

# A systematic review of customer behavior in business-to-business markets and agenda for future research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to offer a comprehensive overview of current research on customer behavior in the business-to-business (B2B) context and propose a research agenda for future studies. Despite being a relatively recent area of interest for academics and practitioners, a literature review that synthesizes existing knowledge into coherent topics and outlines a research agenda for future research is still lacking.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing on a systematic literature review of 219 papers and using a text-mining approach based on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm, this paper enhances the existing knowledge of B2B customer behavior and provides a descriptive analysis of the literature.

**Findings** – From this review, ten major research topics are found and analyzed. These topics were analyzed through the lens of the Theory, Context, Characteristics and Method framework, providing a summary of key findings from prior studies. Additionally, an integrative framework was developed, offering insights into future research directions.

**Originality/value** – This study presents a novel contribution to the field of B2B by providing a systematic review of the topic of customer behavior, filling a gap in the literature and offering a valuable resource for scholars and managers seeking to advance the field.

**Keywords** Future trends, B2B, Business-to-business, Text mining, Customer behavior, Research agenda

**Paper type** Literature review

## 1. Introduction

The practice of business-to-business (B2B) dates back several thousand years, and it is possible to find evidence of it as far as ancient Greece (Michell, 1940). However, it was not until the past four decades that significant studies on B2B marketing emerged, and we are now in a stage of fast-paced development (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Although still underrepresented within the broader scope of marketing, B2B research is becoming increasingly relevant and an exciting field of study, leading to a richer body of literature (LaPlaca and Katrichis, 2009; Mora Cortez *et al.*, 2021).

B2B research presents unique challenges for researchers, often requiring approaches different from those used in business-to-customer (B2C) domains (Wiersema, 2013). The buying process in B2C deals with more complex and emotional behaviors involving households of few customers (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015), whereas B2B buying involves organizations with dozens of individuals from different backgrounds and motivations in the purchase process (Lilien, 2016). The data for research is also far scarcer and more difficult to collect than in B2C settings, requiring the involvement of several cooperating organizations

(Gould *et al.*, 2016; Kumar and Pansari, 2016). Additionally, the B2B buying process is complex and heterogeneous (Aarikka-Stenroos *et al.*, 2018). B2B transactions often involve products requiring significant expertise for the purchase decision, such as titanium dioxide for the paper industry or polyvinylchloride for the plastic industry. Finally, the B2B marketing field has undergone fundamental changes in recent years, and we can observe an evolutionary process in the B2B marketing efforts, with an evolutionary shift from the exchange philosophy (transaction-based marketing) to a behavioral philosophy (relationship-based marketing) (Kaski *et al.*, 2017; Xu and Hao, 2021). For this research, we will indistinctively use the terms “B2B buyer” and “B2B customer.”

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Because of these differences, understanding the behavior of industrial customers and the B2B buying process remains a leading research priority with high potential for academics and practitioners (Lilien, 2016; Xu and Hao, 2021). Therefore, research on B2B customer behavior is essential to organize and systematize existing knowledge (Grewal *et al.*, 2015; Lilien, 2016) and combine it with new perspectives, steering future researchers to improve the understanding of B2C customer behavior. This study offers a valuable and original contribution to the field by summarizing the literature's main topics and discussing future research avenues, proposing a comprehensive research agenda that can potentially unlock new theoretical and managerial knowledge about B2B customer behavior and benefiting researchers and practitioners in the B2B marketing domains.

This paper provides a systematic review of the existing literature on B2B customer behavior. To the best of the authors' knowledge, previous studies have explored various aspects of B2B advertising (Swani *et al.*, 2020), B2B market segmentation (Mora Cortez *et al.*, 2021) or B2B branding (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). However, there is still no similar systematic review on the topic, which evidences this paper's timely and relevant contribution. This study seeks to address this gap by mapping the existing knowledge about B2B customer behavior, identifying and summarizing the main topics arising from the existing body of knowledge, contributing with an integrative framework and, finally, identifying future research avenues and offering a research agenda. The analysis is based on a systematic literature review of 219 papers, which were analyzed using a text-mining approach based on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm. The results of this review reveal ten major research topics on B2B customer behavior, and we apply the Theory, Context, Characteristics and Method (TCCM) framework to summarize the main topics (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

This study is of practical relevance for academics and managers, offering a descriptive overview of the core topics in B2B customer behavior. It also proposes an integrative framework for those seeking to deepen their knowledge in this field and a future research agenda, contributing to the evolution of research in this area and the advancement of new knowledge in B2B customer behavior.

## 2. Methodology

This paper offers a systematic literature review and future research agenda for B2B customer behavior. We apply a systematic literature review methodology, as it allows researchers to identify, select, critically evaluate and synthesize the literature in a rigorous, transparent and replicable way, leading to solid outcomes in a specific research domain (Christofi *et al.*, 2017; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). This review method has several advantages when compared to traditional reviews: improves the review process and outcome quality (Leonidou *et al.*, 2018); reduces bias and errors (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003); increases the process validity because of its process replicability (Wang and Chugh, 2014); allows the information synthesis and mapping of a specific research topic (Paul and Criado, 2020); and offers frameworks that researchers and practitioners may use (Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Paul, 2015).

Systematic literature reviews are common in several exact sciences, such as medicine, chemistry and others (Harris *et al.*, 2006; Moher *et al.*, 2009), and they are an increasing trend in the

management and marketing fields of study, applied in recent studies published in the premier and high-impact management journals (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021; Hayes and Kelliher, 2022; Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Rosado-serrano *et al.*, 2018). The systematic literature review is the appropriate method for this research, as it provides a comprehensive and high-quality state-of-the-art review of the research focusing on B2B customer behavior.

Review papers can have a variety of forms, such as a structured review focusing on widely used methods, theories and constructs (Kahiya, 2018), a framework-based review (Paul and Benito, 2018), a hybrid narrative with a framework for setting a future research agenda (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020), a theory-based review (Giral *et al.*, 2019), a meta-analysis review (Knoll and Matthes, 2017), a bibliometric review (Randhawa *et al.*, 2016) and a review aiming for model/framework development (Paul and Mas, 2020). For this paper, the authors adopt a hybrid narrative with a framework review comprising a structured review followed by a TCCM framework.

### 2.1 Search strategy and search terms

Researchers conducted an extensive search on the "Web of Science" (WOS) and SCOPUS electronic databases using the six Ws of the literature review method (Callahan, 2014) and the well-established guidelines for review articles search method found in previous reviews (Altuntas Vural, 2017; Paul and Criado, 2020). WOS and SCOPUS are renowned electronic databases; the content of their collections is selective and consistent; and independent detailed editorial processes ensure journal quality (Clarivate, 2021). The use of the journal as the criterion to assess the research quality is widely adopted (Chavarro *et al.*, 2018; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020).

Researchers developed a list of search terms with broad coverage to minimize the possibility of excluding a search term that could generate relevant studies (Leonidou *et al.*, 2018; Müller-Seitz, 2012). The search was only limited to the research process timeline. So it was possible to capture all relevant literature irrespective of the publication date, including all papers published in scholarly journals until July 2022. The keyword selection was based on its relevance to the topic, and the search focused on variables endeavoring to explain customers' behavior in both spellings "behavior" and "behaviour." The words "customers" and the "buyers" were used to incorporate the different decision-makers, as we face transactions involving organizations. The research results were restricted to B2B definitions commonly found in the literature, such as "industrial," "B2B," "Business-to-Business," "b-to-b" and "BTB." The search was conducted for keywords in the title, abstract and keywords (Paul and Criado, 2020). The final query for our search is:

$$TS = ((CONSUMER OR BUYER OR CUSTOMER) AND BEHAVIO^*R AND (B2B OR BUSINESS TO BUSINESS OR BUSINESS - TO - BUSINESS OR BTB OR B - T - B OR INDUSTRIAL OR B - B)).$$

### 2.2 Selection criteria and data extraction

The results were limited to articles and reviews, and the chosen categories focus on business and management: business;

management; economics; operations research; management sciences; and business finance. The search resulted in 8,631 articles at SCOPUS and 7,206 at WOS, of which 711 remained after successive filters were applied and duplications were removed. The sequential reading of titles, abstracts and articles allowed the identification of 219 articles independently reviewed by two researchers (Macpherson and Holt, 2007), assuring the focus on this review topic. Only studies that meet all the inclusion criteria specified in the review were included (Appendix). The strict criteria specified in the systematic review are linked to the need to base the review on the best-quality papers available. Our final pool of papers is the outcome of this process (Figure 1).

### 3. Descriptive analysis of literature

The literature about B2B customer behavior dates back to 1971. The *Journal of Marketing Research* published a paper by Cardozo and Cagley (1971), which undertook an experimental study of industrial buyer behavior. However, most of our final pool of papers were published only after the millennium ( $n = 185$ ; 84.47%), and slightly half of the studies were published in the past ten years ( $n = 106$ ; 48.4%), reinforcing the arising relevance of this topic among the marketing literature (Figure 2).

Most of the studies are empirical ( $n = 185$ ; 84.47%), and most are quantitative ( $n = 145$ , 66.21%). We can see flourishing empirical studies after 2007 and some peaks in conceptual research (Figure 2). From our final pool of papers, 158 (72.15%) used a theoretical context to support and expand their findings. The analysis reveals that the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959) is the most frequently used theory among the papers ( $n = 27$ ; 19%), followed by the transaction cost economic theory (TCE) (Williamson, 1993) ( $n = 13$ ; 9%) and the relational exchange theory (RET) (Macneil, 1980) ( $n = 12$ ; 8%). Table 1 shows the most used theories for at least three papers.

Almost half of our final pool of papers were published in the sectorial journals of “Industrial Marketing Management” ( $n = 70$ ; 32%) and “Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing” ( $n = 37$ ; 17%) (Table 2). The analysis also shows that most studies are published in top-tier marketing journals. Tier journals ranking AJG – Academic Journal Guide – 4\*, 4 and 3 ratings (former ABS – chartered Academic Business School ranking) have demonstrated interest in this topic, such as the “Journal of Marketing,” “Journal of Marketing Research,” “Journal of The Academy of Marketing Science,”

“International Journal of Research in Marketing” and “Journal of Business Research” (Table 2). This analysis suggests that these journals have been highly receptive to publishing articles on this topic and that marketing scholars are positioning their work and articulating its importance to mainstream marketing and business theory and practice.

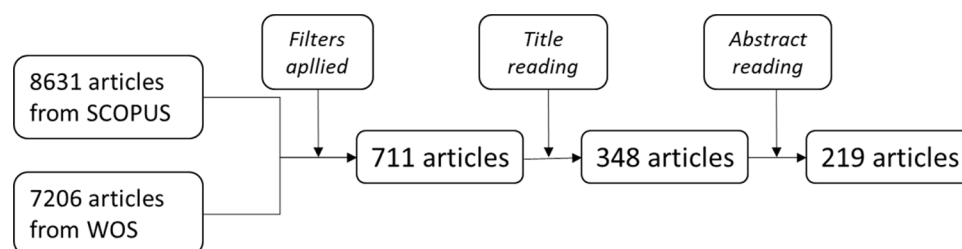
## 4. Thematic analysis of the literature

### 4.1 Topic analysis procedure

The topic analysis of the final pool of papers explores the complete paper’s text to capture the full available information and highlight the latent discussions. Full papers were downloaded and transformed into ASCII text (a common encoding format), and researchers conducted the topic analysis using the R software, an open-source statistical tool used for data analysis (Breuer, 2017). We use the packages tm and topic modeling to transform the text into a corpus, producing the document-term matrix and computing the topics through LDA algorithm (Blei *et al.*, 2003), which has been successfully applied in recent research (El Akrouchi *et al.*, 2021; Xiang *et al.*, 2017).

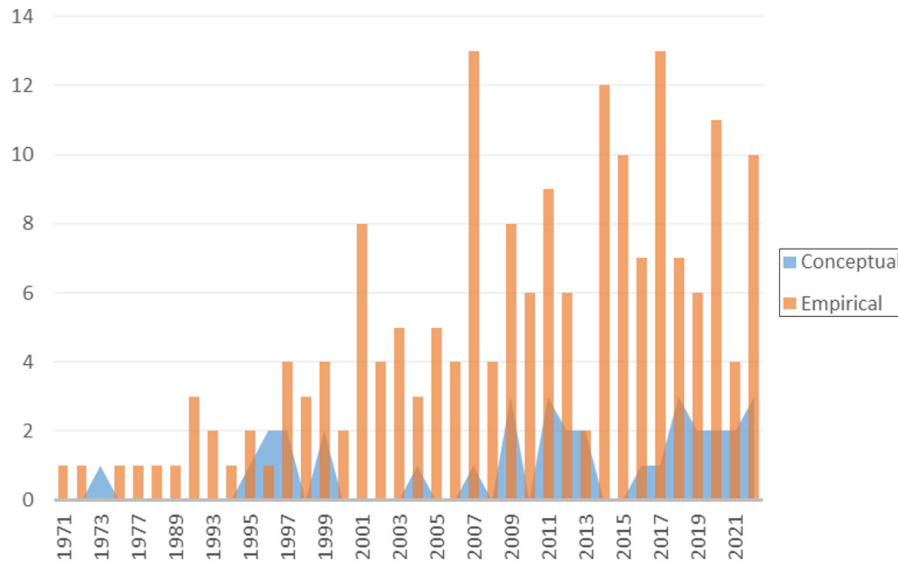
Distinct text-mining tasks are applied to the textual content of the papers. The data cleaning and stemming started by converting the text into lowercase, and numbers, punctuation and whitespaces were removed. Next, we removed common stop words in each sentence, as those words do not have any analytic value. Finally, stemming was applied to reduce all words to their root to avoid related words being considered different (Wu *et al.*, 2017). The remaining text was computed into a document-term matrix (DTM), a matrix-format structure where each row represents a paper, each column a word and within each cell appears the number of times a word occurs within a paper. The number of topics in LDA is an input parameter that must be set previously, so we resort to existing measures (Cao *et al.*, 2009; Griffiths and Steyvers, 2004) to compute the ideal number of topics (Figure 3), with the set of possible topics ranging from  $K = 2$  to  $K = 40$ . The log-likelihood and perplexity start establishing around  $K = 8$ , reaching their optimal values around  $K = 15$  (minimize  $K = 6$  and maximize  $K = 10$ ). The strategy for obtaining the ideal topic number is given by the proximity score showing a clear peak, and the nearest neighbor score flattens (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Uncertainties about the point of flattening can be solved by comparing the measures in use (Figure 3). Therefore, for the current analysis,  $K = 8$  was selected.

Figure 1 Systematic literature review selection criteria



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 2 Article frequency analysis by paper's type of research and year of publication



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Table 1 Main theories used by the papers included in the revision

Main theories in use (>=3) <sup>a</sup>	No. of papers	Weight (%) <sup>b</sup>
Social Exchange Theory (SET)	27	19
Transaction Cost Economic Theory (TCE)	13	9
Relational Exchange Theory (RET)	12	8
Transaction Cost Analysis (TCA)	8	6
Resource Based View (RBV)	6	4
Role Theory	5	3
Attribution Theory	4	3
Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory	3	2
Relational Contracting Theory (RCT)	3	2
Interaction and Network Approach (INA)	3	2

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Theories used in at least three papers; <sup>b</sup>based on the overall number of papers using theories (158)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The topic models were conducted using LDA with a Gibbs sampling technique (a Markov Chain Monte Carlo algorithm), used in this research because of its convergence and performance capabilities. LDA is a mixed-membership algorithm widely used for clustering text into latent topics (Blei et al., 2003). LDA is based on a hierarchical Bayesian analysis and calculates the posterior probability of each word found in the text and each paper belonging to a latent topic. Because of its mixed-membership model feature, each paper may belong to multiple topics (several discussions being addressed in the text).

The profiling of each topic was delineated by analyzing the document-topic classification probabilities using the package tidytext. To know which papers are associated with each topic, we can examine the per-document-per-topic probabilities called  $\gamma$  (gamma). Besides estimating each topic as a mixture of words, LDA also models each document as a mixture of topics. The more words in a

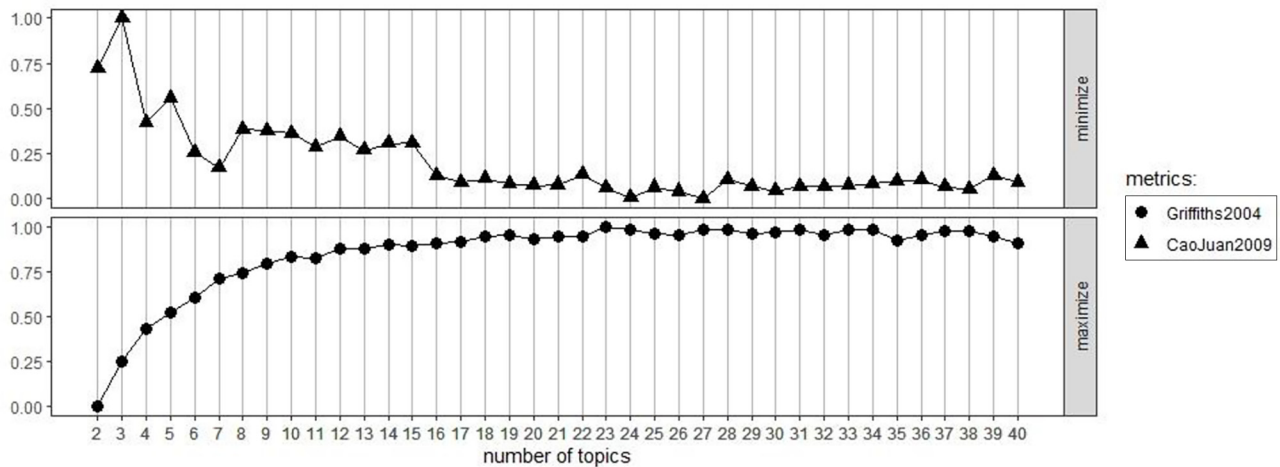
Table 2 Most representative journals in the sample (> 1)

Journal	No. of articles	Weight (%)
<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	70	32
<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>	37	17
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	20	9
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	9	4
<i>Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing</i>	9	4
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	8	4
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	7	3
<i>International Journal of Research in Marketing</i>	6	3
<i>Journal of Personal Selling &amp; Sales Management</i>	4	2
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	4	2
<i>Journal of International Marketing</i>	4	2
<i>International Marketing Review</i>	3	1
<i>Journal of Business Logistics</i>	3	1
<i>International Journal of Operations &amp; Production Management</i>	2	1
<i>Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice</i>	2	1
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	2	1
<i>Decision Sciences</i>	2	1
<i>Journal of Service Research</i>	2	1
<i>Service Industries Journal</i>	2	1
<i>Australasian Marketing Journal</i>	2	1
Others	21	10
	219	100

Source: Authors' own elaboration

document are assigned to that topic, the more weight (gamma) will go on that document-topic classification. In the analysis, gammas present high values, which may be because of lower correlations between the topics. Table 3 shows the top three articles per topic. The content of each topic is discussed and analyzed in the next section.



**Figure 3** Log-likelihood and perplexity metrics to evaluate K

Source: Attained from this research using RStudio 1.4.1103

## 4.2 Topics discussion

### 4.2.1 T1. Buyer–supplier relationships

The buyer–supplier relationship is a prevailing concept in the B2B literature. Effective exchanges between buying and supplying firms are crucial, yet the conflicting goals within the relationship can often lead to conflicts, which pose a significant managerial challenge (Ellegaard and Andersen, 2015). These conflicts stem from differences in behaviors and expectations between the exchange partners, resulting in uncertainty and a breakdown in the relationship, even when parties behave better than expected (Wang *et al.*, 2010). Common sources of conflict include disparities in projected supply/demand, product quality and service performance (Ellegaard and Andersen, 2015). Conflict resolution processes can lead to common behavior patterns such as avoidance or lack of communication, which gives awareness of why exchange relationships that hit a downward spiral can be difficult to secure (Wang *et al.*, 2010).

To overcome these issues, buyers and sellers should aim to achieve joint competitive advantages through inter-organizational goals, congruence and trusting relationships, leading to improvements in profitability, future expectations and relationship functioning (Jap, 2001). Partners should also find ways to collaborate and avoid opportunist behaviors, achieving a trusting relationship (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). The positive effects of collaboration on the relationship can be seen in the restoration of trust, tolerance and avoidance of opportunism (Zhang *et al.*, 2019), making it critical for such relationships to last. Superior buyer–supplier relationships enhance the potential to yield solid outcomes for both parties, reinforcing the partners' attractiveness in the selection, formation and choice of B2B partnerships, leading to successful outcomes in competition (Gould *et al.*, 2016).

### 4.2.2 T2. Bargaining power

B2B customer behavior and relationships are typically formed by a contract between two or more legally independent parties. The ability of each party to achieve its objectives is contingent upon its relative bargaining power (Porter, 1980). Most aspects influencing bargaining power are often challenging to change,

depending on characteristics of the production process, industry characteristics or volume of purchases (Dampérat and Jolibert, 2009). Buyers and sellers seek to exploit asymmetries in their relationship during the negotiations in distinct ways to gain strategic advantages. In certain markets, buyers have acquired advanced procurement techniques and established considerably stronger negotiation positions through control of the procurement process and powerful price negotiation tools (Gadde and Wynstra, 2018).

On the contrary, suppliers concentrate on initiating, signaling and disclosing behaviors to enhance their relationships with buyers, with deliberate efforts to understand their customers' business conditions, adjust to market changes and disclose information about themselves that reinforce the buyer's trust (Vieira and Brito, 2015). The influence of suppliers on buyers' purchasing behavior is evident in their ability to shape more discerning buyers, supporting the notion that favorable and well-formed beliefs about a manufacturer can positively impact its customers' purchasing decisions (Bonner and Calantone, 2005). The bargaining power is also affected by other factors such as uncertainty, risk and business partners' strengths. In scenarios where both parties possess significant sources of power, power is not used in a confrontational manner but rather as a means of fortifying the collaborative aspects of the business relationship (Gadde and Wynstra, 2018).

### 4.2.3 T3. Partnership commitment

Partnership commitment refers to a firm's dedication to maintaining a close and lasting relationship with another firm (Kim and Frazier, 1997). This commitment enables independent partners to work together, better serve customer needs and achieve higher performance levels (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The measurement of commitment varies across partnerships and can take the form of an intention to continue the relationship, the willingness to make short-term sacrifices, confidence in the relationship's stability, the relationship's relevance or the internalization of the partner

Table 3 Latent topics and top correlated papers with the topic

Topic name	Topic terms	Top correlated papers with the topic	Gamma	Journal
T1. Buyer–supplier relationships	Buyer–supplier relationships, competitive advantages, boundaries of the firm, opportunism, collaboration and trust restoration	Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2019)	0.715	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Jap (2001)	0.589	<i>International Journal of Research In Marketing</i>
		Gould <i>et al.</i> (2016)	0.581	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
T2. Bargaining power	Uncertainty, interdependence, supply management, purchasing, customer equity, customer profitability and attentiveness	Leuthesser (1997)	0.965	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Gadde and Wynstra (2018)	0.948	<i>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</i>
		Bonner and Calantone (2005)	0.889	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
T3. Partnership commitment	Distributor commitment, absorptive capacity, manufacturer–distributor dyad, dealer commitment, supplier destructive acts and extra-role behavior	Li <i>et al.</i> (2017)	0.864	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
		Kim <i>et al.</i> (2011)	0.606	<i>Journal of Retailing</i>
		Kim and Frazier (1997)	0.578	<i>Psychology &amp; Marketing</i>
T4. Interpersonal relationships	Interpersonal relationship, buyer–seller relationship, sales process, relationship management, relationship development, selling and organizational processes	Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013)	0.883	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Aarikka-Stenroos <i>et al.</i> (2018)	0.736	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag (2012)	0.735	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
T5. Brand sensitivity	Brand sensitivity, high brand sensitivity, low brand sensitivity, novelty and complexity, organizational buying behavior, purchase importance and purchase complexity	Sharma and Sengupta (2020)	0.640	<i>Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice</i>
		Brown <i>et al.</i> (2012)	0.631	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Mcquiston (1989)	0.588	<i>Journal of Marketing</i>
T6. Procurement and sales processes	Business-to-business services, purchasing, customer needing, offering, buying, value in use, buyers, vendors, customer requirements, value added and sales interaction	van der Valk (2008)	0.583	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
		Strandvik <i>et al.</i> (2012)	0.545	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
		Kaski <i>et al.</i> (2017)	0.501	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
T7. Cultural differences	International marketing, switching costs, normative expectations, business-to-business services, supplier performance and national differences	El-Manstrly (2014)	0.504	<i>International Marketing Review</i>
		Steward <i>et al.</i> (2010)	0.484	<i>Journal of International Marketing</i>
		Keep <i>et al.</i> (1998)	0.471	<i>Journal of Marketing</i>
T8. Sales people	Salesperson, services marketing, dialect, personal selling, cognitive and affective empathy, customer-oriented behavior, customer satisfaction and commitment and supplier reliability	Mai and Hoffmann (2011)	0.582	<i>Journal of Service Research</i>
		Delpechitre, Rutherford and Comer (2019)	0.561	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
		Selnes and Gønhaug (2000)	0.537	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
T9. Supplier selection	Supplier selection, supplier relations, brand names, purchasing, choice process and supply chain management	Voss <i>et al.</i> (2009)	0.885	<i>Journal of Business Logistics</i>
		Ghymn <i>et al.</i> (1999)	0.744	<i>International Marketing Review</i>
		Verma and Pullman (1998)	0.658	<i>Omega - The International Journal of Management Science</i>
T10. Cooperation	Cooperation, Customer–supplier relationships, Perspective-taking, interaction, salesperson effectiveness and communication barrage	Caruana <i>et al.</i> (2020)	0.645	<i>Journal of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing</i>
		Heide and Miner (1992)	0.591	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>
		Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020)	0.476	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>

Source: Attained from this research using RStudio 1.4.1103

firm's norms and values (Kim and Frazier, 1997; Kim *et al.*, 2011).

Different dimensions of commitment elicit unique behaviors from partners. Affective commitment promotes extra-role behaviors, while calculative commitment undermines them, whereas normative commitment induces little change in extra-role behaviors (Gruen *et al.*, 2000; Kim *et al.*, 2011). Each effect on partners' behaviors is because of distinct psychological responses associated with each type of commitment involved (Kim *et al.*, 2011). Firms can also generate relational commitment by fostering alliances and promoting collaborative learning (Cheng *et al.*, 2022). It can maximize the knowledge gained from partners and protect their business from being appropriately (Li *et al.*, 2017).

#### 4.2.4 T4. Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships have recently increasingly interested B2B marketing researchers and practitioners (Aarikka-Stenroos *et al.*, 2018; Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag, 2012). The essence of any interpersonal relationship lies in interaction (Kelley, 1979). However, interactions occur on various levels, in different contexts and for different reasons, with existing research suggesting that there is no best way to understand and manage them (Aarikka-Stenroos *et al.*, 2018). Interpersonal relationships often relate to establishing those interactions, specifically in the B2B sales process setting. Research offers different perspectives to understand this dyad better, namely, the firms' environment and strategies, the firm's relationships and information gathering, the sales cycle and development or the sales characteristics and selling behavior (Méndez-Picazo *et al.*, 2021; Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag, 2012). However, not all methods of understanding and managing interpersonal relationships are equally effective, and dealing with interpersonal relationships in a sales process depends on the level at which the analysis occurs (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag, 2012). Adopting an integrated perspective that encompasses all levels of analysis offers valuable insights into effectively addressing interpersonal relationships in B2B sales processes (Dampérat and Jolibert, 2009; Ellegaard and Andersen, 2015; Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag, 2012).

#### 4.2.5 T5. Brand sensitivity

Brand sensitivity is a key concept in B2B customer behavior. It refers to the likelihood of choosing a well-known brand over a generic or unknown brand (Hutton, 1997). From a B2B perspective, it also represents the extent to which brand information and business associations are positively evaluated in organizational buying decisions (Brown *et al.*, 2012). However, the prevailing view of the B2B buying process posits that firms are primarily rational decision-makers (Brown *et al.*, 2011), differing in the importance they allocate to brands, which is a source of distress in designing B2B branding strategies (Sharma and Sengupta, 2020). To fully comprehend B2B customer behavior, it is crucial to examine brand sensitivity and understand under which conditions brands become more relevant in B2B contexts. Understanding the conditions under which the brand increases its relevance in B2B environments can help managers adapt their sales and marketing strategies and make them appealing to a specific set

of target segments, helping to achieve the profitability goals more successfully (Zablah *et al.*, 2010).

Brand sensitivity is a multi-faceted construct encompassing three dimensions: brand-related information acquisition, brand information processing and buying center memory. The nature of buyer–seller relationships and the number of supplier brands are also known to impact brand sensitivity (Sharma and Sengupta, 2020). Moreover, research suggests that brand sensitivity can exhibit a non-linear relationship with the importance of the purchase and its complexity (Brown *et al.*, 2012). Thus, B2B marketing efforts should aim to establish strong brands and communicate their values in a market with multiple competing brands. This may require rethinking conventional wisdom and emphasizing the brand even when it may appear less relevant to business customers. Doing so is likely to impact performance positively (Brown *et al.*, 2012; Sharma and Sengupta, 2020).

#### 4.2.6 T6. Procurement and sales processes

Procurement refers to the process of sourcing and acquiring goods or services from an external source, typically for business purposes (Laffont and Tirole, 1993). It is influenced by the buyer's perception of their business strategies that affect their priorities, decisions and actions, serving as a mental model for the buyer to achieve a specific task (Strandvik *et al.*, 2012). This process is becoming an essential component of firms' acquisitions of external resources, with suppliers increasingly offering differentiated value propositions by incorporating services into their offerings (van der Valk, 2008). However, procurement is not a static or standard activity, and its context is constantly redefined by social and economic changes (Torvinen and Ulkuniemi, 2016).

In response to the changing competitive landscape, B2B organizations have adapted to innovative sales processes that align with new buying behaviors of B2B decision-makers, moving beyond traditional seller-oriented models (Strandvik *et al.*, 2012). One of the emerging trends in procurement is the incentive to abandon the traditional practices of doing business and move forward to focus on relationship quality (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007), partnerships, networks and/or strategic alliances (Torvinen and Ulkuniemi, 2016). However, the sales process is not always seamless, as the seller's value proposition may not always match the buyer's value requirements. To be genuinely customer-oriented, firms must find ways to bridge this gap and create value for customers (Strandvik *et al.*, 2012). Sellers aim to deliver value for customers, primarily from the solutions they sell and their skills and behaviors, while buyers have expectations about innovativeness, future orientation, long-term relationships and responsiveness to their specific needs (Kaski *et al.*, 2017). Understanding the gaps between buyers and sellers can help recognize the significance of the sales process and value co-creation in B2B environments (Kaski *et al.*, 2017; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020).

#### 4.2.7 T7. Cultural differences

Cultural differences result from variations in cultural values. They influence perceptions and play a relevant role in people's behaviors (Hofstede, 1991). A company's country of origin and market significantly impact customer behavior (Bilro and Cunha, 2021). Various researchers have extensively studied the relationship between business and culture (Armuña *et al.*,



2020; Belchior and Lyons, 2021; Canestrino *et al.*, 2020). Scholars agree on a positive correlation between business relationships and cultural similarity (Keep *et al.*, 1998; Steward *et al.*, 2010). The cultural analysis can be conducted from a single-country perspective, examining cultural factors, such as self-construal, individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (Laufer *et al.*, 2005) or from a multi-country comparison, evaluating cultural belonging (i.e. collectivistic vs individualistic) effects on customers' behavioral intentions (Baghi and Gabrielli, 2019). Research has demonstrated that individuals in a collectivistic culture perceive a prompt resolution of product failure as fairer, leading to higher customer satisfaction, than those in individualistic cultures (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the international B2B relationships connect a firm's national culture to behavior predispositions according to their cultural dimensions (Xu and Hao, 2021). The tension between culturally different partners when cooperating for the common benefit has significant consequences for both parties, endangering the relationship's stability and contributing significantly to relationship failures (Bilro and Cunha, 2021; Gould *et al.*, 2016; Xu and Hao, 2021).

#### 4.2.8 T8. Salespeople

Salespeople refer to the trade-in occupation within a firm, selling goods or services directly to customers or other businesses or organizations for monetary compensation. Sales can be conducted in-person (e.g. in retail stores or dealerships) or using online communication tools. A successful salesperson is perceived as someone skilled enough to persuade other people, especially in a business or professional setting, to buy their products (Delpechitre *et al.*, 2019), which highlights the relevance of suppliers' behavior in customer behavioral intentions, such as supplier loyalty or customer satisfaction (Blaese *et al.*, 2021; Selnes and Gønhaug, 2000). While it is expected that salespeople have a good understanding of customer needs, research has shown that this is often not the case, with salespeople failing to provide an adequate value proposition to customers (Homburg *et al.*, 2009; Rapp *et al.*, 2014). These failures can result in less buyer satisfaction and commitment to the supplier (Kumar *et al.*, 2013; Palmatier *et al.*, 2007). For salespeople to be effective, they must have a clear understanding of customer expectations and act in a manner that satisfies those expectations, reducing failures and increasing positive outcomes in relational exchanges (Haas *et al.*, 2012). Salespeople that can provide a proper value proposition to customers transform themselves into a valuable point of differentiation (Kaski *et al.*, 2017).

#### 4.2.9 T9. Supplier selection

Firms of all sizes and from all industry sectors are active buyers, and the selection of their supply chain is of foremost importance (Kim *et al.*, 2010). The literature emphasizes the importance of quality, cost, delivery and flexibility attributes when choosing a supplier (Voss *et al.*, 2009). Noteworthy, there seems to be a difference between the perceived value of these attributes and the actual practice, as the operational practices may not align with buyers' strategic priorities (Verma and Pullman, 1998). Research suggests that managers responsible for supplier selection may prioritize cost and delivery capability over quality, an issue that deserves thoughtful attention (Alikhani *et al.*, 2019).

Supplier selection also needs to be understood under the process stages, as buyers ground their purchasing behavior in several steps or stages before the supplier selection is made. Research highlights that it is essential to understand the choice phase (which is the most visible part), comprising the buyer problem acknowledgment, the criteria definition and the supplier qualification and the quality of the steps that precede it (de Boer *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, the differences in supplier selection criteria and buyer behavior across various industry sectors should also be considered (Ghymin *et al.*, 1999). However, it is essential to note that these differences do not dictate the suitability of a specific decision process – as more suitable for a specific sector – neither the specific industry nor the criteria used to determine the correctness of the buyer decision. Overall, situational characteristics, such as the number of suppliers available, the availability of historical information or the importance of the purchase, are more determinative of the suitability of that decision (Alikhani *et al.*, 2019; de Boer *et al.*, 2001).

#### 4.2.10 T10. Cooperation and interactions

Developing joint solutions through buyer–seller interaction requires meticulous attention from all involved parties. By fostering interaction and facilitating joint solution development and co-creation, firms can significantly increase their chances of success (Caruana *et al.*, 2020; Vargo and Lusch, 2011). However, interaction can be frustrating if both parties adopt and promote transactional views of solutions instead of relational views (Tuli *et al.*, 2007). Research shows that firms have been pursuing several approaches to improve the success of their interactions. One such approach is adaptive selling, which entails adjusting sales behaviors to enhance customer-oriented selling during interactions (Franke and Park, 2006). Another is interfirm adaptation and perspective-taking, which allows for a deep understanding of mutual needs and motivations to co-develop solutions that strengthen cooperation (Xu and Hao, 2021).

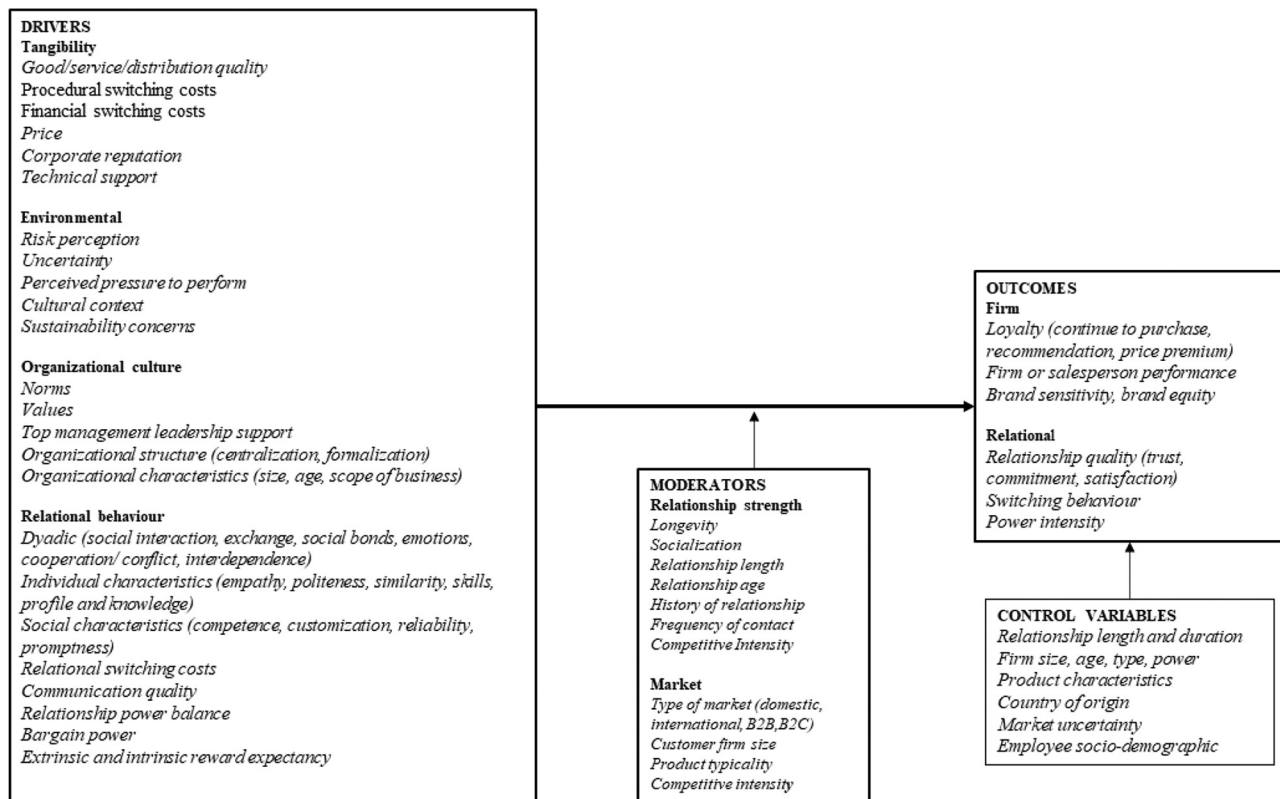
Other researchers have emphasized the relevance of a more interactive approach to inter-organizational relationships, such as inter-organizational cooperation based on the development of trust or commitment between the parties as precursors to cooperation (Heide and Miner, 1992). When executed effectively, such approaches result in cooperative relationships that are profitable and valuable for both parties involved (Kim *et al.*, 2010).

## 5. Discussion and implications for future research agenda

Following prior systematic literature reviews (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021; Hayes and Kelliher, 2022; Vrontis and Christofi, 2021), our research aims to review customer behavior in the B2B context and proposes a research agenda for future studies. Our study consolidates knowledge in this area and highlights several ways to improve its understanding. This research discusses its findings and future research agenda resorting to the well-known TCCM (Loureiro *et al.*, 2021; Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019; Terjesen *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, an integrative framework is presented to enable future researchers to formulate novel conceptual models (as depicted in Figure 4).



Figure 4 Integrative framework



Source: Authors' own elaboration

### 5.1 Future research directions – theory

Three core theories are the most used as foundation support of the analyzed articles: SET, TCE and RET. Others are the resource-based view of firms and resource dependence. The SET establishes that social behavior results from an exchange process that maximizes benefits and minimizes costs (Anaza and Rutherford, 2014; Ellegaard and Andersen, 2015; Sales Baptista, 2014). Therefore, business partners tend to weigh social relationships' potential benefits and risks. Business relationships require a long-term process, mutual respect and the acceptance of the other as a partner and co-producer of value, not just a passive element (Li et al., 2017). TCE focuses on cost and efficiency to stipulate a relationship and uses relationships as management structures to reduce hazards (Lui et al., 2009; Steinle et al., 2014). The resource-based view theory refers that the competitive advantage results from accumulated resources and capabilities that are unusual, valuable, non-substitutable and difficult to imitate by the firm's competitors (Corsaro, 2015). This theory regards the firm as the primary unit of analysis (Mols, 2019). The RD theory analyses how the external resources, the internal resources and the organization's capabilities affect the organization's behavior (Bonner and Calantone, 2005).

Other theories less used can be suggested to support further development of this theme, such as Attribution Theory (Mir et al., 2017; Selnes and Gønhaug, 2000), Service-Dominant Logic (Aitken and Paton, 2016) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Kim et al., 2011). The power dependence theory is

becoming more relevant in studies since 2001 to reflect the power of enduring relationships (Skarmas and Katsikeas, 2001). This theory treats power as inherent in the relationship rather than the partners involved (Prior and Keränen, 2020). Although the theories of power can be considered (Meehan and Wright, 2012; Narayandas and Rangan, 2004), this one should be further explored in the future. New theories should be sought in different fields of knowledge and brought to the B2B relationships. The combination of different theories is also highlighted and can further add to the explanation of B2B.

### 5.2 Future research directions – context

Prior studies tend to rely more on buyers than sellers, and a small group ( $n = 29.14\%$ ) is devoted to the dyadic relationship (Lussier et al., 2017; Mir et al., 2017; Narayandas and Rangan, 2004). Therefore, we recommend more studies designed to capture the B2B relationship instead of focusing on a single partner or both independently. Prior studies tend to focus mainly on multi-manufacture industries, leading us to recommend more effort to understand the service sector. North America and Europe are the regions where most studies were conducted. Hence, new opportunities are open to study firms in other regions, particularly developing countries.

### 5.3 Future research directions – characteristics

Many articles try to explore the drivers of B2B customer behavior (Figure 4). We grouped them into tangibility,

environmental, organizational culture and relational behavior. Tangibility represents the quality of goods, services and distribution offered by one partner to another (Davis-Sramek *et al.*, 2009; Voss *et al.*, 2009). Switching costs, price and technical support are also analyzed, as long as the corporate reputation (both the firm and its brands) is considered (Dax *et al.*, 2019; Hunter *et al.*, 2006; Russo *et al.*, 2017). Environmental category means the factors associated with not only the risk, uncertainty, pressure (Corsaro, 2015), cultural differences (Brush and Rexha, 2007) but also sustainability concerns (Prior and Keränen, 2020). Organizational culture focuses on internal factors of the organization, such as norms, values, organizational characteristics (Aitken and Paton, 2016; Kaski *et al.*, 2017), how top managers deal with other employees and the structure of the organization (Valtakoski, 2015). The influence of rituals, norms, artifacts and the complete factors associated with organizational culture should be better analyzed for a more holistic understanding of how they influence inter- and intra-organizational relationships and behavior (Itani *et al.*, 2020) and business purchase decisions, explore value congruency in the two partner organizations (Anwer *et al.*, 2020) and multiple partner relationships (multi-dyadic relationships).

Relational behavior brings together the factors that influence B2B relationships. Thus, the concept of dyadic market-oriented relationships describes how the relationship evolves between partners (Aitken and Paton, 2016; Kaski *et al.*, 2017) and how they create bonds and favorable emotional states to cooperate (Wong *et al.*, 2010). Individual and social characteristics express the individual partner traits and the social skills to interact in dyadic relationships (Lichtenthal and Shani, 2000; Meehan and Wright, 2012). Particularly, organizational customers' perceptions of supplier employees' empathy (cognitive and affective) are still not well studied (Delpechitre *et al.*, 2019; Selnes and Gønhaug, 2000).

The quality of communication in B2B relationships has been widely recognized as a critical factor that can influence the longevity of the partnership. It encompasses both the intrinsic qualities of the individuals involved and the methods by which firms disseminate institutional information both internally and externally (Doney *et al.*, 2007; Graça and Kharé, 2020; Sinčić Čorić *et al.*, 2017). Relational switching costs can avoid the end of a B2B relationship, as they influence the partners' share-of-wallet, cross-buying behavior and actual switching behavior (Blut *et al.*, 2016). Incentives, such as monetary rewards or appreciation, can encourage partners to maintain their relationships (Tanner, 1996). Additionally, the power dynamic between partners also conditions the relationship's longevity (Hunter *et al.*, 2006; Narayandas and Rangan, 2004).

A proliferation of outcomes is analyzed in previous research, which we aggregate as firm and relational. Firm outcomes are associated with maintaining the relationship by continuing to purchase, recommend to others or the willingness to pay price premium (Brown *et al.*, 2012; Dong *et al.*, 2017), as well as the performance achieved by the firm or the salesperson (Briggs and Grisaffe, 2009; Chaithanapat *et al.*, 2022; Ng, 2010). Brand sensitivity is an essential factor in inducing behavior in the partner and represents a primary emotion felt about a brand (Brown *et al.*, 2012). Brand sensitivity is still in the early stage of their knowledge. More research must be devoted to creating

a proper measurement tool and exploring drivers as individual factors (e.g. stakeholders and personal preferences) or information quality (Sharma and Sengupta, 2020).

Brand equity gives a brand position in terms of value and can generate more revenue when its equity is higher (Bonner and Calantone, 2005). From the relational perspective, we can point out the relationship quality (trust, commitment and satisfaction), which can also act as a mediator between the drivers and other outcomes shown in Figure 4 (Homburg *et al.*, 2005), the power intensity (Meehan and Wright, 2012) and the switching behavior (Blut *et al.*, 2016; Wathne *et al.*, 2001). Other outcomes are suggested, like cost, quality and flexibility of production of the manufacturers and sales performance of the distributors (Li *et al.*, 2017), to refine the specific marketing elements that lead suppliers to make decisions. Researchers should be concerned with design studies that can observe actual behaviors in interaction situations (Kemp *et al.*, 2020) to complement the data collected through interviews and cross-sectional approaches.

The engagement process among all stakeholders can act as a mediator in understanding the decision process between drivers and outcomes of the B2B relationship (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020; Prior and Keränen, 2020), but this concept and process have not been appropriately studied until now. Although past research addresses the concepts of cooperation and interdependence, more research is welcome to show how these concepts occur and influence relationships and decision-making. The dark side of relationships has been somehow ignored. We highly recommend understanding how to handle and restore non-trust, non-commitment or non-satisfaction situations. When attraction shifts to avoidance, what to do? The concept of sustainability and its influence on B2B relationships and decision-making needs an in-depth study.

Concerning moderators, we categorize them as relationship strength and market. The former is devoted to the length, longevity, socialization, frequency of contact or relationship history (Gould *et al.*, 2016). The latter deals with the type of market, the firm and product characteristics and the competitive intensity (Bode *et al.*, 2011; Brown *et al.*, 2011). Some control variables somehow overlap with the moderators, for instance, the characteristics of the firm (firm size, age, type and power), relationship length and duration, market uncertainty or even the product characteristics (size, complexity and type) (Li *et al.*, 2017; Lussier *et al.*, 2017). However, control variables also consider the country of origin (Reardon *et al.*, 2017) or employee socio-demographics (Kemp *et al.*, 2020). How product innovativeness strengthens or weakens the relationship between organizations and buyer purchase behavior is a moderator not yet explored (Bonner and Calantone, 2005). Other moderators can be profit and non-profit organizations, public and private organizations or even levels of technology incorporated (Lakshmi and Bahli, 2020; Nedjah *et al.*, 2022).

The evolution of technologies and their incorporation into organizations are changing the relationships, particularly with artificial intelligence (AI) agents (Guaita Martínez *et al.*, 2022; Liu, 2020). Robots have been used in industry to develop repetitive tasks rapidly, and AI systems are used to treat a large amount of information (big data). In addition, they are also

Table 4 Future research suggestions

Authors	Future research
<b>Heide and Miner (1992)</b>	1. Use multiple theories to analyze relationships
<b>Kim and Frazier (1997)</b>	1. What are consequences of different types of commitment? 2. Dyadic difference in commitment through dyadic studies of channel relationships
<b>Leuthesser (1997)</b>	1. Measure performance from a supplier's and buyer's perspective
<b>Selnes and Gønhaug (2000)</b>	1. Examine how customers' perceptions of salesperson's empathy (cognitive and affective) influence sales outcomes such as sales volumes and salesperson performance indicators
<b>Jap (2001)</b>	1. Consider other drivers of competitive advantage, such as environmental conditions and competitive actions. 2. How buyer-supplier dyads respond to the competitive signals and actions of competing dyads. 3. How does technology provide opportunities for bolstering or impeding competitive advantages? 4. What can buyers and suppliers do together to leverage emerging technologies at the boundaries of the firm?
<b>Bonner and Calantone (2005)</b>	1. Future research using longitudinal analysis is called for to fully examine the dynamics with different partners. 2. Outcomes should include (1) expected future revenues and costs; (2) attitudinal dimensions, such as the buyer's propensity to defect or commitment to the relationship; and (3) purchase process characteristics, such as consideration set size and buying process openness. 2. How product innovativeness strengthens or weakens the relationship between attentiveness and favorable buyer purchase behaviour
<b>van der Valk (2008)</b>	1. Replicating the findings. 2. Determine more precisely the extent to which the observed patterns fit the ideal pattern
<b>Voss et al. (2009)</b>	1. Future research should examine patterns of security adoption of suppliers
<b>Steward et al. (2010)</b>	1. Explore antecedents of country's institutional environment. 2. Include nation-based normative expectations and compare firms in different countries
<b>Mai and Hoffmann (2011)</b>	1. Consider other industrial sectors, other contexts (e.g. personal selling of products, government-to-business/citizen communication) or various categories of services and different cultures
<b>Kim et al. (2011)</b>	1. Whether it is more important in close relationships to engage in constructive acts or to not commit destructive acts? 2. Intentional destructive acts versus unintentional destructive acts and, thus, contrast the potential role of dealer commitment under intentional or unintentional destructive acts by a supplier. 3. Interaction between different types of commitment
<b>Wiatr Borg and Vagn Freytag (2012)</b>	1. On what level is the attention, management or governance of the interpersonal relationship attempted? What effect does this attempt have on the other correlating levels? 2. Is there a connecting or "red thread" in the company's relationship strategy woven through the operative activities on the inner sales characteristics level to the outer environment level? Or are there merely sporadic managerial attempts on random levels?
<b>Brown et al. (2012)</b>	1. Drivers of brand sensitivity (e.g. end-customer demand and contractual ties) 2. Use of multi-item measures. 3. Consider novel purchase situations to analyze brand sensitivity. 4. Evaluate the effects of informational conditions (e.g. availability or quality of information) on brand sensitivity
<b>Strandvik et al. (2012)</b>	1. Uncover differences/similarities in seller views and conduct more research on dynamic factors that can be key in decision-making
<b>Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013)</b>	1. Where can the researchers put the empirical and theoretical boundary which can enable the researchers to perform a deep analysis, testing for generalization and explicit managerial implications? 2. A further discussion about "What is a relationship?" is needed
<b>EI-Manstrly (2014)</b>	1. Consider other switching costs (e.g. learning costs, set up costs)
<b>Gould, Liu and Yu (2016)</b>	1. Study on local partner firms in emerging markets to analyze the liability of foreignness, high status and opportunism and related B2B governance choices
<b>Li et al. (2017)</b>	1. Analyze outcomes, such as cost, quality and flexibility of production of the manufacturers and sales performance of the distributors. 2. Replicate to generalize to other industrial or national context. 3. Conduct a longitudinal survey, with interviews and objective data, which would enhance researchers' ability to identify the dynamics between partners over time and to disclose the underlying causal mechanisms
<b>Kaski et al. (2017)</b>	1. Use authentic data from the sales interaction situations (and not collected through interviews)
<b>Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2018)</b>	1. Examine how the features of industry, geographical or cultural context. 2. Whether the long-term relationship strategy of service companies is changing the importance of initiation processes. Some initiation contributors or process elements seem to be more important than others and, therefore, deserve to become the focus of future studies. For example, standards as artefactual initiation contributors and early access as a key element seemed to be crucial
<b>Delpechitre et al. (2019)</b>	1. Assessing customer's perception of salesperson's empathy and salesperson's empathy simultaneously through role-playing scenarios
<b>Zhang et al. (2019)</b>	1. There may be differences in buyer's and supplier's perspectives on how to respond to opportunism and restore trust. 2. Analyze how miscommunication and misunderstanding can affect trust development. 3. Explore the unintentional offenses of B2B relationships and their influence on B2B relationship maintenance. 3. Future research can replicate our findings in other industries and institutional contexts to examine whether the industry or institutional environment play a role in determining firms' selection of response strategies to different types of opportunism and the efficacy of each strategy at trust restoration after opportunism

(continued)

Table 4

Authors	Future research
Gelderman <i>et al.</i> (2019)	1. Investigate how cognitive dissonance is managed by people with a strong internal locus of control
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2019)	1. Regarding online reverse auction (ORA): How can an ORA be technically improved to work as a value tool not only a price decreasing pressure tool? What emotions are developed in the before, during and after ORA process? How do such emotions interplay during the whole auction process? What topics have concentrated the attention of B2B marketing researchers? Why do managers continue implementing ORAs? How can other fields' ORA understanding be integrated with what we know in B2B marketing?
Steward <i>et al.</i> (2019)	1. Examine five areas of research: the impact of technology, modes of customer and supplier interaction, decision-making approaches, tensions between internal and external communities and B2B marketing analytics
Caruana <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Replicate findings on perspective-taking to cooperation with larger samples in different contexts. 2. Examine interlocking behaviors in solution and not only on perspective-taking and cooperation. 2. What training, sensitization, reward and other activities are likely to work best in fostering perspective-taking among managers in business relationships. 3. The adoption of an aptitude conceptualization of perspective-taking may potentially have broader application to other areas of marketing where interaction takes place
Sharma and Sengupta (2020)	1. Individual factors (e.g. stakeholders and personal preferences) or information quality on brand sensitivity. It would be useful to understand when brand information enters the evaluation scheme and its relative importance compared with other criteria for various decision tactics (e.g. rule-based and personal/professional). 2. A longitudinal study or ethnographic study in which the researcher can actively participate and observe the intricacies of purchase decisions would provide deeper insights to develop further branding theories (B2B context). 3. The three-dimensional representation of brand sensitivity should be examined in new tasks and straight rebuy situations to understand whether brands play any role in decision processes
Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020)	Authors offer several future researches organized by sender's cues, training and recruiting, organizational strategy and structure, suitability of digital interaction and dark side of digital sales interactions
Kemp <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Actual buyers regarding the considerations, feelings and values they possess in the decision-making process. 2. The use fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis. 3. Actual advertising designed to appeal to specific emotions of buyers might be used to assess buyers' attitudes and possible engagement tendencies. 4. Central versus peripheral processing of these stimuli might also be assessed in different media (i.e. social media, print and television). 5. Research opportunities abound for exploring the role of emotions and the centrality of advertising in communicating information and fostering personal and emotional connections with buyers
Itani <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Claim for a longitudinal study and conduct cross-industry comparisons. 2. Analyze frequency of use and the type of technology usage as moderators. Researchers are encouraged to examine other organizational and individual factors that could enhance or diminish the effects of sales technology on salesperson information exchange behaviors and the resulting buyer responses
Kingshott <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Value chains are likely to involve more than two organizations that span both national and/or cultural boundaries. Thus, exploring the relationship marketing dynamics (as reflected in the conceptual model) within the context of a broader network of value chain participants to provide an even more comprehensive picture. 2. Explore drivers of Psychological Contract Breaches (one party's perception of relational obligations that need to be undertaken by the other party). 3. Explore how cultural context influences Psychological Contract Breaches
Anwer <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Collect more data, consider longitudinal designs for studies and replicate in other countries. 2. Consider other values both positive and negative in business purchasing. 3. Explore value congruency in the two partners organizations. 4. Incorporate the concept of organizational culture and norms for a more holistic understanding of business purchase decisions. 5. What are the values portrayed by goods and services and their influence on business purchase decisions? 6. Incorporate quality or satisfaction aspects of business purchase decisions. 7. Compare the results across personal and organizational demographic items and between private vs public organizations. 8. Conduct case studies across several organizations and sample employees at different hierarchical levels in organization
Khan and Eilert (2020)	1. Test the motivations of buyers to establish long-term relationships or safeguard their investments. 2. How suppliers react to the proposed governance mechanism by the buyer, especially when they are planning on making substantial investments in the relationship? 3. Use field or laboratory experiments and case studies can provide more in-depth insights into the intricacies of the different types of buyer and supplier investments and short- and long-term relationship governance considerations
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2021)	1. Future studies can use longitudinal data, explore the interactive effects of contractual and relative governance differentiation strategies on firms' value appropriation (VA). 2. Investigation of possible moderating effects on the relative governance–VA link. 3. Future studies should differentiate between two types of trust (i.e. goodwill- and capability-based), two types of justice (i.e. procedural and distributive) and two types of opportunism (i.e. strong form and weak form)
Crosno <i>et al.</i> (2020)	1. Explore how opportunism develops in contractual negotiation. 2. The willingness to invest in a relationship could be replaced by charting actual investments in a trading partner, and expectations of continuity could be replaced with a longitudinal measure of relationship longevity

(continued)



Table 4

Authors	Future research
Graça and Khare (2020)	1. Are informal social capital networks in emerging countries similar in structure? 2. What facets of informal networks mostly influence commitment between members under distinct institutional and cultural contexts? 3. Are there universal strategies to improve social and business relationships across distinct emerging markets?
Prior and Keränen (2020)	1. How can supplier firms engage productively with buyer firms to develop a clear vision for customer solutions development and delivery? How can supplier firms develop the necessary capabilities to lead customer solutions development and delivery? How can supplier firms integrate diverse offerings from multiple suppliers for innovative, future-oriented customer solutions? How can supplier firms determine when to engage in customer solutions development? 2. What contractual forms are most likely to create cross-functional integration to affect a seamless customer experience? How can supplier firms address the need for customer alignment as both a strategic and interpersonal phenomenon? How can suppliers use processes, procedures and other infrastructure to support cross-functional alignment, noting the fluidity of functional definitions? 3. How can B2B relationships serve as a platform for addressing societal problems? How can agency problems be overcome to encourage a societal-level awareness of B2B relationships? What are the appropriate societal mechanisms (e.g. regulation) that could encourage more responsible B2B relationships? How can we conceptualize sustainability performance at the service ecosystem/ network level? How can zero waste production, transport and exchange processes integrate into B2B relationships? 4. How can B2B firms develop customer solutions for customers that operate in different market contexts, noting the challenges above? How can B2B relationships promote strong linkages with customers in emerging markets? How can B2B collate, analyze and understand diverse information and distribute it to appropriate stakeholders seamlessly?

Source: Authors' own elaboration

being incorporated into the context of the service, operating as a virtual assistant (using voice or text) and embedded in a human-like robot and interacting with other employees. Thus, new avenues are open to exploring the multiple interactions between humans and AI agents and between two AI agents. Saura *et al.* (2021) present diverse research questions to be considered in the future, organized by sender's cues, training and recruiting, organizational strategy and structure, suitability of digital interaction and dark side of digital sales interactions.

#### 5.4 Future research directions – methodology

Structural equation model, regression analysis and confirmatory factorial analysis are widely used in this area of research (Crosno *et al.*, 2020; Dong *et al.*, 2017; Russo *et al.*, 2017). Although some studies also conducted interviews (Friend and Johnson, 2017; Zondag and Brink, 2015), experiments (Cardozo and Cagley, 1971; Mir *et al.*, 2017), conjoint analysis (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2007; Wuyts *et al.*, 2009) or case studies (Bolton and Myers, 2003; Krause and Ellram, 2014), the challenge is to go further and develop mixed-approach methods. We recommend the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to explore complex relationships and moderating effects.

Regarding samples, the size depends on the methodological tool used. Thus, case studies tend to be three on average per article. In structural equation model, the sample (using a cross-sectional approach) ranges between 100 and 600. Interviews have between 10 and 70 participants. Conjoint analysis and cluster analysis have between 100 and 200 participants. Experiments have between 50 and 100 participants. Therefore, previous studies lack longitudinal data collection, field experiments or multiple-case studies, which needs to be considered in future studies. One limitation of previous studies also pointed out as a possible research avenue is a need for collecting more data and the replication of models in other

contexts to allow generalization (Davis-Sramek *et al.*, 2009; Salo and Wendelin, 2013).

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Implications

Research about B2B has adopted different perspectives about customer behavior in this domain, resulting in a rich body of literature trying to understand this phenomenon. Based on an overview of the 219 papers analyzed through a systematic literature review, this paper enhances the existing knowledge about B2B customer behavior, identifies and summarizes the main topics in this field of research, contributes to an explanatory framework, identifies future research avenues and offers a research agenda.

There is still no similar systematic review on the topic to the best of the author's knowledge. Research has been conducted to map B2B advertising (Swani *et al.*, 2020), B2B market segmentation (Mora Cortez *et al.*, 2021) or B2B branding (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011), but a systematic review of customer behavior in the B2B domain is still not available, which puts in evidence the timely and relevant contribution of this paper. This novelty can benefit scholars and practitioners, who can take advantage of our integrative viewpoint on this topic. This paper offers a systematic review and applies a text-mining procedure using R software to adequately capture the relevant topic discussed and open new research avenues, which is still uncommon, particularly in the marketing and B2B domains. Moreover, our initial descriptive analysis offers a helicopter view of the type and number of studies already conducted, the journals publishing in this field of research and the geographic coverage of the empirical studies. This information allowed future researchers to understand the prior studies' characteristics and the potential journals that can be open to receiving more studies on the topic. Indeed,

through the support of the TCCM framework, this literature highlights several gaps for future research, such as a firmer theoretical foundation and development, better contextual positioning or more exploratory methodologies. Our arguments may also assist practitioners in understanding the various direct and indirect connections between antecedents and outcomes of customer behavior in B2B settings, helping to formulate appropriate marketing strategies in a structured and systematic way, such as the insights gained from the analysis of buyer–supplier relationships, the role of supplier selection, cooperation and interactions or the effect of commitment and cultural differences.

### 6.2 Future research agenda overview

This paper proposes an integrated overview of customer behavior in B2B that can be useful for practitioners and academics in future endeavors. We offered the detailed implications for future research agenda in previous Section 5, which we summarized here in Table 4.

### 6.3 Limitations

As with any systematic review, this paper's findings should be taken with caution within the context of this method's limitations. The review has resorted to the WOS and SCOPUS databases to assess the quality of publications. Although it comprises diverse publishers (e.g. Emerald, Sage, Elsevier, Wiley or Taylor & Francis), one may assume that interesting research may not be incorporated in the final pool of papers analyzed as conference proceedings papers or other non-top tier publications. Second, the keywords used may limit the process even if inspired by top reference articles. Additionally, the screening process may have other biases, such as the researchers' data handling. However, the authors believe that the rigorous procedure of this systematic review has reduced the probability that the omitted research would have contained information that would critically alter our conclusions. The gaps and avenues for future research have been identified through the TCCM framework, and the authors prepared a summative table (Table 4) compiling the suggestions of several prior studies that have not been achieved so far.

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## Appendix

**Table A1** Quality assessment criteria

Elements of the study	Level			
	0. Absent	1. Low	2. Medium	3. High
<b>1. Theoretical contribution</b>	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Poor development of theoretical insights and limited awareness of prevailing literature	Basic understanding of theory and use of concepts from existing literature	Deep and broad knowledge of theory, including the novel and provocative development of concepts
<b>2. Implication for practice</b>	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Very difficult to implement the concepts and ideas in pragmatic problem solving	Findings have the potential for being implemented by practitioners with minor reviews or adjustments	The utility for practitioners is clear
<b>3. Methodology</b>	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Data incomplete and not related to theory and weak research design	Data is related to the arguments, although the research design could be improved	Data strongly support arguments. Robust research design and good use of methods
<b>4. The relevance of findings and generalization</b>	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Only tangentially relevant, and mainly to the population studied	Broadly relevant, perhaps in one of the areas or applied in organizations of similar characteristics	High level of integration of findings, methods and theoretical constructs
<b>5. Contribution</b>	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Does not make an important contribution; it does not make it clear the advances it makes	Although using other's ideas, builds upon the existing theory	Further develops existing knowledge, expanding the way the issues were explained so far

Source: Adapted from MacPherson and Holt (2007)

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