

B2B CUSTOMER CENTRICITY: A STRUCTURED LITERATURE REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

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Putting the customer at the center of everything a company does is not a new approach. However, how to strategically implement this in a B2B company remains unexplored. A company must shift from a product-centric to a customer-centric perspective and transform its entire organization. This paper provides a much-needed literature review on B2B customer centricity, examines, compares, and contrasts existing resources, offers a structured overview of the most essential aspects, and provides directions for future research. This review consists of a structured analysis of primary and secondary sources. Recurring topics such as employees, customer experience, customer relationship management (CRM), data, KPIs, and sustainability have been identified and outlined in more detail. The review thereby identifies the two elements, employees and data, as decisive components of customer centricity. Another relevant insight is the transfer of customer expectations from the B2C to the B2B market, leading to continually rising expectations among B2B customers. To realize the concept's full potential and meet the growing expectations of business customers, a major rethink is needed. Future research should therefore focus on initiatives perceived by customers, refine what exactly the "center" is that a customer has to be put in, and clarify the practical process for holistically implementing customer centricity.

Keywords: Customer orientation; B2B marketing; customer centricity

1. INTRODUCTION

The current business environment is more dynamic, complex, and changing faster and more unpredictably than in years past (Seebacher, 2021). How customers define value and how companies can deliver it successfully—has changed over the years. In contrast to earlier times, when customers judged value solely by quality and price, current customers are much more demanding. Additional elements, such as convenience of purchase, after-sales service, and dependability have become more relevant (Ulaga, 2018). Furthermore, the business-to-business (B2B) environment is rational and cost-oriented, and most profitable decisions are made in this context. Therefore, the focus is not on emotions but on process optimization and profit sustainability; however, Seebacher (2021) highlighted the fact that people representing a company and making decisions are also influenced by their personal experience as customers in the business-to-consumer (B2C) sector. This situation is why customer centricity becomes increasingly relevant in today's B2B environment. The rising importance of customer experience strategies arising from this is a significant

challenge for B2B companies across sectors. Overcoming this challenge requires a definition and detailed explanation of the different elements, along with guidance on how to address new customer expectations. Therefore, this study explores the current state of the literature on B2B customer centricity, provides a summary for orientation, and identifies possible starting points for further research in this area.

Even though a business customer and an individual customer might buy the same product, they have different expectations and intended uses. Furthermore, some products and services are not accessible to private customers but only to business customers (Brennan et al., 2020). According to Brennan et al. (2020), a central aspect of B2B marketing is the derived demand of business customers. Organizations buy goods or services to pursue their own business goals, not to satisfy any intrinsic goals; therefore, a B2B supplier can focus on their customers' immediate demand as well as on demand further downstream. Nevertheless, recent research has shown that younger generations, including Generation Z, tend to transfer experience from the B2C environment to their B2B expectations (Hudetz, 2021a), which introduces new complexity to the B2B customer relationship and increases customer expectations (Hudetz, 2021b). However, these expectations are not consistently met, especially in customer experience. Seebacher (2021) examined feedback from more than 360 companies and found a remarkable gap between a company's perceptions of customer experience and those of its B2B customers. While 80% of enterprises in the survey stated they delivered a superior customer experience, only 8% were perceived as having done so.

Customer experience is considered one of the main levers to enhance customer centricity (Uлага, 2018); however, most often, the transformation and alignment of a company's structures to become customer-centric can also entail a particular cost-benefit trade-off (Habel et al., 2020). Therefore, the company must have a comprehensive understanding of customer centricity before starting any change initiatives. A clear overview of customer centricity including its definition, relevant aspects, and its practical application—is missing. Various researchers, such as Becker et al. (2020) and O'Gorman and Schuster (2024), have already called for more research on customer centricity. This study aims to summarize what is already known and identify areas for future research to develop the concept. The literature review first elaborates on the definition of customer centricity. Second, it gives a structured overview of the most recent literature and its thematic clusters. As a third element, directions for future research have been derived from the gaps identified in the existing literature.

2. DEFINITION OF CUSTOMER CENTRICITY

The core of customer centricity is to put the customer at the center (Frank et al., 2020; Habel et al., 2020; Kett et al., 2020; Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2020). The precise definition of this center is where researchers differ. While Frank et al. (2020) mentioned the center of all corporate activities, including business processes, Kett et al. (2020) described it as the center of an enterprise, Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020) as the center of the activities of the whole organization, and Habel et al. (2020) described it as the center of a firm's action. The extent to which a concept impacts corporate activities or activities in general, and whether it also affects processes, can significantly influence the scope of a change project in practice. Besides the overall scope, these differences also determine which departments and people are involved, which are not yet defined. This situation underscores the importance of a literature review to develop a deeper understanding of customer centricity grounded in prior research.

No matter which exact wording might be used, all researchers highlight the importance of a complete and correct understanding of the customer, its point of view, its needs, as well as current trends (Frank et al., 2020; Höckel, 2021; Nenninger & Seidel, 2021; Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2020). Furthermore, Habel et al. (2020) elaborated on the difference between customer centricity and customer orientation. The researchers thereby identified the degree to which the customer is prioritized as the main difference. While customer orientation aims to meet a customer's needs, the researcher defines customer centricity as a broader consideration that prioritizes customer interests and places them at the center of a company's actions.

More than 70% of global economic transactions now come from the B2B sector. Even though this is the case for most transactions, competition and information accessibility make B2B transactions less transparent than B2C transactions (Prior, 2023). Furthermore, the customer journey often shows great complexity, a broad array of stakeholders and touchpoints, and long customer engagement times. The diversity and number of touchpoints grow even further with the introduction of digital touchpoints, which become increasingly relevant in today's B2B competition (Lundin & Kindström, 2024; Selent, 2023). The substantial weight in the economy, the high complexity, and the increasing pressure in competition highlight why a common understanding of customer centricity is especially key to a successful transformation in B2B.

Regarding transformation, Uлага (2018) mentions two significant shifts required during the transition to a customer-centric organization. The first shift refers to a firm's transition from a goods-centric to a

customer-centric orientation, while the second shift relates to moving toward providing customer solutions rather than focusing on manufacturing and selling products. To implement it successfully, Kett et al. (2020) emphasized that the entire firm must participate in this transformational process. An obvious starting point for the transition is the recognition that “the customer” is not a homogeneous group but a heterogeneous community of individuals. To manage a customer-centric company profitably it is essential to identify and define relevant customers. The quintessence is to target the right customer in the right way to achieve the desired results, rather than treating all customers equally (Fader, 2020; Fader & Toms, 2018; Höckel, 2021).

Habel et al. (2020) noted that, although companies are increasingly considering customer centrality and multiple researchers have begun investigating these topics, all activities are still initiated and supported by insights from a company’s perspective. How customers perceive customer centrality is unclear, therefore, the researchers highlight the importance of perceived customer centrality, which they define as the “degree to which a customer perceives a firm to put customers’ interests at the center of all of its actions.”

To identify which elements influence customer centrality as perceived in the B2B area, Duss (2024) conducted a case study. Customers and employees of a Swiss company have been asked to identify the key elements a B2B company must consider to implement a customer-centric approach. The study identified seven relevant elements, comprising elements already identified as relevant in the B2C context, as well as social- and B2B-specific elements. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview that could serve as a reference for B2B companies implementing or improving customer centrality by focusing on genuinely perceived elements.

Table 1: Catalogue of relevant elements of B2B customer centrality

Catalogue of relevant elements of B2B customer centrality	
• Customer support • Assessment of needs • Satisfactory service • Pragmatism • Thinking ahead • Availability • Speed	• Personal interaction • Informed point of contact • Response to requests • Know-How Transfer • Quality education • Sparring • Putting oneself in the other’s shoes • Best alternative for customers • Challenging each other’s ideas • Consequent positioning • Customized services • Delimitation
• Partnership to reach goals • Transparency • Collaboration • Reliability • Knowledge of customer	

3. METHODOLOGY

New knowledge is constantly generated through research and studies worldwide. To ensure continuity it is crucial to build new research on existing knowledge. A structured literature review is suitable for identifying gaps and essential elements of B2B customer centrality, as it gives an overview of existing knowledge and research results in a specific area. Furthermore, it allows for deriving future research directions that build on prior research results and ensure continuity (Aityan, 2022). This study’s literature review includes a summary of the current research status in this area, compares and contrasts the standpoints of different researchers, and identifies a direction for future research to enhance knowledge in this area (Paul & Criado, 2020). Primary data sources include the electronic database Swiss Library Service Platform, which compiles scientific literature from 500 libraries in Switzerland, and the web search engine Google Scholar, which indexes a broad array of articles and books. Keywords like “customer centrality” and “B2B” served as a starting point. These keywords were then combined with the terms “trend” and “sustainability” using the linking word “AND.” Articles were considered relevant if the keywords were mentioned in the title or in the full text of the article (Paul & Criado, 2020). Additional sources were found through snowballing, as the references of the publications analyzed led to more interesting studies. This paper considered sources published in German and English. The research has been limited to articles published within the last five years to ensure only the most recent and up-to-date articles in the review. This approach is critical as trend topics such as sustainability and the development of the B2B market are fundamental. This process supported the identification of areas where further research is needed, as it covered international research, allowing the identification of recurring topics alongside specific keywords, and broadened the perspective to adjacent areas. Through this process, 15 relevant sources were identified, comprising primary and secondary sources. Primary

sources like Hudetz (2022) and Seebacher (2021) presented information in its original form, conducted their own studies, and published their own results. This approach assures high quality and accuracy of the information processed. In contrast, secondary resources, such as Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020) and Ulaga (2018), analyzed existing literature, processed and interpreted previously known data, and placed them in context. These sources were published by well-known publishers or in accredited journals with peer-review procedures.

As Paul and Criado (2020) noted, a literature review should follow a structured approach to deliver insightful information. Articles were scanned to identify clusters of recurring topics, which were used to structure the article. Each cluster builds a sub-chapter and elaborates on the different aspects of the respective topic. The qualitative examination allowed the researchers to compare and contrast their definitions and views on a specific topic.

4. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The extant literature has made little effort to explain what is relevant to customer centricity, especially in the B2B environment. As a result, a significant research gap exists concerning how firms can best manage their customers' journeys to create a customer-centric experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

A review of the literature shows that four keywords, data, customer experience, customer relationship management (CRM), and key performance indicator (KPI) are frequently mentioned. Furthermore, the role of employees and the growing trend toward sustainability have been identified as recurring themes in the literature analyzed. The 15 most relevant references that discuss multiple aspects of customer centricity and have been published in the past 5 years have therefore been analyzed in detail with respect to the aforementioned recurring patterns. Table 2 provides an overview of the literature and the aspects discussed in each work. Notably, the literature has addressed B2B firms only briefly. The overview shows that only 6 of the 15 sources explicitly address the B2B environment.

Table 2: Literature overview

Reference	Type / Technique	Key findings	E	CX	CRM	Data	KPI	S	B2B
Fader and Toms (2018)	- Book - Theory - Practical concept - Case study	- Grow value of customer through CX - CRM = enabler for growth - NPS as starting point for measurement - Acquisition = key for successful retention		X	X	X	X		
Ulaga (2018)	- Article - Interview	- CX = main lever for Customer Centricity - B2B supplier evaluation based on total CX - Digital transformation increases importance of data	X	X		X			X
Palmatier et al. (2019)	- Book - Literature review - Case study	- Assure Customer Centricity in recruitment - Culture influences data processing - Increasing number of channels, touchpoints and KPI measurement	X	X		X	X		
Fader (2020)	- Book - Practical concept - Case study	- CRM = pre condition for Customer Centricity - Value of understanding individual customer - CLV helps a company to value customers individually as well as collectively			X	X	X		
Frank et al. (2020)	- Article - Literature review - Expert interview	- Relevance of data privacy for Customer Centricity				X			
Habel et al., (2020)	- Qualitative interviews - Survey	- Employees = foundation of customer's perception of a company and its Customer Centricity - Perceived Customer Centricity = increased loyalty intentions	X			X			X
Kett et al. (2020)	- Book - Practical concept	- Importance of knowledge and skills of domain - Three perspectives of CRM - Importance of understanding customer profitability and the drivers of the profit	X		X		X		

Table 2: Literature overview (continued)

Reference	Type / Technique	Key findings	E	CX	CRM	Data	KPI	S	B2B
O’Gorman and Schuster (2024)	- Book - Business background reference - Practical concept	- Customer-oriented cultural mindset - Positive effect of CX accelerates the financial performance - Evolution of customer centricity	X	X	X	X	X		X
Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020)	- Article - Bibliometric analysis	- Strong correlation between satisfaction of employees and customers - Customer centricity can increase a company’s economic costs - Sustainability incl. customer, shareholder, social and environmental perspective	X					X	
Prior (2023)	- Book - Practical concept - Case study	- Employees bring customer journey to life - CX is based on subjective perception - Sustainability = trend with steadily increasing demand - Lack of transparency in B2B transactions	X	X	X	X		X	X
Suwelack (2020)	- Book - Practical concept	- Positive correlation between CX and customer loyalty, spendings, willingness to pay, purchase intention and market value of a company - Sustainability, individuality, health = important mega trends		X		X	X	X	
Höckel (2021)	- Book - Business background reference	- Employees = foundation and face of company - CX = reactions from pre- to post-purchase - Data help to respect heterogeneity of customers - Importance of credible sustainability	X	X		X		X	
Hudetz (2022)	- Position paper	- Customer expect similar CX in B2B area as they know from the B2C - B2B buying behaviour highly influenced by B2C - Decisive competitive advantage through data and sustainability		X		X		X	X
Nenninger and Seidel (2021)	- Book - Business background reference - Practical concept	- Culture = decisive for customer-centric transformation - Crucial for CX is a seamless omnichannel experience - Use of data = essential for competitiveness - NPS and CLV = relevant KPIs	X	X		X	X		
Seebacher (2021)	- Book - Theory - Practical concepts - Case studies	- CX = circular process - Gap in perception of customer centricity (customer vs. self assessment of company) - CRM prevents from loss of knowledge when employees leave - Handling of data = success-factor in B2B - B2C and B2B marketing are increasingly converging	X	X	X	X	X		X

Notes: E = Employees; CX = Customer Experience; CRM = Customer Relationship Management; KPI = Key Performance Indicator; S = Sustainability; B2B = Business-to-Business.

The following subchapters provide more information about the different factors that influence customer centricity, make it measurable, or support its execution. Furthermore, the differing views will be compared and contrasted to provide an overview of the various attitudes toward a topic. The primary sources mentioned above have thereby been supplemented with relevant other research on the respective factors.

4.1 The role of employees

Habel et al. (2020) considered employees, especially salespeople, as key intermediaries between companies and customers, as they lay the foundation for customers’ perceptions of a company and its overall customer centricity. They suggested that this is decisively driven by the company’s customer orientation on the one hand and by the individual employee on the other. Their study confirmed that an employee’s customer orientation has a positive and significant effect on customers’ perceived customer-centricity. They also revealed the significant role a sales force plays in increasing a customer’s perception of customer centricity. Prior (2023) highlighted that employees bring the Customer Journey to life through a series of actions that

stimulate the company's brand touchpoints. To efficiently address all customer requirements, a team must define concrete roles with defined responsibilities, goals, and targets. Moreover, O'Gorman and Schuster (2024) confirm that customer centricity can only be successfully implemented if employees have a customer-oriented cultural mindset. Furthermore, they need the knowledge and ability to respond appropriately to customer needs; they must also be empowered to act quickly and solution-oriented to solve problems right away.

According to Kett et al. (2020) and Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020), a strong correlation between employee and customer satisfaction is evident. Crucial to this is that an employee's morale and behavior, guided by incentives, culture, and the structure of power delegation, ultimately result in enhanced customer satisfaction and, with it, retention and profit for the company (Kett et al., 2020). Moreover, Nenninger and Seidel (2021) highlight culture as the decisive factor in transforming a company into a customer-centric one. According to the researchers, this comprises an organization's values and its willingness to act on them. As the culture grows through decisions informed by the vision and mission, learnings, habits, and convictions, it is characterized by employees working for the company, management, and, probably, also the shareholders. Similarly, Begecarslan (2021) focused on the people side of business transformation and found that companies that focus more on continuous improvement are most often driven by their culture and values and highlighted employee development as a crucial success factor.

To let customers experience such a customer-centric culture and transfer employees' satisfaction to customers, employees' strong customer knowledge and relationship skills are crucial. They build the base to form long-term relationships. Additionally, employees' boundary-spanning skills are essential, as they help break down silos between departments and enable satisfying end-to-end customer service. To perform in front of a customer, front-desk employees must have a broad knowledge of the domain they work in, as well as the skills to explain a company's products comprehensively (Kett et al., 2020). Seebacher (2021) added motivation, competence, and innovative thinking to the set of skills just mentioned, while Prior (2023) noted that attracting and retaining employees with relevant skills and strong customer knowledge is challenging.

Höckel (2021) even considered employees to be the foundation and face of a company. Whether one considers an online or an offline business, friendly words or words of understanding can help a customer smile. Palmatier et al. (2019) noted that many organizations do not consider customer centricity in the recruitment process. However, to onboard the right people leaders must manage in a customer-centric way, allowing them to select suitable team members who follow their lead. O'Gorman and Schuster (2024) indicated that, when looking at customer centricity, customers are working with employees; respectively, people are working with people. Therefore, the human factor introduces significant complexity, requiring employees to possess empathetic, creative listening skills.

Uлага (2018) also elaborated on the transformational process needed to create a customer-centric organization, noting that such a transformation typically takes longer than expected because the management team must address multiple issues simultaneously. Besides introducing new behaviors, they also have to support employees in gaining comprehensive knowledge that might go beyond their initial scope of work.

4.2 Customer experience (CX)

Uлага (2018) considered customer experience the main lever for becoming truly customer-centric. However, the definition of the powerful lever remains unclear. According to Seebacher (2021), customer experience encompasses a customer's experience and perceptions throughout the customer journey and its touchpoints. Suwelack (2020) considered the entire customer journey but described the experience itself more as the customer's conscious thoughts and feelings, driven by interactions with the company's employees, channels, systems, and products. Prior (2023) classified customer experience as a concept that, together with the customer journey, forms the foundation of customer engagement. The researcher describes customer experience as the stimulation of customer perceptions and their effects on psychological and emotional states. Höckel's (2021) definition is even more comprehensive, it encompasses all behavioral, sensory, cognitive, and affective reactions throughout the entire process (before purchase, during purchase, during consumption, and after purchase). These three steps are also an important factor, as further elaborated on by Nenninger and Seidel (2021). Firstly, customers help other customers with information, instructions, and inspiration before the purchase. Secondly, they provide support through recommendations and experiences when making a purchase, and thirdly, they offer mutual assistance in after-sales service. Seebacher (2021) also mentions the three steps in a customer's journey; however, the researcher proposes a circular rather than a linear process, as a customer's decision, for example, may be influenced by a recommendation. This situation could mean the supplier has not been involved in the decision-making process until the buying decision has been taken. Afterward, the customer experience during use could lead to repurchase or the re-evaluation of other alternatives.

Seebacher (2021) considered CX an essential factor in a B2B customer's decision-making process in favor of a specific supplier. O'Gorman and Schuster (2024) found that customer experience management helps companies differentiate from competitors and improve their market standing. The positive effect accelerates a company's financial performance, especially in competitive, dynamic markets and amid technological evolution. Nenninger and Seidel (2021) agree and designate the experience as the essential factor of differentiation. A specific experience can help stay top of mind with existing and potential customers. According to Nenninger and Seidel (2021) and Seebacher (2021), a seamless omnichannel experience is crucial across all channels, whether they involve direct interaction with an employee or a digital touchpoint. Seebacher (2021) found that, in this context, while 80% of companies believe they already deliver a superior customer experience, only 8% deliver experiences customers perceive as exceptional. This result indicates unused potential, especially as unique experiences build trust and are likely to lead customers to spread positive word of mouth. Convinced customers sell the company and its products at no cost through their recommendation. Fader and Toms (2018) even considered customer experience as a possible source to not only retain customers but also to grow their value.

A unique customer experience can be created, for example, through personalization. According to Hudetz (2022), the trend of personalization affects both the B2C and the B2B markets. They found that 77% of B2B companies agreed that their customers expect a similar customer experience in B2B as they do in B2C. As a result, customers are no longer interested in a broad B2B portfolio but rather expect a tailored offer that exactly fits their individual needs. Therefore, personalization must create an incomparable customer experience that can build a unique selling proposition and a distinguishing feature to their competitors. Suwelack (2020) highlighted customer experience as the decisive differentiator in competition. To stay relevant and competitive, B2B companies must improve their APIs, simplify access to information, enhance the usability of their portals, and more. This situation increases costs, which can be challenging in an environment with decreasing margins. Nevertheless, B2B sourcing managers are also often willing to pay for services, as long as they receive the customer experience, they expect (Hudetz, 2022). Ulaga (2018) agreed, arguing that B2B customers are increasingly likely to evaluate their suppliers based on the overall customer experience rather than on a single transaction. Prior (2023) argued that customer experience is based on a customer's subjective perception and is therefore highly dependent on psychological and emotional well-being. Furthermore, it is important to align customer experience and brand promise as the promise should be kept through the experience (O'Gorman & Schuster, 2024).

While the importance of a seamless experience is highlighted in literature, the practice often shows a different reality. The data, which could be used to improve offers, are often stored across different databases and systems and under the control of different departments, hindering the creation of a consistent customer picture. The solution to this issue and, with it, the creation of a differentiation genuinely perceived by customers will only be possible through a uniform customer experience across all customer interfaces. This goal can be achieved by leveraging all relevant customer data to continuously refine offers that meet evolving customer needs. Companies must deliver a consistently positive customer experience across all customer interfaces while simultaneously using data to promptly and effectively identify customer needs (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021).

4.3 Customer relationship management (CRM)

As various researchers have confirmed, data is essential to a company's success. To process and use this data, the CRM system builds the technical foundation. Fader (2020) and Fader and Toms (2018) considered the CRM system as the nerve center of a company and an enabler of growth and profitability. The system brings data from various streams—sales, marketing, customer service, and social media—together to best define who the customer is and create a unified picture of the customer across the entire organization. According to the researchers, this is a prerequisite for every customer-centric company, while the roll-out of a CRM system alone does not automatically guarantee success right away (Fader & Toms, 2018). Prior (2023) considered the CRM to be the system for managing all aspects of customer engagement. By consolidating data from various sources into a unified view, it enables seamless, efficient customer management while precisely addressing individual needs. Seebacher (2021) found, in this context, the importance of information technology (IT), data, and content. While the IT department manages the CRM system as part of the company's IT infrastructure, the content entered into the system must be managed by marketing. The marketing department must gather and specify the requirements of the various departments within the company that will access the CRM, and the IT department must ensure the system meets those requirements, implement it properly, and grant access to all required departments.

Without a CRM, genuine customer centricity is, according to Fader (2020), impossible. Years ago, CRM systems were not robust, stand-alone software solutions; they were used only by marketing to centralize and keep customer data up to date (Seebacher, 2021). More recently, the collection and use of massive amounts of

data to support a company's success are not possible without a proper technical solution; it is not only about collecting data but also about knowing how to use it to best serve customers.

Kett et al. (2020) defined CRM even more broadly, mentioning three distinct perspectives. The first is a project-specific perspective that covers information-enabled relationship projects. The second perspective is based on information-oriented processes and capabilities that allow a company to understand customers' desires and motivations. These insights offer a company the opportunity to manage customer relationships more efficiently and effectively. The third perspective is to manage customer relationships holistically, with the goal of shareholder value creation, as CRM manages intangible knowledge of a company's salespeople and all relevant information about their customer relationships. Seebacher (2021) indicated that without a CRM, the loss of a sales employee would automatically result in the loss of customer knowledge.

4.4 Data

Data provides the essential foundation for creating a unique customer experience. Nenninger and Seidel (2021) suggested that this situation is not new, as data have been available for a long time. What changed thanks to digitalization is that more data can be gathered in higher quality throughout the entire customer journey. Furthermore, there is almost no time lag, as it can be generated in real time and made available immediately. The key aspect is to exploit the new potential of it and the information it generates. With the right tools and infrastructure, data derived directly from customer behavior and activities can be processed with artificial intelligence, enriched, and integrated into digital processes. Decisions are thereby made with the support of artificial intelligence and can be partially or even fully automated. Furthermore, the use of historical data to predict future events is becoming increasingly relevant. This approach allows companies to recognize and manage purchasing behavior as well as needs and desires based on existing behavioral data. Nenninger and Seidel (2021) defined customer insights as information about customers, their behavior, and their needs, derived from data. They posited that these insights could help a company improve its offer while generating more data to meet its customers' needs and desires, thereby improving the customer experience. In contrast, Prior (2023) considered customer insights as a modern term for an old idea. Instead of using expensive, time-consuming customer surveys, focus groups, or interviews to identify trends, a company can now rely on data gathered from mostly digital shopping behavior.

Seebacher (2021) considered the proper handling of data and information (including all kinds of data, market, customer, project, and product information) along with knowledge of them as an essential success factor in modern B2B marketing. It is thereby crucial to keep the data up to date. Nenninger and Seidel (2021) even saw the full use of data as the essential competency for remaining competitive. Any company with insufficient data about its customers does not use its full potential and can only become part of a purchasing decision by offering a cheaper price and will therefore not remain competitive in the long term, as markets become increasingly transparent and companies are lost in the battle of constantly undercutting suppliers.

Höckel (2021) found that data competency should be built incrementally, beginning with proper data collection. Prior (2023) highlighted this with the importance of generating meaningful customer data. The researcher points out that not all available data is meaningful, which requires pre-cleaning activities to eliminate duplicates or incorrect data, complete missing data, and transfer the data into a database to make it accessible for analysis. Then, the data must be interpreted and used to optimize products, services, and internal processes to meet the customer's needs (Höckel, 2021). Furthermore, Hudetz (2022) attributed a decisive competitive advantage to data if a company gains access to a large customer base and uses it effectively. Specifically, digital transformation is allocating data and analytics growing importance, according to Ulaga (2018). It even supports the emergence of entirely new business models.

The better the company meets an individual customer's needs, the more data it will receive. In a first step, the data will come from a specific customer, and in a second step, from multiple other customers who buy the same article. Data generates knowledge about customers, their behavior, needs, and interests. With this knowledge, companies can offer improved products that generate more data as they better satisfy needs and wishes, thereby providing a better experience—this is how the cycle continues (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021). Based on previous work, Palmatier et al. (2019) identified the importance and the complexity of the interaction between a company's organizational culture and the way information is processed. To ensure that data, such as customer feedback or market information, are processed correctly and made available to the right departments, the researcher highlights that organizational culture must be considered when examining customer-centric data processing.

To consider the individual customer, it is important to note that customers are not a homogeneous mass that can be easily identified by criteria such as age and geography (Höckel, 2021). Fader (2020) found that companies that ignore the indisputable heterogeneity of customers miss the opportunity for long-term success. The researcher described the value of a fundamental understanding of an individual customer as too

significant to be ignored. Furthermore, Nenninger and Seidel (2021) found that, for true customer centricity, it is essential to personalize the data (i.e., assign it to a specific customer or prospect).

Even if data have been identified as a critical success factor for a company, collecting data can also raise concerns among customers. Frank et al. (2020) found that third parties, such as other service providers or social networks, could reduce the annoying process of data provision for customers, but customers also express concerns about data privacy. They considered data privacy as a relevant element of customer centricity. The presence of privacy heuristics allows customers to control which kinds of information a company gathers, reflecting the extent to which a customer trusts a particular company and increasing the capability for ethical interaction (Frank et al., 2020).

According to Hudetz (2022), awareness of the importance of developing data competency within a company already exists in most B2B companies; however, even when they recognize its relevance, they often struggle to implement standards and processes due to resource constraints. The researcher discovered in a study that about 71% of B2B companies still admit that their knowledge of customers must grow to develop competencies and improve Customer Experience.

Nenninger and Seidel (2021) determined digitalization as the basic requirement for successful data processing. Digitalization lays the foundation for achieving a data-driven, customer-centric orientation within a company. Without digitalization, a company cannot collect sufficient data, therefore, the basis for true customer centricity is missing. The researchers acknowledge that every type of data has value, however, they highlight that data reaches its full potential only when combined. The best data is useless if a company cannot work with it. Therefore, data utilization must combine information from different sources and systems, for example, via CRM with integrated data analytics tools or a corresponding business intelligence solution.

4.5 Key performance indicator (KPI)

According to Habel et al. (2020), perceived customer centricity can increase a customer's loyalty intentions. Especially if a customer perceives a company as charging high prices, this can result in higher purchase volume. Even though management is most often aware that products complement each other, they tend to monitor their performance independently. This approach is not compatible with customer-centric thinking, as in this perspective, the customer perceives the value of the entire product range rather than an individual product (Kett et al., 2020).

Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020) found that although customer centricity can increase customer satisfaction, it could also increase a company's economic costs by imposing additional coordination costs that do not arise within a product-centric structure. They emphasized that a customer-centric structure can have both positive and negative effects on economic benefits; therefore, the benefits must outweigh the costs. Kett et al. (2020) determined that the reason for a company's existence must lie in the profitable serving of customers. A company's urge to maximize customer equity, driven by customer lifetime value, is typical of a customer-centric company. Consequently, profits do not result from a company's ability to create value through the exchange of services or products, but rather from cultivating a client's lifetime value.

While Ulaga (2018) called for further research on the measurement of success in customer centricity, Kett et al. (2020) suggested that a main pillar of a customer-centric transformation is the understanding of customer profitability and its drivers. To measure customer experience and customer centricity, Nenninger and Seidel (2021) mentioned two methods that have proven particularly successful. Both methods focus on customer relationships and loyalty. First, they mentioned the net promoter score (NPS), which uses a simple method to measure customer satisfaction based on their experience. Second, they elaborated on customer lifetime value (CLV), which measures the value of a customer over their lifetime, based on their spending with the company. These two methods, as well as customer equity in general, will be elaborated on in the following sections.

4.5.1 Net promoter score (NPS)

Even though Fader and Toms (2018) admit that the NPS may not be the ultimate metric, the researchers are convinced that it provides a solid starting point for senior executives to understand and appreciate customer centricity. The KPI celebrates, through its split of promoters (customers who score a 9 or 10 out of 10 in the likelihood of recommending to a friend) and detractors (customers who score a 1 to 6), the heterogeneity of customers, which has already been mentioned as a fundamental basis of customer centricity. Nenninger and Seidel (2021) considered NPS a metric for quickly and easily measuring how satisfied a client is with a company's offering by assessing the likelihood of recommending the company to others.

A good NPS score often stems from an excellent customer experience, whether during service delivery or in other interactions with a company. Good NPS scores, in turn, empirically correlate with high customer acquisition and retention rates, as well as company growth rates. Furthermore, a direct positive

correlation between customer experience and customer loyalty, spending, willingness to pay, purchase intention, and a company's market value (Suwelack, 2020).

4.5.2 Customer lifetime value (CLV)

To make NPS economically visible, CLV can be closely monitored as an additional KPI (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021). Earlier in this article, the importance of conscious management of customer relationships has been demonstrated, which can be supported by CRM. This approach is also what Kett et al. (2020) identified as a prerequisite for impactful CLV. To achieve a positive impact, customers must repeat purchases, increase purchase frequency, make cross-purchases, and shop across multiple channels, which also leads to longer relationships (Fader, 2020; Kett et al., 2020). Nenninger and Seidel (2021) agreed and also highlighted the importance of cross-selling and upselling to maximize a customer's revenue. Notably, it affects all departments of a company with a direct link to the customer, but to varying degrees. The key element of a successful customer retention strategy that supports CLV is a reliable, responsive customer service team. According to Fader and Toms (2018), the key is to find the right balance to identify and retain high-risk, high-return, and lower-value customers, treating them appropriately to maximize revenue with the resources invested.

Nenninger and Seidel (2021) defined CLV as "the present value of the future cash flows (profit) attributed to the customer relationship." "Future" is thereby the keyword that indicates which revenue streams to focus on. The researchers highlighted the need to identify ways to create future value from a defined set of customers, as well as the importance of finding even more customers who can be attracted similarly. Fader's (2020) definition of CLV provides more detail, clarifying that cash flow must be associated with a specific customer. Furthermore, he noted that the CLV is a forward-looking, predictive KPI that is not necessarily precise and should not be confused with a customer's past value. An important difference in the calculation of CLV can thereby be observed between contractual and noncontractual relationships, as contracts offer a company-specific level of planning security and stability. Less complex and less detailed than the definitions read before, Kett et al. (2020) define CLV as the amount generated from a profitable customer during the commercial relationship minus the amount spent to attract, satisfy, and retain the customer.

In a customer-centric approach, CLV can be used to determine whether a company should adopt an offensive or a defensive strategy. While the offensive strategy includes loyalty programs and premium offerings, a defensive strategy focuses more on customer service and strategic account management (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021). Moreover, Fader (2020) stated that CLV helps a company value customers individually and collectively. It can also serve as a reference point for identifying which spending is most effective at acquiring new customers and, by extension, support companies in allocating marketing resources across the customer base.

Fader (2020) agreed with Nenninger and Seidel (2021) on the importance of CLV as a basis for identifying the right customers to target, but he does not consider CLV a regular KPI; instead, he views it as the most important data a company can gather. He explains its weighting by noting that the CLV enables a company to understand its customers as a group and as individuals. Moreover, he takes the argument a step further and considers the CLV as "the very unit of measurement upon which customer centricity and customer-centric firms are built."

4.5.3 Customer equity

Customer Lifetime Value is the measurement that drives customer equity. Customer equity, in turn, is an important element of the company value (Fader, 2020; Kett et al., 2020). The researchers believe that companies cannot become customer-centric unless they understand what customer equity is and how to use it as a KPI. Fader (2020) defines customer equity as "the sum of the customer lifetime values across a firm's entire customer base." The long-run positive effect of customer centricity on profits will also increase a company's total equity. As maximizing overall equity is a company's main objective, it should also allocate all necessary resources to maximize the different elements that contribute to it.

To make the most out of a customer base, acquisition is key; Fader and Toms (2018) even considered it the driver of customer centricity, as retention and development can only be successfully cultivated when it starts with the right customers. Kett et al. (2020) noted that customers' profit levels increase over time; therefore, a company might not realize any profit with a customer right after recruitment, but it might in the future. Furthermore, the cost of introducing new services or products, or the explanation needed, is lower for long-term customers who already know a company quite well than for new ones. Long-term customers are often less price-sensitive, more likely to spread positive word of mouth, and more forgiving in the event of any digressions. Therefore, a company can expect to achieve higher customer equity by focusing on the acquisition, retention, and long-term management of customer profit contributions.

4.6 Sustainability

Sustainability is a concept established in 1987 as a quality that guarantees, in the long term, the present without compromising the future. Sustainability aims to prevent the world from an uncontrollable collapse, as the capacities of the future have already been used up in the past. The application of this concept within customer-centricity results in a strategy that focuses on the customer while also respecting the shareholder's perspective, ensuring that all activities within an organization align with the main criteria of sustainability. The pressure on companies to be completely sustainable has steadily increased during the past 30 years, including the need to carefully reflect on the social and environmental consequences of their activities (Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2020). Prior (2023) mentioned sustainability as a trend with steadily increasing demand. The researcher considers the volatility of the global climate to be the root cause of this trend. As heavy weather events become more frequent and powerful, the shift toward sustainability will increase, with the focus and pressure on sustainable products and delivery chains intensifying.

Furthermore, Hudetz (2022) posited that B2B commerce will place sustainability at the top of management agendas as people around the world become more environmentally conscious; therefore, offering sustainable options will give B2B companies a clear competitive advantage. They determined that 86% of B2B purchasing decision-makers believe that increased sustainable action could provide a decisive competitive advantage for B2B companies. This advantage includes environmental aspects, as well as social components such as minimum wages and good working conditions at home and abroad, and realistic market prices. For successful execution, Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020) suggested that sustainable trade should not be limited to marketing; instead, a company should bring the associated values and attitudes to life. Furthermore, the topic should be anchored in the corporate strategy.

Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020) revealed that in recent years, an increasing amount of research has been undertaken on customer centricity and sustainability. The researchers identified three main areas that have been covered. The first area included sustainable development with a customer-centric perspective in the sales department. The second area focused on sustainability and commerce, while the third combined customer-centricity and sustainability trends. Höckel (2021) also mentioned three facts that underscore the relevance of sustainability. First, today, everything a company does is transparent to its stakeholders. Second, customers penalize companies that do not care about the environment. Third, companies that credibly focus on sustainability will gain a competitive advantage.

From a broad perspective, Suwelack (2020) argued that the customer is part of an ecosystem that influences their buying behavior. The researcher thereby mentions sustainability, individuality, and health as important megatrends to consider. According to Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2020), the sustainability megatrend reflects customers' concerns about the environment. They considered sustainability a critical element and an attractive way to link to customer centricity.

Regarding delimitation, Höckel (2021) described neo-ecology as close to sustainability but highlighted slight differences. While neo-ecology describes the process of societal change toward a resource-efficient, whole-sustainable economy, sustainability primarily refers to the principle of action that aims to harmonize the use of resources with the natural regenerative capacity of the systems involved. The researcher agreed that sustainable thinking and management have become a frequently discussed topic, with increased media attention.

4.7 B2B customer preferences

In most countries, the B2B market accounts for more than 70% of economic transactions. Even if a company targets the B2C market, it is highly likely to sell to a B2B customer as a supplier; therefore, B2B has a significant impact on society. Nevertheless, many of these transactions do not become public due to competition, cost pressures, or information availability, and the B2B sector remains quite opaque (Prior, 2023).

Currently, a new generation is taking the driver's seat in B2B procurement, and they already have experience as B2C customers. In market research, it becomes apparent that B2C buying behavior spills over into B2B, leading to more customer-centric sales processes and customer journeys that mirror those in B2C. One example is customized services in the ordering process and the fulfillment (Hudetz, 2022).

Hudetz (2021b) identified six attributes for a successful B2B customer experience. To create a positive experience, a B2B provider must prioritize digitization, convenience, sustainability, web shop, desktop compatibility, and omnichannel integration.

Hudetz (2022) confirmed that B2B customers tend to act more like B2C customers and transfer their high expectations for standards, processes, and convenience to their B2B expectations. However, a comparison of the six attributes identified by Hudetz (2021b) for success in B2B and the key variables identified by Frank et al. (2020) showed that only the omnichannel idea overlaps; other elements, such as digitization, convenience, sustainability, web-shop, and desktop compatibility, were not included as key variables. This omission suggests that differences may persist in the relevant factors underlying customer-centricity in B2B

and B2C. Furthermore, Seebacher (2021) highlighted that the areas of B2C and B2B marketing are increasingly converging. The researcher grounded his statement in studies showing that B2B customers' buying behavior increasingly resembles that of B2C customers. The researcher underlines that the widely held belief that B2B customers make decisions rationally, cost-effectively, and profit-oriented, with a pure focus on price, features, functionality, and services, is only valid to a limited degree. Furthermore, the decision-making process in a B2B environment is rather complex and involves input and expertise from people across different disciplines and departments. As a result, it is accompanied by a lengthy research process and budget constraints, necessitating the involvement of qualified experts on both the customer's and supplier's sides. Nonetheless, the researcher also suggested that every decision is taken by a person who comes home every evening and becomes a regular customer; therefore, a B2B customer's expectations are based on their B2C activities and experiences.

Uлага (2018) highlighted the growing importance of value-added services for effectively addressing a business customer's problems. At the same time, the researcher stressed that business customers started to ask for more. Besides the goods sold by a provider, B2B customers began asking for potential savings, assuming responsibilities, and requesting support in achieving their own goals. The growing importance of data and analytics reinforces this situation, which, when combined with digital transformation, can lead to entirely new, outcome-based business models. Overall, these findings led to the conclusion that customer success becomes increasingly important in B2B markets.

5. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion

Regardless of the details that vary or the definition of customer centrality, the past research agrees that the core concept is to put the customer at the center (Frank et al., 2020; Höckel, 2021; Nenninger & Seidel, 2021; Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2020). However, the exact definition and the characteristics of this center have to be refined. Especially for B2B companies operating in a complex environment and serving customers with long, complex decision-making processes, it is crucial to know precisely where to place the customer at the center. The definition of this center could therefore be further developed in future research.

In a business environment that is becoming more dynamic and complex, changing faster and more unpredictably than before, it is inevitable to constantly adapt to customers' needs to stay competitive (Seebacher, 2021). Especially, the introduction of digital touchpoints becomes more essential to address the diversity mentioned and increase the number of touchpoints needed to reach the customers (Lundin & Kindström, 2024). Various researchers have highlighted that, nowadays, a completely seamless omnichannel experience is crucial (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021; Seebacher, 2021; Uлага, 2018). Providing such an experience can be challenging, especially for large, longstanding B2B companies with high IT standards and legal requirements, as a seamless journey often requires data exchange and interfaces. Existing processes must be redesigned and adapted, which results in a change process for the entire company, therefore, it is crucial to start the change process as soon as possible. The underlying literature review provides an overview of the key aspects to consider, however, clear guidance on implementing customer-centrality remains missing for B2B companies. Therefore, future research should develop a practical guideline to help companies implement the concept—this approach aligns with Wahl (2023) and Sheth et al. (2023). The researchers highlight organizational culture and cross-functional collaboration throughout the customer journey as essential yet underexplored elements of customer centrality. Furthermore, O'Gorman and Schuster (2024) stated that customer centrality is often poorly understood in practice. Overall, past studies have indicated the need to clarify the holistic implementation process across the entire organization.

The extant literature generally indicates that business customers' expectations are constantly increasing and are heavily influenced by their experiences as private customers. Personalized experiences from the B2C sector lead them to expect at least the same level of service as business customers (Hudetz, 2022; Seebacher, 2021). From this knowledge, the approximation of B2B to the B2C market can be derived. For a B2B company, this might also expand the field of competition and shake up the market; therefore, B2B companies must expand their competitive monitoring.

5.2 Limitations

This study has limitations that may affect the comprehensiveness and completeness of the underlying literature review and could stimulate future research. The first limitation of this literature review is the focus on the keywords that have been used for the literature research. Even though relevant citations within books and articles found under the respective keywords have been taken into consideration, a complete coverage of the entire field of study cannot be guaranteed. Second, the study focused on literature published over the past

five years, potentially leading to oversight of relevant earlier publications. Including German and English publications is a third limitation, as research published in other languages could also deliver valuable insights.

5.3 Conclusion

Even if not all prior research defined customer centricity in precisely the same way, they all mention similar elements of it in their publications. Of the 15 sources analyzed, 10 mention employees, data, and customer experience as crucial elements of a customer-centric company. Furthermore, various KPIs shape the understanding of customer centricity of the eight sources. Sustainability, as well as B2B-specific aspects and CRM, have not been mentioned as often as the other elements, but the topics have nevertheless been discussed in multiple sources; however, the rethinking required to create a customer-centric organization has been identified across all sources analyzed.

The shift from a product-centric to a customer-centric perspective automatically brings change. The two elements that have been discussed most often in the literature analyzed—employees and data, as well as the increasingly demanding expectations of business customers—require, for most companies, a significant reconsideration.

The employee is essential, as the face of the company to the customer and, as an individual gear in the construct of customer centricity, and has a decisive influence on success or failure; therefore, it is unsurprising that employee satisfaction correlates with customer satisfaction (Kett et al., 2020; Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2020). As a result, a customer-centric company must pay attention to employees' comments, needs, and concerns, even though it may not be easy for management to be open to such initiatives. The recruitment of suitable managers, along with regular training, could support a fruitful implementation of cooperation, with lively exchanges at all levels of the hierarchy.

To offer a seamless omnichannel experience, a company has to use data to continuously learn, improve its offerings, and serve customers according to their needs. The amount of data gathered across various departments through different customer interactions has to be centrally stored, connected, analyzed, interpreted, and made available. To create an overarching data collection and break down data silos within each department, a rethinking of the IT infrastructure is most often required. A standardized CRM can provide the support needed to fulfill these demanding tasks. The uniform handling of data enables a company to create a unified picture of customers and serve them consistently across all departments (Nenninger & Seidel, 2021; Seebacher, 2021; Ulaga, 2018).

Business customers look for partners who offer products and holistic solutions that solve their problems. To also fulfill these needs, a company must rethink its business model and offerings; therefore, it should adopt an outcome-based approach that focuses on customers' higher-order goals (Ulaga, 2018).

The case study by Duss (2024) illustrated the employee's view of customer centricity and the customer's view, providing a first insight into how customers perceive it. Nevertheless, most studies on customer centricity have so far been carried out from a company-centric perspective, focusing on management levers to enhance it. Studies on customer centricity that adopt a customer's point of view as a contrast are still rare; however, the key to increasing sales revenue is for customers to perceive a company as customer-centric. For this reason, management should explicitly aim for an execution that customers perceive; therefore, further research should focus more on customer-centric initiatives as perceived by customers—their involvement and the collection of customer feedback can be a decisive factor.

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