definition and characteristics of CX in the B2B context.

2.1 Roots and directions of customer experience research

Although the current popularity of the term *customer experience* might suggest that it is of recent origin, the *roots* of this concept can be found in early marketing theories. Specifically, models of customer buying behavior and research on customer satisfaction and loyalty developed in the 1960s and '70s can now be seen as a basis for this concept. These early models have led to customer experience being understood in terms of processes within which customers have certain measurable perceptions and attitudes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, the concept of customer experience attempts to holistically describe a certain facet of human experience and draws upon knowledge from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and business, making this concept truly interdisciplinary (de Keyser et al., 2015).

To continue following the roots of CX research, let us take a brief historical look into the origins of the customer experience concept. The term *consumer experience* first gained popularity in marketing literature when Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) publication emphasized the experiential nature of consumption and enriched a field ruled by the information processing paradigm, thus revolutionizing consumer

research. This shift called attention to the role of emotions (e.g., Havlena & Holbrook, 1986) and other subjective consumer responses (Addis & Holbrook, 2001), challenging the rationality of consumer behavior. Notably, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) defined consumption experience as “a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun” (p. 132).

This interest in fun, enjoyable experiences, in contrast to drier decision-making processes, encouraged research into *extraordinary* experiences (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Zomerdijsk & Voss, 2010). This research direction ventured away from the ideas of experiential consumption and was mainly associated with the staged experiences, such as amusement parks and brand worlds, that a firm can provide instead of increasingly commoditized products or services (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Thus, the idea of competing with a new kind of offering resonated with practice, and research on experience as an offering started to gain traction.

However, Carù and Cova (2003) offered a fuller understanding of customer experiences, stating that *ordinary* everyday experiences are equally meaningful in human lives (see also Abrahams, 1986); for instance, the experience of putting cereal in a bowl each morning, while ordinary, can be life-affirming for many people. With this perspective, consumer, retail, and service research increasingly focused on more or less ordinary experiences, such as online and offline shopping and brand and service experiences. Customer experience was further accepted as a construct that can explain consumer loyalty, buying processes, and word-of-mouth behaviors better than, for example, customer satisfaction (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Research in several fields, including consumer and service design, branding, and retailing, has addressed and developed the concept of customer experience within the marketing discipline over the last 40 years; a systematic literature review by Becker and Jaakkola (2020) revealed eight literature streams that have contributed to the understanding of customer experience since 1982. The authors group these literature streams into two broad research traditions that differ in their metatheoretical assumptions and scope. Indeed, customer experience has been explored in line with different ontological and epistemological assumptions, resulting in *diverse meanings* and often incommensurable models (ibid.). The lack of the common denominator across some elements of the customer experience concept can be explained by a *difference in perspective*: customer experience literature consists of both customer and organizational perspectives, each bringing their contributions to the understanding of the concept (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). These two perspectives provide *two significant directions* for CX research, which are discussed below.

The first is the *customer-centric perspective* on customer experience. What characterizes this research direction the most is its emphasis on the experiential nature of consumption and efforts to situate CXs in the customer’s lifeworld (e.g.,

Kranzbühler et al., 2018). An important distinction to consider when trying to understand the nature of experience is between consumer and consumption experiences, which Carù and Cova (2003) situate on two ends of a continuum. The former considers a person's experiences with the market and is also referred to as *customer experience* (CX). CX refers to people's interactions with businesses, including brands, material products, immaterial offerings, and human and nonhuman representatives. In contrast, consumption experience represents the other end of the continuum where experiences may be acquired in other ways, such as through family, friends, and the surrounding environment. For example, tree hugging may be considered a therapeutic consumption experience, yet it exists outside the market (as many other experiences people value). This distinction indicates the scope of the human experience.

An alternative to putting customer experience on one end of a continuum and consumption experience on the other is to view CX as embedded in consumers' lives and contexts and, therefore, not entirely separate from them (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Heinonen et al., 2013; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). Considering a customer's life means acknowledging that behind market interactions are deeper contexts, meanings, and higher-order goals that a person is trying to accomplish through their interactions with different service providers and nonmarket actors (see Becker, Jaakkola, & Halinen, 2020).

The service-dominant (S-D) logic takes a more abstract view of the customer experience from the consumer perspective (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). In this literature stream, experience is subjective and embedded in a context but is also abstractly positioned within dynamic service ecosystems involving multiple actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Experience is seen as being co-created through resource integration processes that all actors are involved in, and it is intrinsically connected with the concept of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2017).

In sum, the research direction originating from the consumer perspective has led to CX being understood as a concept that emphasizes symbolic meanings and the experiential nature of consumption, reflecting a person's complete psychological and physical experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

The second direction in CX research stems from the *organizational* or provider-centric perspective and concerns itself with the outcomes and determinants of customer experiences related to firm-produced offerings. These determinants involve retailing elements (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009), service encounters (Bitner et al., 1990; Grove et al., 1992; Hoffman & Turley, 2002), service processes (Jüttner et al., 2013; Patrício et al., 2008), online elements (Novak et al., 2000; Rose et al., 2012), and brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). Thus, this research direction focuses on how customers perceive various firm-

produced elements and how these perceptions affect their overall experiences and behaviors.

The scope of customer experience in studies related to the organizational perspective is often limited to customers' interactions with firm-produced stimuli because broader consumption processes seemingly lie outside the providers' concerns (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). However, focusing too much on firm-produced stimuli blurs the line between customer experience and the offering that influences it. In this scenario, improving the offering may be synonymous with improving customer experience, thus equating customer experience with the perceived quality of the offering (see e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1988).

A notable contribution to developing the concept of CX from the organizational perspective comes from the service literature stream. It emphasizes a processual, dynamic view of experiences as being embedded in a series of exchanges (Johnston & Kong, 2011; Tax et al., 2013) and developing across multiple interconnected service interfaces with multiple service providers (Patrício et al., 2008, 2011; Rawson et al., 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). The retailing literature also contributes to understanding customer experience at the analytical level of a customer journey, i.e., its development through time and space (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Several authors have utilized traditional purchase funnels and decision-making models to emphasize multiple channels and touchpoints at which customer experiences occur when customers follow the often nonlinear prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase phases (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Neslin et al., 2006; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Schmitt, 2010; Verhoef et al., 2009).

However, specifying the elements through which CX can be controlled along the customer purchase journey can often blind researchers to the range of uncontrollable elements affecting experience formation. The lack of attention to the contextual and subjective nature of customer experience causes the organizational perspective to lose the depth that the consumer perspective brings to the concept. Of late, there have been multiple calls and attempts to *integrate the organizational and consumer perspectives, unify the nomenclature, and investigate customer experiences in various contexts* (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; de Keyser et al., 2020; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Informed by these calls, the following sections examine the definitions and main characteristics of CX and the special features the B2B context brings to the construct.

2.2 Defining business customer experience

In this section, I present a synthesis of the existing knowledge on CX and business customer properties to propose a definition that is conceptually suitable for studying both CX and CXM in the B2B context. The first subsection presents the various definitions of CX available in the literature, discusses the consensus about its main characteristics and its nature, and proposes a synthesized definition. Following this, the central aspects of CX and the properties of a business customer are highlighted. The section ends with a proposed definition for B2B CX upon discerning its main characteristics.

2.2.1 The general definition of customer experience

Diversity in research perspectives has resulted in a heterogeneous mix of CX conceptualizations (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). However, chronologically examining these definitions allows for identifying the key elements that have made up the concept of CX over decades. **Table 1** (p. 35) displays the definitions of customer experience that have resonated the most with the broad scientific community, thus showing the development of this concept. While not exhaustive, the selected definitions are illustrative of CX as hundreds of works have contributed to their formation.

The definitions emphasize different characteristics of CX, thus illustrating the breadth of the phenomenon. Most definitions stress that CX is *subjective*, *multidimensional*, and *pre-evaluative* (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Homburg et al., 2017; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Schmitt, 1999). Especially the latter characteristic separates CX from other, more evaluative concepts such as perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, and perceived value (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Furthermore, customer experience has been conceptualized as a journey, a *dynamic and constantly evolving process* (Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Many definitions emphasize that experience happens *in response to stimuli* that range from being strictly firm produced or brand related to originating from certain market actors or even customers themselves (Verhoef, 2009; Lemke et al., 2011; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; de Keyser et al., 2015). Together, these definitions provide a solid basis for synthesis.

Table 1. The definitions of customer experience and their historical development

AUTHORS	DEFINITIONS
Schmitt (1999, p. 57)	Customer experience provides sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational values that replace functional values.
Meyer & Schwager (2007, p. 118)	Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company.
Gentile et al. (2007, p. 397)	Customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction . This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels .
Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 32)	Customer experience encompasses the total experience, including the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phases of the experience, and may involve multiple retail channels. (...) This experience is created not only by those elements which the retailer can control, but also by elements that are outside of the retailer's control .
Lemke et al. (2011, p. 848)	we define customer experience as the customer's subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm, including but not necessarily limited to the communication encounter, the service encounter and the consumption encounter .
Homburg et al. (2017, p. 384)	CE is the evolvment of a person's sensorial, affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral responses to a firm or brand by living through a journey of touchpoints along prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase situations and continually judging this journey against response thresholds of co-occurring experiences in a person's related environment .
Lemon & Verhoef (2016, p. 74)	Customer experience is a customer's "journey" with a firm over time during the purchase cycle across multiple touch points. We also conceptualize the total customer experience as a dynamic process .
Becker & Jaakkola (2020, p. 638)	Customer experience comprises customers' nondeliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey.

Before integrating the main components of CX into the definition proposed in this dissertation, it is crucial to understand the different perspectives on *the ontological nature of experience*, i.e., how it comes into being, as these are directly reflected in its definitions and are used to guide research approaches.

First, let us consider the issues related to terminology. Characterizing customer experiences as responses to stimuli has encouraged a lively debate among researchers. The view of experience as a subjective and internal response to brand or product-related stimuli (Gentile et al., 2007) originates from Lavidge and Steiner's (1961) Hierarchy of Effects model. According to this model, any stimulus-induced experience consists of three response elements: cognition (thinking), affect (feeling), and conation (motive) (see also Hilgard, 1980). Despite being based on a linear model, current treatment of experiences suggests that the response components are interdependent and nonlinear (Yoon, 2013). However, the point of contention is the somewhat loose use of the terms *stimuli* and *response*. This terminology originates in the Stimuli–Organism–Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which arguably overemphasizes the effect of the physical environment or stimulus (S) on the individual or organism (O), seeming almost deterministic (see Lipkin, 2016). In contrast, the phenomenological approach to experiences gives more power to the individual and focuses on their sensemaking (e.g., Heinonen et al., 2013; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). However, this focus on mental processes often results in the embodied, spatial nature of experience being disregarded and the role of external stimuli being undermined (Yakhlef, 2015).

Considering both the influence of firm-related stimuli and the importance of customers' lives and contexts, Yakhlef (2015) argued that an experience is neither predesigned within an environment nor purely an outcome of internal mental processes. Instead, an experience is born from interactions as a “spontaneous, practical, reciprocal process between the embodied disposition of the organism and the affordances of the environment” (Yakhlef, 2015, p. 550). This view strongly resonates with the interaction-based perspective on CX (see Lipkin, 2016) that uses terminology consistent with organism–environment interaction (e.g., Edvardsson, Enquist, & Johnston, 2005; Teixeira et al., 2012) while placing experiences within broader contexts where individuals are prominent contributors to their social and physical realities (Pareigis, Edvardsson, & Enquist, 2011).

The position of this study is that *customer experiences are personal and contextually interpreted* and, therefore, cannot be constructed, created, or delivered solely by the service provider. With this understanding, fast and polite service, for example, is not an experience in itself. For an experience to occur, a customer must first perceive the service interaction as fast and polite and then have a psychological response to this perception that is unique to their situation: are they happy to be done with their task on time, or are they worried that the service personnel dealt with their issue only superficially? Thus, customer experience represents a *mix of psychological responses*—thoughts, feelings, and motives—that are inseparable from the customer's lifeworld (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010).

However, this understanding may shift the lens toward the often-imperceptible internal reality of the customer (Heinonen et al., 2010): a customer's response to a particular social cue depends on their perceptions and sensemaking processes, past traumas, dreams, and physical condition—a combination of unique factors that are not necessarily known to the managing firm. This complicates the study of experience “management” that involves providers shaping the external environment to influence or facilitate specific experiences. If a firm and its offering has so little to do with what a customer experiences during an interaction, organized efforts to influence experiences would be of no use. Thus, considering CX as purely a product of human consciousness is not operational for this dissertation.

Therefore, I claim that customer experience is a result of *interactions between different social and environmental stimuli* at touchpoints during the customer journey (see also Yakhlef, 2015). This view allows for exploring CX in terms of a firm's ability to influence it, considering the range of stimuli the firm can create, shape, and put into context. In the case of whether a customer experiences fast and polite service, firm-related stimuli such as a cramped space, a loudly ticking clock and a salesperson's smile would interact with the customer's daily schedule, current state, perception of time, and cultural background, altogether contributing to CX formation—not just as moderating factors but as rightful participants of this spatiotemporal experience. In other words, this approach emphasizes that because CX consists of interacting firm-related and customer-related physical and social factors, it can be influenced.

Acknowledging the subjectivity of psychological experiences as well as the importance of interactions between different (not only offering-related) stimuli in such experiences, this dissertation follows a synthesized definition of CX that bridges the gap between the customer-centric and provider-centric perspectives:

CX consists of customers' multidimensional subjective responses to interacting stimuli coming from both the provider-firm and the customer's context, which they encounter at touchpoints in the course of the customer journey.

Although this definition is perfectly adequate for describing customer experiences in general, it *fails to address the specificities of the business customer experience* in particular. This is because developments in the CX domain have focused on the context of retail and consumer services, with few empirical studies explicitly focusing on B2B CX (e.g., Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Lemke et al., 2011; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Notably, the characteristics of business markets require certain features to be added to the customer experience definition, which warrants further elaboration. The following sections redefine the business customer and offer a new definition of CX that is more suitable for the B2B context.

2.2.2 The “many-headed” customer

The majority of CX research has been performed in the business-to-consumer (B2C) context, where the customer is assumed to be an individual. While discussing one of the basic tenets of CX, namely its interactional nature, de Keyser et al. (2015, p. 13) defined a customer as a “focal individual who engages in a commercial interaction.” However, when the definition of a customer changes from an individual to an organization, the assumption that the experiencing actor is a focal individual does not hold and neither does the meaning of a commercial interaction.

In the B2B context, a customer is, in most cases, represented by *an organized group of individuals* and can therefore be described as a “many-headed customer” (Gummesson, 1987, p. 13). Depending on the organization’s size, the business customer may span from a single entrepreneur to a multi-divisional international conglomerate. The actors within the customer organization differ in their functional roles and hierarchical positions (Witell et al., 2020). Their involvement in usage, service, and communication activities may also vary (Lemke et al., 2011). In the B2B setting, purchase decisions are often made by a buying center (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Johnston & Bonoma, 1981) that is separate from the users of the products or services, i.e., the usage center (Huber & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020; Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2017; Macdonald et al., 2016). This arrangement distances those participating in the experiences of purchasing and constructing a business relationship from experiences of consumption or usage. The divisions among the collective customer can be even more specific, focusing on the experiences of functional units or teams (Witell et al., 2020).

Interpretations of commercial interactions hold the assumption that the person making a purchase decision and paying for the service has ownership over the finances and, in most cases, will experience the service offering. In the B2B context, the definition of a commercial interaction is broader because the money belongs to the buying organization and not, for example, to the buying center or procurement director who makes the purchase on behalf of the organization. Therefore, when a commercial interaction is attributed to an organization, *all interactions between the service provider and the multiple actors belonging to the customer organization can be characterized as commercial.*

Relationship marketing was one of the first academic domains to explore interactions in marketing, identifying the different types of interactions that a *many-headed customer* might have with the *many-headed supplier* (Gummesson, 1987, 1994). These included person-to-person interactions, interactions between people and technological systems or machinery, interactions with the physical environment, and interactions among people working with the provided systems, environment, or resources in the customer organization (Gummesson, 1987). From all these interactions stems the *business customer experience*.

In light of the discussed properties of a business customer, there is a need to reexamine the properties of CX, that is, the idea that CX involves a customer's nondeliberate, subjective, and multidimensional responses and the idea of CX unfolding during a customer journey. This is addressed in the following sections.

2.2.3 Multidimensional responses of individual actors

Across almost all definitions, customer experience is seen as *a multidimensional construct*, best described as a combination of intellectual, affective, sensory, and relational dimensions of human experiences (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt, 1999; Verhoef et al., 2009). These dimensions have underpinnings in psychology and philosophy (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt et al., 2015) and are not without pragmatic considerations in terms of their influence on customer behaviors.

The *intellectual* (cognitive) dimension is expressed when customers apply creative and analytical thinking related to curiosity and problem-solving, while changes in emotions, feelings, and moods fall under the *affective* dimension of customer experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999). To emphasize the physicality of a customer experience, researchers often highlight the *sensory* dimension, which is related to the bodily senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch, and spatial awareness (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999; Yakhlef, 2015). Several authors also identify the *relational* dimension as an indicator of a complex customer experience. It can be seen uniting social, behavioral, lifestyle, and pragmatic dimensions (Gentile et al., 2007; Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2013; Schmitt, 1999) by focusing on experiential responses related to a person's perceptions of their relationships with other human and nonhuman actors, material objects and value systems, and their idea of self. These experiential dimensions come together in a complex mix and are rarely separable, even by the person having the experience (Gentile et al., 2007). They also vary in their expression from context to context (de Keyser et al., 2015).

In addition to dimensionality, de Keyser et al. (2020) noted the other *qualities* of CX, i.e., "attributes that reflect the nature of customer responses and reactions to interactions with the brand or firm" (p. 441). These are *valence* (positively or negatively tinted responses), *ordinariness* (ordinary vs. extraordinary experience), *participation level* (the degree of a customer's active involvement), and *time-flow* (length, speed, tempo, and rhythm) (ibid.). These qualities of customer experience are not inherent to the offering but are created during interactions and interpreted by each actor within the customer organization.

While industrial buyers are commonly portrayed as highly rational in their decision-making, recent evidence emphasizes the significance of emotions in

organizational buying (e.g., Kemp et al., 2018). McColl-Kennedy et al.'s (2019) study was one of the first in B2B experience literature to consider identifying affective responses at touchpoints. However, we still do not know much about the complex experiences that take place in the B2B context. While some authors have suggested that positive experiences for B2B customers are usually effortless, trouble-free, and reassuring (Cardozo, 1965; Meyer & Schwager, 2007), no empirical studies have holistically investigated complex business customer experiences.

The definition of CX as multidimensional and subjective holds in the B2B setting as well, since individual actors experience interactions personally and have individual responses and reactions (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). However, the B2B context challenges the understanding that experiences are purely individual. Actors within a customer organization usually organize themselves in teams and departments and may constitute a collective. Through social interactions within functional units, individual perceptions can influence collective perceptions, and vice versa (Zolkiewski et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). This understanding of a collective is akin to that of collective or communal service experiences, which are characterized by co-consumption practices, i.e., shared use of a firm's offering (Carù & Cova, 2015).

Witell et al. (2020) asserted that while studying affective, behavioral, and sensory responses is more appropriate for the CXs of individual actors within the customer firm, cognitive and relational responses can be attributed to functional units such as procurement teams. However, it remained unclear what this attribution would entail. Considering the subjectivity of a psychological experience, an individual actor may attribute some of their experiences to a collective; for example, "my team had a rough experience with this salesperson." Conversely, can a collective have a shared psychological response? Assigning some shared experiences to a group may be helpful for the managing organization to aggregate responses based on department-level experience and overall customer experience (e.g., Hogueve & Fleischer, 2020).

2.2.4 Multiple journeys and touchpoints in a relationship context

Another essential property of CX is that it occurs at touchpoints throughout the customer journey. In their efforts to provide a common language for describing customer experiences, de Keyser et al. (2015) highlighted, among other characteristics, the dynamic nature of CX. The authors distinguished between a static, event-specific experience that happens at a touchpoint and a dynamic customer experience that evolves throughout a customer journey (see also Kranzbühler et al., 2018).

An *event-specific experience* occurs at a touchpoint—a particular moment in time and space when a customer “touches” the firm (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016). At a touchpoint, a customer encounters material (environmental) and social factors (Yakhlef, 2015) that can relate to the firm, other customers and service providers, as well as their own situation (such as stomachache). Material factors include objects, layouts, and atmospheric cues, while social factors include historical, cultural, cognitive, and emotive processes (Yakhlef, 2015). When these factors interact during a customer’s direct or indirect contact with a firm, customer experience is formed (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009).

Recently, Barann et al. (2020) introduced a detailed conceptualization of a touchpoint, partially reconciling the firm-centric and customer-centric perspectives. The authors dissected the touchpoint into three constructs:

- a firm-controlled *stimulus* (planned cues) carrying a specific function to the customer,
- an *interface* (potential points of interaction) that mediates stimuli and facilitates encounters, and
- an *encounter*, which is the actual moment of contact at which the experience happens in all its complexity.

This understanding of an encounter is consistent with the uses of service, communications, and usage encounters given by Lemke et al. (2011) and Payne, Storbacka, and Frow (2008). Considering the entire touchpoint, the abovementioned conceptualization explicates how predesigned firm-controlled elements and customer, situational, and sociocultural factors come together in experience formation (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Event-specific experiences in the B2B context may differ significantly from those that occur in the B2C context due to variations in their social and physical environments. While theme parks, Instagram ads, and hotlines are most representative of the B2C setting, business customers are more likely to encounter conference rooms, group emails, and Zoom meetings. The multitude of actors, indicative of the B2B setting, adds to the social dimension of a touchpoint. Some touchpoints along the customer journey may demand the participation of multiple individuals within a single space, creating a shared experience, while others may be dispersed in time across different locations, requiring multiple individuals involved to communicate about their individual experiences. Furthermore, people in different roles act on behalf of the customer organization during an encounter, balancing individual and organizational goals (Macdonald et al., 2011), which can have a critical effect on CX formation (Verhoef et al., 2009; de Keyser et al., 2015).

The *dynamic view* of CX considers its evolvement over time, reflecting multiple event-specific experiences along the customer journey (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon

& Verhoef, 2016). The dynamic forming of experiences throughout the customer journey continuously informs and is informed by experiences at touchpoints (de Keyser et al., 2015; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). The term customer journey is widely used in service design literature to understand and assess customer experiences or investigate and communicate shared experiences (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

As can be expected from an evolving field of study, there is some incoherence in the terminology associated with customer journeys, especially concerning its scope. The discrepancies in the scope partly come from differences between the organizational and customer perspectives. The *organizational perspective* sees it as a “*journey with the firm and its offering,*” i.e., how a customer progresses through the prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase cycles or different stages of service (see Johnston & Kong, 2011; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). Despite trying to approach the journey from the customer’s standpoint, the organizational or managerial perspective inevitably relates the customer’s activities and processes to the firm’s offerings and sales goals, referencing a sales funnel in one way or another. In turn, the *customer-centered customer journey* can be understood as a “*journey to the goal*”; it includes interactions with several providers and nonmarket actors to achieve a specific goal or solve a problem (see Becker et al., 2020). This view of a goal-oriented journey recognizes that behind market interactions are higher-order goals that a person, or an organization, is trying to achieve.

This duality of perspectives does not, however, mean that one of them is misguided or that firms do not consider customers’ broader journeys at all. Literature in the areas of CXM and service design shows that firms try to support the broader aspects of customer journeys, for example, by situating themselves in service delivery networks and engaging in new service development (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tax et al., 2013). The beauty of the customer journey construct is its flexibility as a level of analysis for customer experience (Følstad & Kvale, 2018): its scope can be as narrow and as broad as one finds appropriate for the questions under study, ranging from an hour-long journey across a servicescape (e.g., a museum) (Ponsignon et al., 2017) to an entire customer lifetime cycle (Cortez & Johnston, 2017).

The concept of customer journey becomes increasingly important when trying to obtain a holistic view of the dynamic business customer experience. Parallel to the customer-centric understanding of the goal-oriented journey, Witell et al. (2020) defined the B2B customer journey as “a set of relational processes to meet the customer’s business needs” (p. 422). This definition borrows from the customer-centric perspective on solutions (Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadway, 2007; Hakanen & Jaakkola, 2012) and underlines the importance of a supplier’s ability to understand customers’ business processes and goals (Lemke et al., 2011). B2B customer

journeys involve multiple interactions with providers and wide service networks in stages, including pre-bid engagement, negotiation, implementation, and operations (Brady, Davies, & Gann, 2005; Tuli et al., 2007). Furthermore, multiple smaller customer journeys can simultaneously occur within the boundaries of a single customer organization, as firms often purchase multiple offerings from the same supplier (Witell et al., 2020). It is also possible for a single experiencing actor to have only a partial impression of the customer journey and not necessarily be able to evaluate the completion of organizational goals (Witell et al., 2020).

Current CX literature is still unclear on how to position B2B CX in a context of a long-term business relationship. Unlike the B2C context in which a purchase journey is an acceptable unit of analysis, the B2B context consists of journeys that usually happen within a long-term business relationship, extending over years of partnership instead of being limited to a single purchase cycle (Hogreve & Fleischer, 2020), and thus warranting a broader perspective on customer journey. Moreover, a B2B relationship carries an expectation that the interactions between involved organizations will continue in the future (Beitelspacher et al., 2018), which must affect CX and its dynamics.

Table 2 (p. 44) summarizes the properties of CX in the B2B context. As reviewed in the sections above, CX refers to a customer's subjective and multidimensional responses, but it gains new characteristics in business markets where multiple experiencing actors and the customer's organizational structure are introduced. The experiencing actors can be conceptualized based on their organizational unit, hierarchical position, roles, goals, and tasks, all of which come with their own environmental and social factors. A mix of intellectual, affective, sensory, and relational responses can be attributed to different actors or collectives and may diametrically oppose the qualities of other responses within a customer organization. Notably, the event-specific experiences at touchpoints with the provider are more likely to be disconnected from each other due to the presence of different experiencing actors, thus increasing the importance of individual journeys guided by personal and organizational goals.

In light of this analysis, I propose the following definition for CX in the B2B context:

B2B CX consists of the responses of multiple actors within a customer-firm to stimuli coming from the provider-firm, but also from actors' functional units and organization as well as their individual contexts, which they encounter at touchpoints in the course of their journeys within a business relationship.

Table 2. Characteristics of B2B CX

Property	Characteristics
Multiple actors, levels, and hierarchies	Organization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size • Structure Functional unit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buying center • Usage center • Departments and teams Actor: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional roles • Hierarchical positions
Multidimensional responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual, affective, sensory, relational • Individual and collective attribution of responses
Multiple journeys and touchpoints	Event-specific CX at touchpoints: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context-specific interfaces and stimuli • Disconnected encounters Dynamic CX during a customer journey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple parallel individual journeys • Disconnected stages • Guided by individual and organizational goals • Part of a business relationship

Not only does the extant research help comprehend the experiences themselves but it also can illuminate how providers make sense of business customer experiences. The conceptualization of B2B CX above contributes to the aim of this dissertation and is the first step to answering RQ1 concerning the nature of target experiences in the B2B context. The motivation for addressing this research question is quite simple—B2B providers’ understanding of their customers’ experiences and the CX concept would likely affect their approaches to managing CX.

3 CX management and Target Experience

While a more robust understanding of the nature and potency of CX is gradually forming in the academic literature, research on the management of the total customer experience remains limited, especially in the B2B context (Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Witell et al., 2020). Findings from the disciplines of marketing, operations, and human resources reveal CXM to be a genuinely interdisciplinary approach with great potential for overcoming contemporary marketing challenges (Homburg et al., 2017; Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola, 2018).

This chapter delves into the existing knowledge of CXM, its roots and mysteries. First, Section 3.1 positions CX management research within the framework of earlier management approaches, showing how the available information on CXM comes from service, relationship, and channel management literature. The section further highlights CXM as an independent approach. Then, Section 3.2 reviews the definition of CXM and different ways of researching the concept, finally proposing that it be studied through its activities. Following this, Section 3.3 focuses on a specific component of CX management—target experience. It highlights the lack of attention paid to target experiences in the extant CXM research and how target experience can be a valuable object of study for understanding CX management efforts.

3.1 Foundations of CX management research

Research on CX management has diverse roots, which I explore in this section to understand where CXM originated as well as how it compares to other approaches, what it draws from them, and what it leaves behind. To this end, the theoretical foundations of CXM can be divided into three broad research streams: service management and design literature, relationship marketing and management, and multichannel integration and journey management research. These streams were identified by making sense of the literature used in different works on CXM in consumer, retail, service and B2B contexts. The analysed literature provides insights

into the organizational perspective on designing, monitoring, and managing stimuli that influence customer experiences.

3.1.1 Service management and service design

CX management research contributes to and builds on a large body of knowledge in the service quality improvement, service management, and service design domains (e.g., Patrício, Gustafsson, & Fisk, 2018; Tax et al., 2013; Teixeira et al., 2012; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). In this section, I review the relevant elements studied in these domains and position them against the CXM approach.

Since the 1980s, research has expounded how customers and other actors judge the quality of the services they experience based on particular service attributes, namely *service quality factors* (e.g., Grönroos, 1984; Edvardsson, 1998). These evaluations involve judging the quality of the service process as well as its outcomes (Grönroos, 1984). The measures of perceived service quality include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy as well as tangible elements of service delivery (SERVQUAL model) in consumer markets (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and elements related to potential quality, hard process quality, soft process quality, and output quality (INDSERV scale) in business markets (Gounaris, 2005).

Informed by these quality measurements, researchers directed their attentions toward *service delivery* and *service quality improvement*, which include quality assurance, quality management, and quality control (Edvardsson, 1996; 1998). Service quality management has thus been studied in terms of improving internal and external service delivery processes, particularly in designing spaces, tangible elements, and internal operations. Among the service quality drivers that cannot be designed directly, employee empowerment, internal marketing, and service training have been deemed important (Pomirleanu et al., 2016; Hensel, 1990; Lings, 1999). Research on service quality management has further underlined the role of communication and control processes for employee management, specifically to increase role clarity and avoid role conflict among service personnel (Zeithaml, et al., 1988). Other prominent themes in service quality management include the development of quality control measures (van Iwaarden & van der Valk, 2013), managerial commitment (Soltani et al., 2008), expectation management (Robledo, 2001), and the impact of customer education on quality judgments (Eisingerich & Bell, 2008). Research on the development of managerial tools has also emphasized the role of consumer research and marketing in translating identified customer needs and expectations into service requirements (Cravens et al., 1988; Lings, 1999).

There are significant variations in the *scope of interest of service research*. For a while, the main focus of service research was on designing new offerings to ensure service quality and avoid major failures (Shostack, 1982; Edvardsson & Olsson,

1996). More specifically, service design and management research focused on staging and enacting service prerequisites and processes (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Ramaswamy, 1996; Grove et al., 1992). Over the years, researchers have stressed the importance of various objects of design, including physical evidence and surroundings (Shostack, 1982; Bitner, 1992), service interface and infrastructure (Secomandi & Snelders, 2011; Patrício et al., 2008), and touchpoints and encounters (Clatworthy, 2011; Solomon et al., 1985; Bitner et al., 1990). As service design became more systemic, the role of the service concept (Goldstein et al., 2002) and the design of complex service systems gained more notice (Patrício et al., 2011). Thus, the scope of service management and design research fluctuates between the specific elements of a service offering to designing and managing within a service ecosystem.

Service research has also considered the *interactions between physical and social service elements* (e.g., Pullman & Gross, 2004). Recent approaches to service design have emphasized the role of sociomaterial configurations and institutional arrangements in service design (Kimbell, 2011; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018; Vink et al., 2021). Increasingly aligned with S-D logic, concepts such as service ecosystem design have embraced the process of collective designing and view design as a historically situated and reflective practice capable of systemic change, thus making service design more than just a step in new service development (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021). Ultimately, the literature contributes to understanding a provider's role in experience creation at different levels in a customer's context.

According to current service management and design research, managerial action focuses on facilitating desirable experiences. The *design for service* perspective states that the key anticipated outcome of design is the *experience* (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014). However, the primary focus of service literature is on *service experiences* rather than customer experiences. Kwortnik and Thompson (2009, p. 404) saw service experience management as “fundamentally different from customer experience management because of its focus on the management of the service operations system and experiential outcomes” rather than as a provider–customer relationship. Indeed, service experience encompasses the experiences of multiple stakeholders within the service system.

In contrast to service experience, *customer experience* refers to *customers as “experience actors”* within those systems (Jain et al., 2017, p. 649). CX management thus considers only customers' responses to the service exchange, which in business markets are bounded by the context of the associated firm–customer relationship. This approach allows for *positioning CX management within a service system* and examining the actions of the provider firm that are directed toward influencing a customer's experiences as an actor in the service system.

However, CXM should still be viewed in terms of its connections to other actors influencing CX.

In sum, the CXM literature draws extensively from the domains of service management and design. Without understanding the mechanisms involved in influencing experiences through service elements and processes, it is impossible to conceptualize the provider's role in CX creation.

3.1.2 Relationship marketing and management

CX management's roots can also be found in *relationship marketing* and *relationship management* literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Palmer, 2010). Relationship marketing originated from research on buyer–seller relationships (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Ford, 1980, 1984; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Cunningham, 1980; Turnbull & Valla, 1986; Campbell, 1985) and then spread as a business philosophy to other contexts in the early 2000s (e.g., Grönroos, 2011; Gummesson, 2002; Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006; Palmer, 2010), encouraging new approaches to marketing management. In this section, I review the central ideas of relationship marketing and management and focus on customer relationship management (CRM) as an approach that builds a strong foundation for CXM.

Relationship marketing involves “developing, maintaining and enhancing long-term customer relationships” based on “interaction within networks of relationships” (Gummesson, 2002, p. 587). In 1994, Gummesson satirically introduced the 30R model of 30 relationships that occur in the B2B context, including those of the customer–supplier dyad, the many-headed customer and supplier, service encounter relationship, and variations of triads and alliances with commercial and noncommercial actors. These were classified as nano, individual, mass-marketing, interorganizational, or macro relationships, emphasizing the complexity of B2B markets and the need to recognize the importance of relationships in marketing strategies (Gummesson, 1994). Thus, relationship marketing can be seen as *a network phenomenon that includes the dyadic approach but is not limited to it* (Anderson, Hakansson, & Johanson, 1994).

The academic interest in relationships opened up several promising avenues of research. Scholars in the field of industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP), for instance, went beyond focusing on transactional exchanges to understanding the market as *a network of relationships consisting of multiple interaction processes* (Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996; Cunningham, 1980). This approach involved examining interaction processes, interaction participants, the atmosphere of a relationship, and the environment within which a relationship occurs (Turnbull & Valla, 1986; Campbell, 1985; Pardo, Salle, & Spencer, 1995). Accordingly, researchers theorized that interactions may take different forms, such

as interpersonal contacts, negotiations, adaptations, and mediation flows (Turnbull & Valla, 1986; Pardo et al., 1995), and highlighted the distinct types of exchange episodes related to the exchange of products and services, money, information, and sociality (Metcalfe, Frear, & Krishnan, 1990). This research stream thus brought to light the underlying processes in interactions between business parties.

The emphasis on relationships within the customer–supplier dyad directed B2B research toward the *emotional and relational aspects of organizational selling and buying*, including trust, commitment, cooperation, communication, promises, and shared values (Hunt et al., 2006). Researchers stressed the importance of interpersonal liking as an antecedent of trust at the level of individual relationships (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001), which underlines the role of emotions in interaction processes. Furthermore, the focus of some studies in this area on establishing lasting bonds by building customer trust (Doney & Cannon, 1997) shows how interaction processes contribute to fluctuations within a supplier–customer relationship.

As relationship marketing gained traction in academia and business, so did *relationship management*. Built on the principles of Wanamaker’s philosophy of business, which emphasizes the need for balanced relationships in business networks for the benefit of all participants (see Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013), relationship management focuses on reciprocity and the nurturing of long-term relationships with customers and other actors in the business network. Network relationship strategies include managing individual relationships and a portfolio of interrelated relationships (e.g., Krapfel, Salmond, & Spekman, 1991; Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996).

While early conceptual work, such as cited above, took a broad approach to relationship management, including all kinds of relationships in the portfolio, *focus on the customer* and *emphasis on the customer–supplier relationship* subsequently overpowered management practice. This is evidenced by how customer portfolio management (CPM), for example, is now one of the key areas of customer relationship and network management in business markets (Terho, 2009). A more focused approach, key account management (KAM), concentrates on how a firm can systematically build long-term relationships with large, strategically important customers (McDonald, Millman, & Rogers, 1997). The primary aim of KAM is to orchestrate collaborative, mutually beneficial interorganizational relationships by identifying key customers based on relationship data and developing them, for example, by using loyalty programs and upselling tactics (Napolitano, 1997; Kumar, Sharma, & Salo, 2019).

Customer relationship management (CRM) is a managerial approach derived from relationship marketing. Developed with an emphasis on technology, CRM is a cross-departmental, multichannel, and data-driven customer management approach

aimed at increasing customer satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and retention (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). CRM goes hand in hand with customer prioritization: only relationships with profitable customers are considered worth developing (Johnson et al., 2012; Payne & Frow, 2005).

A significant number of CRM studies lie in the information systems discipline and focus on aspects related to data and technologies, such as merging customer interactions at touchpoints, recognizing customer purchasing patterns with data mining, and linking customer touchpoints to front- and back-office functions with data sharing practices (Chen & Popvich, 2003; Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). Such technologies allow for increased personalization and improved services, resulting in higher customer satisfaction (Chen & Popvich, 2003).

However, there is also *a broader approach to CRM* that takes into account both hard (technology-driven) and soft (experience-driven) ways to address relationship management (e.g., Henneberg, 2006; Payne & Frow, 2004, 2005, 2006). The so-called hard approach is preoccupied with customer analytics and knowledge management. The soft approach, which is what Henneberg (2006) calls customer experience management, includes the management of direct customer interactions by developing interaction skills and strategies, understanding customer needs, and establishing new customer-centric touchpoints. The importance given to interaction skills echoes earlier approaches to relationship marketing that considered such skills a source of competitive advantage (Ford, 1984). The direct link between CRM and CXM makes it clear that the approaches are closely related.

Payne and Frow (2004, 2005, 2006) were the first to link CRM to customer experiences and consider its impact on the latter. They characterized CRM as a cross-functional, process-oriented approach that involves strategy development, value creation, multichannel integration, information management, and performance assessment (Payne & Frow, 2005). Furthermore, the authors stressed the importance of employee engagement, project management, and change management processes for successfully implementing CRM strategies (Payne & Frow, 2006).

Some would argue that *CX management is here to replace CRM as a more dynamic concept*. CXM involves capturing customers' perceptions of a company, distributing the knowledge across functions, and creating value together with customers. At the same time, CRM primarily focuses on extracting value and optimizing customer profitability to the firm using customer information (Homburg et al., 2017). The type of information a firm uses is, in fact, one of the main distinctions between these two approaches. CRM utilizes information technology to collect mainly quantitative and transaction-based information that can help enhance the value of carefully targeted customers. In contrast, the goal of CXM is to gain insights into customers' behaviors, feelings, and motivations, which calls for

qualitative research in addition to holistic metrics (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Palmer, 2010).

CRM and CXM approaches *vary in their focus*. CRM's emphasis on customer retention and profit maximization, as well as the limited focus on value creation, makes the concept more customer-focused than customer-centric, separating it from CX management (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, while CRM aims to influence the customer–supplier relationship, CXM is centered on the customer ecosystem (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2018; Lipkin, 2016). Customer experiences include interactions at touchpoints during customer journeys of all kinds, sometimes including interactions with other providers (Homburg et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). In other words, CXM extends to customer processes and is concerned not only with customer relationships but also with customer wellbeing.

Despite the differences mentioned above, one can draw parallels between the relationship marketing view and CX management. First, both CXM and CRM are firm-wide approaches involving cross-functional collaborations and flows of information (Homburg et al., 2017). CRM strategy implementation and management models can also apply to CXM (Hillebrand et al., 2011; Payne & Frow, 2006). The philosophy of reciprocity also finds its way to CXM, as it aims to achieve a “win-win value exchange” between suppliers and customers (Grewal et al., 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, the interaction approach developed by IMP Group in the 1980s situates interactions as the main components of a relationship (Gummesson, 2002), while CX theory sees customer experiences as being formed through direct and indirect interactions (e.g., Meyer & Schwager, 2007). These parallels make customer–supplier interactions the *points d'entrée* for managerial influence on CXs in the B2B context.

Research shows that positive experience in interactions can strengthen B2B relationships (Bolton, 2016) and enhance the customer's willingness to recommend the service to others (Human et al., 2020). This means that firms can influence the dynamics of customer–supplier relationships by managing customer experiences during interactions. Conversely, the dynamics of customer–supplier relationships can also affect customer experiences. For example, Gilboa, Seger-Guttmann, & Mimran (2019) found that two aspects of relationship marketing, namely social relationship and personal care, are crucial components of CX in the small business context. Furthermore, the researchers reported intriguing conflicts between the atmosphere of certain relationships and experiential responses (e.g., feelings of unease arising from an overly close relationship) (Gilboa et al., 2019). These findings emphasize that, despite their differences, *both relationship management and CX management can influence customer experiences and relationship formation*.

3.1.3 Multichannel integration and journey management

CX management literature builds on the findings of studies in the *multichannel management*, *channel integration*, and *journey management* domains (e.g., Murfield et al., 2017; Neslin et al., 2006; Neslin & Shankar, 2009; Payne & Frow, 2004; Saghiri et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015). In this section, I review the central elements of these approaches and draw distinctions and parallels with CXM approaches.

Since the 1990s, changes in technology and retail environments have created various ways for businesses to interact with customers and offer them products through multiple digital and physical channels (Verhoef et al., 2015; Hänninen et al., 2021). As customers adapted to these new environments, new shopping behaviors, such as channel switching, research shopping, and showrooming, emerged (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002; Balasubramanian et al., 2005; Verhoef et al., 2007). It became clear that customer buying behavior was affected not only by product properties but also by the characteristics of the channels used in the process (Frambach et al., 2007). Therefore, researchers directed their attentions to understanding *multichannel shopping behaviors*, *channel preferences*, and *approaches to managing multiple channels*. Among the major objectives in multichannel management research was understanding how different channel options compare in terms of their profitability and contributions to the final purchase decision (Payne & Frow, 2004; Neslin et al., 2006). Moreover, researchers looked into optimal channel strategies, channel synergies and conflicts, and firms' resource allocation strategies across channels (Sharma & Mehrotra, 2007; Rosenbloom, 2007; Payne & Frow, 2004; Neslin et al., 2006).

Multichannel behavior research has experienced *rapid growth in scope*. For at least a decade, multichannel research focused on the online–offline dichotomy, specifically the benefits and tradeoffs of online and offline retail environments (e.g., Dholakia & Zhao, 2010; Gilly & Wolfinger, 2000). However, this is now an outdated approach. In the present day, customers use multiple channels in their interactions with retailers, often simultaneously, including not only points of sale but also media channels such as social media platforms, blogs, and mobile applications (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Barann et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). Furthermore, while the literature on multichannel management has traditionally been developed around the retail context, multichannel behavior is evident in the B2B context as well, with studies considering multiple distribution and communication channels when studying channel management strategies (e.g., Sharma & Mehrotra 2007; Rosenbloom, 2007).

As multichannel management research developed, problems related to *channel integration* took center stage (Cao & Li, 2015; Lee et al., 2019; Herhausen et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Researchers conceptualized channel management models

based on different degrees of channel integration, namely multichannel, cross-channel, and omnichannel (e.g., Beck & Rygl, 2015; Berman & Thelen, 2018). Multiple studies focused on the integration of services, products, promotion, branding, price, and loyalty programs as well as the alignment of inventory and customer data and organization processes to achieve consistency and cohesion among retail elements (Berman & Thelen, 2018; Cao & Li, 2015; Cui et al., 2020). *Omnichannel environments* were characterized in research by full channel integration, which allowed customers to use and trigger interactions in all channels throughout the buying process (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Yrjölä et al., 2018). However, full integration was reported to be difficult to achieve, presenting firms with multiple challenges and obstacles (e.g., Hajdas et al., 2020).

The high degree of integration in omnichannel strategies is also universally assumed to *result in a seamless customer experience* (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2015; Berman & Thelen, 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2020). Yrjölä et al. (2018) differentiated omnichannel strategies from the other types based on their ability to offer experiential value propositions specifically aimed at facilitating seamless, smooth, and effective experiences. This *seamless omnichannel CX* is a *distinctive experience* and has often been addressed through the concept of flow (Quach et al., 2020), which underlines its dynamic nature.

With the broadening of channel scope and the development of CX as a dynamic concept, studies began to shift from channel management to *journey management* (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Kuehnl et al., 2019). Customer journey management is centered on dynamic customer experiences and considers the effects of technology, social, cultural, and political factors as well as retail mix elements (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). From the journey management perspective, a channel may include multiple touchpoints that customers experience during their journeys. Therefore, the integration of touchpoints within and across channels steals the spotlight from channel integration (Gasparin et al., 2022; Barann et al., 2020). The various properties of journey design—such as consistency, thematic cohesion, and context sensitivity of brand-owned touchpoints (Kuehnl et al., 2019) or journey personalization, coherence, and seamlessness (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021)—echo those reported in the channel integration literature but also make journey design a distinctive approach. Because journey management approaches CX more earnestly than earlier omnichannel management literature, the expected experience outcomes are not limited to smooth and seamless experiences but also include exciting, challenging, and surprising experiences (Siebert et al., 2020; Gasparin et al., 2022).

To sum up, CXM studies *build on the channel integration and management literature* by incorporating findings related to channel management strategies, experiential outcomes of increased channel integration, and organizational

challenges of managing a mix of internal and external channels and touchpoints. Furthermore, CXM is a broad approach that *encompasses the newly developing journey management perspective*. Specifically, journey management focuses more on experiences related to customer journey progression, while CX management takes a more holistic approach, including experiences at and across different touchpoints in the customer's lifeworld.

3.1.4 CX management as a distinct approach

CX management arises as a distinct approach from the foundation created by the streams of literature discussed in previous sections. **Table 3** outlines the central concepts, scope of interest, and management focus of the abovementioned approaches, positioning CXM among them. The central concepts indicate the central ideas used in this approach, while the management focus represents the objective toward which the managerial effort is directed. The scope of interest addresses the scope of the management approach in terms of elements being manipulated.

CX management focuses on customer experience in all its variations and richness (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Its scope lies within the service system, includes the relationship dyad, and stretches toward the customer ecosystem. It attempts to influence event-specific and dynamic experiences across multiple partner-owned, customer-owned, and external touchpoints (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), which makes its scope broader than those of traditional approaches to journey management.

To sum up, since CXM has received surprisingly little research attention as a strategic approach to facilitating desirable experiences, a solid theoretical basis had to be established. The overview of several management approaches provides a crucial understanding in this regard. The following section delves deeper into the literature on CX management, integrating some of the findings from approaches discussed above.

Table 3. Positioning CX management among other marketing management approaches

	Central concepts	Scope of interest	Focus of management
Service management			
Service quality management	Perceived service quality; service delivery; service requirements; quality control	Service process	Service quality
Service design and management	Service blueprint; service systems; operations; encounters; interface; service recovery	Service ↔ Service ecosystem	Service experience
Relationship marketing			
Relationship management	Interaction processes; business networks; trust; commitment; reciprocity	Interactions ↔ Business networks	Business relationships
CRM	Customer prioritization; personalization and optimization of interactions	Relationship dyad	Customer–supplier relationship
Channel integration and journey management			
Multichannel management	Channel integration; channel synergies & conflicts; omnichannel experience	Interaction channels	Channel integration
Journey management	Effective journey design; touchpoint integration	Customer journey	Customer experience
CX management	Customer experience; customer journey; touchpoint management	Customer ecosystem	Customer experience

3.2 Key CX management perspectives

Although CX management is a highly significant topic in the current business environment, only a handful of empirical studies have taken an organizational perspective to understanding the concept (Ponsignon et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2017), and even fewer have focused on CX management in B2B settings (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Witell et al., 2020; Sahhar et al., 2021). In the following sections, I inspect the most representative definitions of CXM and identify their central elements. I then argue for a holistic approach to studying CXM through its constituent activities. The theoretical understanding formed in this chapter forms the backbone of my empirical study.

3.2.1 Defining CX management

Even firms without any organized CXM functions and initiatives have a role to play in customer experience formation. However, this dissertation limits its view of CX management to include only *deliberate, strategic efforts* to influence and manage customer experiences (Verhoef et al., 2009; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

An examination of the different definitions of CXM established over the years (**Table 4**, p. 57) revealed that it is often seen either as a strategic management approach (e.g., Grewal et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009; Homburg et al., 2017) or as a collection of activities and processes (e.g., Ponsignon et al., 2015; Jain et al., 2017). The aims of CXM are often presented in sequential form: to optimize the use of cues (Berry et al., 2002; Jain et al., 2017) and thus create or engineer CXs (Verhoef et al., 2009; Mahrous & Hassan, 2017) to establish customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2017) and reciprocally beneficial relationships (Grewal et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009; Mahrous & Hassan, 2017). The inclusion of high-order goals such as relationship development and value creation in the definition clearly indicates that CXM involves strategically meaningful efforts. It is also evident that the management aims are achieved by influencing micro-level elements, i.e., clues and interactions (Berry et al., 2002), which affect experience creation.

CX creation is mentioned in the definitions as an aim of CX management in several ways. Earlier, practitioner-oriented works have considered CXM to be a strategic approach for *creating* or *engineering* CX, with overly deterministic language used in relation to CX formation (see Schmitt, 1999). Of the definitions chosen (

Table 4), only the one used in Ponsignon's et al. (2015) work showcases a customer-centric approach to CX; it talks about a firm's role in *enabling CX co-creation*. This definition resonates with the view adopted in this dissertation that a firm cannot unilaterally create CXs but can facilitate their emergence (Patrício et al., 2011; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). In fact, recent research on CX management in the

B2B context emphasizes the importance of service providers' efforts in influencing CXs during value creation processes and also adheres to the customer-centric perspective on experience formation (Sahhar et al., 2021). Finally, tautological mentions of CXs have been altogether avoided in most definitions, with the focus remaining on CX management's aim to influence interactions where experiences happen (Berry et al., 2002; Jain et al., 2017).

Table 4. Representative definitions of CX management

AUTHORS	DEFINITIONS
Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel (2002, p. 85)	Total CX management means orchestrating an integrated series of functional and emotional clues that customers detect during the buying process.
Grewal, Levy, & Kumar (2009, p. 1)	CX management represents a business strategy designed to manage the customer experience. It represents a strategy that results in a win-win value exchange between the retailer and its customers.
Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 38)	CX management is a retailer's strategy to engineer the customer's experience in such a way as to create value both to the customer and the firm.
Ponsignon, Klaus, & Maull (2015, p. 297)	CX management involves manipulating the interactive elements of the service delivery system to enable customers to co-create their experiences with the organization.
Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl (2017, p. 384)	CX management is a firm-wide management approach. It refers to cultural mindsets towards CXs, strategic directions for designing CXs, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CXs, with the goals of achieving and sustaining long-term customer loyalty.
Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare (2017, p. 652)	CX management can be understood as the systematic identification, prioritization and incorporation of right set of clues at touchpoints across all the stages; designing and developing interactive processes for experience creation; and measuring customer responses using appropriate performance metrics.
Mahrous & Hassan (2017, p. 1050)	CX management aims at aligning a company's capabilities with customer needs at each interaction channel to create a superior customer experience and achieve a reciprocal relationship benefiting both parties.
Becker & Jaakkola, (2020, p. 641)	Firms cannot create the customer experience, but they can monitor, design, and manage a range of stimuli that affect such experiences.

Direct and indirect interactions with customers constitute the central sphere of influence for CXM (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). This means that the managing firm would focus on organizing and optimizing its contact with a customer, that is, a customer's entire encounter with the firm and its offerings (Schmitt, 2010). Notably, in recent academic and practitioner-oriented literature, interaction management is often replaced with touchpoint and journey management (e.g., Rawson et al., 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Homburg et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). Some definitions acknowledge that the customer journey extends across multiple interaction channels (Mahrous & Hassan, 2017) or the entire service delivery system (Ponsignon et al., 2015). Thus, these definitions position management of the channel mix and service system elements within the domain of CX management.

A few definitions refer to the organizational characteristics of CXM, primarily focusing on firms' capabilities and a shared customer-centric culture (Homburg et al., 2017; Mahrous & Hassan, 2017). These firm capabilities can be analyzed in relation to the collection of processes such as identifying, tracking, measuring, overseeing, analyzing, understanding, prioritizing, organizing, manipulating, orchestrating, structuring, designing, building, integrating, developing, renewing, and innovating. These are only a handful of action verbs used in the definitions of CXM above, which signify a multitude of processes that take place in an organization that deliberately manages CXs.

This dissection of CXM definitions reveals the different ways in which the concept is approached by researchers. Further analysis of the existing literature shows that the different approaches follow the Aristotelian elements of circumstance: the five Ws and H questions (who, what, why, when, where, and how). The objectives and findings reported in extant CX management research can be categorized based on four general questions: 1) *Why* do firms try to manage experiences? 2) *What* are the manageable elements of CX? 3) *Who* owns CX and participates in its management? 4) *How* is CX management organized? Although present in the literature, the questions of when (timescape) and where (context) CX management occurs are omitted from this dissertation for generalization purposes. The existing knowledge on CX management is summarized in **Table 5** (p. 59), and the following subsections are structured according to the why, what, who, and how of CXM. The final subsection proposes an activity-focused approach to studying CXM.

Table 5. Extant CXM research categorized based on the 3Ws and H questions

	CENTRAL FINDINGS	REPRESENTATIVE STUDIES
WHY	<p>Outcomes of improved CX:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased engagement, frequency of use, retention, satisfaction, lower price sensitivity - Increased loyalty and commitment - Positive WoM - Positive effect on brand equity <p>Effectiveness of CX management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive effects of CXM on differentiation, market performance, financial performance - Positive moderating effects of market turbulence, competitive intensity, and technological turbulence 	<p>Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Keiningham, Aksoy & Bejou, 2006; Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Ismail et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2012; Srivastava & Kaul, 2016; Keiningham et al., 2017; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019</p> <p>Grønholdt et al., 2015; Klink et al., 2020</p>
WHAT	<p>Design and management of touchpoints:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of firm-produced stimuli at touchpoints - Design of interfaces, servicescapes - Management of noncontrollable stimuli at touchpoints - Management of encounters <p>Design and management of journeys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consistency, thematic cohesion, and context-sensitivity in touchpoint journey design - Design for flow experience, moments of truth, smooth vs. sticky journeys 	<p>Berry et al., 2006; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010; Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef et al., 2016; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Barann et al., 2020; Siebert et al., 2020; Witell et al., 2020</p>
WHO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Firm-wide CXM involving top-down and bottom-up strategies with multiple departments - Collaborative design with employees, engagement with customer groups 	<p>Mosley, 2007; Chakravorti, 2011; Kandampully et al., 2018</p> <p>Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Wetter-Edman et al., 2014</p>
HOW	<p>Strategic directions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience and journey-oriented strategic directions; branding and operation decisions - CX-driven business model innovation <p>Culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customer-centric and experience-oriented culture <p>Capabilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Touchpoint monitoring, prioritization, adaptation, and design - Data leveraging for CX insights - Knowledge and change management - Partner/channel management - Employee recruiting, training, team building - Customer education 	<p>Keiningham et al. 2020; Mosley, 2007; Chakravorti, 2011; Homburg et al., 2017; Holmlund et al., 2020; Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewsky et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2002; Schmitt, 1999, 2010; Voss et al., 2008; Kwornik et al., 2009; Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Grove et al., 1992; Rawson et al., 2013; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Ponsignon et al., 2015</p>

3.2.2 The “why” of CX management

Research on the “why” of CX management focuses on the reasons for firms’ interest in improving customer experiences or, in other words, the aims and strategic outcomes of CXM. The ability to serve customers well is generally a reasonable goal for socially responsible businesses. However, in the case of a sustainable business model, great CXs need to coexist with profitability. Since establishing CXM processes requires considerable investments of time and resources, executive managers are urged to demonstrate the ROIs and the resulting value to the firm.

Although more CXM research is needed in light of the holistic customer experience measures being developed, researchers agree on the constructive outcomes of positively evaluated CXs for service providers. These outcomes include increased engagement and frequency of service use, customer satisfaction, repurchase intention, customer loyalty, and commitment (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Ismail et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2012; Srivastava & Kaul, 2016; Keiningham et al., 2017), which lead to other desirable outcomes such as low customer price sensitivity and positive WoM (Hallowell, 1996; Zeithaml, 2000). As the positive outcomes of CX programs may take a long time to emerge, managers are encouraged to use forward-looking customer-focused metrics, such as customer lifetime value (CLV) (Keiningham et al., 2006), alongside more granular and immediate metrics, such as retention.

A wealth of models have been built to test the various outcomes of customer experience. Lemke et al. (2011) proposed a conceptual model in which the relationship between CX and relationship outcomes, such as commitment, purchase, retention, and WoM, is mediated by value-in-use in both B2C and B2B contexts. Using different measures, Kuppelwieser et al. (2021) tested the associations between customer perceived value, experience (EXQ scale), and WoM in a broad range of services and confirmed the existence of direct links between those constructs. Research in the banking sector confirmed a positive relationship between experience and relationship quality in terms of retention, WoM, and tolerance (Fernandes & Pinto, 2019). Furthermore, one rare CX study in the B2B context revealed the positive effects of CX on the dimensions of brand equity (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010), while another study found support for linkages between sales interaction experience, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to recommend (Human et al., 2020). However, researchers have not yet agreed on the most suitable measures for CX based on the current academic understanding of CX.

In addition to studying the outcomes of improved CX, some studies have tested the effectiveness of CXM by developing CX management measures based on industry experience and practitioner-oriented models. For example, Grønholdt et al. (2015) proposed seven dimensions of CXM and tested their impacts on firm differentiation, market performance, and financial performance, finding positive

influences. Recently, Klink et al. (2020) developed a scale for the CX management construct based on the seminal work of Homburg et al. (2017) and found a positive relationship between CXM and a firm's financial performance in B2C and B2B contexts, strengthened by market turbulence, competitive intensity, and technological turbulence. However, such studies on the approach's effectiveness are pretty scarce, as progress in this direction requires a comprehensive understanding of what CX management involves. Thus, comprehensive CX management frameworks need to be developed in different contexts to demonstrate the links between organizational activities implemented to improve CX, their effects on customer experiences, and the tangible financial benefits resulting from them.

3.2.3 The “what” of CX management

The “what” question in CXM research focuses on the approach's main domain—the manageable elements that influence CX. This direction has received the majority of research attention, with findings spanning service, retail, and B2B marketing contexts.

Since CXs result from customer's direct and indirect interactions at touchpoints that, in turn, comprise customer journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the firm-produced elements of these touchpoints and journeys fall under the domain of CX management. More precisely, a firm's role in CX creation includes designing and managing firm-controlled stimuli and monitoring and responding to noncontrollable stimuli and key contingencies at different firm-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social touchpoints in line with the intended CX (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

CX design refers to a firm's efforts to design firm-controlled stimuli and is a prominent theme in CX research (Silva et al., 2021). Researchers have addressed CX design on multiple levels, from how firms manipulate a winning combination of clues at a touchpoint (e.g., Berry et al., 2006) to how they orchestrate the sequences of touchpoints that comprise customer journeys (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019) or claim a place in broader consumer journeys and align their business with the corresponding customer ecosystem (Becker et al., 2020).

Research into how different stimuli can be organized to constitute a touchpoint resulted in the development of blueprinting, the critical incident technique, experience cue management, servicescape design, and other various tools (Bitner, 1992; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Berry et al., 2006). In addition to these, concepts such as affordances or signifiers, counterform, and service moment are used by service designers to understand the design of specific touchpoints, processes, and resources (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014).

Planned cues (firm-controlled stimuli)—which originate from people, processes, and physical evidence (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2010)—and interfaces that mediate these cues are the predesigned elements of a touchpoint (Barann et al., 2020). Cues, including product presence, spatial environments, communications, co-branding, electronic media, and visual and verbal identity and signage, have also been referred to in earlier practitioner-oriented literature as experience providers (ExPros) (Schmitt, 1999). In contrast, the part of a touchpoint that cannot be predesigned but can only be facilitated is the firm's actual encounter with the customer; this is where uncontrollable stimuli emerge, and the medium involved (e.g., employee or interactive technology) is responsible for responding to them (Schmitt, 1999). Encounters can be categorized based on their associated tasks as service, communications, or usage encounters (Lemke et al., 2011; Payne et al., 2008).

The touchpoint design process involves experimenting with physical evidence that can range from products and uniforms to communication materials and spaces. Notably, the design of such products and materials is often considered a part of sensory design, which falls under the domain of service design (Dasu & Chase, 2010; Grove et al., 1992; Ponsignon et al., 2015; Zomerdijs & Voss, 2010). In CX management literature, physical evidence is only briefly mentioned in terms of the design and management of tangible or mechanic clues (Berry et al., 2002; Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). However, studies on the sensory design of objects and environments, which includes their visual elements, smells, sounds, tastes, and textures, provide a wealth of knowledge about human experiences (see Pullman & Gross, 2004).

Humanic clues emerging from the behavior and appearance of frontline personnel, such as their word choices, tone, level of enthusiasm, body language, and neatness, are more difficult to design but are still under the influence of the managing firm (Berry et al., 2006). In the context of buyer–seller interactions, elements of communication styles in face-to-face interactions, such as the rituals or mannerisms of participating parties, have been acknowledged to have the same significance for interaction outcomes as the content of the interaction itself (Sheth, 1975). Face-to-face communications in the B2B context tend to be rich with a variety of stimuli, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone, pitch, rate, intonation, speech pace, personal appearance, and physical space (e.g., Daft & Lengel, 1986). Recent studies have found that online environments, such as Zoom meetings or email chains, radically change the range of verbal and visual cues perceived at these touchpoints, necessitating further research in this area (Ahearne et al., 2021).

An essential part of touchpoint design is considering the ownership of touchpoints. While some touchpoints stay in complete control of the supplier, other touchpoints may lie deeper within the customer ecosystem or be under the control of

partners and other actors. Witell et al. (2020, p. 422) drew attention to touchpoint control issues by posing the question, “Who exerts the greatest influence on the customer experience?” Research shows that even with limited control, a provider can exert influence over customer-owned touchpoints by educating customers on how to use a firm’s product or service (e.g., Grove et al., 1992; Kwortnik & Thompson, 2009; Ponsignon et al., 2015), engaging customers in shared decision-making (Dasu & Chase, 2010), and, in some cases, managing customer’s interactions with other customers (Grove et al., 1992; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) or even mediating interactions between different actors in a customer organization (Lemke et al., 2011; Witell et al., 2020). A supplier firm can also extend its influence over CX at partner-owned touchpoints by carefully managing its partner networks (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this regard, Tax et al. (2013) wrote about service delivery networks (SDN) and how a provider’s ability to coordinate and cooperate with a customer’s network influences the customer’s experience and relationship with the provider. Furthermore, Witell et al. (2020) concluded that the ability to handle business relationships with partners lies at the basis of successful CX management.

Reviewing a broader range of touchpoints reveals the recent shift from touchpoint design to overall journey design and management (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kuehnl et al., 2019). The journey design perspective originates from service design research and its significant contributions to analyzing and designing customer journeys (Patrício et al., 2011; Teixeira et al., 2012; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). CX management puts great importance on service design techniques such as customer journey mapping (Clatworthy, 2011; Følstad & Kvale, 2018), multilevel service design (MSD) (Patrício et al., 2011), and customer experience modeling (CEM) (Teixeira et al., 2012). Multilevel service design considers CX on different levels, taking into account service encounters, service systems, and larger value constellations (Patrício et al., 2011; Tax et al., 2013; Teixeira et al., 2012). In this approach, service touchpoints are considered a part of the broader service concept with which a customer interacts during their journey.

Taking a slightly different approach to the concept of touchpoint journeys, CX management literature places emphasis on process quality (Palmer, 2010) and the management of communication, service, and usage encounters (Lemke et al., 2011) by designing touchpoint journeys to be coherent, consistent, context-sensitive, and interconnected (Homburg et al., 2017; Kuehnl et al., 2019). This perspective considers different touchpoint sequences and how well they fit together. In business markets, these sequences depend, among other things, on the nature of the business relationship: transactional exchanges involve short-term events with distinct beginnings and ends, often including automated processes, while relational exchanges encompass a chain of linked events over long periods without any clear

end or beginning (Witell et al., 2020). Firms thus design touchpoint journeys to thematically fit the context of the relationship, with transactional exchanges requiring consistency and cohesion and relational exchanges calling for context-sensitivity and connectivity of touchpoints (Homburg et al., 2017). Coherence and consistency are often linked to the integration of different cues and elements across touchpoints (Schmitt, 1999). However, some authors have reported that inconsistencies and surprises along the customer journey may appeal to customers due to the distinct experiences such unexpected sequences provide (Siebert et al., 2020). More research is needed on how different sequences of touchpoints influence CX.

The importance of influencing CX through journey design rather than just touchpoint design arises from the dynamic nature of CX. In their recent conference paper, Reitsamer and Becker (2021) stressed the importance of CX dynamics in the formation of remembered CXs. Different touchpoints vary in their level of importance and are thus prioritized differently both in customers' memory and by provider firms. Firms tend to emphasize moments of truth or critical incidents, that is, the touchpoints that are significant to the overall remembered CX (Normann, 2000; Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). In contrast, research on flow experience focuses on the design elements that can help a customer reach the flow state during work processes or while interacting with a piece of software, for example (see Novak & Hoffman, 1997; Quach et al., 2020).

In sum, while touchpoint design focuses on introducing a set of cues and a suitable interface for facilitating a CX during a specific interaction, journey design is about sequencing and aligning different touchpoints to influence overall CX. The management dimension of journey design involves areas outside the direct provider's control. These include partner agreements, distribution channel choices and negotiations, personnel training, and service recovery issues as well as choices made to address uncontrollable stimuli.

3.2.4 The "who" of CX management

The question of who handles CX management requires taking into account the actors participating in the design and management of touchpoints and journeys. This question rarely takes precedence in CX management research, but some clear indicators of its importance can be found in the extant literature. The literature review in the present study revealed issues related to CX management's cross-departmental approach, top-down commitment of executive management, and bottom-up participation of different actors in the service system, all explicated on the next pages.

CX management is often characterized as an enterprise-wide management approach (e.g., Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Chakravorti, 2011; Homburg et al., 2017). This suggests that multiple units, departments, and functions are involved in facilitating CXs at touchpoints. More precisely, strategic CX management requires cooperation between the units responsible for marketing and communications, partner and network management, human resources, operations, information technology, and strategic work (Kandampully et al., 2018; Kwortnik & Thompson, 2009; Mosley, 2007). Researchers have characterized CX management as an integrated business strategy that considers the fit between all the elements that go into a customer–firm relationship (Mascarenhas et al., 2006), thus recommending its firm-wide deployment (Voss et al., 2008; Homburg et al., 2017). Accordingly, the responsibility for CX is spread across the entire organization rather than being limited to one functional unit. In other words, multiple actors from different departments of an organization are involved in the firm’s touchpoint and journey design processes.

Questions related to the actors who participate in designing have received a lot of research interest in recent years (e.g., Björgvinsson et al., 2010; di Salvo et al., 2012; Luck, 2003; Sanders, 2002; van der Velden et al., 2014). In the domain of service design, for example, research advancements have led to the use of collaborative tools for experience design, which are instrumental for balancing the conflicting goals of actors in complex service systems (such as healthcare, education, and aviation) (Patrício et al., 2019). Collaborative experience design means involving involving different actors within a service system (e.g., several partners involved in an electrification solution) and from different hierarchical levels and touchpoints (i.e., top and middle management and employees involved in support, installment, and production) in designing the CX touchpoints and journeys. In addition, customers (or users, as often referred to in the design literature) can actively shape the future experiences they will have if managers actively involve them in the design processes (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014). In this case of bidirectional participation, where the lines between users and designers are blurred, participation processes tend to be empowering and democratizing (Björgvinsson et al., 2012). Firms may even solicit customer engagement behaviors around CX management projects, encouraging the proactive involvement of multiple actors in co-creating CX (e.g., Li et al., 2017; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).

While a bottom-up approach to participation can contribute to the development of customer-centric cultures and CX mindsets, it is important to note that the commitment and directive of the top management of a firm play a significant role in CX management (Homburg et al., 2017). Top management’s commitment to the goal of long-term customer loyalty is essential for keeping this approach on the firm’s list of investment priorities and for establishing the required capabilities (Mascarenhas

et al., 2006; Homburg et al., 2017). Notably, Karmarkar (2004) suggested that having a person at a senior level of the organizational structure in charge of CX would ensure the top management's commitment.

The involvement of multiple actors from different hierarchical levels may seem like a managerial issue and a matter of implementation rather than research; however, I argue otherwise. The actors involved in CX management will inevitably shape CXs and contribute to its effectiveness. Further research is needed to understand how the participation of different actors shapes CXM activities and affects their outcomes.

3.2.5 The “how” of CX management

The “how” of CXM research refers to the resources, capabilities, and processes of the organization involved in managing customer experiences. In this area of research, a firm is the unit of analysis, and organizational factors connected to CX management fall under the the scope of investigation. Studies in this area contribute to the broader domain of strategic marketing research, which focuses on larger, mainly irreversible, resource commitments that have long-term outlooks and emphasize the goal of achieving competitive advantages (Varadarajan, 2010).

Similar to many studies in strategic marketing, some CX management studies borrow from management and organization theories, such as the resource-based view (Peteraf, 1993) and knowledge management theory (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990), among others (Chakravorti, 2011; Homburg et al., 2017; Mosley, 2007). The first to provide a comprehensive picture of CXM from an organizational perspective were Homburg et al. (2017), who identified three key operant resources: (1) strategic directions for designing customer experiences, (2) cultural mindsets toward customer experiences, and (3) firm capabilities for continually renewing customer experiences. Strategic directions are the various approaches to customer touchpoints and journey design adopted by a firm. Cultural mindsets refer to an organization's shared corporate culture and emphasise on achieving customer loyalty through CX as a central goal. In turn, capabilities refer to a firm's ability to turn cultural mindsets and strategies into action by designing, prioritizing, monitoring, and adapting touchpoints. Thus, how CX management is organized roughly depends on strategy, culture, and capabilities.

Based on their empirical study, Homburg et al. (2017) suggested that *strategic directions* pertain to choices related to the value proposition, which is delivered through thematic cohesion, consistency, context sensitivity, and connectivity between touchpoints. This refers to the strategic choices an organization makes about its participation in experience creation. Earlier practitioner-oriented literature contains similar perspectives on strategic directions, such as the development of an

experience motif connected to the company's values and branding strategy (Berry et al., 2002) or making decisions related to the experiential grid, i.e., different combinations of desired CX dimensions (strategic experiential modules) and firm-produced stimuli (ExPros) (Schmitt, 1999).

Schmitt's (1999) approach to strategic CX focused on decisions related to branding. He underlined the connection between customer experience and brands (ultimately focusing on brand experience) and how it inevitably leads to choices around corporate brand and sub-brand coordination, partnership strategies, and cultural issues associated with global branding. A firm's brand-related decisions interact with its strategic directions for customer experience, highlighting the importance of aligning brand communications with CX strategies (Palmer, 2010).

Researchers in the domain of service operations have studied firms' strategic choices related to physical settings, technology, infrastructure, employees, customer touchpoints, and process integration (Voss et al., 2008; Kwornik et al., 2009), bringing to light issues often overlooked in marketing management research. For example, while strategic choices related to "stageware" and "customerware," as conceptualized by Voss et al. (2008), are akin to the directions for journey and touchpoint design, those related to "orgware" and "linkware" stand as distinct elements of CXM. Orgware refers to a set of choices encompassing infrastructural management systems and policies, including incentives and management structures, while linkware refers to the integration of systems and processes that enable the flow and filtering of information across the organization (Voss et al., 2008).

There are some indications in the literature literature that an idea or promise of the experiential outcomes gives CX management a strategic direction. Kwornik et al. (2009) developed an analytical model in which a service promise guides strategic choices related to service operations. In B2B markets, such value promises are often agreed upon collaboratively by the parties involved, as are the outcome measures connected to CX (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Furthermore, Becker and Jaakkola (2020) argued that a significant part of a firm's role in CX formation involves defining the intended experiences, which, in turn, reflects the firm's strategic directions.

Homburg et al. (2017) identified cultural mindsets as an organizational resource, emphasizing the relevance of an *organizational culture* that acknowledges and understands the importance of customer experience. Such a culture is characterized by a shared customer-centric orientation (Shah et al., 2006), with the firm's values, norms, and beliefs centered on the customer. A customer-centric culture is strongly compatible with CX thinking. Shah et al. (2006) described the central value of customer-centricity as an enduring preference that every decision begins with considering the customer and their advantage. According to the authors, the ruling norms of a customer-centered organization advocate for customers and for sharing information about customer needs among employees within the organization (Shah

et al., 2006). Customer-centered firms commonly operate on beliefs that understanding one's customers starts with a close connection to the customers' lives and that long-run profitability is achieved through customer loyalty (ibid.).

Discussing organizational culture, Schmitt (1999) wrote about experience-oriented cultures and considered the benefits of Dionysian organizations, where employees' spontaneity, creativity, and innovativeness are the most critical resources in CX management. Employees are encouraged to solve problems creatively and experiment with new methodologies in such organizations, and managers focus on facilitating different experiences in exciting ways and welcome critique and disruption (Schmitt, 1999).

The cultural mindsets identified in Homburg et al.'s (2017) study—namely experiential response orientation, touchpoint journey orientation, and alliance orientation—do not directly represent different organizational cultures but focus on managers' mental portrayals to describe a firm's competitive advantage (Day, 1994). The experiential response mindset is characterized by the belief that evoking experiential responses at touchpoints is vital for enhancing customer loyalty and achieving competitive advantage (Homburg et al., 2017). According to the touchpoint journey orientation, working with touchpoint journeys should be the main focus of decision-making for competitive advantage (Homburg et al., 2017). Finally, the alliance orientation mindset emphasizes the need to build partnerships around the customer's ecosystem to align the related touchpoints, which is believed to contribute to loyalty-enhancing experiences (Homburg et al., 2017). These three mindsets exhibit the same underlying beliefs that characterize customer-centric organizations.

The need for customer-centricity in CX management does not mean that such a culture must be established before any CXM activities are implemented; customer-centricity can even develop during the process of CX management. For example, Patrício et al. (2019) showed that applying service design methods to problems can foster institutional and cultural change even in an organization that does not exhibit strong customer-centricity.

Culture not only affects behaviors but also stems from them (Ind & Bjerke, 2007). Consequently, cultural attitudes toward CXs can only be achieved if governing systems and structures do not impede preferred, customer-centric behaviors. To build supportive structures and foster a customer-centric culture, a firm must develop the capability to continually renew and adapt its systems and processes for CX creation (Homburg et al., 2017). Drawing from service research and HR management studies, CXM literature emphasizes the importance of recruiting, selecting, and training employees to develop customer-centric cultures (Schmitt, 1999; Grove et al., 1992; Berry et al., 2006; Gazzoli et al., 2013). Furthermore, CXM requires building cross-organizational teams and *communities of*

practice where, for example, front-line employees are coupled with back-stage employees so that the entire team can support a customer's journey (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Grove et al., 1992; Rawson et al., 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Moreover, appropriate incentives and performance measures are needed to support and align customer journeys with CX strategies (Mosley, 2007; Rawson et al., 2013). Mosley (2007) even suggested that managing employee experiences during recruitment, orientation, communication, shared services, reward, measurement, and employee development processes should go hand in hand with CXM processes.

Homburg et al. (2017) identified certain *firm capabilities* that are explicitly related to strategic directions governing touchpoint design. These include the capability to (i) plan touchpoint journeys and disseminate requirements across different functions, (ii) ensure the data-driven prioritization of touchpoints and constant implementation and modification of touchpoints, (iii) monitor and coordinate touchpoint collection following specific performance indicators, and (iv) adapt/change or introduce radically new touchpoints based on in-depth customer research (Homburg et al., 2017). From a broader viewpoint, the identified capabilities relate to a firm's ability to innovate (Schmitt, 2010) and are required to balance incremental and radical innovations in the market (Holmlund et al., 2020).

All four firm capabilities identified by Homburg et al. (2017) have one thing in common—the ability to analyze and utilize data to obtain customer insights. Berry et al. (2002) referred to this as an experience audit (i.e., in-depth customer research), while Schmitt (2010) emphasized analyzing the experiential world of the customer as one of the central functions of CX management. It is not surprising that this capability is crucial to CX management, as it allows a firm to understand customers' business goals, journey dynamics, and critical touchpoints as well as what customers value in their experiences (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Zolkiewsky et al., 2017). Several research attempts have been made to determine mechanisms and opportunities for gaining CX insights, for example, by utilizing text mining (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019) or big data analytics (Holmlund et al., 2020). The ultimate goal of these analytical capabilities is to understand, manage, and improve CX. Such improvements could range from short-term operational, incremental innovations to long-term strategic, radical innovations based on how the obtained CX insights guide strategic action (Holmlund et al., 2020).

In addition, a firm's analytical capability refers to the establishing of metrics that support the customer journey perspective and enable the continuous monitoring of customers' emotional and cognitive responses at different touchpoints across their journeys, which would contribute to real-time understanding of their experiences and allow for responsive action from the firm (Dasu & Chase, 2010; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Rawson et al., 2013; Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Connected to firms' analytical capabilities are their practices of knowledge management. While knowledge management has existed as a distinct approach and independent research interest for decades (e.g., Demarest, 1997; Mårtensson, 2000), the capabilities of managing, sharing, and utilizing customer-related information have been increasingly linked to CX management (Chakravorti, 2011; Jaziri, 2019). Chakravorti (2011) stated that knowledge management can enhance CX by "integrating, sustaining and improving processes and routines" (p. 141) for technology adaptation; creating, storing, accessing, and sharing customer and product information; and internal and external collaboration.

In the B2B context, capabilities specific to business markets are required to address the challenges related to actor interactions and relationship expectations (Witell et al., 2020). According to Witell et al. (2020), a supplier needs to be able to identify and support the needs of diverse actors in the customer organization, manage expectations by ensuring greater transparency and customer education in cases involving complex solutions and contracts (see also Ponsignon et al., 2015), get staff members at different levels of the customer organization involved with the service or solution, and leverage data and incentivize partners involved in the solution to achieve greater touchpoint control. Witell et al. (2020) further suggested that future studies focus on the capabilities of suppliers, customers, partners, and external actors when examining CXM within B2B settings.

The literature review conducted for this dissertation revealed only a few *studies that have deliberately approached the concept of CXM based on its activities* or similar dynamic perspectives (Jonhston & Kong, 2011; Ponsignon et al., 2015; Sahhar et al., 2021). Each of these works had a particular focus as well as certain limitations. Jonhston and Kong (2011) adopted a pragmatic approach to investigate how organizations design and improve customer experiences. However, the findings of this study describe a change project rather than an established practice. An empirical study by Ponsignon et al. (2015) focused on understanding CXM practices that support experience co-creation with customers. The researchers discovered activities aimed at maintaining an appropriate experience environment and facilitating experience co-creation in the financial sector (Ponsignon et al., 2015). However, greater weight was given to co-creation activities than internal organizational activities. Finally, an ethnographic study by Sahhar et al. (2021) investigated the practices used by providers of knowledge-intensive services to manage the customer service experience throughout a customer's journey in the B2B context. However, service recovery was emphasized as the main way to improve customer experiences (Sahhar et al., 2021). Furthermore, due to the study context, the discovered micro-level practices are applicable only to solution-oriented customer journeys.

To summarize, the literature review revealed that several facets of CX management have been explored by past studies. However, the overall picture remains *fragmented*, and especially management activities have received little research attention. The literature lacks a systemic view of CXM that, in addition to CX facilitation at touchpoints and journeys, considers strategic and organizational facets. Thus, more theory-building work is needed on the elements and effectiveness of CXM to represent it as a holistic and strategic managerial approach.

Based on the information gathered, I believe that it is important to further study CX management by focusing on its *activities*, as doing so can address all four general questions (why, who, what, and how) and provide a more holistic view of this management approach. After all, activities have aims (*why*), actors to perform each activity (*who*), and objects and contents (*what*) of externally facing and internal actions (*how*) (**Figure 2**).

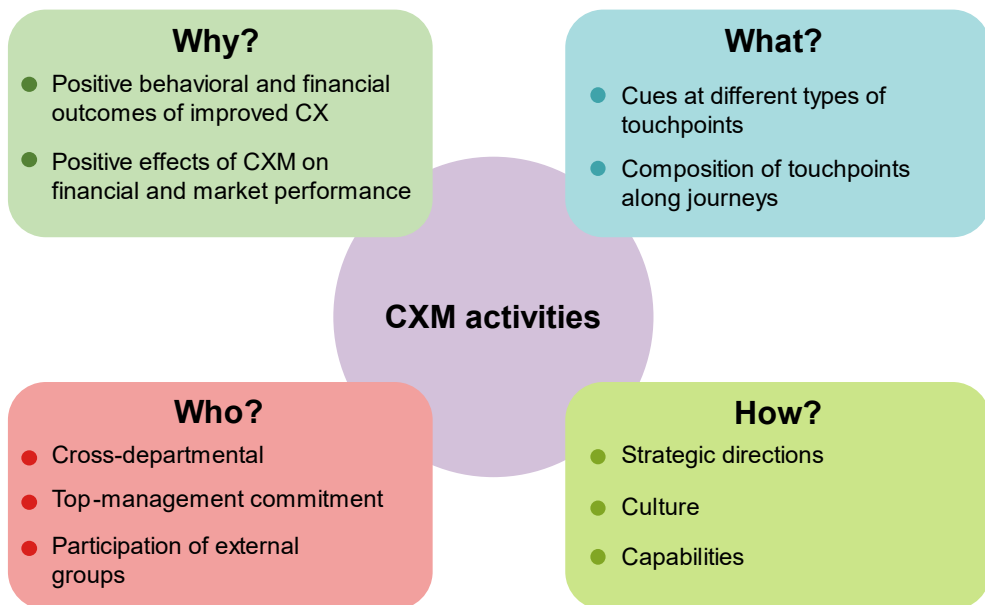


Figure 2. An activity-based view of CX management

An *activity* generally consists of a motive that directs the activity, actions that are guided by goals, and methods for accomplishing said actions (i.e., operations), dependent on the context in which the activity is performed (Blackler, 1993; Leont’ev, 1978). Analyzing the scope of B2B CX management based on its activities is appropriate, as the understanding that an activity involves a motive is consistent with the view that CXM involves deliberate, strategic efforts to influence customer experiences. Furthermore, considering different perspectives on CX management

allows for a systemic and flexible view of this management approach and provides opportunities for future theoretical development.

Overall, the literature review revealed some promising theories in the B2B CX management field. However, only some of them are supported empirically, and there is a lack of a general framework that includes all the important elements of CXM, leading to a fragmented understanding of the concept. Thus, there is a need *to delineate the scope of CX management in the B2B context by focusing on the activities involved*. The present dissertation is aimed at addressing this research need by deepening the insights into the variety of activities constituting CXM in the B2B context (RQ2).

3.3 Target experience as an object of study in CXM research

The previous sections provided an in-depth understanding of CXM from the organizational perspective on customer experience. However, researchers have called for integrating the conceptualization of CX management with the customer-centric perspective on the nature of CX (Kranzbühler et al., 2018; de Keyser et al., 2020). Specifically, there is a need to account for the *content of customer experience*, i.e., its qualities and attributes as interpreted by customers (de Keyser et al., 2020; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Proponents of the organizational perspective have embraced at least one of the customer experience building blocks of the recently developed touchpoints, context, qualities (TCQ) nomenclature (de Keyser et al., 2020), i.e., touchpoints (T), and are working toward understanding different levels of customer contexts (C). However, the CX management domain still has a long way to go in addressing the *qualities* (Q) of customer experience.

The majority of CX management studies have only accounted for the valence of customer experience, encouraging positive service experiences and avoiding negative experiences at touchpoints (e.g., Frow & Payne 2007; Ponsignon et al., 2015; Sahhar et al., 2021). However, if the valence is the only thing in focus, the concept becomes indistinguishable from evaluative binaries, such as customer satisfaction, adding only to the range of stimuli with which customers can be satisfied or dissatisfied. The few studies from the organizational perspective that consider the dimensionality of CXs focus more on opportunities to measure and understand them (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019) rather than the effects that the identified CX qualities have on management efforts.

Approaching CX and its qualities from the organizational perspective means looking into intended experiences (e.g., Ponsignon et al., 2017; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). An intended experience is, as the name suggests, an experience that firms

intend their target customers to have (Roth & Menor, 2003). As Heinonen et al. (2010) rightfully note, a realized customer experience may be very different from the initially intended experience. Even though actual customer experiences are only partially under the firm's control, I argue in this dissertation that having a clear understanding of the firm's intentions for experiences makes CXM more deliberate.

There are mentions of intended customer experiences throughout the CXM literature. Bolton et al. (2014, p. 267) stated that creating a "meaningful experience" is an important prerequisite for competitive advantage. Mosley (2007, p. 132) wrote about creating a "desired customer brand experience" through a unique style of service. Homburg et al. (2017, p. 386) referred to "strategically desired customer-firm exchange" as a goal for touchpoint design, while Clatworthy (2012, p. 125) described the elements of "desired customer experiences" formed in the transformation of a brand strategy to a service concept. Intended experiences have also been mentioned in terms of an "experience motif" that reflects the organization's core values and branding strategy (Berry et al., 2002, p. 87) and "targeted customer perception" (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994, p. 9). While all of these mentions hint at a specific phenomenon—a firm's intention to evoke certain experiences at touchpoints—the topic has not been given enough research attention, making its connection with strategic CX management unclear.

Only a few noteworthy exceptions have considered intended experiences in more detail. Schmitt (1999) proposed an experiential grid as a managerial tool to uncover opportunities for decisions such as intensifying or diffusing, connecting or separating, and enriching or simplifying experiences across different elements and broadening or focusing experiences across experience dimensions. While it drove managers to make these strategic decisions, this work's focus was not on how these intentions materialize or are applied within managing organizations.

Johnston and Kong (2011), in studying the progression of CX improvement projects, identified a stage during which the sampled firms developed customer experience statements based on their customer research. These statements articulated the nature of the firms' intended CXs from the customer's viewpoint at the various touchpoints during the customer journey. The authors described organizations agreeing, for instance, upon the feelings they wanted their customers to have (Johnston & Kong, 2011). While they hinted at how these statements further guided the CX design process, the researchers did not place any additional emphasis on the role of intended experiences in the broader area of CX management.

Ponsignon et al. (2017) closely studied the discrepancies between the intended and realized experiences of a museum tour, which required exploring both provider and customer perspectives. The scholars identified a clear design intention consisting of a mix of cognitive and emotional responses as well as significant differences between the intended and realized experiences (e.g., the freedom to choose a self-

guided tour turned into feelings of confusion and being lost; see Ponsignon et al., 2017). They found that while the design of touchpoints and journeys lay at the core of customer experience, the physical and social environments supported the realization of intended experiences (Ponsignon et al., 2017). Interestingly, Ponsignon et al. (2017) turned readers' attention to experience design, which, as an applied practice, often utilizes tools such as mood boards or emotion cards (e.g., positive emotional granularity cards, rich experience quality cards, emotion rainbow) to help define intended experiences during product or service design (Clatworthy, 2019). However, these applications are often limited to the design of an offering and mostly involve predesigned elements. At the same time, the overall customer experience with the firm falls out of their scope.

In efforts to connect the concept of intended experience to a higher level of abstraction, service design researchers have turned to the concept of brand (Clatworthy, 2012; da Motta-Filho, 2017). In his study, da Motta-Filho (2017) focused on brand experience proposition as a type of targeted customer experience; this was earlier acknowledged by Carbone and Haeckel (1994). The researcher defined brand experience proposition as "the meaning proposition the organization should aim at delivering through the service interactions" (da Motta-Filho, 2017, p. 54). He further developed a triadic model to show that the brand experience proposition is transformed into an interactive experiential setting where the experience is realized (da Motta-Filho, 2017); the realized experience is intended to carry a meaning proposed by the brand. The author argued that defining the characteristics of a service offering differentiates the experiential target from its competitors, providing a competitive advantage based on factors other than price or premium experience (da Motta-Filho, 2017). Although the author was working with a different definition of customer experience than the one used in this dissertation, his argument is still relevant when considering the possible roles of TXs.

I use the term *target experiences* in this dissertation to refer to the intended customer experiences defined by and shared within a firm to reflect its strategic directions. I chose this instead of, for example, desired experiences to avoid the misattribution of the intention's origin. For example, in service design literature, the term customer experience requirements refers to a customer's desired qualities of an experience and not to experiences that companies desire to evoke (Teixeira et al., 2012). While customers' desired experiences might be considered when rethinking intended experiences, target experiences are set by firms. The term target experience also reflects a more purposeful and strategic goal than the term intended experience. While an intended experience can be based on the intention of a single salesperson, a target experience requires a consensus on a strategic level. Based on the reviewed literature, I define TX as follows:

Target experience is an intended customer experience that the firm aims to evoke as an outcome of its activities.

This definition links target experiences to the prior argument about studying CX management through its activities. In fact, as an aim of CX management, establishing a TX anchors the different elements of CXM activities (**Figure 3**). I propose that target experiences could provide concrete aims that direct a firm's attempts to influence CX (*what?*) as well as the development of its capabilities (*how?*), are shared among the actors in the organization (*who?*), and work as an indicator against which the effectiveness of CX management can be judged (*why?*).

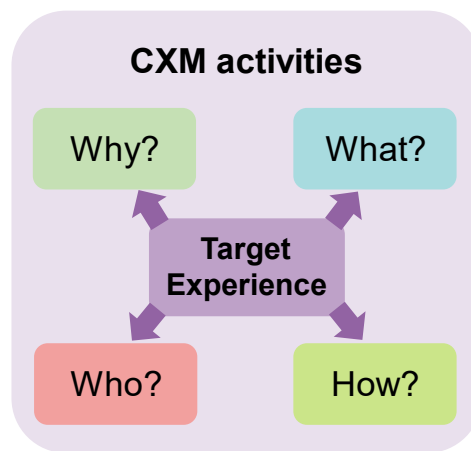


Figure 3. Target experience anchoring CX management activities

There is almost no research on whether and how target customer experiences are defined in the B2B firms as a part of CXM. Witell et al. (2020) suggested that suppliers, partners, and customers should jointly agree on the appropriate level of customer experience; however, there is no further knowledge of this process unfolding. Furthermore, I argue that by exploring the types of TXs set by B2B firms through a customer-centric lens (RQ1), one can build on the theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Zeithaml, Jaworski et al., 2020) by CX managers and learn from them.

The literature hints at how TXs can be connected with brand personality (Clatworthy, 2012) and corporate culture (Mosley, 2007), which are in turn reflected in emotional value propositions (Sandström et al., 2008). By defining their target experiences, firms can make a superior CX promise that guides the service process and consequently strengthens brand engagement and the long-term customer–supplier relationship (Silva et al., 2021). Therefore, target experiences can be

instrumental in aligning a firm's activities with its CXM strategy. However, the role of target experiences in strategic CX management needs a more thorough investigation so that they aren't merely implications; this realization led to the formulation of *RQ3* in the present study.

To summarize, target experiences can be considered a valuable object of study, as they have real effects on CX management. The concept has theoretical potential to bridge the organizational and customer perspectives as well as practical relevance for differentiating with unique CXs.

4 CX management and value propositions

Drawing from the definition of CXM as “a strategy to engineer the customer’s experience in such a way as to create value” (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 38), this chapter examines a crucial aspect of CXM—*value*. Despite being conceptually distinct, experience and value are tightly interlinked. An increasing number of research articles on value have acknowledged the role of experience, and vice versa, serving as evidence of this connection. In fact, some key theories used in CX research from an organizational perspective are essentially theories on customer value creation (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Indeed, the concept of value is vital to both customer experience and B2B research. Metaphorically, it can serve as a connective tissue that helps build a body of knowledge on CXM in B2B markets.

However, there is a lack of attention toward the important task of *situating CX management within the broader idea of value co-creation*. I address this gap in the present dissertation through a posteriori theorizing based on the study findings. To link CX to value and understand the role that CXM plays in value creation, the concept of value and different approaches to value creation must be explored in more detail. This examination forms a basis for the discussion in Chapter 8 on the individual nonmonetary value created through experience and how it connects to the identified roles of target experiences (*RQ3*).

This chapter is structured as follows. In Section 4.1, the concept of customer value is analyzed through two perspectives: value perceptions and value co-creation. CX is then introduced as a link between the two perspectives, firmly positioning the concept of CX in relation to value. Then, building on this understanding, Section 4.2 discusses two approaches to value propositions in business markets: one based on differentiating value outcomes and one based on the unique fit of activities and resources. These approaches come together when considering CVPs, as the section further explores how experiences can be a basis for value propositions.

4.1 Linking CX to the value concept

It is widely accepted that understanding and facilitating customer value creation lies at the core of any business and is crucial for a company's long-term survival (Eggert et al., 2018, p. 80; Holbrook, 1994, p. 22). The value concept has been central to B2B research; therefore, it is particularly important to link CX with the ways value has been addressed in B2B literature in order to understand CX management in business markets. However, over the years, researchers have used differing conceptualizations of customer value from multiple perspectives (see Zeithaml, Verleye, et al., 2020), resulting in somewhat conflicting views on the value concept and difficulties in finding a common language.

An analysis of the literature on value reveals two foci: *value perception* and *value co-creation*. The former regards how value judgments are formed and the kinds of value derived from an exchange, use, or experience; and the latter examines the processes, actors, and activities involved in value co-creation. This division was recognized and discussed first by Gummerus (2013) and later by Zeithaml, Verleye et al. (2020). I build on my interpretation of these two works to showcase how seeing value as an evaluation of experience (Section 4.1.1) as well as an outcome of the value co-creation process (Section 4.1.2) is relevant for linking the concept to CX and further understanding how CXM can be situated in the process of value creation in business markets (Section 4.1.3).

4.1.1 Value perceptions

This perspective focuses on value being “a judgment or evaluation of an experience or interaction with an object of any type” (Zeithaml, Verleye et al., 2020, p. 411). In this view, value is the result of an evaluative process and is often referred to as value perception or customer perceived value. There are *two broad approaches to value perception* that vary in their ontologies of value and focus on different facets of perceived value: the realist perspective, which is dominating in B2B research, and the interpretivist perspective, which is more compatible with the customer-centric view of CX. Next, I compare these views and discuss the nature of value, the formation of value perceptions, the reference objects in relation to which value perceptions form, and the collective dimension of value perceptions, which is especially relevant in the B2B context. This overview forms a basis for linking CX and value perceptions.

First, it is important to consider the *ontological differences in understanding value*, i.e., in what way is value real. Even though the majority of researchers agree that value perceptions are subjective and multidimensional, with rational, emotional, and social components playing a role in the overall evaluation (e.g., Holbrook, 1994; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), the realists (e.g., Eggert, Ulaga, &

Schultz, 2006) see *value existing outside of value perceptions*, as something that can be perceived. For instance, if you ask the lead engineer of a biofuel factory about the value of a laterally installed agitator and then pose the same question to a CFO, you may expect their answers to vary, as their perceptions are subjective. In addition, one of them might have a fuller picture of its value to the firm. By combining their perceptions, one can get closer to knowing the “true” value of the offering. More broadly, researchers’ interest would primarily be in the *value of* an object and ways to increase this value, taking a provider-centric perspective.

An alternative approach to understanding value perception is from the phenomenological perspective, i.e., by considering value as an evaluative perception of experience, or, as Holbrook (1994, p. 27) put it, a “preference experience.” According to this perspective, *value perception is synonymous to value itself*, due to which there is no value inherent to an offering or business relationship (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010). This *experiential view* maintains that value is relative, comparative, personal, and context-specific (Gummerus, 2013; Holbrook, 1994). Instead of examining the perceived value of an object, the attention of experiential value is on the value *for* the customer or, in other words, the way a customer determines value by making sense of their experiences (Helkkula et al., 2012).

Second, it is important to examine *the formation of value perception* from different perspectives. The realist view, for instance, considers customer perceived value as derived from *an evaluation of the benefits and sacrifices perceived by a customer* (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Ulaga, 2003; Zeithaml, 1988). Customers’ ability to distinguish between different benefits and sacrifices, as well as the ways in which a seller’s brings them forth, would play an essential role in the formation of value perceptions.

A significant development in understanding customer perceived value in the B2B context came with a shift in focus from the benefits and sacrifices associated with product attributes to the goals and objectives of customers. Value began to be seen as *an offering’s perceived ability to facilitate or hinder the achievement of customer goals while in use* (e.g., Macdonald et al., 2011; Woodruff, 1997; Zeithaml, 1988). To explain the role of customer goals in the formation of customer perceived value, Woodruff (1997) introduced a customer value hierarchy model consisting of elements against which a customer evaluates the offering on a means–ends basis; this involves appreciating product attributes and performances based on their ability to facilitate the desired outcomes in use situations, which would, in turn, result in the customer’s goals and purposes being achieved. Although it’s seemingly distanced from the benefits vs. sacrifices approach, the means–ends model still involves an evaluation of desired and undesired consequences but with an added balance between different goals (Macdonald et al., 2011, 2016). This is important because, even in terms of a business’s primary objective of maximizing profits, one can find

a multitude of competing goals. Macdonald et al. (2016) found that a solution's value in business markets is judged based on *organizational goals as well as the individual goals of people interacting with it*. This indicates that the heterogeneity of value perceptions within one customer organization (e.g., Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) may be due to diverse organizational and individual goals.

The interpretivist view of value pays less attention to tradeoffs or sacrifices, focusing instead on the various benefits a person derives from an experience (Gummerus, 2013), i.e., the experiential value. Contrary to the common connotation, the experiential value does not refer only to hedonic value but represents *different types of value derived from the experience*, which can be seen in different typologies of customer value (Holbrook, 1994, 2006; Mathwick et al., 2001). Thus, it revisits the idea that all kinds of experiences are potentially valuable to people in different ways.

It is worth noting that the concept of experiential value has been developed in the context of consumer services and retail, and there are rare references to it in the B2B context (Lehtimäki et al., 2018). Recent research has emphasized the need to examine the *multidimensional nature of value in B2B relationships* and go beyond the extrinsic dimensions of value (Mencarelli & Rivière, 2015). In response to this, several authors explored different types of value that individuals have derived from business networking events (Mitchell et al., 2016) or from B2B brand worlds (Österle et al., 2018). In their analysis, Mitchell et al. (2016) distinguished between *personal and organizational value*, stating that the personal value derived from networking events is an amalgamation of the social, emotional, relationship, and hedonic value types, while organizational value, i.e., value for the customer organization as experienced by an individual, includes learning, innovation, reputational, and professional value. These value types can be linked to personal and organizational goals (Macdonald et al., 2016), thus providing a common ground between the realist and interpretivist views.

Following this examination of value perception, it is crucial to understand *what the reference object of a value perception is*, i.e., if what is being judged by a customer is a product, service, business relationship, solution, or general experience. Since customer goals can be met at any point in the relational process, defining perceived value in relation to goals allows for considering a broader scope of value creation (Macdonald et al., 2016). Researchers are increasingly recognizing that customers' value perceptions are continuously formed in their use of products, service interactions, and over the course of a business relationship (e.g., Lapierre, 2000; Macdonald et al., 2011; Payne & Holt, 2001). Lapierre (2000) called this the *scope of the customer value construct* and identified potential benefits related to *products* (alternatives, quality, customization), *services* (responsiveness, flexibility, reliability, technical competence), and *customer-provider relationships* (supplier's

image, trust, solidarity). Sacrifices, such as price, effort, and conflict, were also mentioned at all scopes (Lapierre, 2000). As a result, Lapierre (2000) argued that value in business markets should be associated with “more than product only, more than service only, more than relationship only” (p. 131).

In this regard, researchers have further explored the concept of *relationship value*. From a realist perspective, relationship value is often treated as a summative construct that refers to the value of multiple exchanges with a business partner and includes both transactional and relational dimensions (e.g., Oliver, 1997; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Ulaga, 2003). This definition suggests that a customer assesses the value of a relationship by looking back at the benefits and costs of the relationship at a particular moment in time and concluding whether it was worth the tradeoffs (Eggert, et al., 2019). To illustrate this point using some of the identified relationship value drivers (see Ulaga, 2003), we can imagine a customer considering the following questions: Did the supplier bring their unique know-how to the business relationship? Did their offering improve our processes over time? Were they fast or slow to respond to complaints? Did they give any annual discounts or unexpectedly increase prices?

Interpretivist researchers have critiqued this approach to relationship value as being too simplistic and having an excessive focus on economic value and rational evaluation criteria (e.g., Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Lehtimäki et al., 2018). Indeed, this summative view of relationship value seems to discount diverse, incomplete, actor-specific, and constantly changing value perceptions as dependent on the reference object under evaluation rather than on the context and person perceiving the value (cf. Eggert et al., 2019); the evaluation of relationship value seems to take place outside the actual experience, with a lack of clarity on who the actor pronouncing the judgments is. In the realist approach, relationship value seems to be a property of the relationship under evaluation, and differences in value perceptions are considered a reflection of the unfortunate, error-prone state of human reality.

Since the premise of the interpretivist view is that *value emerges through experience* (Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010), *the scope of value transcends the categories of product, service, and relationship*. Value perceptions are formed based not only on the functional qualities of the offering or the particular dimensions of a relationship but also on the sensorial, affective, cognitive, lifestyle, pragmatic, and relational components of different experiences (Schmitt, 1999). Examples of such experiences include reading interesting supplementary material on the newest technological solutions; putting considerable effort into gathering a team to oversee a new engineering project with a supplier of specialized equipment; or becoming frustrated due to difficulties in organizing a routine maintenance check. These examples involve the dimensions of a customer-supplier relationship, product attributes, and service interactions, all within the context-specific experiences of

particular actors. Continuous conscious and unconscious evaluations of these experiences lead to value judgments (de Keyser et al., 2015; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010), and the scope of a value perception can range from a single touchpoint, such as a phone call or a meeting, to a broad solution for a customer's business.

The next aspect of value perception that can be found in the literature is *the collective dimension of value*. Since the experiential value perspective considers value in relation to an individual's perceptions, the question most relevant for the B2B context is how value is built up for a firm or network (Lehtimäki et al., 2018). The realist perspective approaches this issue through *almost summative aggregation*, considering the different views of the actors within a single customer organization and different customer firms' perceptions of various suppliers' products, thus making the value of a reference object a proxy for collective value (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). Conversely, some researchers following the interpretive perspective posited that organizational-level and group-level (e.g., team or project) value perceptions depend on the actor making sense of them (Lehtimäki et al., 2018). In layman's terms, the valid answer to the question, "What is the value of this interaction/product/relationship to your firm?" from the interpretive experiential perspective would be, "Depends on whom you ask!"

While, theoretically, individual value perceptions can vary significantly, empirical world shows that individuals across a team or an organization can come to a consensus about the value created for the firm. Helkkula et al. (2012) found that an actor's personal value perceptions are impacted by how other market actors perceive value—a notion that emphasizes the *importance of an actor's interorganizational and intraorganizational social relationships*. Furthermore, Lehtimäki et al. (2018) proposed that this coherence in value perceptions can be explained by *the social influence of the key actors* in a business relationship.

Collective value depends on the time and place at which value perceptions are formed. In a research setting, an individual participant must reflect on their experiences and explicitly articulate an informed organization-level value perception in response to a researcher's question. In a natural situation, however, an individual would have to reflect on their experiences when having to make a business decision. This collective organizational-level value perception greatly depends on *the available information as well as the motives and personal biases* of an individual (Lehtimäki et al., 2018) and may not necessarily reflect the genuine experiences of other people using the offering or even come close to a summative abstraction of all the different opinions within the company. Nevertheless, it remains relevant because it determines customers' future behaviors.

In sum, there are two broad directions at play in the extant research on value perceptions, which vary in their ontology of value and serve researchers in different ways. In the realist view, value is either embedded in the offering or created through

its use and service interactions, resulting in value perceptions. Accepting that value exists outside of value perceptions facilitates the measuring of broader concepts such as relationship value and leads to the discovery of *generalizable value drivers* while being relatively free from individual actors' interpretations. By focusing on the objective measure of a reference object's value based on a summary of value perceptions, researchers can test this construct's relationships to other variables by building explanatory models to infer predictions of future behaviors.

The interpretive view argues that people, including decision-makers in businesses, behave according to their individual and collective value perceptions, which are formed through sensemaking. In this view, value perception equals value because value stems from personal experiences. The focus is thus on *what individuals find valuable in an experience* at a particular time and in a particular context. Unlike the realist approach, the interpretive approach does not offer generalizations in the same way as the realist approach does but provides a more accurate basis for contextual explanations of future behaviors.

Both of these approaches to value perception are concerned with value drivers, aiming to discover the sources of benefits and sacrifices or of different value types. Ultimately, this focus on value perception can help providers understand what is valuable to their customers and, thus, what kinds of offerings or experiences will be competitive in the market.

In this dissertation, *I adopt an experiential value approach*, with the view that value originates from experience and is interpreted by an individual. This approach allows for connecting value perceptions to CX, and it is appropriate for the B2B context, as various value perceptions originate from the experiences of multiple actors across multiple touchpoints and journeys in the context of a business relationship. Despite the focus on an individual, it is important to note that individual value perceptions do not exist in a vacuum: as this literature review shows, there are several ways to understand the value for a collective, namely through social relationships and the influence of individual, personal and organizational goals or based on a common reference object, such as an event, a product, or a relationship, in relation to which the offering's value is interpreted.

4.1.2 Value co-creation

A different approach to understanding value is to study the process of value creation instead of focusing perceptions of value. According to interpretive researchers, the process of value creation occurs through an individual's sensemaking or, as some may say, "in their head" (e.g., Helkkula et al., 2012). In contrast, the social constructionist perspective sees value as co-created by actors involved in different resource integration activities (Macdonald et al., 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008).

Resource integration means that the resources of both the customer and supplier are made available for use, which is why the outcomes of value co-creation processes are often referred to as *value-in-use*. Macdonald et al. (2011) stressed that “use” in this case does not refer to the usage process alone but any resource-integrating activities that take place. Studies focusing on value co-creation have seldom differentiated between the concepts of value-in-use, value-in-experience, and value-in-context, but all the conceptualizations acknowledge the importance of multiple actors and the interactions between them (see, e.g., Macdonald et al., 2016; Patrício et al., 2008, 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

From the value co-creation perspective, both the supplier and the customer have an active role in value creation by providing and integrating their resources (e.g., Macdonald et al., 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Moeller et al., 2013). The resources in question can be monetary, natural, technological, or human, relating to information, skills, standards, or processes. Furthermore, with the shift from the customer–supplier dyad to the systemic view of value co-creation, researchers started to consider other actors within value-creating systems as resource integrators (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; 2011; Beirão, Patrício, & Fisk, 2017).

The customer’s role in value creation *is not limited to judging value outcomes*. Customers actively and creatively deploy their resources to derive value that may vary significantly from the value initially intended by the service provider (Arnould et al., 2006). Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) identified various customer resources, including information on needs and context, industry expertise, production material, financial resources, time, and effort, that customers of knowledge-intensive business services utilize during joint problem-solving. In addition to customer resources, a customer’s different roles during a service provision will impact their value outcomes. For example, Moeller et al. (2013) identified five roles of a customer during a service delivery: a bargain-hunting independent, a comprehensive help seeker, an engaged problem solver, a technology-savvy networker, and a self-reliant customizer. The customer’s approach to resource integration would also result in different levels of provider involvement.

A service provider can be *more or less active in value co-creation* from the customer perspective. Some views consider customer value co-creation only within active collaboration or collaborative production processes (e.g., Grönroos, 2011). Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) reported that a provider can take the roles of value option advisor, value process organizer, value amplifier, and value experience supporter in collaborative processes, with their various resources being utilized for joint problem-solving. As for value co-created within solution business, researchers have found that the provider and customer firms jointly integrate their organizational competencies, employee competencies, and sourcing network competencies to the customer’s benefit (Macdonald et al., 2016). Authors have also accounted for the

provider's passive role in value co-creation through the customer's acceptance and creative use of the provider's resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This approach follows a more abstract view of resource integration, positing that every economic and social actor is a resource integrator, and allows for the provider's passive participation in resource-integrating activities as they make their resources available for use (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

The systemic view of value co-creation causes the amount of available resources to increase due to the presence of multiple actors who can be considered at several levels of analysis. These actors include employees, divisions, service network partners, communities, and the government. The enhanced systemic complexity has led to increased research interest in the factors that influence and support resource integration among the multitude of actors. Exploring the effectiveness of resource integration practices, Gummesson and Mele (2010) asserted that a good match between resources, activities, and processes is critical for value co-creation. In turn, Macdonald et al. (2016) recognized the importance of collaborative coordination of information and asset flows (coordination and asset management effectiveness) in judging the quality of resource integration processes. Furthermore, Beirão et al. (2017) identified resource access, sharing, recombination, monitoring, and governance as important value co-creation factors at the individual, organizational, and national levels of analysis. Thinking about resource integration in a more nuanced way also allows for understanding value co-destruction, i.e., the negative variations in actors' ability to access and utilize different resources (Cabiddu et al., 2019).

Co-creation or co-construction of value means that each actor has a role and some amount of power in the process. Ultimately, for a provider firm, this means considering its own participation in value co-creation within a system of actors. However, a universal perception of co-created value is not shared among resource-integrating actors. To address that, studies focusing on value co-creation frequently utilize the S-D logic principles, one of which posits that "value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 7), which is compatible with the interpretivist *experiential view* of value perceptions. This foundational premise allows researchers to study different benefits an individual actor can derive from their experience during the value co-creation process (e.g., Beirão et al., 2017, Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

Value is thus created both *for* multiple individuals, resulting in multiple value perceptions, and *with* multiple individuals as they go about integrating resources. In some ways, the value co-creation approach is the best of both worlds. It sees value as co-constructed, *existing outside a single individual's value perceptions* and, at the same time, *perceived uniquely by individuals*. Based on the S-D logic principle that value is always co-created in interaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), it can be said that

value exists in-between interactions, taking different forms for each actor. In contrast to prioritizing an individual’s sensemaking and biases, the value co-creation approach separates value perceptions from the value creation process, thus allowing to consider the roles of different actors in affecting those perceptions.

4.1.3 CX as a link between value co-creation and value perception

Pragmatically, seeing value creation as a process in which the supplier has a role to play is appropriate for the organizational perspective on CXM and, hence, this dissertation. This dissertation also benefits from acknowledging the participation of other actors in value creation processes, including partners, subcontractors, and customers. Nevertheless, this approach does not discount the importance of individually interpreted value for beneficiaries. The experiential view of value enriches this dissertation due to its consideration of “individual level and non-economic aspects of B2B relationship value” (Lehtimäki et al., 2018, p. 5). But what unites the value co-creation perspective and value perception?



Figure 4. Uniting value co-creation processes and value outcomes (adapted from Gummerus, 2013, p. 33)

Gummerus (2013, p. 32) stated that “*experience is the missing link and the common denominator of value creation processes and value outcomes*” based on the premise that experiences are created when customers engage in value co-creation activities (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Furthermore, lived experiences are initially not reflected on—customers might not acknowledge or think much of them (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). However, at some point, people think about or communicate their experiences, reflecting on them. This reflection often happens in relation to objects of experience, such as in these examples: “This *meeting* was too long and boring,” “this *software* is easy to learn,” and “I am afraid to *open this email*.” By reflecting on their experience, a person can attach a valence to it or its outcomes: “overall, it was a positive experience.” A customer’s interpretation of value, i.e., their understanding of the value the reference object brought to them personally and professionally, as well as to their team, function, or the whole firm, needs an additional level of reflection. Thus, Gummerus (2013) suggested a

relationship between value co-creation activities and value perceptions, as illustrated in **Figure 4** (p. 86).

By applying this understanding to CX management, I arrive at the following question: How can a firm engage in value co-creation such that the resulting experiences would be interpreted as valuable by customers and potentially by other participating actors? Ultimately, linking both CXM and CX to the value creation process creates a basis for discussion on the individual nonmonetary value created in experiences and how the firm can influence the same.

4.2 Proposing value in business markets

The differences between the ideas of value perception and value co-creation result in distinct approaches to forming value propositions. On the one hand, studies that approach value from the co-creation perspective focus on co-creation practices and the ways actors can participate in the construction of customer value (Zeithaml, Verleye et al., 2020). This approach is illustrated in **Figure 5**, depicting how competitive advantage can be achieved by forming *value propositions through a unique fit of activities and resources* (see Section 4.2.2).

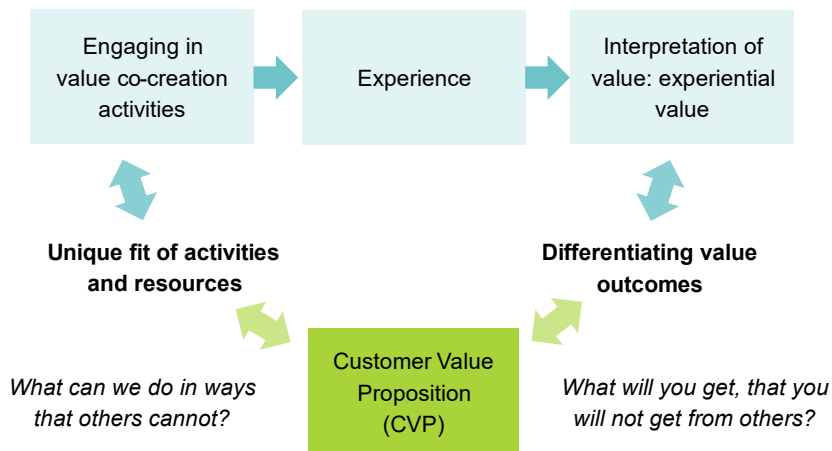


Figure 5. Distinct approaches to forming customer value propositions (CVPs)

On the other hand, research attempting to capture or explore the emergence of value judgments would begin from the endpoint of **Figure 5**. To provide recommendations on competitive strategies with this approach, researchers must trace the perceptions of value back to their sources. This results in understanding *value propositions based on differentiating value outcomes* (Section 4.2.1).

The following two sections delve deeper into both of the abovementioned approaches, and the final section (4.2.3) focuses on how these perspectives can be united to establish CVPs, paving the way for experience-based value propositions in business markets.

4.2.1 Differentiating value outcomes

In studies that consider value perceptions as a starting point for forming CVPs, the different value drivers and sources of perceived value are the main ingredients of value creation. When designing a value-creation strategy, firms ensure that their offering contains important value drivers that maximize the potential benefits and minimize the sacrifices involved, thus increasing customers' willingness to pay for the service (e.g., Ulaga, 2001; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Smith & Colgate, 2007). Considering that the scope of value encapsulates a range of different experiences within the customer–supplier relationship as well as the customer's processes (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016), the steps taken toward creating superior value for the customer could include anything from product and process innovations to key account communication improvements or aftersales service developments (e.g., Almeida Costa & Zemski, 2021).

By tracing the process backward from value outcomes, one can dissect different experiences and identify the elements that result in benefits and sacrifices and how a customer makes sense of them. These elements include the attributes of the offering, such as a particular product functionality or the friendliness of service personnel, as well as contextual and personal drivers related to the individual interpreting the experiences. For example, in the context of networking events, Mitchell et al. (2016) identified personal value drivers related to the actions and offerings of the event organizer, speakers, facilitators, and other attendees, which resulted in different types of experiential value. Notably, Roig et al. (2006) quantitatively studied value as a formative multidimensional construct in the banking sector. They found that it is composed of the functional as well as emotional and social value of the establishment, personnel, service, and price, with the latter referring to how customers feel and relate to their social context while participating in service interactions. This kind of research informs service providers not only about the elements that can be improved and developed to increase customers' perceived value of the offering but also the various value types that firms can aim at creating in their service provisions.

Research also reveals that different value drivers have varying levels of importance when customers form value judgments. For instance, in their study on how business customers choose their main suppliers, Eggert et al. (2006) found that personal interactions and service, access to know how, and increased time to market

were more important relationship value drivers than product quality and delivery performance. Thus, value drivers can help discern promising routes for service differentiation and for attaining a competitive advantage in business markets.

Smith and Colgate (2007) emphasized taking a strategic approach to understanding value drivers and identifying the particular value categories that can differentiate the offering and firm, rather than all of the benefits that customers might perceive. The researchers asserted that strategy is all about focus and that this focus lies in finding a competitive advantage (Smith & Colgate, 2007). This view is consistent with the recommendations of Anderson, Narus and Van Rossum (2006) for best-practice value propositions. Anderson et al. (2006) further differentiated between favorable points of difference, i.e., comparative benefits with key competitors, and resonating focus, i.e., key benefits for the chosen segment. According to the authors, the resonating focus, which is grounded in customer needs, presents a superior value proposition (Anderson et al., 2006). Furthermore, Smith and Colgate (2007) suggested that the value strategy most appropriate in the B2B context would include focusing on the value created through interactions and ownership transfer activities.

Grönroos (2011) put forward three categories for all possible customer value outcomes (value-creating effects). The first consists of the offering's effects on customers' capacity to increase their revenue, either by growing in the market or charging premium prices on account of the supplier's service (Grönroos, 2011). The second category comprises the effects on customers' cost levels, resulting either from a service being provided at a lower cost or a decrease in the customer's operating or administrative costs due to the supplier's solution (Grönroos, 2011). Finally, the third category is formed by effects on perception, which include increased customer trust, commitment, attraction, and comfort toward the supplier (Grönroos, 2011). Unlike the first two types, which can be measured in monetary terms, the measurement of the third type of value outcomes relies on perceptions and cognitive effects. These categories map out the firms' opportunities to focus on particular effects in their value propositions.

A generic value creation strategy based on value perceptions thus focuses on *selecting and developing differentiating value drivers* to increase benefits and decrease costs or encourage particular types of value. It must be noted that this focus on value sources and drivers does not necessarily mean that value is seen as embedded in predesigned experience packages (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Experience is dynamic, subjective, and contextual and, therefore, cannot be fully controlled by the supplier firm, only influenced (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009). Identifying value drivers is merely a step toward understanding what customers find valuable in their experiences and why; it can inform a provider firm's

value propositions and allow for its strategic positioning among its competitors (Rintamäki & Saarijärvi, 2021).

4.2.2 Unique fit of activities and resources

When approaching value creation strategies from the perspective of the value co-creation process, the focus is not on the outcome but on the different ways a firm can participate in value co-creation. The value creation process is not a form of managerial action, i.e., of designing and producing offerings, but managerial *interaction*, i.e., being involved and engaged in value-creating activities (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). Ballantyne and Varey (2006) outlined three broad types of value-creating activities: relationship development, communicative interaction, and knowledge renewal. Building on relationship marketing literature, the authors argued for the significance of relationship-building processes that provide a structural framework for other value-creating activities across time and space (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). Notably, Ballantyne (2004) emphasized the importance of dialogical communication activities, where value emerges not only from the promises made and kept by the supplier but from discovery-oriented interactions with the customer. Finally, Ballantyne and Varey (2006) claimed that knowledge renewal, defined as the generation, sharing, and application of both tacit and explicit knowledge, is a value-creating activity and a fundamental source of competitive advantage (see also Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The management of value co-creation processes is a central theme in understanding this approach to value propositions. Payne et al. (2008) explored this managerial process and developed a framework that considers both customer and supplier processes and the communicative interactions between them, which the authors call encounter processes. These include communication, service, and usage encounters that impact CXs by supporting customers' emotions, thinking, and actions (Payne et al., 2008). This typology was later used to describe the range of touchpoints along which experiences arise during the customer journey (e.g., Lemke et al., 2011), thus tightly linking activities, experience, and value.

While encounter processes govern *how* a supplier participates in value co-creation and influences customer experiences, value creation strategies stem from the supplier's understanding of target customers' value-creating processes and identification of strategic co-creation opportunities, i.e., *where* to step in. This involves collaborative planning, testing, and prototyping CXs to create value. Payne et al. (2008) characterized this as an outside-in strategy, which originates not from the supplier firm's capabilities but the customer's understanding.

The outside-in view of strategies such as competitive positioning is often criticized for omitting the dynamics of strategic action and the different roles that

internal actors play in strategy formation (Stonehouse & Snowden, 2007). However, a close look at the sources of competitive advantages reveals the importance of firms' activities and processes. Porter (1996) argued that this strategic advantage lies not in particular activities per se but in the fit between these activities; a firm may choose a different set of activities than its competition or perform the same activities differently.

Indeed, there are myriads of unique ways for a firm to make its resources available to and jointly integrate them with customers and other members of the service network. For example, Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) identified various collaborative activities that take place in the context of knowledge-intensive business services, such as diagnosing needs, designing and producing solutions, implementing the solutions, managing value conflicts, and organizing processes and resources. Making strategic choices about how these activities are enacted and coordinated would be a major part of sustainable and differentiating value creation strategies.

In addition to deciding how and to what degree a firm would participate in value co-creation activities, decisions are made about whom such activities should be performed with from within the service network. In their recent study, Komulainen et al. (2018) discovered the limited role a single service provider plays in advancing a customer's way of life, as a provider's influence strongly depends on how other economic and social actors participate in value co-creation. Therefore, a firm's ability to engage other actors in value co-creation can be strategically important.

To summarize, the value creation strategies that arise from the value co-creation perspective are based on the fit of *activities* and *resources*, which results in unique differentiating experiences. Value propositions in this perspective can be seen as configurations of different practices and resources (Skålén et al., 2015). A firm's choice of distinctive practices and resources to engage with and develop must be guided by a shared perspective on target customers' needs and industry factors (Day, 1994).

4.2.3 Customer value proposition

Rintamäki and Saarijärvi (2021) were the first to explicitly unite the two perspectives described above in their framework around the customer value proposition (CVP) concept. Their CVP model is built around perceiving and proposing value and operational and strategic levels of managing value creation. Both perspectives agree that the supplier cannot deliver value on their own and can only offer value propositions (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). A *value proposition* is "a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization's ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers" (Payne, Frow, & Eggert, 2017, p.

472). The communicative role of a value proposition has been specifically emphasized in this definition, as a good CVP needs to convey what kind of superior or different value customers can expect from doing business with the firm. This definition also incorporates the value co-creation perspective by emphasizing resource sharing as the high-level value-creation activity. Notably, a firm's ability to focus its resources on achieving differentiating value perceptions is a prerequisite for a competitive advantage. This advantage emerges when a good value proposition is presented and the desired perceived value is realized (Payne et al., 2017; Rintamäki et al., 2007).

The proposed value should strongly resonate with the firm's target customers; this can be achieved by following an outside-in thinking (Day & Moorman, 2010; Day, 2020) and addressing the functional and experiential elements of value (Rintamäki et al., 2007; Payne et al., 2017). In the marketing of more complex B2B solutions, such propositions are not set by the supplier alone but are determined based on joint negotiations with customers (Macdonald et al., 2016; Payne et al., 2017; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

Many authors have attempted to identify and classify a variety of strategies based on unique value propositions. To date, the consensus is that there is no single inherently superior value strategy: studies show that value-based firms have a wide range of strategies to pursue different economic objectives (Slater & Narver, 1996). The most generic value-based strategy includes establishing market objectives, selecting specific market segments to target, creating a value proposition that advantageously positions the offering and the firm, and developing the capabilities necessary to understand customer needs and deliver on value promises (Slater, 1997).

An influential work that ignited the research interest in value propositions is Treacy and Wiersama's (1993) normatively oriented article on customer value creation strategies. The authors have delineated three types of value propositions that a firm can make: operational excellence, product leadership, and customer intimacy (Treacy & Wiersama, 1993). Significant due to its effects on customer's cost level (Grönroos, 2011), the operational excellence strategy focuses on price and convenience leadership and necessitates business processes that minimize costs and create close links to customers and channel partners (Treacy & Wiersama, 1993). Such a strategy often relies on the provider minimizing their costs, so it does not leave much room for adjustments and carries the risk of running a firm into the ground if market competition is high (Porter, 1996).

The value-creation strategy focused on product leadership emphasizes the continuous development of innovative products and services by recognizing customer needs, assessing customer reactions, and designing fast market entry strategies (Treacy & Wiersama, 1993). Product leadership can affect cost level

(Grönroos, 2011) if the provided solutions help customers save money in the long run, and customer growth and revenue (Grönroos, 2011) if the innovative products facilitate customers' business growth. This strategy is often criticized, especially in consumer markets, for being harmful to the environment due to its advocacy of infinite economic growth in a finite world (Roulet & Bothello, 2020).

The third competitive strategy for value creation is customer intimacy. The objectives of this strategy are to build strong customer relationships and respond to customers' unique needs (Treacy & Wiersama, 1993). Achieving customer intimacy requires a firm to tailor its offerings to customer expectations and predict changes in customer needs. While such an approach of going above and beyond the fixed offerings may be expensive, it is highly likely to help the firm achieve customer loyalty behaviors. Organizations that follow this strategy are likely to be customer-centric (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000).

At the center of these value-creation approaches lies customer experience: firms make value propositions to enable the co-creation of experiences (Payne et al., 2008). Smith and Wheeler (2002) highlighted the role of CX in the context of value propositions and argued that a branded CX is central to defining and delivering a firm's value proposition. In addition, Dhebar (2013) underlined the strategic importance of differentiating experiences as they are the direct reflection of the value promise. The scholar explicitly emphasized the importance of CX that reinforces the value promise at each touchpoint (ibid.). Indeed, considering experience as a basis for value proposition allows for a more extensive range of value elements (Almquist, Cleghorn, & Sherer, 2018) that can help increase customers' loyalty and the firm's revenue growth.

To sum up, this chapter reviewed the different perspectives on value, first by separating the concepts of value perception and value co-creation and then linking those together through the concept of CX. A firm can facilitate CXs by participating in value co-creation, which are then interpreted by customers and consequently result in individual and collective value perceptions. This link allows for a further distinction between the two ways a firm can make competitive value propositions in business markets: by proposing their participation in value co-creating processes and by promising unique and desirable value outcomes. Following this logic, I characterize CXM as a competitive strategy that involves value co-creation activities aimed at building valuable CXs. I use this idea to reflect on the study findings in Chapter 8.

5 A strategic framework for CX management

Many authors have portrayed CXM as a strategic approach (e.g., Schmitt 2003; Verhoef et al., 2009) that involves strategically managing touchpoints throughout the customer journey (Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and aligning this journey with the provider firm's strategic goals (Clatworthy, 2012; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). However, apart from rare exceptions (e.g., Keiningham et al., 2020), the concept of strategy has been addressed only superficially in the extant CXM literature. Therefore, this dissertation is aimed at bridging the existing knowledge gap through *a more detailed examination of the strategy concept*. The resulting analytical lens is used to interpret the empirical findings and for theory building, thus providing a stronger basis for labeling CXM as a strategic approach.

This chapter culminates with an *initial conceptual framework* around which the empirical investigation has been developed. The conceptual framework integrates the main elements of CXM and presents the relationships between relevant theoretical constructs, including the main focus of the empirical investigation—target experiences. I also elaborate on the research questions used in this study.

5.1 The strategy concept as an analytical lens

When studying a managerial approach that is characterized as strategic, it is crucial to question what strategy means. Strategy is a concept that is often contrasted with tactics or operations, yet its scope remains unclear. As Varadarajan (2010) noted, the same decisions pertaining to the elements of classic marketing mix, for example, are characterized by some researchers as strategic and by others as tactical. In their synthesis of the definitions of strategy, Bracker (1980) identified two characteristics of a business strategy: establishing the firm's position in its environment and utilizing its resources to attain its goals. However, these are not the only elements involved.

Moore (1959) defined *strategy* as “a structuring of a somewhat unpredictable situation where there is only fragmentary information and in which the probable behavior of others must be taken into account” (p. 225). He further emphasized that

a strategy has a specific end goal and occurs either simultaneously with the action or before the action (Moore, 1959). Moore (1959) primarily saw strategy as the conception of a situation, which leads to the understanding that it is a conscious plan followed by a purposeful action. However, there may be differences between public and private strategies. As Moore (1959) noted, “a public strategy may be a rationalization of more private intentions” of managers (p. 225). This underlines the private nature of conscious decisions, which, despite their nature, are often informed by unconscious factors and depend on the person doing the strategizing. The more public a strategy is, the more its conception is shared across an organization.

Furthermore, Moore (1959) differentiated strategy from planning and decision-making processes, stating that a plan can be too static, like a blueprint lacking continuous adjustments and calculations toward an end goal, and decisions can be too specific, involving choices between alternatives and describing actions rather than a preceding conception of the situation. Mintzberg (1978), however, wrote that a strategy is formed when a sequence of decisions exhibits a consistent pattern over time. Drawing from this notion, it can be stated that a series of actions and decisions can be characterized a strategy.

Nevertheless, Shirley (1982) critiqued Mintzberg’s (1978) approach to strategy, stating that the author has not specified what makes the decisions strategic. In turn, Shirley (1982) identified five criteria for strategic decisions: they are externally oriented, relate to the firm as a whole, depend on multifunctional inputs, provide direction for administrative and operational activities, and are essential to the firm’s success. In the more specific context of a marketing strategy, Varadarajan (2010) emphasized the connection between strategic marketing decisions and strategic marketing actions, activities, or behaviors. More precisely, the researcher argued that an organization’s marketing decisions determine the marketing activities of the firm in the marketplace (Varadarajan, 2010). Both these views suggest that strategic decisions guide action.

Even in this short overview of the discussions around the strategy concept, the different dimensions of strategy are clearly noticeable. To organize the variety of implicit understandings of strategy, Mintzberg (1987a) proposed the *five Ps* of strategy, stating that it is not sufficient to work with only one definition. According to this model, a strategy can be perceived simultaneously as

1. a consciously developed *plan*,
2. a devious *ploy*,
3. an emergent *pattern* of behavior,
4. an organization’s *position* in relation to its environment, and
5. a shared *perspective*.

The traditional and most commonly used definition of strategy treats it as an explicit and consciously developed *plan*, an intended course of action (Mintzberg, 1978) meant to focus the firm's efforts in a particular direction before any actions are taken (Mintzberg, 1987a). One of the main characteristics of this traditional approach is that strategy is considered a conception that precedes action, and the action undertaken is directed by this intended strategy.

The author further specified *ploy* as one of the five Ps, referring to firms' "false" strategies, such as announcing moves to achieve a different objective than what was claimed (Mintzberg, 1987a). Notably, this dimension still refers to the strategy as a plan that directs certain actions (such as a public announcement).

However, Mintzberg (1990) actively criticized these first two approaches, or what he collectively referred to as the Design School of strategy research, which often separates strategy conceptualization from strategy implementation. Mintzberg (1990) argued that this view does not reflect the reality of strategy formation, especially in uncertain markets, and suggested an alternative conceptualization of an emergent strategy characterized by trial-and-error processes. In a firm rebuttal, Ansoff (1991) challenged the critique of the design school by emphasizing the widespread use of the explicit and a priori strategy formulations even in unstable and hard-to-predict environments.

Still, Mintzberg's (1987a) argument remains relevant—the view of strategy as a plan is indeed insufficient. To describe a realized strategy, rather than a preexisting conception, one can view strategy as a consistent *pattern* in a stream of action (Mintzberg, 1987b). Depending on how intentional the actions are, the resulting strategy would be either deliberate or emergent (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). It is quite rare for an organization to implement only its intended actions; some actions and decisions are emergent, "open, flexible, and responsive" to learning (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985, p. 271). Emergent decisions that happen to follow a coherent pattern can be characterized as forming a strategy, even if this was not preconceived (*ibid.*). In his critique, Ansoff (1991) warned against using the emergent strategy model in a prescriptive manner in broader contexts, stating that the emergence of strategies does not mean that attempts should not be made to formulate the firm's strategy in advance.

The plan and pattern perspectives both indicate a particular direction of action: the first describes the intended future actions and consequences, while the second reflects on the realized ones. The two perspectives are united by learning processes through which managers reflect on the emergent and deliberate, realized strategies to further inform strategy design (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

The strategy can also be conceived as defining a *position*, i.e., situating an organization in relation to its environment (Mintzberg, 1987a). In line with this perspective, Moore (1959) described a goal of business strategy as "achieving and

maintaining an advantageous set of relations in the socio-economic environment” (p. 225). The most famous scholar in the positioning school of thought is Michael Porter, who has developed several influential models such as five forces framework, generic competitive strategies, and value chain frameworks (see Stonehouse & Snowdon, 2007, for an overview). The positioning perspective is often characterized as an outside-in approach to strategy, which means that an organization’s external environment determines its strategic approach (Stonehouse & Snowdon, 2007). Mintzberg (1987a) noted that any viable position can be an independent strategic position, irrespective of whether its directly competitive. This view is consistent with the B2B literature on cooptation (e.g., Walley, 2014) as well as the S-D logic’s appeal to “foster relationships and cooperation with other actors” for successful strategy development (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 60).

Finally, strategy as a shared *perspective* highlights the role of the people working within an organization (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b). It refers to individuals united by a collective idea and emphasizes the constructive and illusory nature of strategy (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b). Viewing strategy as a perspective draws attention to collective strategists, that is, the people involved in the strategy formation. Rather than considering the process involved, the perspective approach focuses on the conception of strategy. However, instead of describing a detailed plan of action attributed to a single strategist, such as a CEO, this conception refers to the associated ideology and actions that are *shared* by the members of an organization (Mintzberg, 1987a). This dimension sees strategy as “an abstraction which exists only in the minds of interested parties” (Mintzberg, 1987a, p. 16) and is tightly connected to organizational culture, enveloping the more precise plans and patterns of strategic action.

Table 6. The concept of strategy as an analytical lens

DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGY	MEANING OF STRATEGY	GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR ANALYZING THE ROLE OF TX
Strategy as a plan, ploy, or pattern	Strategy focuses on what the firm does, thus guiding or reflecting its actions.	What is the role of TX in guiding CXM actions?
Strategy as a perspective	Strategy gives meaning to the people working within an organization.	What is the role of TX in providing a shared meaning within an organization?
Strategy as a position	Strategy defines organization in relation to its environment.	What is the role of TX in positioning an organization in the market?

The extant literature reviewed in Chapter 3 indicates that target experiences are instrumental in aligning CXM activities with an overarching CX strategy. Mintzberg's five Ps can be used to analyze the roles of target experiences in CXM (RQ3) by offering a structured analytical lens. Based on the five dimensions of strategy, I have formed three guiding questions to analyze the role of TXs in strategic CX management and thus answer RQ3 (Table 6, p. 97).

First, strategy as a plan, ploy, or pattern relates to the firm's actions, either guiding them or reflecting how they are realized. The plan dimension is clearly present in the CXM literature, with discussions on planning service delivery and customer journeys to create positive CXs through, for instance, service blueprinting (Bitner, Ostrom, & Morgan, 2008), multi-level service design (MSD) (Patrício et al., 2011), and customer experience modeling (CEM) (Teixeira et al., 2012). Moreover, the literature indicates that while CXM is driven by explicit strategic directions in some firms, it is based on continuous touchpoint adaptations and customizations in others (Homburg et al., 2017), which is more consistent with the pattern dimension. Nevertheless, the formulation of a target for a firm's strategic CX direction is still uncharted research territory, leading to the following question: *What is the role of target experience in guiding CX management actions?*

Second, strategy as a perspective gives meaning to the people within an organization. CX management is widely associated with cultural change (Chakravorti, 2011) toward customer-centricity (Schmitt, 2007; Shah et al., 2006). Moreover, Homburg et al. (2017) referred to the intangible mental models that managers use to describe their firm's competitive advantage (see also Day, 1994) as cultural mindsets toward CX. However, to represent strategy as a perspective, these mental models should not only exist in managers' minds but must be shared, constructed, co-created, and interpreted by people involved in its implementation (cf. the Design School view, see Mintzberg, 1990). Thus, the following question arises: *What is the role of target experience in providing a shared meaning within an organization?*

Last, strategy as a position defines an organization in relation to its environment. Authors have described CX differentiation in two ways: through orchestrated cues, designed touchpoints, and small details that are difficult to replicate (Berry et al., 2002; Bolton et al., 2014; Carbone, 1994) or through brand-aligned experiences with employees, including distinctive service styles and unique brand associations (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Mosley, 2007). However, a better understanding of how an organization can position itself with respect to its experiential targets is needed, giving rise to the following question: *What is the role of target experience in positioning an organization in the market?*

5.2 Initial framework for CX management

This dissertation is aimed at providing an understanding of *the roles of target experiences in strategic CX management for value creation in business markets*. Several research streams and concepts have been reviewed in the previous chapters, each of which has a role in explaining the phenomenon under investigation. These theoretical building blocks form an initial framework that illustrates the existing literature's role in the abductive theory development reported in this dissertation.

First, the focus of CX management, i.e., customer experience, and the associated managerial idea, i.e., target experience, were explored in relation to the B2B context. I reviewed the extant CX literature and synthesized it with relevant findings from the domains of industrial marketing and organizational buying behavior to achieve a customer-centric definition of B2B CX. Target experiences, in turn, were defined as the intended CXs that firms aim to evoke as outcomes of their activities. Hence, the literature review indicates that TXs would in some ways reflect or *consider* the complex nature of B2B CXs (**Figure 6**). This idea contributes to answering RQ1: *What is the nature of target experiences in the B2B context?*

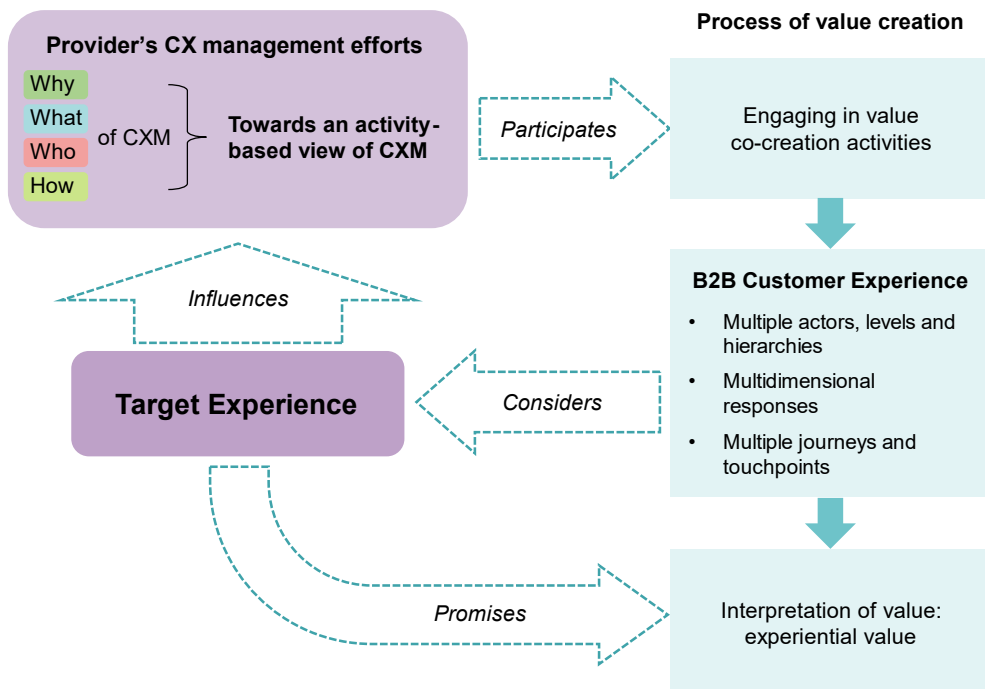


Figure 6. The initial framework for understanding the strategic roles of target experiences in CXM for value creation in business markets

Second, it was necessary to study the activities involved in CXM in B2B settings, i.e., the actions that separate firms that deliberately try to manage CXs from firms that do not engage in CXM efforts. After positioning CXM among other relevant managerial approaches and organizing the extant knowledge around four general questions, I argued for approaching CXM as a range of activities for two reasons. First, activities provide a systemic and flexible perspective on multiple facets of CXM that have been studied only piecemeal to date. Second, activity as a unit of analysis is conceptually compatible with the value co-creation process, which includes a range of resource-integrating activities that contribute to the formation of experiences and value perceptions (**Figure 6**). Thus, activities directed at facilitating experiences can be theoretically linked with the formation of experiences themselves to address RQ2: *How do B2B companies strive to manage customer experiences?*

Third, introducing TX as an object of study and reviewing the extant knowledge on CXM resulted in a strong basis for studying the *influence* of TXs within CX management (**Figure 6**). Some developments in the CX management literature indicate that TXs may have connections to brand personality and organizational culture and thus guide CX facilitation. An examination of the strategy concept in Chapter 5.1 provided additional insights into when an activity or decision can be considered strategic, thus helping to structure the investigation around the strategically important roles of target experiences and address RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

Finally, the CVP concept had to be taken into account when considering marketing management approaches in B2B settings. Accordingly, the value concept was reviewed, and different approaches to value proposition in business markets were discussed. This led to the understanding that creating a value proposition involves a firm *promising* superior value outcomes and proposing a combination of activities and resources as it *participates* in the value co-creation process. In other words, a provider firm gains a competitive advantage when its value proposition is realized through its (and other actors') activities, becoming perceived value. As TXs are based on a provider's intentions, they must also have a link to the desired experiential value outcomes. This idea is further developed based on the empirical findings around the three research questions and reported in the Discussion (Chapter 8.2).

6 Research methodology

6.1 Pragmatic constructivist approach to knowledge creation

For greater transparency and reflexivity, I report the philosophical assumptions that have guided the research strategy and methodology (e.g., Zalan & Lewis, 2004; Burrell & Morgan, 1979) in this section. My philosophical position underlines the choices made throughout the study, which increases the internal consistency of the research.

The philosophical underpinnings of this study follow the views of pragmatic constructivism based on George Kelly's (1955, 1966) personal construct theory and the radical constructivism of Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995, 2001; see Raskin, 2011). Pragmatic constructivism is essentially "a theory of knowing, not being" (Glasersfeld, 2001, p. 41), meaning that it sheds light on the epistemological assumptions, i.e., the question, "How can something be known?"

One of the main characteristics of pragmatic constructivism is that a person is considered *a construer of their own reality*. This means that knowledge is not just passively received by an external spectator but actively constructed (Glasersfeld, 1995). This implies that a person cannot have rational knowledge about a reality beyond their own experiences (Glasersfeld, 2001). Kelly's personal construct theory also focuses on the meanings that people attribute to experiences and their personal epistemologies in contrast to objective propositions about reality (Stevens, 1998).

Kelly (1955) underlined the significance of the *internal and interpersonal consistency of people's construct systems*, proposing clear criteria for the validation of constructs as follows: "consensus of observers; previous validation of criteria; exhaustiveness of the construct axes of reference; multidimensional fix of the observed event, etc. – none of them absolute of course" (Kelly, 1966, p. 39; see also Stevens, 1998). Moreover, Kelly (1955) introduced the concept of sociality to refer to personal constructions about how other people construe their realities. Similarly, Glasersfeld (1995) wrote about intersubjective reality, which comes to be when people ascribe to others the same processes of knowledge construction they themselves follow, leading to *collective* knowledge.

While Glasersfeld (1995) and Kelly (1955) emphasized the importance of sociality, Raskin (2011) *warned against confusing pragmatic constructivism with social constructionism*. Social constructionism sees knowledge as created through communication and joint coordination in relational processes among people, while constructionism sees ascribed meaning as personal and internal (Raskin, 2011, 2002). Although external stimuli may trigger sensory and meaning-making systems, constructivists focus on internal psychological processes, seeing people as closed systems (Raskin, 2011). In the end, knowing is an individual achievement in the constructivist view.

The epistemic assumptions of pragmatic constructivism inevitably lead to *epistemic relativism*. The human experience is knowable, but that knowledge is intertwined with the inquirer as much as the situation (Avenier & Thomas, 2015). This also means that the inquirer's intention influences their experience of a situation (Avenier & Thomas, 2015; Glasersfeld, 2001).

How can one manage the multitude of knowledge constructions that are characteristic of epistemic realism? According to pragmatic constructivists, this comes down to the *function* or *usefulness* of that knowledge. In Glasersfeld's (1995) view, human knowledge is not representational (is not meant to represent reality) but adaptive:

“[...] ‘to know’ is not to possess true representations of reality, but rather to possess ways and means of acting and thinking that allow one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen” (Glasersfeld, 2001, p. 40).

Knowledge is represented by generic models and propositions of plausible interpretations that fit a person's experience and are viable for intentional actions (Avenier & Thomas, 2015). Thus, according to the pragmatic constructivist perspective, *viability* is the main property that legitimizes knowledge (Raskin, 2011). In other words, “the meaning or value of knowledge lies in its function” (Glasersfeld, 1995, p. 14).”

To describe this idea, Kelly (1955) used the term *predictive efficiency* or the *workability* of constructs. As they represent action plans, constructs are continuously evaluated in terms of their usefulness:

“The constructs that are hierarchically organized into systems are variously subject to test in terms of their usefulness in helping the person anticipate the course of events which make up the universe” (Kelly, 1955, p. 434).

The truthfulness of knowledge is thus reflected in its ability to fit a person's experiences again and again (see Stevens, 1998). According to James (1907), “True

ideas are those we can validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not” (p. 142). To elaborate on the concept of verification, Kelly (1955) stated that “verification of the assumption here means its leading to *no frustration or contradiction*” (p. 144).

Both Kelly (1955) and Glaserfeld (1995) relied on the *ideas of pragmatism* given by John Dewey and William James (see, e.g., Garrison, 1998; Butt, 2000). According to Dewey and other pragmatists, people appraise ideas and theories from the perspective of utility, i.e., by looking at ideas as tools that help us operate in the world (Stevens, 1998). Pragmatism is quite compatible with the constructivist paradigm, which maintains that “while we can never know whether our knowledge matches a presumed external world, we can know how satisfied we are with it” (Raskin, 2011, p. 225).

Another significant property of pragmatism, in addition to its instrumental perspective on knowledge, is the *significance of action and doing in knowledge formation*. Pragmatists have posited that genuine knowledge is obtained “by integrating thinking and doing, by getting the mind to reflect on the act” (Gordon, 2009, p. 49). Phillips (1995) further characterized Dewey’s pragmatist perspective as constructivist, asserting that the knower (and actor) is inseparable from the situation being examined; therefore, altering the conditions and messing with reality is required to gain knowledge about the world.

Interestingly, pragmatic constructivism does not prescribe *any founding ontological assumptions* (Glaserfeld, 2001; Avenier, 2010). In fact, Glaserfeld (2001) explicitly stated that “a model of the construction of knowledge could be designed without making ontological claims about what is known” (p. 41). This approach is very different from other epistemological frameworks that also make claims about the nature of reality. Therefore, pragmatic constructivism *should not be confused* with the *constructivist paradigm* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) that presents a relativist ontology, i.e., asserts the relative character of whatever exists and is thus linked to the postmodern paradigm rather than to pragmatism (Avenier, 2010; Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Intrigued by pragmatic constructivism’s agnostic relationship with ontology, Stevens (1998) examined the compatibility of Kelly’s (1955) ideas with a realist ontology and arrived at a requirement for *minimal realism*. According to Stevens (1998), Kelly attempted to transcend realism and pure phenomenology by acknowledging the impersonal constraining forces of reality and “a world beyond our wishes and constructions” (Stevens, 1998, p. 289). Expanding on that thought, Stevens (1998) wrote that although reality allows for a variety of viable and predictive constructs, at some point the real world may indicate that some of these constructions are untenable.

This desire to integrate constructivist sensemaking with the realist ontology comes from the author's discomfort with relativism:

"In light of this constraining power of reality, it will be posited that if a constructivism does not assume a minimum realism, philosophical relativism must result" (Stevens, 1998, p. 287).

To counteract relativism, one can distinguish between *two types of knowing*: "nonreflexive, first-order knowing," which originates from neural structures that preintentionally order sensory information, and "reflexive, second-order knowing," which involves making sense of the information (Stevens, 1998, p. 288). This distinction is consistent with the nonreductive materialism of Margolis (1978), who separated natural entities from culturally emergent entities, as well as the radical ontology given by Harré (1989):

"I begin with the bold assumption that there are at most two human realities. One of these comprehends our biological nature as relatively closed systems of molecular interactions. The other comprehends our social nature as elements of a network of symbolically mediated interactions" (p. 440).

Minimal realism thus bridges our preintentional and emergent realities. While pragmatic constructivism centers its attention on how people construct and validate knowledge and does not concern itself with "what is," the reality can still be heard as a "voice of the world is in the background," as Stevens (1998, p. 299) stated.

The *pragmatic constructivist stance* presents itself in several ways in my study of CX management. To begin with, the goal of this dissertation is to create knowledge relevant to the discipline of marketing and marketing practice. Considering the notion that *one's intentions influence how they construe knowledge*, this goal directs knowledge production, and I need to clarify my motivations for the same. The study I conducted for this dissertation was aimed at understanding and conceptualizing CXM in the B2B context. I believe that the CX concept has great managerial potential and can also have positive societal implications. Taking it seriously shows concern for the experiences of other human beings. However, in practice, it takes years for the effects of the CX concept on a firm's profitability and society at large to be seen. Thus, with my research results, I aim to flesh out CX management in a way that is *useful to marketing practice*, so that it can be better understood and replicated. This can increase the lifespan of the construct as well as the attention given to it, driving researchers to study the and impact of this managerial approach, testing the existing ideas.

Second, this study's compatibility with pragmatic constructivism can be seen in *the treatment of different approaches to customer management*, such as relationship management or channel management. While these approaches have many similarities and can be practiced in similar ways as CXM, I believe that CX management as a construct currently has better intersubjectivity in terms of its foci and thus presents a more actionable way of conceiving managerial efforts aimed at influencing customer's thoughts and emotions. As long as this approach resonates with researchers and managers, the knowledge created around it will be functional.

Third, to build on the existing knowledge about CX management, I decided to *analyze practitioners' own constructions by using CX managers as informants* instead of, for example, forming an understanding through my own observations. This choice was informed by the pragmatic stance that knowledge is formed from doing; accordingly, managers involved in CXM efforts, including strategic decisions, would have the most reliable insights regarding the same. Moreover, interviewing managers from different firms and highlighting a consensus would corroborate the understanding of the phenomenon at a higher level of abstraction.

Fourth, the noncommittal approach to ontological assumptions in pragmatic constructivism provides *a way of dealing with conflicting paradigms while using different theoretical constructs*. For example, when discussing the concept of value in Chapter 4, I considered a view informed by the realist ontology, the interpretivist perspective on value, and a concept of value co-creation that follows social constructionist assumptions. Instead of taking a stance on ontological properties of value, I use the concept to study the role of TXs in forming value propositions. As both value propositions and target experiences are managerial constructs, different perspectives on value can be useful for meaning-making.

Fifth, the pragmatic constructivist approach *helps address the nature of CX management, target experience, and CX itself*. The fact that this approach does not prescribe ontological assumptions is beneficial for studying and theorizing about the concept of CXM because it allows for ontological flexibility. In this study, I am both researching and creating constructions. To elaborate, CX management can be considered a socially constructed concept in the organizational reality of participants involved in managerial efforts (Homburg et al., 2017). CX management is real in a way that it is socially constructed, which is consistent with the constructionist ontology. The same goes for ideas about target experiences: they are constructed among people through communication. Even though personal interpretations of TXs vary, they are real and exist in-between interactions in the context of an organization.

It is important to note that knowledge constructions have very real consequences due to their influence on material things and embodied experiences of real people.

While this dissertation does not focus on these consequences and is not studying the CX itself, it is still important to be consistent in theorizing about it. Accordingly, I conclude that I follow a realist ontology for customer experience and the world as a whole, but my ontology for CXM and target experience is very much constructivist.

Put simply, my stance is as follows: CX management and its elements can be seen as socially constructed in their essence, while CX itself demands a certain commitment to realism to acknowledge its materiality. However, the reality of TXs and CX management is not as significant for the purposes of this dissertation; what is more important is knowing whether the constructed knowledge about these concepts can be acted on. To this end, I develop an understanding of this phenomenon through interviews with the informants and my analysis of the extant literature, striving for internal and interpersonal consistency in my system of constructs.

6.2 Abductive research approach

The study was conducted with the objective of abductive theory development (Bertilsson, 2004; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in the domain of B2B CX management, which benefits from the convergence of theoretical preunderstandings and rich, in-depth interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In fact, this approach fits nicely with the constructivist perspective, since prior viable theoretical constructs as well as ideas arising from the explorative field study come together in my theorizing.

To describe my research approach in more detail, I first contextualize the phenomenon, describing the environment where knowledge construction took place. This reflection is vital for transparency and validation of further constructs, as gradual context-based learning confirmed several prior assumptions and informed further choices during the research project.

In the second subsection, I describe the research strategy adopted: an explorative cross-sectional field study. While some of my choices for the research design were made before the start of the project, many methodological and conceptual choices were made during the project. Therefore, instead of using the term research design, which implies that a strict plan or blueprint is involved, I use the term research strategy to indicate a pattern of action (Mintzberg, 1987a), thus emphasizing both its deliberate and emergent facets.

6.2.1 Contextualizing the phenomenon of interest

To understand the context in which data was to be generated and to establish a competent sampling technique, I began the project by familiarizing myself with the

context of CX management in the B2B sector. **Figure 7** illustrates the context in which B2B CX practice is developed in Finland: the understanding gained both prior to and during data generation. Gaining knowledge of the circumstances surrounding CXM informed continuous adjustments of research strategy.

While CX as a topic has been present in different business forums for many years, my initial conversations with CX professionals in Finland made it clear that CXM is lacking attention in the B2B context. Although the B2B sector is prevalent in Finnish markets, CX managers working in B2B firms conveyed that they often felt isolated in their endeavors and lacked best-practice benchmarks. The CX managers I contacted treasured every colleague that they could learn from and actively participated in and created *professional communities* that varied in their formality. I gained access to some of these communities through groups on the professional networking site LinkedIn, namely “Asiakaskokemus Suomi,” “Customer Experience Exchange: The Professional Networking Group for CX Leaders,” “Customer Experience & Customer Success Community,” and “Customer Experience & Innovation Management,” and on Facebook, namely “Asiakaskokemuksen parantajat.”

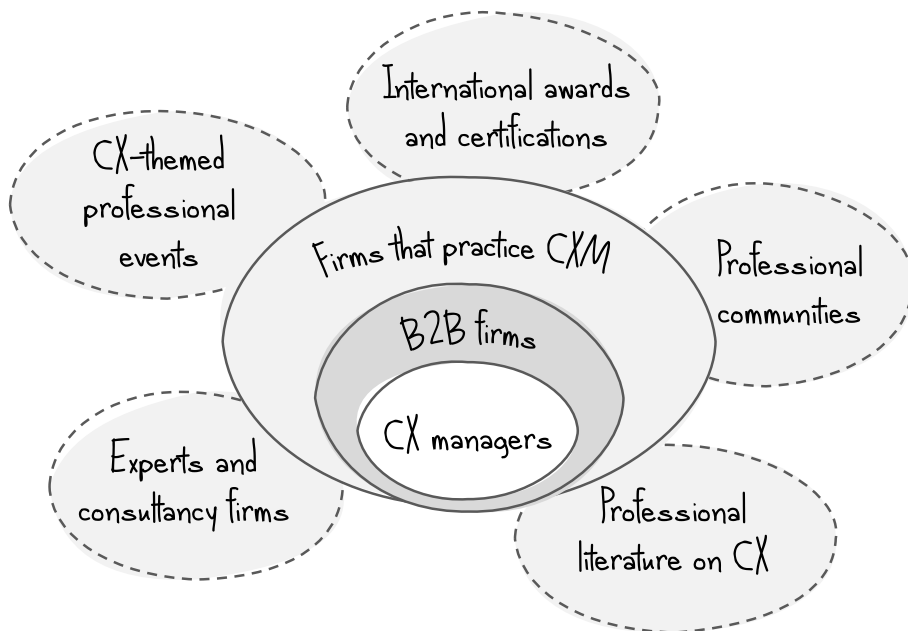


Figure 7. The Northern European context of CX management

The research interviews indicated that CX managers communicate more informally through their social media pages and during business events, sharing their ideas and experiences. Familiarizing myself with the context of professional CX

communities revealed how B2B CX managers learn from their colleagues in the consumer services and retail sectors and share their knowledge and experiences with their colleagues in other B2B organizations.

Notably, during the sampling process I encountered several people who did not fit the criteria for CX managers in B2B organizations (and thus were not included in the main sample) but who were experts in CX field, working either independently as speakers and writers or as employees of design, software, and consultancy firms. Knowing that they can be valuable informal sources of information about the practice, I was able to organize four interviews with a total of five experts to learn more about the context of CX management in the B2B sector and how it compares to the B2C sector (**Table 7**).

Table 7. Interviews for context familiarization (N = 4)

TITLES / ROLES	EXPERTISE	INTERVIEW	MINS
Service designers (x2)	Service design, CX management change projects, workshop management, teaching CX and service design; B2B and B2C	F2F group interview	55 min
Head of the CXM software product	CX measurement based on big data, development of software products that support CXM; B2B and B2C	F2F interview	53 min
Speaker and writer; former board member	Strategic CX management, change management and communications; B2B and B2C	Phone interview	44 min
Strategic CX consultant	Change project initiation, executive level consulting, CX strategy, UX and CX design; B2B and B2C	Zoom interview	62 min

The interviews revealed, among other things, that the CX management function often includes *cooperation with external experts* in areas such as customer research (e.g., in-depth interviews with customers, journey mapping), CX design (e.g., jump-starting CX thinking in new and existing service development through service and experience design methods), and CX measurement (e.g., custom measurement systems and tools, including AI-based tools). Some consultancy firms have broader access to the focal firm's processes and also participate in employee training and change management. The involvement of external actors in CX management is characterized by their short-term participation: projects involving the interviewed and mentioned external actors were aimed at establishing or invigorating the management practice and lasted a year on average. However, this means that external consultants rarely have the prolonged access needed to ensure the effectiveness of their interventions. This sentiment was further confirmed during my research visit in the fall of 2021 to Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO), where professionals with experience in multiple service and CX design projects reiterated

the short-term nature of external interventions. It was clear that only an internal CX executive could establish a sustainable practice and ensure that the initiated activities continued over a longer term.

The third contextual factor that characterizes CX management, as identified during the data collection, is the wide variety of *international awards and certifications in CX*, such as “CX Leader of the Year,” “International Customer Experience Award,” “European Customer Experience Award,” “CX Impact Award,” and “Digital CX Awards,” which can be seen across professional networks. Such awards constituted one of the rare benchmarks for optimal CX management practices in the industry. In this regard, one of the interviewed managers from the main sample stated that there must be something they were doing right to receive an international award. Furthermore, many respected organizations offer certifications in the area of CX. For example, a nonprofit Customer Experience Professionals Association (CXPA), which is dedicated to making CX management a key business area by creating universal standards and best practices, offers the Certified Customer Experience Professional (CCXP) credential. This credential is visible in the LinkedIn professional network among CX managers and includes components related to the customer-centric culture; customer voice; customer insight and understanding; organizational adoption and accountability; customer experience strategy; experience design, improvement, and innovation; and CX measurement and ROI. Other organizations that provide CX certifications specifically for consultancies and software firms include Medalia, Forrester, CX University, and McorpCX. All certifications touch upon the topics of CX management, customer journey mapping, and CX design.

Professional events, such as conferences with entrance fees and free seminars and presentations around CX, make up the fourth contextual factor. Conferences in this field emphasize the networked nature of CX management efforts, allowing professionals who are usually isolated in their work to exchange knowledge and socialize. CX-themed conferences are usually separated into academic and professional categories, resulting in limited access, and free seminars tend to be promotional in nature. While I was not able to gain access to professional conferences, some academic conferences (e.g., the 9th BMM-EMAC held in summer 2019) have invited practitioner speakers engaged in the topic of B2B CX, with whom I was able to interact. I was also able to attend two promotional events: a face-to-face event organized in the fall of 2019 by a large professional union for a book promotion (*Viiden tähden asiakaskokemus* by Ahvenainen, Gylling, and Leino); and a webinar in January 2021 titled “7 steps on how to build a successful CX program” by an awarded entrepreneur, Jaakko Männistö, who was also promoting his book (*The Journey - How to create the happiest customers in the world*). During these events, I attended the presentations, observed the participants, and participated in

discussions. The free events appeared to attract entrepreneurs and sales and marketing managers who did not yet have functioning CXM practices but were interested in the topic. While ending up being an unsuccessful way to gain access to informants of interest, the promotional events unveiled a variety of applied theories and frameworks that CX professionals develop and disseminate.

During my research project, I also came across *professional literature* in the form of reports, white papers, blogs, and books. Some of these texts were written by my informants and other practitioners, while others were produced by consultancy firms, such as McKinsey and Gartner, and general management magazines, such as Harvard Business Review and MIT Sloan Management Review. The literature is widely read by CX professionals, which was evidenced by ideas and phrases being repeated or referenced during the main interviews. I was also able to get a glimpse of the writing process of the book on B2B CX in Finnish: “*Menestys syntyy asiakaskokemuksesta - B2B-johtajan opas*” by Liisa Holma, Kirsti Laasio, Minna Ruusuvaori, Salla Seppä and Riikka Tanner. The writers are practitioners of CX management in the B2B sector and have developed their framework based on interviews with 50 B2B firm leaders and their own experiences. The blogs and books written by CX practitioners evidence the significant intellectual work performed by managers and a variety of theories-in-use (see Zeithaml, Jaworski et al., 2020).

During my four-year plunge into the context of CX management in the B2B setting, I identified several methodological considerations that I gradually included in my research strategy and theorizing as the process unfolded. Specifically, knowing the context allowed for creative ways of gaining access to informants and the ability to communicate with the informants on their terms. Furthermore, the interviews with management consultants confirmed that focusing on executives who manage CX full time would be a viable sampling strategy. The context also revealed an alternative narrower sampling strategy that I decided not to employ: with the existence of certification standards, an option was to focus only on certified managers. I chose to keep the sampling broad and not focus only on certified or awarded CX efforts so that the findings would not represent only a particular commercialized model of conduct. This choice led to uncovering other voices in the CX management community and gaining information on different ways of making sense of the CX practice. Finally, recognizing the influence of knowledge shared through printed material, social networks, and events carries important epistemological consequences, emphasizing the clear intersubjective nature of the studied phenomena and the knowledge produced.

6.2.2 Explorative cross-sectional field study

The study followed a process of *analytic abduction*, which is an approach to *qualitative research* that reorients the relationship between theory and empirical data toward extending, advancing, or revising early theories in light of new empirical findings (Bertilsson, 2004; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Abduction is not a method of data collection or analysis but a broader methodological process of inquiry that relates to research design.

The term abduction is most associated with the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sander Peirce, who characterized it as a creative inferential process that can inform us “why something is the way it is” (Bertilsson, 2004, p. 376). During this process, the theory is confronted with the empirical world (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) in a way that is different from a deduction—it leaves space for questioning and restructuring initial frameworks based on the findings. This method is a nonlinear, creative process of “going back and forth between framework, data sources, and analysis” with “the ultimate objective of matching theory and reality” and is often referred to as *matching* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 556). Abduction is close to being a form of perceptual insight that, while fallible, can lay out the phenomenon under study in a novel, promising, and useful way (Peirce, 1931–1958, as cited in Paavola, 2015). Indeed, according to Dubois and Gadde (2002), the abductive approach allows for discovering something new rather than confirming existing theories.

It was abductive logic that led to the decision to perform an *explorative field study* of CX management in the B2B context for this research. By a field study, I mean a generic research design whose scope lies between those of in-depth case studies and wide-ranging surveys, involving a larger number of companies than a case study would but still capable of producing data that deals with more complex “how” and “why” questions than surveys. This approach is best described by Lillis and Mundy (2005), who have used the label *cross-sectional field study*. This approach is characterized by a clearly defined domain of interest, rather than being fully open-ended, which constrains the scope of potential constructs and relations to a greater degree than a traditional explorative case study would (Lillis & Mundy, 2005). In my study, the domain of interest was the activities involved in CXM. Although CXM is a rather fuzzy phenomenon that is difficult to delimit, the literature review and research questions give some initial pointers anchoring the phenomenon to clear points of interest. Hence, the interview themes were based on the extant theoretical constructs, focusing especially on the strategic dimensions and activities.

Furthermore, in the sampling strategies, the cross-sectional field studies ensure maximum variability in the relevant dimensions of the studied phenomenon along with the ability to compare data (Lillis & Mundy, 2005). I chose a purposive nonrandom sampling strategy, following inclusionary logic for alternative sampling strategies, to capture the diversity of CXM approaches. Similar approaches have

been used in marketing studies (e.g., Homburg et al., 2017; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Malshe & Sohi, 2009; Terho, 2009; Tuli et al., 2007) that involved describing a new practice, developing new frameworks, or proposing a new way of thinking.

The interview protocols in cross-sectional field studies usually follow a semi-structured model to establish constraints within the defined domain while making sure that the generated data are comprehensive, comparative, and narrative (Lillis & Mundy, 2005). The present study's data collection approach was aimed at generating rich in-depth interview data, which is necessary for theorizing (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and I used a semi-structured interview protocol that gave the interviewed managers significant room to voice their opinions.

The field study data were analyzed in a systematic way across cases, providing a critical link back to theory (Lillis & Mundy, 2005). Interestingly, the characteristics of a field study proposed by Lillis and Mundy (2005) suggest the process of abduction, as field studies are usually grounded in extant theory but attempt to address questions regarding either the nature of the constructs being researched, the relations between them, or their interpretation (cf. Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

A systematic discovery-oriented data-driven approach was adopted for data analysis in this study, using the methods offered by the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) and the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), including open informant-centric coding and focused coding as well as data structures for reporting. I used sequencing, memos, and other connecting strategies to make sense of the codes and build them up into larger constructs (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) and confronted the emerging data with existing theoretical constructs. While the grounded theory and the Gioia methodology are often seen as inductive, the processes of theorizing employed in these methods, especially as they develop, follow creative abduction (Bruscaglioni, 2016; Reichertz, 2019). Therefore, this data-driven method of analysis is well-suited for abductive theorizing following an explorative field study.

6.3 Data collection

The empirical study took a form of a field study involving B2B firms that recognize CX management as their function. The study specifically focused on the views and interpretations of senior managers responsible for CXM initiatives. Taking the management's perspective was suitable for addressing questions concerning the firms' strategic goals and tactical activities, as CX managers are reliable sources of information when it comes to delineating firms' CX management activities, aims, and CX targets. In addition, managers who are responsible for CX tend to have a good understanding of how their company's operations and personnel's actions fit into customer journeys and how the management can influence them. Experienced

managers also have insights about issues of corporate culture, structure, and individual behavior with respect to change management.

6.3.1 Purposive sampling criteria and process

I used a purposive sampling strategy with the aim of gaining access to information-rich instances of the research phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Firms were chosen for the study sample based on *two main inclusion criteria*:

- the existence of deliberate CX management efforts
- a customer base that included business customers, either as the only customer segment or as a significant one.

I considered the presence of an appointed manager who oversees and develops CXM in the firm as a proxy for the existence of CXM in the firm. As CX approaches are customer-oriented, the study specifically focused on firms whose main customer group consists of other businesses instead of selecting firms from a particular industry. This resulted in a diverse sample of industries and firm types. However, to generate a sample, even with the simple criteria defined above, I had to employ several sampling strategies and employ additional criteria for the search and evaluation of potential participants. The rest of this section describes the approaches I took to arrive at the study sample.

In prior studies on CXM (see Homburg et al., 2017; Lemke et al., 2011), participants were recruited through theoretical and convenience sampling. Homburg et al. (2017) enlisted participants during a conference on the topic, and Lemke et al. (2011) considered their contacts from executive education; both used the snowball sampling technique. As I did not have any personal contact with professionals in this field, I predominantly focused on cold contacts. The search for CX managers was conducted through the professional networking site LinkedIn; I shared participation invitations with my personal and professional contacts, providing a description of the ideal participant in line with the aforementioned criteria. While a public invitation to participate resulted in almost no contacts, the search on LinkedIn proved successful (see **Figure 8**, p. 114).

On the LinkedIn platform, I utilized the search function for the titles “Customer Experience Manager,” “Head of Customer Experience,” and “Asiakaskokemusjohtaja” (in Finnish) as key terms, limiting the search by geographical location (Finland). I further evaluated the search results manually, looking for information about the firms where the managers were employed. Researching each firm’s profile on LinkedIn allowed me to determine whether the firm had any activities in B2B markets and whether CX manager was a unique title in the firm (through the firm’s list of employees). The uniqueness of the title

indicated an executive position rather than a frontline role; several firms have used this title for employees in the customer support function, and such individuals were not contacted.

I further evaluated the firms of potential informants by visiting the company websites and searching for any mentions of customer experience in the value proposition, mission or vision statements, blogs, and public documents on strategy. I also checked the job descriptions given on the managers' LinkedIn pages. Upon determining, based on this circumstantial evidence, that CX management is supported by the firms on a strategic level, I invited the potential contacts to participate in the study. I utilized email if I was able to acquire one through the firm's website or requested a "Connect" with a short message on LinkedIn if not. The invitation reiterated the desired participation criteria, i.e., people who are officially leading or responsible for CXM efforts in the B2B setting. I followed this procedure for the first 100 search results. Around 10 emails and more than 30 contact requests were sent in this round.

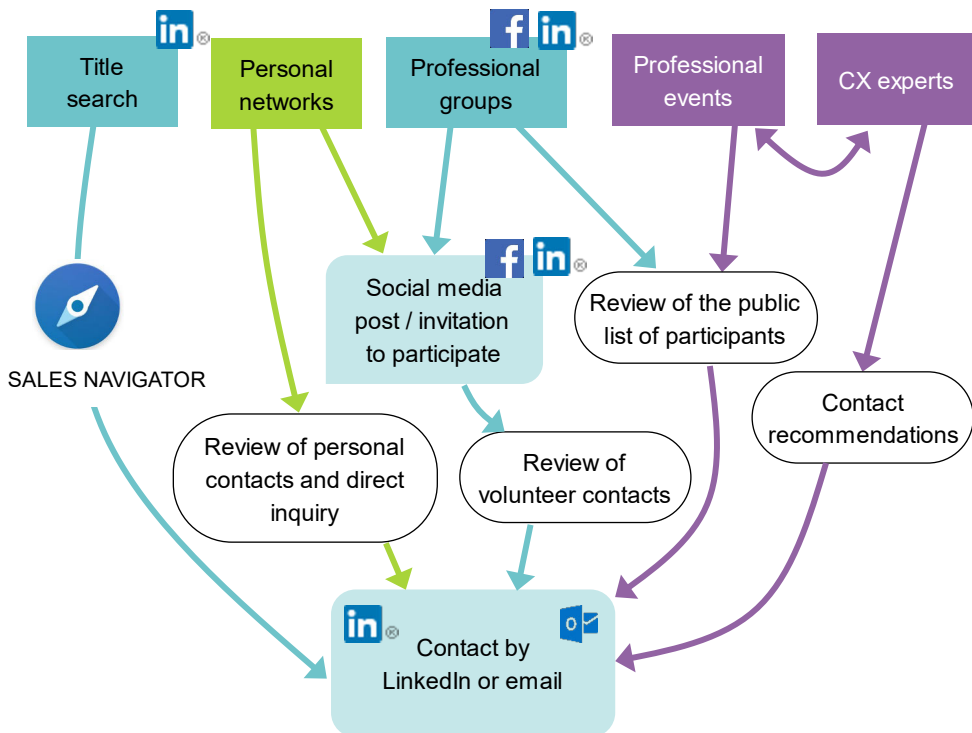


Figure 8. Strategies for contacting potential interviewees

The aforementioned approach resulted in interviews with 17 informants from the corresponding number of different firms in Finland. These interviews revealed that

the managers interact with each other (1) in professional CX groups and (2) at professional CX events as well as (3) with consultants specializing in CX development. This contributed to the development of alternative strategies to gain access to potential respondents, all of which are given in **Figure 8** (p. 114) above.

Although the alternative access strategies resulted in some interesting contacts, the most successful strategy proved to be the title search on LinkedIn. This was further enhanced using the LinkedIn Premium feature called Sales Navigator, which allowed for a more structured search of titles and less restrictive messaging (40 messages allowed per month). The use of this tool resulted in 120 sent messages with a 20% response rate and was instrumental in recruiting more than half of all informants. The filters applied to obtain the most relevant results in the title search are given in

Table 8 below.

Table 8. Search criteria when using the Sales Navigator feature on LinkedIn

CATEGORIES	CRITERIA
Geography	Included: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland
Title (selected from the options offered on the platform)	Included: Customer Experience Manager, Director Customer Experience, Experience Manager, Head of Customer Experience, Vice President Customer Experience Excluded manually: Titles including “User Experience,” “Designer,” and “Guest Experience”
Industry filter (selected from the options offered)	Included: Computer Software, Education Management, Financial services, Human Resources, Staffing and Recruiting, Marketing and Advertising, Management Consulting, Information Technology and Communication, Insurance, Oil & Energy

First, the sampling was broadened to other Nordic countries, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, to increase the pool of CXM practitioners; this was recommended by several informants. The assumption was that countries like Sweden and Norway would have a larger number of B2B firms that can afford to invest in CX management. However, the response rate of contacted managers from those Nordic countries ended up being low: four informants from Denmark, three from Sweden and one from Norway.

The Sales Navigator tool allowed for a more precise title search and offered a variety of existing titles connected to an executive CX management position, making the approach more reliable. Managers with titles that included “User Experience,” “Designer,” or “Guest Experience” were manually excluded from the sample; the first title indicated that the manager’s tasks were strictly related to developing digital offerings, the second indicated tasks related to design rather than management

processes, and the third indicated that the manager was in the hospitality industry. The manual sorting procedure was the same as in the first round of title search.

After the two filters were applied, the search results exhibited over a thousand managers, and an initial overview showed that most of the search results were managers from the B2C sector. As the Sales Navigator tool does not have a B2B filter, I narrowed down the search using the industry filter, based on the industries that appeared in prior interviews. As the prior set of interviews exhibited a great diversity of sectors in which B2B CX is managed, the goal of this sampling stage was not to increase the number of industries considered but fill in the gaps and gain more informants per industry to potentially make industry-specific claims. The filter proved somewhat useful, but the search results still had to be manually sorted to eliminate managers who work with consumer markets and middle management whose job descriptions indicated customer service tasks rather than strategic management tasks.

The data generation process in this stage involved a more precise form of purposive sampling, namely theoretical and saturation sampling, to search for informants based on the emerging theoretical ideas and reach saturation (**Figure 9**). The theoretical ideas were specifically related to how B2B customers are perceived in CX management. Inclusion of different industries resulted in a diversity of approaches to B2B CX in the managing firms; however, further industry-specific sampling revealed that the industry and offering alone are not sufficient to explain the differences.

I also considered the benefits of negative case sampling to combat confirmation and researcher bias (see **Figure 9**). Following inclusionary logic, I remained open to alternative sampling strategies to uncover potential downsides to the main sampling strategy focused on the title of CX manager. Some contacts gained through personal networks, events, and other CX experts were invited for interviews despite not fitting the sample criteria used for the LinkedIn title search. For example, the final sample included several firms that had cross-departmental teams overseeing the development of CX management initiatives, and the CEOs and managers carrying the main responsibilities were selected as key informants (VP, Customer & Sales Support, and Marketing Director). Inclusionary logic was also applied for the two cases from Germany and Russia, differing geographically from the Northern European sample. Although they exhibited some expected cultural differences, they did not significantly change the outcomes of the study, but instead strengthened the understanding of the phenomena.

The search for informants continued until saturation point was reached, i.e., until a stable theory started to emerge from the interviews, and any new information obtained did not add to or change the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The sufficiency of the sample was decided based on whether convincing, useful, and

robust analytical categories could be built, with multiple cases supporting each element or link (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

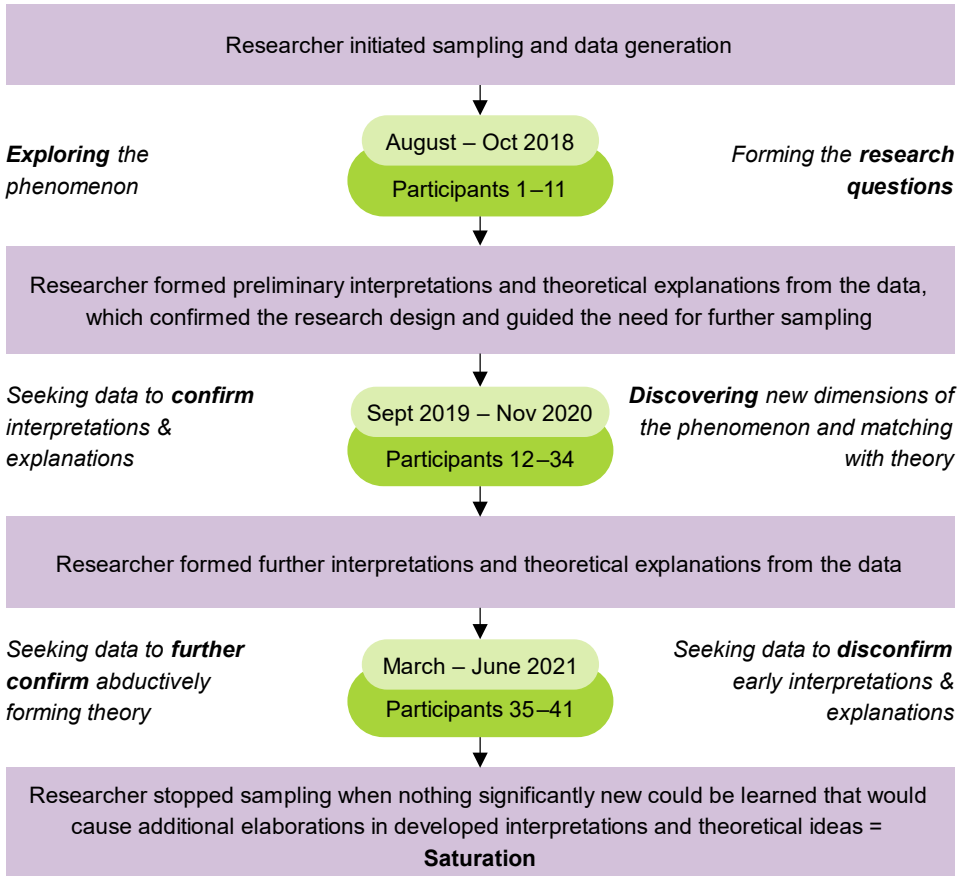


Figure 9. The purposive sampling strategy and data collection rounds

The final sample consisted of 41 firms from different industries, including information and communications technology (ICT); manufacturing and energy; financial, insurance, and administrative B2B services; educational services; and business events (Table 9, p. 119). The selected firms also varied in size and age. All the firms had CX improvement as one of the key points in their documented strategies, with the duration of CXM practice ranging from 1 to 5 years. Some firms worked in the traditional B2B service sector, and others had both B2B and B2C offerings; some represented the B2B2C model, while some could be positioned at the beginning of the B2B2B value chain. Geographically, most firms were based in

Finland; a smaller fraction of informants were from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Russia. The study sample contained both international and local firms; notably, the informant from Russia represented a large international company that had a CX manager for each local unit. The cultural differences revealed in the interviews did not intervene with the theorizing related to the phenomenon of interest. As an incentive for participation, the informants were promised a managerial report of the findings by the end of the project.

In purposive sampling, sample size is not as important as the informants themselves. The main assumption was that questions concerning a firm's strategic goals and CX management activities can be best answered by considering the management's perspective. While the implementation of CXM activities also concerns other actors in an organization, I chose to focus on the key informants—the managers responsible for B2B CXM in their respective firms. This choice complemented the purpose of the study, since the position is unique in each company considered and CX managers are the ones who experience the phenomenon of theoretical interest (Gioia et al., 2013). An attempt to sample and interview several actors within one organization (a trial performed in 2018) did not result in any significant insights about the phenomenon of interest but, instead, introduced further questions; these are recommended for future research related to organizational and cultural change and team dynamics.

Table 9. Sample characteristics (N = 41) and length of transcribed interviews in minutes

#	PSEUD.	SECTOR	SIZE	LOCATION	TITLE	MINS
1	CLM	Manufacturing	Large	Finland	CX Development	45 min
2	CLP	Manufacturing	Large	Finland	VP, Cust. & Sales Support	53 min
3	CLR	Manufacturing	Large	Finland	Head of CX	58 min
4	CLW	Manufacturing	Large	Finland	Head of CX	56 min
5	DLY	Electricity supply	Large	Finland	CX Manager	64 min
6	DLZ	Electricity supply	Large	Finland	Head of CX	57 min
7	DMA	Electricity supply	Medium	Finland	CX Manager	62 min
8	ELT	Waste management	Large	Finland	Marketing Director	72 min
9	GLD	Wholesale trade	Large	Denmark	Head of CX	58 min
10	GSK	Wholesale trade	Small	Finland	CX Manager	43 min
11	HMA	Transport and storage	Medium	Finland	Head of CX	80 min
12	JLG	Info. & com. technology	Large	Finland	Director of CX	62 min
13	JLI	Info. & com. technology	Large	Finland	CX Manager	45 min
14	JLQ	Info. & com. technology	Large	Sweden	Head of CX	66 min
15	JLR	Info. & com. technology	Large	Finland	CX Manager	54 min
16	JLW	Info. & com. technology	Large	Finland	CX Manager	74 min
17	JMA	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Finland	CEO	61 min
18	JMC	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Finland	CX Manager	69 min
19	JMF	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Germany	CEO	40 min
20	JMH	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Finland	CX Manager	59 min
21	JMO	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Finland	CX Manager	71 min
22	JMX	Info. & com. technology	Medium	Finland	CX Manager	56 min
23	JSB	Info. & com. technology	Small	Finland	CX Manager	62 min
24	JSE	Info. & com. technology	Small	Denmark	Head of CX	69 min
25	JSJ	Info. & com. technology	Small	Sweden	CX Expert	47 min
26	JSL	Info. & com. technology	Small	Finland	Head of CX	48 min
27	JSS	Info. & com. technology	Small	Finland	Head of CX	55 min
28	JSU	Info. & com. technology	Small	Finland	Head of CX	51 min
29	KLM	Finance & insurance	Large	Denmark	CX Manager	121 min
30	KLO	Finance & insurance	Large	Finland	CXM & Measurement	70 min
31	KLU	Finance & insurance	Large	Finland	CX Manager	60 min
32	KMD	Finance & insurance	Medium	Finland	Head of Customer Journey	56 min
33	KMT	Finance & insurance	Medium	Sweden	Head of CX	56 min
34	KSA	Finance & insurance	Small	Denmark	CX Manager	60 min
35	KSE	Finance & insurance	Small	Finland	CX Manager	40 min
36	NLP	Admin. & support serv.	Large	Norway	Global Head of CX	50 min
37	NLQ	Admin. & support serv.	Large	Russia	Head of CX	55 min
38	NMR	Admin. & support serv.	Medium	Finland	CX Manager (x 2)	145 min
39	OLV	Social security	Large	Finland	CX Manager	56 min
40	PSB	Education (events)	Small	Finland	Head of CX	54 min
41	QLB	Health and social work	Large	Finland	Director of CX	53 min

6.3.2 In-depth interviews

Data were collected through in-depth thematic interviews with executive CX managers who presented both retrospective and real-time accounts of their CX management initiatives as well as their future visions, depending on the current stage of their projects. Follow-up data were obtained via email in several cases.

The interviews with CX managers were performed in three sets between August 2018 and May 2021, with breaks of several months between data collection rounds due to holidays and busy periods (i.e., June–July and December–January). This allowed for a preliminary analysis and the perfection of the sampling technique. Some of the interviews were during the pre-pandemic period, for which I could organize on-site face-to-face interviews at participants' workplaces. Interviews in 2020 and 2021 were held virtually over Zoom video calls. Some interviews were done via phonecalls upon participants' request.

Performing interviews in two different formats revealed interesting methodological differences between on-site face-to-face interviews and virtual video interviews. On-site interviews required expending time and resources for travel but were incredibly rich information sources. At the entrances to office buildings, I saw mission statements and value propositions that included experiential elements. Furthermore, at times when I was invited to the CX manager's office, I noticed various workshop materials and their outcomes, such as customer journey maps and design and communication work, displayed on the walls. The Zoom environment lacked this kind of richness but was more efficient for retrieving the needed information: While face-to-face participants had to convey details from memory and lacked any immediate way to verify them, Zoom call participants were already in front of their computers and could easily look up details from their internal documents and reports. Those who felt particularly comfortable with the online environment were quick to share images and graphs to illustrate their points.

Another significant difference was the time I spent building a rapport with the participant versus the actual interview time. In face-to-face scenarios, I would arrive at the interview location on time (meaning ten minutes early), which was enough to establish an initial connection. The allocated time for the interview (60 min) was usually focused solely on the interview, and there was often enough of a buffer to go over the time limit. The same 60 min slot looked different in the digital environment. During the pandemic, the managers tended to book back-to-back calls, so they would often join the Zoom meeting a couple of minutes late and would have to leave a couple of minutes early. In addition, it took longer to establish a trusting dynamic and have a relaxed discussion in the virtual interviews than in the face-to-face ones. Consequently, several interviews resulted in only 40 min of valuable (transcribed) content. Due to the aforementioned efficiency of the medium, we were almost

always able to discuss all the themes to a sufficient extent, and it was easy to schedule a follow-up call if topics were left underexplored.

Each interview lasted approximately an hour and involved broad discussions to obtain rich data about CXM efforts. I informed the interviewees about the general themes of the interview in advance so that they could prepare. Following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), I treated the respondents as knowledgeable agents and ensured that they had a significant voice in the interviews. Discussions were structured around four main themes drawn from the extant knowledge on CXM (see Chapter 3): 1) the role of CX in the company and its business context; 2) the company's strategic goals connected to CX, including potential target experiences; 3) CXM activities aligned with the company's CX goals; 4) organizational requirements for CX management.

The discussions involved sub-questions and prompts for each theme; the interview protocol can be found in Appendix 1. In doing so, I made sure to keep the interview open enough to follow the informant's line of thinking and took notes so that I could direct the interview toward topics they touched on. It was important to get an account of CX management specific to the context of each firm, considering the activities that the informant felt the need to emphasize. Although each interview followed a nonlinear pattern, I ensured that the themes were all sufficiently discussed, returning to some questions if necessary. As the research questions became more precise through the abductive analysis process, I adjusted the interview protocol to thoroughly explore the emerging themes.

The final dataset consisted of 44 interviews in 41 B2B firms. The interviews with the HMA and KLM managers could not be completed in a single sitting and had to be split between two timeslots; notably, this resulted in the overall length of the interviews being longer than the planned 60 mins. Furthermore, two successive CX managers (instead of one) had to be interviewed for NMR due to a role handover. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim through a professional service. As I am equally fluent in English and Finnish, I held interviews in the preferred language of the interviewee. Not all CX managers from the Finnish sample spoke Finnish, and not all Finnish speakers preferred giving interviews in their native language, due to using English as their working language. Thus, 60% of the interviews were performed in Finnish. The transcribed files were saved under pseudonyms and imported into the NVivo 12 analysis software. The data were treated by cases rather than by interviews. The analysis was performed in both languages, and the quotes used in the reporting were translated, edited, and verified with the interviewees before publishing.

6.3.3 Supporting materials

Data obtained from secondary documents supported the in-depth interviews. The supporting data included multimedia and textual evidence from the firms’ public strategy statements, websites, and internal reports. This material served the purpose of triangulation by converging the lines of evidence (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). The data did not lead to any significant additional insights but, rather, supported the data interpretation process and confirmed the findings from the managerial perspective.

6.4 Approach to data analysis

I analyzed the interview data based on approaches recommended for data-driven qualitative analyses, such as open, focused, and axial coding and memo writing (Charmaz, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013) and techniques related to abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), as well as general recommendations for drawing meaning from qualitative data (see Miles & Huberman, 1984). I performed the analysis simultaneously with data collection, verifying the emerging findings from new data across the whole dataset. The analysis was also supported by the process of abductive matching with the preconceived but constantly evolving theoretical framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

The most suitable way to describe my general approach to analysis is to adapt the qualitative data analysis framework by Miles and Huberman (1984). The researchers conceptualized the analysis process as a set of three concurrent activity flows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Figure 10).

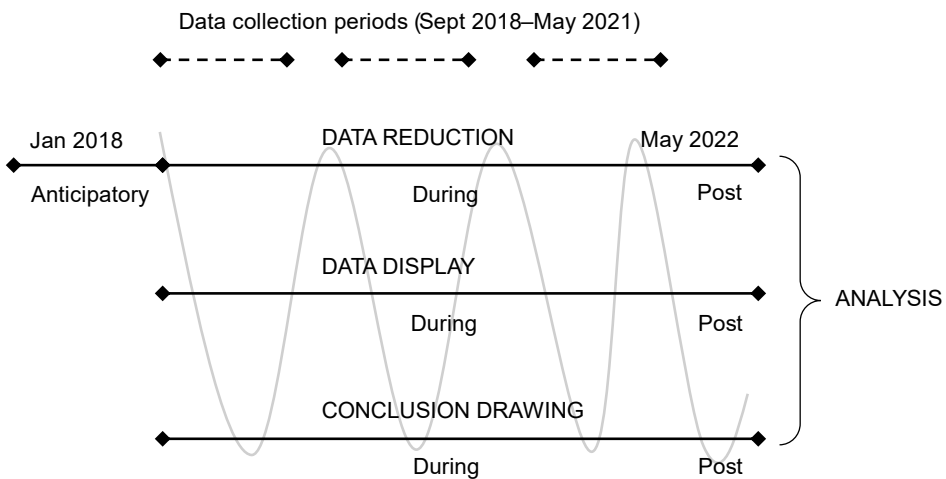


Figure 10. Interactive model of data analysis in this project (adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 23)

The first activity flow, *data reduction*, involves selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This process started before data collection in my research, with sampling strategies and initial research questions directed at focusing and bounding the data generation. Choosing a relatively well-defined conceptual CXM framework to guide data collection helped avoid data overload (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Lillis & Mundy, 2005). Data reduction was performed using interview notes and different types of coding both during and after data collection.

The second activity flow, *data display*, is often overlooked in the analysis stage and considered just a reporting strategy. However, deciding how to display and present data, i.e., through tables, graphs, or models, is a significant part of the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Once data collection commenced, I began displaying the initial findings of my research at academic conferences (QUIS16 and 9th BMM-EMAC in 2019, 7 Experience Summit in 2021), doctoral colloquiums (organized by Hanken School of Economics 2018, University of Vaasa 2020), and internal department seminars; the feedback I received from the academic community furthered my analysis. I also created a range of mind maps, tables, loops, and conceptual drawings that aided the analysis throughout the project.

Finally, *conclusion drawing and verification* involves drawing meaningful explanations from the reduced and displayed data and identifying any regularities and relationships between constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1984). I used several different strategies to draw conclusions from the categorized data. I used connecting strategies to identify connections between the categories (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), arriving at findings that could be further clustered following different logics, described in the next sections. Faithful to abductive reasoning, I also utilized different theoretical frameworks in forming meaningful relationships between constructs. To verify the plausibility and robustness of my conclusions (see Miles & Huberman, 1984), I checked my forming ideas with interviewees (Charmaz, 2014) after their official interviews were done, went through the whole dataset every time a new idea emerged in the following interviews, and discussed my constructs with colleagues, supervisors and the broader academic community during events to develop an intersubjective consensus (see Miles & Huberman, 1984; Glaserfeld, 2001).

Next, I report on the data-driven coding methodology of data categorization, the utilized connective strategies, and the role of theory in sensemaking and knowledge construction.

6.4.1 Open and focused coding

Coding is the most common categorizing strategy used in qualitative research (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). I started coding the gathered material after the first 17 interviews were performed, recorded, and transcribed. When reading through my field notes and the transcribed text, I began getting ideas—which compounded the ideas I had during the interviews themselves—about how to code the data, what to pay attention to, and where to focus my research.

The first round of informant-centric open coding was performed on three randomly selected interviews from the first round of data collection, after which the main research problem and more precise research questions started to form. The informant-centric process focused on retaining the informants' language and meanings when coding the data (Gioia et al., 2013). The goal was to simplify the data rather than categorize it, so I used zero-order codes before forming first-order categories. Guided by the forming research problem, I discarded the codes that were not relevant to the research questions and performed several rounds of selective, focused coding on the remaining interview data, continuously reviewing the codes. In the following steps, I organized the codes into higher-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) exploring the commonalities and differences between informants' accounts.

I kept performing this process for the incoming data throughout the project, returning to the first interviews and reviewing the codes, treating them as provisional and open for revision and rejection (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The further the analysis progressed, the more focused the codes and categories became, as I directed my data collection toward filling out the emerging analytical categories (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) and finding alternative narratives (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Figure 11 and **Figure 12** illustrate the different approaches I used for comparing and categorizing different codes, from physical to electronic formats. While the NVivo program was a great tool for organizing and storing data, the tree structure of the nodes was sometimes detrimental to the creative analysis process. Therefore, printing out the codes and playing around with them (see Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) was crucial for the progression of the analysis. It must be noted that I kept the connection with the raw interview data (using NVivo); thus, I can claim that my analysis has not been performed *on* codes but *with the help* of codes. Researchers have warned that one can get blinded by their excessive reliance on codes and labels (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). To mitigate that, I made sure to refer to the original quotes and interviews whenever I needed to refresh my memory or refine the labels.

The original codes were related to target experiences (not yet labeled as such but represented the experiences the firms were aiming at) and their properties and the different activities that firms engage in for CXM, as viewed by the informants. To combine them into higher-order categories, I focused on the commonalities and differences between informants' accounts of their managerial efforts, similar to the

axial coding procedure (cf. Charmaz, 2014). However, the coding process alone was not enough to answer all of the emergent questions.

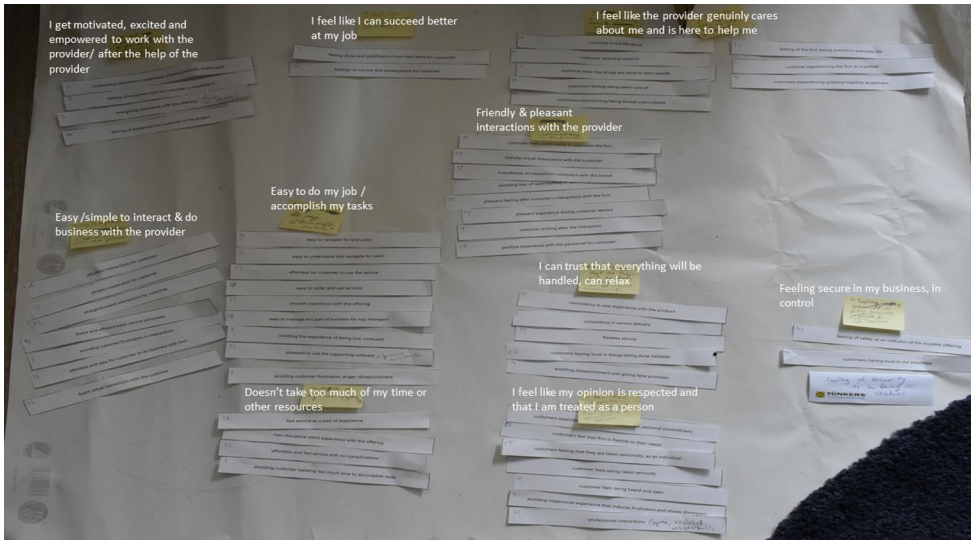


Figure 11. An example of a physical coding process

Name	Files	References
Strategic use of TXs	42	429
The role of TX in guiding CX management actions	38	200
GENERAL - TXs guide everything a firm does	6	10
Guiding the facilitation of CX creation	37	143
Guiding the measurement of realized CX	25	47
general experience measures	11	15
Not possible to set the TX goals before being able to measure them	2	2
TXs inform development of custom CX measurements	7	11
TXs inform the use and development of common measurements	7	7
TXs used in interpreting non-numeric feedback	8	12
The role of TX in positioning the organization in the markets	28	78
The role of TX in providing a shared meaning within the organization	37	142
Unsorted	5	9

Figure 12. An example of a work-in-progress coding structure in NVivo

6.4.2 Making connections

Maxwell and Miller (2008) emphasized the importance of combining categorizing and connecting strategies in qualitative data analysis. Coding alone was not

sufficient to investigate the roles that target experiences play in CX management (RQ3). Each interview had to be analyzed individually to build connections between the identified TXs and different CXM activities in view of what they do and how they work in the reality of each company. I then coded and thematically organized the influences that I could trace based on similarity. In some cases, I had to make inferences based on participants' indirect cues, while in other cases, I could base my analysis on explicit statements related to the aim of achieving TXs through particular activities. I took particular care to base my inferences on further evidence by writing out and memoing the interpretations and connections made in each inferred case (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Memoing was beneficial in bringing transparency to the analysis, and it helped me form explanations for the emerging relationships.

The other connecting strategy I used involved following a lead revealed by the analysis, particularly related to the differences between general and nuanced target experiences (Section 7.1.1). This resulted in further variations in the strategic roles of general and nuanced target experiences in CX management (RQ3). My close familiarity with the data and the initial coding helped me identify two general patterns across CXM activities: 1) a process of continuous improvement of CX driven by general TX, and 2) a process guided by a desire to create a nuanced TX. The analysis further focused on identifying the different stages of the processes associated with these two factors across the whole dataset, including the underlying activities and behaviors and the connections between different stages. Finally, I explored how these processes interact with each other to determine if they are independent or reinforcing or have certain crossover points.

6.4.3 Theorizing abductively

Theoretical knowledge performed three main roles in my abductive approach to analysis. First, it *guided the data collection in a noncommittal way*. To delineate the phenomenon and not get lost in the field, I had to gain an initial understanding of CX and CXM. Guided by this understanding, I used relevant concepts and my initial sensemaking of CXM to form the interview questions. However, I made sure not to commit to the initial constructs and to treat the extant theoretical conceptualizations as provisional and fallible (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Second, prior literature *aided the interpretation and categorization of informant-centric codes*, as it contained different grouping and construct verification logics that I could refer to. For example, in analyzing different dimensions of target experiences, I drew and developed upon prior categories of multidimensional CXs, namely the intellectual, affective, sensorial, and relational dimensions (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999; Verhoef et al., 2009), to establish the internal

consistency of the categories in this research. The characterization and interpretation of TXs benefited from detailed qualitative descriptions that were able to illustrate how intellectual, affective, relational, and sensorial responses interact with each other to conceive a particular target experience. Moreover, analyzing the contexts in which TXs were mentioned revealed differences between the TX categories based on the scope of the intended experience (Section 7.1.3). Using abductive theorizing logic, it was possible to connect the differences in scope to different CX perspectives, specifically at touchpoints (static CX), at the journey level (dynamic CX), and in the customer sphere (experiencing solutions).

The three general categories of CXM activities were a result of abductive matching, i.e., going back and forth between data and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Inductively developed action constructs helped to identify and enrich the broader activity categories that found confirmation in the extant literature. Moreover, the sociological understanding of activities (Leont'ev, 1978) provided a more systematic logical framework for distinguishing between different categories than those used in earlier versions of my analysis. Similarly, themes related to the roles of TXs were grouped according to the different perspectives on strategy (Mintzberg, 1987a). This was the last step of the meaning-making process and allowed for analyzing the discovered dimensions of the TX roles in a consistent manner, highlighting the connection between TX and strategy. Thus, the dialogue between data and theory provided a way to verify the data-driven constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Some theoretical concepts were applied after the completion of the data-driven analysis. The concepts of value and value creation and prior theories connected to the cycles of CX management were used *to reflect on the findings and form the final models*. The reflections are presented in Chapter 8, showing how my analysis fits and extends some of the existing ideas in the field of CX management (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

6.5 Ethical issues of data collection and analysis

In this section, I discuss some central ethical issues that are relevant to my research. The three core values that are especially relevant are *autonomy*, *fidelity*, and *nonmaleficence* (Kitchener & Kitchener, 2009; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). While nonmaleficence or the intention of doing no harm is very subjective, as “harm” cannot be clearly defined, the principles of fidelity and autonomy have clearer parameters. Fidelity refers to the relationship between a researcher and research participants and includes the qualities of faithfulness, loyalty, honesty, and trustworthiness. Autonomy, in turn, refers to the freedom of action and choice and reciprocal responsibility.

From these principles stem confidentiality and informed consent (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), which are most relevant in the data collection stage and take an interesting turn in my research. It is an ethical requirement in qualitative research to obtain participants' informed consent for recording and using interview material before the study commences. The Finnish community interested in CX management is relatively small, which might open participants' identities to educated guesses. Considering this, I informed the participants in advance about their right to privacy and my duty to keep personal identifiers such as the names of participants and companies confidential. Interestingly, several participants said that their business would actually benefit from others knowing that they are engaged in CXM, as it would differentiate their services in the market. This indicates that these participants' perceived benefit of having their personal information exposed exceeds the potential risks. However, not all the participants agreed with this view: those managers who were less confident about their CXM strategies or lacked support from the board for this initiative explicitly wished to stay anonymous. For the sake of uniformity, I anonymized all the participant information.

Confidentiality was another issue I had to consider when conducting this research: as the interviews focused on CXM strategies and business aspects that give firms a competitive edge, revealing those details would be harmful to the sampled firms. However, there are several factors I could take into account to combat this issue. First, the production of this manuscript, like any other published material, would take time, which, considering the pace of business, is long enough for a firm to get ahead. For instance, an informant who was considering sharing information on their rebranding campaign and experiential value promise inquired about when I would publish my work. Upon hearing my answer, the informant was ready to share this information, as the campaign would have been launched by then. Nevertheless, I carry the responsibility of maintaining the confidentiality of any information that can potentially harm the participating firms' businesses or negatively affect their position in the market. To ensure that such information remains concealed, I censored not only the identifiable information of the firms and participants but also the precise industry and market as well as the details of different CX models, which can be considered the intellectual property of the associated firm. In addition, the research design and theorizing approach enabled me to establish a general framework for converging the different models and ideas in ways that do not reveal the particular sensemaking of a singular firm, thus contributing to stronger confidentiality.

To ensure ethical conduct, I adhered to the following protocol during the data collection. First, I obtained the verbal consent of all informants to record and transcribe the interviews. In the case of face-to-face interviews, the recorder was visibly kept on the table to avoid any misunderstandings. In the case of Zoom

interviews, the respondents could see an indicator on screen when the call was being recorded. The verbal consent for recording was selected over the written one for several reasons. First, having additional documents with written and signed consent would increase the risks connected to anonymity (additional sources of personal information) and the process of signing them virtually would unnecessarily inconvenience the respondents and intervene with the flow of the interviews. Second, the sampling process already resulted in personal communications with the initial written consent to participate in the study as the interview times were agreed upon. Third, the data collection protocol included a final step of confirming the reported quotes with the interviewees. At this stage the participants still had a chance to revoke their informed consent.

Furthermore, all interviewees were informed about the following anonymity and confidentiality procedures:

- The real names of participants and companies will be replaced with pseudonyms.
- No personal information about the managers apart from their titles and amount of time spent in the position will be disclosed.
- Only the following identification information about the company will be disclosed: sector/industry (NACE classification), country, size.
- The quotes reported will not contain any identifiable or confidential information; any such information will be censored.
- The audio recordings containing personal information will only be accessed by the researcher and the transcription firm—the latter upon signing an NDA.
- The transcribed interviews in their entirety will only be accessible to the researcher.
- The anonymized quotes will be offered for verification to the participants before reporting.
- The data obtained will only be used for the purposes of this research project and its subsequent publications.

Some of this information was provided in written form in the participation invitation, and additional information about the protocols was provided upon request. The full declaration was delivered to each potential informant, with the right to refuse, before the interviews commenced.

At the data analysis stage of any research, issues of fabrication and falsification come into play—these are related to the principle of fidelity and arise from the researcher's deliberate misconduct or unintentional negligence. Some researchers

may consider qualitative research to be easily falsifiable since it is based on the researcher's own interpretations of the data. To ensure the fidelity of my research, I used methods that would bring transparency to my analysis. I kept notes and memos of all interviews and used NVivo and data structures to organize the qualitative data, which allows to trace my line of thought from the conclusions to the raw data.

I also addressed potential issues of data security following the data-protection principles specified by the Data Protection Ombudsman, a national supervisory authority in Finland. The only personal data collected separately from the interviews were respondent's names, company names and their contact information. I saved the respondents' personal information in a separate password-protected file on a virtual server behind the university firewall. The audio files of the interviews containing personal information were removed from the recording devices and stored securely together with the transcriptions on the same secure virtual server. Secure and password-protected backups of the interview data in the form of .zip files were stored on a personal external drive. The NVivo project files, which included the transcribed and analyzed data and tables with identification details, were also password-protected and securely stored protected by the university security systems. The data excerpts shared with the supervisors and other parties during the research project were anonymized. By following this protocol, I ensured that I would be the only person with access to any confidential or identifiable information.

According to my Data Management Plan, the anonymised interview data will be used in the subsequent publications reporting on the research findings and hence stored for as long as 10 years since the start of the research project (until 2027). The retention period for storing personal data is 5 years since the beginning of the project, until the end of 2022. As respondents were promised to be contacted with the research report upon the completion of the dissertation, the personal data has to be stored until the promise is fulfilled. After the end of 2022 I will ensure that all kept interview data is anonymised, and the personal contact data is either permanently deleted or the consent for its storage and use updated. In the future storing of the data, I will adhere to the data security protocols to ensure anonymity and confidentiality as well as continue with the additional step of direct quote verification procedure.

6.6 Evaluation of the study

The best way to evaluate the quality and rigor of a study is to take a pluralist approach, i.e., choose criteria consistent with the assumed paradigm (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). In the following subsections, I combine the criteria of the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) with those relevant to abductive studies (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014;

Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to evidence the quality of the present research. The constructivist grounded theory is consistent with pragmatism and has, in fact, descended from the pragmatist tradition in terms of methodology (Charmaz, 2017). Therefore, it is compatible with the epistemological perspective and paradigmatic assumptions of this study, rendering some of its quality criteria useful. By combining them with the criteria of abductive studies, I arrived at *credibility*, *plausibility*, and *significance* as the criteria for evaluating my study.

6.6.1 Credibility

The credibility of a study is indicative of the richness and sufficiency of the data and its ability to show that the analysis has been performed systematically and that the categories and relationships uncovered in the analysis are verifiable (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The issues of fit between the data and the drawn theoretical conclusions coming from abductive research criteria (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) also relate to the issues of credibility, as the fit can be best achieved through transparent reporting strategies. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) also noted the importance of transparent reporting in qualitative inquiries, from sampling choices to how theory and data are used.

To ensure that the data gathered would be rich and sufficient for the purposes of this dissertation, I adopted an open sampling strategy and an interactive and flexible interview process. The decision to use alternative sampling and limited sampling criteria and to continue sampling until the saturation point was reached ensured that the data reflected a wide variety of CXM representations. Keeping the interview process flexible enough to pursue lines of enquiry based on the interviewees' responses and making sure to return to the themes of interest, ensured that data included unexpected and surprising themes yet was able to contribute to the forming analytical categories.

I employed multiple strategies to ensure that my analysis was systematic and the resulted findings could be trusted. While the first stage of analysis—the open coding process—was messy and creative, since the research focus and precise research questions were just starting to form, the focused coding process was a lot more systematic. The raw data were organized into nodes in the NVivo program, which were then assigned labels and descriptions. I made a habit of using the description function to note down the logic based on which the data (zero-order codes) were grouped. When working with codes, I frequently returned to their descriptions and the raw data they contained to re-evaluate the grouping in light of new information and insights coming from additional data. I also maintained consistency in the codes by matching the label, description, and content of each node used in the analysis. When they did not match, I developed a new grouping logic or a new code or

regrouped and reworked the same code. The same procedure was followed for grouped codes, i.e., the themes and aggregate dimensions. As the findings reached the stage in which they are now reported, I performed final checks for consistency between the descriptions of aggregate dimensions, themes, codes, and raw data.

To gain support for some emergent logics for aggregating codes to higher-order dimensions, I turned to the literature on the subject. Frameworks such as Mintzberg's five Ps of strategy (1987a) or Leont'ev (1978) conceptualization of activities sharpened my analysis, adding credibility to the different logics that emerged when I was making sense of the codes.

I also strived to make my reporting transparent and traceable, using quotes and data structures (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013) to show how the raw data has been transformed into analytical categories. Accordingly, this Methodology chapter contains my report on not only the final sample but also how the sampling procedure developed and what choices were made. I described the role of theory in my abductive research process in Section 6.4.3, and Chapter 8 further discusses the fit between my empirical findings, theoretical conclusions, and extant theories.

Informed by the pragmatic constructivist philosophy, I can expand the fit criteria to emphasize the credibility of the "knower." The constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017) acknowledges the premises of pragmatic constructivism and considers knowledge to be actively constructed by a researcher (see Glasersfeld, 1995). Therefore, the researcher's reflexivity and familiarity with the context play an important role in credibility evaluation. With this in mind, I reflected on the context of CX management and my exposure to it in Section 6.2.1; the greater my familiarity with the context, the greater my credibility as a coder and as a researcher on this topic.

6.6.2 Plausibility

The second criterion for evaluating this study is plausibility (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012): a researcher should be able to demonstrate that their explanation of reality (based on the study findings) is plausible. Although there is no guaranteed safeguard against false explanations, greater plausibility can be achieved by continuously interrogating the emerging findings and consciously looking for alternative explanations of the data (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). From the perspective of pragmatic constructivism, intersubjectivity is important for validating a system of constructs (Glasersfeld, 2001).

To ensure that my explanations are plausible, I employed several tactics: I discussed the emergent constructs with interviewees (Charmaz, 2014) after data collection, reviewed older data after analyzing each new interview, retroactively searched for a consensus or disagreements, and discussed my constructs with

colleagues, supervisors, and the broader academic community during events to develop an intersubjective consensus (see Miles & Huberman, 1984; Glaserfeld, 2001). By using supporting materials in addition to interviews, I tried to avoid contradictions and gain the benefits of triangulation. In addition, having read managerial literature and participated in the broader CXM context, I can confidently claim that the theoretical conceptualization I am offering based on the explorative study will resonate with a wide audience of CX managers and other CX professionals.

The data analysis process involved a continuous questioning of findings, leading to refinement of explanations or even the appearance of alternative explanations. For example, the granularity dimension of TXs appeared when the discovered nuanced TX alone could not explain the patterns appearing in CXM activities.

All of the above choices were directed toward improving the developed framework's (**Figure 19**) ability to represent the phenomenon in an actionable and coherent way. However, this framework requires further testing and refinement to clarify the relationships between constructs.

6.6.3 Significance

The significance of the findings, i.e., why they matter, can be determined by evaluating their scope and generalizability, connecting them to the extant theory, and arguing for the significance of the contribution (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). This dimension can also be combined with the originality and usefulness criteria proposed by Charmaz (2006). Originality refers to how much the developed theory challenges or refreshes the existing understanding of the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). To determine usefulness, one needs to evaluate the study's results based on the managerial and policy implications, improvements in the understanding of participants and other relevant actors, and theoretical usability (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2014). This criterion is directly linked to a basic pragmatist assumption—the viability of theory. Pragmatists argue that a theory should be viable and facilitate the actions and thoughts that would allow one to achieve their goals (Glaserfeld, 2001; Raskin, 2011).

The generalizability of a study can be evaluated by using the idea of resonance from the constructivist grounded theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006). Resonance indicates that the constructed concepts are relevant not only to the study participants but to other actors in similar conditions. In other words, the theory must make sense to a wider audience sharing the same context (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2014). By interviewing managers from different industries, I tried to understand the CXM phenomenon across various contexts, arriving at a framework of CXM in the broad B2B context. The similarity of conditions in this context allowed for establishing the

criteria for the nonrandom sample: 1) firms that work in B2B markets; 2) firms that have established deliberate CXM activities. Therefore, the representation of reality I provide in this dissertation can be expected to resonate with any firm that has business customers and wants to practice CX management.

Furthermore, I believe that parts of the resulting framework can be adapted to the B2C context as well. While studying the nuances and characteristics of CXM in the B2B context resulted in a better understanding of the issues relevant to this specific context, the mode of theorizing allowed me to connect and reflect my findings to the broader literature on CX and CX management. Therefore, the higher-order categories of CXM activities or the roles of TXs are transferable to the B2C context, although they may manifest in different ways.

Having evaluated my research, I can claim that this dissertation offers an original perspective on CXM by focusing on TX as an object of study. I have developed a framework that includes strategic ideas about intended experiences as well as customer-facing and internal activities, which helps develop and expand on the theoretical understanding of CXM and allows for exploring further questions, creating measurable constructs, and proposing new relationships. The theoretical significance of the findings is further discussed in Section 9.1.

As for practical usefulness and viability for action, I have strived to develop a framework that not just reflects the reality of CX managers but also organizes the knowledge in a new and actionable way with the aim of bringing additional insights and reflexivity to practice. Further practical and societal implications are discussed in Section 9.2.

7 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the explorative field study and connects each group of findings to the extant literature. I have chosen to report the findings in a way that can most transparently showcase the abductive process used in the study. Each section presents the most significant findings that resulted from the abductive matching of constructs identified from the data and prior literature (cf. Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In summarizing the findings, I further reflect on their fit and relationships with existing theoretical constructs.

First, I report on the findings related to target experiences in business markets, specifically the forms in which they emerge and how they reflect the complex nature of B2B CX. This group of findings contributes to answering RQ1: *What is the nature of target experiences in the B2B context?*

Then, I present the findings related to CXM activities, delineating the approach and contextualizing TX within CX management. The empirical findings help answer RQ2: *How do B2B companies strive to manage customer experiences?* In the dialogue with the literature on CXM, the findings construct an alternative conceptual model grounded in empirical work.

After providing an overview of the nature of TXs and the scope of CXM, I describe the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management. Explicating how TXs influence CXM in B2B organizations helps answer RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

The final section presents an alternative connecting strategy that combines the different groups of findings in a novel way, providing further insights into the strategic roles of TXs (RQ3). Each group of findings engages in dialogue with the reviewed literature and plays a role in theorizing.

7.1 Target experiences in business markets

Target experience is an emergent construct originating in the disparity between the academic understanding of the multifaceted nature of CX and the widespread managerial narrative of characterizing good CX through service elements and static experience drivers or equating it to satisfaction. Recognizing this disparity, I looked into whether customer-centric ideas about the content of intended CXs are articulated

within firms in B2B markets. I examined these ideas based on the concept of business customer experience using abductive logic, thus exploring the potency of target experiences as an object of study. This section reports on the resulting findings.

The findings revealed that ideas about the content and qualities of target experiences indeed exist within the studied firms, varying greatly in their expression and functions. Through an abductive theorizing process, I can define and characterize target experience as following:

Target experience is a shared idea of an intended customer experience that is used by a provider firm to drive CX facilitation and serves as a link between the firm's strategy for competing through CX and its CX management efforts.

Interestingly, the findings also indicated that TXs of different types can coexist within a single organization. To further understand this variety, the following sections discuss the discovered properties of target experiences. First, I present the findings concerning the granularity of the researched TXs, ranging from general to more nuanced. I further discuss the findings related to qualitatively different types of nuanced TXs, which reflect the multidimensional properties of realized CXs. Second, I discuss the attribution of different target experiences to different actors within the business customer firm – a characteristic of target experiences that enters the dialogue with B2B CX properties. Third, I review the analysis results that discerned between different scopes of target experiences – the findings that correspond with the journey concept. I then summarize this group of findings.

7.1.1 Granularity of target experiences

The data analysis revealed a notable variance in how the firms characterized their target experiences, i.e., the customer experiences they aimed to create. I identified two main approaches that differ in terms of whether the content of the intended CX is nuanced or not.

First, while all the interviewees explained that their firm aimed at delivering positive experiences, for a number of firms, this meant that the firm's CX management focus was to ensure an "excellent" customer experience for their clients or, in some cases, to even have "the best CX in the industry," which was also documented as a goal in their strategies.

Table 10. Data structures of the identified general TXs in the B2B setting

2 nd order themes	1 st order informant-centric concepts
<p>Customer happiness <i>“Make the client happy [...] to ensure that at every step, at every single touchpoint, you get the most out of it and the client, too, gets the most out of it.”</i> (NLP) <i>“Try to keep people as happy as you can.”</i> (KSA)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make customers happy • keep customers happy • happier customers ...
<p>Positive experience with the provider <i>“Positive experience, [...] positive emotional footprint.”</i> (JMO) <i>“As long as the person you identify for your product is happy and has a really good experience using that service, you are quite successful.”</i> (JSE)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive experience overall • good feeling • as good CX as possible • people are eager to do business with you ...
<p>Improved experience with the provider <i>“[...] to improve both customers’ and users’ performance and experience [...] how it could be better.”</i> (CLR) <i>“The ultimate goal of these projects is to improve the whole customer experience.”</i> (JLQ)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved experience across touchpoints • continuous improvement • improve customer journey • serve customers better ...
<p>Best experience with the provider <i>“The fact is that everybody cannot have wow-experiences or excellent experiences, but we aim for that with every customer.”</i> (JLG) <i>“If our employees are happy and try to do their best, this [will result in] the best customer experience.”</i> (JMH)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best experience in the industry • being best in CX • exceptional experience • incredible experience ...
<p>Avoid negative experiences during encounters <i>“[...] customer experience where there are no big pain points.”</i> (CLM) <i>“These pain points and the meaningful touchpoints—when we start developing those, customer experience will improve.”</i> (DLZ)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience without pain points • reduce negative feelings • no pain • no disturbances ...
<p>Peak experiences at encounters <i>“[...] we also want to create moments of delight, of course.”</i> (GLD) <i>“If you exceed that promise, then you have an opportunity to leave a customer with an emotional mark or a positive feeling about something.”</i> (HMA)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exceed expectations at every encounter • delightful moments • great experience at moments-of-truth • peak experiences ...

For some firms striving for the best CX meant general improvement of CX across the whole journey. Interviewees who did not claim to strive for “the best” customer

experience still aimed to facilitate “good” or “positive” experiences by removing problems and pain points and “making customers happy”:

“Creating a **positive experience** enables us to retain customers for a long time. So my goal is to make them feel like they had a **positive experience overall.**” (JSU)

“We want to leave a **positive imprint** on the customer and **exceed their expectations.**” (DLZ)

“We want [CX] to be part of [the new] strategy, and we want to provide **the best customer experience in the industry.** [...] With each support request we resolve, we ask the customer if they are satisfied. We ask [them] about our individual training sessions [...] We ask [them] at the end of deployment projects [...] our results show that customers are more satisfied [than earlier].” (JMC)

The quotes above all refer to the *general target experiences*. **Table 10** (p. 137) shows the data structure for the identified group. The 2nd order themes include keeping or making customers happy; ensuring that customers have the best, positive, or improved experiences with the provider; and either minimizing negative experiences or creating peak experiences at meaningful encounters.

What unites this group of TXs is how general the intended experiences are. In several cases, it appears that CX is almost equated to satisfaction but with slight differences, specifically the focus on the emotional component and on customer journey thinking. The qualities of the intended CXs are not easily discernable in this group apart from their positive valence, and CX management is centered on drivers of positive experiences rather than CXs themselves.

Second, the analysis revealed that some, but not all, firms had *more nuanced target experiences* that they strived to attain through their CXM efforts (**Table 11**, p. 139). These nuanced TXs varied in their nature, from simple descriptions of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that firms aimed to induce through their CXM actions to more structured and formalized models that captured TXs through slogans or abbreviations and combined qualitatively different but complementary TX types.

Table 11. Data structure of the identified types of nuanced TXs in the B2B context

	2 nd order themes	1 st order informant-centric concepts
Effortless experiences	Reduced effort through the solution <i>"Easy to manage this [area of responsibility] [...] ease in their own work."</i> (ELT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less effort in one's own work • easy to solve one's problems
	Smooth experiences during encounters <i>"[We need] to make the platform easier to understand or even help them with the services."</i> (JMF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple to use the offering • pleasant user experience • smooth experience at encounters
	Easy to do business with the provider <i>"[...] trouble-free [experience], that it is flexible and fluent to work with us."</i> (JLG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effortless experience with the provider • experience of fluency with the provider • trouble-free experience with the provider
Secure experiences	Security through the solution <i>"Security and a feeling of control, like 'I am in control of my own money affairs and my own finances.'" (KSE)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling of safety as an indicator of the offering's success • feeling in control of one's business
	Reassuring experience with the provider <i>"Reliability is pretty much at the core of our operations because we manage a 50-billion investment portfolio, which comes with a certain kind of responsibility."</i> (OLV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience of reliability • feeling convinced of the provider firm's expertise • experience of consistency and predictability • trouble-free experience with the service offering
Sympathetic experiences	Friendliness at encounters <i>"We would like our customers to feel that we are very approachable."</i> (JSS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling comfortable in approaching the firm • pleasant interactions with the firm • not intimidating to use the service
	Humanizing experiences at encounters <i>"... that the customer thinks, 'hey, I am seen and noticed, and I am important to this firm.'" (JSL)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • customer feeling important • sympathetic human experience • personalized experience • respectful experience in interactions
	Caring experience with the provider <i>"If we want to be a risk management partner present in everyday life; then are we [present] there?" (KLO)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience of being cared for • assurance of provider's presence • experience of true partnership
Inspiring experiences	Triumph through the solution <i>"We are striving for that emotional experience to be this—that a person rejoices when they get value from their own work."</i> (OLV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feelings of success and development • feelings of joy and gratification from one's work • feeling of professional growth
	Stimulating experiences during encounters <i>"Now we are talking about this 'smooth, energizing experience' principle."</i> (PSB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • energizing experience in service interactions • feeling of being positively challenged • fun to perform even boring tasks • feeling of empowerment in interactions • feeling excited to start the project

While some of the nuanced descriptions of TXs, such as “effortless,” “trouble-free,” and “reassuring,” were consistent with those considered relevant to the B2B context (see Cardozo, 1965; Meyer & Schwager, 2007), many other themes also came up. I identified four categories of *nuanced TXs* from the data: 1) effortless, 2) secure, 3) sympathetic, and 4) inspiring (see **Table 11**, p. 139). This is not an exhaustive typology of the possible TXs in the B2B setting but a stepping stone to understanding the variety of experiential goals in firms’ B2B CX strategies.

To identify the different types of target experiences, I analyzed how the ideas of interlinked responses support each other in creating a comprehensible single meaning, rather than by dissecting target experiences into separate components. Building up from the first-order informant-centric conceptualizations, I was able to group identified target experiences into second-order themes and then further into four categories that are distinct in their multidimensional qualities (**Table 11**, p. 139).

Effortless experiences	Secure experiences
<p>Intellectual: low problem-solving effort; experience does not demand high attention.</p> <p>Affective: avoiding frustration, confusion and disappointment; feeling relieved and optimistic.</p> <p>Relational: minimal human interactions; routine cooperation; product as tool; moving forward; motivation to perform the task.</p> <p>Sensorial: interface graphics, physical location cues and space perceived as clear and simple.</p>	<p>Intellectual: supported decision-making; consistency in cognitive effort.</p> <p>Affective: feeling peaceful, confident, relaxed, and content; avoiding feeling worried, afraid, powerless, anxious, and regretful.</p> <p>Relational: trusting human and non-human actors; recognizing consistency in the relationship; no desire to micromanage other actors; letting go.</p> <p>Sensorial: not identified.</p>
Sympathetic experiences	Inspiring experiences
<p>Intellectual: cognitively supported.</p> <p>Affective: feeling happy, fond, cared for, and peaceful; avoiding feeling insecure, intimidated, neglected, powerless, hostile, agitated and anxious.</p> <p>Relational: recognizing respect and care from other actors; self-identification as somebody with unique needs & opinions; actors as humans and friends, provider as a partner; seeking further interactions.</p> <p>Sensorial: warm atmosphere, familiar visual cues.</p>	<p>Intellectual: problem-solving, creativity, high attention, learning, motivation.</p> <p>Affective: feeling excited, hopeful, eager, joyful, and proud; avoiding feeling bored and apathetic.</p> <p>Relational: feeling part of a team; feeling gratification from work; provider as an energizer and enabler; engaging in extra interactions with human and non-human actors, change in routine behavior.</p> <p>Sensorial: stimulating visual interface design, new and surprising physical environment.</p>

Figure 13. The distinguishing attributes of the identified TX categories

The four identified TX categories differ in their sensory, affective, intellectual, and relational dimensions (see **Figure 13**, p. 140), similar to how the realized customer experiences would vary (Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999; Verhoef et al., 2009). Recognizing the different dimensions of TXs served to qualitatively differentiate the managerial aims from one another. The analysis revealed an emphasis on intellectual, affective, and relational dimensions in the responses, while the sensory dimension manifested solely in discussions of visual cues during encounters. **Figure 13** presents the characteristics of each TX category identified in the data. The commonalities across experiential dimensions served the analytical purpose of grouping the arising themes together and choosing an appropriate label.

The *effortless experience* category includes target experiences of ease, simplicity, fluency, and nondisruption. These TXs are characterized by customers' low cognitive efforts, routine and utilitarian relation to the surrounding people and objects, and reactions to simple and clear visual and spatial cues. The affective dimension in this category clearly emphasizes the avoidance of undesirable emotions: the managers described the target of preventing frustration, confusion, and disappointment, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“The aim is to ensure that doing business with us is **effortless**, so that the customer **does not have to spend too much time** on it, for example, so that or it **does not cause frustration**.” (DLY)

“[Customers are] not coming to us due to a lot of interest in the product. It’s just something they need to do. **We’re more of a tool**, so we need to be **an efficient tool** to work with. We need to be **very convenient**.” (GLD)

“In most cases, the customers that we talk to **don’t want to see us**. They want [the service] to happen in the background **silently, not disrupting** their daily work; they **don’t want** it to **be visible**.” (JLI)

The category of *secure experiences* is characterized by feelings of peace, trust, confidence, and control. The TXs in this category include consistency and predictability in the provider’s work, customers’ ability to rely on the provider’s expertise and good intentions, and customers feeling safe and in control of their own business.

“Transparency—it’s a really important part of customer experience, wildly important, so it’s being emphasized in account management. It actually involves many levels of trying to be **transparent and predictable**.” (JMH)

“The starting point for everything is the confidence found in that **feeling of trust**, that, ‘hey, I can trust them.’” (JLG)

“[...] in such a product, you have to have a **constant feeling** that the main **risks are taken care of**. [...] **Security and safety** are perhaps the strongest emotional states that insurance companies aspire to induce.” (KLO)

The category of *sympathetic experiences* is more heterogeneous than the other categories. Even so, the TXs in this category are united by strong relational and affective dimensions. The customer experiences in this category are intended to give rise to feelings of fondness toward other people, being cared for, and happiness; the respondents stated that their firms tried to prevent their customers from feeling abandoned, neglected, or anxious, and the TXs aimed to reinforce customers’ idea of self as important to the firm, with unique thoughts and needs. The relational dimension of sympathetic target experiences includes customers’ perception of the service provider and other people they interact with as being friends and partners, not just means to an end. The sensory dimension includes bodily reactions to a warm atmosphere and familiar, non-threatening visual cues.

“A good feeling ... ‘I was **taken seriously**, and I was able to handle things.’” (JMA)

“We want our customers **to not be intimidated**.” (JSJ)

Finally, the category of *inspiring experiences* includes target experiences united by strong positive affective and intellectual dimensions. These TXs are aimed at providing intellectually engaging experiences, wherein customers learn, create, and discover new things and are motivated to participate in problem-solving. Sensory experiences in this category are associated with surprising and stimulating visual and environmental cues: managers described aiming to induce feelings of joy, fun, excitement, and pride among their customers and avoiding feelings of boredom and apathy. The relational dimension of these TXs involves customers seeing their own work as gratifying and meaningful and their colleagues and the service provider as enabling, energizing, and empowering actors, which encourages further contact.

“The experience of running a business should be a **party**. It should be **awesome**. [...] No one actually wants to do accounting. [...] It’s the most **boring** thing you can actually do.” (JSJ)

“**Happiness** and **positive impact** are, of course, related to the customer experience. We have identified a few important points, one of which is the relevance of the work, so the very fact that we are doing **significant work** affects the customer experience between us and the client.” (JMH)

“At the early stage of the customer journey, we want to **inspire**, [...] produce a certain **sense of empowerment**, for example, through success stories, like ‘**hey, I can be like this as well!**’” (JSL)

In conclusion, grouping close to a hundred identified and reported TXs into these broad and clearly different categories lead to a wealth of experiential targets used in CX management. Moreover, this analysis revealed opportunities for further nuance and articulation of TXs by delineating the intended sensory and relational dimensions and not stopping at the conventional duality of thoughts and feelings. This analysis also evidenced that B2B firms find different kinds of experiences appropriate for their businesses.

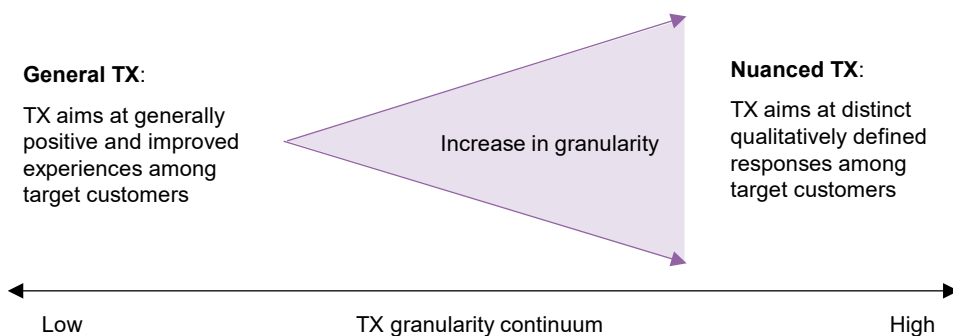


Figure 14. TX continuum increasing in granularity from general to nuanced

The two approaches to target experiences—general and nuanced—did not appear dichotomous in practice, but the degree of articulation of the TXs varied. Based on this, I positioned the identified TXs on a *granularity continuum* (**Figure 14**), ranging from *general target experiences*, where the desired target state of CX is not described beyond generally positive or improved, to *nuanced target experiences*, which are defined in detail to represent the intended customer responses during encounters with firm-related stimuli.

Ultimately, the varying granularity was not just one of the properties of TXs but also a strategically important characteristic. The next two sections discuss the other

identified properties of target experiences, while Sections 7.2 and 7.4 explore how different degrees of granularity influence how TX works in CXM strategies.

7.1.2 Target experiences attributed to different actors

The data analysis revealed that target experiences in B2B markets also vary in terms of their *target customer*. In fact, two findings followed from the analysis: 1) target experiences were assigned to different actor roles in the customer organization, and 2) managers had different working conceptualizations of a general customer for whom the target experience was intended.

Through a data-driven analysis of TXs and considering the B2B CX definition given in the literature, I identified *TXs directed specifically at users, buyers, influencers, or different groups of decision-makers*, like in the quotes below:

“We would like our customers to **feel that we are very approachable** and by no means **scary IT nerds**. But, at the same time, we want them to **strongly trust** in the fact that we are the best experts in the field in Finland. [...] Our main target group in the [customer] firm comprises **marketing managers**—because it is the marketing function that uses our system the most, followed by product managers. Then we have the firm’s **IT managers** in the [deployment] project; it is actually the IT managers who are tasked with finding solutions to problems. So **there are two very different target groups**.” (JSS)

“We try to follow the notion that the customer is a company, and the user is an individual. [...] **Ideal experiences mean different things to different user types**. [...] So if we decide upfront based on, for example, CX validation, that it is essential that we improve the life of system designers, the system designer becomes the user in focus—that narrows down things quite a bit. But **what is ideal for a system designer is not necessarily ideal for an installer, not at all**.” (CLR)

Considering that one of the defining characteristics of the B2B context is the multitude of actors and roles, it was not surprising to discover that some managers defined their TXs with different actors in mind. However, what was surprising was that the majority of managers did not assign TXs to particular actor groups and, instead, talked about the experiences of a “general customer,” i.e., the collective B2B CX. To further address the theme of the “general customer” that was prevalent in the data, I explored the managers’ understanding of a business customer, comparing them with the TXs identified within each individual interview. This analysis aided

the interpretation of who was that “general customer” that the target experiences were directed at in each case.

The analysis revealed the *different ways in which the CX managers conceptualized the collective B2B customer experience*. I identified three general approaches to B2B CX (Table 12): (1) a sales-dominant perspective, (2) a user-dominant perspective, and (3) a holistic perspective.

Table 12. Managerial perspectives on collective B2B CX

MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES ON COLLECTIVE B2B CX	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
SALES-DOMINANT PERSPECTIVE	Actors: buying center actors Target experiences: experiences of “doing business” Focus: purchase journey
USER-DOMINANT PERSPECTIVE	Actors: usage center actors Target experiences: experiences with the offering Focus: product use or solution outcomes
HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE	Actors: all actors, roles and hierarchies Target experiences: experiences of all interactions Focus: the entire customer sphere

Some managers took what I call a *sales-dominant perspective* on collective B2B CX. They considered the buying center, specifically the decision-maker, to be the main experiencing actor. Other roles in the buying center, such as influencers and gatekeepers, were often recognized too. Here, firms prioritized the customer’s buying journey through information search, sales meetings, negotiating, ordering and renewal.

“I see the **employer-customer** [paying customer] as **a person, and I know that feelings have a great impact** [on customers]. [...] The majority of our contact is with the **chief HR officer** because they are usually the **person who makes decisions** in the organization related to staffing or wellbeing at work. There are also **other groups that are really important** from our point of view, for example, the CFO and the top management, the CEO of a company, or the mayor, who makes decisions about who will be the pension insurer in the future.” (OLV)

While the experiences of different actors participating in the buying process were considered to affect the decision-maker’s experiences, the usage experiences of the offering received less attention from the managers upholding this perspective.

Accordingly, the defined TXs were related to the buying center, including ease of doing business and caring and reassuring experiences with the provider (see **Table 11**).

“On the business customer side, it is more complex: we identified **several different actors** as part of our **customer care program**, and we know their **different roles with different types of clients**. That customer care program also includes [...] **other stakeholders** to whom we have to provide good service. [...] The aim is to ensure that **doing business with us is effortless**. [...] We want to be that service partner, [to show] that we are here, and that the **customer can be in touch**; we are not such that you buy some solution from us and then we disappear.” (DLY)

The second way B2B CX was conceptualized by CX management followed a *user-dominant perspective*. From this perspective, managers centered B2B CX on the intended user experiences of the relevant digital or (more rarely) physical offering and the support functions as well as target experiences resulting from living with the benefits of the offering. This perspective was mostly expressed in the context of IT services:

“Our customers are typically one-person businesses. [...] We try to **introduce accounting as a tool** that actually helps their business, to **make the user understand** that [...] they can actually **make things easier for themselves**. [...] the customer should **feel rewarded for actually using it** [...] [We remove] **everything that is obviously accounting from the user** as much as possible.” (JSJ)

In this view, the experiences of the usage center got more attention, yet they stayed somewhat disconnected from the overall customer journey. The related identified target experiences in this group were, for example, “reduced effort,” “security,” and “triumph through the solution” (see **Table 11**). The quote below presents a manager’s reflections on how the focus of CXM changed when offerings moved toward self-service tools:

“When the customer is the one who takes care of these things [meaning self-service], we are talking about the **user experience and how the [JMX firm’s] service works**. At the moment, it is perceived as an **easy-to-use service**, but we still have development needs. [...] we consider the fact that the customer does everything themselves, then we arrive at the user experience—that if you use digital services, if you use [the JMX] service, the **service has to work and must**

be easy to use and understand. The customer should understand **what they are getting** and **what they are doing there.**” (JMX)

The findings indicated that, despite being disconnected from the buying center’s journey, such TXs may have a direct connection to the value originating from the usage center’s experience, which is often in line with the core value proposition of the provider’s offering.

“If you put in a lot of small solutions, the end result is a big mess, so we are working with many companies—which could be even competitors—because our point is to **smooth out the process for the client.** So instead of having our own user interface, we can use one of the most commonly used platforms that are in the building industry. And by being able to offer that, they then **have one system less to watch.** Also, we always go through integrations and see if we can add anything to their current systems.” (JSU)

An important theme that I identified in the managers’ choice of emphasizing user experiences over decision-maker experiences, or the other way around, was that of *control*, i.e., the ability to influence a particular actor’s experience. If a provider firm did not have continuous contact with the customer firm’s decision-makers, the former’s efforts to affect CX were focused on developing the offering to improve user experience, assuming that the intended user experience would have an effect on the decision-maker. The quote below illustrates the situation of the KSA firm: after the complex initial implementation of their financing solution with a merchant, the main way to influence CX was through the experiences of the end users, which become a priority to maintain their competitive position.

“We offer a financing option for end users. [...] Whenever a customer goes to a website to buy t-shirts and gets to the payment part, they can **decide how to pay based on the options that the specific website offers.** [...] One of the options that might be offered to customers is [KSA option]. [...] You create an account with [KSA] in the check-out—it’s quite **seamless.** [...] customer experience is so important for us because we have a twofold customer base. Our customer is the person buying the t-shirt and then the owner of that webstore. [...] We have some **merchants that use us to provide financing, and they use a few other companies as well,** because the customer base in their country uses all of those companies. [...] You compete with [...] the **products or the services that you put out there, the features.**” (KSA)

Conversely, managers in firms that lacked contact with the usage center, or sometimes even with the end customer and beneficiary of the service, focused on the decision-maker's experience. The following quote illustrates a relationship where the financing for a leasing service was provided through partners with the leased equipment, who served de facto as decision-makers for the end customers. As this service was only a part of the main service offering, the CX efforts and, consequently, the TXs were focused on the intermediary, with the hopes of indirectly influencing end-customer experiences:

“We do not control that customer path. The ecosystem where that customer is, it is by no means ours. [...] In practice, it means that our partners are the dealers, [...] we invest in their experiences—their tools and their so-called satisfaction—so they are even more important to us than the end customer. [...] we kind of treat those middlemen in such a way that for them all, **dealing with us is as easy, quick, and effortless as possible. That's when** [this experience] **is reflected to that end customer** [also a business client].” (KMD)

Finally, some CX managers conceptualized collective B2B CX from a *holistic perspective*. TXs were defined in relation to the whole customer organization as a unit, and singular experiencing actors were not specified. Thus, the customer organization is an experiencing actor in this model.

“Are [customers] happy or not [...] the company actually started to pay more attention to customer experience, and we have several big projects. The ultimate goal of these projects is **to improve the whole customer experience.**” (JLQ)

Furthermore, the managers assigned equal importance to all experiencing actors and interactions and aimed for homogeneous TXs. This was especially true when smooth, simple, friendly, or humanizing customer experiences were targeted (see **Table 11**). Notably, the majority of firms emphasized that all the different people in and around a customer organization that in any way touch the provider firm or its offering will have customer experiences:

“We have **a large spread of customers.** [...] [The customer groups are] **site managers** who are responsible for working out the plan to build a building. [...] **installers** who are there to work out how these pieces go together. [...] We then have **people who influence the whole chain** and are **very important for our customer experience**, because we need to acknowledge that they can have a big impact on our ability to develop it. [...] **developers** who are interested in how to make money off these builds. [...] **architects** who are designing [...], so we need

to give them inspiration about how they can use our material. [...] **engineers** who are technically working out ‘is it this element or that element?’ [...] And then we have the **investors**, who are even more hardcore than the developers and are like, ‘show me the money.’ [...] We have quite an interesting [setup], the **buying customers** and also the **nonbuying customers**. And the nonbuying customers have a massive influence on the rest of the chain of events that happen.” (CLW)

In some cases, managers considered the main decision-maker’s experience to be a proxy for the holistic B2B CX. It is interesting that firms recognized that a decision-maker could have an aggregate, organization-level perception of experiences. Several managers emphasized that the individual experiences of users and other actors in the organization will have an effect on the decision-maker’s experiences in the long run:

“What kind of feedback does the customer’s decision-maker receive from their own staff about us as a service provider [is important]—**decision-makers listen very carefully to their own employees**. [...] we have to be on good terms with **all the staff members of the client**, and we have to make sure that **they are happy with us**.” (GSK)

“In the smallest companies, there is usually one person who takes care of those things [buying the provider’s offering]. Then, when you go to a medium-sized company, there may be a few who take care of it, but [...] you will quickly come to understand that the customer is also the single user there. [...] **The user ultimately has this customer experience**. If you assume that a company has, say, at least 30 people, even though there's one guy that you take care of [...] he thinks that you’re doing well. If those others [users] think, ‘damn it, these calls are interrupted, and this is quite a [messed-up] service,’ then this one guy won’t keep you there. **At some point, this brings down so many [complaints] on his neck that** [he has to discontinue the agreement].” (JMA)

The three perspectives on B2B CX presented above are, of course, simplifications of the providers’ conceptualizations. Each respondent shared context-specific views on their different customer groups and journeys, which interacted in complex ways with their ideas about TXs. In contexts where the paying customer and the beneficiary of the service were separate groups, the user-dominant and sales-dominant perspectives peacefully coexisted, and the related TXs influenced each other:

“The two are not separate things. They are really **tightly intertwined**, because **in the interests of the employer are**, of course, **the insured** and their good work life [...] And even if **we target** these **development services** mainly to **employers**, they will **affect those who are insured** in the end. [...] We now need to shift that mindset even more toward how the insured can get support from us during their careers or their daily lives, either indirectly through their employer indirectly or even directly [with us].” (OLV)

To summarize, exploring the targets of target experiences resulted in interesting insights. First, the findings confirmed the complexity of defining TXs with different experiencing actors in mind, as it is inseparable from the issues of balancing and prioritizing different role types. Second, the findings uncovered several models for collective B2B CX present in the data and dependent on the providers’ contexts. Based on these findings, I suggest that such theories-in-use (see Argyris & Schon, 1974; Zeithaml, Jaworski et al., 2020) would have an influence on the different CXM approaches in the kaleidoscopic context of industrial marketing.

7.1.3 Different scopes of target experiences

The data analysis in this study revealed varying scopes of target experiences. Using the abductive logic of theorizing, I was able to connect these scopes to different CX perspectives, specifically to the static experience at touchpoints, the dynamic experience during the customer journey, and the broader experience in the customer’s lifeworld. The identified TXs could be categorized based on scope (from narrow to broad) as follows: 1) target experiences at touchpoints, 2) target experiences during a customer’s journey with the firm, 3) target experiences in a customer’s business (see **Figure 15**).

The first category consists of TXs *at touchpoints* during encounters with a firm, such as experiences in sales meetings, while using the provider’s software, or when receiving an email. Such TXs in my data were of the friendly, humanizing, and stimulating type. Their event-specific nature is illustrated by the following quotes:

“If we have a **prospect** [client], for the most part they **go to our website**, and [they] **ask people** if someone has used [our offering]; then, our aim is to **generate enthusiasm** and grab attention.” (JSL)

“In the questionnaire after the touchpoints [...] we ask [about] the **main feeling that comes to mind about that encounter** [...] There is a **sense of trust**, and the client **feels valued and appreciated** and **cared for** and **relieved in that situation**.” (KLU)

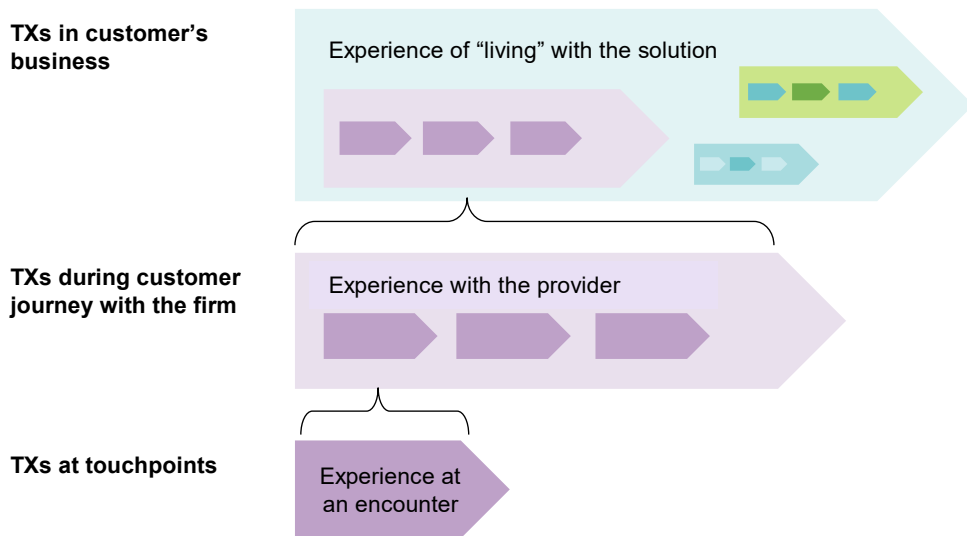


Figure 15. Different scopes of target experiences

Furthermore, smooth and effortless experiences were a target both *as a result of a particular encounter* and *during the transition from one touchpoint to another*. These smooth TXs relate to relatively small-scale journeys, e.g., an ordering process, a step-wise customer care issue, or a sequence of tasks in the digital system. This finding alludes to the flexible nature of the customer journey (see Følstad & Kvale, 2016); one can liken it to zooming in and out of the customer journey, changing its scale.

“It comes down to **tracking** [...] the customer in the platform to make part of the platforms **easier to understand** or even give them help with the services. [...] to improve experience is basically for [the customer] to **escape the unpleasant experiences of confusion or impatience.**” (JMF)

“[...] it should be **as hassle-free as possible, the whole onboarding journey.** I mean the customer should not have to spend too much **time or effort** on it, because we know we are not the main focus of the customer.” (KMT)

The second scope consists of *target experiences during the customer's journey with the firm*. Such TXs are related to different stages of a customer's business relationship with a provider, such as the pre-bid engagement, negotiation, implementation, and operations stages (see Witell et al., 2020). At this level of the analysis, I found differences in the identified TXs based on the type of service exchange: Mass market customers are expected to engage in relatively small-scale purchases of offerings that demand minimal levels of customization and are involved

mostly in routinized transactional exchanges. In these cases, TXs include ease of doing business and consistent, reassuring feelings with the provider. The interviewed managers emphasized fluency and friendliness in interactions at touchpoints in these customer journeys:

“It’s [TXs] a lot around making business easy for our customers. I would say this **ease of doing business** translates into many things.” (CLW)

“A B2B customer **doesn’t want doing business with us to be difficult** [...]. They are in a hurry, and the work needs to be done. So they **don’t want it to be more difficult to do business**. And with good customer experience, expertise, fluency, we can ease the role of a B2B customer, their tasks, and everyday life.” (DMA)

“We want them to **be happy** with the product that we’re providing and the service that goes with it and that we deliver on time, and we live up to our promises basically. [...] We should be **consistent**, and that can apply to product quality, deliveries, or services.” (CLP)

On the other hand, key accounts, i.e., strategically important customers involved in complex projects, tend to enjoy more relational exchanges. The identified TXs for such customers involved reassuring and caring interactions with the provider, with the customer feeling like they are in a true partnership and are taken care of. The managers emphasized the humanizing and stimulating nature of experiences during such customer journeys.

“Our hope is that we can **be present** for the customer as much as they need us. [...] a good customer experience is one in which the **customer feels heard and understood**.” (JSB)

“Actually, the brokers [...] they don’t really care that much about the efficiency; they just want to be able to have a **better relationship** and **speak to someone** and **get to know them** and have **somebody reliable** in the organization who will **listen to them and take care of their needs**.” (KLM)

The third scope-based category consists of *target experiences in a customer’s business*, intended to result from the provider’s solution. These experiences directly relate to the experiential benefits associated with the core offering of the provider. The identified TXs in this category were characterized by feelings of security and triumph or the decreased overall effort that emerges as a result of using the offering.

Therefore, managers intend for such experiences to occur in customer processes and support the achievement of organizational and personal goals.

“A person **rejoices when they get that value from their work.**” (OLV)

“We want **ease**. [It connects to] how an individual experiences things. [...] Easy ordering, easy use of services, but **easy to manage** [their waste-disposal] **needs**. Related to this is the data we provide about that [waste collection] [so that] they can trust that things are okay. [...] **we are helping them succeed**. Of course, that means the **company** but equally the **individual** [too]. We’re bringing development suggestions to them that they can show that [snaps fingers] ‘**I’ve done my job well!**’” (ELT)

In sum, the analysis revealed several important findings related to the nature of TXs. First, distinguishing the various scopes of TXs resulted in different conceptualizations of CX that would be relevant for CX management. Second, the analysis allowed me to recognize the differences between TXs at touchpoints and across touchpoints, signaling the importance of experiences that occur when a customer moves from one touchpoint to the next. Third, the findings allowed me to determine the differences between the TXs of transactional and relational exchanges across the customer journey. Lastly, I identified TXs related to business solutions and separated them from those related to business relationships and interactions during encounters.

7.1.4 Summary of the findings on the nature of target experiences in business markets

In this section, I consolidate the findings that illuminate the nature of TXs in business markets, thus addressing RQ1: *What is the nature of target experiences in the B2B context?* The results show that target experiences reflect the nature of B2B CXs yet have their own complexity and thus are valid objects of study.

CXs in the B2B context have been conceptualized by prior researchers as involving *multiple experiencing actors* at different hierarchies and aggregated at several organizational levels. My own analysis of emergent TXs in provider organizations confirmed their attribution to various actors within the business customer firm, underlining the experiences of individual actors as managerially relevant. The findings especially highlighted various *actor roles and goals* that characterized specific personas. Furthermore, analyzing TXs with respect to the properties of B2B CXs unveiled *three different models for collective B2B CX*: a sales-dominant perspective that focuses on the collective experience of a buying

center (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981); a user-dominant perspective that focuses on the collective experience of a usage center (Macdonald et al., 2016); and a holistic perspective that considers the collective experience of a customer firm as a whole. These managerial models were found to be highly dependent on the providers' contexts, which includes the type of customer, the type of offering, and issues of touchpoint control (Witell et al., 2020).

Second, the definition of B2B CX emphasizes the *multidimensionality of experiential responses*, namely the intellectual, affective, sensory, and relational dimensions (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007), as well as the distinctiveness of this concept from its more evaluative counterparts, such as perceived quality, satisfaction, or value (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). My analysis of the target experiences set by B2B service providers revealed that not all providers consider the multidimensional properties of CX in their practice; I found variations in the degree of *granularity* of target experiences. While the more general TXs focused mostly on valence, with positive experiences being desired and negative experiences being avoided, the more nuanced TXs exhibited a richness in their experiential dimensions. Based on the findings, I conclude that *a variety of nuanced, qualitatively different target experiences* are relevant in the B2B context, not only effortless, trouble-free, and reassuring ones (see Cardozo, 1965; Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Finally, B2B CXs were found to occur across *multiple journeys and touchpoints*. The findings revealed that target experiences are conceptualized at different scopes related to the event-specific CX at touchpoints (see Halvorsrud et al., 2016) and dynamic CX during the customer journey (see Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). The managers were found to place importance on *experiences that occur at touchpoints* as well as the *changes in experiences* that take place during actors' progression through multiple touchpoints.

The most interesting findings were related to how TXs reflect the dynamic nature of CXs. In this regard, the analysis showed that TXs are often experiences *within the business relationship*, i.e., influencing how different actors experience doing business with a particular provider. The TXs at this level differed depending on the customers' involvement in transactional vs. relational exchanges (see Witell et al., 2020): fast, easy, and invisible experiences were prioritized in transactional exchanges, while caring and reassuring experiences with the provider were targeted in relational exchanges (see also Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Moreover, dynamic target experiences are also related to *experiences in the customer's own business*, akin to the goal-oriented journey view (Becker et al., 2020) and the solution-oriented view of business customer journeys (Tuli et al., 2007; Witell et al., 2020). These occur when a customer experiences the benefits of an offering over a course of time, i.e., the value-in-use, and are closely connected to achieving one's personal and organizational goals.

7.2 CXM activities in business markets

This section presents the findings on the provider's CXM activities in the B2B context (RQ2). The goal was to map out the different activities through an explorative study to provide a holistic view of CXM and enrich the understanding of this concept in the B2B context.

The analysis followed the sociological understanding of *activities as composites of actions* guided by *motives and goals*, with *operations* being the methods used to achieve actions (Leont'ev, 1978). Motives are the main attributes that distinguish activities from one another, while goals direct the actions. The data analysis in this research was informant-centric and followed the data-driven coding method (Gioia et al., 2013), while the aforementioned understanding of activities provided the logic of distinguishing different discovered elements of CXM from one another. The extant knowledge on CXM supported the interpretation of data. **Table 13** (p. 157) shows the data structure, i.e., the representation of how the analysis progressed from raw data to the first-order concepts (*operations*), then to second-order themes (*actions* grouped based on their *goals*) and to the three aggregate dimensions (*activities* grouped based on their *motives*).

In the dialogue with the extant literature, natural to the abductive theorizing approach, I identified three types of CX management activities: activities directed at *understanding CX*, at *facilitating CX*, and at *aligning the organization for CX*. These aggregate categories can be distinguished by their motives, which are quite evident from their labels: the first is motivated by a need to understand CXs, the second is directed at facilitating desirable experiences, and the third is aimed at developing the organization's ability to understand and facilitate CXs. Each activity involves basic components, namely actions.

The following sections provide detailed accounts of each identified activity type. In addition, the analysis allowed for describing the specifics of each activity group in the B2B context, as their operations are highly dependent on the context and conditions. The contextual characteristics of each CXM activity are reported at the end of each of the following sections.

Table 13. Data structure of CXM activities, actions, goals, and operations

		2nd order themes: ACTIONS	Distinguishing attributes between 2nd order themes: GOALS	1st order informant-centric concepts (examples): OPERATIONS	
Aggregate dimensions: ACTIVITIES	UNDERSTAND CX	Gather CX data	The action aimed at acquiring different kinds of customer data relevant for understanding CX.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular feedback • phone interviews • partner data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • end user surveys • custom CX measures ...
		Generate CX insight	The action directed at analyzing and understanding the experiencing actor(s), their needs, motivations, and value perceptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exp. value drivers • CX segmentation • root causes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • journey mapping • role identification ...
		Track CX dynamics	The action directed at ensuring continuous and consistent flow of information about the trends and anomalies in CX dynamics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentiments at t-ps • real-time metrics • red/green indicators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • automated triggers • simple comparable metrics at all t-ps ...
	FACILITATE CX	Design and manage touchpoints	The action directed at improving CX by designing and organizing cues at touchpoints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of visual cues • gamification • meetings as exp. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve automated cues • language in sales vs. project materials ...
		Design and manage journeys	The action directed at improving CX by creating, sequencing, and adapting touchpoints along the customer journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design of supporting services to fill gaps • design journeys for individual roles • remove pain-points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • t-p adaptation with smart automated processes • thematically unify t-ps • plan for helpful emotions along the journey ...
		Manage unexpected events at touchpoints and along journeys	The action directed at mitigating negative effects of uncontrollable events related to service failure, customer behavior, partner behavior, or force majeure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disassociate from partners • transparent communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • turn unfortunate situations positive • moments to show skills ...
	ALIGN FOR CX	Adapt internal processes to support customer journeys	The action directed at supporting the facilitation and understanding of CX through (re)designing journey-oriented processes, systems, and structures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate IT systems • streamline processes • CX-focused incentive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cross-departmental work groups • reassign responsibility ...
		Develop CX-centered mindsets	The action directed at changing and developing an organization wide CX mindset that supports company's ability to facilitate desirable CX.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employee workshops • changing attitudes • training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empowering storytelling • CX manager as sparring partner ...

7.2.1 Understanding customer experiences

As CX management is a customer-centric approach (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), it is crucial to understand customer processes, activities, and contexts as well as realized experiences. My analysis revealed three groups of actions that are motivated by the aim of understanding customer experiences: 1) gather CX data; 2) generate CX insight, including insights into customer journeys, business goals, and value sources; 3) track CX dynamics at touchpoints and across journeys. Furthermore, the findings revealed the characteristics of these actions that are specific to the B2B context.

First, the interviewed managers greatly emphasized the need for CXM efforts focused on *gathering CX data* through multiple methods and from different sources. The goal of this action is to acquire different kinds of relevant customer data that reflect realized CXs. The firms have strived to collect data to the extent of their processing capacities. In fact, the majority of CXM initiatives in the sampled firms began with developments in their data generating and processing capacities and the establishment of CX measurements.

The sampled firms have employed a range of data collection methods as part of their CXM initiatives, including surveys, phone or face-to-face interviews, and open-ended feedback approaches as well as measures of user behaviors on digital platforms and services. The importance of qualitative data was particularly emphasized:

“We conduct different **interviews**. We conduct **focus groups** [and] **traditional qualitative research** using quite traditional qualitative tools. We try to **understand in depth** all these details.” (JLQ)

“Over the course of a year, we get **regular feedback** from our customers, which gives us an **indication of how well we’re doing** in terms of **providing good customer experiences** for them.” (CLP)

“To our business customers, we send **a monthly survey**; it goes out to a random sample of **500–800 clients**. [...] also, our **salespersons** send out **questionnaires about how a meeting went** so we can assess [the customer’s experience].” (NMR)

Furthermore, in addition to different methods, the managers stated that they utilized multiple sources of CX data in their initiatives. A lot of the data relevant for understanding CX is not explicit and is stored by the front-line employees of the firms; therefore, generating CX data required extracting and soliciting information from the personnel through interviews and workshops. Also, data produced through

the processes of customer care and stored in different systems and emails, could be accessed and structured retroactively.

“We have our own **internally-produced information**, starting from that which is **told and experienced by** the people [**employees**] and what our **sales managers** or **energy advisers** do as their work; it is a **huge source of information**, and we have **used it a lot in the mapping of the current situation.**” (DLY)

“We get summaries from the **discussions** that **account managers** have [with their customers].” (JSL)

The findings underlined some data sources that are characteristic of business markets. The managers emphasized the importance of obtaining information from different people within customer organizations as well as channel partners who participate in the service provision to form a coherent picture of a customer journey and the variety of experiences that happen along it. Furthermore, the strategy of prioritizing the most important customers, i.e., customers with whom a long-term relationship or its potential exists, was evident in the managers’ approaches to CX data collection:

“What we try to do is include our **most important customers** in the process and **interview as many contacts on the customers’ end as possible.**” (CLP)

“We need to talk to various functions [internally within the provider firm] to understand their points of view of the customer journey [...] and then we also have to go talk to the customers; and if it is a B2B customer, then we also have to **talk to our channel partners** to understand how they see these activities happening and what their expectations along this journey are. [...] By talking to the **internal stakeholders** and **external stakeholders**, our **partners**, and our **customers**, we can piece together a journey.” (JLI)

Lastly, I found that the firms gathered data at different levels—from more transactional measurements at the touchpoint level to higher-level measurements related to longer relationships and journeys. The touchpoint-focused questionnaires used by the firms were usually time-sensitive, as they were designed to tap into the fresh experiences of a particular interaction and were often automated, whereas the larger relationship-level surveys addressed customers’ remembered experiences throughout their relationship with the firm, spanning, for example, a year.

“We have this **first-order questionnaire**, [and] it is usually quite critical. When a customer starts doing business with us for the first time and orders personnel [...] **the questionnaire is sent automatically**, and we get good feedback from it.” (NMR)

“We are doing this [KSE]-experience measurement, which [involves] **assessing how does being our customer feel**; we **regularly send it** [the questionnaire] to our customers. It is a **broader measurement**.” (KSE)

“We have different kinds of questions for **decision-makers** and for **users**. [...] Generally, we try to measure [experiences] at **different stages of the customer journey** [throughout the JLG deployment project]. [...] From those, we try to create a sort of **synthesis**—not just take the answers of a decision-maker and a user or a particular customer and search for the average; we try to measure the **different points along the customer journey** and then communicate to the person managing customer relationships how customer satisfaction is developing [at those points].” (JLG)

These examples show how providers gather CX data from different sources, through a variety of methods and at different timescapes, taking the first step toward understanding CX.

Second, in an attempt to understand CXs, providers were focused on *generating CX insights*. These actions are aimed at analyzing and understanding the experiencing actors’ needs, motivations, and value perceptions, which serves as a basis for strategic and tactical decisions related to CX facilitation.

It was interesting to learn that, with the establishment of CX programs, the sampled firms have greatly increased their analytical capabilities. For example, to generate CX insights, providers with a large number of clients have used text analytics, often aided by internally developed or externally acquired machine-learning tools:

“When talking about data and [large] amounts of data, I definitely recommend **using artificial intelligence** and machine learning. We **have had good experiences** when we used our own data. We **got good proof**. If the decision-makers say something, it **comes through in their feedback** [analyzed with the help of AI]. **The qualitative data is speaking**.” (JLW)

“[The tool we use] does **artificial intelligence-based analyses of qualitative data**. So, we have started using it [...] for our organization, where we

significantly enrich the numeric data. We can see **all the trends** and the things that are **behind the numeric feedback.**” (KLU)

By utilizing such approaches for qualitative data analyses, the firms were able to interpret numeric data, which on its own is not always capable of providing valuable insights. Furthermore, the firms used customer and employee workshops and mapping exercises, which aided sensemaking, to produce insights that can be used for facilitating CXs.

“[...] **our value proposition was updated for the corporate customer** side, so we conducted a fairly **extensive customer survey** in the background. And we also have that **customer experience [research]** present when we do something new, plan a new business or update our processes and make new launches; it is **built into service design.** We **invite customers** all the way to our office [to] **do workshops**, put up post-it notes and all that—it’s all built in.” (KLO)

In addition, the firms have attempted to connect the generated CX data with other kinds of data and information to generate insights. For example, several managers emphasized the importance of connecting the development of CX to financial indicators, which can prove the effectiveness of different CX initiatives in monetary terms:

“We should be able to **connect it [data] to euros**, which means that if there is NPS, for example, and a customer is giving the lowest grades, **we connect it to the financial data** [to see] how the customer’s profitability is developing.” (JLW)

The CX insights that the firms obtained through their research gave them a holistic understanding of the various experiencing actors within their customer firms. The interviewed managers stated that it is especially important for firms in B2B markets to be able to map out customer journeys and situate themselves within these journeys. Journey mapping often included identifying the different customer roles, mapping out the customers behaviors and attitudes in a dynamic format, and reflecting on the current and desired states of CXs and journeys:

“We get people to describe to us, **phase by phase**—how they move from one phase to another and what they think should happen and how they feel. [...] We are documenting how we want to engage customers, so it is important that we capture the emotions. For example, customers might be very confused at the beginning phase when they are trying to find the best option for them. [...] If we

want to **improve this journey**, how can we help the customer reduce or eliminate this confusion? What do we have to do to achieve that? [...] We have to understand the **activities**, we [need to] understand the **emotions**, and we also need to understand the **moments of truth**—what are the key, critical phases or points along the journey?” (JLI)

Furthermore, the managers provided evidence of changing segmentation practices based on the customer journey, with the segments being formed on the basis of the typical customer journeys:

“Last year, we did a segmentation of our customer base. Well, we already had different segments, but here we built **segments based on [the] service model**. Through [an] analysis, we formed four different service model segments.” (JMX)

A notable insight that the managers gained was regarding the kinds of experiences their customers would find valuable. They focused on identifying the sources of customer value, which stem from customer needs and expectations:

“[...] the point of working with the data [is] so that you don’t only look at the negatives and what you have to improve; [it is] equally important to see **what we’re doing right** and make sure we **keep doing those things right** and then maybe even develop them further. [...] we have received **good scores from the customers**, and **these are the things that they have positive emotions around**.” (HMA)

“[The next step is] to dig deeper into the understanding of customer’s insights and **expectations—what do they want?** We are then able to collaborate more closely with our customers and **deliver better products or services**.” (JLI)

“We started to do in-depth interviews with our customers in three markets that are most important for us—Finland, Sweden, and France. [...] We have interviewed them together with our external partner, so that we would understand **the points in our joint activities** that are **most meaningful for our customers** and [the factors] based on which they **make provider choices**.” (DLZ)

In many cases, this insight contributed to determining valuable and differentiating target experiences that could be used strategically:

“We have utilized our measurements [in building the NMR CX model] and the feedback that we received. We knew that in the earlier [customer] research, we **have been associated with speed**; we are fast to serve [...] And then also **reliability**, as we have long been in the industry in many areas [geographically], and **it was also emphasized [in the feedback]** that these two things are **often connected to us** [in customer’s minds].” (NMR)

Finally, the firms have established activities for the *tracking of CX dynamics*, which is aimed not as much at a comprehensive understanding of the experiencing actors and their needs and wants but at ensuring the continuous and consistent flow of information that allows for reactive measures. The continuous flow of data in consistent formats is meant to reveal the trends and anomalies in CX dynamics. Establishing metrics and automatic triggers that support the customer journey perspective and continuously monitoring customers’ emotional and cognitive responses at different touchpoints across the journey contributes to firms’ real-time understanding of CX and allows for proactive action on an operational level.

“We do **track feelings**. [...] We have **regular measurements** of different customer experience metrics such as [the] Net Promoter Score, Customer Effort Score, Customer Satisfaction, and some specific metrics in particular touchpoints for particular actions that we know are very important for our customers. We also collect feedback from open sources. For example, we **monitor social networks**, Twitter. We monitor different **news websites** in several languages and **automatically categorize** all these pieces of feedback in text format. [We] categorize it **based on the customer journey phase** relevant to this particular feedback [and also] **based on issues and sentiments**. [...] It means **when something happens**, we can see it in figures; this is a **very fast tool, so we can do this even [the very] next day**. This is the **automated part of our analysis**.” (JLQ)

It was surprising to discover that social media monitoring would be an appropriate tool for tracking business CXs in some cases, such as the JLQ firm in the quote above, as it is not considered a common method in this context. However, for firms with fewer clients and more relational exchanges, which would not leave their feedback on social media networks, other approaches to tracking CX dynamics might be more appropriate. In the following quote, the JMC manager discusses the development of the firm’s monitoring systems toward a “360° measurement” of the customer, referring to real-time customer wellbeing tracking:

“The 360 view of our customers [...], it’s still missing, quite clearly. [...] But this would be our management’s main metric or task board, a customer view where we would see **which ones are in green** and **which ones are in red** and **how everybody is doing.**” (JMC)

The explorative study I conducted for this dissertation thus revealed numerous approaches that the sampled firms have used in order to understand customer experiences. Grouping these approaches (operations) into three generic actions allowed me to distinguish between the in-depth customer research used for strategic planning and design from the real-time tracking and monitoring processes used for more responsive operational improvements. In turn, separating the gathering of CX data as a distinct action allowed me to examine the specifics of data collection in the B2B context.

In fact, my analysis revealed several ways in which the B2B context influenced the methods used by the firms to understand CX. First, there was an *emphasis on networks and channel partners as relevant sources of information* for customer journey mapping. It should be noted that the presence of various intermediaries, dealers, and external partners characterize the B2B sector and its complex services. Accordingly, several providers in the sample only had partial control over the customer journey and needed inputs from their business networks to fully understand CX across multiple touchpoints.

Second, business customers as sources of data had their own traits. *Different actors in customer organizations served as sources of different information* for the provider firms. To understand the customer experience of “doing business” with the firm, i.e., a relationship-level understanding, the decision-makers or representatives of the buying center were the main sources of data. However, to understand the experience of using the offering or further benefits of the solution for both individuals and the organization, the firms considered a wider range of actors in their data collection, including different user groups and multiple hierarchies.

Furthermore, the managers reported that *business customers were extremely willing to participate in research and development* by giving feedback and suggestions for improvement. However, while actors in the customer firms gladly engaged in operations related to insight generation, they did not exhibit an equal desire to be continuously monitored, according to the interviewed managers. The interviewees further stated that customers who participated in CX research has made customers feel heard and valued. However, some mentioned that careless and exceedingly frequent questionnaires at touchpoints, even short ones, might be value detractors.

It was interesting to observe the *diversity of analytical methods dependent on customer volume*. While B2B markets are often characterized by a small number of

customers of different sizes, some B2B firms in the studied sample had thousands of customers, resulting in data amounts and types that they could not easily analyze manually. As qualitative data received much attention, different machine-learning-based tools were used for textual analytics. Therefore, the study shows that B2B CX data can originate from other than the traditional sources such as sales and key account managers.

Finally, the CX insights produced often had *a clear separation between market-customers (transactional exchanges) and partner-customers (relational exchanges)*. The differences were visible both in the types of data collected and the journeys and touchpoints considered. Providers often had different kinds of offerings, from low-involvement products or service packages, which could be routinely purchased and made to work “invisibly” in the background, to more involved partnership models where the offerings consisted of complex, made-to-order solutions, including consulting and knowledge-intensive services. Further differences between transactional and relational exchanges were evident in the individual and organizational value drivers that the interviewed managers reported. Their own research showed that valuable CXs differ for customers involved in transactional and relational exchanges.

7.2.2 Facilitating customer experiences

The second type of activity in CXM is motivated by provider firms’ aim to facilitate desirable CXs. A firm’s role in CX creation involves three generic actions: 1) designing and managing touchpoints, 2) designing and managing journeys, and 3) managing unexpected events at touchpoints and along journeys (see also Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). This dissertation enriches the existing literature by offering a comprehensive articulation of the significance this activity type has in B2B organizations that deliberately manage CXs.

Designing and managing touchpoints can be conceptualized as the design and organization of different *cues* at touchpoints. Evidence for this action can be seen in the interview data, specifically in responses regarding the firms’ CX improvement and development projects. CX managers are tasked with ensuring that the design of products, marketing and communication materials, and spaces contain the right cues and stimuli to produce the desired experiences at touchpoints, as illustrated by the following interview quotes:

“For example, **web pages or marketing material**: we have our own experts who know [these areas], and then we **reflect it in our [CX] framework** that I have produced, like does it support **enthusiasm** [...] whether we produce a **sense of community** and are able to **control customer frustration**.” (JSL)

“Since we’re developing accounting [software], you have to keep in mind one particular fact about our customers: no one actually wants to do this. [...] we’re introducing **gamification** bits in the software, so the customer should **feel rewarded for actually using it** and at least log in every day, make sure that all their banking transactions actually match the accounting.” (JSJ)

While, for example, graphic and software design are always present in one way or another when touchpoint cues are produced, CX management efforts involve collaborating with different design professionals to connect these little details to the firm’s strategic goals. Managing firm-controlled stimuli at touchpoints also includes influencing employee behavior in different interactions. In contrast to predesigned cues, these social stimuli cannot be strictly monitored. Instead, managers make sure that everybody in the organization is on the same page and takes CX into account in their actions:

“Our **customer service** has clear principles; for example, we try to **answer [queries] within a certain [amount of] time**, [...] so there are certain standards, and we try to **exceed expectations** and think of ways to make it **the most pleasant experience possible**. **Marketing and communications** have their own mission: ‘we add value with every post we make.’ [...] so instead of thinking [about] what we want to tell [customers], we think about what the customer should hear, **what information they need**. So when we plan our communications, [...] I spar with our communications director about **what it means from the customer experience perspective**. [...] of course, **sales** is extremely important, because our tickets are traditionally mostly sold through **telesales** [...] salespeople understand **their role in customer experience formation**.” (PSB)

In addition, to achieve the goal of touchpoint management, the firms tried to influence partner-owned and customer-owned touchpoints in different ways, consequently dealing with the challenge of touchpoint ownership that is often encountered in B2B markets (see Witell et al., 2020):

“In some countries, **the majority of our sales is done via distributors**. [...] So, of course, deploying this type of customer experience activity with distributors is much more difficult than with our internal salesforce.” (CLM)

“In our case, it’s more like **the customers are out of our control** because we **never have direct contact with them**, because they are always **buying through our channel partner**. [Even when] we don’t have control, **we should have a**

lot of influence. I think that is why **partner engagement is very important:** How do we make the partner collaborate with us? How do we make the partner open up and more willing to share information about the customers with us? That is never easy.” (JLI)

My analysis revealed that the firms not only focused on the individual touchpoints but also attempted to influence the whole customer journey. Activities related to *designing and managing customer journeys* involved creating, sequencing, and adapting touchpoints along the customer journey to improve CX. The data illustrated the different approaches managers took to journey design and management, from aligning and prioritizing touchpoints to adapting and expanding the range of touchpoints. The managers rarely explicitly talked about new journey design, as most of their projects were focused on the improvement and management of existing journeys. However, the following quote illustrates how different actors within the customer organization are important for journey design:

“By understanding this persona [the actor], we can then understand their [actor’s] needs, their expectations, and what sort of challenges [they face], and we then **design a customer journey with this persona in mind.**” (JLI)

In many responses, touchpoint consistency during the customer journey was emphasized as an important element of journey management. However, consistency in experience differs from consistency in stimuli, as the following respondent pointed out:

“We have defined **the general experience**, how we want to be experienced, but have not really made any difference to what that is at the point of sale or other [touchpoint]. In practice, there are some differences, but [...] it must be **a single continuum** in any case. And, of course, there is the **potential to implement it in slightly different ways at different stages.**” (JSS)

The interviewed managers further emphasized that with the multitude of customer journeys related to a single business customer, it is important to focus on the moments when the provider’s actions can be most influential in terms of CX. Thus, the prioritization of touchpoints gains even more importance in business markets:

“We need to understand **the moments of truth**, and obviously it will be **different for different people.** For the **implementation phase**, once a company has decided to use our product, they purchase it; and then they need to implement

it for 500 employees. So, **what is the moment of truth for this person** [responsible for the implementation], how do we **make him succeed in his job**. For the **purchaser**, the **decision-maker**, there will be **something else** that he is looking for, so it's important that we understand this whole journey and **find the correct points where we can make a difference**, where **we can impact that experience**." (JLI)

"So, we're looking at the whole customer journey and **the moments that we would like to make a difference in** and **what kind of things are going on in the customer's world**. [...] we have very **complex players** here, so it's **not necessarily one moment for one customer**. It might be one moment for **several different players**. So [we need] to try and think about those moments and **what should we provide**. [...] **things that we should do**, tools which might be available; services, people, the attitude as well." (CLW)

The findings also indicated that the firms used smart, automated processes to adapt not only the content of their touchpoints but also the timing. This gave them better control in meeting customers at the current stage of their journeys. The following quote illustrates the use of marketing automation to facilitate communication encounters:

"The customer always decides the context in which they do business with us. Of course, **we want to be there in the right moment**, keep our finger on the customer's pulse. We cannot fully control [how the customer behaves] but we can **guide the customer**. With better analytics and modeling, better interaction channels, and smarter processes, we can strive [to make sure] that our **customer wouldn't need to think and wonder what should they do next**, and we can be **more proactively in touch** with them. [...] We have this concept—smart sales lead—where **we utilize machine learning and marketing automation** and, with its help, recognize customers that are interested in particular topics. [If] a customer has read our digital content and told us that they are a person that makes decisions in this area, we score them and **contact them when it is the right time**." (KLO)

Furthermore, I was able to identify the differences between relational and transactional exchanges in journey design. Compared to customers involved in routine transactions, key customers that purchase complex solutions already have many contact points with the provider. However, firms attempt to expand the range of touchpoints for these key relationships even more to be able to facilitate experiences more relevant for the partnership:

“We call them partners: basically **80 per cent of our sales** go to these **customers**. So we focus intently on those partners. We have a separate stream of activity that is focused on those partners, and for them we’re **trying to increase the activity and the touchpoints that we have towards them**. So we open more of our experts to them, we open up more of our research to them, we use them as first point of calls for any product and service development, for stories, everything. [...] as a key group, and we focus on that group a lot. [The focus is] around **expanding the touchpoints with that group**.” (CLW)

Conversely, in journeys characterized by more transactional exchanges, the provider firms tried to simplify the process by removing as many touchpoints as possible and introducing self-service elements or “one-stop shop” practices.

Moving on, the third action for facilitating CX is the *managing of unexpected events at touchpoints and along journeys*. This action is directed at mitigating the negative consequences related to service failure, customer behavior, partner behavior, or force majeure, all of which influence CXs. This objective represents an important aspect of actions aimed at facilitating CXs, as CX is understood to be idiosyncratic and context-specific. The interviewed managers stated that they felt quite comfortable dealing with the uncontrollable elements of CXM and emphasized their ability to react to unexpected situational factors:

“I often say it’s **not always about getting it right** for the customers 100 percent of the time; it’s about **‘if it goes wrong, how quickly can we fix it and how well can we fix it.’**” (KLU)

“Then, of course, there are those times **when our own system doesn’t work**; there is a bug or something. We need to think of how we can **fix it and take care of it** in a way that it would **leave a good taste in the [customer’s] mouth**, as good as possible in the end.” (JSS)

Indeed, service recovery was considered by managers an important and loyalty-building point in customer journeys. However, as, understandably, none of the firms wanted to deliberately create moments of service failure—something that’s especially costly in industrial markets—they instead took measures to ensure that they were prepared for any eventuality. This included empowering and trusting their employees and establishing a process of learning from mistakes:

“**Trust helps a lot** [in dealing with uncontrollable events]. I trust in the team, in the experts, or in the customer. [...] Of course, there are situations that you cannot always affect. You also need to **go through and reflect** on [the

questions], ‘did we fail somewhere, should have we done things differently, or was it a situation where nothing could’ve been done differently?’” (JMH)

“You could also sometimes be **too controlling**. [...] one thing I noticed when I joined this organization is that they do indeed **know customers very well**. Sales have a pretty fantastic understanding. [...] And, I think that’s a really positive thing. [...] Where does this become inefficient, and where is the good-enough point [in controlling the processes]? [In] a company like [CLW], which is growing, it’s really hard not to just come and put processes everywhere and put rules everywhere. You **need a balance that [makes] people still feel like they’re getting things done their way.**” (CLW)

The data revealed some interesting situations related to customers’ conditions that the CX managers have had to consider. In sectors such as banking and insurance, for example, the service can result in undesirable consequences for the customer, such as denial of an insurance claim. Figuring out how to turn such a clearly upsetting situation into a positive one was also considered a part of CX management:

“It is inevitable that some of the damage will not be compensated for, and [...] it is **a really critical moment for the customer experience**; if for one reason or another, the compensation is not received, then how to **reverse this situation to create a good customer experience**—this **could be a real winning moment**. [...] by what means can the situation be approached or handled so that the customer will **leave the situation in good spirits** even if they **did not receive the compensation for the damage.**” (KLU)

Furthermore, to manage situations outside their direct control, providers followed methods such as clearly disassociating from the partners’ offerings through separate logos and disclaimers or, conversely, fully integrating with partners for a tight collaboration and information exchange:

“[Customers] register [on the JMF platform], enter our product, and then they can use it; **they have a shop inside the product**, and there they can click or **book certain services from the partners**, and we do all the billing and other things. So, they [customers] don’t have to interact with anybody—they can just do it all online and with one click. Overall, it’s our offering, that’s what they perceive, but **they fully understand if it’s a partner’s offering** [included in the platform] **because it’s very well stated; there’s a partner logo on it** and so on. [...] However, it’s **so embedded** that they always think it’s **a part of the [JMF] platform.**” (JMF)

“Of course, the **[partner] products we integrate with or the services**—they can **affect the customer experience** for sure. [...] So, what we’ve done to this point [is], after we’ve implemented the services, we hold **follow-up meetings**, and we keep in touch, usually through a customer experience manager from their side or some sort of key account manager, somebody who not only is in charge of the integrations but also the vision and [knows] what we want to do. If there’s any improvement meetings about things like, ‘okay, our **process is good enough for the customers.**’ [...] It’s important for us to sort of **align, give them feedback**, and so we do that **back and forth** to make sure that the customer is not actually forgotten.” (JSE)

Finally, unexpected conditions that have a huge impact on CX but can only be reacted to range from an illness or a mishap related to a single frontline employee to large-scale force majeure, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or wars and economic sanctions. Some interviewees noted the importance of transparency when prices were influenced or business was affected by such events. Sympathetic and caring target experiences were emphasized specifically in connection to larger events as a guideline for action. Notably, in some cases, unexpected and undesirable events became the provider’s moments to shine. The following quote is from a manager working in a security industry:

“**The most critical point is when the [security] breach happens**—how do we help our customers to react, to respond to this, [in a way] that would really **create that peak moment**. If it’s handled well, then I believe people will **stay with us for life**, so that is very critical.” (JLI)

Together, the above findings show that CX management involves the use of multiple tools and methods to design and manage firm-produced stimuli at touchpoints and along journeys as well as react to unexpected events. While the toolkit for the design and management of touchpoints and journeys is already rich, further development of machine-learning technology will no doubt make its quality skyrocket. In this regard, the sampled B2B firms did not shy away from the creative tools that service design has to offer. In fact, the study revealed several ways in which the B2B context influenced the firms’ activities for facilitating CXs.

The first influence was related to the firms’ *choices for context-appropriate cues at touchpoints*. While the research showed that different kinds of TXs were appropriate for the B2B context, from reassuring to inspiring ones, the firms’ use of cues was still limited by how they would be perceived in the professional context. Some interesting details arose in a discussion of visual cues in sales material, for example. A manager (JSS) reported that one actor group within a customer

organization found graphically appealing materials trustworthy, while another group found those designs off-putting and trusted materials that were graphically simpler or even amateurish; for the latter group, the use of graphically “bad” presentation material signaled that the salesperson was a professional in the core matter rather than in graphic design. Another example of cues in the B2B context was the use of particular colors and language in the offered material to make it more valuable to the customer firm (ELT). From these accounts, one can see how strongly the B2B context affects the interpretation and perception of firm-produced stimuli.

Second, the abundance of customer journeys resulted in *increased efforts toward touchpoint prioritization*. The firms’ CX insights revealed an overwhelming number of individual and organizational customer journeys; therefore, the managers focused on prioritizing different “moments of truth” for different actors: instead of prioritizing different actors, firms try to find moments where their own participation in the journey can be most beneficial for a particular actor and their experience, thus emphasizing impactful participation rather than journey control.

To mitigate the inability to address every actor’s journey, the firms focused on increasing the *continuity and cohesion of touchpoints from the perspective of the whole customer organization*. While this did not necessarily ensure a continuous journey for individual actors, the firms strived to facilitate experiences that would cohesively come together to reflect the overall CX with the provider, thus influencing the provider’s collective image.

In addition, the firms employed different journey management strategies for different customer segments. For business customers involved in more *relational exchanges*, providers strived to *expand the number of touchpoints* and interactions, while for customers participating in more *transactional exchanges*, firms focused on *minimizing the amount of interaction* to show respect for the customer’s time. However, these approaches seemed to complicate the strategies for developing customer relationships toward more relational exchanges. Further insights are needed on how these two strategies interact within a customer organization that’s involved in both transactional and relational exchanges.

Finally, the *relationship’s context* was found to *impact how providers address unexpected events at touchpoints*. Instead of ignoring or distancing themselves from the newly arisen problems, providers approached unexpected situations in ways that a couple in a healthy relationship would approach it: by taking responsibility for their mistakes, encouraging open communication, and setting boundaries in the business relationship. Thus, while some mechanisms of CX management are generic enough to be applied across different contexts, as they mostly consider H2H (human-to-human) interactions, the B2B context impacts the methods and operations chosen to accomplish the goal of facilitating CXs.

7.2.3 Aligning the organization with CXM

CXM has been characterized as a firm-wide management approach with the goal of positively influencing CXs to facilitate experiential value formation (Homburg et al., 2017). Thus, the third activity arising from the dialogue between the extant literature and the empirical findings comprises a group of actions directed at reforming the organization's structural and cultural resources, in turn improving its ability to understand and facilitate CXM activities. The alignment activity includes two actions: 1) adapting internal processes to support customer journeys and 2) developing CX-centered mindsets.

First, the research data showed that the *firms adapted their internal processes to support customer journeys*. More specifically, this action was aimed at supporting CX facilitation through the (re)design of journey-oriented processes, systems, and structures. The changes that were required for the firms to be able to facilitate desirable experiences were often internal. There is clear evidence that to support CX management across customer journeys, firms focused on closing knowledge gaps and improving internal communications:

“We are a **traditional silo-organization**, like any other. We probably will never get rid of silos fully. Everybody here is used to taking care of their own piece of their process. And now **the work we are doing is focused on smoothening the intersections of these processes** so that everybody has the big picture and not just their piece of the process.” (OLV)

“We have had quite a **siloed organization**, and now, because of that, we are making some **organizational changes** so that we **burst through the silos** and **increase our communications**. [...] Before, production was its own thing, and services and our [...] product management were separate. We are **bringing them together now**. And then customer service also joins it, and the support function that helps sales as well. [...] Now we'll have a separate support function that helps sales and customer support, like **a hub that provides internal support, internal guidance on services for the sales function**.” (JMX)

Internal communication of CX insights on its own has not been seen effective in breaking down organizational silos. Firms had to reorganize their knowledge-sharing and internal decision-making processes or even restructure parts of the organization to be able to achieve their CX plans and promises. Furthermore, the managers reported adapting and changing their IT systems to support the customer journey perspective:

“We are growing very quickly [...] and it means that we had **different kinds of [IT] systems**. [...] Now we are making our **system structure more sensible** so that we get to use them [the systems] in an **optimal way**, [...] and get the benefits that we need. Those are big investments and something that we discuss a lot in our executive team. [...] We think about how to **make those systems support the buying path**.” (QLB)

“It [CXM] includes the **systems that are in the background**; the **systems support us** so that we **have the right information**, so that **customer experience doesn't suffer** if, for example, we get customer's name wrong and that **information from the systems reaches the salesperson**, for example.” (DMA)

When focusing on systematic and structural organizational changes, some firms paid attention to the incentives and key performance indicator (KPI) systems that guide employee behavior. By revising reward systems based on experiential KPIs and constantly re-evaluating their effectiveness, firms were able to support customer journeys and align the organization with the CX strategy:

“**Customer experience is incentivized** through the **management bonus scheme**. So, 25% of all managers and leaders' bonuses are linked to the **performance of customer experience** in their business, which is great 'cause it really supports and drives [CX] from the top; it's the right thing we should be focusing on. [...] The **incentive is based on our actions**, our delivery against the **maturity model [CX-related]**, and the **customer outcome scores**.” (KLM)

However, not all firms found formal incentive systems and monetary rewards necessary. While some CX managers feared the misuse of reward systems (e.g., salespeople asking customers for better feedback), others felt that CX-focused mindsets were best supported through more informal social structures, such as public praises:

“We have **the best salesperson** or the **best colleague** [recognition] in the stores. [...] enforcing is **based on the customer experiences**, but **I don't** feel like I **need** to create an **incentive to do something completely different**.” (GLD)

In addition, the firms have established various tools to help employees achieve the desired effects on CX. These range from different process models to analytical tools that can bring the customer's voice and inputs to different organizational units:

“We’re going to launch a **customer-driven continuous development model** where we would expect business units to start using these tools themselves and **analyze their own areas based on that customer’s voice**, so that’s one thing that will definitely help implement [CX mindsets] in the future.” (KLU)

This leads us to the second action: there is evidence that firms focused on *developing CX-centered mindsets* as a part of their CXM efforts. This action was aimed at developing an organization-wide CX mindset that supports the company’s ability to facilitate desirable CXs. The importance of developing an organizational culture was emphasized by the majority of interviewed managers. Thinking about ways to nurture and develop this customer-centric culture then becomes a common task:

“It all starts with the **culture of the company, creating and nurturing** it. We discuss in the management group quite a lot about how we can make sure that the **good culture here is maintained.**” (JSS)

The findings highlighted the importance of recruiting, assigning, and training employees in ways that support the desired CXs and cultivate CX-centric mindsets.

“Within our customer service survey, [...] there have been times where the **feedback** was that **some of the employees lacked empathy**. So we picked that up as a **training need**, then we rolled out some customer care training on how to treat customers with empathy [...] at one point, we **changed the recruitment process** as well, so rather than having somebody with lots of medical experience, for example, we’d focus more on **softer skills such as empathy and care**. But there was certainly a balance as well ‘cause what you find is some customers, although they want empathy, some of them have got an emergency as well, so they need you to be solid and firm with them and deal with their issue, help them [...] there’s a fine line.” (KLM)

Employee training as a response to customer feedback was, however, only one way to embed a particular CX mindset into employees’ minds. Some managers conducted what they called “culture work”: they got employees involved in CX development projects to emphasize the importance of these projects and motivate employees to think about CX in their daily work.

“[For] implementing this mindset in the organization, how do we **get customer experience to be important everywhere?** That it is something that we keep track of and is always there in the daily work. [...] How do we get such a new

approach **embedded in this organization**, something that is a truly holistic perspective on things? I'd say it's probably [the biggest challenge]. And it comes as part of the **culture work** and it is **done as we move forward in** these bigger **customer experience projects**, and we're **doing these things together** in our organization, **involving and engaging people.**" (KLU)

In addition to engagement and training, some managers mentioned storytelling as a way to disseminate the desired CX mindsets. Through different success stories, managers not only cultivated certain models of behavior but clearly defined the aspects valued in the organization:

"We use a lot of **stories**. We tell [employees] a lot about how something was done. In a way, that [CX-centric] **culture is conveyed by sharing** what was happening last year and what kind of customer encounters occurred, so it becomes very clear to [the new employees]." (PSB)

"The role of the supervisor is really important [in the implementation of CX thinking]. There are **perfect examples**: one [unit] has a **customer experience idea board**, together with an occupational safety board. They've developed this system themselves. Anyone can go and put ideas there, and then they [the ideas] are considered. [...] **We have shared this example** [internally]. We strive to do that when **there's a good practice.**" (ELT)

Lastly, empowering employees to take responsibility for CX was underlined by several managers as an important component of developing CX-centric mindsets. The following interview quote presents a manager's response regarding the implementation of a freer organizational model in which each employee carries the responsibility for CX:

"The most difficult task was to **make people realize [the CX strategy] by themselves**. We haven't told it to them in the same way as I am condensing it here for you [...], but we talked about the things that we want to see happen. [...] **we don't give ready answers**, as **people should come up with them on their own**. [...] Change is always hard. [...] The first effort is always the hardest. If there is a very hierarchical and top-down organization that is rigid and limited in its operating environment, [...] freeing those people from it is the hardest thing in my experience of change management. The realization [is] that there is going to be **a lot of freedom** and that you can **decide more things yourself**, but you are also **responsible for decisions** like before." (NMR)

To sum up, the activities directed at aligning the firms with their CX strategies included adapting the internal processes of the organization and cultivating CX-centric mindsets. The reorganization of internal processes and systems involved different operations, such as improving knowledge-sharing processes, restructuring units, building cross-departmental teams, and renewing and upkeeping reward and information systems—all with the intent of supporting customer journeys. Developing CX-focused mindsets happened through hiring and training employees in soft skills, engaging employees in development projects, and implementing storytelling and empowerment tactics.

The actions and methods used to achieve this organizational alignment were internal and thus not as specific to the B2B context as the customer-facing activities. However, I still identified several issues that traditional B2B organizations, such as the ones in this study, might encounter more often than their B2C counterparts. Many B2B organizations have been historically sales- and product-dominant, which is still visible in the *siloiing of internally produced data*. While data relevant to CX were produced by sales, customer support, and product-related analytics (e.g., in the case of the digital offering) in the sampled firms, consolidating and disseminating the information was a challenge that many firms had to overcome through different knowledge-sharing practices. Furthermore, *B2B organizations may be characterized by an overly product-centric culture*, wherein caring for the customer needs is outsourced to the sales function. Thus, achieving cultural change would be challenging in B2B organizations with a long history of product-centered development. Nevertheless, establishing a separate function for CX management with top-management support and ability to communicate with multiple functions can give this approach the momentum it requires.

7.2.4 Summary of the findings on CXM activities in business markets

The findings presented in this section contribute to abductive theory building, complementing and organizing the extant knowledge on CXM and, as a result, providing an alternative conceptual model grounded in empirical work. The empirical findings help answer RQ2: *How do B2B companies strive to manage customer experiences?*

The analysis revealed three broad activity groups of CX management (**Figure 16**, p. 177). The activities can be separated into customer-facing, i.e., primarily directed at the customer, and internal, i.e., directed at the provider organization's internal processes.

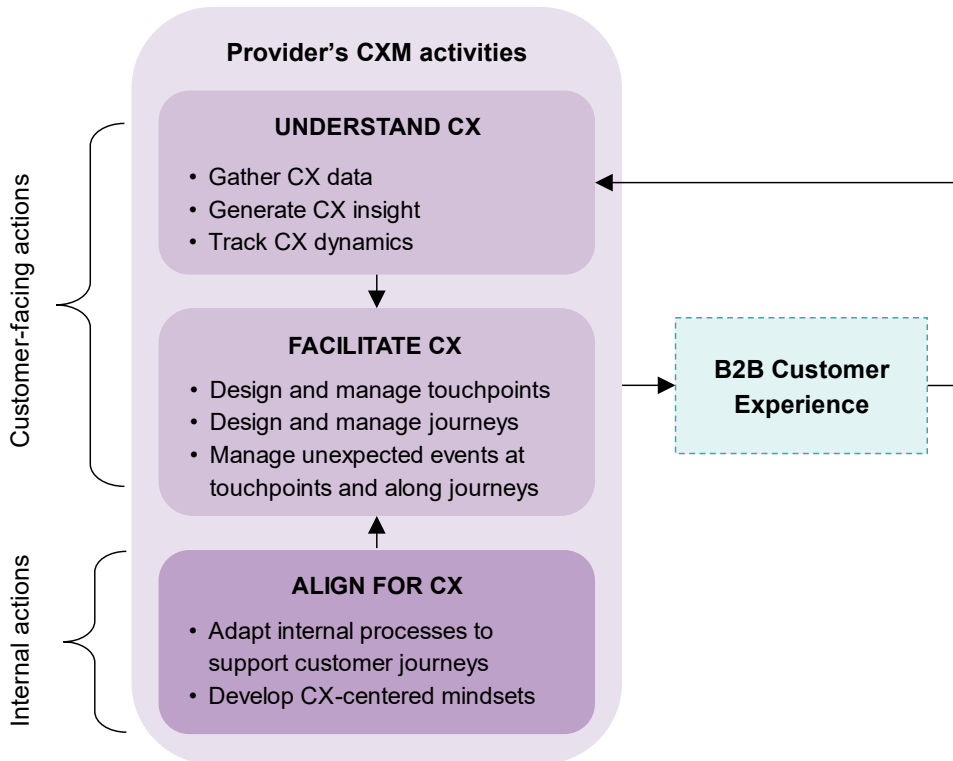


Figure 16. Providers' customer-facing and internal CXM activities

First, firms try to develop an *understanding* of their customers' experiences through the actions of gathering CX data, generating CX insights, and tracking CX dynamics (see also Holmlund et al., 2020). Second, firms engage in actions directed at *facilitating CX* at touchpoints and journeys, including the design and coordination of cues at touchpoints and along journeys as well as responding and preparing for unexpected events outside the provider's control (see also Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Finally, *aligning the organization* to support customer-facing CXM activities has risen from the data as a significant group of actions. This empirically grounded conceptualization diverges from the extant understanding of internal management actions (the "how"). Since strategy, culture, and capabilities can be considered overarching high-level concepts, they are separate from the more concrete internal CXM activities. Instead, actions for adapting internal processes to support customer journeys and for developing CX-centered mindsets have taken their place. These actions are necessary for firms to understand and facilitate activities, thus building their capabilities (cf. Homburg et al., 2017).

This improved conceptualization thus provides a fuller picture of CX management, bringing together several facets that were previously considered only

in a fragmented way. The new conceptualization further allows for linking CXM to the value creation process, thus explaining how firms can propose value through CXM and increase their competitive advantage in the market (see Section 8.2).

Second, the findings of this study enrich the understanding of how CX management activities are performed in the B2B context. For instance, they confirmed that the type of exchange (transactional vs. relational) has an impact on the way activities are understood and facilitated. According to prior literature, consistent and cohesive touchpoints are required for transactional exchanges, while context-sensitivity and connectivity are more important for relational exchanges (Homburg et al., 2017). My findings show that firms *strive to increase the number of touchpoints and the amount of time customers spend at them* when it comes to *relational exchanges*, which are characterized by their long durations and lack of a clear start or end (Witell et al., 2020). In turn, for *transactional exchanges*, firms attempt to further *reduce interactions and the number of touchpoints*, ideally limiting the interaction to a one-stop self-service shop. The different characteristics of CXM in business markets discovered through this study have contributed to the list of future research avenues proposed in Section 9.3.

7.3 Strategic roles of target experiences in CXM

Target experience would not be a meaningful phenomenon or an object of study if it did not have some kind of influence on managerial action. The empirical data demonstrates that B2B companies leverage target experiences in many ways to steer their CX management efforts. **Table 14** (p. 179) shows the data structure of this part of the analysis, going from the first-order informant centric concepts to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. As past studies on CX management have not offered a clear understanding of the key elements of a CXM strategy, I structured my findings according to Mintzberg's (1987) classic work on the different meanings of strategy. Using this analytical lens supported the formation of the aggregate dimensions and refinement of the data-driven second-order themes, which reflects the abductive theorizing approach. Thoroughly considering the concept of strategy (Section 5.1) directed my analysis of the strategic roles of target experiences that can be separated into 1) guiding customer-facing CX management actions; 2) building a shared CX mindset across the organization; and 3) helping to create and sustain a beneficial position in the markets with CXM. The analyzed strategic roles of target experiences are discussed in the following sections and presented in a table with power quotes in Appendix 2.

Table 14. Data structure of the strategic roles of target experiences

Aggregate dimensions	2 nd order themes	Definitions	1 st order informant-centric concepts (examples)
TXs guide customer-facing CXM actions	TXs guide the measurement of realized CX	Firms use target experiences as a yardstick to measure and make sense of the realized CX along customer journeys.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new measures based on TXs • TXs in customized CX measures • TX for interpreting open feedback <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
	TXs guide the design of customer journeys	Firms (re)design the combinations and sequences of (firm-controlled) touchpoints along customer journeys to support the realization of target experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs inform sequence of t-ps • TXs guide dev. of new t-ps • TXs ensure coherent journey • TXs increase consistency of t-ps <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
	TXs guide the design of touchpoints	Firms (re)design the combinations of (firm-controlled) experiential cues at touchpoints to support the realization of target experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs guide details in f2f interaction • TXs guide design of comm. materials • TXs in UI design <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
TXs build a shared CX mindset across the firm and partner networks	TXs form a common interpretive framework for action	Firms use target experiences as a common reference point shared among employees and service partners and informing their actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs shared across departments • TXs guide front-line staff behav. • TXs transl. insight into action frame <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
	TXs support the alignment of organizational systems	Firms use target experiences as a rationale for aligning their and their service partners' internal systems, structures, and processes, thus sharing the CX mindest structurally.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs demand new CRM system • reward systems built around TXs • TXs structure customer support unit <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
TXs help create and sustain a beneficial position in the market	TXs define the firm's position in relation to its competitors' CX efforts	Firms use target experiences to define their position in the industry by relating them to their competitors' CX efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not left behind in CX • best CX in the industry • better than others in nuanced TX <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
	TXs build recognizable brand associations	Firms position in the market as providers of unique customer experiences by building associations between the target experiences and the brand name.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs bring branded message • assoc. with recognizable TX • on-brand CX in each t-p • TXs & desired brand image merged <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>
	TXs propose experiential value to customer	Firms use target experiences to articulate their promises of valuable customer experiences meant to result in both individual and organizational value for customer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TXs bring individual value • TXs valuable for organizations • TXs integrated in value promises • TXs valuable professionally and personally <p style="text-align: right;">...</p>

7.3.1 Target experiences guide firms' customer-facing CXM actions

The traditional and most commonly used definition of strategy treats it as an explicit and consciously developed *plan*, an intended course of action (Mintzberg, 1978) meant to set a direction and focus the firm's efforts and actions (Mintzberg, 1987a). But how can one plan a trajectory towards the bull's eye (see Yavitz & Newman, 1982) if the target is unclear? The quote below expresses this concern:

“We are doing different things based on what the customer pain points are. [...] But the **Northern Star is sort of missing—what is it that we want to do?** Because we cannot be everything to everybody all the time. We also need to choose our battles, and **it's difficult to choose our battles if we don't know what the target state is.**” (CLM)

My findings in this study showed that target experiences can be connected to CX strategy to guide various firm activities in a particular direction. More precisely, the data provided evidence for three ways in which TXs can direct a firm's customer-facing actions toward understanding and impacting CX formation, namely by guiding 1) the measurement of realized CXs, 2) the design of customer journeys, and 3) the design of touchpoints.

First, *target experiences guide CX measurement*: firms can use target experience as a yardstick for realized CXs along customer journeys. When the sampled firms aimed to create general, positive CXs, they typically used traditional customer research methods and customer-related measures such as satisfaction (CSAT), loyalty, service quality, or customer effort (CES) for measuring success and examining whether the numbers were proceeding in the right direction:

“The higher your **Net Promoter Score**, is the more difficult it becomes to improve. [...] we're **getting enough data** to allow us to **measure how well we're doing** and also to analyze which parts of the customer experience we're doing well with and **which ones we need to improve.**” (CLP)

“We have certain metrics, and we have **our own goals for NPS**. Our support service always sends inquiries [to customers] after resolving support requests; we have certain goals about how many answers are expected, **how many commendable answers there are**, etc. So those are things that we pay attention to and also to our customer satisfaction results. [We look] at trends like **whether general satisfaction is declining or rising.**” (GSK)

Some interviewees from firms that had defined nuanced target experiences noted that those TX features had to be incorporated into the measurements. Firms commonly modified key customer metrics such as NPS, CSAT, or CES, or even developed custom measurements for target experiences to comprise a toolkit aimed at measuring the achievement of these experiences:

“We have our customer **experience vision defined**, and, for example, **in the NPS survey** at encounters or **the satisfaction survey**, we have **tried to add some similar questions** so that **we can really prove if our vision is realized in our daily work**. And in terms of being a financial partner, we’ve done a panel study to see **how good we measure up** if you look at the whole market.” (KSE)

“We want to create such a customer experience that a customer **can rely on us**—we are **friendly**, and we are **flexible**. [...] also in customer experience measurement we **get high ratings exactly for these strategic indicators**, [showing] that we work according to our values, that we keep the promises we give, that our staff is friendly, [and that] it is flexible to work with us. [...] **These three things [form] the kind of experience we want [to create]**. [...] At the moment, **we measure them annually**.” (QLB)

The quote below describes how the feelings of being valued, appreciated, relieved, and cared for have been integrated into KLU’s regular questionnaires at touchpoints:

“We want to know how customers experience doing business in certain channels, what things stand out there, and how we are performing in relation to them. [...] Our customer satisfaction surveys **measure NPS, CES where it makes sense**. [...] then **we also ask the question about emotions, in those questionnaires that are given after touchpoints**. We ask [customers] ‘what is the main feeling that comes to mind about that encounter,’ and then **it has ready-made options for those feelings**. And **they are kind of linked to the brand as well, what kind of emotional experience the brand wants to achieve**.” (KLU)

Many managers also expressed that it was difficult to measure and interpret TX achievements, both general and more nuanced, purely through customer surveys. They noted the need to provide open-ended questions and move towards softer qualitative CX elements that could be described in terms of emotions and perceptions:

“Within our surveys, there’s **not just a ‘how do you score us (from) zero to ten’** let’s say for the NPS scale; **we also have free text, customers leave us videos**, and there’s lots of different tools like **text analytics tools**, where they’re **picking up positive, negative, or neutral sentiments**. We’re looking for certain words, trigger words; if a customer says something, then that will get picked up.” (KLM)

Thus, to complement their traditional research methods, the firms gathered and analyzed textual and oral feedback data obtained either from the firms’ systems or from external sources such as social media. For some business models, the markets were characterized by a lower number of customers, so the achievement of target experiences could be monitored in less laborious ways:

“I know we are succeeding [at achieving TXs] because **we have customers spontaneously tell us.**” (JSJ)

In firms with standard offerings or large end-user groups, manual processing was not suitable to handle the volume of customers and related customer data. In these cases, managers reported the use of machine learning technology:

“Basically, the **AI is doing the work**. We get about 40,000 consumer feedbacks a year in Finland. About **15% are open comments**, which are really the ones that we’re working with. Basically, the **AI is finding keywords in the comments and distributing them in each impact area**. Then, for those areas, I have ownership, so it’s **not just one customer experience measurement.**” (HMA)

In addition, managers widely noted the importance of obtaining systematic qualitative feedback from customers through frontline employees:

“So those problems [pain points] were actually mapped out [and were] **coming from the employee level**, that ‘hey, what changes would you like to see?’ Then, we compiled a synthesis of [their responses]. [...] **Our workers** who know best and are the ones who **are dealing with customers the most every day**, they say ‘hey, we got this kind of **feedback from customers**; this is what we could do smarter.’” (JLG)

It must be noted that not all the firms that had defined nuanced TXs used them for measuring realized experiences: often, the nuanced TXs served only one or two roles in the organization, while other CXM actions followed a more general pattern.

This suggests that general and nuanced TXs can coexist within an organization, taking on different roles.

Second, I found that *target experiences guide the design of customer journeys*. The interviewees emphasized that TXs are facilitated not only by individual touchpoints but also the functioning of the customer journey as a whole. Target experiences were stated to drive customer journey development, for instance, in terms of aligning the existing touchpoints, designing new touchpoints, or getting rid of unnecessary touchpoints.

“... how can we **streamline** that, how can we **improve** it, how can we just, **cut things out** potentially.” (KLM)

“We want to provide customers with **the most hassle-free IT** possible. [...] the experience we want to give to the client is that **we disturb the client’s staff in their work as little as possible**. [...] What **stage** we are at, what **contact points** we have with customers and how they are managed, how often the customer is contacted, what is the focus at any given time—this has all been **thought through very carefully**. [Specifically] **through fluency**. [...] communication plays a very important role in customer experience. We inform [customers about] what is going on, what happens next, when it happens, etc.” (GSK)

Many of the firms saw striving for uniformity in the TXs at each touchpoint as a way to achieve a cohesive journey-level experience. For instance, manager JSL described how syncing touchpoints in journey design allows for empowering and inspiring experiences:

“We check that **everything is in line with our brand manual**, that everything has the same spirit, **independent of what touchpoint it is** or what channel the customer is coming from. [...] Now that the different **touchpoints are synced** and we say the same things everywhere, we are able to bring our point of view and **realize this personal and exciting experience**.” (JSL)

In turn, manager JSS, who earlier described desirable experiences for the two target groups: an easygoing, nonthreatening experience for the users of the offering (marketing / product managers) and feelings of trust and reassurance among the people responsible for the implementation of technically demanding software (IT managers), emphasized the importance of consistently implementing this strategy across multiple touchpoints:

“We have made a content strategy, among other things, where [target experience] is clearly described. But **it has to be visible in all encounters**. [...] This content strategy work is aimed exactly at this: that **we get everything consistent**. [...] Now we focus on how the customer experience can **continue in a consistent manner** from the sales [stage and] forward.” (JSS)

Interestingly, building consistent and recognizable experiences did not necessarily mean that the same target experiences were present in all encounters. One case showed a clear variation in the TXs across the customer journey, with different target experiences considered suitable for different stages of the journey. The TXs included feelings of excitement during the sales stage, confidence as the deployment project progressed, and motivation to grow and improve afterward. The manager stated that, together, these target experiences were designed to create an overall experience consistent with the firm’s brand.

While nuanced TXs were responsible for facilitating journey-level experiences consistent with a provider’s brand, general TXs also played a role in journey design. For firms guided by general target experiences, it was important to have a positive experience at each touchpoint and experiences that could potentially exceed customer expectations at the most important touchpoints.

“Doing something that **customers notice**, it creates a **positive experience** [...] we can measure at **each point in the customer journey** when the customer interacts with us whether it’s **positive, negative, or neutral**. Then, what we can do based on customer feedback over time is **to tweak and improve it**. So if we’re doing that, we’re providing a **great customer experience**, which is constantly **evolving and improving**. [...] and if something goes wrong, how quickly we **fix it** [also matters].” (KLM)

Moreover, the idea of a better or improved experience also guided journey design in the sampled firms, intertwined with broader service development initiatives. Indeed, the firms’ focus on supporting customers in their journeys and their businesses was connected to achieving better CXs and was more characteristic of the general TX category:

“Our staff might say ‘hey, this is just fine, but we thought **this thing could be better** in this and that way, so could we start doing this for our client.’ And then I’ll run with it; I’ll talk to the client and often it might be that they say ‘brilliant, awesome idea, let’s do it!’ And then we do that, [which,] in turn, **increases customer satisfaction**, especially when we could be proactive and come and say

‘hey, **this could serve you really well**’ or ‘we’ll do it differently.’ So they [customers] are usually **really happy** with that kind of thing.” (JSB)

“Describing customer **journeys to better serve customer in the future** [is important]. In addition to describing the current customer journey, we start describing the **future target state**, some kind of optimistic ideal that we currently imagine it could be. And [we] start focusing on those **improvement measures**, more on **what takes us toward it** [the target state] and not fixing the old journey.” (KMD)

The CX insights gained by the providers often revealed gaps in customer journeys: inconsistencies in CXs or, more poetically, bumps in the road. Service development was then tasked with filling these gaps, focusing on supporting customers on their journeys and in their businesses:

“We are at the level where we say that we want our CX to be good. [...] We are thinking about what kind of goals and needs the customers—these different segments—have, what communication channels they **would use in the future**. Then we’re thinking about the **solutions**, so what if [...] fewer people actually want to call, but they want a chatbot or digital online service [...] to take care of their business. If we establish that this is the case, then **the development of those digital services will be on our roadmap**. [...] We also strive to **develop new products and services** for the customer. **To better serve the customer**, and the **customer’s business**. That is, our **service offering** and our product offering also **affect the customer experience**.” (DMA)

Following the same logic of filling the gaps in customer journeys, the nuanced TXs guided the introduction of supporting services and educational material as additional touchpoints that bring the business relationship close to the desired state:

“We have some **educational videos** on our YouTube channel [...] we ask whether any aspect is perceived as **difficult to use** and whether it can be helped by organizing **training sessions**.” (GSK)

“The **[ELT portal] offers a view** where you can find all the waste items at a customer’s properties, and they can see when the car is coming [to collect the waste]. [...] With this, we also **seek emotion**. They [customers] **are responsible for it**. [With the portal], they have the ability to **see that the job is going to be taken care of**. And, of course, [there’s] also the **ease** of that [service], a certain kind of **traceability**.” (ELT)

Thus, the findings unveiled how target experiences guide journey design in different ways, from enabling the cohesiveness of touchpoints and filling gaps in customer journeys to prioritizing critical touchpoints for peak target experiences.

Third, the data revealed that *target experiences guide the design of touchpoints* using experience cues. These include automated service cues and predetermined personnel actions; marketing and communication materials; colors, words, and imagery in digital offerings; and the materials and design elements of products and packaging.

“If you can find something within this [accounting] that **brings you joy or a smile**, then that is fundamentally important. [...] One of the [things we do] is **getting rid of difficult words** or language that makes customers **feel** slightly **uneducated** in the field. [...] We want our customers **not to be intimidated**. We work with, for instance, **nice, cozy, happy colors**. We try to add **little things** that might be totally pointless but maybe make customers **feel some sliver of joy**. For instance, if you search for a term through one of our tiny search boxes and you don’t get a result, instead of having just a blank page or a label saying ‘we didn’t find anything,’ you’ll see **a unicorn eating a doughnut**.” (JSJ)

“Little things, an **automated ticket**, it is [...] a negative experience for the customer, it is **not a positive experience** [in terms of the TX of feeling cared for and respected]. It’s a machine; a lot of people think, ‘this damn machine has sent me a ticket!’ It’s much better when you get the **message** that [says], ‘Hi, **I am Janne, I’ll take care of this thing**’; they don’t expect that, because they get the ticket from the competitors.” (JMA)

The interviews showed that the little details also matter for the achievement of the general positive experiences but as less precise experiential cues:

“The be-all and end-all of what we do is in all these **little, little details** that we’re aiming for. [...] It’s these little nuances. For example, we regularly remind our entire company that there’s an important customer visiting and to **greet them** when they come to the office so that there is a **good mood here and it is pleasant to come here**. [...] When the customer visits, of course, we have **good coffee, tea**. We take our customers to **lunch** every now and then, and we have **Christmas packages** for those customers with whom we have a lot of cooperation. [...] We have a **ping-pong table at the office**; if a customer wants to have a match with us, we will play a game with them before or after the meeting. These are the little things that show that we care about the customer and [that help us] build that trust and interpersonal relationship.” (JSB)

These cues could have been traced better if my research project focused on a particular CX development project rather than on the general CXM practice; nevertheless, the short examples that managers recalled clearly evidence the influence of TXs on the smallest details of the service. This is also the most straightforward and common application of TXs in experience design and other design directions.

Considering the novelty of CXM, it was clear that some of the actions and decisions of the CX managers were emergent rather than preplanned; making them “open, flexible, and responsive” to learning (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985, p. 271). This means that even when lacking a pre-established and clearly articulated strategically desired experience (Homburg et al., 2017; Mosley, 2007), firms could strive for a particular kind of experience, for example, through strategies originating in the process or consensus (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). This aligns with the view of strategy as a consistent *pattern* in a realized stream of action (Mintzberg, 1987a). Depending on how intentional they are, the actions result in either deliberate or emergent strategies (Mintzberg, 1987a). While the research design of this study did not allow for distinguishing between deliberate or emergent plans and patterns, some data (e.g., target experiences expressed primarily through actions or articulated through inconsistent vocabulary; see quotes above) suggested that some firms were still in the process of forming a consensus around target experiences based on various activities and behaviors.

Thus, through the abductive data analysis, I identified three ways in which B2B provider firms have used target experiences to strategically guide their customer-facing actions. Specifically, the firms used target experience as an ideal state for the evaluation of realized CXs along customer journeys, for design of customer journeys and to inform the use of experiential cues at touchpoints. The claim that these methods of guiding CXM actions could be seen as strategic is, in turn, based on the understanding of strategy as a deliberate plan or a consistent pattern of action leading towards the desired end goal.

7.3.2 Target experiences help build a shared CX mindset across the firm and its partner networks

The findings of the present study highlighted how target experiences result in a shared meaning among the employees, departments, and partner networks of a firm. This understanding is based on the view of strategy as a shared *perspective* that gives meaning to people working within an organization; individuals are united by a collective idea, which emphasizes the constructive and illusory nature of the strategy concept (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b). The findings showed that target experiences contributed to shared meanings within the sampled firms by 1) forming a common

interpretive framework for action and 2) supporting the alignment of organizational systems.

First, I found that *target experiences formed a common interpretive framework for action* and provided employees in different departments and at different hierarchy levels a common reference point for understanding and reflecting on their behaviors in relation to pursued CX. Human interactions could not be entirely predetermined and designed by the firms for each touchpoint due to their very nature, but a common understanding of nuanced TXs offered the personnel an interpretive framework that they could use to self-regulate behavior. This helped the firms deal with uncontrollable stimuli and different kinds of customers in service and communication encounters as well as with behind-the-scenes decisions:

“We are talking about this **smooth energizing experience principle**. [...] It guides us well. In a way, the same smooth energizing experience is what our **IT department** should do, our **sales [department]** should do, our **communications [department]** should do. [...] An example of a good understanding of customer experience in this company is that we accept that we **can’t have a thick manual** on how to do things, but we **have a strong empowering approach** toward it. They [employees] have **a few basic principles**. [...] But how they do it varies a lot. Even volunteers who come to us are given a free hand.” (PSB)

“...these **themes**, these **top-level concepts** which were given to these departments, they are a mixture of our value proposition and business goals. So there are margins, but there is also this **risk management partnership** goal. That’s what [these themes, including TXs] are built on, and with them we take care of the uniformity. In a way, we want to give some freedom [so that] people can influence their own goals, but on the other hand, we should also **make sure** that the **CX is consistent**. [...] We have this frame, so those themes are important, but everyone can affect themselves at least 80 percent.” (KLO)

Interestingly, the more nuanced target experiences materialized into detailed frameworks that were often represented visually or through simple phrases that encapsulated the main experiential goal. Such frameworks gave employees some room for interpretation, yet ensured that everyone in the organization and across partner networks were on the same page:

“Here is our **[NMR CX] model** [represented visually]. This **Head** shows that we keep our customer in mind; we have ears so that we hear what the customer wants. After an encounter with our company, a customer should have a smile on their face, so here we refer to our main measurement, NPS. The **Heart**

[represents] taking customers to heart, throwing yourself into service, making bold choices. [...] being respectfully present for them [the customers]. [...] The **Foot** is typical for our industry; it is very fast-paced, and one must be able to do things quickly. [...] At the individual touchpoints, we first aim to get everything to the same level, and then through the [NMR CX] model [we] increase it all the time so that we can deliver peak experiences to our customers. [...] With CX, you **can't really offer a recipe**. [...] That's kind of why we decided that our model of customer experience must be **very general where it's easy to apply your own thinking**. So when I act according to [this model], [for] any level of customer, things should work out well." (NMR)

Conversely, the data also showed that in the absence of nuanced TXs, this kind of detailed framework was often missing. However, this was overcome by the firms' emphasis on the importance of better or great customer experiences (more general target experiences), reinforcing the underlying ideas of a customer-centric culture:

"People from the operational level are involved in every one of these development projects, and most of them have been extremely enthusiastic, and it feels like they're finally getting to **do their bit in achieving a better customer experience**. [...] That **shift in the mindset** from engineer, product, and process efficiency-based thinking to **thinking about customer needs**, and [understanding] that all development projects start from what the customer needs, is a really big change process, and it doesn't happen overnight. It's about **continuous change management**." (DLZ)

"At least I have managed to add '**customer at the center**' to **our company's values**. I'm not sure if it is still just in the celebratory speeches [laughs], but if you go to our website, you'll see that what we say we value, it is there. That **everything should start with the customer**, and it should be like this **in our culture**." (JMO)

Target experiences were often used in employee training and management to guide employee behavior and consequently influence CX. Although this role is closely linked with CX facilitation, its emphasis on looking at CX strategy as a shared perspective helped address *how* target experiences can be used to build a customer-centric culture rather than whether they guide employee activities:

"What we manage? We manage **the attitude of our colleagues**, I would say. And we manage this **environment of constant improvement** in the company. We try to **nurture this attitude** that we have to be **attentive to clients**. **We have**

to care. [...] building this **culture of attention to client and continuous improvement.** [...] We tried to build this awareness that [CX] is important [...] I saw the change in their [employees] attitude. I saw how they think differently, and I saw how they actually sincerely tried to do things better, and I think that this is a good thing. [...] These people are **100 percent dedicated to the goal of making customers happy and working on continuous improvements.**” (NLQ)

Interviewees emphasized that nuanced and general TXs could not lead to a shared meaning in an organization without continuous communication, persistent change management, and the development of a customer-centric culture. While the research design did not allow for studying the formation of a customer-centric culture or the degree to which TXs were shared among employees, I could infer from the CX managers’ accounts that target experiences, being inherently customer-centric, were instrumental in cultivating a customer-centric culture when put in easily understandable and shareable forms.

Second, I found evidence that *target experiences supported the alignment of organizational systems*, which contributed to breaking down organizational silos and creating fruitful work environments for achieving the chosen target experiences. The interviewed managers understood that different functions have different, yet important, roles in CX creation, and they organized their work around customer processes and nuanced TXs. The target experiences provided a rationale and reference points for structural changes in the organizations, including changes to department structures, hierarchies, IT systems, and knowledge sharing practices. Common ideas about experiential goals could thus be shared through structural changes rather than softer communicative frameworks.

“We think about [...] how do we build the kind of **buying experience, a service experience** for that customer, that it **seems easy to them** even if we have some hassle in the background. [...] We try to make it **frictionless for [the customer]**, whether it is the B2B-customer or the consumer, so that it goes as **easily and flexibly and reliably** as possible. But that’s an internal grappling with **systems** and them **talking to each other** and not so much the silos of business units anymore. From that we’ve moved on, [...] but we still have some work to do on those **systems and integrations.**” (QLB)

“When it comes to knowledge, you cannot necessarily digitalize anything unless you have **digitized the knowledge** that often is in people’s heads. [...] I always get this when I interview people [employees]. [I ask] ‘How do you sort this out with your customers? You have datasheets?’ And they [say], ‘I have everything

in my head.’ [...] Which is great, you are an expert, but your knowledge is not documented, so it can’t be accessed, and it can’t be shared; hence, it can’t be digitized. It’s not digitized, and you **can’t have a digital experience** if these steps aren’t fulfilled first.” (CLR)

The data further revealed that TXs were used in decisions related to hiring practices, ownerships over functions, the redesign of internal procedures, centralization or decentralization of services, and digitalization of processes. The most dramatic organizational changes were claimed to be driven by target experiences in customer support functions.

“[...] when **we put the responsibility for customer service on everyone** rather than some certain people, then if there is a more complex problem, a person [a representative of the provider firm] calls you [the customer] and clearly understands the technology [being used]. So you **get a good feeling** that ‘okay, now **someone who really understands this thing is doing something about this**. That way you **are ready to wait much longer**, even if it [the service] lasts just as long.” (JMA)

“We want to serve customers **fast**, and we want to be **compassionate**. [...] What we are already doing and know how we want to stand out is that we want to be **close to the customer**. We want to be **approachable**. For example, last year I was **breaking some silos** here. [...] we’ve changed so that we have **one point of contact** for customers. It is our service desk. We want to **serve customers personally**, and we are no longer doing this—that this call will be transferred somewhere such that the **customer feels that they are going into a black hole**. [...] There are already frameworks for these; we want to serve customers agilely as a small business to small business, **compassionate and agile**.” (JMC)

The role of TXs in providing a shared meaning through organizational alignment was also evident in the ways the managers used target experiences to make decisions about prioritizing development projects or designing KPI and reward systems.

“This **ease of doing business**, it translates into many things in terms of our actual projects and our ways of working because it also means many things. [...] **It helps us as a team understand what projects we might push for**, [...] what [development projects] are worth pursuing, because there’s loads of opportunities out there. There’s quite an endless list of things that can be done. And then trying to get those projects on the agenda of our stakeholders. I would say **we use it** [the target] **more as our guiding tool**.” (CLW)

“We have **high-level KPIs**, and we also have a **high-level understanding of what kinds of experiences we would like to deliver** [...] that every task customer has they can solve **without any additional efforts**. All these efforts will be less compared to all competitors. That’s an objective we have, and that objective can be **transferred into some hard numbers and KPIs**.” (JLQ)

Some firms had clear KPIs based on TXs (although a rarity in the sample), but they faced challenges in determining which KPIs should be used to inform the reward system. Another challenge was the incentive itself: informants warned of the potential misuse of monetary incentive models for CX. The NMR recruitment agency, for one, has set up an alternative incentive, namely company-wide appreciation:

“[One of the franchise offices] had received pretty good feedback across the board and many good grades, so they were awarded **the [NMR CX] area of the month**. And as a reward, they **got to choose the customer about whom we made a customer reference story** [with their franchise mentioned]. [...] It’s not a monetary model, nor ‘if you do this you get that’, but it’s more like, **we really notice it, when we find a good thing being done in some area**.” (NMR)

The findings showed that target experiences could be translated into KPIs for different functions based on both performance and feedback. KPI systems encouraged the achievement of TXs across the organizations, thus supporting customer journeys. The KPI and reward systems were closely linked to CX measurement in the firms (see Section 7.2.1), due to which the differences in measuring the achievement of more nuanced vs. more general target experiences were reflected in a systemic way across the organizations.

Interestingly, the sharing of perspectives not only took place in the provider organizations but also across their partner networks, which is a finding specific to the B2B context:

“The big part is the production because a lot of the feedback is relating to something that happens in the last mile. We’re **relaying that data**, whether it’s negative or positive, **all the way back to the partners and subcontractors**. [We’re] also trying to proactively **fix and educate** [actors] about something that **went wrong** or caused a negative experience, but at the same time [we] also **celebrate the positives**. We notice that we have drivers that have continuously received great feedback. We want to communicate, and we want to lift those up.” (HMA)

“It starts with the fact that we **share the same goals with the partners**, so we can somehow **define together what we are now seeking** or wanting to get out of this cooperation.” (OLV)

In sum, I found that target experiences can be used to develop a shared meaning across an organization and its partner networks through common referential frameworks and structural alignment. The findings also indicated that TX plays an important role in driving an organization toward a customer-centric culture through softer communicative mechanisms and systemic structural changes.

7.3.3 Target experiences help create and sustain a beneficial position in the market

The findings of this study showed that TXs were used by the sampled firms in ways that reflect the meaning of strategy as a *position*, i.e., defining an organization in relation to its environment (Mintzberg, 1987a). I found three ways in which a provider firm could use TXs in building their position in the market: 1) by defining the firm’s position in relation to its competitors’ CX efforts, 2) by building recognizable brand associations, and 3) by proposing experiential value to the customer.

First, the data showed that general TXs were used for *defining the firm’s position in relation to its competitors’ CX efforts*. This position was not about the value that the firm was offering to the customer but, instead, about how the firm saw itself succeeding in its CX efforts and where it wanted to be in terms of measurable outcomes. Interestingly, I found evidence of providers’ desired position of “the greatest CX in the industry,” i.e., winners of the CX race, as one might call it, and of CX used as a hygiene factor, where providers’ CX ambitions were limited to not being the worst, i.e., just keeping up with the race. Interestingly, even low amounts of CX efforts go a long way in positioning the firm in the market when considering the industry context:

“At the **strategic level**, we have expressed it very clearly that **we compete in terms of staff and customer experience**. We want to be the **most well-liked company in the industry**. [...] **Customer experience is important to us**, and it is [a part of] both our **internal and external message**.” (QLB)

“We have won this year’s B2B award in Russia. The nomination was for **best CX in B2B in [the] industry of consulting**. It was pleasant that our methodology and our approach were recognized by the Russian CX community.” (NLQ)

“We have been focused more on fixing the pain points, [...] but it’s **not something** that would create **any extraordinary or unique customer experiences**; it’s just about making sure that we are doing sort of the **minimum**. [...] to get to **a sustainable level of creating a customer experience** where there’s no big pain points [...] having customer-centricity in the **very core of the strategy** is a good starting point. And our industry is still very traditional, so [...] **we are one of the forerunners**, so we are really far.” (CLM)

The firms that focused on keeping up with CX developments to stay competitive aimed to create generally positive experiences and avoid negative experiences, but the use of general TXs to position themselves in the front of the line took more diverse forms. I observed an interesting interaction between the different roles of TXs and the degree of granularity. While the general TXs were used for internal meaning sharing and external positioning, the nuanced target experiences guided journey and touchpoint design. I also found evidence of firms using more nuanced TXs to define their position of excellency in the market.

“For us, it’s a lot around **making it easier** because it’s quite a complex space which we operate in. [...] to break things down so that **they’re more bite-sized so that our customers can understand** and thus come back to us again and again. We see **that’s a differentiator between us and our competitors** as well—that it is complex, and those who put a lot of effort into making things simple, then [...] it’s the world that Apple has created for us: we want things simple, we want things easy, and we want to be able to self-navigate. That’s pretty much the focus [of our CXM]. [...] We discuss a lot around **the experiences that we want [to create] and what kind of positioning [we aim for] as a whole**.” (CLW)

Firms’ use of nuanced TXs in positioning often coincided with their objective of attaining a compatible brand image. Accordingly, the firms focused on *building recognizable brand associations*, i.e., on facilitating recognizable CXs that could be positively associated with their respective brands. This allowed firms to situate themselves in the market as providers of unique, distinct experiences:

“It’s a **distinctive personalized [experience]**. The kind that leaves a strong emotional connection. [...] the way we approach it at the moment, we understand that the **customer experience has such a huge impact on how people see [PSB] as a brand** that they seem to merge together.” (PSB)

“CX and customer orientation have started to appear in many a firms’ strategic vision. We brought these into our strategy because the industry changes. [...] **by investing in customer experience, we can differentiate [our offering] in the market.** [...] It involves the use situations, starting with ‘does the customer get value and benefits from a concrete service situation’ to the feeling that the customer gets, whether it is what we want. [...] What we work toward in terms of CX [is] we want it to be planned in even more detail and **to increasingly express our company’s brand.** [...] so that in **every single detail, our brand promise is visible and customers can feel it.** [...] We’re not the Lidl of the energy industry, but we don’t necessarily want to be the Rolls Royce of the energy industry either, meaning **we’re looking for the right level for our brand,** [related] to how friendly we are and how far we go in handling service situations.” (DLY)

Furthermore, firms used general TXs to communicate to customers that they prioritize CX, which effectively worked to build up their image of being customer-centric:

“The strategy states that we will continue to have a person who is responsible for CX. That is considered to be a really **important thing.** [...] The **importance of handling CX has been noticed**—it is growing all the time. More and more companies are looking for people related to CX and are also **strengthening their own market share** and expertise **by communicating to customers that the customer and the customer’s experience are important to their company.**” (GSK)

Finally, the findings revealed that *nuanced target experiences* play an important role in positioning a firm in the market *by proposing experiential value to customers*, i.e., communicating a promise of valuable experiences. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of target experiences culminate into a promise of both individual and organizational value.

“We have a high-level understanding of **what kind of experience we would like to deliver.** [...] a solution that takes **less effort from our customers.** For a gatekeeper, it means that they **save money.** They **save resources.** [...] When it comes to specifiers—people directly working with our product—it means that we **help them** not just to **solve technical tasks,** but also to **save their time,** to **use this time for their professional goals.** We **boost careers.** We **help them become experts in IT security.** [...] all these decision-making centers, they have their own objectives and experiences that we have to deliver to them all.” (JLQ)

Interestingly, the value arising from TXs took many unexpected forms. For instance, JSJ positioned their firm in the future market such that, due to their offered services and experiences, their competitors inadvertently took on the role of an advisory function, which resulted in further value to the customer indirectly from other providers in the network:

“There are a lot of companies that do accounting software, but I believe that we approach it **in a unique way**. [...] Make it **painless**. I don’t think most of our competitors do that. [...] The experience of running a business should be a **party**. It should be **awesome**. [...] Having stuff like taxes, VAT, and accounting kill that party would be a bad thing. So, **that’s the angle we’re leaning towards** [...] If we can make our customers, the small business owners, able to do this **painlessly**, then our customers can **save money** obviously, and **the accounting firms can provide valuable services as advisors instead**, actually focusing on how the customer should manage his business rather than the tedious stuff. [...] So, I’d say we indirectly help the customers that way also.” (JSJ)

Notably, the role of target experiences in value propositions varied, from constituting the main competitive factor, as shown above, to providing secondary value added to the main benefits:

“The CX is **value added**. That is [based on] a person’s subjective experience of something. [...] the customer engages with us because we can **give them something valuable that will make their business easier**. [...] To answer [the question of] if it could be a **competitive advantage**: [...] it’s really much nicer to do business with nice people with whom it’s **smooth and easy, pleasant and adds value**, and you can be confident that when you agree on what should be done, it will be done as agreed.” (NMR)

“We have found that we are **inherently quite successful in CX**. [...] the way we bring out our expertise, or that on our platform we have a lot of functions that are shaped by pedagogical theories—how we emphasize this and how we get our customers to understand that this is something different than our competitors. That is, **we do not actually compete with the customer experience** but are well aware that **if we do not succeed in it, then the game stops there**.” (JSL)

“How do we get the **added value across**; how do we make [the customer] very quickly see that **he can solve an issue that he has**? [...] What we promise is to get certain problems fixed, and then the **CX is something that he has to experience himself**, for him to think, ‘wow, I used that, and I’ve seen everything

works smoothly.’ [...] Yes, we can [compete through CX] because they [competitors] are often software-based with terrible UI. So, if we had the same features, we would be better than them. [...] I think there’s a lot of room for improvement, and I think **this is the big chance**, if you understand it right, **to get competitive advantage.**” (JMF)

The findings also revealed interesting relationships between value propositions and target experiences. While some experiences were seen to bring experiential value on their own (e.g., smooth and easy), some desired experiences (e.g., joyful) resulted from experiencing other potential benefits, e.g., growing their career by solving a problem with the help of an offering. Therefore, TXs and other kinds of value propositions were intertwined in the providers’ strategies, building on each other.

“From [the] customer perspective, we are looking at three things. We are seeking to provide **impactful services** [...] Then, we are seeking to provide **financial benefit**. [...] And then the third is **smooth service processes**. [...] Through these three customer benefits, we are striving for that **emotional experience to be this**—that a person **rejoices when they get that value from their work** or that meeting our people is **gratifying** and leaves them in a **good mood**. [...] CX is always some kind of feeling. And the feeling arises through different things. A pretty big part of CX comes from the value creation. That is, **what value the customer gets from that relationship is what their feelings are going to be**. And that value can then be created at many different levels; it can be a **personal value**, or it can be a value created **for an organization.**” (OLV)

The following quote illustrates KLO’s views on this relationship. First, the manager equated their target experiences to the value proposition, yet the formulation of the value promise only hinted at experiential qualities (“straightforward,” “partner”). Further in the conversation, the manager provided a more detailed account of the target experiences and elaborated on the importance of syncing TXs with value propositions to follow through on the provider’s promise and strengthen their image in the eyes of the customer:

“It could be said that **value proposition is the same as the desired customer experience**. [...] Our value proposition is that we [the firm] want to be a **straightforward claims manager** and **risk management partner** for our corporate customers. [...] The value promise is the kind of promise that what you as a customer get from us, specifically from us, [is] what you don’t get from [Competitor A or B]. What is our special thing that we are especially good at

and where we are ready to really put ourselves into it, so that we will be able to give you this experience and redeem [the promise]. [...] **In all communications and [in] marketing, and also with value proposition and customer experience, one needs to be pretty disciplined and clear about it and be on the same wavelength in the organization** so that all customer encounters are in line and **tell the same story to reinforce that customer image.**” (KLO)

It was also not uncommon for the three different roles of TXs in positioning to intersect. The following quotes show how nuanced TXs were used by the firms to build brand associations and value propositions, while general TXs were used to situating themselves among their competitors:

“What makes up CX in our company: we see that the big part of that is the **brand** and those **brand promises** and how we redeem what that brand has promised in those encounters. [...] In our **new brand, we promise to be present in the customer’s life** in a way that the **customer can boldly live their own life** and shape their life into something unique. KLU is a **partner** that allows you to **live a bold, unique life**. [...] The goal is to be **the most customer-oriented player in the industry**, as we believe it will give us a **competitive advantage**, it can be used to position ourselves over our competitors.” (KLU)

“The competition is fierce; there are a lot of [similar offerings]. There are more and more of them now, [...] more and more foreign providers come to Finland; so, we established that **customer experience** would be the **competitive advantage** that we are aiming for. [...] our vision is that we want to provide the **best CX in the industry**. [...] When you asked that how we want to stand out, clearly what we are already doing and what we know is that we want to be **close to the customer**. [...] We want to serve customers **fast**, and we want to be **compassionate**. [...] We tell [customers] what is being done, and we do it regularly in our customer communications: since I joined this position, I always **write of what has been done in terms of customer experience.**” (JMC)

As the quote above shows, CX was seen as having the potential to be a competitive advantage in a saturated market. The firm also identified a customer niche that would interact well with their nuanced TX of being present in their customers’ lives. Interestingly, the value proposition contained not just a positive CX but also a promise to constantly improve CX and inform customers once the improvements were implemented.

Finally, this focus on discovering a firm's strengths and, thus, an appropriate customer niche rose as an important theme in parallel with incorporating TXs into value propositions:

“This **vision is based on our strengths**. We need to look at where the market is, what we are good at. We are not an example of the best digital bank on the market; we are just not. And our vision is different; it is based more on a **personal approach** and **partnership**. And these are also the things that **customers value in us the most**. [...] It is a combination of these things: what is needed in the market and what we are good at. [...] We have customers that are more on the small side, more from the SME sector, that don't get **personal service** from other big banks, but **from us they get it**—that's our segment. We don't have the muscles to compete for big business customers, and we don't try; we have the smaller side.” (KSE)

Overall, I uncovered three ways in which TXs can be used to strategically position a firm in its environment: first, by situating a firm in relation to its competitors' CX efforts; second, by building brand associations by connecting recognizable TXs with a firm's name or brand; and third, by proposing experiential value to customers. The third approach in particular contributes to a firm's promise of a differentiating value outcome, i.e., what a customer can get from this firm that they cannot get from others.

7.3.4 Summary of the findings on the strategic roles of TXs

My analysis of the ways in which target experiences influence CXM in B2B organizations revealed several strategic roles, which are encapsulated in **Figure 17** (p. 200). These findings directly contribute to answering RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

First, I found that *target experiences guide firms' customer-facing actions* toward understanding and facilitating CXs. More precisely, TXs direct CX measurement, customer journey design, and touchpoint design. While the use of TXs and in-depth customer understanding is a familiar theme in the existing literature on user-centered and human-centered design of services and products (e.g., Teixeira et al., 2012; Patrício et al., 2011, Kim et al., 2018), the broader role of TX as something that can influence measurement activities has not been considered by past researchers. Furthermore, TX has primarily been regarded as a design tool rather than a strategic construct that can offer direction.

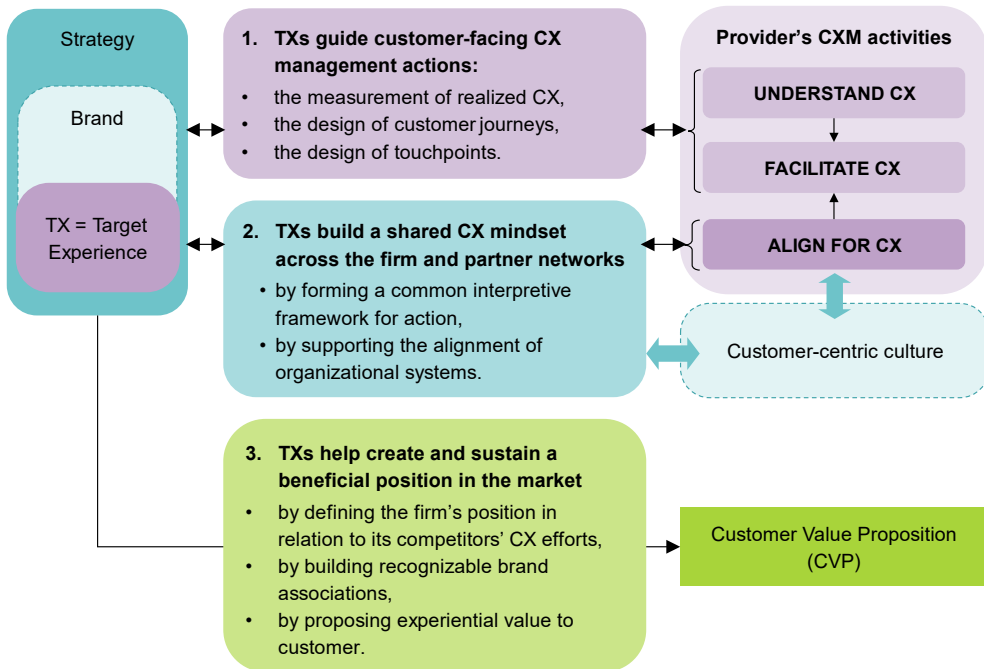


Figure 17. Strategic roles of target experiences in CX management

Second, *target experiences help build a shared CX-centric mindset across a firm and its partner networks* by serving as a common reference point for action and by aligning the organizations' different systems and processes. To form a shared goal, target experiences are spread across an organization in the "hard" form of unit structures, action frameworks, KPIs and reward systems as well as in "soft" mechanisms of communication and, more importantly, negotiation and consensus; this ensures that all employees are on the same page with regard to CX. Mosley (2007) partially proposed this relationship in discussing the alignment of employees' brand experiences with desired customer experiences. Mosley (2007) connected this alignment with the role of organizational culture in promoting employees' on-brand behaviors. Therefore, as shown in **Figure 17**, I propose that by creating a shared mindset related to the firm's CX intentions, TXs not only influence activity alignment but also have wider effects on organizational culture. Furthermore, the alignment of activities can further reinforce an organization's customer-centric culture and sharing of target experiences.

Finally, I found that *target experiences help create and sustain a provider's beneficial position* in the market by situating the firm in relation to its competitors' CX efforts, building brand associations, and articulating experiential value propositions. By understanding and defining their target experiences, firms inadvertently position themselves in relation to their competitors in the market. Are

the TXs of a firm better, smoother, or more exciting than their competitors'? Or does the firm deem it sufficient to keep up with the industry just enough to not be considered the worst? Mapping out their position allows a firm to keep an eye on the development of the industry and, in turn, customers' growing expectations.

Moreover, recognizable target experiences help position a provider firm within customers' minds by building brand associations: the main idea is that certain experiences would be inseparable from the firm's brand in the customer's mind. While I did not take the concept of brand or brand image into account while theorizing, both the extant literature (Clatworthy, 2012; da Motta-Filho, 2017) and the interviewed respondents highlighted connections between brand personality and target experiences. Accordingly, in **Figure 17**, I have positioned target experiences within *the broader strategy of a firm and as a part of the desired brand image* (e.g., Davis et al., 2008; Keller, 2003; Kuhn et al., 2008). Indeed, a brand can be seen as an external communication of a firm's "commitment to provide a certain kind of experience for customers" (Davis et al., 2008, p. 221), which forms its CX strategy.

The role of target experiences in a firm's articulation of its CVPs takes the abovementioned commitment to the next level by *proposing experiential value to customers*. The findings showed that value propositions can be based on the potential value arising from realized TXs with the provider's offerings as well as on the added value from experiences that result from a customer's perception of the potential value—a nod to the circularity of the relationship between CX and value (see Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). These findings are more thoroughly connected to the literature on value and value propositions and discussed in Section 8.2.

7.4 Strategic cycles of CX management

The data analysis in this research revealed some interesting avenues connecting the nature of target experiences (RQ1), the roles of TXs in influencing CX management (RQ3), and the activities characteristic of CXM in business markets (RQ2). The findings reported in this section play an integrative role in making sense of the previously discussed results and furthering the response to RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

The identified key approaches for defining target experiences, i.e., general and nuanced (Section 7.1.1), are likely to induce distinct modes of CXM processes. The interviews revealed that *general target experiences* principally drive a CXM cycle that focuses on *continuous improvement* in a predominantly *responsive manner*. In turn, *nuanced target experiences* drive a *vision-driven CX management cycle* that is *proactive* in nature (**Figure 18**, p. 202). Both CXM cycles are centered on understanding the state of realized CXs vis-à-vis the intended target experiences and adapting the business to support the attainment of the desired outcomes.

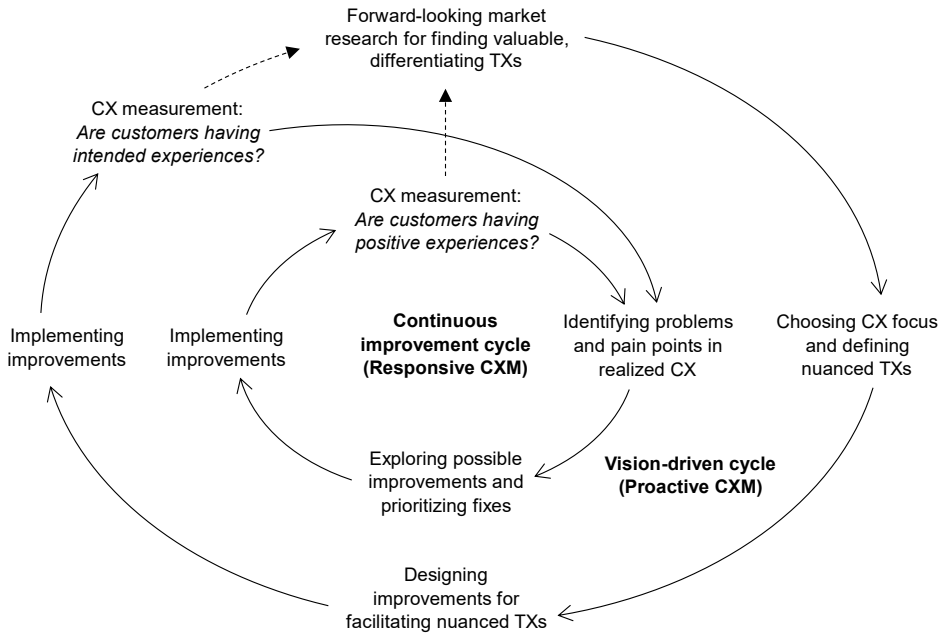


Figure 18. Two cycles of the CX management process

These two cycles of CX management come together to form a process. I utilized the Pettigrew’s (1997) definition of a process as a “sequence of individual or collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context” (p. 338) and constructed the two cycles by tracing the sequences of identified activities (Section 7.2) and regrouping them to showcase the dynamics. Since the data spanned several firms and was not longitudinal, the time and specific firm context dimensions were intentionally omitted in favor of greater abstraction. The following subsections describe the two cycles involved in CXM and touch upon the interplay between them. The final subsection summarizes the findings.

7.4.1 General TX as a driver of responsive CXM

The interview data showed that when firms defined good or excellent CX as their target, CX managers’ main responsibility was to improve the firm’s current operations to ensure that its offerings and customer journeys could *facilitate the emergence of good or improved CX*. Many managers pointed out the importance of systematically *monitoring customer experiences* across touchpoints to *identify problems and pain points*, which would reveal the areas where customers’ needs or expectations were not met. In other words, the CXM cycle was driven by customer satisfaction metrics and their variations (i.e., numbers going in the right direction)

and root causes identified through interviews and textual feedback. Thus, generic, positive TXs were established to improve current CXs based on historical feedback regarding the business:

“If we see that, during the past year, our customers were **using our products less** or, for example, that our support was receiving **more questions** about a particular product. [...] then we start a dialogue, with me in the lead role, **about what is causing this**—is it maybe because we **haven’t educated [customers] enough?**” (JLG)

“What we’re basically trying to do [is] what that customer expects of us. And if we can **meet those expectations**, we’re bound to **enhance their experience** with us. [...] The idea is that **focusing on these low scoring places** is how we’re trying to **improve the customer’s experience** with [CLP] by addressing any **issues that they’ve highlighted.**” (CLP)

Thus, customer feedback and the identification of pain points could set in motion the continuous improvement cycle in provider firms. This is further evidenced by the following quote from an interview with JMC, who talked about having to avoid “dropping the baton,” i.e., failing to facilitate a certain level of experience during the whole journey:

“The first task was to actually start **talking with customers** [...], interviewing and questioning them. [...] We ask about this customer’s whole journey to make sure that we **don’t drop the baton at any point.** [...] we started **systematically making these easy, small corrections** [based on] what we heard [...] We are still **fixing** our operations daily [and] when we notice that **it doesn’t make any sense** why we do this when **customers want us to do that.**” (JMC)

The insights gained from customer feedback were then used by the firms to *explore possible improvements* based on the identified pain points and problems. My data analysis revealed that these CX problems could be vast and numerous, requiring diverse developments. The interviewed managers widely emphasized that the firms had limited resources and not all the improvements could be made immediately, due to which development projects had to be *prioritized*. Prioritization of CX improvement projects typically took place through cross-departmental meetings involving senior managers from units linked to CX and, in some cases, even customers, reflecting the nature of customer journeys with multiple touchpoints across various units.

“We can react to this [discovered issue] by making a plan for the next year or half a year, where we invite customers and offer them as much education as possible for the use of this product or improve our support page where the customers search for information. [...] If I choose 10 aspects [to improve], none of them will be ever finished. [...] Once in a quarter, we **choose three important areas that we develop** [...] we go through this with our business management and executive managers of different organizational units; we have a **common direction** that these are **the areas that we are starting to fix.**” (JLG)

“[...] we first look through **feedback** for the last month, read it, find and **emphasize possible development points**, and inform our staff about them [...] We’d send a **message to customers**, [saying], ‘hey, after almost one hundred visits [to your manufacturing sites], we have this **list [of improvements]**,’ and it goes to all our clients, and **they can work on it** [and] develop it further **by voting in our development portal.**” (JMC)

Finally, small and big *changes were implemented* sequentially in order of priority, and the *subsequent CX measurements* revealed whether the fixes were successful. The interviewees highlighted the importance of having measurable outcomes and conducting follow-up checks after the implementation of changes to ensure that systematic progress was made in CX management. Thus, CX measures were used to determine *whether CX has improved*. In fact, many managers described the CXM process based on general TX goals as a “continuous improvement cycle” in which managers identify the most burning problems, plan and implement improvement measures, and assess the effects of the improvements on CX; the completion of this process starts a new CXM cycle where new problems and improvement points are identified, thus constantly improving the firm’s operations for better CX. Managers characterized this process as follows:

“We **put it in order** and **look at the situation again**. [...] Usually we find that it is now in good shape, but then we have some other aspect—for example, should we now invest in internal training? [...] It is this kind of **continuous improvement**—sometimes smaller, sometimes bigger—and the aspects [of improvement] can vary within our organization quite extensively. It can be a part of sales, marketing, support services, it can be many different things.” (JLG)

“First you need the **analytics part** before you can **understand what the issue is**. [...] We collect **feedback**, of course, and then we **change things** and adapt things and **improve things**. That’s a **continuous cycle** we do all the time.” (JMF)

As seen in the following quote, the NLQ manager even vocalized the reactive nature of continuous CX improvement. Listening, understanding, and responding to customer issues were at the center of the firm's CXM program:

“We don't have clear understanding of what feelings we would like to create within our customers. But we **work on continuous improvement in a reactive way**; so [if] we get a complaint in NPS, then me and my team, we look into it and we control our teams within the company to resolve this issue. Within three years of the program, we've got **more than 200 improvements**. [...] Sometimes, clients wanted to change the invoice; sometimes, they wanted to change the type of report; sometimes, they didn't get feedback from the person whom they'd contacted, and we tried to solve all that. Sometimes, they wanted [a] new service. [...] These are **small steps**, but still, it was also a big job within the company to create this environment of **wanting to make things better**.” (NLQ)

What made this CX improvement cycle different from, for example, operation-based continuous improvement was its focus on improving customer experiences rather than the quality of a product or the efficiency of a process:

“And then we started to study [CX], **not just from the perspective of [our] internal processes** but from the perspective that when a customer has a need and when a customer has some project, what are the steps of a customer's purchase journey, and what are we doing in each step of customer's purchase journey so that we can **serve this customer as well as possible through the whole journey**.” (DLZ)

While striving for a positive general CX via a continuous improvement cycle seemed ambitious, it was ultimately the responsibility of the CX managers to find and pinpoint problems that would prevent them from attaining this general goal. The research findings clearly showed that CXM based on continuous improvement logic was highly important to some of the sampled firms, as it systematically improved the quality of interactions at critical firm-controlled touchpoints in customer journeys, thus facilitating satisfaction, retention, and loyalty. Nevertheless, while the continuous improvement approach was critical for customer-centric and cross-departmental development of operations, it remained reactive in nature, being based on a backward-looking analysis of how a firm interacts with customers.

7.4.2 Nuanced TX as a driver of proactive CXM

The dataset also revealed another, albeit rarer, CXM cycle followed by the sampled firms, which was directed at discovering strategic opportunities to gain a competitive edge and using nuanced TXs for differentiation. Rather than looking backward at current operations on the basis of customer responses, the starting point for this proactive CX management cycle involved conducting *market research into the kind of customer experience that the business customers found valuable* and that was not offered by competitors in the same way. Firms used these insights to find opportunities for differentiating their offering and positioning their firm (see also Section 7.3.3), as evidenced by the interview quotes below:

“We do both online **surveys** and telephone **interviews**. [...] We can see that the B2B-customers **especially appreciate** this, because **we are really strong at being flexible**—we are fast in our movements and can solve things in a flexible way, we find solutions when discussing or making agreements with a B2B-customer. We get [this feedback] from reading open answers, that it is **important** that there is a lot of **cooperation** and that is **flexible**.” (QLB)

“When we know what our strengths are and what our **customers perceive to be the best things**, we need to **strengthen those strengths**. [...] We have a **vision of CX**, which is that we are [seen as] a strong financial partner, an expert, a useful, agile and courageous player. [...] we want to be the financial partner that **helps the customer become stronger** [...] that the customer’s **life is developing in a favorable direction**. [...] But at the moment, what is most praised is that we **see the customer as a whole** and more broadly than others. [...] we are more than just a provider of financial products; we are a partner, a financial partner who **helps the customer to increase their own value, and the customer’s own value increases because we help**.” (KSE)

Interviewees noted that when a firm *chooses to compete by facilitating CXs that customers find particularly valuable*, the specific qualities of the chosen nuanced TXs should steer the firm’s operations (see also Section 7.3.1) and enable the design of journeys and touchpoints that are, in turn, directed at facilitating the nuanced TXs. To this end, the sampled firms emphasized not only the positive direction of improvement actions but also the need to *align the facilitation of CX with the goal of achieving more nuanced target experiences*:

“Of course, you should have **clear goals in CX**, like **what kind of experience you aim for**. If you aim for good or better or the best customer experience, you have already made horrible assumptions that CX can be altogether good or bad.

It is better that you have something like a value proposition, or a strategy or vision or whatever, and **you set your sight on it** and start following it and **[connect] objectives, indicators, and actions to it.**" (KLO)

"All the touchpoints [at which] the client or the prospect deals with us—whether they are websites or newsletters or implementation trainings or salespeople or something else—each of these points is **examined through certain criteria**, and they then follow **the same continuum to reinforce that emotional experience of the company as a whole.**" (JSL)

Finally, the findings showed that this CX vision cycle ended with the *systematic implementation of improvements* and *CX measurements*. The interviewed managers emphasized that it was not sufficient for them to measure only the valence of CX and that they needed to introduce specific metrics and questions to understand and *monitor whether customers had the experiences the seller intended them to*. The goal was to keep in check the connection between a differentiating TX and the corresponding realized CX:

"...if we want to be a risk management partner present in everyday life, then [the question is,] **are we [present] there?**" (KLO)

"[The goal] is to have the **best CX in this industry**. [...] For customers, it means that every task they have can be **solved without any additional efforts**. All these **efforts will be less** compared to all competitors. [...] When it comes to CX, this is our universal formula. I would say that, first of all, you have to **understand the customer**, and you have to **understand what you are really going to achieve** and **understand how you're measuring that**. You have to be creative with the solution, you have to coordinate, and you have to measure. Without any of these components, you cannot achieve any goal in customer experience." (JLQ)

To sum up, the findings revealed that firms that made the explicit decision to position themselves using experiential value propositions leveraged a proactive CXM cycle, which included defining nuanced TXs and designing the firm's processes in line with the desired customer responses.

7.4.3 Interplay between the proactive and responsive CXM cycles

Patterns in the study data revealed two kinds of dynamics in the interplay between the identified CXM cycles: firms relying on a proactive approach followed the *continuous improvement cycle* after defining their target experiences and implementing appropriate changes, but they *returned to the vision-driven cycle* when changes in the marketplace demanded it.

As operations directed at realizing nuanced TXs became routinized, firms typically focused on more fine-grained improvements related to the problems and bottlenecks to be repaired in order to achieve the target experiences.

“We wanted to have an end-to-end [experience], [...] so [we focused on] designing ideal experiences: ‘if the **ideal experience** would look like this, **what does it take** in the back end **to actually produce such an experience**? Which systems, tools, data transfers, etc., would it take to enable this ideal experience? [...] **improvements can be at different levels**; again, it can be at the single touchpoint level [or] at the journey level.’” (CLR)

“We try to develop **better FAQs**, or we try to do tutorials and videos, and we try to work a lot with the transaction e-mails that we send every time something happens so that the person is informed every step of the way. We are trying to **integrate a new tool** that would be like a live chat based on AI interaction; that [AI] is going to learn from interactions with all the customers. So, all of those little things—I mean little because they’re not going to change the core [...] a strong bond where the person **can just rely on us** [...] and have a **very smooth experience**. [...] The less they hear from us, the better things are working, because it’s quite **an invisible and smooth process**.” (KSA)

With the presence of proactivity, the continuous improvement cycle becomes what I call an *alignment cycle*, with the problems and bottlenecks to be repaired relating to the achievement of target experiences. When this cycle begins, a firm’s CX management is concerned with how to achieve the target experiences and reasons for not being able to achieve them. In time, the firms’ strengths and customer expectations are re-evaluated and target experiences redefined, thus *restarting the proactive cycle*.

Although, at the time of this study, none of the firms from the sample had yet arrived at this stage of re-evaluation, I could infer from the data that changes in the world and in customer preferences would cause changes in the experiences that business customers value. In addition, the competitive environment or the new

strengths that a firm develops might drive the re-evaluation of target experiences, thus closing the cycle.

“The work will never end with customer experience management, because **the world changes so quickly. The demands of customers change.**” (JMC)

“It’s an ongoing thing. Even when I talk about customer journey ... that map is not a static map; it has to be a living document [that] **we have to revisit**, that we have to keep **continuously changing and updating**, improve on those processes and then **react to the environment, to the macro factors, to the competition...** yeah, so it never ends.” (JLI)

In sum, my findings showed that the two cycles of CX management interact: the proactive cycle driven by nuanced TXs provides a direction for the continuous improvements of a firm while keeping a hand on the pulse of market changes and dynamics. Competitive advantage can thus be gained through meaningful experiences that are in line with the firm’s unique value proposition.

7.4.4 Summary of the findings on the cycles of CX management

The findings in the above subsections delineated two ways in which firms differentiate their offerings based on the cycles of CXM: 1) by increasing the responsiveness of CXM actions to the continuous flow of CX insights; and 2) by directing their CXM activities toward the facilitation of meaningful experiences in line with their unique value propositions. This reiterates the role of target experiences in CXM and underlines the importance of degree of granularity in guiding CX management, thus deepening the insights around RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

My review of the extant literature indicated that CX management activities are performed around the continuous improvement cycle. Managers first assess current CXs (Chakravorti, 2011; Patrício et al., 2008; Rawson et al., 2013), coordinate and implement changes in different departments (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Rawson et al., 2013), and then monitor and test the changes for continuous improvement (Grove et al., 1992; Ponsignon et al., 2015). However, the CX management cycle guided by a more strategic vision has received much less attention.

Based on their ethnographic study in the context of knowledge-intensive B2B services, Sahhar et al. (2021) differentiated between proactive and reactive modes of engagement in the CXM practices of provider firms. According to their

conceptualization, mode of engagement refers to the ways a service provider deals with problems that arise during the customer journey (Sahhar et al., 2021). While reactive engagement involves responses that restore service quality to the expected levels, the proactive mode of engagement involves a constructive and explorative approach to solutions, which bolsters CX (Sahhar et al., 2021). However, in comparing the findings of Sahhar et al.'s (2021) study with the results reported in this dissertation, I found that the discovered phenomenon is slightly different. The authors focused on providers' approach to solving problems in a solution-oriented journey, with service recovery considered the main way to improve customer experiences. My findings do not merely reveal a proactive problem resolution process but highlight deliberate actions toward facilitating desirable experiences during customer journeys and at touchpoints. However, this may be a mere contextual difference.

Notably, an idea similar to the conceptualization of two different CXM cycles has been addressed in prior literature through the concept of radical and incremental innovations (Homburg et al., 2017; Holmlund et al., 2020). Homburg et al. (2017) characterized a short-term cycle for the continuous monitoring, adaptation, and prioritization of touchpoints as incremental market innovations; and a more long-term cycle of business planning and customer journey designing as radical market innovations. Furthermore, Holmlund et al. (2020) mentioned the role of CX insights in directing firms' actions for incremental and radical CX innovations. Indeed, redesigning a range of touchpoints to attain desired, strategically differentiating experiences may demand radical innovations, while removing or adapting a touchpoint is an incremental change. However, the authors have not elaborated on these ideas enough to make them suitable for comparison.

8 Discussion

This chapter presents the final framework of the research results, uniting the groups of findings reported above. Through abductive theorizing, I further reflect on the empirical findings and their fit with the existing understanding of value, value creation processes, and customer value propositions. Using *a posteriori* linking, I propose CX management as a strategic approach for differentiation with experiential value in B2B markets.

8.1 Final framework based on research results

CX management has become increasingly attractive for B2B firms, finding its place among their strategic priorities. However, the lack of comprehensive empirical research into CXM in the B2B context hinders conceptual development and further research around this managerial approach. I advocated for integrating the customer- and provider-centric perspectives in studying managerial action to facilitate favorable experiences. To respond to this need, I proposed focusing on the properties of target experiences as objects of study. To date, the focus of CXM research has been on service or brand elements and their effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty, thus missing the actual managerial aim and a vital linking element—customer experience. In addition, I argued for using a more thorough approach to understanding the concept of strategy when studying CX management.

I addressed these needs through my empirical research into the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management. First, by studying the experiences that B2B firms have targeted, I distinguished between *different types of target experiences* (see **Figure 19**, p. 212, RQ1). I found differences in the *granularity* of target experiences. The more general ideas for target experiences focused on “improved,” or “great” experiences, holding only positive valence, while the more nuanced experiences varied in their qualitative dimensions. Among the nuanced experiences, I found multiple *qualitative subtypes* of target experiences, which differed in their intellectual, affective, sensory, and relational dimensions (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007). Understanding these differences allows for a more complete picture of the types of experiences that are relevant in the B2B context.

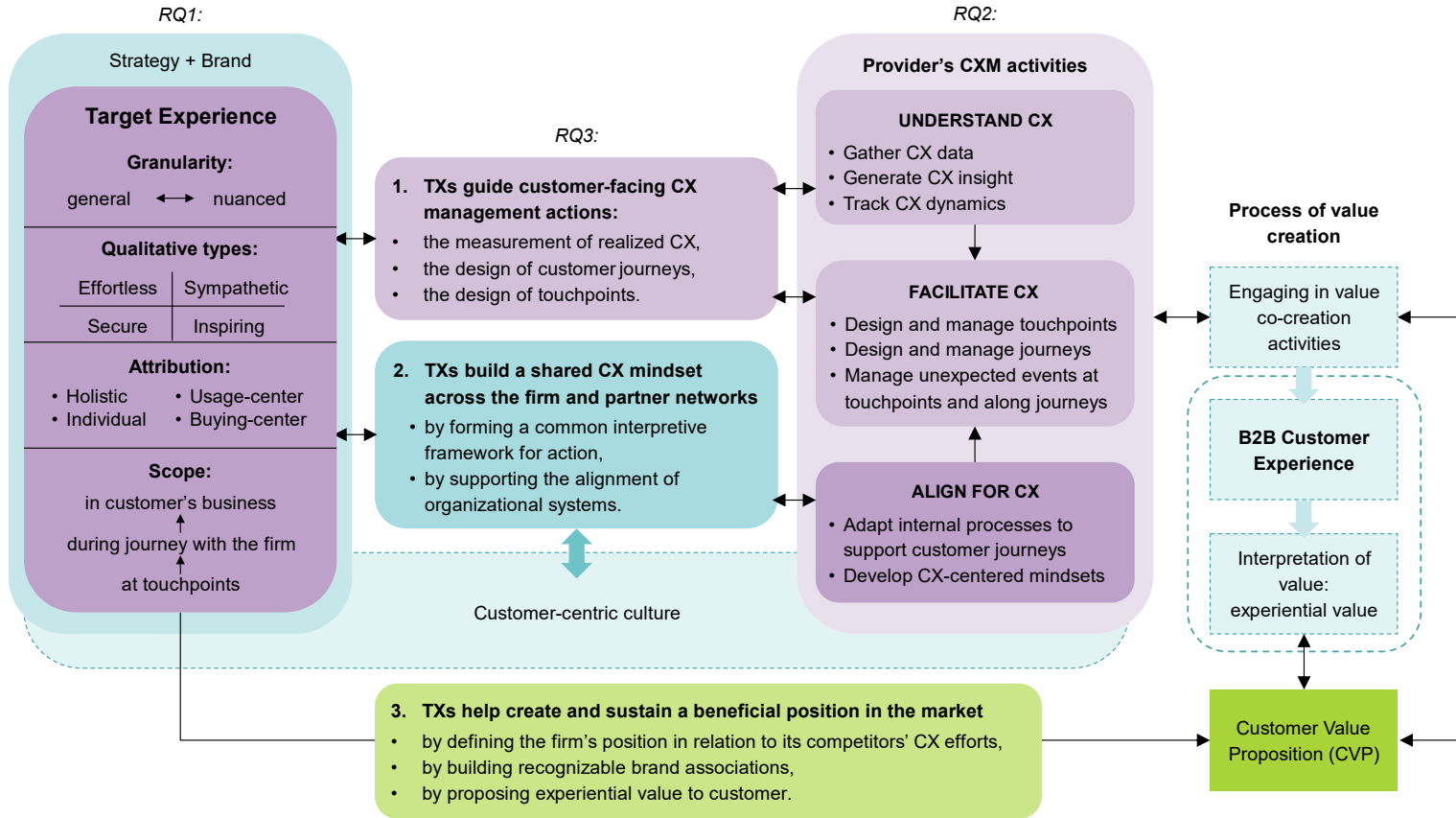


Figure 19. The final framework of the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management connected to the value creation process

Next, my analysis showed that managers *attribute* target experiences to different actors and groups within a customer firm. In attributing TXs to individuals, managers consider their roles and personal goals (see Macdonald et al., 2011). Further, some firms may take the sales-dominant perspective to B2B CXM and attribute their target experiences to the collective experience of a buying center (see Johnston & Bonoma, 1981). The user-dominant perspective, in contrast, focuses on the collective experience of a usage center (see Macdonald et al., 2016). Finally, the holistic perspective attributes TXs to every actor in a customer firm and, thus, considers the collective experience of the entire customer firm.

Finally, I found that target experiences can be defined at different *scopes*: at touchpoints, reflecting event-specific CXs (see Halvorsrud et al., 2016), during a customer's journey with the firm (see Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), or in a customer's business. The last scope mirrors the goal-oriented consumer journey (see Becker et al., 2020) and the solution-oriented view of business customer journeys (see Tuli et al., 2007; Witell et al., 2020). By articulating these different dimensions of TXs, I was able to integrate some elements of the customer-centric perspective with CX management. Thus, this empirical study, the first to focus on the properties of TXs in business markets, allowed me to answer RQ1: *What is the nature of target experiences in the B2B context?*

The second set of findings came from exploring *different activities of CX management* (see **Figure 19**, p. 212, RQ2). Through the abductive research process, I identified three broad categories of activities guided by their main motives: to understand CX, to facilitate CX, and to align the organization for CX. Actions directed at *understanding CX* include gathering relevant data, generating insights, and tracking CX dynamics (cf. Holmlund et al., 2020). Actions aimed at *facilitating CXs* include designing and managing touchpoints and journeys and responding to noncontrollable events (cf. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Together, the actions of facilitating and understanding CX can be seen as customer-facing CXM actions. Finally, actions directed at *aligning the managing organization for CX* help support the understanding and facilitation of CXs and are internal actions. While the extant literature suggests that strategic work, cultural change, and capability development are crucial processes in CXM (see Homburg et al., 2017), I ascertained two concrete internal action categories that show how firms implement these high-level constructs in practice as a part of their CX management efforts. To be precise, I found different ways in which firms adapt their internal processes to support customer journeys and develop CX-centered mindsets. Altogether, the findings provide a systemic view of CX management based on its constituent activities, thus addressing RQ2: *How do B2B companies strive to manage customer experiences?*

Finally, by studying *how target experiences "worked" in provider firms* and sharpening my inquiry into the concept of strategy, I arrived at the third part of the

findings (**Figure 19**, p. 212, RQ3). I distinguished between three strategic roles of target experiences in B2B CX management, thus answering RQ3: *What are the strategic roles of target experiences in CX management?*

The first role of target experiences is *guiding customer-facing CX management actions* (facilitating and understanding activities). More precisely, both general and nuanced target experiences guide CX measurement, journey design, and touchpoint design. While the use of target experiences in design is familiar, for example, as a part of NSD (Clatworthy, 2012) or a particular contained experience like an exhibition (Ponsignon et al., 2017), the role of TXs in strategically driving customer-facing activities across an organization has not been studied before.

Second, target experiences help in *building a shared CX mindset across a firm and its partner networks*. In doing so, TXs form a common interpretive framework for action and align the organization's different systems and processes. Prior studies have associated CX management with cultural change (Chakravorti, 2011) toward customer-centricity (Schmitt, 2007; Shah et al., 2006), a perspective that my findings corroborate. Thus, it can be concluded that target experiences are essential for driving the communication and structural changes needed to establish a customer-centric organizational culture. Ultimately, viewing strategy as a shared perspective revealed several strategic roles of target experiences that have not been considered in CXM research.

The roles of target experiences do not directly correspond with CX management activities. While TXs guide the measurement of customer experiences and the design and management of touchpoints and journeys, the management of unexpected events cannot be directly guided; instead, it relies on the use of TXs as common reference points, alignment of internal systems, and presence of a strong customer-centric culture. The internal alignment activities play a supporting role and are not only informed by target experiences but also reinforce the sharing of the meaning they convey.

The third role of target experiences is also somewhat removed from CX management activities and involves *creating and sustaining a beneficial position in the market*. By articulating TXs, a firm can position itself in relation to its competitors' CX efforts, build brand associations, and articulate experiential value propositions. While objectives such as "the best CX in the industry" can position the firm's strategic ambitions in relation to their competitors, articulating nuanced and identifiable TXs has the added benefit of positioning the firm in customers' minds. Target experiences are sometimes connected in the literature to the concept of brand personality or brand identity (Clatworthy, 2012; da Motta-Filho, 2017; Silva et al., 2021), which ultimately means that experiences can help convey a desired brand image (e.g., Davis et al., 2008; Keller, 2003; Kuhn et al., 2008). Thus, a brand is a critical construct that directs a firm's approach to defining target experiences. Lastly,

TXs may be used to form CVPs based on experiential value. The findings of this study showed that providers aim to facilitate, above else, valuable experiences, which means that target experiences help communicate the promise of experiential value (Payne et al., 2017; Rintamäki et al., 2007). A more detailed reflection on the concepts of value and value creation is needed to understand the connection between target experiences and CVPs.

8.2 Positioning the findings within the value creation process

To highlight CXM as a competitive strategy in business markets, I aimed to first empirically explore the various facets of CX management and then thoroughly analyze the findings based on the concept of value. This section presents the latter.

Understanding and facilitating customer value creation is vital for any business (Eggert et al., 2018; Holbrook, 1994). In the area of B2B marketing research particularly, the concept of value has engaged the interest of researchers for several decades; however, there are still more riddles to solve (Cortez & Johnston, 2017).

In Chapter 4, customer experience was raised as the missing link between the value co-creation process, i.e., resource-integrating activities of multiple actors, and value outcomes, i.e., value perceptions (Gummerus, 2013). Furthermore, the chapter presented two ways in which a firm can propose value in business markets: by suggesting its participation in value co-creation and by promising unique and desirable value outcomes. By considering the findings of my empirical study and the conceptual understanding of the value creation process (**Figure 19**, p. 212), I can *link the roles of target experiences and CX management activities to a larger, more abstract value creation process*.

First, as shown in **Figure 19**, *CX management activities are linked to the value creation process* as avenues for firms' participation in value creation, i.e., engagement in value co-creation activities. As CX management is theoretically defined as an approach aimed at value creation (Verhoef et al., 2009), the identified CXM activities can be seen as participating in value co-creation. This broad view of value co-creation is consistent with the S-D logic principles (Macdonald et al., 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Based on the findings related to CXM activities, I describe three broad ways in which firms that “manage” CXs engage in value co-creation activities within a system of actors (customers, partners, competitors).

The first CX management activity that firms perform is aimed at *understanding* their customers' experiences by gathering relevant data, generating insights, and tracking CX dynamics. This activity requires the participation of multiple actors in the service network, including employees, partners, and customers. The main idea of this activity is to generate valuable insights—data and

knowledge—that can be used in further value co-creation and strategizing activities. Notably, the activity itself can result in experiential value for customers: the interviewed managers reported that their customers were excited and willing to participate in workshops and interviews, as they felt cared for and heard. Thus, provider’s very intentions to improve CX based on customer insights can create valuable experiences. In contrast, while tracking CX dynamics can bring value to customers in the long run, such as through touchpoint optimization, the negative experiences this action results in, such as feelings of annoyance, can work as value destructors (see Plé & Cáceres, 2010).

The second CXM activity reflects how firms engage in actions directed at *facilitating CX* at touchpoints and during journeys. These actions include designing and coordinating a range of cues and touchpoints as well as responding and preparing for unexpected events. A variety of different actors integrate their resources through this activity (see Vargo & Lusch, 2008): the processes of touchpoint and journey design and management involve collaborations across the whole provider organization as well as the participation of partners and customers in creating new touchpoints, mitigating unexpected events, and/or rethinking optimal customer journeys. The facilitation activity is directly linked to customer value creation, as its goal is to enable the creation of valuable experiences relying on anything from small details to extensive service innovations.

Finally, the activity of *aligning an organization* with customer-facing CXM activities has significant potential to create value. To understand and facilitate CXs, a firm needs to adapt its internal processes to support customer journeys and develop CX-centered mindsets, thus building its capabilities and indirectly participating in value creation (Homburg et al., 2017). In addition, aligning activities can result in concrete value outcomes. For example, due to a provider’s improved knowledge-sharing practices, a customer would not have to go through the hassle of repeatedly providing their billing information or figuring out the model of their device that needs maintenance.

In addition to relating CXM with value co-creation activities, a link can be established between *target experiences and value propositions* (see **Figure 19**, p. 212) by examining the role of TXs in developing experiential CVPs. Based on the findings of my study, I can state that target experiences, above all, promise valuable experiences. Similar to the idea of emotional value propositions (Sandström et al., 2008), target experiences go hand in hand with a provider’s conception of resulting value judgments and the different types of value that a customer can derive from their experiences (see Mencarelli & Rivière, 2015).

Several studies have linked CX to value perceptions in the B2B context. Biedenbach and Marell (2010), defining CX as “the result of the customer’s interpretation of his or her total interaction with the brand and perceived value of

this encounter” (p. 450), conducted a study on brand experiences and discovered that they positively influence brand equity in a B2B service setting. Furthermore, Lemke et al. (2011) showed that B2B customers evaluate their experiences in communication, usage, and service encounters based on their personal and organizational goals. Further exploring business customers’ evaluations of their experiences, McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) focused on customer experiences and the so-called value creation elements of a B2B relationship (resources, activities, context, interactions, customer role) that result in perceived value for customers. What all these studies suggest is that positive B2B experiences are the ones that are valuable for the customer (Hollyoake, 2009) and ultimately build collective value.

Examining the findings, I can conceptually combine the data on the nature of target experiences (Section 7.1.3) and the role of TXs in positioning a firm through value propositions (Section 7.3.3) to arrive at the conceptualization depicted in **Figure 20**. Specifically, the different scopes of target experiences, the scope of realized experiences (e.g., Becker et al., 2020), and the scope of perceived value (see Lapierre, 2000) are integrated in this conceptualization.

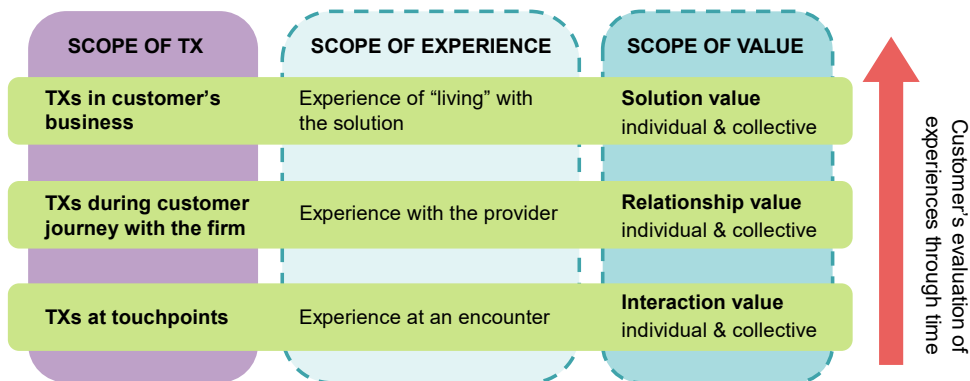


Figure 20. Scope of TXs related to realized experiences and value as the basis of CVPs

From the bottom up, **Figure 20** shows the *value of a singular interaction* at a touchpoint, such as a sales meeting, a phone call, or a maintenance visit. The defined TXs for those touchpoints would include experiences that may be interpreted as valuable by people participating in the interactions. The next level shows the value that is interpreted by evaluating dynamic experiences during a customer’s journey with a provider firm. These value perceptions are related to *relationship value*, i.e., the collective value of multiple interactions with a provider, including both transactional and relational exchanges (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Ulaga, 2003). Finally, the third level consists of experiences that occur in a customer’s business

while they're on their journey to higher-order goals. Multiple actors participate in helping the customer accomplish their goals. Therefore, the customer does not judge the value of the business relationship alone but of the entire *solution*. The judgement happens based on the customer's ability to use the provided resources and how well this solution fits into their lifeworld, i.e., business.

All three levels represent *value-in-use*, including the *individual and organizational dimensions* therein (see Macdonald et al., 2016), and convey both personal and collective conceptions of value. However, the reference object (value of *what* is being judged) is different when considering different scopes. The experiential value propositions can be built around these scopes of value with the help of target experiences, ensuring that each level contains experiences that can result in greater value for individuals, teams or other functional units, and entire customer firms.

To conclude, I suggest that by proposing value, directing firms' actions, and allowing for a shared perspective across an organization, target experiences help differentiate a firm from its competitors, providing a market advantage based on the different scopes of experiential value. Connecting the strategic roles of TXs and CXM activities to the CX formation and value creation processes not only helps conceive of CX management as a strategic approach but also solidifies it as a differentiation strategy based on experiential value.

9 Contributions and implications

In this final chapter, I articulate the theoretical contributions, practical and societal implications, and limitations of this study and propose future research directions.

9.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several valuable contributions to the literature on CX management in the B2B context. In this section, I articulate four major contributions of my study and indicate several minor developments that provide good starting points for moving the field forward.

First, the study *deepens the understanding of the types of experiences B2B companies seek to provide to their customers* and contributes to CX research by highlighting the contents of a nuanced target experience. This helps distinguish CX as a concept from evaluative outcomes, such as quality or customer satisfaction, and from the overly provider-centric view that equates CX with stimuli such as service or product elements (see Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Moreover, producing this knowledge signifies an essential step for CXM research. With a focus on target experience as an object of study, this study highlights complex and multilevel ideas about intended CXs in the B2B context. These insights are important contributions to the CX management literature, as past studies have not explicitly considered the nature of CX but have mentioned “experience motifs” or similar managerial intentions in passing (e.g., Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Berry et al., 2002; Bolton et al., 2014) or focused on facilitating positive and avoiding negative experiences, which are hard to distinguish from evaluative concepts (e.g., Frow & Payne, 2007; Ponsignon et al., 2015; Sahhar et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the study findings allow for a broader conception of B2B CX, despite not focusing on customers’ realized experiences per se. Although a customer in this research is a black box that can only be seen through CX managers’ eyes, it is important to consider that CX managers learn about their customers through action and thus have viable theories-in-use around B2B CX (Zeithaml, Jaworski et al., 2020). Based on my detailed analysis of different TXs and their properties, I arrive at a unique way of discussing B2B CXs as foci of CX management. In addition to the different qualitative types of TXs, the findings also address the question of who

an experiencing actor might be. The different scopes at which TXs can be defined allow for understanding B2B CX as a dynamic concept. Although previous research has highlighted the multi-actor view of B2B CX (e.g., Witell et al., 2020), its properties have not been explored to this degree. My study integrates the provider-centric view of business customers and managerial goals with the customer-centric view of CX to respond to the tension between the perspectives and thus builds a valuable framework for understanding B2B CX, contributing to the development of CX literature.

Second, by delineating the activities involved in CXM, the study *provides a robust empirical basis for conceptualizing CX management in the B2B context*. The resulting framework of CXM activities can be used in processual investigations of issues related to CX management and for developing constructs and scales to measure the effectiveness of the actions taken. Only a few studies to date have offered frameworks that can be used in a similar manner (Grønholdt et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2017). My results represent an alternative to the few existing conceptualizations of CX management in the B2B context, such as the resources and capabilities view adopted by Homburg et al. (2017) and the characterization of CX management through areas of influence (and lack of it) by Witell et al. (2020). Moreover, the identified specifics of the activities in the B2B context give rise to new research questions for future investigation. Thus, my comprehensive empirical study of CX management in the B2B context responds to the identified need for empirical research around this phenomenon and contributes to CXM literature.

The findings on CXM activities comprise a general framework that can be used in different theoretical approaches including or operating around activities. For example, the activity-based framework is consistent with the S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2017), and it can be further investigated based on the actors, activated resources, institutional arrangements, or service ecosystem involved. Furthermore, the framework can be enriched with additional elements, such as actors and resources from the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model (Hakansson & Johanson, 1992) or routines, skills, and coordination mechanisms (see Dutta, Zbaracki, & Bergen, 2003) from the resource-based view. Ultimately, the results of this study advance the conceptual development of CXM and provide opportunities for further empirical investigations.

Third, the study *explains how target experiences are used by organizations engaged in CX management and reveals that CX management can be responsive or proactive* depending on the granularity of employed TXs. This is an important contribution to the literature, which has only grazed the surface of this topic; past studies have described somewhat similar dynamics in terms of incremental and radical innovations (Homburg et al., 2017; Holmlund et al., 2020). Focusing on target experiences, however, reveals a reason for the identified cycles and explains

why CX management can look very different in different companies. These findings further support the view of target experience as a valuable object of study.

Moreover, the study revealed that target experiences strategically guide CX measurement and touchpoint and journey design with the goal of differentiating firms in business markets. This finding contributes to touchpoint and journey design literature (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019; Patrício et al., 2011; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010), promoting CX design to a strategic level. The strategic level includes not only the design of stimuli at touchpoints and journeys but also the design of measures to establish the effectiveness of the CXM activities. Prior studies have proposed that “CX design allows organizations to define the intended CX and guides the CX management” (Silva et al., 2021, p. 908). To my knowledge, however, the present study is the first empirical study to show how this happens in the B2B context. The data further suggests that target experiences are built on in-depth customer research and understanding, which describes a proactive use of customer, employee, and partner insights for the customer journey and experience optimization. These findings indicate that CX management is the next step in development from the data-driven and customer-centric CRM approaches (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Payne & Frow, 2005).

Separate from CX design, the findings of this study highlight the role of TX as a reference point for developing a CX-centered cultural mindset and for aligning an organization’s internal systems, thus producing a shared meaning. This role develops and concretizes the connections made between CX management and customer-centric culture in the literature (Chakravorti, 2011; Homburg et al., 2017; Mosley, 2007), contributing to the organizational perspective on CX management and opening up more avenues for investigation. These findings were obtained by making the strategic facet of CXM explicit and including different approaches to strategy in the analysis, thus responding to the need for a more thorough conceptual development of CX management as a strategic approach.

Fourth, the study *establishes that target experiences provide a basis for experiential value propositions and discusses how CXM enables value creation*. Among the several ways academic research in B2B can help marketers solve real problems, Cortez and Johnston (2017) proposed that “understanding of how continuously create value in the customer-supplier interaction process will contribute to close the gap between B2B marketers’ challenges and scientific research” (C7, p. 97). By using the understanding grounded in customer value literature, this study proposes that through CX management a firm can deliberately facilitate CX formation and subsequently the creation of experiential value, i.e., the value created in experience. Considering experience as a source of value broadens the scope of value creation, recognizing the individual and noneconomic aspects of B2B value (see Mitchell et al., 2016; Österle et al., 2018), and thus opening the

opportunity for firms to go beyond quantifiable and price-focused value propositions (cf. Anderson & Narus, 1998; Anderson et al., 2006). The findings support and strengthen Almquist et al.'s (2018) argument, who proposed the B2B elements of a value pyramid, consisting of functional value, value from ease of doing business, as well as individual and inspirational value. Based on the results of my study, I argue that target experiences provide a basis for experiential value propositions that consider a broad variety of value elements. Together, the findings further contribute to the literature on value and value propositions in business markets (e.g., Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Payne et al., 2017; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) with a specific focus on individual experiential value, hence contrasting earlier approaches.

Furthermore, proposing a superior CX to customers has been deemed crucial for fulfilling the on-brand experience, thus strengthening the brand engagement and the long-term customer–supplier relationship (Silva et al., 2021). Thus, the study suggests that CX management can be a viable experience-based competitive strategy in business markets.

9.2 Practical and societal implications

In this section, I first present the practical and then the societal implications of my study. I expect the main implications and recommendations to benefit CX managers and other top managers and executives of firms operating in business markets. Broader audiences, too, may find the insights interesting.

First, *defining and using nuanced TXs to guide CX management and develop CX-centric mindsets within an organization should produce better and more traceable CX results*. Shaping target experiences into a structured tool that reflects the complexity of B2B CX can help make CXM more focused and in line with the main aim of the related activities—to provide differentiating and valuable customer experiences. Furthermore, target experiences can provide a better basis for measuring realized CXs than the commonly used NPS metrics. In addition to measuring the willingness to recommend, customer satisfaction, and effort, developing custom measures for the fulfillment of different TXs throughout the customer journey can enrich the CXM toolbox. However, firms should not forget the importance of qualitative data that can provide valuable and actionable information.

Second, *a nuanced understanding of the different properties of TXs helps build and communicate experiential value propositions*. Target experience can not only, if connected to brand identity, strengthen a firm's desired brand image but also communicate different levels of promised value. My analysis of target experiences revealed the different scopes of intended experiential value and presented a clear framework around which experiential value propositions can be built. In practice, value propositions hold various functional and emotional benefits, resulting in a mix

of different scopes. However, articulating the range of valuable experiences that can arise 1) from interactions, 2) in business relationships, and 3) when a customer continuously experiences the benefits of a solution can help a firm identify the strengths and development areas of their value proposition.

The third group of implications is related to the findings around the two CXM cycles. Customer experiences occur in the lifeworlds of all firms in the market, whether providers manage them or not. A firm can manage CX without choosing it as the main competitive factor. For example, there are several suitable TXs when a firm competes with a price point or superior product (e.g., “cheap and simple”). However, *if the firm chooses to compete through CX*, they might find themselves: a) competing in a market where other actors focus on other kinds of value propositions, b) competing in a market where other firms also focus on CX as their competitive factor.

In the first case, the value proposition would be similar to the customer intimacy strategy (see Treacy & Wiersema, 1993): focusing on CX would allow a firm to compete with great customer experiences. The role of nuanced TXs would be minor and mainly considered in the design stage to produce offerings and establish services. A firm would thus separate itself from the competition by improving CXs at touchpoints and across journeys, with a more general TX focused on troubleshooting and removing pain points. However, CX-based positioning in a competitive market is challenging and can easily become a buzzword if approached using general target experiences, such as “the best CX in the industry,” which is not specific enough to locate the future state of the organization in its environment. In the second case, the value proposition would build on a nuanced type of TX that’s consistent with the firm’s brand identity, aiming to provide identifiable and valuable CXs at touchpoints and across journeys for a specific niche of customers.

Inspired by the findings, I have made a *simple managerial tool* that pays homage to the famous Boston Consulting Group matrix and helps analyze the current state of CX and CX management to make strategic decisions (**Figure 21**, p. 224).

The symbol of the “Angry customer” in the bottom right corner of the **Figure 21** represents a negative experience that does not qualitatively differentiate a provider firm from the competitors; in other words, it does not carry any experience-based value proposition. It is likely that firms in this corner do not focus their competitive strategy on CXs but, instead, on price or a unique product feature. In B2B markets, such occurrences are not rare: firms in the IT sector often have business models that can be described as “sticky.” Customers may invest millions in expensive IT implementation projects, including hiring and training personnel, resulting in a high threshold for exiting such a relationship, hence, the “stickiness” of it. In these kinds of relationships, firms usually treat CX as a hygiene factor, keeping it at the minimum acceptable level. That means that investments in CX would hardly be a

strategic priority, and CXM as a function would not be taken seriously. However, even in the models where the main selling point is not great CX, negative experiences can spread through WoM and affect future sales and market growth.

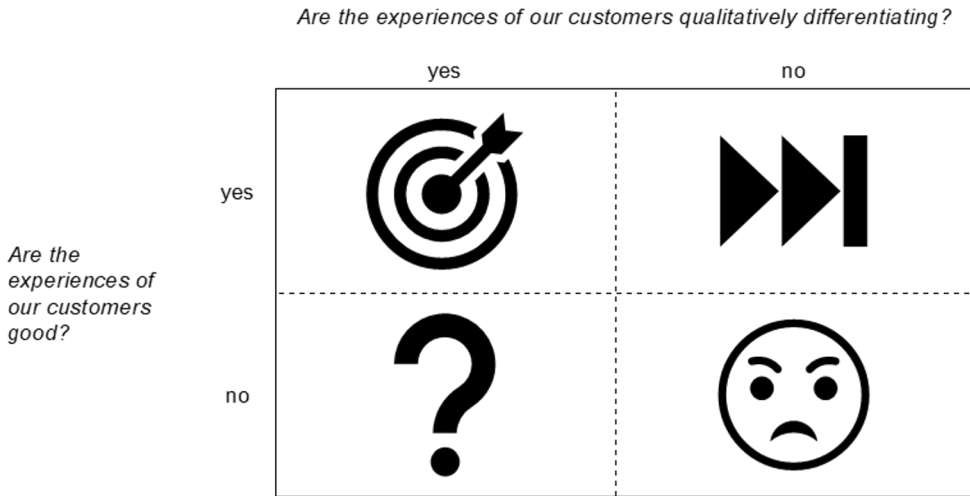


Figure 21. Target experience matrix for analyzing the current state of CX

The “Question mark” in the bottom left corner of the matrix **Figure 21** represents firms that need a further diagnosis. They either chose nuanced target experiences that are not working for their customers, requiring them to focus on better ways of defining target experiences, or work in a context where certain types of negative experiences can be valuable and differentiating. An example of the latter would be a knowledge-intensive service business, like a consultancy agency, whose job is to take firms out of their comfort zones, inevitably resulting in some negative experiences such feelings of fear, frustration, or insecurity. Nevertheless, negative experiences at touchpoints should still coincide with more positive experiences during the whole journey.

The “Fast-forward to the end” symbol in the top right corner of the **Figure 21** represents firms that focus on continuous improvement, rushing to facilitate better and better experiences. This model is built around the responsive continuous improvement cycle and focuses on eliminating negative experiences and continuously exceeding customer expectations. This competitive mode may be bearable in an industry where the competitors are not focused on CXs and where the firm can manage the rapid rate of growing expectations; however, few can win the race to the top by following the vertical differentiation strategy (Silva et al., 2018),

i.e., by providing the “best” or “perfect” customer experience. Instead, firms that want to spare their resources might choose the following approach.

The “Target” on the top left of the matrix represents a firm that knows its niche and can facilitate meaningful and unique customer experiences (Bolton et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) by following a horizontal differentiation strategy. This kind of firm fully utilizes its customer knowledge and the multifaceted nature of CX to bring competitive experiential value propositions to the market.

My study also has several *societal implications*. Business organizations can be seen as places of work where people spend roughly a third of their lives. That means that if management practices can improve the social experience of work, both for customers and firm’s own employees, it would benefit our labour-centered society. Informed by the findings of my study, I assert that *making CX a priority allows for cultivating genuine care in business environment*. This is significant because a customer may be far removed from the people working to serve them. Even when service personnel have great personal motivation to create something good for customers, serve them well, and understand them, it is not always possible due to various organizational constraints and lingering business goals. Introducing a cross-organizational practice centered on customers and their experiences can bring them closer to the people who work toward their benefit. People working in customer organizations, in turn, can more successfully advance their personal and professional goals as CX becomes a priority for suppliers and providers.

Furthermore, being closer to the customer can further result in *benefits to wellbeing and a newfound meaning in work*. Indeed, in practice, employee experiences and wellbeing often go hand in hand with CXM, as they contribute to the success of this approach. There are, however, also risks to wellbeing associated with my findings that readers should consider. One of the risks is associated with using TXs too prescriptively, as service interactions can become robotic and inflexible and lack personalization, which has significant consequences both for the receiver of the service and the front-line employee. Forced smiles and restrictions on personal style can deteriorate the wellbeing of front-line employees and make them question their professional value. In my study, target experiences, above else, formed a framework for interpretation, which welcomed a variety of different approaches while keeping the common goal clear. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that with great tools comes great responsibility. In using target experience for design, one should always consider questions of business and environmental ethics and avoid the unethical use of stimuli at touchpoints.

Businesses are also essential participants of any working welfare state, and their financial success, if achieved responsibly, should benefit society through taxes, employment, and valuable services. Based on my findings, I suggest *considering investing in B2B CX management programs to grow Finland’s international profile*.

International business markets are essential targets for Finnish businesses, as only a small fraction of Finnish exports consists of consumer products and services (Laaksonen, 2016). Furthermore, the most significant and growing Finnish service exports are business services and information and communication technology (Tilastokeskus, 2022). Hence, ensuring the success of B2B firms in general and B2B *service* firms in particular can benefit the Finnish welfare state. Since the Finnish market is small, choosing the right differentiation strategies is crucial, and mastering CX-based differentiation can be a trump card for Finnish businesses that already have a reputation for being innovative, reliable, and honest business partners (Business Finland, 2022).

9.3 Limitations and future research directions

Like any research, this study has its limitations and does not report on all the interesting elements involved in CX management in the B2B context. This section discusses the limitations of the study and offers future research agenda to continue the theoretical development initiated by this study.

There are several limitations connected to the *methodological choices* of this study. Being an explorative cross-sectional field study, it lies between the in-depth case study and a survey and thus is neither.

First, as the study was performed with a large number of firms and only one key informant per firm, it does not have the richness specific to a particular industry, size, service offering, or organizational culture. Also, my analysis was based on managers' accounts and remembered examples of their CX management efforts. However, the examples were somewhat disconnected from each other, illustrative of the different development projects and activities that the interviewed CX managers participated in. By choosing to study a single firm in depth and focusing on a few CX development projects as units of analysis, I would have been able to dig deeper, build a more detailed processual model, and potentially discover more elements specific to that firm's context, which might have been generalizable across companies of similar sizes or types. However, considering that my goal was to delineate CX management, such an approach could have resulted in only a partial view of the practice, illustrating only a particular stage of its maturity. Furthermore, best-case sampling for such an in-depth study would have led to potential problems, as establishing the best case for CX management can be challenging. Nevertheless, I recommend an in-depth longitudinal case study or ethnographic approach be conducted in the future to enrich the current findings and adapt the categories proposed in this study to specific contexts (Table 15, p. 229).

Second, as this study was performed with a nonrandom sample, it cannot be easily replicated, or its results generalized. By choosing a survey method (instead of

personal interviews), I could have operationalized some emergent constructs in the literature and tested potential relationships, allowing for explanations based on probability and statistical generalization. However, I assert that the explorative study I conducted was necessary for delineating interesting constructs and discovering new lines of questioning. Nevertheless, there remains a need to operationalize and test the three activity constructs constituting CXM and their effects in terms of customer outcomes (**Table 15**, p. 229).

Furthermore, the choice of diverse sampling, although often employed in such studies (e.g., Homburg et al., 2017; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Malshe & Sohi, 2009; Terho, 2009; Tuli et al., 2007), resulted in rather broad findings that are not specific to any industry. The next step to understanding CX in the B2B context, which consists of a great variety of business models and offerings, would be to focus on specific industries, such as the financial or ICT sectors or knowledge-intensive services, and gain insights relevant for that particular context (**Table 15**, p. 229).

Finally, the study could have benefited from considering the customer perspective (**Table 15**, p. 229). While this would have been cumbersome for the research design I adopted, a more elegant research design, akin to one used by Ponsingnon et al. (2017), would have allowed me to include a dyadic perspective or even narrow the research focus to one firm and several of its customers. A different research design could have also highlighted the interaction between intended and realized experiences.

Some limitations of the study are connected to the *chosen theoretical approaches*. I chose a nonrestrictive explorative approach for interviewing managers and analyzing CXM activities, focusing only on the idea that activities would have underlying motives. I could have taken a more detailed approach relating the activity perspective to the resource-based view used in CXM literature (Homburg et al., 2017), viewing CXM activities as resource-integrating activities between different actors within a managing organization as well as at the level of a service network (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). However, I chose not to include firms' resources, capabilities, or other elements related to activities in the interview protocol, as that would have demanded a more structured theoretical framing that would change the explorative nature of the study into confirmatory: discovering activities was, after all, the main theoretical interest. To study CXM activities in more detail, taking into consideration the actors or required skills, the interview guide should include appropriately operationalized constructs.

Furthermore, an alternative to studying CX management based on its activities is studying it as a practice. According to the S-D interpretation of the institutional theory, activities that are institutionalized become practices (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), and depending on many factors, including the length of CX initiatives, activities may be institutionalized to various degrees. However, I did not consider the degree of

institutionalization of CXM activities in this study, so this remains a potential object of future study.

In **Table 15** (p. 229) below, I present the various themes related to my study that can be used in future research. In addition to research directions stemming from the limitations above, the Table contains research questions that I have formed based on my data analysis.

The data obtained in this study gave rise to initial insights around how target experiences have been defined, chosen, and communicated in the sampled firms. However, questions related to the influence of different actors as well as the roles of customer insights, offering type, relationship type, a competitive environment, and a firm's vision in building TXs need further investigation. This study shows that target experiences are influential within B2B organizations, so it is crucial to understand where they originate from.

In addition, I found that several target experiences can coexist within one organization. Nevertheless, further research is needed into the interactions between different kinds of TXs within one firm, including the possible conflicts involved in attributing target experiences to different actors and customer firms.

My findings on CXM activities in B2B firms allowed for articulating questions related to different contextual aspects of those activities (**Table 15**, p. 229). Studying the value arising from customers' engagement in generating CX insights and the impacts of tracking CXs relates to creating knowledge around the understanding activities of CX management. Also, further research into the cues at touchpoints in consumer and business contexts, the risks of touchpoint prioritization, the influence of the relationship context on how uncontrollable events are dealt with at touchpoints, and customer perceptions of different journey management strategies for transactional and relational exchanges would illuminate the specificities of activities directed at facilitating CX in the B2B context. Finally, studying how organizational culture and the dynamics between the selling organization and producing organization influence alignment activities would add to the literature on how B2B firms prepare their organizations for CX management.

Table 15. Recommendations for future research

THEMES	POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Target experience definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who participates in defining TXs? How do different actors influence the definition? • How are customer insights used in defining TXs? • What are the roles of the offering type, relationship type, competitive environment, and firm's vision in defining TXs? • How are TXs shared across an organization? • How do TXs help in building CVPs? How do established value propositions affect the definitions of TXs?
Use of TXs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do different TXs coexist and interact within a firm? • How does the attribution of TXs take place? • What factors make a firm approach CX from a sales-dominant, user-dominant, or holistic perspective? • How do the three roles of TXs change depending on the specific organizational context (i.e., the small and medium-sized enterprises, knowledge-intensive or ICT contexts)?
General CX management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of deliberate CXM efforts on CXs, customer loyalty, and firms' financial performance? • What are the impacts of nuanced and general TXs on CX management and its outcomes? • How can the activity constructs be operationalized for specific industries?
Measurement of B2B CX	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can B2B CX be conceptualized from the customer perspective? • How can the B2B customer journey be conceptualized from the customer perspective? • How can TXs of different scopes, attributed to different actors in a client organization, be integrated into CX measurements?
B2B CX management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of value arise from the involvement of B2B customers in generating CX insights? • What are the impacts of CX tracking on customer experiences in the B2B context? • How do customers experience similar cues at touchpoints in consumer vs. professional contexts? • What are the risks of touchpoint prioritization when dealing with an abundance of customer journeys? • How do customers perceive the different journey management strategies that providers employ for transactional and relational exchanges? • How does the relationship context impact the ways in which providers address uncontrollable events at touchpoints? • How does the organizational culture affect alignment activities? • How do the dynamics between the selling and producing organizations influence alignment activities?

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview guide

ENTRANCE

Frame the situation: Lay out the research purpose and interview agenda, explain that the research will benefit from detailed responses, inform participants about the interviews being recorded, and explain the confidentiality and anonymity issues.

NOTE: Make sure that the interviewee gets to speak freely but remains focused on one of the themes from the script; planned time: 60 min.

INTRODUCTION (estimated 10 min)

Choose the best opening question for the situation.

Tell me a little about yourself; how did you end up in the position of CX manager?
or: To understand the context, could you tell me a little bit about the market and your typical customers?

What typical interactions do your customers have

- directly with your company;
- with your partners;
- with your service/products outside your control, independently; and

Do the interactions happen with different people inside your client's company?

I understand that customer experience is important to your company ... *[silence]*

- Why is that?
- Does your firm have an official strategy for CX?
- What is strategic about CX management?
- How do you understand CX in the B2B context specifically?
- What about customer journeys and touchpoints (importance)?
- Is this understanding shared throughout the firm?

EXPLORING TARGET EXPERIENCES (estimated 20 min)

TYPES OF TXs

What kinds of experiences do you want your customers to have? *[Listen!]*

- *Prompt:* Consider their responses ... how would you want them to think, feel, act? Can you describe it in terms of emotions, thoughts, or actions?
- Would you say that the experiences your company wants to deliver are unique to your company? In what way?

[If no] Why, what does it mean to your company?

[If yes] Do you think you can compete with them? How?

----- *if relevant* -----

- Do target experiences differ for different people in the customer company? How?
- Do you focus on individual journeys? Whose journeys or which touchpoints do you prioritize?
- How do you see the overall picture of your customer's experience? How do you think it comes together, considering multiple experiencing actors?
- Do the aforementioned target experiences relate to the [aforementioned] big picture or to experiences during interactions (at touchpoints) and journeys? Do TXs differ?
- Are TXs different at the beginning, during the development project, after the deployment, etc.?
- Do your target experiences differ by customer segment? By offering?

----- *if relevant* -----

FORMATION AND DEFINITION OF TXs

- Are you aiming to create those (mentioned) experiences specifically? Why?
- Are those officially defined? Why, what does it let you do?
- How do you define them? Where do these *[examples of TXs]* come from?
- Who participates in defining them? Why does it matter?
- How would it affect your CX goals if employees/partners/customers participated in defining TXs?

If target experiences are not defined, ask speculative questions.

- If you were to define target experiences (i.e., experiences that your firm aims to provide for your customers) in more detail in your CX strategy, how would you approach it?
- Do you see defining target experiences as something that can help your strategic goals regarding CX? Why/why not?

INVESTIGATING CXM ACTIVITIES (estimated 20 min)

We were talking about how you see customer experiences and what experiences you want to achieve. *[Wait for an affirmative nonverbal cue.]* Could you tell me more about how you try to deliver them? *alternatively, dive right in:* What does CX management include? What are you managing?

Pick out the important elements from the answer. Ask follow-up questions if these elements arise:

- CX insights, research activities, mapping/workshopping
- Designing/managing touchpoints; communication (material, emails, website), usage (products, offerings), service (support calls, sales interactions) cues
- Designing/managing journeys: consistency, cohesion, sensitivity
- Designing/managing networks: partners and other service providers, other customers

Other possible elements/keywords – establish connection to CXM:

- Brand management, brand image
- Measurement, KPIs, incentives
- Employee management and training
- IT systems
- Department structures and roles

Does the way you handle CX management facilitate the unique target experiences we talked about? If yes, how? If not, how can it do so?

If the participant hasn't talked about TXs yet, ask: What are your aims with these actions?

Pick up on specific target experiences and goals, and ask about the activities that relate to them.

Example: You mentioned that you want your customers to have effortless experiences. What do you do to achieve effortlessness?

Potential follow-up questions:

- Which department is responsible for it? Why?
- What would it require from your customers?
- Could you give a specific example to help clarify?

INVESTIGATING CXM REQUIREMENTS (estimated 15 min)

Can you tell me more about your position (CX manager) and responsibilities? What facilitates your work?

We've talked about target customer experiences and what's being done to achieve them ... do you think you've succeeded in this? What has it required?

- What obstacles were in your way? What did you find challenging, and why?
- What changes have you made to make *[the mentioned challenge]* work? What still needs to happen?

If the respondent has no ideas, probe further. Pick up on issues that come up in other interviews and ask about them.

- Culture: How do people view customer experience in your organization? Should it change? Has it changed? How?
- What thoughts do you have on your company's strategy, priorities? What are the roles of strategy and the top management in CX management?
- Capabilities of a company (What should be in place? What should work, in order for you to be able to achieve mentioned aim/ solve challenge?). Similarly: company's structure, resources, reward systems.

Finally, name three of your successes in CX management and three things in which there's still work to be done.

EXIT

First summarize the discussion. Ask, Are there any important issues that we have not discussed?

Get some background info on the participant if this has not already been done. End on a positive note and ask for permission to follow-up. Have the respondent agree to further cooperation and help with finding participants for further inquiries and promise to provide a report on the research results.

Appendix 2. Strategic roles of target experiences with power quotes

CATEGORIES	DEFINITIONS	POWER QUOTES
Target experiences guide customer-facing CX management actions		
TXs guide the measurement of realized customer experiences.	Firms use target experiences as a yardstick to measure and make sense of realized CXs along customer journeys.	<i>We have extensive circles of influence, and we want to bring this <u>[QLB] experience</u> to everyone. [...] We want to create such a customer experience that a customer can rely on us; we are friendly, and we are flexible. We <u>see this in customer experience measurement: we get high ratings exactly for these strategic indicators, for working according to our values: that we keep the promises we give, our staff is friendly, it is flexible to work with us.</u> [...] <u>These three things make up the kind of experience we want.</u> [...] We can see these in the buying customers' and consumers' assessments. [...] At the moment, we measure them annually using questionnaires. In fact, we have both <u>online questionnaires and phone interviews</u> ... and basic <u>feedback processes</u> through which one can always provide feedback; we actively take these up in sales conversations. (QLB)</i>
TXs guide the design of customer journeys.	Firms (re)design the combinations and sequences of (firm-controlled) touchpoints along customer journeys to support the realization of target experiences.	<i><u>All the touchpoints at which the client or the prospect deals with us—they could be websites, or newsletters, or implementation trainings, or salespeople—each of these points is examined based on certain criteria, and they then follow the same continuum to reinforce an emotional experience of the company as a whole</u> [...] <u>Trust</u> that we have expertise. [...] Then, in general, <u>a good feeling</u>; we are young, we breathe it into our being, and we are up to date and really <u>approachable</u>. [...] An important aspect is that we offer personalized learning, so we also want to offer <u>personalized service</u>. [...] We check that <u>everything is in line with our brand manual</u>, that everything has <u>the same spirit, independent of what touchpoint it is or what channel the customer is coming from</u>. [...] Now that the different touchpoints are synced and we say the same things everywhere, we are able to put forward our point of view and <u>realize this personal and exciting experience</u>. (JSL)</i>
TXs guide the design of touchpoints.	Firms (re)design the combinations of (firm-controlled) experiential cues at touchpoints to support the realization of target experiences.	<i><u>No one actually wants to do accounting. It's the most boring thing you can do.</u> [...] If you can find something within this that <u>brings you joy or a smile, then that is fundamentally important</u>. [...] One of the ways [to achieve the target experience], is <u>getting rid of difficult words or language that might make customers feel uneducated in the field</u>. [...] We want our customers <u>not to be intimidated</u>. We work with, for instance, <u>nice, cozy, happy colors</u>. And we try to add little things that might seem totally pointless but <u>make customers feel a sliver of joy</u>. For instance, if you search for a term through one of our tiny search boxes and you don't get a result, instead of seeing a blank page or a label saying "we didn't find anything," you'll see a <u>unicorn eating a doughnut</u>. (JSJ)</i>

Target experiences facilitate a shared CX mindset across a firm and its partner networks

<p>TXs form a common interpretive framework for action.</p>	<p>Firms use target experiences as a common reference point shared among employees and service partners and informing their actions.</p>	<p><i>Here is our [NMR CX] model. [represented visually]. [...] With customer experience, you can't really offer a recipe [...]. But that's kind of why we decided that our <u>model of customer experience must be very general and easy [for the personnel] to apply their own thinking.</u> So, <u>when I act according to the [NMR CX] model</u>, with any level of customer, <u>things should work out well!</u> (NMR)</i></p>
<p>TXs support the alignment of organizational systems.</p>	<p>Firms use target experiences as a rationale for aligning their and their service partners' internal systems, structures, and processes, thus sharing the CX mindset structurally.</p>	<p><i>[...] we <u>put the responsibility for customer service on everyone</u> rather than some certain people. So then, if there is a more complex problem, a person that calls you [the customer] clearly understands the technology. <u>You get a good feeling that someone who really understands this thing is doing something about it.</u> That way, you are ready to wait much longer, even if it lasts just as long. (JMA)</i></p>

Target experiences help create and sustain a beneficial position in the market

<p>TXs define a firm's position in relation to its competitors' CX efforts.</p>	<p>Firms use target experiences to define their position in the industry by relating them to their competitors' CX efforts.</p>	<p><i>We have clearly expressed that <u>we compete in terms of staff and customer experience.</u> We want to be the most well-liked company in the industry. [...] <u>Customer experience is important to us</u>, and it is both our internal and <u>external message.</u> (QLB)</i></p>
<p>TXs help build recognizable brand associations.</p>	<p>Firms position in the market as providers of unique customer experiences by building associations between the target experiences and the brand name.</p>	<p><i>It's a <u>distinctive, personalized [experience]</u>. The kind that leaves a strong emotional connection. [...] <u>smooth energizing experience principle</u> [...] the way we approach it at the moment, we understand that <u>customer experience has a huge impact on how people see PSB as a brand</u> that they seem to <u>merge together.</u> (PSB)</i></p>
<p>TXs are used to propose experiential value to customer.</p>	<p>Firms use target experiences to articulate their promises of valuable customer experiences meant to result in both individual and organizational value for customer.</p>	<p><i>There are a lot of companies that do accounting software. But I believe that <u>we approach it in a unique way.</u> [...] The experience of <u>running a business should be [like] a party. It should be awesome.</u> [...] Having stuff like taxes and accounting kill that party would be a bad thing. So, <u>that's the angle we're leaning towards.</u> [Promise from the website: <u>If anyone knows how to make bookkeeping fun, we do</u>] [...] we can <u>make our customers, the small business owner, able to do this painlessly.</u> (JSJ)</i></p>