



In good company: Three essays on B2B buyer-supplier relationships and their management

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how organizations build, manage, and transform relationships with their suppliers and customers in increasingly digitalized and interconnected business-to-business (B2B) environments. It explores the dynamics of buyer–supplier relationships from both upstream (supplier-facing) and downstream (customer-facing) perspectives, with a focus on the domains of supplier relationship management (SRM) and customer experience management (CXM). Although both concepts are closely linked to customer relationship management (CRM), they remain less developed in B2B theory and practice.

Drawing on a combination of conceptual and empirical research, the dissertation comprises three complementary studies. Study I systematically maps the fragmented SRM literature across B2B marketing and supply chain management, identifying central themes, overlaps, and research gaps. Study II adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to conceptualize the supplier journey and investigates how digital technologies reshape SRM throughout its lifecycle. Study III shifts the focus downstream to analyze how augmented and virtual reality technologies transform CXM in B2B settings, emphasizing their strategic potential across complex, multistakeholder customer journeys.

Taken together, the three studies advance a journey-oriented, holistic understanding of how firms can effectively manage both supplier and customer relationships in today’s dynamic B2B environment. The findings contribute to theory by integrating fragmented SRM perspectives, strengthening the conceptual clarity of research on CXM in B2B contexts, and highlighting the role of emerging digital technologies in transforming interorganizational relationship journeys. The business model canvas serves as an integrative framework that links these upstream and downstream insights by illustrating how SRM and CXM jointly shape the firm’s value proposition. Practically, this dissertation provides actionable insights for managers seeking to develop more strategic, resilient, and digitally enabled B2B partnerships—demonstrating that in modern business, success truly depends on being *in good company*.

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List of papers

Paper 1 (accepted version)

Not quite alike: Supplier relationship management in B2B marketing and supply chain literature

- Désirée Wieland, Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg
- Björn Ivens, Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg

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Paper 2 (submitted version)

The supplier journey: Reframing supplier relationship management

- Désirée Wieland, Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg

This study has not yet been published and is currently under review.

Paper 3 (accepted version)

Augmented and virtual reality in managing B2B customer experiences

- Désirée Wieland, Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg
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1 Introduction

“No business is an island.” (Håkansson & Snehota, 1989, p. 187)

Although Apple has historically occupied a leading position in the global smartphone market, in 2023 the company surpassed Samsung to become the world’s largest phone manufacturer in terms of volume (International Data Corporation [IDC], 2024). Apple owes much of its continued success to a deep business relationship: its partnership with Foxconn. The nature of this relationship goes far beyond that of a simple supply agreement. Foxconn is responsible not only for the assembly of products but also for the management of a significant proportion of Apple’s component value chain. The two companies are engaged in a co-specialized innovation-development relationship (Enderwick & Buckley, 2019). This relationship has enabled each of the two parties to concentrate on the areas of value creation in which they possess the greatest comparative advantage. Specifically, Apple focuses on design and marketing, whereas Foxconn concentrates on manufacturing and supply chain management.

Despite its overall record of success, the relationship between the two companies was not always without its challenges; a number of difficulties arose over time. In 2010, after a series of employee suicides at its Shenzhen factory, Foxconn faced global scrutiny, which drew attention to poor labor conditions, excessive overtime, and inadequate mental-health support (Mishkin & Palmer, 2012; Pun & Chan, 2012). Although Apple does not directly manage these facilities, it has come under intense criticism due to the depth and visibility of its reliance on Foxconn. However, despite long-lasting external pressure and internal tension, the relationship between Apple and Foxconn has endured. It continues to serve as a prime example of a deeply interwoven business-to-business (B2B) relationship—one marked by both challenges and collaboration, conflict and commitment (Enderwick & Buckley, 2019; Leonidou et al., 2023).

B2B relationships, such as the partnership between Apple and Foxconn, are strategic collaborations between firms that wish to access critical resources or capabilities while jointly creating and delivering value to customers (Dwyer et al., 1987; Shamsollahi et al., 2021; Young & Wilkinson, 1998). Typically, various stakeholders are involved, each pursuing its own interests (Brennan et al., 2020; Pagani & Pardo, 2017). These actors carry out numerous activities with a diverse range of tangible and intangible resources

(Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Puri & Korgaonkar, 1991). The activities may take place in a parallel or sequential manner.

A buyer-supplier relationship (BSR), defined as the exchange and collaboration between a purchasing company and its supplier, represents a specific type of B2B relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987). Although such relationships may at times be purely transactional, they often involve enduring interaction patterns characterized by continuity, complexity, and mutual adjustment. Shared value creation plays a central role in these relationships, as the Apple–Foxconn BSR demonstrates (Dwyer et al., 1987; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ott, 2012). Some researchers have even compared BSRs to a marriage between spouses (Dwyer et al., 1987; McCall, 1966; Levitt, 1983). The “marriage” between buyer and supplier comes with benefits such as reduced uncertainty, managed dependence, and efficient exchange (Dwyer et al., 1987). However, such a relationship has to be maintained and can be quite resource intensive (Dwyer et al., 1987). Ultimately, the success of the “marriage” depends on how well the relationship is managed (Levitt, 1983). In some cases, the costs can outweigh the benefits (Dwyer et al., 1987; Gadde & Snehota, 2000).

In today’s dynamic business landscape, understanding BSRs and their management—in terms of both their potential benefits and their pitfalls—has become more important than ever. Across industries, B2B BSRs are evolving into increasingly complex and strategic partnerships, shaped by globalization, rapid technological transformation, and the demand for agility (Hartmann et al., 2024; McClure et al., 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2021). The regulatory environment reinforces this development; for example, the European Union’s Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Act places legal responsibility on firms to identify, prevent, and mitigate adverse human-rights and environmental impacts throughout their supply chain, not just within their immediate operations (Sinnig & Zetzsche, 2025). Simultaneously, consumer expectations are rising. Companies are now expected to demonstrate ethical sourcing, transparent supplier practices, and measurable sustainability outcomes. Research has shown that these expectations are reshaping supply chain strategies; firms are integrating sustainability performance into supplier selection and relationship management processes (Bai et al., 2024; Kannan et al., 2014; Mollenkopf et al., 2022). Technological advances, particularly digital transformation, have further increased the complexity of BSRs. Digital tools now facilitate real-time data sharing, predictive analytics, and enhanced visibility across supply chains, enabling more

responsive and collaborative partnerships (Creazza et al., 2022; Cui et al., 2023; Pattanayak et al., 2024). However, these tools introduce new challenges, such as those associated with ensuring data security, maintaining interoperability across systems, and managing technological dependencies between partners. Additionally, the growing interdependence of global supply chains has magnified the impact of power imbalances within BSRs. When one partner holds significantly more leverage than the other, there is a risk of opportunistic behavior, in which the dominant firm prioritizes its own interests at the expense of its partner's (Blome et al., 2023; Caniëls & Gelderman, 2007). Such asymmetries can erode trust, reduce mutual commitment, and ultimately weaken the long-term effectiveness of the relationship. Together, these regulatory, technological, and structural dynamics make the effective management of BSRs—both upstream, in relation to suppliers, and downstream, in relation to customers—a critical form of competence (Flint et al., 2002; Gadde & Snehota, 2000).

On the downstream side of a BSR, both customer relationship management (CRM) and customer experience management (CXM) play a critical role in the building and maintaining of profitable relationships through strategic alignment, data-driven insights, and customer journey management (Chen & Popovich, 2003; Homburg et al., 2017; Payne & Frow, 2005). Whereas CRM focuses on understanding customer behavior and coordinating interactions, CXM emphasizes shaping customer experience across all of its touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Complementing this, supplier relationship management (SRM), positioned on a BSR's upstream side, is essential for fostering long-term collaboration and value creation with suppliers. It involves actively managing supplier interactions throughout the relationship lifecycle—from initial selection and onboarding to ongoing performance evaluation and, if necessary, exit strategies (Möller et al., 2006; Park et al., 2010). Together, these relationship management approaches provide a useful foundation for managing the complexities of today's interconnected and complex business networks.

Research has examined CRM, CXM, and SRM to varying degrees, but important differences and research gaps remain. In both the business-to-consumer (B2C) and B2B literature, extensive research has been conducted on the subject of CRM. In the B2C context, the management of large quantities of customer data and the personalization of interactions have been the primary concerns (Zineldin, 2006). In B2B settings, studies have focused on leveraging insights and knowledge to optimize the long-term

management of valuable and complex customer relationships (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2010; Gummesson, 2004; Stein & Smith, 2009). Building on the concept of CRM, the concept of CXM has gained increasing attention. Studies have increasingly recognized customer experience as a key competitive factor in B2B markets (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Wirtz et al., 2025; Witell et al., 2020). Managers view CXM as critical for customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage (Homburg et al., 2017; Homburg & Tischer, 2023; Wetzels et al., 2023; Wirtz et al., 2025). The practitioner literature has emphasized the role of technology and customer journeys in enabling a seamless customer experience (Wirtz et al., 2025). However, academic research has yet to catch up. According to Wirtz et al. (2025), a more strategic understanding of CXM in B2B settings is necessary. Despite growing interest, B2B CXM research has offered limited insight into how CXM can drive sustainable competitive advantage and has often promoted a one-size-fits-all approach, overlooking strategic diversity and context-specific needs (Wetzels et al., 2023; Wirtz et al., 2025). In particular, the complex, multistakeholder nature of B2B customer journeys and the impact of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) remain insufficiently addressed in the academic literature (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Purmonen et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022; Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022). As Obal and Lancioni (2013) noted, whereas end users and consumer markets have received substantial attention from the existing research on digitalization in B2B relationships, the impact of digital communications on interorganizational relationships—especially between buyers and suppliers—has been mostly neglected. In a related manner, Ritter and Pedersen (2020) emphasized that “the extant literature on industrial marketing has not yet realized the full potential of digitization and digitalization in industrial relationships” (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020, p. 188). The nature and consequences of these changes require theoretical lenses tailored to the complexity of B2B contexts. These perspectives align with broader calls for B2B marketing research on digitalization (Pandey et al., 2020).

On the other side of the coin, considerable attention has been given to SRM in B2B research, particularly in the fields of supply chain management and B2B marketing. Key topics, such as supplier selection, performance evaluation, and trust-building mechanisms have been widely explored (e.g., Ashnai et al., 2016; Chatterjee, 2023; Dey et al., 2015). However, despite this breadth, the body of research on SRM remains fragmented. These

key topics have typically been examined in isolation, without a comprehensive or holistic perspective (Park et al., 2010). There is only one integrative, lifecycle-oriented model that considers the dynamic nature of supplier relationships (i.e., the model developed by Möller et al., 2006). Moreover, cross-disciplinary integration between different research perspectives is lacking (Park et al., 2010; Su & Yang, 2017). This absence of integration has limited the development of a unified understanding of SRM and hinders the advancement of more robust theoretical frameworks.

In light of these observations, this dissertation advances the understanding of CXM and SRM in B2B contexts. Because CRM has already been extensively conceptualized and empirically examined in both B2C and B2B research, this study focuses on the emergent domains of CXM and SRM, which currently pose great theoretical and managerial challenges in the context of digitalized and networked B2B markets. This dissertation addresses the shortcomings in these areas by combining conceptual and empirical research across three studies; taken together, these studies contribute to a more holistic understanding of BSRs. The first two studies focus on the upstream (supplier-facing) aspect of relationship management, offering both conceptual and empirical insights into SRM. The third study shifts the focus to the downstream (customer-facing) aspect, exploring CXM within B2B contexts. The research objectives of each study are presented in the following section. Table 1 provides an additional overview of the studies.

Study I systematically maps the conceptual landscape of SRM across B2B marketing and supply chain management. Specifically, the study identifies key research themes, highlights overlaps and divergences in the two disciplines, and uncovers underexplored areas, such as conflict and relationship dissolution. This investigation directly addresses the fragmented nature of existing SRM research and responds to the lack of a cross-disciplinary synthesis between B2B marketing and supply chain management perspectives (Park et al., 2010; Su & Yang, 2017). To achieve this, a scoping literature review was conducted in combination with a bibliometric analysis of 249 peer-reviewed articles published between 1980 and 2024. The research questions are as follows:

1. How has the concept of SRM been explored in the fields of B2B marketing and supply chain management?
2. What are the key findings in each of these two disciplines?
3. What research opportunities remain for future exploration?

Study II builds on the conceptual groundwork of Study I by examining how firms actively manage their supplier relationships throughout the supplier journey. Specifically, this study identifies and structures key phases and touchpoints of the supplier journey and examines how digital technologies—such as SRM platforms and AI—support and transform SRM. As Park et al. (2010) pointed out, SRM has rarely been examined in a way that considers the full trajectory of supplier relationships. Furthermore, to date, only one study has developed a comprehensive and integrated framework that does not concentrate solely on discrete key areas of SRM (i.e., Möller et al., 2006). Study II directly responds to the call of Möller et al. (2006) to extend their framework and conduct empirical research on the supplier framework. In addition, it addresses the gap identified by Ritter and Pedersen (2020) as well as Obal and Lancioni (2013), who argued that the impact of digital communication technologies on BSRs in industrial marketing remains underexplored, especially in contrast to consumer-focused digital research. To address these gaps, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, drawing on 43 semi-structured interviews with SRM professionals from a wide range of industries. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do companies design the different phases of the supplier journey within their SRM?
2. What is the role of digital technologies in supporting and transforming specific phases and interactions within the supplier journey?

Shifting to the downstream dimension, **Study III** explores the role of AR and VR technologies in managing B2B customer experience. Specifically, the study identifies current AR and VR use cases in B2B marketing, clarifies their function within the customer journey, and assesses the strategic value these technologies offer. B2B CXM research has lacked strategic depth and has often overlooked context-specific needs (Wetzels et al., 2023; Wirtz et al., 2025). A more strategic understanding is needed, especially regarding complex, multistakeholder journeys and the role of technologies like AR and VR (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Purmonen et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020; Rustholkarhu et al., 2022). To address these gaps, this study follows an exploratory, theory-building approach using case-based expert interviews with B2B marketing professionals. A series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews was conducted with 21 leading experts in the field. Study III investigates the following research questions:

1. What kinds of AR and VR use cases do B2B firms currently implement in their CXM?
2. How can AR and VR contribute to CXM concepts in B2B companies?
3. What benefits do B2B firms anticipate from the use of AR and VR technologies in CXM?

Through the integration of three complementary studies, this dissertation offers a nuanced, journey-oriented understanding of how B2B BSRs are structured, managed, and transformed in today's dynamic business landscape. By bridging conceptual and empirical work, it provides a holistic view of both upstream (SRM) and downstream (CXM) relationship management, examining them through the lens of the supplier journey and the lens of the customer journey, respectively. The dissertation contributes to theory by addressing fragmentation in the existing literature and highlighting the role of emerging technologies in shaping relationship dynamics. Practically, it delivers actionable insights for firms aiming to build more strategic, resilient, and digitally enabled B2B partnerships.

The three studies are presented in turn in Chapters 3–5. Preceding these, Chapter 2 provides the dissertation's theoretical background for this dissertation, which it presents in four sections: (1) a general overview of B2B BSRs and their characteristics, (2) insights into the relevance of and motivation behind the formation of B2B BSRs from the perspective of both buyers and suppliers, (3) an examination of approaches to the management of BSRs, with a focus on CRM and CXM on the buyer side and SRM on the supplier side, and (4) a discussion of the business model canvas (BMC) as an integrative framework that links upstream and downstream relationship management. Finally, following the presentation of the three studies, Chapter 6 synthesizes their findings and discusses the dissertation's theoretical and managerial contributions. It also addresses the dissertation's limitations and proposes directions for future research.

Table 1-1. Overview of studies.

	Study I (Chapter 3)	Study II (Chapter 4)	Study III (Chapter 5)
Title	Not quite alike: Supplier relationship management in B2B marketing and supply chain literature	The supplier journey: Reframing supplier relationship management	Augmented and virtual reality in managing B2B customer experiences
Author(s)	Désirée Wieland & Björn Ivens	Désirée Wieland	Désirée Wieland, Björn Ivens, Elizaveta Kutschma, & Philipp Rauschnabel
Status	Published in <i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	Manuscript currently under review	Published in <i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>
Research gaps	▪ Fragmented nature of SRM research ▪ Lack of a holistic perspective on SRM ▪ Lack of cross-disciplinary synthesis	▪ Fragmented nature of SRM research ▪ Lack of a holistic perspective on SRM ▪ Need for extension and empirically testing of existing SRM framework ▪ Limited understanding of how digital technologies reshape BSRs in B2B contexts	▪ Limited understanding of how digital technologies reshape BSRs in B2B contexts ▪ Limited research on emerging technologies in B2B CXM ▪ Need for a more strategic understanding of B2B CXM ▪ Overreliance on one-size-fits-all approaches in B2B CXM
Research questions	1 How has the concept of SRM been explored in the fields of B2B marketing and supply chain management? 2 What are the key findings in each of these two disciplines? 3 What research opportunities remain for future exploration?	1 How do companies design the different phases of the supplier journey within their SRM? 2 What is the role of digital technologies in supporting and transforming specific phases and interactions within the supplier journey?	1 What kinds of AR and VR use cases do B2B firms currently implement in their CXM? 2 How can AR and VR contribute to CXM concepts in B2B companies? 3 What benefits do B2B firms anticipate from the use of AR and VR technology in CXM?
Research approach	Scoping literature review and bibliometric analysis	Exploratory qualitative study with semi-structured interviews	Exploratory qualitative study with semi-structured interviews

2 Theoretical overview

2.1 What? B2B BSRs and their characteristics

2.1.1 Shaping and being shaped: The dynamics of B2B relationships

As Young and Wilkinson (1998) argued, “The spaces between firms, their network of relationships, as much defines firms as do these firms define the network” (p. 54). In other words, a firm shapes the structure, quality, and dynamics of the relationships it is a part of—be they with suppliers, customers, or partners—but at the same time, these relationships shape the firm’s identity, behavior, and opportunities (Gummesson & Polese, 2009). Such a dynamic relationship is not a one-way street; rather, it is a reciprocal and constantly evolving process in which firms and their networks are interdependent.

B2B markets are characterized by transactions between organizations, in which goods, services, or information are exchanged not for end consumption but for further use within the value creation processes of other firms (Kumar & Raheja, 2012). These interactions form the backbone of industrial supply chains, in which multiple business actors, such as manufacturers, suppliers, wholesalers, and service providers, collaborate across various stages to source, transform, and deliver the components and capabilities necessary for final products or solutions (Saha et al., 2014). Importantly, B2B exchanges are not always transactional in nature. They often evolve into long-term, strategic relationships grounded in interdependence, mutual trust, and shared goals. As such, B2B relationships represent a critical arena in which firms coordinate activities, co-create value, and build sustained competitive advantage within increasingly complex and networked business environments. Although the academic study of B2B relationships has gained momentum over the past few decades, its roots can be traced to much earlier thinkers. A notable example is John Wanamaker, who, in the context of the late-19th-century retail revolution, advocated a more balanced and relational approach to business interactions (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Jones & Richardson, 2007; Tadajewski, 2008). As a pioneering department-store owner, Wanamaker emphasized mutual benefit, long-term trust, and repeat transactions as the foundation of sustainable commerce, identifying relationships—rather than short-term profits—as the key to enduring success (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013). His advocacy of the principles of fairness, reciprocity, and trust laid an early conceptual foundation for what modern scholars formalized as core tenets of B2B relationship research (Gibbon, 1926; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013).

B2B relationships can include, for example, relationships with suppliers, distributors, customers, or competitors (Young & Wilkinson, 1998). Such relationships often emerge from interdependence and evolve over time through repeated exchanges, creating both opportunities and constraints. Moreover, they help structure interactions between companies in industrial markets (Blois, 1972; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Firms themselves perceive and manage their interactions as relationships, forming quasi-organizational structures over time. Although it may be difficult to define the concept of a “relationship” between companies with precision, it is commonly understood as a mutually oriented, ongoing interaction between two committed parties (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). A business relationship is shaped by learned rules and behavioral norms, creating an atmosphere in which individual episodes, such as negotiations, payments, and deliveries, occur. These episodes both influence and are influenced by the overall relationship. Over time, such relationships evolve through stages marked by growing mutual adaptation, closer interaction, and stronger commitment (Ford, 1982). In this context, interaction plays a central role. Rather than being a static event, interaction is a relational and processual activity that evolves over time through the coordinated actions of the involved parties (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). As Håkansson et al. (2009) emphasized, the development of interaction forms the foundation of value creation in B2B markets, allowing firms to jointly develop solutions, overcome challenges, and advance innovation. Shaped by past experiences and future expectations, interactions are inherently dynamic and highly context specific (Wilkinson & Young, 2002).

In this regard, B2B relationships are characterized by dynamic interaction processes that evolve continuously over time. Researchers have identified several core elements of these processes: mutual adaptations, cooperation and conflict, social interaction, and routinization (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Mutual adaptations, whether technical, logistical, or administrative, are essential for aligning the operations and goals of both parties. They reflect and reinforce mutual commitment while also introducing a level of interdependence that shapes how the relationship functions. Similarly, cooperation and conflict coexist within relationships (e.g., Newell & Ellegaard, 2022; Pulles & Loohuis, 2020). Although conflict over value distribution is often inevitable, the long-term orientation of relationships can encourage constructive resolution and value creation (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Monczka et al., 1998). Social interaction also plays a significant role. Relationships are most often not purely transactional. They are deeply

shaped by the personal bonds and trust developed between the individuals involved (Akrouf & Diallo, 2017; Dwyer et al., 1987). Over time, these interactions can become routinized: Rules, norms, and behaviors stabilize, reducing coordination costs and helping the companies navigate complexity (Andersen et al., 2009; Nelson & Winter, 1982). Together, these features suggest that dynamic continuity rather than static stability defines B2B relationships. They evolve as chains of interdependent episodes, constantly shaped by past experiences and future expectations. That is, B2B relationships are not fixed states but ongoing processes of mutual adjustment and development (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

Academic research on B2B relationships has produced a wide range of models for explaining processes of interaction between organizational actors. These models are typically categorized as either structural or process models, based on whether they adopt a cross-sectional or longitudinal perspective, respectively (Dabholkar et al., 1994). Structural models focus on the key elements of relationships, such as trust, commitment, and dependency, and examine how these factors influence the nature and quality of exchanges. A prominent example is the interaction model developed by the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (see Håkansson, 1982; Turnbull & Valla, 1986), according to which B2B markets are networks of organizations made up of individuals that maintain exchange relationships with each other. Transactions proceed based on various factors, including a logical connection between consecutive transactions and the characteristics of the organizations (structure, technology, resources, strategy) and individuals (goals, attitudes, experience). Each relationship is influenced by these factors and the atmosphere of interaction they create. In contrast, process models analyze the development of B2B relationships over time. Dwyer et al.'s (1987) five-phase model, for instance, outlines a progression from initial awareness to commitment and potential dissolution, highlighting how trust and mutual dependence evolve. Holmlund's (1997, 2004) model refines this model by organizing business interactions into hierarchical units—actions, episodes, and sequences—that together form the basis of a B2B relationship. Underlying these models are key theoretical perspectives, including commitment-trust theory (see, e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994), dependency theory (see, e.g., Hibbard et al., 2001), transaction-cost theory (see, e.g., Heide & John, 1990; Wathne & Heide, 2000; Wilson, 1995), and relational-norms theory (see, e.g., Macneil 1980). Together, these theoretical perspectives form a robust foundation for explaining both the

structure and dynamics of B2B relationships. They capture the interplay between economic and social dimensions of exchange; in this interplay, dependency and transaction-cost perspectives clarify the strategic and efficiency-driven motives of relationship formation, whereas commitment-trust and relational-norms theories illuminate the behavioral processes that foster trust, cooperation, and long-term stability in interorganizational networks.

2.1.2 BSRs: Between transactions and partnerships

A distinct type of B2B relationship, a BSR is an exchange relationship between a buyer and a supplier (Dwyer et al., 1987). This exchange relationship represents a structured economic connection and is often conceptualized as a dyad, that is, a pair of actors (i.e., a buyer and a supplier) interacting with each other (Achrol et al., 1983; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). BSRs can take different forms (Tangpong et al., 2015). On one end of the spectrum, they may be market-based, meaning the relationship is mostly transactional, short-term, and governed by prices or contracts (e.g., spot buying). On the other end, they may also be characterized by a relational structure, in which there is a high degree of integration between the two companies (e.g., a supplier can be deeply embedded in a customer's operations, resembling an internal department). Within a single firm, various forms of BSRs can exist simultaneously (Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Ivens et al., 2013). Although a mutually beneficial collaboration between a buyer and supplier might appear ideal, the actual advantages gained by each party often differ considerably (Rokkan et al., 2003; Whipple & Frankel, 2000). Throughout the life of a relationship, the dynamics of interaction and the resulting benefits change, as do the levels of commitment each side invests in sustaining the relationship over time (Dwyer et al., 1987; Wagner, 2011).

Several typologies for the classification of BSRs have been proposed. Scholars have made a foundational distinction between discrete transactions and relational exchanges, according to which the former are short-term and price-driven relationships and the latter are long-term, trust-based relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987; Macneil, 1980). Expanding on this distinction, researchers have often positioned BSRs along a transactional–relational continuum (e.g., Grönroos, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which reflects varying degrees of cooperation and commitment. Other typologies emphasize the role of power and dependence within the relationship, distinguishing among buyer-dominated,

supplier-dominated, independent, and interdependent forms (e.g., Cox, 2001). Beyond that, Bensaou (1999) introduced a framework based on types of investments that distinguishes market exchanges from strategic partnerships. These typologies illustrate that BSRs are not static but evolve depending on relational, structural, and contextual factors (Tangpong et al., 2015).

The classification and description of BSRs in these typologies rely on specific key attributes that reflect the nature of the BSR (Tangpong et al., 2015). BSRs can be characterized mainly by two categories of key attributes: relational attributes and power-dependence attributes (Tangpong et al., 2008; Tangpong et al., 2015). Relational attributes that can define BSRs include cooperative efforts, relational norms, trust, commitment, and integration. These central attributes of BSRs can function as governance mechanisms and play an important role in limiting opportunism and reducing transaction costs to enhance performance (e.g., Heide & John, 1992; Tangpong et al., 2008; Wang & Wei, 2007). Power-dependence attributes, on the other hand, can be power-, dependence-, and transaction-specific investments (Tangpong et al., 2008; Tangpong et al., 2015). Dependence is a key factor in determining power dynamics (Tangpong et al., 2008). In this regard, dependence can be defined as the degree to which one party is reliant on the other to obtain the resources it needs to achieve its objectives (Frazier, 1983). According to some researchers (e.g., Cook, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), the party with less dependence exerts greater power over the more dependent party. It is evident that relational and power-dependence attributes play a pivotal role in the effective functioning of BSRs (Tangpong et al., 2008). These attributes have the capacity to influence critical dynamics, which are essential for the performance of both buyer and supplier firms. These dynamics include control, cooperation, power exploitation, and the prevention of opportunism (e.g., Provan & Skinner, 1989; Tangpong et al., 2015; Wang & Wei, 2007; Wathne & Heide, 2000).

Beyond the dyadic lens, BSRs rarely exist in isolation. Although the exchange between the two firms in a BSR remains fundamental, such relationships are typically embedded in wider constellations of interconnected actors, activities, and resources (Anderson et al., 1994). Such “business networks” can be understood as interdependent structures in which firms’ performance is shaped not only by bilateral ties but also by the dynamics of the surrounding network (Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997; Ritter et al., 2004).

Scholars disagree about the degree to which these networks can be deliberately shaped or managed. Some have highlighted the possibility of purposeful coordination and the formation of strategic constellations (Jarillo, 1988), whereas others have stressed the self-organizing character of networks, according to which outcomes emerge from continuous interaction without centralized control (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that BSRs must be understood as both dyadic interactions and parts of broader, evolving networks. Recognizing this dual embeddedness has become particularly critical in digitally connected environments, in which firms compete and collaborate as elements of larger ecosystems.

In summary, this chapter highlights that B2B BSRs are dynamic, interdependent, and processual in nature, evolving through ongoing interaction, mutual adaptation, and shared history (e.g., Wilkinson & Young, 2002; Young & Wilkinson, 1998). These relationships are shaped by both relational attributes, such as trust, commitment, and cooperation, and power-dependence dynamics that influence how value is created and distributed (Tangpong et al., 2008; Tangpong et al., 2015). The typological classification of BSRs has revealed the diverse forms these relationships can take, from arm's-length, market-based exchanges to deeply integrated partnerships (e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994). These forms are not static but shift in response to structural and contextual changes over time. Importantly, firms do not operate in isolation but are embedded in a broader network of interactions that shape, and are shaped by firms' strategic behavior (Young & Wilkinson, 1998).

2.2 Why? The motivations for forming B2B BSRs

The study of BSRs has held a significant place in marketing research since the early 1980s (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Möller & Halinen, 1999). Early research emphasized short-term, transaction-oriented exchanges, often overlooking the complex, evolving nature of long-term interactions between firms (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Holmlund, 2004; Dwyer et al., 1987). In recent decades, however, this perspective has shifted considerably; academics and practitioners have paid increasing attention to the strategic importance and multifaceted nature of BSRs. A key reason for this shift lies in the recognition that industrial firms often prefer to engage with known counterparts rather than continually seeking out new transactional partners (Anderson et al., 1994; Dabholkar et al., 1994;

Holmlund, 2004; Wilkinson & Young, 2002). This preference has spurred growing interest in the relational aspects of B2B exchange. Relational dimensions, such as trust, commitment, and opportunism, have emerged as extensively studied constructs, because they are foundational to the development, maintenance, and performance of long-term interorganizational relationships in B2B markets (e.g., Ashnai et al., 2016; Blome et al., 2023). For instance, trust is widely regarded as a key factor in reducing opportunistic behavior and fostering cooperation between buyers and suppliers. In this context, relational governance mechanisms—which support and regulate the development of trust—are viewed as central to the effective management of reliable and enduring supplier relationships (e.g., Jean et al., 2021; Lumineau & Henderson, 2012). This growing focus on relational factors has reinforced the view that BSRs are not merely operational necessities but strategic assets that can create significant value for both buyers and suppliers.

Accordingly, BSRs in business markets are widely recognized as a critical source of competitive advantage for both parties (e.g., Dyer & Singh, 1998; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Tangpong et al., 2008). However, the strategic interests that drive the establishment and maintenance of such relationships are not always perfectly aligned and can vary according to role, context, and stage of the relationship. In the short term, buyers and suppliers pursue distinct yet complementary objectives, centered on transactional efficiency and risk containment; in the long term, motives shift toward co-creation, innovation, capability building, and resilience. The following section therefore delineates the motives for forming and sustaining BSRs along these two horizons and from both the buyer and supplier perspectives, and it clarifies the resource- and governance-related mechanisms that underpin them.

In the early phases of an exchange—and in more arm’s-length arrangements—motivations are oriented primarily toward efficiency and mitigation of risk. Firms engage in BSRs when expected transactional benefits outweigh coordination costs, and partner selection follows cost–benefit and transaction-cost logics (Crosno & Dahlstrom, 2011; Noordewier et al., 1990). On the buyer side, outsourcing noncore activities to specialized suppliers serves to lower costs, free up resources, and preserve strategic flexibility, particularly when market conditions demand rapid adaptation (Gelderman & Van Weele, 2005; Saeed et al., 2005). On the supplier side, the immediate motive is demand stability:

Access to stable orders allows for more accurate capacity planning and reduces volatility in production schedules (Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995; Möller & Halinen, 1999).

As relationships deepen, motives shift toward co-creation and sustained competitive advantage. Enduring ties enable access to superior forms of innovation, knowledge sharing, and coordination, which are difficult to replicate through market transactions (Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Ragatz et al., 1997). Buyers pursue agility and technological renewal via early supplier involvement, whereas suppliers build reputational capital, preferred-supplier positions, and learning effects through joint development (Gu et al., 2024; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Schiele et al., 2012). In turbulent environments, long-term BSRs further enhance resilience by fostering information sharing, joint problem solving, and coordinated crisis response (Bunduchi, 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Runfola et al., 2023).

In long-term BSRs, close relationships with suppliers facilitate direct access to innovation and technical expertise—especially through early supplier involvement in product development—which accelerates innovation cycles, reduces development costs, and improves product quality (Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000; Ragatz et al., 1997). Strategically, long-term BSRs open pathways for collaborative innovation: When suppliers engage in joint product design or process optimization with committed buyers, they not only co-create value but also expand their own technical capabilities and reputational capital (Gu et al., 2024; Schiele et al., 2012). These innovation-related gains reflect a broader resource-based motivation: According to resource-dependence theory, complementary and difficult-to-replace resources and networks generate interpartner dependencies (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Heide, 1994). Existing know-how and jointly developed knowledge reinforce these dependencies, and mutual dependence in turn motivates both sides to enter long-term commitments or establish isolation mechanisms (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Tanskanen & Aminoff, 2015).

Robust relationships are ultimately marked by lasting trust and shared commitment between the parties (Andersen et al., 2009; Gu et al., 2024). When such conditions hold, firms report improved corporate outcomes, greater market competitiveness, enhanced innovation potential, and more efficient supply chain structures—benefits driven largely by effective information flow, collaborative knowledge exchange, and the

complementary use of resources (Dai, 2022; Li, 2021; Li, 2024; Mao & Yang, 2024; Tsanos & Zografos, 2016).

At the same time, these motives coexist with nontrivial risks. Overembedded partnerships can produce dependency, reduce flexibility, or enable opportunistic behavior when governance is insufficient (Blome et al., 2023; Håkansson & Snehota, 1998; Heide & John, 1992; Mitrega & Zolkiewski, 2012). Moreover, even as buyers and suppliers pursue value co-creation, tensions related to power asymmetries, conflicting interests, and competitive pressures persist (Caniëls & Gelderman, 2007; Cox, 2001). In this context, Leonidou et al. (2023) highlighted opportunism, distance, and conflict as negative dimensions that increase uncertainty in supply chain relationships and can ultimately undermine long-term benefits and inhibit innovation performance (Lu et al., 2021). Together, these dynamics underscore that BSRs require careful relationship management to balance short-term efficiency motives with long-term partnership ambitions.

2.3 How? The management of B2B BSRs

As one study has claimed, “A firm’s ability to successfully manage both its downstream relationships with buyers and its upstream relationships with suppliers is central to its competitive advantage” (Flint et al., 2002, as cited in Shamsollahi et al., 2021, p. 418). In other words, the degree to which a company is successful in creating value at both ends of a supply chain depends on how effectively it manages both its upstream (supplier) and downstream (customer) relationships (Flint et al., 2002; Pardo et al., 2006). BSRs are inherently dynamic, evolving and changing over time (Gadde & Snehota, 2000). Changes in the relationship can lead to complex and unpredictable outcomes. Consequently, careful management of BSRs is necessary and important.

2.3.1 Downstream: CRM and CXM

The downstream, customer side of a BSR is typically managed through a CRM approach. The definition and conceptualization of CRM vary across authors and organizations. This variety reflects the wide range of perspectives on this subject (Payne & Frow, 2005). Some scholars, such as Zablah et al. (2003), view CRM as an extension of relationship marketing, which focuses on establishing, developing, and maintaining successful

customer relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Although it is often used interchangeably with the concept of relationship marketing, CRM is sometimes framed as a more technology-driven concept and has been described as “information-enabled relationship marketing” (Ryals & Payne, 2001, p. 3). Originating in the IT and practitioner communities of the mid-1990s, CRM was initially viewed as encompassing technology-based tools like sales-force automation (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001). Today, CRM is broadly understood as a strategic approach that integrates people, processes, and IT to build, maintain, and enhance relationships with profitable customers and market segments (Payne & Frow, 2005). Rather than being solely a technological tool, CRM represents a holistic framework combining strategic objectives, customer-value delivery, data utilization, and operational excellence (Chen & Popovich, 2003; Payne, 2005).

CRM’s growing importance in academia and practice has been driven by several factors: the shift from transaction- to relationship-oriented marketing, the increased focus on customer value, the move from functional to strategic organizational structures, advances in IT, and the rise of one-to-one marketing (Payne, 2005). The primary goal of CRM is to generate mutual value for the firm and the customer by fostering long-term, trust-based relationships. Its purpose is to understand customer behavior, enhance satisfaction, increase loyalty, and ultimately drive profitability (Chen & Popovich, 2003). CRM supports the alignment of marketing strategies with customer needs and ensures delivery of a superior customer experience throughout the customer lifecycle (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2010; Payne & Frow, 2005).

CRM comprises interconnected processes aimed at building and sustaining valuable customer relationships. CRM research has increasingly emphasized customer retention through effective management of customer relationships (Zineldin, 2006). Payne and Frow (2005) identified five processes that are critical to CRM implementation: strategy development, value creation, multichannel integration, information management, and performance assessment. Strategy development aligns the firm’s business and customer strategies through market analysis and segmentation (Davidson, 2002; Porter, 1980). Value creation then translates these insights into actions that enhance value for both parties (Levitt, 1969). Multichannel integration ensures a seamless customer experience across touchpoints (Friedman & Furey, 1999; Sudharshan & Sanchez, 1998), whereas information management leverages data and IT to enable targeted interactions

(Greenberg, 2001). Finally, performance assessment links CRM activities to outcomes such as customer satisfaction and shareholder value (Payne & Frow, 2005).

Building on the concept of CRM, CXM has gained growing attention as a related but distinct approach (Homburg et al., 2017). A customer experience is the evolving set of emotional, mental, social, and behavioral responses a person has while interacting with a brand across various interactions—before, during, and after purchase—constantly comparing these experiences to others in its environment (Homburg et al., 2017). Whereas CRM is concerned primarily with understanding customers and using data to manage relationships, CXM centers on understanding real-time customer reactions and behaviors and using that insight to shape customer experience (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Edelman and Singer (2015) emphasized that conducting CXM and, more specifically, overseeing interactions from the perspective of the customer journey play an important role in addressing any issues that could negatively impact the overall customer experience. Payne and Frow (2005), however, argued that CXM elements are embedded within a strategic CRM framework because both aim to deliver a compelling value proposition and superior customer experience. This conceptual overlap has also led to a debate among practitioners, some of whom have questioned whether CXM is the new CRM (Davey, 2012).

According to Wirtz et al. (2025), B2B CXM is the process of designing, analyzing, and orchestrating customer journeys, along with their associated cues and touchpoints, to create experiences that support both individual and collective customer goals over time. CXM seeks to enable the achievement of these goals through three universal value propositions: relieving customer experience (which promotes efficiency at the organizational level and convenience at the individual level), enabling a seamless customer experience (which supports organizational differentiation and individual empowerment), and enriching customer experience (which enhances brand association for the organization and fosters relationships for individuals). A firm's CXM strategy is shaped by its position along two key dimensions: CXM impact (i.e., the degree to which customer experience is strategically important as a competitive differentiator) and CXM scope (i.e., the breadth and depth of customer-experience initiatives, including customer journeys and the touchpoints and cues associated with them).

Both CRM and CXM are closely tied to the concept of the customer journey, which is central to shaping customer perceptions and behaviors (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Reinartz et al., 2004; Witell et al., 2020). Whereas CRM uses customer journey insights to manage relationships and value exchange, CXM focuses on improving experiences across touchpoints (Payne & Frow, 2005). Touchpoints are any type of interaction, digital or physical, between a customer and a brand, product, or service (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Witell et al., 2020). Although definitions vary, a customer journey typically encompasses the full path of interactions a customer has with a company, from initial awareness and purchase to post-purchase experiences, including product use and service (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). In B2B settings, these journeys involve multiple stakeholders and complex, goal-driven interactions shaped by the broader business relationship (Purmonen et al., 2023; Witell et al., 2020).

The integration of new technologies exerts a significant impact on customer experience by blending digital and physical touchpoints, enabling B2B firms to deliver enhanced value throughout the customer journey (Breibach et al., 2014; Flavián et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2016). Although in-person engagements like site visits remain important in many B2B settings, customer journeys are increasingly shaped by digital interfaces, such as search engines, online platforms, and social media (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; Hallikainen et al., 2019; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Consequently, a growing body of research has called for further investigation into B2B customer journeys and especially the role of new technologies (e.g., AI, AR, and VR) in enhancing these journeys (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Purmonen et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022; Rustholkarhu et al., 2022). Lundin and Kindström (2023) argued that digitalization reshapes B2B customer journeys by adding and transforming digital touchpoints, shifting roles toward greater customer activation and more collective, team-based interactions and extending and supporting journey processes over time. These insights underscore the complexity introduced by digital technologies; they not only multiply and modify contact points but also diversify participant roles and drive the evolution of the structure of the journey itself.

2.3.2 Upstream: SRM

On the upstream side of a BSR, SRM can be employed to oversee the relationship with suppliers (Möller et al., 2006). The management of supplier relationships is of particular importance, because strong supplier relationships can enable successful and valuable customer relationships (e.g., Hunt & Lambe, 2000). Due to the expansion of global markets, diverse customer demands, and increasingly complex products, efficient supply chain management has become critical to a company's competitiveness. To manage supply chains effectively, companies must prioritize the purchasing function, especially as outsourcing and sourcing costs become increasingly important. As a result, companies are placing greater emphasis on SRM, recognizing that proper management of supplier relationships can not only reduce risk and uncertainty but can also optimize inventory levels and process-cycle time, enabling companies to satisfy customers and increase profitability (Park et al., 2010; Simchi-Levi et al., 2003). SRM can be defined as a strategic approach to managing interactions with suppliers, that covers the entire lifecycle of the relationship—from its establishment and development to its maintenance and eventual dissolution (Möller et al., 2006; Park et al., 2010; Piercy, 2009). The objective of SRM is to foster strategic collaboration with suppliers in order to support competitive product development and efficient production (Park et al., 2010).

One of the most widely recognized SRM models is the three-phase framework developed by Möller et al. (2006), which conceptualizes SRM based on the phases of out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and the management of in-supplier dissolution. Out-supplier management involves the identification and evaluation of potential suppliers based on hard criteria (e.g., cost, quality, and delivery) and soft factors (e.g., flexibility and shared values) (Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Kannan & Tan, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This phase ensures that companies remain open to better alternatives and do not become overreliant on existing suppliers (Gadde & Snehota, 2000). Once a supplier is onboarded, in-supplier management begins. This includes setup activities that build commitment (Dyer et al., 1998), ongoing performance and development management (Bowman & Narayandas, 2004; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005), contract governance (Heide, 1994), and conflict-resolution processes (Johnston, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The objective is to tailor management intensity based on the strategic importance of the supplier (Gadde & Snehota, 2000). If a relationship no longer serves strategic goals, in-supplier dissolution management is necessary. Exit strategies may be indirect (silent or

disguised exits), or they may be direct, involving negotiation and closure (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000). Although Möller et al. (2006) offered a structured SRM framework, they emphasized the need for empirical research that addresses the specific realities of supplier relationship dynamics and identifies ways to enhance practical applicability.

This process-oriented view of SRM has evolved substantially over the past decades. Initially, SRM was largely transactional in nature and influenced by transaction-cost economics (Williamson, 1975); it focused primarily on cost reduction and the avoidance of opportunism. However, the growing complexity of global supply chains in the 1990s brought increased attention to strategic and collaborative supplier relationships (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Harland et al., 1999). Since the early 2000s, research has increasingly emphasized relational governance mechanisms, such as trust and commitment (Heide & John, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), particularly within B2B marketing. At the same time, the literature on supply chain management has focused on integrating performance-based supplier evaluation and risk mitigation (Chen et al., 2004). In recent years, digitalization and sustainability have reshaped SRM practices further, and studies have highlighted the role of technologies like real-time analytics (e.g., Cui et al., 2023) and models of sustainable supplier selection (e.g., Alikhani et al., 2019; Kannan et al., 2014). Despite these advancements, some aspects of the SRM process—especially relationship dissolution and conflict management—remain underexplored (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Möller et al., 2006), indicating the need for a more comprehensive approach to managing the full lifecycle of supplier relationships. According to Park et al. (2010), researchers have addressed SRM primarily by focusing on isolated aspects, such as purchasing strategy, supplier selection, collaboration, and development, rarely approaching it from a holistic perspective.

Although often treated as distinct forms of management, customer management (i.e., CRM and CXM) and SRM are closely linked, because both establish critical connections within the supply chain (Lambert & Schwieterman, 2012): “Without one, the other would cease to exist” (Kooli et al., 2016). Whereas CRM and CXM center on managing interactions and experiences with customers, SRM focuses on optimizing relationships with suppliers. In complex and long-term B2B relationships, both approaches are vital for generating value. CRM and CXM highlight the importance of understanding and shaping the customer journey (Homburg et al., 2017), and SRM aims to strengthen

collaboration with suppliers, ensuring that their input enhances the buyer's performance and competitive edge (Choy et al., 2003).

2.4 The BMC as an integrative metaframework for the management of buyer-supplier relationships

Managing buyer–supplier relationships requires not only understanding the relational, behavioral, and managerial mechanisms such relationships involve but also situating these mechanisms within the broader strategic logic of firms' creation, delivery, and capture of value. Sections 2.1–2.3 show that B2B relationships are dynamic, heterogeneous, and embedded in networks, that firms pursue both efficiency- and innovation-oriented objectives in forming and maintaining such relationships, and that the management of B2B relationships requires the systematic approaches embodied in SRM, CRM, and CXM. What remains less explicit is how these relational dynamics are embedded within the architecture of the firm's business model. To make this connection, this dissertation adopts Osterwalder and Pigneur's (2010) BMC as an overarching conceptual framework.

Despite a surge of interest in business model research over the past decades, the literature lacks a unified understanding of what constitutes a “business model” (Foss & Saebi, 2017; Ghaziani & Ventresca, 2005; Zott et al., 2011). Nonetheless, scholars broadly agree on the centrality of the notion of value within business model thinking (Richardson, 2008). This notion encompasses three distinct but interrelated components (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Richardson, 2008; Teece, 2010):

1. value proposition: the value organizations promise or offer to customers
2. value creation: how this value is produced and delivered
3. value capture: how firms capture a share of the value that is created.

In addition to its value-centric orientation, the business-model perspective provides a structural lens for analyzing how firms interact economically with external stakeholders. It emphasizes the patterns of exchange between the firm and actors in its factor and product markets, thereby illuminating how transactions, collaborations, and resource flows are organized (Zott & Amit, 2008). Whereas strategic management emphasizes how firms achieve competitive advantage through positioning and resource allocation,

the business model complements this view by focusing on the architecture of value creation and the patterns of exchange through which firms interact with external stakeholders.

Despite the emergence of several alternatives to their initial insight over the past years, the original BMC remains one of the most widely used artifacts for business modeling (Blank, 2013). The BMC was conceived as an ontological framework that clarifies the relationships among key components of an organization. Influenced by an information-systems perspective, the canvas was intended to provide a shared language and structure for organizational analysis and collaborative decision-making (Mintzberg, 1989). Its visual and iterative nature has made it a highly accessible instrument for both individual and collaborative exploration of business-model innovation (Eppler et al., 2011; Fritscher & Pigneur, 2010).

The BMC consists of nine interrelated building blocks. The right-hand side of the canvas captures the value-delivery and customer-facing dimensions of the business model, including customer segments, channels, and customer relationships. The left-hand side structures the internal architecture for value creation through key activities, key resources, and key partnerships. The value proposition sits at the center of the canvas, reflecting its role as the connective element between the organization's value-creation architecture (including internal capabilities and external partnerships) and its customer-facing activities. From an analytical perspective, this bilateral structure corresponds to the duality inherent in B2B relationship management: SRM relates primarily to the left-hand side of the canvas, whereas CRM and CXM pertain to its right-hand side. This mapping, however, is interpretative rather than explicitly defined in the original BMC. The financial building blocks, revenue streams and cost structure, cannot be assigned to one side alone; instead, they capture the cumulative outcomes of how all the other building blocks interact to create, deliver, and capture value.

From an upstream perspective, SRM directly influences the left-hand side of the canvas. Key partnerships constitute the most explicit point of integration: Suppliers often represent critical contributors to technological knowledge, production capacity, innovation capabilities, and operational stability (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Jap, 1999). In many industries, they are indispensable to shaping the firm's key activities; they do so, for example, through joint development projects,

coordinated logistics processes, or integrated digital interfaces (Birou & Fawcett, 1994). Suppliers may likewise provide key resources, such as proprietary technologies, specialized expertise, or reliable input factors (Cui et al., 2023). SRM can shape both cost structure and revenue streams by influencing the efficiency, stability, and innovativeness of value creation through partnerships, resources, and activities. For example, reliable and well-coordinated suppliers reduce production delays, rework, and monitoring expenses, thereby lowering operational costs. At the same time, long-term partnerships and collaborative innovation efforts can enable differentiated offerings or faster market entry, which strengthen the firm's ability to generate revenue. The left-hand side of the canvas can thus provide a structural representation of how SRM mechanisms (e.g., trust, commitment, and mutual adaptation) become embedded in the organization's business model.

From a downstream perspective, CRM and CXM can shape the factors on the right-hand side of the canvas. These approaches affect how firms define and prioritize customer segments, design and integrate channels, and orchestrate customer relationships across the customer journey. As B2B markets become increasingly digitalized and technologically sophisticated, the role of emerging technologies (e.g., AR and VR) in enriching customer experience or enabling a seamless customer experience becomes crucial for differentiation and competitive advantage (Homburg et al., 2017; Lundin & Kindström, 2023), which are key elements of the customer relationships and channels building blocks. Moreover, CRM and CXM can affect cost structure and revenue streams by shaping the effectiveness and quality of value delivery through customer interactions, channels, and customer engagement patterns (Chen & Popovich, 2003; Payne & Frow, 2005). Digital self-service options, streamlined communication, and remote support can reduce service and travel expenses, thereby lowering costs on the delivery side (Wieland et al., 2024). At the same time, improved customer experience quality, enhanced clarity in complex buying situations, and richer value communication can increase conversion rates, elevate willingness to pay, and foster long-term loyalty, which together enhance revenue generation. Thus, the right-hand side of the canvas reflects how downstream relational mechanisms translate into market-facing strategic outcomes.

Positioning the BMC as an overarching framework makes it possible to conceptualize upstream and downstream relationship management not as isolated managerial domains but as interconnected elements of a firm's business model. This integrative view

reinforces the idea that B2B relationships are fundamental to how firms configure their value architecture. For example, the ability of a supplier to adapt, co-develop, or share knowledge affects the firm's capacity to innovate its value proposition; similarly, the quality of customer experience influences how effectively value is captured. In this way, the BMC provides a structural map that links relational characteristics, such as interdependence, continuity, governance mechanisms, and journey-oriented interactions, to the strategic logic of the organization.

Finally, the BMC offers a perspective for integrating the three studies included in this dissertation. Study I and Study II focus on SRM and therefore contribute primarily to the left-hand side of the canvas. Both of these studies show that SRM shapes several infrastructure-related building blocks: It shapes key partnerships through the structuring, governance, and development of strategic supplier relationships, key activities through coordination routines, joint processes, and journey-based relational interactions, and key resources through the relational and technological capabilities that enable effective collaboration. Both studies also speak indirectly to cost structure, because they show how SRM can reduce transaction costs, mitigate risks, and enhance process efficiency. The findings of Study II have indirect implications for the understanding of revenue streams insofar as reliable supplier performance and co-innovation can support the development of higher-value offerings and more robust value delivery. Study III, in contrast, investigates CXM and thus informs the right-hand side of the canvas. It addresses customer relationships and channels by examining how digital and immersive technologies reshape customer touchpoints and interaction patterns along the B2B customer journey. Like SRM upstream, CXM downstream contributes indirectly to the understanding of cost structure; it does so, for instance, by suggesting that the use of AR and VR can reduce service and travel expenses through remote demonstrations or support. Moreover, Study III has indirect implications for the understanding of revenue streams, because it shows how AR and VR can reduce uncertainty, improve decision quality, and increase customers' willingness to engage, thereby improving the effectiveness with which firms capture value.

This integrative logic is visually summarized in Figure 2-1, which illustrates how the three studies collectively span and connect the building blocks of the BMC. Taken together, these studies reveal how upstream and downstream relationship management jointly influence the firm's ability to construct and sustain a compelling value proposition

as the central linking element of the canvas. Insights from SRM clarify how supplier collaboration, co-development, and capability alignment generate the resources, activities, and partnership structures that underpin the firm's value promise. Insights from CXM, in turn, illuminate how experiential design, technology-enabled interactions, and channel orchestration determine how this value is perceived and realized in the market. By situating SRM and CXM within the BMC framework, the dissertation demonstrates that a firm's value proposition emerges from the interplay between internal value-creation processes and external value-delivery mechanisms. This highlights the strategic role of relationship management in developing coherent, resilient, and innovation-oriented business models in complex B2B environments.

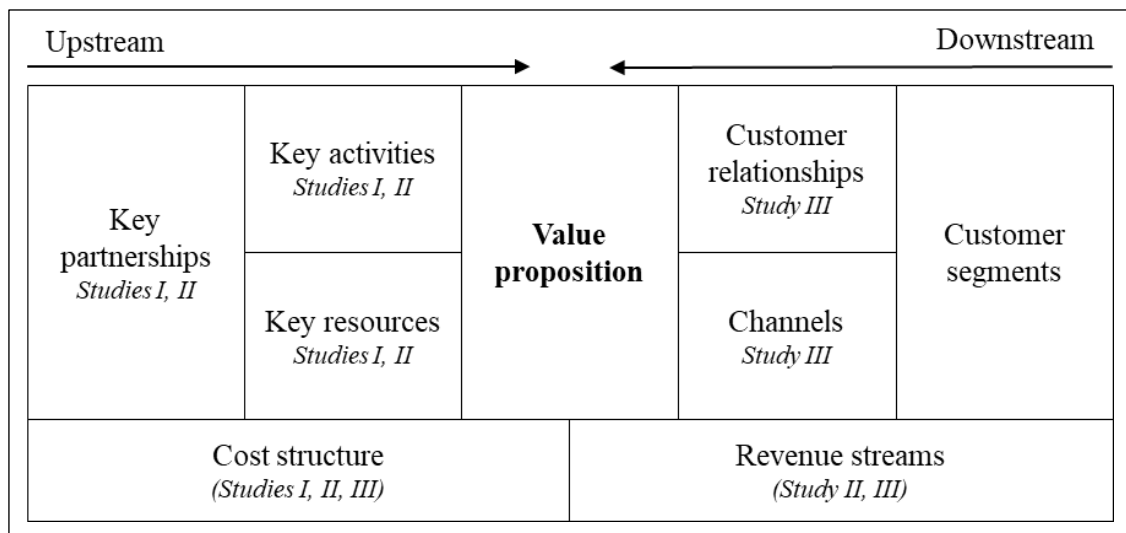


Figure 2-1. Integration of the three studies within the BMC, based on Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010).

3 Study I

Not quite alike: Supplier relationship management in B2B marketing and supply chain literature

Abstract

Many companies implement systematic supplier relationship management (SRM) approaches. However, while scholars from different disciplines (e.g., business-to-business [B2B] marketing, supply chain management [SCM]) have examined SRM, a clear picture of which aspects have been extensively studied and which have not is lacking. To address this gap, this study conducts a scoping literature review combined with a bibliometric analysis encompassing B2B marketing and SCM research. It aims to unpack the extent and nature of research activity in the fields of B2B marketing and SCM to identify key findings and areas requiring further investigation. The analysis indicates that these two perspectives exhibit some degree of overlap but also emphasize disparate foci. The literature on SRM lacks a comprehensive overview and focus on important areas, such as relationship termination and conflict management. This study highlights these “white spots” on the SRM map, encourages further investigation on them, and offers guidance for fostering more collaborative, effective, and sustainable buyer–supplier relationships.

Keywords

Business-to-business; Industrial marketing; Buyer–supplier relationships; Supplier relationship management; Scoping review; Bibliometric analysis

3.1 Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing literature extensively discusses the importance of managing customer relationships (Webster, Malter, & Ganesan, 2005; Witell et al., 2020). Customer relationship management (CRM) and customer experience management are both crucial drivers of competitive advantage (Piercy, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). At the same time, however, building and maintaining relationships with key suppliers is essential to generate and deliver value to customers (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Piercy, 2009; Saunila, Ukko, Sore, Rantala, & Nasiri, 2019). In other words, healthy supplier relationships are a vital resource that, in turn, engender successful customer relationships (e.g., Hunt & Lambe, 2000).

The roles of suppliers in a company's value chain are multiple and diverse, as they encompass a spectrum of engagements, from the one-time or long-term provision of goods and services to the status of strategic partners. For example, the outsourcing of activities to suppliers enables companies to concentrate on their core competences, enhance their operational efficiency, and simultaneously preserve organizational flexibility (Conner & Prahalad, 1996; Tangpong, Michalisin, Traub, & Melcher, 2015). Nevertheless, a growing perception is that suppliers are not merely one among many links in a company's value chain but collaborative partners as well, offering their expertise and resources to help buyer firms respond rapidly and effectively to evolving customer demands (Birou & Fawcett, 1994; Möller, Fassnacht, & Klose, 2006; Wynstra, van Weele, & Weggemann, 2001). This notion has led to an increasing awareness of the role of buyer-supplier relationships in both theoretical and practical discourse in the past few decades and has underscored the importance of a systematic approach to supplier management (Gadde & Snehota, 2000).

In a company, different types of buyer-supplier relationships coexist (Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Ivens, van de Vijver, & Vos, 2013). Although a win-win collaboration may at a first glance seem the optimal situation for both parties, the benefits realized by each partner often differ significantly over the course of the relationship (Rokkan, Heide, & Wathne, 2003; Whipple & Frankel, 2000). For example, the nature of interactions and outcomes between buyer and supplier varies, as do the levels of effort both parties put into maintaining a long-term relationship (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Wagner, 2011).

In this context, supplier relationship management (SRM) represents a strategic approach for interactions with suppliers, encompassing activities from the initiation of relationships, to their stabilization, to their termination (Möller et al., 2006; Piercy, 2009). Researchers in various disciplines, particularly in B2B marketing and supply chain management (SCM), have studied SRM, each with distinct objectives and areas of focus. However, while both fields have made significant contributions to the understanding of SRM, their efforts have largely been independent, with limited interaction between them, resulting in a fragmented perspective of SRM lacking a holistic approach (Park, Shin, Chang, & Park, 2010; Su & Yang, 2017). Against this background, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *How has the concept of SRM been explored in the fields of B2B marketing and SCM?*
2. *What are the key findings in each of these two disciplines?*
3. *What research opportunities remain for future exploration?*

To address these questions, we conduct a scoping review combined with a bibliometric analysis. This approach enables us not only to map and synthesize relevant existing studies in the two fields but also identify key trends, research gaps, and influential works (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Baker, Kumar, & Pandey, 2020; Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee, Pandey, & Lim, 2021). By employing this method, we systematically compare and contrast findings from both B2B marketing and SCM literature. This comprehensive analysis sheds light on how SRM has been explored in these two disciplines, offering valuable insights into their distinct contributions and potential areas for future research. The results show that while both B2B marketing and SCM have made extensive contributions to the field of SRM, they have distinct foci with only limited interactions between the two fields. In general, research in SCM tends to focus on operational aspects and the strategic management of supplier relationships. In contrast, B2B marketing puts more emphasis on relational dynamics and focuses primarily on relational governance mechanisms, trust, and the evolution of buyer–supplier relationships. A substantial body of work in SCM is dedicated to sustainable supplier selection and supplier selection in general, a topic that is comparatively underexplored in B2B marketing. In addition, both fields extensively study the impact of SRM on performance, examining how effective relationship management influences operational and strategic outcomes. However,

processes for managing the termination or switching of partnerships as well as for conflict management receive scant attention.

The structure of this research is as follows: it begins by outlining the key conceptual foundations of SRM, including a discussion on interactions in buyer–supplier relationships and the definition of SRM itself. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methodological approach used in the study. Then, we present the distinct understandings of SRM from the perspectives of B2B marketing and SCM and examine the evolution of SRM and the changing levels of research attention over time. In addition, we analyze cross-disciplinary citation patterns in SRM research to unpack the extent of interaction between the research disciplines. Next, we identify and explore the main topics in SRM research as reflected in both B2B marketing and SCM literature. We conclude with a discussion of the findings, contributions to research and practice, study limitations, and suggestions for future research.

3.2 Conceptual background

3.2.1 Interactions in buyer-supplier relationships

Buyer–supplier relationships constitute a specific type of business arrangement between suppliers of goods and services and professional buyers (customers), mostly organizations. The literature identifies several factors that distinguish buyer–supplier relationships from other types of business relationships and, in particular, from company–consumer relationships in business-to-consumer markets. These factors include derived demand, multi-personal buying decisions, investments in the relationships with key buyers or suppliers, and the long-term nature and interdependence of these relationships, which require trust, commitment, and coordination to ensure mutual benefits (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Webster & Wind, 1972).

The involvement of several actors on both sides of the buyer–supplier dyad often creates highly complex situations (Ott, 2012). This complexity can be caused by actors' geographic distribution, their functional backgrounds and respective goals, their differing levels of know-how and experience, and other factors. High relationship complexity requires close coordination among all the actors to ensure that interactions are efficient

and effective from both sides' perspectives (Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Pardo, Wei, & Ivens, 2022).

Different disciplinary perspectives of business relationships exist because, among other reasons, the actors involved in managing the dyadic business relationship come from different functional backgrounds, such as procurement, SCM, manufacturing, marketing, sales, customer service, and accounting and finance. Different backgrounds can lead to different conceptualizations of what a business relationship is and to different points of interest in relationship management.

The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group, for example, suggests that three fundamental building blocks in business relationships require coordination: actor bonds, activity links, and resource ties (Hakansson & Snehota, 1995). Actor bonds refer to the interpersonal connections between individuals, activity links represent the coordination of joint tasks, and resource ties involve connecting and sharing tangible and intangible resources (Hakansson & Snehota, 1995). In buying and selling organizations, the actors may span different functional areas, hierarchical levels, or geographic regions. As a result, various interdependent activities occur in parallel or sequentially, requiring the coordination of both tangible and intangible resources from both sides to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of interactions between buyer and seller (Lacoste & Johnsen, 2015). Other disciplines in management research focus on other aspects or examine buyer–supplier relationships through different lenses.

Research has identified several factors that have a positive impact on the long-term performance and quality of business relationships, such as the fundamental norms of reciprocity, role integrity, and solidarity (Cox, 2004; Ivens, 2006; Ivens & Blois, 2004; O'Toole & Donaldson, 2002). Relationship quality in B2B relationships refers to the overall assessment of the strength and depth of the partnership, often measured by factors such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction between firms (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Parsons, 2002). Performance pertains to the outcomes of the relationship, including operational efficiency, financial gains, and mutual value creation, which in turn are influenced by the quality of the relationship (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). For example, reciprocity (or, in some parts of the literature, mutuality) refers to the mutual exchange of value between parties, with each party expected to return favors or benefits received during the relationship (Thomas, Fugate, & Koukova, 2011). This norm fosters

a cooperative dynamic by ensuring that both parties maintain an equitable balance in their exchanges, which is essential for building trust and reducing opportunistic behavior. As Ivens and Blois (2004) note, reciprocity plays a role in enhancing the stability of long-term relationships, as both parties are incentivized to act in each other's best interests, knowing that positive actions will be reciprocated. This mutual reinforcement of behavior helps create a stable foundation for long-term cooperation, thus improving the overall performance and quality of the relationship.

While fundamental norms and values are important for buyer–supplier relationships, actors' perceptions of relationship quality and performance are based directly on their experiences throughout the interaction processes between the buyer and seller (Lemke, Clark, & Wilson, 2011; Rasila, 2009; Su, Song, Li, & Dang, 2008). Interaction is a core concept for the analysis and explanation of buyer–supplier relationships in business markets (Hakansson & Ford, 2002; Kühne, Gellynck, & Weaver, 2013). According to Ford and Mouzas (2010, p. 956), interaction is a “problem-coping process that involves a set of choices for interacting actors within particular business relationships that are unique in time and space.” In B2B markets, interactions go beyond mere transactional exchanges; they are oftentimes relational and processual in nature, evolving over time as both parties engage in a series of coordinated activities (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). According to Hakansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, and Waluszewski (2009), interaction is the foundation of value creation in B2B markets, as it allows firms to jointly develop solutions, address challenges, and foster innovation. Interaction often involves negotiation, adaptation, and collaboration, where both firms must align their goals and adjust their processes to achieve mutual benefits (Kahkonen & Lintukangas, 2014). Furthermore, Wilkinson and Young (2002) suggest that interactions are not static; they are shaped by past experiences and future expectations, making each interaction unique and context-specific. This dynamic nature of interaction also implies that the quality of communication, trust, and the ability to resolve conflicts effectively play crucial roles in shaping the overall relationship quality and performance between buyers and suppliers.

Building on this foundation, recent research has enriched process models by integrating perspectives from the customer experience and customer journey in B2B marketing and sales research, concepts originally deployed in business-to-consumer contexts (Bont, 2018; Steward, Narus, Roehm, & Ritz, 2019; Witell et al., 2020). In B2B relationships, the customer journey encompasses the entire series of touchpoints that occur between the

customer and the supplier, including interactions before, during, and after purchase, whether physical or virtual (Homburg & Tischer, 2023). The customer journey is influenced not only by the tangible exchanges between the buyer and supplier but also by the buyer's experiences – cognitive, emotional, and social responses to these interactions – which shape how future encounters are perceived.

Customer experiences in B2B contexts are multidimensional, comprising behavioral, cognitive, emotional, sensorial, and social reactions to a supplier's offerings (Dobrzykowski, 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Each touchpoint during the customer journey provides an opportunity for the supplier and customer to affect these experiences. Moreover, as Purmonen, Jaakkola, and Terho (2023) note, the customer journey in B2B settings involves multiple actors in the customer's organization, all of whom contribute to the purchase decision and shape the overall experience as they engage with the supplier across various touchpoints. These touchpoints are influenced by the nature of the business relationship, meaning that relational aspects such as trust, role integrity, and reciprocity are crucial in determining the customer's experience throughout the journey.

3.2.2 Supplier relationship management

SRM and CRM, though often viewed as separate concepts, are closely interconnected. Both form links throughout the supply chain (Lambert & Schwieterman, 2012). While CRM focuses on managing customer interactions and experiences, SRM involves optimizing interactions with suppliers. In B2B contexts, in which relationships are long and complex, both systems are essential for value creation. Just as CRM emphasizes the importance of understanding customer experiences across the journey (Homburg, Jozic, & Kuehnl, 2017), SRM plays a similar role on the supplier side by fostering collaboration and ensuring that the supplier's contribution positively influences the buyer's overall performance and competitiveness (Choy, Lee, & Lo, 2003).

These two relationship management approaches are complementary, as the success of B2B relationships depends on how effectively both upstream (supplier) and downstream (customer) relationships are managed (Pardo, Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naud'é, 2006). By maintaining strong interactions, firms can create value at both ends of the supply chain, driving long-term success. The integration of SRM with CRM highlights the importance of managing not just individual transactions but the entire network of relationships,

ensuring consistent high-quality experiences across all touchpoints (Lambert, 2009; Oghazi, Rad, Zaefarian, Beheshti, & Mortazavi, 2016; Piercy, 2009).

Möller et al. (2006) divide SRM into three sequential phases (for a slightly different perspective, see Park et al., 2010). Before a relationship is established and maintained, the selection of potential suppliers is a necessary task (Jack & Powers, 2015; Möller et al., 2006). This phase, referred to as out-supplier management, entails overseeing suppliers that have yet to form a relationship with the acquiring company – so-called out-suppliers (Möller et al., 2006; Vaandrager, 2024). These potential suppliers are closely observed, compared, and, if appropriate, integrated, as close partnerships also involve investments that can be amortized through the benefits of interaction. With the first transaction of the partners, the potential supplier (i.e., former out-supplier) becomes an existing and so-called in-supplier. The goal of in-supplier management is now to build and maintain relationships with existing suppliers to increase value creation (Wee, Peng, & Wee, 2010). Möller et al. (2006) further describe existing relationships as being about maintaining and expanding the interaction, which requires further investment. If a partnership is to be terminated, in-supplier dissolution management is necessary. In parallel, the management of potential suppliers begins again to identify a new partner.

According to Möller et al. (2006), SRM is therefore a life cycle with different stages and points of interaction that require different investments and activities. Against this background, we adopt their definition of SRM as “the process of engaging in activities of setting up, developing, stabilizing and dissolving relationships with in-suppliers as well as the observation of out-suppliers to create and enhance value within relationships” (p. 73). SRM is one of eight macro processes identified by the Global Supply Chain Forum and interfaces with the other macro processes, such as demand management, order fulfillment, CRM, and returns management (Lambert & Cooper, 2000).

3.3 Methodological approach

To answer our research questions, we conducted a scoping literature review together with a bibliometric analysis. Literature reviews, in general, can serve a crucial role as groundwork for subsequent research endeavors by identifying relevant research activities or highlighting current research gaps (Munn et al., 2018; Snyder, 2019).

Two important forms of literature reviews are scoping reviews and systematic literature analyses. A scoping review is a type of literature review that aims to systematically map the breadth, scope, and characteristics of research in a particular field. While systematic literature reviews are usually designed to answer specific, more narrowly defined research questions, a scoping review is more exploratory in nature and provides a broader overview of a topic by mapping the breadth and scope of research in a given field, identifying key themes, and highlighting areas that may warrant further investigation (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

A bibliometric analysis quantitatively assesses the academic literature to identify patterns, trends, and the impact of publications in a specific field. It uses citation data to evaluate the influence of individual articles, authors, journals, and research topics, revealing the structure and development of a research area. When combined with a scoping review, bibliometric analysis enhances the understanding of the scope and evolution of a field by systematically mapping the research landscape and identifying key studies, influential authors, and emerging themes. This approach provides a comprehensive overview that not only outlines the extent of existing research but also highlights gaps and future directions for study (Donthu et al., 2021). With our study, we aim to give an overview of how SRM has been explored in the fields of B2B marketing and SCM. We aim to identify and contrast key findings in each discipline and to build a basis for future research on SRM.

We conducted the scoping review following the methodological framework initially established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), with further enhancements provided by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010). This approach ensures a systematic and rigorous process for mapping the existing literature on the chosen topic. The framework comprises several iterative stages, which we adhered to in order to identify, select, chart, and synthesize the relevant studies.

The first stage involved identifying a clearly defined research question to guide the scope of the review. This step was crucial for setting the boundaries for the study and determining the key themes and concepts that needed to be addressed. By doing so, we identified the need for a literature review on SRM because the existing literature seems fragmented between the B2B marketing and SCM disciplines (Ross, Buffa, Droge, & Carrington, 2009; Su & Yang, 2017). Researchers can benefit from a unifying perspective

of interdisciplinary findings, which we aim to address with our study (Park et al., 2010; Su & Yang, 2017). We refined the research questions, ensuring that the scope was sufficiently broad to capture a comprehensive overview of the existing literature while remaining manageable in terms of search and analysis.

The second stage focused on identifying relevant studies through a comprehensive search strategy. Our search aimed to be as exhaustive as possible, encompassing two major electronic databases and reference lists of included articles to capture all pertinent studies. We iteratively refined the search strategy, adjusting search terms and sources to ensure that we covered the breadth of the topic while remaining feasible within the study's time frame. We limited our search to peer-reviewed articles written in the English language and published in academic journals between 1980 and 2024 (October). We deliberately selected a wide range of years to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of the SRM research over the past decades. We decided to focus on academic journals ranked within the category "3" or higher according to the Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools to ensure a high quality of the included studies. For the identification of suitable articles, we used Web of Science and Scopus (September 2024), which offer systematic search possibilities and provide access to a wide variety of peer-reviewed business journals. We used a predefined search string to identify relevant articles by their titles, keywords, and abstracts: (supplier relation* OR buyer supplier relation* OR supplier buyer relation* OR supplier relationship management OR supplier management OR purchasing relationship management OR supply chain relationship management). We decided to keep the search string very general to find as many studies from different research directions as possible.

Following the identification of studies, we engaged in the third stage: study selection. Appendix A provides a detailed illustration of the selection process in a flowchart. We applied predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to screen studies for relevance. The initial search returned 25,415 results. After we limited the articles to the management, business, and operations research and management science categories of the databases, 13,787 studies remained. Following a quality screening and restriction of the articles specifically to the research fields of B2B marketing and SCM, 5389 studies were left in the set. A thorough title, abstract, and full-text screening followed, which narrowed down the articles further to 249. Appendix B contains a list of the 249 studies, including authors, titles, journals, and publication years.

Note that the distinct perspectives of B2B marketing and SCM are accompanied by varying terminology (Su & Yang, 2017). For example, some researchers appear to equate SRM roughly with SCM (e.g., Alvarado & Kotzab, 2001; Chen & Paulraj, 2004). Moreover, some researchers concentrate on the general management of buyer–supplier relationships, while others address specific areas such as supplier development, supplier selection, or other SRM-related topics without referring to the specific term “supplier relationship management”; as such, this term is not explicitly referenced in many studies. However, some studies treat SRM as a distinct construct (e.g., Forkmann, Henneberg, Naudé, & Mitrega, 2016). To ensure comprehensive coverage, we include articles that mention the term “supplier relationship management” as well as those that do not mention the term explicitly but address topics closely related to it.

The fourth stage involved charting the data from each selected study. We systematically extracted relevant information, such as study characteristics, methodologies, and key findings. Charting took the form of an iterative process, allowing us to refine data extraction fields to capture essential elements that emerged during the review process.

In the fifth stage, we collated, summarized, and synthesized the data to obtain a comprehensive overview of the literature. This involved both a descriptive numerical summary and a qualitative thematic analysis to highlight key themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. Our approach aimed to go beyond a mere aggregation of data by offering insights into the implications of the findings for future research and practice. We coded the material and identified relevant themes to address the proposed research questions. We categorized the selected literature on the basis of its general research focus in relation to SRM. We first grouped the studies according to their focus on the three phases of SRM according to Möller et al. (2006) – out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and in-supplier dissolution management – and then categorized the studies by their specific thematic focus within the three phases. We used a mixed inductive–deductive approach to categorize the selected literature, following the Gioia methodology (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia, 2021; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), an established procedure in marketing and management research. Appendix C provides the data structure.

Simultaneously, we conducted a bibliometric analysis, using the software tool VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2012), which we also employed to create a visual representation of the results. First, we conducted a citation analysis of the bibliographic

references used in all the articles analyzed. Citation analysis, a key bibliometric method, evaluates the significance and impact of publications by counting how often they are cited by other works (Appio, Cesaroni, & Di Minin, 2014). Despite alternative approaches to assessing a publication's value, citation counts are a straightforward and objective measure of its influence (Stremersch, Verniers, & Verhoef, 2007). The use of citation analysis enabled us to identify cross-disciplinary citation patterns in SRM, allowing us to determine the extent to which the B2B marketing and SCM disciplines take each other into account in the field of SRM research. Second, we conducted a co-occurrence analysis. The recurrence of particular word combinations suggests the presence of underlying themes or topics. We took the words used from the author keywords, article titles, abstracts, or complete texts (Baker et al., 2020), to establish thematic links between words and identify themes and trends not evident in citation patterns (Donthu et al., 2021).

3.4 Results

This section presents the results from the literature review and bibliometric analysis. The aim is to answer the research questions on how SRM is explored in the fields of B2B marketing and SCM, to identify key insights from each discipline, and to suggest potential directions for future research. To provide an overview of the most significant thematic clusters, we also conduct a co-occurrence analysis. We then examine the three largest clusters identified in greater detail through a comprehensive review.

3.4.1 Understanding SRM from a B2B marketing and SCM perspective

SRM is a critical function in both B2B marketing and SCM, but the emphasis and outcomes differ slightly between the two domains. SRM in its broadest sense refers to the strategic approach organizations take to manage interactions with their suppliers and foster long-term collaboration (Carr & Pearson, 1999; Chen, Paulraj, & Lado, 2004; Cousins, Lawson, & Squire, 2006; Möller et al., 2006). In this section, we present a comprehensive account of the definition of SRM in the two research areas of B2B marketing and SCM, outlining the key similarities and differences between their understandings.

In the context of B2B marketing, SRM particularly emphasizes the development of trust, mutual commitment, and shared value creation (Ganesan, 1994; Heide & John, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Dwyer et al. (1987) describe SRM as integral to building long-term relationships that foster loyalty and cooperation between firms and their suppliers. B2B marketing mainly views supplier relationships as strategic assets that contribute to innovation, differentiation, and competitive advantage (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Jap, 1999). Anderson and Narus (1990) further elaborate on this, highlighting how close, cooperative relationships between buyers and suppliers can lead to co-innovation and improved market positioning. A key distinction in the B2B marketing approach to SRM is the focus on relational governance instead of the formal, performance-based governance often part of SCM (Heide & John, 1992; Yu, Liao, & Lin, 2006). Heide and John (1992) argue that in B2B marketing, relational norms such as trust, flexibility, and cooperation play a more significant role than formal contracts in regulating buyer–supplier relationships. This relational governance allows firms to adapt to changing market conditions and foster deeper collaborations with suppliers (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Heide & John, 1992). Morgan and Hunt (1994) further support this view with their commitment–trust theory, which posits that trust and commitment are fundamental to successful long-term relationships in the B2B context, leading to enhanced collaboration and value creation. In this light, SRM from the B2B marketing perspective “involves developing partnership relationships with key suppliers to reduce costs, innovate with new products and create value for both parties based on a mutual commitment to long-term collaboration and shared success” (Lambert & Schwieterman, 2012, p. 338).

In the context of SCM, SRM focuses primarily on operational efficiency, risk management, and the seamless integration of suppliers into the firm’s production and logistical processes. SRM plays a crucial role in ensuring the continuous flow of goods and services, thereby reducing supply chain disruptions and enhancing overall performance (Chen et al., 2004; Monczka, Petersen, Handfield, & Ragatz, 1998). As Chen et al. (2004) argue, SRM in SCM is critical for improving supplier performance and reducing uncertainties, especially in complex global supply chains. SRM, in this framework, emphasizes the evaluation of suppliers based on performance metrics such as cost, quality, and delivery reliability, which are essential for achieving cost reductions and operational efficiency (Chen et al., 2004; Harland, Lamming, & Cousins, 1999).

An important early contribution to the SCM understanding of SRM is the work of Kraljic (1983), who developed a supplier segmentation model based on strategic importance. Kraljic's matrix, still widely used in SCM today, recommends different management strategies for suppliers depending on their categorization as strategic, bottleneck, leverage, or non-critical:

- Strategic suppliers come with both high supply risk and high profit impact. These suppliers require close, long-term collaboration and active management because of their critical role in achieving strategic goals.
- Bottleneck suppliers have high supply risk but low profit impact. Managing these suppliers requires risk mitigation strategies, as supply interruptions can disrupt operations despite their limited contribution to profit.
- Leverage suppliers have low risk but high profit impact. These suppliers allow for the use of purchasing power to negotiate favorable terms, as their market conditions are relatively stable.
- Non-critical suppliers have low risk and low profit impact. These suppliers require minimal management effort and are typically managed through efficient transactional processes.

This approach aligns with the SCM focus on managing risks and ensuring that resources are appropriately allocated to suppliers that contribute the most to the firm's strategic goals (Cousins, Lawson, & Squire, 2008; Kraljic, 1983). Thus, in SCM, SRM serves predominantly as a tool that extends beyond traditional procurement, with a focus on reducing costs, achieving operational efficiency, and reducing risk, through sustained collaboration and performance-driven evaluations (Chen & Paulraj, 2004; Cousins et al., 2008).

In summary, the different orientations of SRM in B2B marketing and SCM stem from their distinct objectives. B2B marketing views SRM as a means to foster long-term relationships that can lead to innovative collaboration and competitive differentiation (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Ganesan, 1994). Here, supplier relationships are built on values such as trust and commitment, with the goal of achieving joint benefits over time (Jap, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In contrast, SCM, being primarily concerned with the optimization of the supply chain, emphasizes efficiency, risk management, and cost control (Chen et al., 2004; Cousins et al., 2006; Harland et al.,

1999). Relationships with suppliers are often performance-driven, with an emphasis on integrating suppliers into the firm's logistical and operational processes (Kraljic, 1983; Monczka et al., 1998). However, despite their slightly different orientations, both approaches recognize the importance of performance, cost-efficiency, and joint value creation as central objectives in managing supplier relationships.

3.4.2 Evolution of SRM research over time

The evolution of SRM in the past decades helps illustrate both perspectives and highlights significant shifts in focus in both B2B marketing and SCM fields. These developments are mirrored in the evolution of research attention to SRM over time. Fig. 1 illustrates how SRM has gained prominence in both research disciplines across the periods 1980–1990, 1991–2001, 2002–2012, and 2013–2024. This figure is based explicitly on the selected articles for the specific purpose of this study.

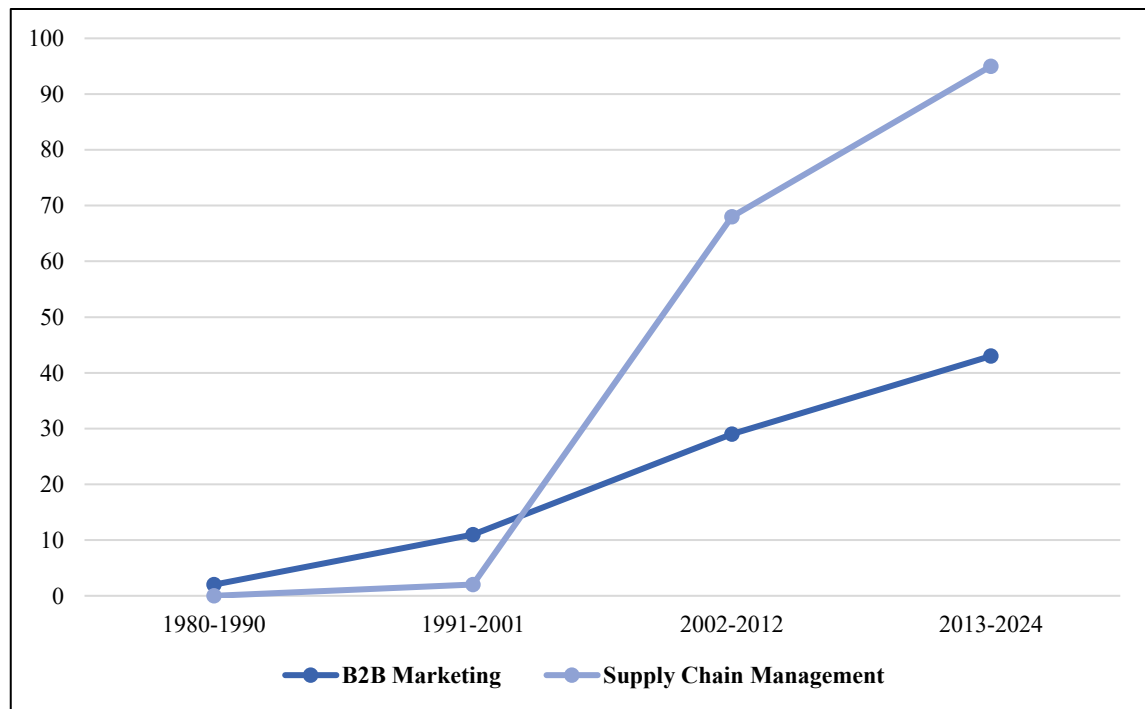


Figure 3-1. Study I – Number of articles per research area by period.

Initially, the management of supplier relationships was viewed in a transactional light, especially within SCM, in which firms sought to minimize costs through aggressive negotiation and short-term contracts (Kraljic, 1983; Williamson, 1975). This approach was influenced by transaction cost economics, as outlined by Williamson (1975), with

the primary goal being to reduce procurement costs and avoid opportunism. Therefore, between 1980 and 1990, SRM received minimal attention in both research disciplines. From the selected articles, only two articles (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987), both published in *Journal of Marketing*, fall into this period. This dearth suggests that SRM was still in its infancy, particularly in the context of supply chain research, which was focused primarily on operational efficiency and transactional relationships at the time (Kraljic, 1983; Williamson, 1975).

However, with the rise of global supply chains and the increasing complexity of production networks in the 1990s, firms began to recognize the value of building more strategic, long-term relationships with suppliers (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Harland et al., 1999). As a result, the subsequent period, from 1991 to 2001, witnessed a modest increase in research output, with 11 articles of our selection published in B2B marketing (e.g., Doney & Cannon, 1997; Hult, Ferrell, Hurley, & Giunipero, 2000; Jap, 1999) and two in SCM (Carter, 2000; Harland et al., 1999). This period reflects an early phase in the recognition of SRM's strategic importance. The increase in B2B marketing publications signals growing interest in relational approaches to supplier management, with firms beginning to recognize that closer collaboration with suppliers could lead to joint innovation and shared market success (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Jap, 1999). In SCM, the still relatively low number of articles indicates that SRM had not yet become a central concern in this discipline, though the emerging global supply chains during the 1990s began to shift the focus toward more integrated supplier relationships (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Harland et al., 1999).

The period between 2002 and 2012 is characterized by a notable increase in research activity in both fields. A review of the selected articles revealed 29 from the field of B2B marketing (e.g., Jean & Sinkovics, 2010; Kingshott & Pecotich, 2007; Laaksonen, Pajunen, & Kulmala, 2008) and 68 related to the area of SCM (e.g., Bai & Sarkis, 2010; Cousins, Lamming, & Bowen, 2004; Pagell, Krumwiede, & Sheu, 2007). This period reflects the integration of SRM as a critical component in both disciplines. The significant growth in SCM publications suggests that SRM has become an essential topic, especially as global supply chains have become more complex, requiring closer collaboration with suppliers (Chen & Paulraj, 2004; Monczka et al., 1998). The corresponding growth in B2B marketing indicates that SRM has become an increasingly important strategic tool

for companies seeking to improve innovation and value creation through stronger supplier relationships.

In the most recent era (2013–2024), SRM continues to evolve in both B2B marketing and SCM, driven by technological advancements and the growing importance of sustainability (Caniëls, Gehrsitz, & Semeijn, 2013; Fang et al., 2024). Digital tools such as enterprise resource planning systems and cloud-based SRM platforms enable firms to monitor supplier performance in real time, enhancing responsiveness and collaboration (Cui, Wu, Wu, Kumar, & Tan, 2023; Moradlou, Roscoe, & Ghadge, 2022). These technologies have streamlined the transactional aspects of SRM, allowing firms to focus on more strategic, long-term partnerships. At the same time, sustainability has become a key consideration in SRM, with firms increasingly aligning their supplier relationships with environmental and social goals (Ahmed & Shafiq, 2022). Consequently, from 2013 to 2024, research attention to SRM has continued to increase, with 43 identified articles related to B2B marketing (e.g., Blome, Paulraj, Preuss, & Roehrich, 2023; Griffith, Hoppner, Lee, & Schoenherr, 2017; Makkonen, Vuori, & Puranen, 2016) and 95 to SCM (e.g., Faraz, Sanders, Zacharia, & Gerschberger, 2018; Huang & Chiu, 2018; Pulles & Loohuis, 2020). This period shows the maturity of SRM as an established research area in both fields, with a particularly strong focus on SCM.

Overall, the evolution of SRM research shows a clear trajectory of increasing attention in both B2B marketing and SCM, with SCM showing a particularly sharp rise in more recent decades. While B2B marketing initially led the discussion on SRM, SCM has now arguably taken the lead, reflecting the growing complexity and strategic importance of supplier relationships in modern supply chains.

3.4.3 Cross-disciplinary citation patterns in SRM

The three journals with the highest average number of citations in the field of SRM are *Journal of Marketing*, *European Journal of Operational Research*, and *Journal of Marketing Research* (see Appendix D). Appendix E lists the first 10 most frequently cited articles. We employed VOSviewer to analyze citation patterns in the field of SRM across the disciplines of B2B marketing and SCM. The software helped create a network visualization based on cross-citations, revealing clusters that indicate how journals from each discipline are connected. By identifying key bridging journals and examining the

strength of connections within and between clusters, the analysis provides insights into the extent of cross-disciplinary engagement and thematic integration in SRM research. In a citation analysis of journals, VOSviewer generated a network map on which each node represents a journal, and the lines connecting the nodes represent citation links between journals (see Fig. 2). The sizes of the nodes in this case indicate how strongly a journal is connected within the citation network, reflecting its central role and importance in its linkage with other journals, while the thickness of the lines reflects the strength of the citation link (i.e., how often one journal cites another).

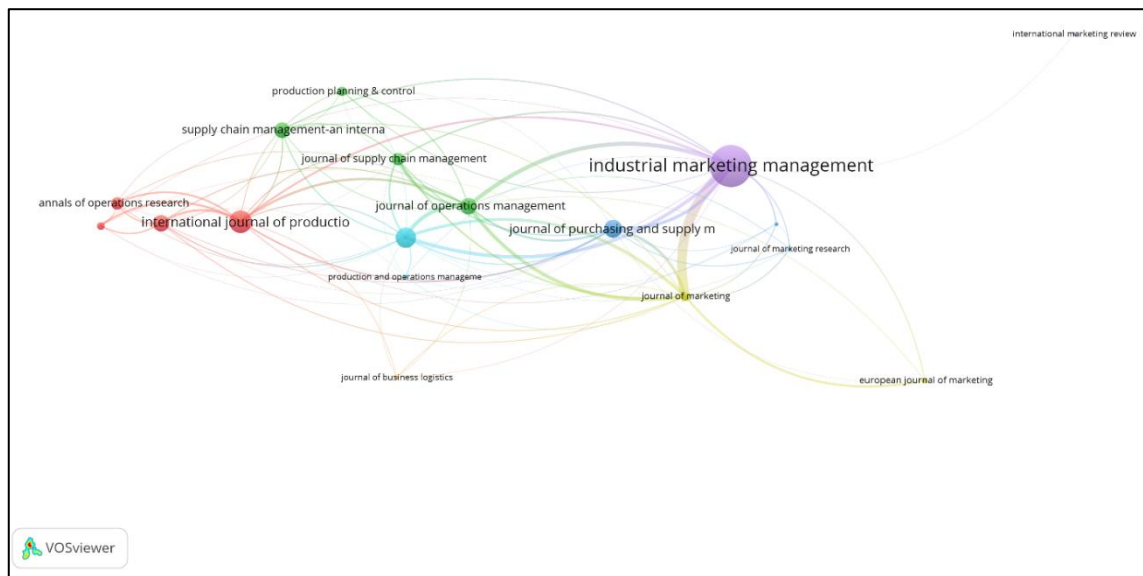


Figure 3-2. Study I – Network visualization of citation patterns.

The network visualization indicates that certain journals serve as bridges between the B2B marketing and SCM disciplines in SRM research. These journals show linkages to both clusters, suggesting that they facilitate cross-disciplinary citation and contribute to integrating insights from both fields.

Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management is a significant bridging journal, with connections to both key SCM-focused journals such as Journal of Operations Management, Journal of Supply Chain Management, and Production and Operations Management and B2B marketing journals such as Industrial Marketing Management. This pattern indicates that the Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management attracts research that intersects both procurement and supply chain topics, appealing to scholars from SCM while also addressing relational aspects of interest to B2B marketing

researchers. The journal's position in the network highlights its role in linking operational and strategic themes in SRM across disciplines.

Similarly, Industrial Marketing Management acts as a central node in the B2B marketing cluster while also displaying notable connections to SCM journals, including Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management, Journal of Business Logistics, and Journal of Supply Chain Management. The presence of Industrial Marketing Management as a bridge reflects its broader thematic coverage, which extends beyond traditional marketing topics to incorporate elements relevant to SCM. The journal's connections to both clusters suggest that it provides a platform for marketing and supply chain research, particularly on topics relating to relationship dynamics and strategic management.

Journal of Supply Chain Management, though primarily situated within the SCM cluster, shows some linkages to B2B marketing journals, notably Industrial Marketing Management and Journal of Marketing. Its role as a bridging journal underscores its coverage of strategic aspects of SRM, which may resonate with marketing scholars interested in the managerial and relational dimensions of supply chains. Journal of Business Logistics also exhibits some, though weak, connections to both SCM-focused publications such as International Journal of Production Economics and marketing-oriented journals such as Journal of Marketing.

Overall, as the visualization reveals, while there is some degree of interdisciplinary integration in SRM research, evidenced by the bridging roles of journals such as Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management and Industrial Marketing Management, the extent of cross-disciplinary engagement remains limited. The strength of the links between the interdisciplinary journals is generally relatively weak. The strong intra-cluster linkages within each discipline suggest that the B2B marketing and SCM fields primarily develop their SRM research independently, with selective integration facilitated by a few key journals that act as conduits for cross-disciplinary exchange.

3.4.4 Exploring key themes in SRM

3.4.4.1 Evolving trends in SRM

We carried out co-occurrence analysis to examine the evolving themes in the field of SRM, with a particular emphasis on its intersections with literature pertaining to B2B

The overlay visualization further reveals a temporal dimension in the evolution of SRM research themes. The color coding of the visualization, which ranges from blue (representing data from around 2010) to yellow (representing data from around 2020), provides insights into the progression of scholarly focus during the past decade. Earlier research predominantly explored the interplay between performance, trust, and management, as indicated by their blue-to-green shading, reflecting their foundational status in the SRM discourse. Furthermore, “governance” and “opportunism” gained prominence in early literature, reflecting a growing interest in the mechanisms for governing supplier relationships (e.g., Huang & Chiu, 2018; Shahzad, Ali, Takala, Helo, & Zaefarian, 2018) and the strategic responses to potential opportunistic behaviors (e.g., Blome et al., 2023; Hawkins, Pohlen, & Prybutok, 2013). This highlights an increasing concern with managing the risks associated with supplier opportunism and the formal and informal governance structures that can mitigate such risks. As SRM has matured as a field, the research focus has shifted toward newer themes, such as supplier selection (e.g., Amorim, Curcio, Almada-Lobo, Barbosa-Póvoa, & Grossmann, 2016; Chatterjee, 2023), sustainability (e.g., Aditi, Darbari, & Jha, 2023; Bai, Kusi-Sarpong, Khan, & Vazquez-Brust, 2021), and innovation (e.g., Patrucco, Frattini, & Di Benedetto, 2022; Pulles, Veldman, & Schiele, 2014), which appear in green-to-yellow shading, indicating increased attention in recent years.

The co-occurrence network also reveals distinct thematic clusters, with terms closely linked to specific areas of SRM research. One of the most prominent clusters centers on the concept of “trust,” which is strongly linked with the terms “governance,” “opportunism,” and “cooperation.” This cluster highlights the crucial role of trust in SRM, particularly in managing and governing inter-organizational relationships. The prominence of the terms “governance” and “opportunism” suggests that trust is a key factor in reducing opportunistic behavior and fostering cooperation between buyers and suppliers. Relational governance mechanisms, which regulate and support trust-building, appear to be a central concern in managing effective and reliable supplier relationships (e.g., Jean, Kim, Shin, & Hult, 2021; Lumineau & Henderson, 2012).

A second central cluster focuses on “performance,” with key terms such as “management,” “competitive advantage,” “strategy,” and “impact” closely associated. This cluster suggests a strong emphasis in the literature on the relationship between supplier management practices and organizational performance outcomes. The

connections between these terms indicate that the strategic management of supplier relationships is essential for achieving competitive advantage and improving overall performance. This thematic area reflects a broader trend in the literature of treating strategic supplier management as a critical driver of both operational efficiency and long-term competitiveness (e.g., Amoako-Gyampah, Boakye, Adaku, & Famiyeh, 2019; Carr & Pearson, 2002).

The third major thematic area involves “SCM,” with important terms such as “model,” “supplier selection,” “sustainability,” and “supplier development” featuring prominently. This cluster suggests that SRM is closely integrated with broader SCM practices, particularly in the areas of supplier selection and development. The inclusion of “sustainability” in this cluster reflects the increasing importance put on sustainable practices in managing supplier relationships. This focus on sustainability aligns with a growing recognition of the need for environmentally and socially responsible supply chains, which has become a critical area of concern in both academic and industry discourses (e.g., Alikhani, Torabi, & Altay, 2019; Kannan, 2018). The presence of “model” further indicates that conceptual frameworks and models are frequently employed to structure and optimize SRM practices.

In summary, the centrality of performance, trust, and management concepts reflects the foundational role of these elements in shaping supplier relationships, while the emergence of governance and opportunism as areas of focus highlights an interest in managing relational risks in increasingly complex supply chains. The findings suggest that SRM research is evolving to address contemporary challenges in supply chain governance and sustainability, thereby opening new avenues for future research on the strategic management of supplier relationships. In addition, the analysis reveals that a considerable number of studies in this field concentrate on supplier selection, which is a fundamental aspect of out-supplier management as defined by Möller et al. (2006). With regard to in-supplier management, research puts significant emphasis on fostering cooperation with existing suppliers through mechanisms such as governance, trust, and commitment.

Of the three process components of SRM (Möller et al., 2006), the literature has devoted considerably more attention to out- and in-supplier management than to in-supplier dissolution management, or the process of managing the termination and switching of supplier relationships. Only five of the 249 selected studies are explicitly linked to the

topics of supplier switching and termination (Blessley, Mir, Zacharia, & Aloysius, 2018; Bygballe, 2017; Chen, Dooley, & Rungtusanatham, 2016; Helm, Rolfes, & Günter, 2006; Pfeiffer, 2010). Two of the studies (Blessley et al., 2018; Helm et al., 2006) originate from the field of B2B marketing, whereas the remaining three (Bygballe, 2017; Chen et al., 2016; Pfeiffer, 2010) come from the SCM literature. The B2B marketing studies tend to analyze the “why” of dissolution (e.g., trust breaches, relational breakdowns), while the SCM studies analyze the “how” (e.g., processes, models, firm-level strategies). Both perspectives are essential for a holistic understanding of supplier switching in theory and practice. The management of terminating partnerships is an area that is both underestimated in practice and underresearched in theory (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Möller et al., 2006). SRM research has traditionally emphasized building and maintaining long-term relationships with suppliers to enhance collaboration and efficiency. This focus may have led to less attention on the dissolution aspects of supplier relationships.

Furthermore, only a limited number of studies have explicitly addressed the issue of conflict management (e.g., Newell & Ellegaard, 2022; Yang, Gao, Li, Shen, & Zheng, 2017). This crucial aspect of supplier management seems to be underexplored as well, indicating a gap in the literature that warrants further investigation, especially given the growing complexity and dynamism of modern supply chains.

Also noteworthy is that the majority of the 249 studies adopt the buyer’s perspective, with only a small number of studies explicitly taking the supplier’s perspective. The predominance of studies adopting the buyer’s perspective limits understanding of the relational dynamics in supply chains, as it neglects the supplier’s strategic priorities, challenges, and decision-making processes. This imbalance can hinder the development of a comprehensive framework for SRM, potentially overlooking key factors that influence the sustainability and effectiveness of buyer–supplier relationships. In the following subsections, we conduct more detailed analyses of the three main thematic clusters identified in the field of SRM research: governance mechanisms, the impact of SRM on performance, and sustainable supplier selection.

3.4.4.2 Transactional versus relational governance mechanisms

The first thematic cluster, governance mechanisms, can be broadly divided into transactional or formal mechanisms, such as written contracts and relational mechanisms

based on trust and communication (Kingshott, 2006; Shahzad et al., 2018). Governance as a part of buyer–supplier relationships has garnered significant attention in academic literature on SRM. Several key studies provide important insights into how governance frameworks shape the dynamics of buyer–supplier relationships. The literature analyzed herein suggests that both B2B marketing and SCM researchers are equally concerned with governance mechanisms in SRM. However, studies from B2B marketing focus more on relational governance mechanisms; the SCM literature also studies relational governance, but it mainly focuses on transactional governance.

From a B2B marketing perspective, Kingshott and Pecotich (2007) provide a foundational study on the role of psychological contracts in shaping trust and commitment in supplier–distributor relationships. Their research underscores the importance of unwritten, relational agreements that go beyond formal contracts to form the basis of long-term partnerships. Breaches in these psychological contracts can severely undermine trust, leading to a deterioration in the relationship’s quality and longevity. This relational perspective highlights the value of informal governance mechanisms in sustaining buyer–supplier dynamics.

Similarly, Jean, Kim, Lien, and Ro (2020) focus on the interplay between virtual and relational governance. Their work demonstrates how virtual governance, facilitated by technology, supports coordination while relational governance, rooted in trust and relationship-specific investments, is vital for managing uncertainty and enhancing performance in cross-border collaborations. This highlights the need for a dual approach to governance, in which both virtual and relational mechanisms complement each other in managing supplier relationships.

Another important contribution from the B2B marketing literature on governance mechanisms is Sande and Haugland’s (2015) study on the misalignment of formal contracting and the mediating role of relational contracting. They find that overly rigid formal contracts can hinder strategic performance while relational governance, through trust and flexibility, mitigates these negative effects. Their research reinforces the idea that a combination of formal and relational governance mechanisms is essential for managing complex inter-organizational relationships, especially as formal contracts alone may not address all relational needs.

In SCM research, Eckerd and Hill (2012) provide a different perspective by focusing on information sharing as a key relational governance mechanism to deter unethical behaviors in buyer–supplier relationships. Their study emphasizes the social contract between partners, where open communication and transparency reduce the risk of opportunistic behavior. This relational approach aligns with trust-building strategies, but the SCM context also incorporates the importance of information exchange as a governance tool, particularly in managing risk.

Liu, Luo, and Liu (2009) undertake a comprehensive analysis of both transactional (formal) and relational governance mechanisms. They argue that while relational governance is crucial in contexts with weak formal institutions, transactional governance mechanisms, such as formal contracts, still play an important role in providing legal safeguards. Their study highlights the need for a balanced governance approach, particularly in institutional environments that may not fully support one mechanism over the other.

Finally, Eckerd and Girth (2017) examine buyer–supplier contract design in the context of risk management, focusing on how contract complexity and mission criticality shape the use of formal governance mechanisms. Their findings show that in high-risk environments, detailed formal contracts are necessary to mitigate potential hazards. However, the overreliance on formal governance can erode relational trust, suggesting that effective governance must incorporate both contractual detail and relational adaptability to respond to evolving risks.

In comparing governance perspectives from B2B marketing and SCM, a key difference emerges in the emphasis put on transactional versus relational governance mechanisms. In B2B marketing, the focus tends to be on relational governance, with psychological contracts and trust playing central roles in fostering long-term commitment and collaboration. Formal contracts, while recognized, are often secondary to the relational dynamics that sustain buyer–supplier relationships. In contrast, SCM literature puts greater emphasis on transactional governance mechanisms, particularly in managing risk, complexity, and uncertainty. While relational governance remains important, especially in fostering trust and cooperation, formal contracts are frequently regarded as essential tools for ensuring legal safeguards and managing risk in complex supply chains. Overall, both fields recognize the importance of a balanced governance approach, combining

formal and relational mechanisms to manage buyer–supplier relationships effectively. The key difference lies in the relative emphasis each discipline puts on these mechanisms.

3.4.4.3 Impact of SRM on performance

The impact of SRM on performance, the second significant thematic cluster, is examined from two perspectives: the effect of SRM practices on firm performance and the influence on the performance of buyer–supplier relationships. From the first perspective, studies explore how SRM practices directly enhance firm performance by improving operational and strategic outcomes. Carr and Pearson (2002) show that strategic purchasing and supplier involvement positively influence firm performance by enhancing cost-efficiency, quality, and innovation capabilities. Prajogo, Chowdhury, Yeung, and Cheng (2012) further demonstrate that effective supplier management improves multiple operational dimensions, such as flexibility and cost, contributing to a firm’s overall competitive position. Similarly, Amoako-Gyampah et al. (2019) show that SRM practices, when moderated by organizational factors such as flexibility capability and ownership structure, can lead to better financial performance in firms, especially in developing economies. Moreover, Gu and colleagues (Gu, Zhou, Cao, & Adams, 2021) examine how supplier development combined with big data analytics capabilities enhances firm performance, emphasizing the role of data-driven insights in optimizing supplier relationships and driving strategic decision-making. These studies collectively emphasize the internal performance gains that firms achieve through strategic SRM practices, including data-driven approaches and supplier development.

The second perspective focuses on the performance outcomes in buyer–supplier relationships. Autry and Golicic’s (2010) longitudinal study investigates the evolving dynamics of buyer–supplier relationships, noting that these relationships can experience performance spirals that affect both parties. Giannakis (2007) examines the effectiveness of performance measurement systems in managing supplier relationships and suggests that the ability to measure and manage these relationships leads to improved supplier performance and, consequently, better relationship outcomes. In addition, Cousins et al. (2008) explore the mediating role of socialization mechanisms in enhancing the quality of strategic buyer–supplier relationships and show that relational factors such as trust and collaboration significantly contribute to the overall performance of the relationship.

Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of SRM's impact, with some studies emphasizing direct effects on firm performance through strategic, data-driven, and development practices and others focusing on relational outcomes that influence buyer–supplier dynamics. This dual focus enables SCM research to address both internal operational benefits and the quality of external relationships in enhancing supply chain performance.

The B2B marketing literature approaches the impact of SRM on performance with a more distinct focus than in the SCM field. Compared with SCM research, which often tackles multi-dimensional performance outcomes, B2B marketing studies tend to focus on how governance mechanisms, trust, and sustainability influence relationship quality and stability. This perspective complements the SCM literature by providing a deeper understanding of the relational and governance factors that shape buyer–supplier relationship performance rather than broad operational metrics.

A central theme is the role of contracting and governance mechanisms in relationship outcomes. For example, Sande and Haugland (2015) examine the effects of misaligned formal contracting and show that relational contracting can mitigate the negative impacts of contract misalignment on strategic performance. This suggests the importance of complementing formal governance structures with relational elements to strengthen buyer–supplier relationships. Similarly, Griffith and Zhao (2015) investigate contract specificity and violations in international relationships and find that well-defined contracts and adherence to terms enhance relationship stability by reducing uncertainty.

The emphasis on sustainability and trust is further explored by Casidy and Yan (2022), who analyze how a supplier's sustainability positioning affects buyer performance. They identify trust as a mediating factor, where a supplier's commitment to sustainability fosters trust, thereby enhancing relationship performance and improving buyer outcomes. This highlights the growing significance of sustainability in B2B relationships as a key factor for building trust and achieving performance benefits.

Moreover, Jean et al. (2020) examine the moderating role of virtual integration on intergenerational governance in international relationships, suggesting that such integration enhances coordination and reduces conflict, thereby improving relationship performance. By fostering real-time communication and seamless information sharing, virtual integration allows multiple generations within organizations to align their goals

and expectations more effectively. This alignment minimizes misunderstandings and builds stronger trust, which is especially valuable in the complex dynamics of international customer–supplier relationships.

In general, both research disciplines are strongly focused on the impact of SRM on performance. Our selected literature dataset contains 45 articles in total that focus on performance. Compared with the SCM literature, B2B marketing research puts greater emphasis on governance mechanisms, contracting, and relationship learning rather than multi-dimensional performance metrics such as cost, quality, and flexibility. While SCM research frequently addresses firm-level operational outcomes, B2B marketing studies prioritize the conditions under which relational factors and governance strategies optimize relationship quality and stability. This suggests a complementary but narrower focus in B2B marketing, with an orientation toward understanding the determinants of relationship performance rather than broader supply chain performance metrics.

3.4.4.4 (Sustainable) supplier selection

Third, research is increasingly emphasizing strategic supplier selection as an important means to ensure the effective management of supplier relationships (Andersen, Ellegaard, & Kragh, 2016). To date, research in this area has focused primarily on the criteria used for supplier selection, with the development of various frameworks and methods for supplier classification and selection.

However, despite the extensive discussion of supplier selection in the literature on SCM and the considerable research conducted on the topic, B2B marketing researchers have only marginally addressed the subject so far. Of the selected articles, only one from B2B marketing research (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020) explicitly addresses the topic of supplier selection. The study emphasizes the role of trust in the supplier selection process. According to the authors, trust operates at three levels in the supply chain: interpersonal (between individuals), inter-organizational (between companies), and system (within industry standards and regulations). These levels interact and influence supplier selection processes. Trust, at all levels, helps mitigate risks in the supplier selection process. Manufacturers aim to minimize uncertainties by selecting suppliers they believe will deliver consistently high-quality products and services, meet deadlines, and align with the company’s strategic goals. Long-term collaborations tend to be more stable and

beneficial for both parties due to deepened trust over time, leading to better mutual understanding and improved performance.

In contrast, more than 30 studies in the field of SCM address the issue of supplier selection. Several of these studies propose innovative models and methodologies to address the complex task of sustainable supplier selection, particularly balancing environmental, social, and economic criteria. For example, Kannan, Jabbour, and Jabbour (2014) emphasize the significance of selecting suppliers that prioritize environmentally responsible practices. Their approach accounts for the inherent uncertainties in supplier data, thereby providing a robust method to assess green suppliers, even when information is incomplete or unclear. This guarantees that companies can still make environmentally focused decisions in challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, Alikhani et al. (2019) present a strategic supplier selection model that integrates both sustainability and risk considerations. Their framework can assist organizations in selecting suppliers that not only meet environmental and social standards but also mitigate risks associated with disruptions. By balancing sustainability with risk management, this model contributes to the construction of more resilient supply chains, capable of withstanding environmental and social challenges.

Bai, Govindan, and Dhavale's (2024) study is also oriented toward the optimization of supplier selection and investment allocation for the purpose of sustainable supplier development. Their model provides guidance to companies on the strategic allocation of resources to suppliers based on their sustainability practices. This approach emphasizes the importance of continuous improvement, allowing firms to invest in key suppliers capable of driving long-term sustainable outcomes in the supply chain. In this regard, researchers in the discipline of SCM address the challenges of sustainable supplier selection, with the goal of companies not only aligning with sustainability goals but also strengthening the resilience and efficiency of their supply chains.

Other studies adopt a more general approach to the topic of supplier selection and present several models that address key challenges, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and the necessity for continuous improvement. For example, Basu, Jain, and Hazra (2018) propose a supplier selection model that accounts for the effects of production learning and process improvements. Their approach puts emphasis on the dynamic nature of supplier capabilities, whereby suppliers can enhance their performance

over time through learning and process improvements. The model enables organizations to select suppliers not only on the basis of their current performance but also in consideration of their potential for future improvement. The incorporation of production learning curves and process efficiencies into the supplier evaluation process enables the formation of more strategic, long-term supplier partnerships.

In contrast, Chai and Ngai (2015) adopt a strategic approach to supplier selection in uncertain environments. Their model takes a multi-perspective approach, considering a range of factors, including price, quality, and risk, while also addressing the potential impact of uncertainty on supplier performance. By integrating these multiple perspectives, the model assists decision-makers in navigating uncertain conditions and making more informed, balanced supplier selection decisions, ensuring that the chosen suppliers are equipped to meet both strategic and operational needs.

In summary, SCM research has developed comprehensive models for supplier selection, focusing on sustainability, risk management, and dynamic performance improvements, while B2B marketing literature offers less coverage on the topic. The SCM field addresses multi-dimensional criteria and aims to build resilient supply chains, whereas the B2B marketing perspective emphasizes relational factors such as trust. This suggests the need for further research in the field of B2B marketing that focuses on the areas of supplier selection and out-supplier management, in general, as categorized by Möller et al. (2006).

3.5 Conclusion

3.5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study addresses the three research questions asked in the Introduction section. The aim was to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature, identify key themes in each field, and uncover areas where further exploration is necessary. This research contributes to the understanding of SRM by systematically mapping the literature in both B2B marketing and SCM, offering valuable insights for future theoretical and practical advancements.

First, employing a scoping review with bibliometric aspects, this study offers a comprehensive overview of SRM research in the B2B marketing and SCM disciplines. The study highlights the differences and similarities in the understanding of SRM. It

reveals that while B2B marketing tends to emphasize relational dynamics such as trust, commitment, and joint value creation, SCM often focuses on operational efficiency, risk management, and cost reduction. By mapping these distinct but overlapping perspectives, the study provides a foundation for integrating the perspectives of both fields to develop a more holistic approach to SRM.

Second, this study analyzes the thematic research trends in the SRM field of B2B marketing and SCM in the past decades and identifies the central focal points of research. The analysis reveals evolving priorities in the fields, such as a shift from traditional cost-focused procurement strategies to more complex themes, including sustainability, digital transformation, and relational governance. It also uncovers recurring topics within each discipline, such as relationship-building and trust mechanisms in B2B marketing and performance measurement and supplier integration in SCM. By tracing these trends over time, the study provides valuable insights into how SRM research has developed in response to changing market conditions.

Third, the study lays the groundwork for future research efforts in SRM, suggesting avenues for further exploration and theoretical development. These include underexplored areas such as in-supplier dissolution management and supplier switching, in which current literature lacks strategies for managing relationship termination or transitions effectively. In addition, the study identifies conflict management as a crucial area requiring more attention, as existing research tends to focus on collaboration while neglecting how conflicts can be resolved or mitigated in buyer–supplier relationships. Furthermore, we identified a need to shift the research focus to include the supplier’s perspective on SRM, which remains largely underrepresented, to better understand the reciprocal dynamics and motivations that shape buyer–supplier interactions. Addressing these gaps could enrich the theoretical frameworks of SRM and provide more comprehensive guidelines for managing complex supplier relationships.

3.5.2 Managerial implications

In recent decades, the role of suppliers has shifted from a purely transactional relationship to prolonged collaborative partnerships. While CRM has gained prominence, SRM still plays a minor role. This study has significant implications for managers in terms of managing supplier relationships.

First, adopting an active approach to SRM is important to enhance interaction and collaboration in the buyer–supplier relationship. Buyers need to recognize suppliers as strategic partners that can provide unique capabilities and contribute to achieving organizational objectives. Emphasizing strategic alignment and mutual benefit strengthens these partnerships. Organizations should prioritize trust-building initiatives to establish strong cooperation between buyers and suppliers. This can be achieved by creating an environment of transparency, reliability, and honesty, which helps mitigate risks associated with opportunistic behaviors.

Second, the study emphasizes the importance of adopting a balanced approach to SRM that integrates both operational efficiency and relational aspects. Managers should not exclusively focus on transactional factors such as cost control and performance metrics but also prioritize relational elements such as trust, collaboration, and long-term commitment. This dual focus can help firms establish more resilient and adaptable supplier relationships that are better equipped to handle dynamic market changes. In addition, incorporating a mix of transactional and relational governance mechanisms ensures that relationships are both legally secure and flexible. While formal contracts provide a structured foundation, relational governance, such as fostering joint problem-solving, open communication, and mutual adjustments, can help navigate uncertainties and enhance cooperation. This balanced approach can strengthen partnerships and lead to more sustainable supply chain outcomes.

Finally, though not extensively researched, organizations need to acknowledge the significance of effectively managing conflicts and the switching or ultimate termination of supplier relationships. Developing strategies and protocols that allow for the smooth termination of supplier relationships while minimizing disruption to supply chain operations is crucial.

3.5.3 Limitations and future research avenues

While this study provides a comprehensive overview of SRM research through the lenses of B2B marketing and SCM, several limitations offer opportunities for further exploration. First, the scope of this review was restricted to literature from the fields of B2B marketing and SCM, potentially overlooking valuable insights from other disciplines, such as organizational behavior, information systems, and general

management. SRM is inherently multidisciplinary, involving aspects that extend beyond just operational and relational perspectives. Future research could incorporate insights from these other disciplines to better understand factors such as organizational culture, leadership influence, and technological adoption in the context of SRM. Integrating these perspectives could lead to a more comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses the complex nature of supplier relationships.

Second, this study employed a scoping review combined with a bibliometric analysis to provide a general overview of the SRM research landscape. While this approach allowed for the identification of major themes, research trends, and gaps across a wide range of literature, it inherently lacks the depth that more targeted systematic literature reviews could provide. Specifically, detailed systematic reviews focusing on distinct areas such as out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and in-supplier dissolution management could yield more comprehensive insights and nuanced understandings. For example, a systematic review on out-supplier management could better explore criteria and processes for engaging new suppliers. Future research should therefore consider conducting more narrow systematic reviews in these specific areas to gain a more detailed understanding of each aspect of SRM.

Third, the study mainly reflects a buyer-oriented view of SRM, as much of the existing literature tends to focus on the buyer's strategies, criteria, and governance mechanisms. Research examining SRM from the supplier's perspective, including how suppliers experience buyer practices, manage conflicts, or navigate relationship terminations, is limited. Collaborative research between B2B marketing and SCM could address this imbalance by incorporating the supplier's viewpoint, exploring questions such as: How do suppliers perceive different governance mechanisms? and What factors drive their decision to continue, change, or dissolve a relationship? Understanding the supplier's side could lead to more balanced and effective SRM strategies that account for the interests and challenges of both parties.

Last, several underexplored areas in SRM could benefit from collaboration between B2B marketing and SCM. For example, research on the dissolution and termination of supplier relationships is limited, as most studies focus on maintaining and building relationships. Future research could combine SCM's structured approaches to risk management could be combined with B2B marketing's insights into relationship dynamics to develop

frameworks for managing supplier exit strategies, including exit planning, managing relational ties post-termination, and supplier switching. Joint research should explore how to minimize negative impacts during relationship dissolution while retaining the potential for future collaborations. Similarly, conflict management in SRM remains underdeveloped, with existing literature emphasizing collaboration rather than how to handle disputes effectively. Combining SCM's operational focus on process improvements and metrics with B2B marketing's relational governance techniques can provide a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution. Future research should examine how firms can integrate both fields' insights to develop conflict management strategies that maintain trust and collaboration even during disputes, ensuring that disagreements do not jeopardize long-term partnerships.

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3.7 Appendix

Appendix A. Flowchart of study selection

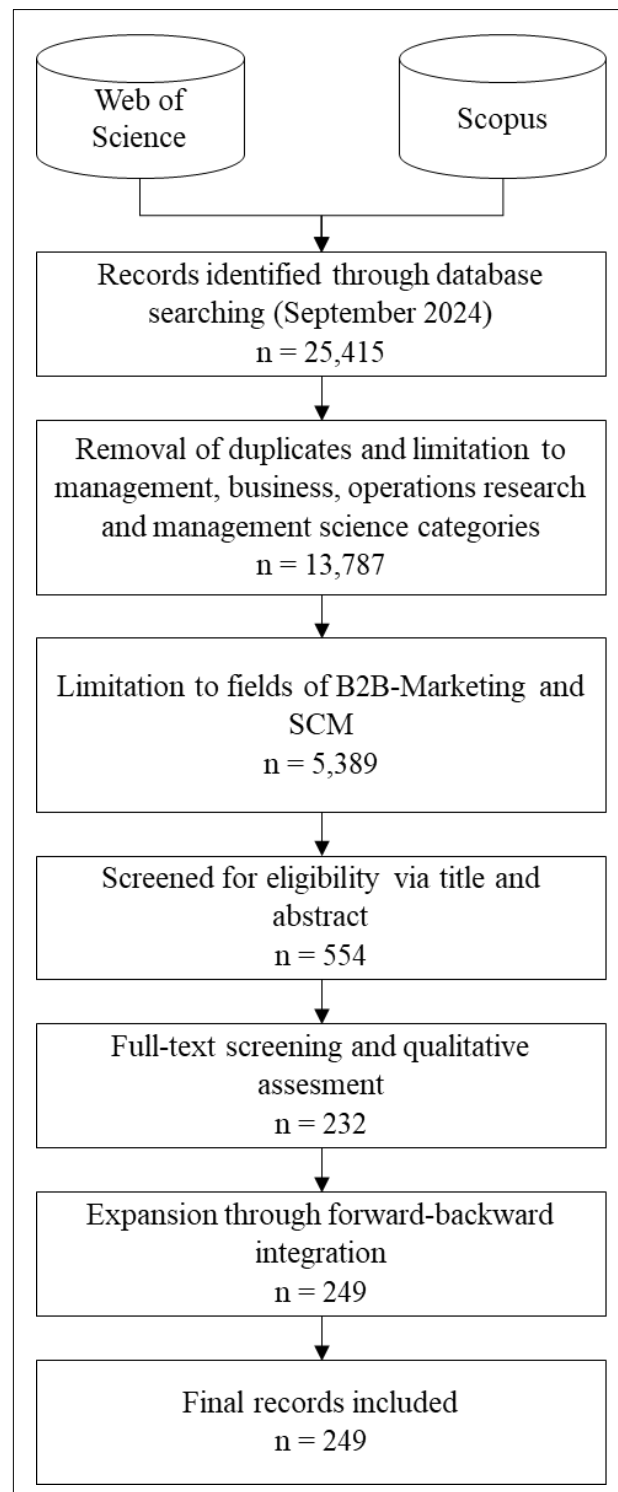


Figure 3-4. Study I - Appendix A. Flowchart of study selection.

Appendix B. List of studies included

Table 3-1. Study I – Appendix B. List of studies included.

Nr.	Authors	Article Title	Source Title	Publication Year
1	<i>Aashi, S; Rajesh, R</i>	Integrating social sustainability into supplier evaluation using data envelopment analysis	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
2	<i>Aditi; Kannan, D; Darbari, JD; Jha, PC</i>	Sustainable supplier selection model with a trade-off between supplier development and supplier switching	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
3	<i>Asadabadi, MR; Ahmadi, HB; Gupta, H; Liou, JJH</i>	Supplier selection to support environmental sustainability: the stratified BWM TOPSIS method	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
4	<i>Bai, CG; Govindan, K; Dhavale, D</i>	Optimal selection and investment-allocation decisions for sustainable supplier development practices	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2024
5	<i>Bai, CG; Kusi-Sarpong, S; Khan, SA; Vazquez-Brust, D</i>	Sustainable buyer-supplier relationship capability development: a relational framework and visualization methodology	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2021
6	<i>Bai, CG; Sarkis, J</i>	Supplier development investment strategies: a game theoretic evaluation	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2016
7	<i>Biehl, M; Cook, W; Johnston, DA</i>	The efficiency of joint decision making in buyer-supplier relationships	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2006
8	<i>Chatterjee, M</i>	Multivariate supplier selection for asymmetric specification region: using price and quality	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
9	<i>Cui, L; Wu, H; Wu, L; Kumar, A; Tan, KH</i>	Investigating the relationship between digital technologies, supply chain integration and firm resilience in the context of COVID-19	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
10	<i>Gu, VC; Zhou, B; Cao, Q; Adams, J</i>	Exploring the relationship between supplier development, big data analytics capability, and firm performance	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2021
11	<i>Kamble, SS; Gunasekaran, A; Subramanian, N; Ghadge, A; Belhadi, A; Venkatesh, M</i>	Blockchain technology's impact on supply chain integration and sustainable supply chain performance: evidence from the automotive industry	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2023
12	<i>Mohammed, A; Harris, I; Soroka, A; Naim, M; Ramjaun, T; Yazdani, M</i>	Gresilient supplier assessment and order allocation planning	ANNALS OF OPERATIONS RESEARCH	2021
13	<i>Canning, L; Hanmer-</i>	Trust in buyer-seller relationships: the challenge of environmental (green)	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF	2007

	<i>Lloyd, S</i>	adaptation	MARKETING	
14	<i>Doney, PM; Barry, JM; Abratt, R</i>	Trust determinants and outcomes in global B2B services	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MARKETING	2007
15	<i>Helm, S; Rolfes, L; Günter, B</i>	Suppliers' willingness to end unprofitable customer relationships -: An exploratory investigation in the German mechanical engineering sector	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MARKETING	2006
16	<i>Kingshott, RPJ; Pecotich, A</i>	The impact of psychological contracts on trust and commitment in supplier-distributor relationships	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MARKETING	2007
17	<i>Amorim, P; Curcio, E; Almada-Lobo, B; Barbosa-Póvoa, APFD; Grossmann, IE</i>	Supplier selection in the processed food industry under uncertainty	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2016
18	<i>Handfield, R; Walton, SV; Sroufe, R; Melnyk, SA</i>	Applying environmental criteria to supplier assessment: A study in the application of the Analytical Hierarchy Process	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2002
19	<i>Ho, W; Xu, XW; Dey, PK</i>	Multi-criteria decision making approaches for supplier evaluation and selection: A literature review	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2010
20	<i>Kannan, D; Jabbour, ABLD; Jabbour, CJC</i>	Selecting green suppliers based on GSCM practices: Using fuzzy TOPSIS applied to a Brazilian electronics company	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2014
21	<i>Pfeiffer, T</i>	A dynamic model of supplier switching	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2010
22	<i>Rezaei, J; Ortt, R</i>	Multi-criteria supplier segmentation using a fuzzy preference relations based AHP	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH	2013
23	<i>Adams, FG; Graham, KW</i>	Integration, knowledge creation and B2B governance: The role of resource hierarchies in financial performance	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2017
24	<i>Ahmad, F</i>	Source-oriented asymmetric information sharing in B2B negotiations: Two sides of time pressure	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2024
25	<i>Akrout, H; Diallo, MF</i>	Fundamental transformations of trust and its drivers: A multi-stage approach of business-to-business relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2017
26	<i>Alghababsheh, M; Gallear, D</i>	Social capital in buyer-supplier relationships: A review of antecedents, benefits, risks, and boundary conditions	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2020
27	<i>Alinaghian, L; Kim, Y; Srari, J</i>	A relational embeddedness perspective on dynamic capabilities: A grounded investigation of buyer-supplier routines	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2020
28	<i>Alvarado, UY;</i>	Supply chain management - The	INDUSTRIAL	2001

	<i>Kotzab, H</i>	integration of logistics in marketing	MARKETING MANAGEMENT	
29	<i>Andersen, PH; Christensen, PR; Damgaard, T</i>	Diverging expectations in buyer-seller relationships: Institutional contexts and relationship norms	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2009
30	<i>Anderson, H; Havila, V; Salmi, A</i>	Can you buy a business relationship? On the importance of customer and supplier relationships in acquisitions	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2001
31	<i>Arslanagic- Kalajdzic, M; Kadic- Maglajlic, S; Miocevic, D</i>	The power of emotional value: Moderating customer orientation effect in professional business services relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2020
32	<i>Arvidsson, A; Melander, L</i>	The multiple levels of trust when selecting suppliers - Insights from an automobile manufacturer	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2020
33	<i>Ashnai, B; Henneberg, SC; Naude, P; Francescucci, A</i>	Inter-personal and inter-organizational trust in business relationships: An attitude-behavior-outcome model	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2016
34	<i>Baglieri, E; Secchi, R; Croom, S</i>	Exploring the impact of a supplier portal on the buyer-supplier relationship. The case of Ferrari Auto	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2007
35	<i>Blessley, M; Mir, S; Zacharia, Z; Aloysius, J</i>	Breaching relational obligations in a buyer-supplier relationship: Feelings of violation, fairness perceptions and supplier switching	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2018
36	<i>Blome, C; Paulraj, A; Preuss, L; Roehrich, JK</i>	Trust and opportunism as paradoxical tension: Implications for achieving sustainability in buyer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2023
37	<i>Blonska, A; Storey, C; Rozemeijer, F; Wetzels, M; de Ruyter, K</i>	Decomposing the effect of supplier development on relationship benefits: The role of relational capital	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013
38	<i>Bonner, JM; Calantone, RJ</i>	Buyer attentiveness in buyer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2005
39	<i>Burkert, M; Ivens, BS; Shan, J</i>	Governance mechanisms in domestic and international buyer-supplier relationships: An empirical study	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2012
40	<i>Caniëls, MCJ; Gelderman, CJ</i>	Power and interdependence in buyer supplier relationships: A purchasing portfolio approach	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2007
41	<i>Casidy, R; Yan, L</i>	The effects of supplier B2B sustainability positioning on buyer performance: The role of trust	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2022
42	<i>Day, M; Fawcett, SE; Fawcett, AM; Magnan, GM</i>	Trust and relational embeddedness: Exploring a paradox of trust pattern development in key supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013

43	<i>Day, M; Magnan, GM; Moeller, MM</i>	Evaluating the bases of supplier segmentation: A review and taxonomy	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2010
44	<i>de Ruyter, K; Keeling, DI; Cox, D</i>	Customer-supplier relationships in high technology markets 3.0	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2019
45	<i>Eggert, A; Ulaga, W</i>	Managing customer share in key supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2010
46	<i>Ekici, A</i>	Temporal dynamics of trust in ongoing inter-organizational relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013
47	<i>Ellegaard, C</i>	Interpersonal attraction in buyer-supplier relationships: A cyclical model rooted in social psychology	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2012
48	<i>Forkmann, S; Henneberg, SC; Naudé, P; Mitrega, M</i>	Supplier relationship management capability: a qualification and extension	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2016
49	<i>Gadde, LE; Snehota, I</i>	Making the most of supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2000
50	<i>Gu, J; Bai, YT; Chu, X</i>	Do more friends make your way smooth? Supply chain relationships, moral disengagement, and innovation performance	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2024
51	<i>Han, SL; Wilson, DT; Dant, SP</i>	Buyer supplier relationships today	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	1993
52	<i>Han, WX; Huang, Y; Hughes, M; Zhang, M</i>	The trade-off between trust and distrust in supply chain collaboration	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2021
53	<i>Han, ZJ; Handfield, RB; Huo, BF; Tian, Y</i>	Effects of power use in buyer-supplier relationships: The moderating role of communication	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2022
54	<i>Handfield, R</i>	Shifts in buyer-seller relationships: A retrospective on Handfield and Bechtel (2002)	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2019
55	<i>Handfield, RB; Bechtel, C</i>	The role of trust and relationship structure in improving supply chain responsiveness	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2002
56	<i>Hawkins, TG; Pohlen, TL; Prybutok, VR</i>	Buyer opportunism in business-to-business exchange	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013
57	<i>Hawkins, TG; Wittmann, CM; Beyerlein, MM</i>	Antecedents and consequences of opportunism in buyer-supplier relations: Research synthesis and new frontiers	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2008
58	<i>Hingley, MK</i>	Power to all our friends? Living with imbalance in supplier-retailer relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2005
59	<i>Holmen, E; Aune, TB; Pedersen, AC</i>	Network pictures for managing key supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013

60	<i>Hult, GTM; Ferrell, OC; Hurley, RF; Giunipero, LC</i>	Leadership and relationship commitment - A focus on the supplier-buyer-user linkage	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2000
61	<i>Jean, RJ; Kim, D; Shin, GC; Hult, T</i>	Enhancing performance in emerging- market-supplier/MNE-buyer relationships: An examination of the interplay between virtual and relational governance	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2021
62	<i>Kingshott, RPJ</i>	The impact of psychological contracts upon trust and commitment within supplier-buyer relationships: A social exchange view	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2006
63	<i>Kingshott, RPJ; Sharma, P; Sima, H; Wong, D</i>	The impact of psychological contract breaches within east-west buyer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2020
64	<i>Laaksonen, T; Pajunen, K; Kulmala, HI</i>	Co-evolution of trust and dependence in customer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2008
65	<i>Lacoste, S</i>	Vertical coopetition: The key account perspective	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2012
66	<i>Leek, S; Mason, K</i>	The utilisation of network pictures to examine a company's employees' perceptions of a supplier relationship	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2010
67	<i>Leek, S; Turnbull, PW; Naudé, P</i>	How is information technology affecting business relationships?: Results from a UK survey	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2003
68	<i>Leuthesser, L</i>	Supplier relational behavior: An empirical assessment	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	1997
69	<i>Liu, Y; Liu, T; Li, Y</i>	How to inhibit a partner's strong and weak forms of opportunism: Impacts of network embeddedness and bilateral TSIs	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2014
70	<i>Liu, Y; Su, CT; Li, YA; Liu, T</i>	Managing opportunism in a developing interfirm relationship: The interrelationship of calculative and loyalty commitment	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2010
71	<i>Liu, Y; Yuan, L; Tao, L; Wang, Y</i>	Relationship stability, trust and relational risk in marketing channels: Evidence from China	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2008
72	<i>Makkonen, H; Mervi, V</i>	The role of information technology in strategic buyer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2014
73	<i>Makkonen, H; Olkkonen, R</i>	The conceptual locus and functionality of key supplier management: A multi-dyadic qualitative study	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013
74	<i>Makkonen, H; Vuori, M; Puranen, M</i>	Buyer attractiveness as a catalyst for buyer- supplier relationship development	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2016
75	<i>Mitrega, M; Zolkiewski, J</i>	Negative consequences of deep relationships with suppliers: An exploratory study in Poland	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2012
76	<i>Nagati, H; Rebolledo, C</i>	Supplier development efforts: The suppliers' point of view	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013

77	<i>Newell, W; Ellegaard, C</i>	Managing buyer-supplier conflict when one party dominates: A process study	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2022
78	<i>Obal, M; Lancioni, RA</i>	Maximizing buyer-supplier relationships in the Digital Era: Concept and research agenda	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2013
79	<i>Pardo, C; Missirilian, O; Portier, P; Salle, R</i>	Barriers to the key supplierization of the firm	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2011
80	<i>Pulles, NJ; Hartman, P</i>	Likeability and its effect on outcomes of interpersonal interaction	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2017
81	<i>Pulles, NJ; Veldman, J; Schiele, H</i>	Identifying innovative suppliers in business networks: An empirical study	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2014
82	<i>Schiele, H; Calvi, R; Gibbert, M</i>	Customer attractiveness, supplier satisfaction and preferred customer status: Introduction, definitions and an overarching framework	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2012
83	<i>Schmitz, T; Schweiger, B; Daft, J</i>	The emergence of dependence and lock-in effects in buyer-supplier relationships - A buyer perspective	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2016
84	<i>Shahzad, K; Ali, T; Takala, J; Helo, P; Zaefarian, G</i>	The varying roles of governance mechanisms on ex-post transaction costs and relationship commitment in buyer-supplier relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2018
85	<i>Siemieniako, D; Mitrega, M</i>	Improving power position with regard to non-mediated power sources - The supplier's perspective	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2018
86	<i>Yang, W; Gao, Y; Li, Y; Shen, H; Zheng, SY</i>	Different roles of control mechanisms in buyer-supplier conflict: An empirical study from China	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2017
87	<i>Yu, CMJ; Liao, TJ; Lin, ZD</i>	Formal governance mechanisms, relational governance mechanisms, and transaction-specific investments in supplier-manufacturer relationships	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2006
88	<i>Zaefarian, G; Najafi-Tavani, Z; Henneberg, SC; Naudé, P</i>	Do supplier perceptions of buyer fairness lead to supplier sales growth?	INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	2016
89	<i>Ahmed, MU; Shafiq, A</i>	Toward sustainable supply chains: impact of buyer's legitimacy, power and aligned focus on supplier sustainability performance	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2022
90	<i>Ambrose, E; Marshall, D; Fynes, B; Lynch, D</i>	Communication media selection in buyer-supplier relationships	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2008
91	<i>Ambrose, E; Marshall, D; Lynch, D</i>	Buyer supplier perspectives on supply chain relationships	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2010

92	<i>Banerjee, A; Ries, JM; Wiertz, C</i>	The impact of social media signals on supplier selection: insights from two experiments	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2020
93	<i>Barbieri, P; Dattée, B; Mahapatra, SK</i>	The paradox of supplier development in technology-based luxury supply chains	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2023
94	<i>Brandon-Jones, A; Ramsay, J; Wagner, B</i>	Trading interactions: supplier empathy, consensus and bias	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2010
95	<i>Carr, AS; Kaynak, H</i>	Communication methods, information sharing, supplier development and performance - An empirical study of their relationships	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2007
96	<i>Carr, AS; Kaynak, H; Hartley, JL; Ross, A</i>	Supplier dependence: impact on supplier's participation and performance	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2008
97	<i>Carr, AS; Pearson, JN</i>	The impact of purchasing and supplier involvement on strategic purchasing and its impact on firm's performance	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2002
98	<i>Chen, J; Lewis, M</i>	Trust and distrust in buyer-supplier relationships: an exploratory experimental study	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2024
99	<i>Chen, J; Zhao, XD; Lewis, M</i>	Supplier motivation to share knowledge: an experimental investigation of a social exchange perspective	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2023
100	<i>Chen, L; Ellis, SC; Suresh, N</i>	A supplier development adoption framework using expectancy theory	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2016
101	<i>Cousins, PD; Lamming, RC; Bowen, F</i>	The role of risk in environment-related supplier initiatives	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2004
102	<i>Cousins, PD; Lawson, B; Squire, B</i>	Performance measurement in strategic buyer-supplier relationships: The mediating role of socialization mechanisms	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2008

103	<i>Cousins, PD; Lawson, B; Squire, B</i>	Supply chain management: theory and practice - the emergence of an academic discipline?	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2006
104	<i>Eckerd, S; Hill, JA</i>	The buyer-supplier social contract: information sharing as a deterrent to unethical behaviors	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2012
105	<i>Faruquee, M; Paulraj, A; Irawan, CA</i>	Strategic supplier relationships and supply chain resilience: Is digital transformation that precludes trust beneficial?	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2021
106	<i>Harland, CM; Lamming, RC; Cousins, PD</i>	Developing the concept of supply strategy	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	1999
107	<i>Huo, BF; Tian, M; Tian, Y; Zhang, QY</i>	The dilemma of inter-organizational relationships Dependence, use of power and their impacts on opportunism	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2019
108	<i>Johnston, DA; Kristal, MM</i>	The climate for co-operation: buyer-supplier beliefs and behavior	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2008
109	<i>Matook, S; Lasch, R; Tamaschke, R</i>	Supplier development with benchmarking as part of a comprehensive supplier risk management framework	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS & PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT	2009
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246	<i>Patrucco, A; Harland, CM; Luzzini, D; Frattini, F</i>	Managing triadic supplier relationships in collaborative innovation projects: a relational view perspective	SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT-AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL	2022
247	<i>Prajogo, D; Chowdhury, M; Nair, A; Cheng, TCE</i>	Mitigating the performance implications of buyer's dependence on supplier: the role of absorptive capacity and long-term relationship	SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT-AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL	2020
248	<i>Sánchez-Rodríguez, C; Hemsworth, D; Martínez-Lorente, AR</i>	The effect of supplier development initiatives on purchasing performance:: a structural model	SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT-AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL	2005
249	<i>Scholten, K; Schilder, S</i>	The role of collaboration in supply chain resilience	SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT-AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL	2015

Appendix C. Coding structure

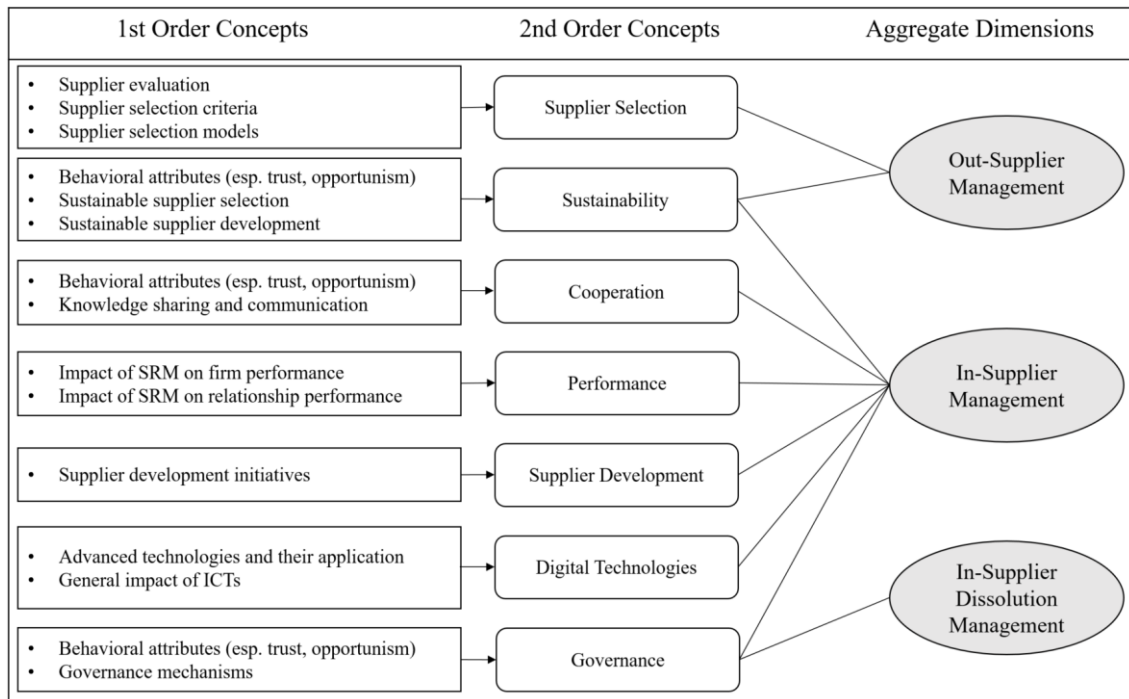


Figure 3-5. Study I – Appendix C. Coding structure.

Appendix D. Average number of citations per journal

Table 3-2. Study I - Appendix D. Average number of citations per journal.

Journal	Nr. of articles	Total nr. of citations	Average nr. of citations
Journal of Marketing	7	24571	3510
European Journal of Operational Research	6	2941	490
Journal of Marketing Research	2	861	431
Journal of Operations Management	17	4837	285
Journal of Supply Chain Management	12	2002	167
International Journal of Production Economics	28	4554	163

International Journal of Production Research	17	2197	129
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	2	253	127
Supply Chain Management – an International Journal	16	1444	90
European Journal of Marketing	4	331	83
Production and Operations Management	2	166	83
International Journal of Operations & Production Management	24	1931	80
Industrial Marketing Management	66	4973	75
Journal of International Marketing	1	66	66
Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management	20	822	41
Production Planning & Control	8	293	37
International Marketing Review	2	72	36
Annals of Operations Research	12	375	31
International Journal of Research in marketing	1	23	23
Journal of Business Logistics	2	34	17

Appendix E. First ten most cited articles

Table 3-3. Study I - Appendix E. First ten most cited articles.

Nr.	Authors	Journal	Year of publishing	Nr. of citations
1	Morgan & Hunt	Journal of Marketing	1994	10530
2	Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh	Journal of Marketing	1987	4818
3	Doney & Cannon	Journal of Marketing	1997	3771
4	Anderson & Narus	Journal of Marketing	1990	2916
6	Heide & John	Journal of Marketing	1992	1559
7	Ho, Xu, & Dey	European Journal of Operational Research	2010	1430
8	Pagell & Wu	Journal of Supply Chain Management	2009	1149
9	Chen, Lin, & Huang	International Journal of Production Economics	2006	1140
10	Ganesan	Journal of Marketing	1994	832
11	Jap	Journal of Marketing Research	1999	819

4 Study II

The supplier journey: Reframing supplier relationship management

Abstract

Supplier relationship management (SRM) remains an underexplored aspect of business-to-business interactions. While customer relationship management (CRM) research often employs customer journey frameworks, an equivalent framework for suppliers is missing. This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing the supplier relationship life cycle as a circular journey. The study is based on 43 semi-structured interviews with practitioners across multiple industries. This qualitative approach provides in-depth insights into how companies design, manage, and digitalize their supplier relationships. The analysis confirms the three established phases of SRM—out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and in-supplier dissolution management—and identifies a fourth, previously overlooked phase: reactivation. Across these four phases, the study highlights critical touchpoints, transitions, and feedback loops that shape the evolution of buyer–supplier relationships. It also shows how digital technologies and platforms help buyers orchestrate supplier experiences and manage transitions more effectively. Digitalization functions as a connective pathway across the supplier journey, enabling coordination, transparency, and ecosystem-building. By adapting journey logic from CRM to the upstream side of business relationships, the supplier journey framework advances SRM theory and offers managers a roadmap to structure, digitalize, and strategically guide supplier relationships.

Keywords

Supplier relationship management; Supplier journey, Business-to-business relationships, Buyer-supplier relationships, Digitalization

4.1 Introduction

Customer and supplier relationships are widely recognized as fundamental to business success (Piercy, 2009; Webster et al., 2005; Witell et al., 2020). Suppliers, in particular, play a decisive role in value creation, directly shaping customer satisfaction and competitive performance (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Saunila et al., 2019). Increasingly, buyers view suppliers not merely as transactional links in the value chain but also as strategic partners with the potential to drive innovation and resilience (Carr & Pearson, 1999; Carter & Narasimhan, 1996; Pearson et al., 1996). This perspective has gained urgency in today's global and fast-changing business environment. Rising customer expectations of ethical and sustainable practices, new regulatory requirements (e.g., the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Act), and the complexity of digitalized supply chains have made effective supplier relationships more critical than ever (Hartmann et al., 2024; McClure et al., 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2021). In this context, especially Tier 1 suppliers—those delivering directly to buyer firms and often providing essential components or services—are especially vital, enabling buyers to respond quickly and effectively to shifting market demands (Birou & Fawcett, 1994; Wynstra et al., 2001).

These developments underscore the relevance of buyer–supplier relationships, a specific form of business-to-business (B2B) interactions defined by continuous exchange and collaboration between purchasing organizations and suppliers (Dwyer et al., 1987). While some buyer–supplier relationships remain transactional, many evolve into long-term, dynamic interactions (Holmlund, 2004; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Managing these evolving relationships is the focus of supplier relationship management (SRM), which encompasses the full supplier life cycle from initial engagement to potential dissolution (Möller et al., 2006; Piercy, 2009). Research in this area has examined core themes such as supplier selection, performance evaluation, and trust-building (Ashnai et al., 2016; Chatterjee, 2023; Dey et al., 2015); however, most studies treat these as isolated aspects, resulting in fragmented insights into SRM (Möller et al., 2006; Park et al., 2010; Wieland and Ivens, 2025). To date, only Möller et al.'s (2006) study proposes a comprehensive and integrative framework that moves beyond these discrete areas, dividing SRM into three overarching phases: out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and in-supplier dissolution management.

Building on this foundation, the present study responds directly to Möller et al.'s (2006) call to refine and empirically advance their framework. By conceptualizing supplier relationships as dynamic journeys, it offers a life-cycle-oriented perspective that captures the evolving nature of SRM. Similar to customer journeys in customer relationship management (CRM), supplier relationships are dynamic supplier journeys comprising phases and touchpoints that critically shape collaboration and long-term outcomes (Hollebeek et al., 2023; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Yet this conceptualization remains largely unexplored in B2B research. Understanding these phases and corresponding touchpoints is essential for firms to develop more strategic, collaborative, and resilient supplier networks.

Ritter and Pedersen (2020) and Obal and Lancioni (2013) also note that the role of digital communication technologies in shaping industrial buyer–supplier relationships remains underexplored – especially when compared with the extensive literature on digitalization in consumer markets. Digitalization has added further complexity and opportunity to B2B relationships (Ivens et al., 2024; Rusthollikarhu et al., 2022). Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), are transforming how firms engage and interact across relationship phases, influencing trust, collaboration, and long-term value creation (Pagani and Pardo, 2017). However, the nature of these changes and their implications for managing supplier relationships remain poorly understood. This lack of understanding aligns with the broader research call on digitalization in B2B marketing research (Pandey et al., 2020).

These two critical gaps in current SRM research—namely, the lack of holistic, life-cycle-oriented perspectives that conceptualize supplier relationships as dynamic journeys and the limited understanding of how digital technologies shape and manage these relationships across their phases—motivated our study. We thus ask the following:

1. *How do companies design the different phases of the supplier journey within their SRM?*
2. *What is the role of digital technologies in supporting and transforming specific phases and interactions within the supplier journey?*

To address these questions, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study, including 43 semi-structured interviews across multiple industries. Our findings confirm the three SRM phases identified by Möller et al. (2006) but reveal an additional, overlooked phase

in which former suppliers are re-engaged and reintegrated: reactivation. Together, these four phases form a circular supplier journey framework. Moreover, we show how digital technologies shape this journey along four dimensions: digitalizing touchpoints, reshaping roles, digitalizing processes, and enabling ecosystems.

By integrating a life-cycle perspective with digitalization insights, this study reframes SRM as a dynamic and interactive journey. The framework offers both theoretical advancement by extending Möller et al.'s (2006) model and managerial guidance on how to strategically design supplier relationships in increasingly digitalized business environments.

4.2 Theoretical background

4.2.1 Business relationships

4.2.1.1 From life-cycle models to journey thinking

Relationships between buyers and sellers have existed since humans first began trading goods and services, but in today's globalized and technology-driven economy, they have become inherently strategic (Wilson, 1995). As business environments grow more complex, so too do the relationships that underpin them (Zaefarian et al., 2017). During the past decades, scholars have examined business relationships through diverse theoretical lenses. Commitment–trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), dependence theory (Bucklin & Sengupta, 1993; Hibbard et al., 2001), and relational exchange theory (Dyer & Singh, 1998) each highlight critical elements such as trust, commitment, communication, cooperation, and dependency (Palmatier et al., 2007). Transaction cost economics provides additional insights into relationship-specific investments and the management of opportunism in buyer–supplier dynamics (e.g., Ganesan, 1994). To integrate these perspectives, Conner (1991) introduced the resource-based view (Wernerfelt, 1984), later extended by Dyer (1996) and Jap (1999), suggesting that firms achieve superior performance by cultivating and managing strong buyer–supplier relationships (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Palmatier et al., 2007).

Business relationships are often conceptualized as dyads, or pairs of actors (e.g., a buyer and a supplier) engaged in exchange, and many models describe them as life cycles evolving through stages such as exploration, growth, and maturity (e.g., Dwyer et al.,

1987; Ford, 1980; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). However, later phases such as decline, termination, or renewal are often overlooked, despite their practical importance. Different relational attributes dominate across stages: in early phases, trust, reputation, and performance are critical; in later stages, cooperation, structural bonding, and joint investments become central (Wilson, 1995).

This life-cycle view has paved the way for the journey perspective, particularly in consumer research. The customer life cycle captures broad stages of a customer's relationship with a firm, while the customer journey zooms in on the concrete steps, touchpoints, and interactions that move a customer through these stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). A journey therefore provides a detailed roadmap of how relationships actually unfold in practice (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). One of the most well-known customer journey models differentiates between the three stages of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Touchpoints are a fundamental component of customer journeys, as they influence how customers perceive and engage with a brand and its offerings. They refer to any instance of interaction—whether online or offline—between a customer and a company's brand, product, or service (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Wang et al., 2019; Witell et al., 2020).

The notion of the “customer journey” is not restricted to the business-to-consumer context; rather, it has gained significant traction in the B2B area. In B2B markets, Purmonen et al. (2023) describe these journeys as overlapping and goal-driven processes taken by different decision-makers and users, shaped by both direct and indirect interactions and the broader context of business relationships. Because journey models are necessarily simplified representations, researchers and practitioners adapt them to specific industries, audiences, and objectives (Witell et al., 2020). Lundin and Kindström's (2023) recent work deepens this understanding by showing how digitalization is reshaping B2B customer journeys on multiple levels. Their study identifies three main dimensions of change. First, digitalization fundamentally alters touchpoints. New digital touchpoints (e.g., self-service portals, AI chatbots) are added, while traditional ones are transformed or facilitated by technology, often blending digital and physical elements rather than replacing them outright. Second, digitalization changes the roles within the journey. Customers take more active control, as they can independently access, share, and act on information across functions, while suppliers take on new roles (e.g., digital service managers) and even partner with external actors (e.g.,

technology support specialists), creating more collective and multi-actor engagement at touchpoints. Third, digitalization affects the overall process of the journey. Early-stage digital touchpoints extend the journey's front end by enabling customers to initiate contact and gather insights long before engaging in sales, while later-stage digital touchpoints can simplify complex service or maintenance interactions. Digitalization, as Lundin and Kindström (2023) argue, brings greater transparency and integration across the journey, reducing dependence on single relationships and enabling smoother transitions between phases. In short, their findings suggest that digitalization does not merely “add” technology to B2B journeys—it redefines how journeys are mapped, how touchpoints connect, and how trust and value are built over time.

4.2.1.2 Beyond dyads: Networks and embedded relationships

While buyer–supplier relationships remain central, they rarely exist in isolation. Anderson et al. (1994) emphasize that relationships are embedded in broader networks of interconnected firms, in which activities, resources, and actor ties interact in complex ways. A business network represents “a set of connected actors that perform different types of business activities in interaction with each other” (Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997, p. 304). Firms therefore operate not as autonomous entities but as interdependent actors whose performance is shaped by network dynamics (Ritter et al., 2004).

This embeddedness raises the question whether networks can actually be “managed.” Some scholars argue that firms can coordinate surrounding actors and form strategic networks (Jarillo, 1988). Others regard networks as largely self-organizing systems, in which no single actor holds full control and outcomes emerge from ongoing interaction (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that supplier relationships are both dyadic journeys and networked interactions. Recognizing this duality is crucial for building resilient and strategically aligned supplier relationships, especially in digitally connected business environments. This is because firms no longer compete as isolated entities; instead, they are part of interconnected ecosystems, in which the ability to manage individual supplier ties while navigating broader networks determines long-term competitiveness and value creation.

4.2.2 SRM

4.2.2.1 Conceptualization

On the downstream side of B2B relationships, both CRM and customer experience management (CXM) are pivotal for cultivating and maintaining profitable customer relationships by aligning strategy, applying data-driven insights, and guiding the customer journey (Chen & Popovich, 2003; Homburg et al., 2017; Payne & Frow, 2005). While CRM primarily aims to interpret customer behaviors and coordinate organizational interactions, CXM puts more emphasis on crafting and enhancing experiences across all customer touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

On the upstream side, SRM is vital for building enduring supplier relationships and enabling collaborative value generation. SRM encompasses buyers' strategic planning and execution of interactions with suppliers to achieve long-term value creation for both parties (Carr & Pearson, 1999; Chen et al., 2004; Cousins et al., 2006; Möller et al., 2006). It extends beyond transactional exchanges, focusing on collaboration, innovation, and mutual benefit (Piercy, 2009). The discourse on SRM is particularly prevalent in B2B marketing and supply chain literature (Wieland & Ivens, 2025). Within the past 40 years, SRM research has become increasingly important in both research areas.

Scholars have identified key components of SRM, such as supplier selection, development, performance management, and governance (Carr & Pearson, 2002; Cousins et al., 2008; Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Wieland & Ivens, 2025). However, the literature often treats these components as discrete rather than integrated elements of a broader journey, limiting a holistic understanding of supplier relationships (Park et al., 2010; Wieland & Ivens, 2025).

4.2.2.2 The three-phase model of Möller et al. (2006)

The most widely accepted framework for understanding SRM is the three-phase model proposed by Möller et al. (2006, p. 73), who define SRM as “the process of engaging in activities of setting up, developing, stabilizing and dissolving relationships with in-suppliers as well as the observation of out-suppliers to create and enhance value within relationships.” Their framework conceptualizes SRM as a life cycle based on three phases: out-supplier, in-supplier, and in-supplier dissolution management.

Out-supplier management refers to the continuous observation and evaluation of potential suppliers, so-called out-suppliers, who have not yet formed a relationship with the buyer firm (Möller et al., 2006; Vaandrager, 2024). The primary objective of this process is to ensure access to the best suppliers available on the market, as current supplier relationships may not be permanent solutions (Gadde & Snehota, 2000). While CRM often puts excessive emphasis on acquiring new customers, the opposite tends to occur in SRM, as firms may neglect the search for alternatives if current suppliers meet their needs (Buttle, 1996; Vavra, 1992). Companies apply supplier selection models that assess specific selection criteria, such as on-time delivery, quality compliance, pricing, cultural compatibility, and organizational flexibility (Kannan & Tan, 2002; Min, 1993). While many firms still prioritize hard criteria in their supplier selection, soft factors are just as important, as they indicate a supplier's adaptability to the firm's expectations (Cannon & Homburg, 2001). For example, a supplier's flexibility can lower overall procurement costs, as it enables firms to respond more efficiently to changes in demand and production needs. Moreover, shared values and open communication enhance trust and collaboration, facilitating long-term cooperation at lower costs (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

With the very first transaction, an out-supplier transitions into an in-supplier, marking the start of in-supplier management, which focuses on establishing, maintaining, and optimizing supplier relationships to enhance value creation (Möller et al., 2006). Because suppliers contribute value differently, they must be managed accordingly rather than treated uniformly (Gadde & Snehota, 2000). In-supplier management consists of setup management, development management, contract management, and disturbance management. Setup management requires initial investments to establish supplier relationships, particularly with strategic suppliers, as these investments signal commitment and reduce opportunistic behavior (Dyer et al., 1998; Jap & Ganesan, 2000). Development management ensures continuous value creation by evaluating supplier performance with both hard (e.g., price, quality) and soft (e.g., innovation, responsiveness) criteria (Dyer et al., 1998; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005). Empirical research suggests that key suppliers' contributions increase over time, justifying ongoing investments (Bowman & Narayandas, 2004; Eggert et al., 2006). Not all supplier relationships require close collaboration. Under contract management, firms rely on formal agreements rather than relational governance, using contracts to secure performance and prevent opportunism (Heide, 1994; Wuyts & Geyskens, 2005). Last,

disturbance management addresses conflicts, which may arise from pricing, demand fluctuations, or performance issues (Johnston, 1995). While some disputes can be constructive, a lack of trust and commitment often leads to disruptions, necessitating proactive conflict resolution (Amason et al., 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The last phase, in-supplier dissolution management, involves the structured termination of supplier relationships when they no longer align with business needs. A relationship ends when no resources are exchanged between the partners (Giller & Matear, 2001). Despite its significance, supplier dissolution is often underestimated in both research and practice, even though it can be complex and resource-intensive due to prior investments and integrated value-creating activities (Giller & Matear, 2001; Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). Exit strategies can be indirect, such that buyers subtly alter conditions to encourage supplier withdrawal (disguised exit) or allow the relationship to fade without explicit communication (silent exit) (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000). In contrast, direct exits involve open communication and negotiation to resolve contract disengagement and final obligations (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). As dissolution affects broader networks, firms must reinforce remaining supplier relationships and analyze failures to prevent future breakdowns. Effective dissolution is thus a critical part of SRM.

Möller et al. (2006) therefore provide a foundational framework for SRM with their three-phase model, which offers a structured approach to segmenting, managing, and developing supplier relationships. The framework illustrates how firms can evolve from basic transactional coordination to deeper, collaborative value creation and has strongly influenced subsequent SRM thinking. However, Möller et al. acknowledge that their model is largely conceptual and needs further empirical validation and refinement to tackle the complexities of real-world supplier management. This need has only intensified as global supply chains have become more dynamic and uncertain, shaped by trends such as digitalization, sustainability requirements, and multi-tiered interdependencies that go far beyond the conditions considered in the original model.

At the same time, the rise of digital technologies is reshaping the foundations of buyer–supplier interactions (Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Digital solutions, including AI, enterprise resource planning systems, and cloud-based SRM platforms, now give companies the ability to track supplier performance instantly, fostering greater agility and more seamless collaboration (Cui et al., 2023;

Moradlou et al., 2022). These tools contribute to automating and simplifying transactional tasks, enabling firms to dedicate more energy to strategic, long-term partnerships. Beyond process efficiency, digitalization is also transforming how firms coordinate activities, allocate resources, and cultivate trust in increasingly virtual, data-driven relationships. To stay relevant, SRM frameworks must therefore evolve to reflect these technological shifts and equip organizations with practical guidance for managing supplier relationships in a fast-changing, digital business environment.

4.3 Methodology

To answer the two proposed research questions, a qualitative, exploratory case study approach was adopted, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kumar et al., 1993). This method allows for a detailed examination of SRM structures and practices, capturing both formal processes and individual perceptions in firms (Bonoma, 1985; Stake, 1995). A case study design was chosen to gain in-depth insights into SRM across different industries (Yin, 1994).

4.3.1 Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted between July 2024 and February 2025, with 43 respondents from various industries. The majority of participating firms operate within the manufacturing sector, but firms from consumer goods, healthcare, communication, energy, transportation, and media industries were also included. To ensure a broad and nuanced understanding of SRM practices, firms were purposively sampled to represent diverse backgrounds in terms of industry sectors, company sizes, SRM maturity levels, and degrees of digital adoption. This purposive sampling strategy aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and practices, from organizations with highly formalized and digitally advanced SRM systems to those whose SRM was still emerging or informal. Potential companies were identified through a combination of professional networks, industry-specific associations, and targeted outreach via LinkedIn. In selecting firms, attention was given to achieving maximum variation (Patton, 1990) to avoid bias toward specific industries or organizational types.

Within each selected company, participants were chosen based on their direct

involvement in SRM-related activities, such as supplier selection, evaluation, development, and disengagement. By including respondents from strategic purchasing, leadership, and digitalization-focused roles, the study ensured that insights reflected both operational and strategic perspectives on supplier management. This deliberate selection approach helped minimize potential sampling bias and enable comparative analysis of SRM practices across industries, organizational scales, and levels of technological sophistication. The sample included 12 female and 31 male respondents, with an average age of 43 years and an average company tenure of 12 years. To ensure anonymity of the participating companies, we do not present use cases in detail. However, Appendix A provides a summary of the participating firms, and Appendix B gives an overview of the interviewees.

The interview guide captured both strategic and operational aspects of SRM, ensuring that insights reflected both process-driven SRM and relational and resource-based considerations. The interview protocol was designed around a consistent core structure, which was not adapted to different industries so as to maintain comparability across cases. This decision ensured that all respondents answered the same questions, enabling cross-industry patterns and differences to be systematically identified during the analysis. The semi-structured, open-ended, and probing nature of the interviews encouraged respondents to elaborate on industry-specific practices and to introduce emergent themes beyond the pre-specified categories. That is, this structure allowed respondents to elaborate on their own experiences and perspectives and encouraged them to raise emergent themes and unexpected dynamics that went beyond the pre-defined categories. The interviews covered four main thematic areas. The first block explored respondents' general understanding of SRM, including their personal definitions, perceived goals, and the importance of SRM in their organizations. The second block focused on actors, addressing the roles and responsibilities of individuals and departments involved in SRM, as well as cross-departmental collaboration and potential gaps in organizational involvement. The third block concentrated on activities, including processes such as supplier selection, cooperation routines, governance practices (e.g., performance monitoring), supplier development initiatives, and relationship dissolution strategies. The fourth block examined resources, both tangible and intangible, with particular attention given to the role of digital tools and technologies in managing supplier relationships.

The interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams and had an average duration of 47 minutes. A pretest was conducted to ensure the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Eisenhardt, 1989). In addition, various internal and external documents shared by respondents were incorporated into the data analysis. For example, some respondents provided insights into how their firms classify suppliers into different groups, and others shared SRM roadmaps they use to structure and manage supplier relationships. This data triangulation enhanced the reliability and depth of the analysis (Yin, 1994) and further enabled the verification of interview statements through additional sources.

4.3.2 Data analysis

To analyze the collected interview data, a mixed inductive–deductive approach was used following the recommendations of the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). This approach allowed for the systematical capturing of emerging themes while maintaining a data-driven perspective. The coding process followed the three-stage Gioia approach.

First, to gain an initial overview, we conducted open coding of the transcripts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process allowed us to organize the material thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1984). By doing so, first-order concepts were developed by closely reviewing the interview transcripts and coding individual statements into distinct concepts. This stage remained closely tied to the raw data, ensuring that the analysis captured the nuances of respondents' perspectives on SRM. Second, second-order themes were identified by grouping related first-order concepts, revealing broader patterns across interviews. This step allowed for the recognition of common supplier management strategies, decision-making processes, and key touchpoints that emerged from the respondents' experiences. Third, aggregated dimensions were derived from the second-order themes, integrating them into a structured framework. These dimensions provided a higher-level conceptualization of how companies manage supplier relationships across different journey phases and leverage digital technologies to optimize SRM practices. This three-stage process ensured a rigorous but flexible analysis, enabling both theoretical insights and practical implications to emerge from the data.

Given the inherently subjective nature of qualitative coding, several measures were implemented to enhance the consistency and credibility of the analysis. Throughout the

process, the coding framework and emerging themes were repeatedly reviewed and refined against the raw data to ensure alignment and avoid premature closure. In addition, the findings were triangulated with supplementary materials provided by the informants (when available), as well as public sources, such as company websites, to validate and contextualize the insights. Finally, a version of the study was presented at a B2B marketing conference attended by leading academics and industry practitioners. The external feedback gathered during the discussions contributed to refining the conceptual framework, ensuring that all relevant constructs were captured, and improving the wording and delineation of the supplier journey phases.

The full Gioia structures, including first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions, are available in Appendices C and D. Appendix C provides the structure of the supplier journey phases, based on and adapted from Möller et al. (2006). Appendix D presents the structure of the digitalization of the supplier journey, based on and adapted from Lundin and Kindström (2023).

4.4 Findings

4.4.1 From supplier relationship life cycle to supplier journey

To advance Möller et al.'s (2006) SRM framework, this study adopts their three-phase model—out-supplier management, in-supplier management, and in-supplier dissolution management—as the conceptual backbone. However, while their framework depicts supplier relationships as a life cycle with distinct managerial tasks, findings indicate the need to reconceptualize these phases through the lens of a journey.

The interview data reveal a previously overlooked fourth phase, reactivation, in which buyer firms strategically re-engage and reintegrate former suppliers into their supply base. This addition renders the model circular, as learnings from dissolution inform new supplier selection and former partners can re-enter the journey, reinforcing its iterative nature. Figure 1 illustrates the supplier journey.

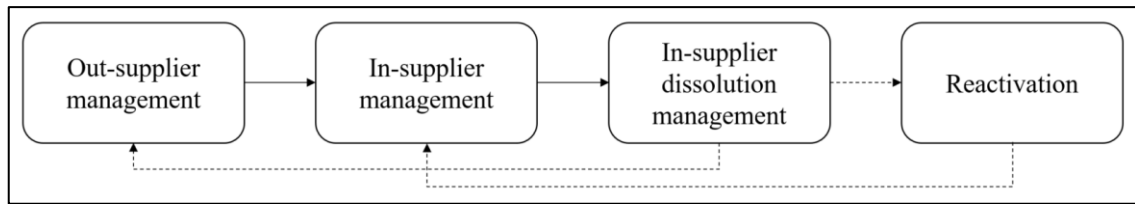


Figure 4-1. Study II – Supplier journey.

4.4.1.1 Out-supplier management: Setting the foundation for future engagement

The supplier journey begins with out-supplier management (Möller et al., 2006). Interview data suggest that this phase is not a transactional filtering step but the strategic starting point for future collaboration. Respondents emphasized three interlinked practices. The first is structured identification and positioning. Here, buyers identify potential suppliers through trade fairs, online platforms, or industry databases, while suppliers signal their capabilities and availability. These early, often indirect touchpoints help shape initial impressions and expectations of what a future collaboration might entail.

The second practice involves multidimensional evaluations, or targeted assessments of both hard and soft criteria (Möller et al., 2006). In addition to strategic fit, compliance, and governance requirements, many respondents highlighted the increasing importance of sustainability criteria. Companies expect suppliers to meet environmental and social standards not only in response to regulatory requirements but also to enhance the resilience of their supply chains (Alikhani et al., 2019; Bai et al., 2024; Kannan et al., 2014). Trust was another central theme throughout this phase. Respondents noted that trust is built across multiple levels—interpersonal, inter-organizational, and system—and serves to reduce uncertainty and mitigate risk in early stages of engagement (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020). Initial impressions, transparent communication, and cultural alignment were cited as trust-building mechanisms that go beyond formal compliance checks.

The third practice, observed particularly among larger firms, is the use of probationary mechanisms, such as pilot projects or short-term contracts, as bridges between evaluation and full integration. This practice is typically applied to strategic or high-potential suppliers and allows buyers to assess real-world performance, collaboration dynamics, and organizational fit in a controlled, low-risk setting. As **Sarah** explained:

“We actually think very carefully about whether [a supplier is] worth it and whether it will help us move forward. So, is there a benefit for us behind it or a particular added value? I would consider this as a trial phase.”

In contrast, smaller or non-strategic suppliers are often integrated through more standardized procedures without such transitional engagements. Overall, out-supplier management is not a one-off task but a foundational stage that sets the tone and expectations for the entire journey.

4.4.1.2 In-supplier management: Building and sustaining value

After suppliers transition through probation, they enter in-supplier management—the central phase focused on co-creating and safeguarding value (Möller et al., 2006). Interview data show two interdependent processes: onboarding and ongoing collaboration.

Onboarding is strategically decisive. Beyond contracts, compliance checks, and system integration, it establishes governance structures that are shaped by earlier touchpoints, particularly the trust built during scouting and evaluation. Governance mechanisms combine formal contracts and performance clauses (Eckerd & Girth, 2017; Liu et al., 2009), with relational tools based on trust and mutual understanding (Kingshott, 2006; Shahzad et al., 2018). Respondents warned against over-formalization, which can erode flexibility, emphasizing instead psychological contracts and informal routines (Kingshott & Pecotich, 2007). Virtual governance—via digital platforms—emerged as another layer, enhancing transparency and cross-functional collaboration (Jean et al., 2020).

Ongoing collaboration then unfolds through structured activities such as performance reviews, co-development projects, and rituals such as supplier days, which reinforce commitment and shared direction:

“We have a supplier day, where we invite our most important suppliers—and those we want to make our most important suppliers.... We present our development, outline where we want to go, and bring everyone together. There’s even an award for the best supplier in different categories” (Robert).

At the same time, tensions may arise when roles are unclear or contributions are perceived as imbalanced. Respondents highlighted proactive conflict management, such as transparent communication and fair negotiations, as essential to sustain long-term value (Corsten & Kumar, 2005; Zajac & Olsen, 1993).

In-supplier management thus emerges as a dynamic process embedded within the broader supplier journey. It is shaped by trust built in earlier phases and strongly influences later transitions, including dissolution and potential reactivation.

4.4.1.3 In-supplier dissolution management: Managing exits

The dissolution phase marks a turning point when relationships unravel from misalignment or underperformance (Möller et al., 2006). Interviewees confirmed that decline is a regular, expected part of SRM. Triggers include poor performance, shifting strategies, financial instability, and obsolescence (Blessley et al., 2018; Helm et al., 2006).

Dissolution is rarely abrupt. Early indicators, such as quality issues or diverging priorities, often lead to renegotiations or remedial measures before disengagement begins. Once decided, exit management includes phasing out contracts, securing replacements, and mitigating risks. Key touchpoints such as final performance reviews, exit discussions, and data handovers shape the tone of closure. As **Ethan** noted: *“Dissolution is a two-way street.”*

Exit strategies align with Alajoutsijärvi et al.’s (2000) typology: disguised exits (subtly pushing suppliers out), silent exits (relationships fading without explicit termination), and direct exits (open communication and formal closure). Direct exits are often preferred in strategic relationships to preserve reputations and enable future re-engagement.

Importantly, dissolution is not an end point but a critical transition. Lessons learned, such as governance failures or cultural misfit, feed back into out-supplier management. The manner of disengagement also directly affects the feasibility of future reactivation.

4.4.1.4 Reactivation: Closing the loop and renewing relationships

Though rarely addressed in prior research (Poblete & Bengtson, 2021), our study identifies reactivation as a distinct phase of the supplier journey. Defined as the reestablishment of ties and exchanges after a break (Poblete & Bengtson, 2021), reactivation turns Möller et al.'s (2006) life cycle into a circular model.

Reactivation is not simply undoing dissolution; it is a deliberate process of reassessing fit, rebuilding trust, and aligning new expectations. Past experiences strongly shape feasibility: respectful dissolutions and retained relationship data ease re-entry, while abrupt exits require repair work (Cespedes & Poblete, 2019; Chou & Zolkiewski, 2012). Trust and interpersonal ties from earlier phases often determine negotiation outcomes.

Reactivation also reflects supply chain agility. Some relationships are intentionally paused and later resumed without full onboarding. As one interviewee (**Mia**) from airfreight explained: airlines may be contracted for defined projects, “*put on ice*,” and then quickly re-engaged if similar needs arise.

Importantly, recognizing reactivation as a separate phase offers several conceptual and managerial benefits. First, it acknowledges that dissolution does not always represent the definitive end of a relationship, especially in B2B markets characterized by specialized resources, limited supplier availability, and long-term interdependencies. Second, reactivation expands the strategic options available to buying firms: instead of starting from scratch with entirely new suppliers, organizations can leverage existing knowledge, established interfaces, and prior collaboration routines. This reduces onboarding costs, accelerates ramp-up times, and increases resilience amid disruptions—an increasingly critical capability in volatile supply chain environments. Third, treating reactivation as a formal phase sheds light on the role of relationship memory and learning: experience from earlier interactions informs selection criteria, governance choices, and trust-building mechanisms when partners reconnect. Finally, acknowledging reactivation underlines the fundamentally iterative nature of SRM. Supplier relationships are not linear trajectories but may cycle repeatedly through activity, disengagement, and renewal as strategic priorities, capacities, or market conditions shift.

This phase thus underscores the cyclical, dynamic character of the supplier journey: relationships are not simply born, managed, and ended—they can be paused, reassessed, and revitalized.

4.4.2 How digital technologies shape and transform the supplier journey

Building on Lundin and Kindström's (2023) work on digitalized B2B customer journeys, our study shifts the lens from customer empowerment to buyer-driven digitalization in supplier relationships. In supplier journeys, buyers act as designers and orchestrators of digital touchpoints, processes, and ecosystems. This represents a shift in agency: while Lundin and Kindström (2023) emphasize how suppliers create value for buyers through digital means, our findings show how buyers configure, enable, and constrain supplier experiences through technologies such as SRM platforms, AI tools, and digital ecosystems.

Extending the supplier journey model developed in Section 4.1, our data reveal that digital technologies are not confined to individual phases, they rather function as the connective pathway across them. Digital tools facilitate transitions (e.g., from probation to onboarding, from collaboration to dissolution), preserve continuity when relationships pause, and support the reactivation of dormant suppliers. Rather than managing suppliers through isolated steps, digitalization enables buyers to coordinate relationships as continuous, evolving trajectories.

Our analysis identifies four dimensions of how buyers digitally shape supplier journeys (see Figure 2). The first three adapt Lundin and Kindström's (2023) categories to the supplier context; the fourth is new and reflects an original contribution.

1. **Digitalizing touchpoints:** creating new digital interactions, hybridizing traditional ones (e.g., audits, training), and smoothing supplier interactions across all stages.
2. **Reshaping roles:** broadening participation across functions, activating suppliers as proactive actors, and fostering collective engagement.
3. **Digitalizing processes:** automating and integrating workflows to connect phases of the journey and enable data-driven decision-making.
4. **Enabling ecosystems:** building digital infrastructures that integrate suppliers on shared platforms, offering visibility and coordination across the supply base and laying foundations for connected networks.

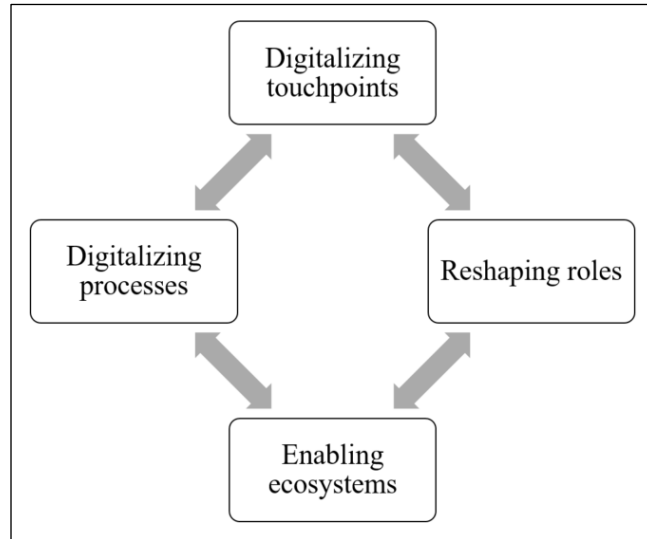


Figure 4-2. Study II – The influence of digitalization on the supplier journey.

Together, these dimensions show that buyers are moving beyond managing discrete relationships: they are digitally orchestrating integrated journeys; reshaping interactions, roles, and processes; and building the scaffolding for connected supply ecosystems to redefine how supplier relationships will evolve over time.

4.4.2.1 Digitalizing touchpoints: Structuring interaction across phases

Digital tools expand and transform supplier interactions, particularly at pivotal transitions such as onboarding, collaboration, and reactivation (Cui et al., 2023; Moradlou et al., 2022). Three developments stand out as vital.

The first is adding new touchpoints. Automated scouting platforms and AI-driven databases allow buyers to identify and filter potential partners long before direct engagement. These “front-end” touchpoints set expectations early, streamline selection, and speed up onboarding.

The second development involves reshaping traditional touchpoints. Activities such as audits, compliance checks, and onboarding workshops are increasingly digital or hybrid, reducing cost and increasing consistency (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Wieland et al., 2024).

Third, buyers also facilitate and enrich existing touchpoints. Digital dashboards and centralized repositories ensure real-time transparency and continuity across phases. As **Jason** explained:

“It is very important that there is a central location where this information is organized, where you can see the history and it is prepared in such a way that anyone can step in at any time and see what is going on with the supplier. Where do I stand contractually, but also who are my contacts.”

Through these developments, digitalization is not merely multiplying and transforming the number and nature of touchpoints; it is also creating a more structured, transparent, and connected supplier journey that spans all phases of the relationship.

4.4.2.2 Reshaping roles: Broadening participation and agency

Digitalization changes not only how buyers and suppliers interact but also who participates and with what agency. Three developments emerged from our analysis.

The first involves reshaping existing roles. Rather than creating entirely new functions, SRM platforms are drawing existing experts from, for example, IT, legal, and compliance more directly into the process. These experts, whom may once have been consulted only occasionally through procurement or category managers, are now embedded into key workflows and decision points, particularly during the phases of onboarding and reactivation. Their structured involvement ensures that transitions between phases are handled more seamlessly, with specialized oversight applied precisely when needed, instead of relying solely on procurement to manage every step.

The second development entails activating suppliers. Self-service features embedded in SRM systems enable suppliers to upload documentation, monitor key performance indicators, and manage delivery schedules directly. In line with Lundin and Kindström’s (2023) idea of “activating customers,” this adaptation highlights how suppliers gain more control over their own touchpoints—becoming more active and engaged—while buyers trade a degree of control for more independent and accountable partners.

The third development emphasizes collectivity. Shared systems enable multiple actors on both sides of the buyer–supplier relationship to work in parallel, providing transparency and reducing dependence on single-point contacts. This collective engagement is particularly valuable during complex or sensitive transitions, such as moving from collaboration to dissolution, in which coordinated decision-making and access to shared information are critical to minimizing disruption and preserving trust. By incorporating

shared visibility into processes and decisions, these platforms also ensure that the know-how of different departments is integrated more effectively and that efforts are not duplicated, as all actors involved can see what others have contributed. Together, these developments show that digitalization is fundamentally redistributing participation and agency within supplier journeys, transforming them into more collaborative and interconnected processes.

4.4.2.3 Digitalizing processes: Connecting stages and enabling continuity

Digital workflows are increasingly transforming supplier journeys from a sequence of disjointed steps into a more integrated, continuous system (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Two processes emerged from the analysis: automation and transparency.

First, tasks that were once manual and time-consuming, such as compliance checks, document handling, and supplier scoring, are now supported by automation, reducing administrative burden and accelerating movement through critical stages—for example, from probation to onboarding. By automating these repetitive activities, buyers free up resources to focus on more strategic aspects of supplier management.

Second, shared analytics platforms provide ongoing transparency, enabling joint planning and continuous feedback loops that maintain data continuity even when relationships pause or suppliers shift between phases. This infrastructure becomes particularly valuable during reactivation, as it allows buyers to draw on historical information to restart collaborations efficiently. Emerging AI capabilities further extend this support by adding predictive intelligence—flagging potential risks, identifying performance trends, and prompting proactive interventions before issues escalate.

One respondent described his company's SRM system as being designed much like a "*metro map*" (**Chris**): every supplier is visualized as if traveling along a route, with each station representing a touchpoint, milestone, or pending task. The system shows which stages have already been passed, where the supplier currently is, and what the next step in the journey will be. This type of visualization turns supplier management into an intuitive, process-oriented journey map, giving both buyers and suppliers a shared understanding of the relationship's status and trajectory.

4.4.2.4 Enabling ecosystems: An infrastructure-building phase

A key contribution of this study is the finding that buyers are beginning to use digitalization not only to manage individual supplier relationships but also to build broader supplier ecosystems. This shift aligns with the observation that dyadic relationships rarely exist in isolation. From this perspective, a company is not an autonomous entity but part of an interdependent system, carrying out activities and deploying resources in interaction with others (Anderson et al., 1994). Within this context, digital infrastructure, particularly SRM platforms, are enabling buyers to coordinate not just one-on-one supplier relationships but entire webs of interactions. Conceptually, this represents a move from viewing supplier management as a series of linear chains to viewing it as a digitally mediated network in which buyers orchestrate multiple supplier journeys simultaneously. For example, buyers can monitor onboarding progress for one set of suppliers while reactivating dormant partners and phasing out underperforming ones, all within the same SRM environment, because digital tools enable them to consolidate data, automate routine updates, and execute priorities across different relationship stages in parallel.

This shift raises the classic question of network manageability: while some researchers envision orchestrated “strategic networks” (Jarillo, 1988), others argue that outcomes emerge from self-organization (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). This study suggests that digital infrastructures lean toward orchestration, enabling buyers to classify suppliers, differentiate engagement levels, and steer activities with increasing precision.

These emerging ecosystems remain largely buyer-centric. While suppliers are digitally integrated into shared platforms and gain a certain amount of control over touchpoints, their ability to collaborate directly with one another is still restricted. Several interviewees noted that while current systems are highly effective for buyers, they offer few opportunities for suppliers to meaningfully coordinate or innovate together. This limitation is important because how suppliers interact with each other affects the buyer’s own performance (Wu & Choi, 2005): frictions and gaps can lead to delays, quality issues, or duplicated efforts, while closer coordination—through shared planning, data exchange, or co-development—can improve reliability across the network. Yet encouraging such collaboration is complicated by co-opetition: suppliers are expected to cooperate operationally but remain competitors for future business (Brandenburger & Nalebuff,

1996; Richardson, 1993). As Cross (1995) observed, this duality makes suppliers hesitant to share information, highlighting the tension between required collaboration and underlying rivalry.

What is emerging, then, is an infrastructure-building phase. Buyers already benefit from greater oversight, risk detection, and portfolio-level management, while suppliers enjoy clearer expectations and improved visibility. Although true cross-supplier collaboration remains constrained, the scaffolding for more connected and potentially self-organizing networks is now in place.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study offers four key theoretical contributions to the SRM, B2B marketing, and digital business relationship literature. Each contribution addresses a previously identified research gap and advances existing conceptual frameworks in specific, empirically grounded ways.

First, existing SRM frameworks, most notably Möller et al.'s (2006) supplier relationship life cycle, conceptualize buyer–supplier relationships as linear, stage-based progressions—from initiation to dissolution. However, such models insufficiently reflect the iterative, dynamic, and reconfigurable nature of actual B2B relationships. As Park et al. (2010) observe, SRM research has often focused on isolated phases or managerial tasks, resulting in incomplete insights that fail to capture the full trajectory of supplier relationships. This study directly addresses that gap by empirically extending Möller et al.'s (2006) model by identifying reactivation as an additional distinct and recurring phase. In doing so, it transforms the static life cycle into a circular supplier journey model that integrates all phases, including post-dissolution dynamics, into a coherent, continuous framework. Thus, this study contributes to the under-theorized domain of supplier reactivation (Batonda & Perry, 2003; Poblete & Bengtson, 2021; Polonsky et al., 2010) and reframes SRM as a non-linear, ongoing process in which past relational history and the quality of disengagement directly influence future collaboration potential.

Second, while customer journey mapping is well-established in business-to-consumer and increasingly B2B marketing research (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2023; Lemon & Verhoef,

2016; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Witell et al., 2020), supplier journeys have remained conceptually neglected. By adopting a journey perspective, focusing on phases, transitions, and touchpoints, this study transfers and adapts core concepts from CRM and CXM research into the upstream domain of supplier management. Doing so bridges a conceptual gap between customer and supplier relationship management and expands the theoretical repertoire available for understanding B2B interactions.

Third, although studies have noted that digitalization is transforming B2B relationships (e.g., Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020), few have systematically explored how digital technologies reshape SRM across its full trajectory. The present study identifies four digitalization dimensions—digitalizing touchpoints, reshaping roles, digitalizing processes, and enabling ecosystems—that show how digital tools not only support but also actively transform the structure, governance, and interaction patterns of supplier relationships. These findings contribute new insights into the mechanisms through which digital tools (e.g., SRM platforms, AI systems) influence journey transitions, information flows, and multi-actor coordination. Thus, the study empirically advances the digital SRM literature by showing that technologies are not just enablers but also embedded design elements in SRM strategy.

Fourth, this study contributes to the business network perspective (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ritter et al., 2004) by highlighting the digital emergence of buyer-centric ecosystems. While most SRM research continues to focus on buyer–supplier relationships, our findings reveal that firms are beginning to leverage digital infrastructures to manage multi-supplier portfolios as interconnected networks. These ecosystems, though still largely buyer-controlled, allow parallel coordination of onboarding, collaboration, dissolution, and reactivation activities across suppliers. This insight expands existing network theory by illustrating a new, digitally enabled orchestration logic, in which firms simultaneously act as SRM strategists and ecosystem architects.

4.5.2 Managerial implications

The findings offer concrete guidance for managers tasked with designing and overseeing supplier relationships in increasingly complex and digitalized B2B environments. By reframing SRM as a cyclical supplier journey, the study encourages a more holistic and

phase-sensitive approach to managing supplier interactions—one that goes beyond transactional control and actively considers trust, continuity, and digital enablement across all phases of engagement.

First, managers should treat supplier exits not as routine closures but as strategic transitions with long-term implications. Reactivation often depends on how dissolution was handled. Formalized offboarding procedures—performance reviews, relationship debriefings, and archival of interaction histories in SRM systems—preserve knowledge and reduce friction in later re-engagements. Even minimal contact after exit (e.g., supplier updates or check-ins) can lower barriers to reactivation.

Second, we encourage managers to transform digital SRM tools from static databases into dynamic journey management systems. Visual journey maps, showing each supplier's current position, touchpoint history, and upcoming milestones, can help synchronize procurement, quality, and technical teams, ensuring that processes such as onboarding, requalification, or exit are not handled in isolation.

Third, managers should use digitalization not only for internal efficiency but also to actively involve suppliers. Self-service access to SRM platforms, transparent performance dashboards, and co-developed governance tools strengthen engagement, increase transparency, and create a more balanced relationship dynamic—especially in collaboration-intensive phases.

Fourth, the supplier journey perspective supports more ecosystem-oriented SRM strategies. Journey-phase tagging and SRM analytics can reveal cross-supplier dependencies, identify reactivation opportunities, and simulate network effects of onboarding or dissolution. These tools enable procurement to manage multiple supplier trajectories in parallel, anticipate risks, and coordinate collective re-engagements.

Finally, adopting a journey-oriented and digitally orchestrated SRM approach yields not only relational but also financial benefits. Firms can reduce transaction and onboarding costs, shorten time-to-value with new suppliers, and preserve relational capital that lowers switching costs. At the same time, stronger collaboration and supplier activation drive innovation, service quality, and resilience, contributing to revenue growth. By aligning supplier management with these cost and revenue effects, managers can more clearly demonstrate the return on investment of SRM initiatives to senior leadership. However,

these effects are not guaranteed: in some cases, the required investments in coordination, digital infrastructure, or relationship-building can exceed the realized benefits, leading to a negative cost–benefit balance (Dwyer et al., 1987; Gadde & Snehota, 2000). Managers must therefore evaluate carefully whether the expected relational and financial outcomes justify the costs in their specific context.

4.5.3 Limitations and avenues for further research

While this study contributes to SRM theory and practice by introducing a supplier journey perspective, several limitations offer targeted opportunities for future research. First, the findings are based on qualitative data from 43 semi-structured interviews across a range of industries. While this approach provides rich, exploratory insights into how firms manage supplier relationships and implement digital tools across journey phases, it does not allow for statistical generalization. Future research could validate the proposed supplier journey framework through quantitative studies—for example, by developing and testing a survey instrument that measures the presence, effectiveness, and digital support of specific journey phases (e.g., reactivation mechanisms, probationary onboarding, digital touchpoint orchestration). Such studies could examine correlations between journey design and relationship outcomes such as supplier retention, responsiveness, or innovation contribution.

Second, the study captures mainly the buyer-side perspective of SRM processes. While some findings reflect relational dynamics, the supplier voice remains underrepresented. This presents a valuable avenue for dyadic or multi-actor studies that include suppliers as well as sub-tier actors. Future research could, for example, conduct matched interviews with buyers and suppliers involved in reactivation cases to determine how both sides perceive trust repair, information asymmetry, or onboarding asymmetries across journey phases. Doing so would also allow for testing how relational memories are stored, interpreted, and acted upon differently across organizational boundaries.

Third, while digitalization emerged as a key enabler throughout the supplier journey, this study does not focus on the specific affordances of particular technologies (e.g., SRM platforms vs. AI systems vs. blockchain-based traceability tools). Future research could unpack how different digital technologies shape relationship governance, transparency, and coordination within and across journey phases. Comparative case studies or

longitudinal implementations could explore how certain tools affect supplier onboarding efficiency, conflict resolution, or reactivation timelines. Such studies would support more granular, technology-specific theory-building at the intersection of SRM and digital transformation.

Fourth, we conceptualize the supplier journey framework as a typical, ideal model, but journey configurations likely vary by industry, supply base structure, and regulatory environment. For example, firms in highly regulated or risk-sensitive sectors (e.g., pharmaceutical, aerospace) may emphasize formal governance and probation phases more strongly, while fast-moving industries may rely more on relational and digital governance. Future studies could investigate contingency factors that shape how the supplier journey is designed and implemented. Cross-industry comparative research could test whether certain phases are skipped, compressed, or more intensely managed depending on contextual constraints.

Finally, we identify reactivation as a distinct SRM phase, but the mechanisms, thresholds, and timing of reactivation decisions remain underexplored. Future research could examine what specific conditions (e.g., cost shocks, internal capability gaps, strategic pivots) trigger the decision to re-engage former suppliers and how firms balance the trade-off between exploring new suppliers and leveraging dormant ones. Such research would deepen the understanding of dynamic supplier portfolio management in uncertain and volatile environments.

4.6 References

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4.7 Appendix

Appendix A. Case descriptions

Table 4-1. Study II – Appendix A. Case descriptions.

Identifier	Industrial sector	Company size ¹	Headquarters
C1	Healthcare & medical technology	Large-sized	Germany
C2	Consumer goods manufacturing	Large-sized	Germany
C3	Automotive & industrial manufacturing	Large-sized	Germany
C4	Mechanical engineering & automation	Large-sized	Germany
C5	Food & beverage	Large-sized	Germany
C6	Energy & industrial technology	Large-sized	Germany
C7	Packaging & industrial machinery	Large-sized	Germany
C8	Logistics & transportation	Medium-sized	Germany
C9	Telecommunications	Large-sized	Germany
C10	Food processing & industrial machinery	Large-sized	Switzerland
C11	Automotive & industrial manufacturing	Large-sized	Germany
C12	Retail & e-commerce	Large-sized	Germany
C13	Consumer & industrial tools manufacturing	Large-sized	Germany
C14	Utilities & smart infrastructure	Large-sized	Germany
C15	Food & beverage	Large-sized	United Kingdom
C16	Automotive & industrial manufacturing	Large-sized	Germany
C17	Energy & grid infrastructure	Large-sized	Netherlands
C18	Chemical solutions	Small-sized	Germany
C19	Construction & infrastructure development	Large-sized	Austria
C20	Chemical solutions	Small-sized	Germany
C21	Wholesale & supply chain logistics	Large-sized	Germany
C22	Engineering and technology consulting	Large-sized	Germany
C23	Home & interior wholesale	Small-sized	Germany
C24	Consumer goods manufacturing	Medium-sized	Germany
C25	Information technology & consulting	Large-sized	United States
C26	Construction	Small-sized	Germany
C27	Media & journalism	Large-sized	Switzerland
C28	Media & journalism	Medium-sized	Slovakia
C29	Media & journalism	Medium-sized	Bulgaria

¹ In terms of number of employees: large-sized – more than 249 employees or turnover more than €50 million, medium-sized – up to 249 employees and turnover up to €50 million, small-sized – up to 49 employees and turnover up to €10 million. (based on: Statista, 2024)

Appendix B. Interview respondents

Table 4-2. Study II – Appendix B. Interview respondents.

Identifier	Gender, age	Industry experience	Department	Company affiliation
Tony	m, thirties	8 yrs	IT & digitalization	C1
Adam	m, forties	17 yrs	IT & vendor management	C1
Emma	f, twenties	4 yrs	Strategic procurement	C1
Sophia	f, thirties	7 yrs	Product management	C1
Jake	m, thirties	14 yrs	Executive leadership	C1
Daniel	m, forties	16 yrs	Operations & logistics	C2
Robert	m, fifties	16 yrs	Quality & supplier management	C3
Chris	m, thirties	5 yrs	Procurement & digitalization	C4
Matthew	m, forties	2 yrs	Sustainability	C5
Ryan	m, thirties	7 yrs	Supply chain management	C6
David	m, forties	26 yrs	Strategic procurement	C6
George	m, sixties	27 yrs	Procurement & supply management	C6
Olivia	f, twenties	2 yrs	Project management	C7
Mia	f, twenties	2 yrs	Procurement	C8
Laura	f, forties	14 yrs	Procurement & category management	C9
Ethan	m, thirties	9 yrs	Procurement	C10
Frank	m, sixties	40 yrs	Procurement	C11
Jason	m, thirties	9 yrs	Procurement & category management	C11
Eric	m, thirties	2 yrs	Procurement	C11
Alex	m, N/A	37 yrs	Technical procurement	C11
Mark	m, forties	7 yrs	Project purchasing	C11
Walter	m, seventies	35 yrs	Legal & executive management	C12
Jeff	m, forties	14 yrs	Procurement & strategic sourcing	C13
Tom	m, thirties	2 yrs	Strategic procurement	C14
Sarah	f, forties	9 yrs	Procurement	C15
Nick	m, thirties	2 yrs	Procurement	C16
Henry	m, sixties	25 yrs	Procurement & supply management	C16
Brian	m, thirties	35 yrs	Category management	C17
Kevin	m, thirties	12 yrs	Supply chain management	C17
Anna	f, thirties	3 yrs	Procurement	C18
Margaret	f, sixties	20 yrs	Procurement	C19
Nancy	f, fifties	3 yrs	Consulting & advisory	C20
Scott	m, thirties	2 yrs	Strategic procurement	C21
Diane	f, fifties	2 yrs	Supply chain & supplier management	C22

Study II

Rebecca	f, forties	20 yrs	Executive leadership	C23
Greg	m, fifties	6 yrs	Executive leadership	C24
Patrick	m, fifties	30 yrs	Consulting & advisory	C25
John	m, fifties	24 yrs	Executive leadership	C26
Liam	m, twenties	4 yrs	Product management	C27
Noah	m, twenties	2 yrs	Business intelligence & data analytics	C27
Emily	f, twenties	1 yr	Business development & strategy	C27
Ben	m, twenties	5 yrs	Product & marketing strategy	C28
Samuel	m, thirties	4 yrs	Product & project strategy	C29

Appendix C. Coding structure supplier journey

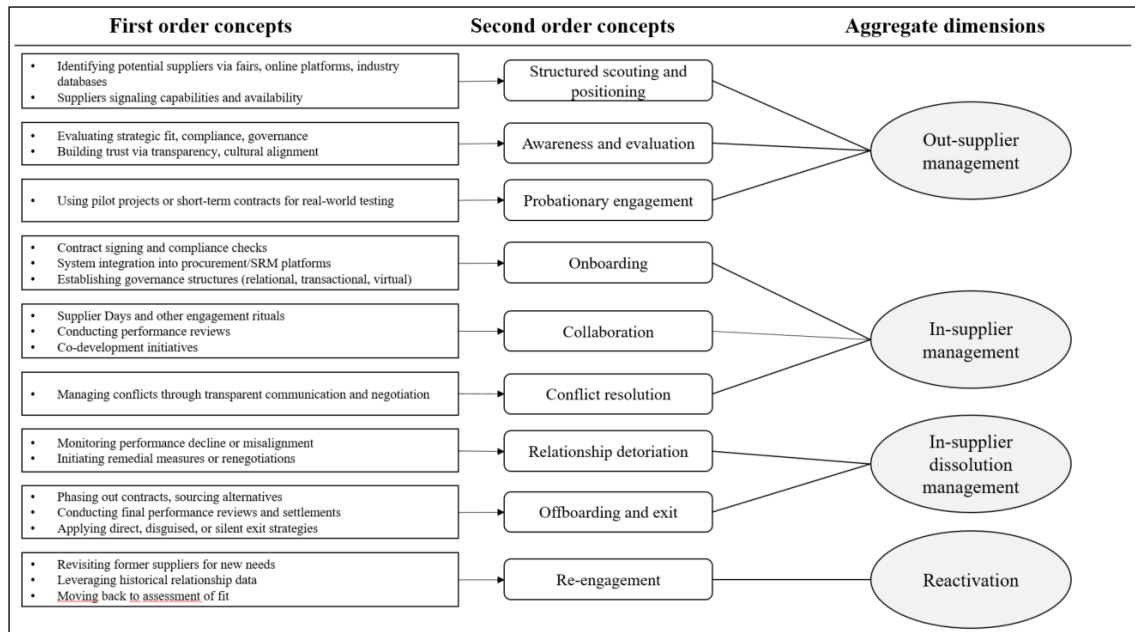


Figure 4-3. Study II – Appendix C. Coding structure supplier journey.

Appendix D. Coding structure digitalization of the supplier journey

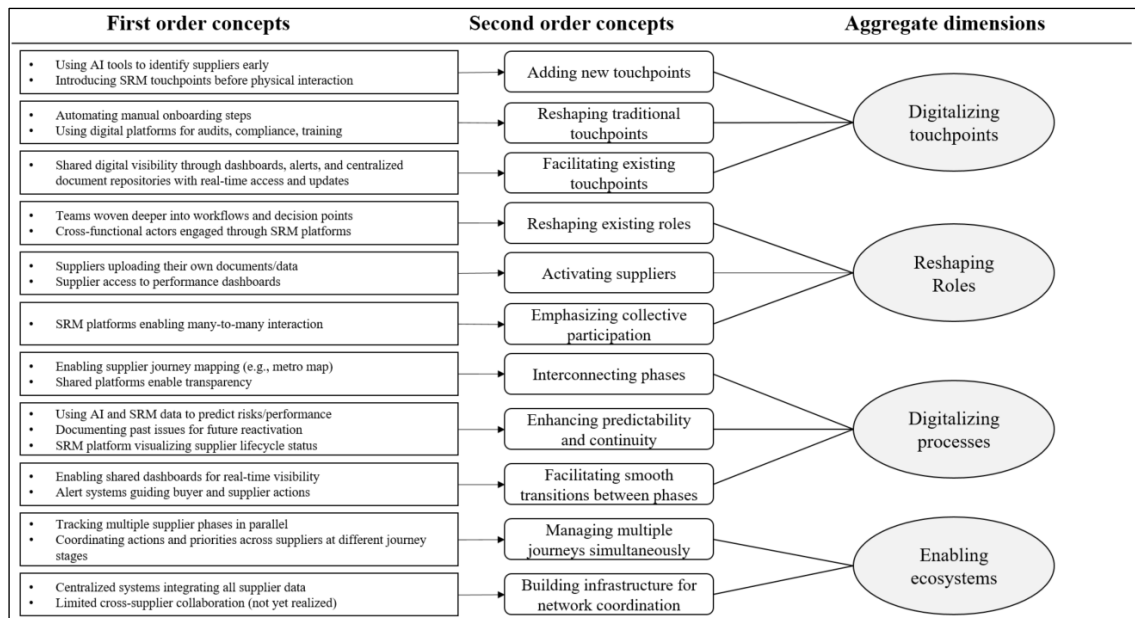


Figure 4-4. Study II – Appendix D. Coding structure digitalization of the supplier journey.

5 Study III

Augmented and virtual reality in managing B2B customer experiences

Abstract

Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are promising approaches that B2B companies consider to be part of their customer experience management. However, this area is largely unexplored academically, resulting in a lack of theory and practical guidance. Based on existing customer experience and AR/ VR literature, we anticipate that these technologies can expand touchpoints in the customer journey, enhancing the experiences of professionals involved in purchasing activities by providing them with empowerment and support. Consequently, we applied exploratory, theory-building research to identify and organize current industry practices into a coherent framework and theorize their role in shaping customer experiences. For example, current marketing use cases include project and product visualization, event-based engagement, remote support, and employee training, and are particularly employed in the early stages of the customer journey. We also identified several benefits related to branding, relationships, transactions, costs, and sustainability. The theoretical contribution of our study extends the current understanding of the role of AR and VR in B2B customer experience management. It provides practical insights for B2B marketing professionals on the strategic deployment of AR and VR technologies to enhance customer experiences based on real-world examples.

Keywords

Customer experience management; Augmented reality; Virtual reality; Marketing; B2B

5.1 Introduction

The concept of customer experience (CX) represents a key concept in today's marketing research and practice. CXs are made throughout a customer journey and encompass diverse interactions between actors at different touchpoints. In the end, value is a function of various experiences that come from interaction (Ramaswamy, 2011). Relevant CXs include the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses of a buyer to the actions of a firm (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Consequently, organizations have increasingly adopted a customer perspective to strategically manage the CX along the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy, Zaki, Lemon, Urmetzer, & Neely, 2019). In recent years, these activities have evolved into a strategic concept called customer experience management (CXM). This concept is not just about improving customer journeys that describe a path with several stages, from getting to know a supplier and its products or services to using them (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). Rather, it includes a seller's strategic approach to create added value for both sides by consciously shaping a buyer's experience so that companies continuously develop strategies to improve and align existing and new touchpoints along the customer journey. If managed effectively, CXM can result in competitive advantages of firms (Hilton, Hajihashemi, Henderson, & Palmatier, 2020; Klink, Zhang, & Athaide, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

One approach to CX is to incorporate new technologies and media (Homburg, Jozic, & Kuehnl, 2017; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiro, & Schlesinger, 2009). For example, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are two promising technological developments that have attracted the interest of marketers in recent years, as they allow users to either superimpose or replace the physical world. While a considerable amount of academic research has investigated the effectiveness of AR and VR on CX in the B2C sector (e.g., Farah, Ramadan, & Harb, 2019; Tan, Chandukala, & Reddy, 2021; tom Dieck & Han, 2022), their role in B2B contexts has received comparatively less attention. This is surprising, as B2B industry practitioners have frequently discussed the role of such new presentation formats as part of their CXM (Kostusev, 2019). For instance, IBM engineers used a proprietary AR tool (IBM Immersive Insights) to visualize Instacart grocery shopping data and better understand

users' purchasing patterns. Likewise, Airbus used AR to present cabin models of aircraft to its business customers in Germany (Airbus, 2023).

Against this background, scholars have called for more research attention on the role of new technologies in improving B2B customer journeys (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Purmonen, Jaakkola, & Terho, 2023; Rad, Oghazi, Palmié, Chhirumalla, Pashkevich, Pat, & Sattari, 2022; Rustholllkarhu, Toukola, Aarikka-Stenroos, & Mahlam, 2022). Specifically, researchers have repeatedly recognized the potential of virtual (e.g., VR) and hybrid (e.g., AR) presentation formats for B2B firms (Cardoso, Mariano, & Zorzal, 2020; De Jong, De Ruyter, Keeling, Polyakova, & Ringberg, 2021; Pöyry, Parvinen, Mattila, & Holopainen, 2020). However, except for Boyd and Koles' (2019) conceptual work on VR, to the best of our knowledge, there is no academic research on AR/ VR technologies in the B2B marketing literature. At the same time, the differences between B2B and B2C customer journeys, as well as the motives, processes, and outcomes involved in them, are such (e.g., Cartwright, Liu, & Davies, 2022; Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019) that the results from empirical research on consumer contexts cannot be fully translated to business markets.

We aim to address this gap by taking an exploratory, theory-building research approach and asking the following question: *How can AR/VR technologies support B2B customer experience management?* More specifically, we tackle this issue from a managerial view and aim to identify and document common use cases, discuss their role as new touchpoints in CXM, and integrate them into a framework addressing CX. Therefore, we employ a qualitative research design using case study-based interviews with B2B marketing professionals.

We argue that exploratory and theory-building research is an appropriate step to identify relevant themes and patterns and to organize and simplify complex market observations (MacInnis, 2011). In accordance with MacInnis's (2011) categorization of conceptual contributions to theory, our study provides a contribution by simultaneously classifying AR/VR use cases within an established framework and the B2B customer journey. This leads to a new holistic perspective for research. Such findings are of theoretical interest, as they can ensure that the B2B literature remains current with industry developments and provide a starting point for further research to build on. Given the promising market forecasts for AR and VR (Marr, 2021), the relevance of AR and VR in B2B marketing

theory and practice is likely to increase in the coming years, especially in relation to broader contexts such as the (industrial) metaverse and spatial computing.

Our research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we are among the first to describe and classify AR and VR use cases in B2B marketing, thus contributing to the documentation of B2B marketing practices (especially in CXM). For each of the four identified cases (product or project visualization, event-based engagement, remote support, and employee training), we provide a detailed analysis of their anticipated benefits, their significance in various stages of the customer journey, and the characteristics of the experience they offer. Second, we organize these use cases in a taxonomy based on Flavián, Ibáñez-Sánchez, and Orús's (2019) framework for technology-enhanced customer experiences and the B2B customer journey (Brady, Davies, & Gann, 2005; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007; Witell, Kowalkowski, Perks, Raddats, Schwabe, Benedettini, & Burton, 2020). This contributes both theoretically and practically, offering a foundation for future research and guiding B2B marketers in the effective implementation of AR/VR technologies.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we start with the theoretical foundations and the current state of research. Second, we introduce the methodology—that is, an exploratory case study approach. Next, we present our findings. We close with a discussion of the implications and directions for future research.

5.2 Theoretical background

5.2.1 Customer journey and customer experience management in B2B marketing

5.2.1.1 B2B customer journey

Mapping customer journeys is a well-established tool in marketing academia and practice (for a review, see Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021). As stated by Purmonen et al. (2023), using customer journeys “has become one of the predominant concepts for business practitioners to use in understanding contemporary customer buying behavior” (p. 84). Although not consistently defined in the field, in general, the customer journey describes the entire path a customer takes when interacting with a company (or, for example, with its brands, products, technology, and employees), from initial awareness

to purchase and post-purchase experiences, such as the use of products or customer service (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

In B2B marketing, Purmonen et al. (2023) conceptualize customer journeys as “a combination of buying and usage center members’ intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships” (p. 84). While modeled customer journeys are by definition prototypical, they simplify and visualize the complex behavior of customers from their perspective. Consequently, scholars and managers adjust customer journey models to their specific purposes, industries, and consumer groups. For instance, while many customer journey models simply differentiate between the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), others propose more nuanced steps (e.g., Brady et al., 2005; Rauschnabel, Babin, Tom Dieck, Krey and Jung, 2022) — which might provide more detailed insights yet lack simplicity.

This research builds on an established four-stage approach from the B2B literature, with the interrelated stages referred to as (1) pre-bid engagement, (2) negotiation, (3) implementation, and (4) operations (Brady et al., 2005; Tuli et al., 2007; Witell et al., 2020). In the pre-bid engagement stage, informal conversations aim to identify potential overlaps between the buyer’s business needs and the supplier’s capabilities, potentially resulting in opportunities for value creation. During the negotiation stage, the buyer specifies the products to be procured, shares information about its operations and requirements through touchpoints, and selects the most appropriate supplier. Upon finalizing the contract terms, the implementation stage begins. Finally, the operations stage encompasses all activities occurring throughout the contractual period of the service offering or the product life cycle (Biggemann, Kowalkowski, Maley, & Brege, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, touchpoints are a core element of customer journeys since they shape how customers experience a brand and its offerings. A touchpoint is any point of interaction, whether digital or physical, between a customer and a brand, product, or service (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Wang, Malthouse, Calder, & Uzunoglu, 2019; Witell et al., 2020). Here, AR and VR can represent touchpoints on their own (e. g., a virtual showroom that customers can experience without assistance) or contribute to existing touchpoints (e.g., a product visualization in AR at an exhibition booth). Lemon & Verhoef, 2016 distinguish four categories of CX touchpoints: (1) brand owned, (2)

partner owned, (3) customer owned, and (4) social or external. First, brand-owned touchpoints refer to buyer interactions during the CX that are designed, overseen by, and under the control of the seller. Examples include a brand's website, advertising materials, product attributes, packaging, service, and the sales force. Second, partner-owned touchpoints represent buyer interactions that are collaboratively designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and one or more of its strategic partners. Third, customer-owned touchpoints represent customer actions that are not influenced or controlled by the firm, its partners, or other entities, such as a buyer determining their own needs or preferences in the pre-bid engagement phase. Fourth, social or external touchpoints are dedicated to potential external influences, such as other customers or independent information sources – for example, product reviews on social media. Other authors (e.g., Hilken et al., 2018; Lundin & Kindström, 2023) distinguish between digital (e.g., social media) and analog (e.g., a newspaper ad) touchpoints.

In summary, a customer journey is punctuated by touchpoints - specific moments (i.e., experiences) of interaction between the customer and the brand, product, service, or employee. These touchpoints, which include everything from advertising to customer service interactions to the use of the product itself, shape customer perceptions and decisions. Customer journey maps are a strategic tool for visualizing and managing ideal stages or touchpoint sequences, and they help companies understand and optimize the customer experience at each stage of the journey.

5.2.1.2 B2B customer experience and customer experience management

As Abbott (Abbott Lawrence, 1955, p. 40) recognized early on, “what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences.” The enhancement of CX is widely recognized as a crucial driver of a company's competitive advantage and success (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The literature presents numerous definitions of CX. In general, CX results from various interactions between a buyer and an organization or a product (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). These interactions elicit a particular response in the buyer and encompass cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical reactions toward the seller (Verhoef et al., 2009).

The factors that determine CX are twofold. Some are controllable, such as with a service interface or an assortment. In contrast, with certain CX factors, sellers only have reduced

control (ranging from limited control to no control at all), such as with the impact of intermediaries (Payne & Frow, 2004), the behavior and communication of salespeople, or the behavior of other buyers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Consequently, CX is a complex and dynamic construct, both from an academic perspective and in managerial practice, which as a whole is difficult to capture (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

The vast majority of CX research has been conducted in the B2C context, particularly in service marketing. There has been notably less research on CX in the B2B context. It poses even greater challenges in capturing CX (Palmer, 2010; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). In a B2C environment, individual private recipients are the focus, while B2B consists of organizations with multiple stakeholders pursuing different interests (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). B2B relationships tend to be more complex, with high levels of interaction and interdependence between buyers and sellers (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). These interactions are usually driven by organizational goals, oftentimes conflicting ones, and are governed by formal rules and procedures (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981; Purmonen et al., 2023; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Given the prominence of interpersonal interactions in a B2B context, it is surprising that the academic focus on B2B CX is limited (Lemke, Clark, & Wilson, 2011; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

Prominent management literature, exemplified by the contributions of Pine and Gilmore (1998), underlines the importance of companies directing their attention to improving CXs. These sources argue that strategies based on service or pricing for differentiation are no longer sufficient (Verhoef et al., 2009). Ponsignon, Durrieu, and Bouzdine-Chameeva (2017) identified that achieving successful CX necessitates a thorough comprehension of both the intended and the realized experiences. Thus, it seems essential to effectively manage CX. In this regard, CXM represents a strategic approach employed by sellers to deliberately shape a buyer's experience, with the aim of generating value for both the buyer and the seller (Verhoef et al., 2009). In short, CXM is the process of strategically managing a buyer's entire experience with an organization or product (Homburg et al., 2017; Schmitt, 2003).

Nonetheless, research into CXM is rather scarce (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, it displays notable fragmentation across various contexts and a lack of clear differentiation from other marketing management concepts (Homburg et al., 2017), such

as customer relationship management, relationship marketing, and customer engagement (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As an example, CXM differs from customer relationship marketing, as it focuses on the buyer's immediate experience instead of their documented history (Verhoef et al., 2009). Customer relationship marketing aims to know customers and utilize that data, whereas CXM focuses on understanding real-time customer reactions and behaviors (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Nevertheless, there are areas of intersection. Some academics view these two aspects as encompassed within a strategic approach to customer relationship marketing and aiding in the assessment of whether the value proposition is likely to yield a superior CX (Payne & Frow, 2004). While scholars have thoroughly examined CX as the operational focus of CXM, particularly in the B2C context, there is a dearth of academic research dedicated specifically to CXM. Moreover, practitioners appear reluctant to attempt to determine the effective deployment of CXM (Homburg et al., 2017). Edelman and Singer (2015) highlight the necessity of performing CXM and specifically managing interactions at various touchpoints with a customer journey perspective to address relevant issues that can affect the entire experience.

5.2.2 Augmented and virtual reality

As we begin to explore the emerging areas of AR and VR in the B2B landscape, it is important to acknowledge their evolutionary journey (Farah et al., 2019; Rauschnabel, Felix and Hinsch, 2019; tom Dieck & Han, 2022). Initially developed several decades ago, AR and VR have undergone remarkable transformations fueled by the communication activities of the players in these markets, as well as research activities across disciplines. These dynamic developments have resulted in a landscape characterized by new, changing, and often inconsistent terminologies, concepts, and definitions. To provide clarity and facilitate a comprehensive discourse, we first provide working definitions and background information specifically tailored to each technology's corresponding applications and implications in the B2B sector.

Following the xReality view (Rauschnabel, Felix, Hinsch, Shahab, & Alt, 2022), we use the abbreviation "XR" as an overarching umbrella term. It is an abbreviation for xReality, where the "X" can be seen as a placeholder for any form of new reality. Under the umbrella of XR, there are two main categories: AR and VR. In VR, users are completely isolated from the real world, typically by wearing a VR headset. VR experiences can

range from simple 360-degree environments to highly immersive virtual worlds, with telepresence as the force bridging the separation. Telepresence refers to the degree to which a user feels present in a virtual environment. Some use cases in VR, such as 360-degree videos, highly immersive games, and virtual meeting rooms or training, have received a great deal of public attention in recent years (e.g., Hennig- Thureau et al., 2023; Howard, Gutworth, & Jacobs, 2021). VR can be used to create completely new experiences that do not exist without the technology. In contrast to VR, AR allows users to perceive their physical environment and extend it with virtual content ranging from simplistic information (e.g., textual work instructions) to sophisticated 3D elements. Whereas VR is typically about telepresence, AR's conceptual core is local presence, which describes the degree to which users perceive virtual content as being present in their physical environment (Rauschnabel, Felix, et al., 2022). AR can be used with various devices, including standard smartphones and tablets, stationary installations, and wearable AR “smart” glasses. Common use cases include games (e. g., Pokémon Go), product visualizers (e.g., IKEA's AR app, which displays digital models of furniture in one's living room prior to its purchase), and navigation apps (e.g., Google Maps' “Live View” function).

Previous research on AR and VR marketing has primarily focused on its use in B2C contexts (Kumar, 2022). For example, research has shown that AR can be relevant throughout the marketing mix (Rauschnabel, Babin, et al., 2022). For instance, AR elements can be used to make products more interactive, as is the case with the IKEA Place app. By adding AR features, products can be extended virtually, as can be observed with Lego. Furthermore, the BICK FOUR framework (Rauschnabel, Babin, et al., 2022) shows that AR can support the marketing goals of branding, inspiring, convincing, and keeping. In this context, games or product visualizations can enable a company to build brand awareness, strengthen its brand image (Rauschnabel, Hüttl-Maack, Ahuvia, & Schein, 2024), and inspire (potential) customers. Furthermore, regarding the objective of convincing, purchase interest can be generated (Jung, Bae, Moorhouse, & Kwon, 2021; Kowalczyk, Siepmann, & Adler, 2021), for example, by displaying products virtually, and willingness to pay can be enforced (Heller, Chylinski, de Ruyter, Mahr, & Keeling, 2019a). Regarding the goal of retaining customers, customer loyalty can be increased (Dacko, 2017) by offering additional services or adding value via AR content.

Without a doubt, such studies underline the power of XR in marketing. However, the extent to which this research can be applied to a B2B context may be limited given the important differences between the B2B and B2C markets. As mentioned in the context of CX, B2B is not focused on individuals, but on formally managed organizations with different stakeholders, often with conflicting interests. (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981; Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Purmonen et al., 2023; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). As a result, there is a higher level of complexity and more nuanced interactions and interdependencies between the relevant parties (Dwyer et al., 1987). This can affect the intended use, usefulness, and types of use cases that are relevant in the B2B context.

To the best of our knowledge, only one study has assessed XR in a B2B context. Specifically, Boyd and Koles' (2019) conceptual article discusses the role of VR in the post-purchase stage in B2B marketing. The authors theorize that VR can improve the effectiveness of buyer–supplier coordination and asset management effectiveness, which are important determinants of buyer–supplier resource integration quality. By theorizing about the potential of VR use cases, Boyd and Koles (2019) lay out theoretical arguments on the power of VR in B2B marketing. In addition, they provide a motivation for further research in this field, for instance, as they state, “at the pre-purchase and purchase stages of the buying journey” (p. 596). Our study responds to this call by researching both VR and AR along the B2B customer journey with boots on the ground.

5.2.3 AR and VR in customer experience management

The use of new technologies can significantly influence CX through a combination of digital and physical touchpoints, providing buyers with added-value propositions along the customer journey (Breidbach, Brodie, & Hollebeek, 2014; Flavián et al., 2019; Kumar, Dixit, Javalgi, & Dass, 2016). Several studies have emphasized the necessity of designing optimal CXs that transcend conventional interpersonal and physical connections between buyers and sellers (Breidbach et al., 2014; Flavián et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2012). Channel integration can help generate a comprehensive experience by providing the benefits of multiple channels, and human–technology interactions across various realities can enhance CX (Breidbach et al., 2014; Flavián, Gurrea, & Orús, 2016; Grohmann, Spangenberg, & Sprott, 2007; Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). While conventional physical interactions, such as project meetings or on-site repairs, continue

to hold significance in many B2B contexts, modern B2B customer journeys increasingly rely on digital touchpoints. Interactions now occur to varying degrees through digital channels, such as search engines, digital service platforms, and social media (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; Hallikainen, Alamaki, & Laukkanen, 2019; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Firms are facing increasing media and channel fragmentation, with omnichannel management becoming the prevailing standard (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Consequently, firms face growing complexity in their efforts to design, manage, and control the experiences and journeys of individual buyers (e.g., Edelman & Singer, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The employment of digital technologies can result in new interactions between buyers and sellers. Additionally, it has the potential to facilitate existing touchpoints (Lundin & Kindström, 2023).

Flavián et al. (2019) proposed a “technology-enhanced customer experiences” framework for XR by building on the experience hierarchy of Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin (2014). Here, the customer “core experience” is considered the fundamental basis, encompassing the basic, traditional customer experience without substantial technological involvement. New technological developments in XR can support and extend the core experience in four different ways: (1) directly supported experiences; (2) indirectly supported experiences; (3) related empowered experiences; and (4) diverted empowered experiences that assist a core experience in different ways (Flavián et al., 2019):

Directly supported experiences: In the context of directly supported experiences, digital technology enhances a core real-world activity through direct interaction with the physical environment. A prime example of such an experience can be found in the case of a truck driver utilizing an AR navigation system integrated into their vehicle’s windshield while making deliveries to customer locations. While the central experience remains the act of driving from one destination to another, the technology, in this case, the AR navigation app, directly supports this experience by overlaying real-time directions, traffic updates, and estimated arrival times onto the driver’s field of vision. This augmentation serves to significantly improve the driver’s core experience, making the journey more informed, efficient, and aligned with the principles of AR experiences (Orús, Ibáñez-Sánchez, & Flavián, 2021), as digital navigation information seamlessly integrates with the surrounding physical world.

Indirectly supported experiences: These experiences refer to situations in which technologies aid customers' core experiences without seamless integration into the physical world. An illustration of indirectly supported experiences with technology can be observed when customers scan a QR code to receive further information on a YouTube Video (Flavián et al., 2019).

Related empowered experiences: Generally speaking, empowered experiences entail technologically enhanced experiences in which a technology creates a new experience that is either connected (related empowered experiences) or disconnected (diverted empowered experiences) from the customer's core experience. XR can generate technological enhancements of the CX that complement the core experience as new touchpoints. For instance, one such experience would be a 360-degree/VR video that potential attendees of a B2B trade show could view before attending the event to plan their visit and get an overview of the exhibitors (c.f., Flavián et al., 2019).

Diverted empowered experiences: Here, technologies generate novel encounters that are not directly related (or even unrelated) to the core experience but exert an influence on their ongoing experience. For example, an aerospace parts manufacturer specializing in creating high-precision components for aircraft could offer a diverted empowered experience to their B2B clients through a VR escape room team-building program. In this experience, client teams can participate in VR-based escape room challenges that require teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking. This diversion is unrelated to the manufacturing of aerospace parts but empowers clients by providing a unique and entertaining team-building activity that fosters collaboration among employees.

In conclusion, digital technologies have the potential to improve CX by supplementing core experiences or creating new experiences (i.e., new touchpoints; Flavián et al., 2019; Hilken et al., 2018; Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patrício, & Voss, 2015). Scholars are calling for research on how information technology can transform interactions between buyers and sellers (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). We propose that, specifically, XR can contribute to heightened perceptions of value and involve buyers in a highly contextual and experiential way. However, as noted, research on XR in B2B marketing, particularly CXM, is still in its infancy. Responding to this call in the current article, we discuss common XR use cases in the B2B domain through the lens of the technology-enhanced CX framework (Flavián et al., 2019).

5.3 Research gap and study objectives

In the previous sections, we emphasized the use of digital technologies to support B2B CXM, particularly highlighting the potential of AR and VR in marketing. Given the lack of research and the novelty of the topic, we concluded that exploratory and theory-building research is best suited for extending the currently limited knowledge in this field, documenting actual B2B practices, and moving toward an organizing framework.

To better understand XR's potential and actual use in B2B marketing, we begin with the assumption that XR can play a central role in the CXM concepts of B2B companies. More specifically, based on our assessment of the extant general XR literature, we anticipate that XR can extend existing and create new touchpoints along the customer journey and, by doing so, enhance the core experience of actors involved in professional purchasing activities by providing them with empowered and supported experiences. Furthermore, since CXM is strategic, we propose that B2B firms integrate them in a goal-oriented way by exploiting specific benefits.

Against this background, our aims in the current research are to identify and describe common marketing use cases in B2B and organize them in a coherent framework that draws on both the CXM literature and the business relationship literature. In this context, we aim to answer the following research question: *How can AR/VR technologies support B2B customer experience management?*

This general research question encompasses three main sub-questions that we attempt to answer and were reflected in the interview guide used for the qualitative expert interviews:

1. *What kinds of XR use cases do B2B firms currently implement in their CXM?*
2. *How can XR contribute to CXM concepts in B2B companies?*
3. *What benefits do B2B firms anticipate from the use of XR technology in CXM?*

The next section describes the research approach used to provide answers to the research question and its sub-questions.

5.4 Methodology

5.4.1 Research design

To answer the proposed research question, we conduct a qualitative study by applying a case study approach with semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). The case study approach is suggested for researchers to create a deeper understanding of theory building (Bonoma, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). This method allows us to generate valuable insights into the various structures and processes within the respective companies, but at the same time explore specific perceptions of pathways and challenges behind the individual use cases.

5.4.2 Data collection & analysis

Our primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kumar et al., 1993; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) with 21 participants from 11 different firms who had prior experience with XR technologies in the B2B sector. Most of these interviews were conducted on an individual basis, while three were conducted as group interviews with multiple participants. The reason for this was that, in these cases, a group of people was found who had worked together on a specific AR/VR project. Group interviews were conducted to allow the respondents to stimulate and complement each other's responses. Interactions among participants can generate new perspectives and insights that may not emerge in individual interviews. For this reason, group interviews were considered a valuable addition.

The data were collected from late 2021 to mid-2022. We used specific criteria to select companies with prior XR experience in marketing. We insured that the informants in our sample included different types of B2B markets (Backhaus & Voeth, 2014), including project business ($n = 4$), product business ($n = 3$), supply business ($n = 3$), and system business ($n = 1$), to incorporate insights from a broader set of firms. Of the participating companies, seven were active in manufacturing industries, three represented the professional services industry, and the remaining firm acted within the financial services industry. To ensure anonymity of the participating companies, we do not present use cases in detail. Appendix A provides a summary of the participating firms.

Our informants represent a broad range of backgrounds and demographics, as outlined in Appendix B. All had been involved in either the adoption or operation of XR technologies in the firms. With one exception (face-to-face), all interviews were conducted online using video conferencing tools and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Eisenhardt, 1989), resulting in 250 pages of transcripts. In addition, handwritten field notes were taken and included in our data analysis as well as various internal and external documents that respondents had shared with us. This triangulation of data allows for a more reliable and in-depth analysis of the materials (Yin, 1994) and, furthermore, allows for the verification of interview statements with additional sources.

Qualitative research should be grounded in existing theory, while it also generates unique insights into a specific, under-researched topic (Pratt, 2008). In our case, we incorporated previous work on XR in B2B marketing, B2B customer journeys, and CXM (as discussed in the theory section). We used a mixed inductive–deductive approach following the recommendations of the Gioia methodology (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia, 2021; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), an established procedure in marketing and management research. To answer our research question, we analyzed the collected data in two consecutive steps. Looking at the interview material at first glance, one finds a variety of different aspects and categories. To obtain a general overview, we open-coded the transcripts in the first step (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This enabled us to thematize the material and identify different use cases (Miles & Huberman, 1984). We included a data structure, as indicated by Gioia et al. (2013), and it shows the aggregation of data into use cases. In a second step, these use cases were attached to the four stages of the customer journey, where they illustrated the potential for enhancing the customer experience according to our respondents. At the same time, we assigned the use cases to the categories of Flavián et al.'s (2019) framework for technology-enabled customer experiences.

5.5 Findings

Our study aims to answer the research question of how sellers can use XR technologies at different stages of a B2B customer journey to enhance CX. To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kumar et al.,

1993; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Based on the data from the interviews conducted with XR-experienced practitioners, we identified four main marketing-related AR/VR use cases that demonstrated the ability to support the customer experience: (1) product or project visualization, (2) event-based engagement, (3) remote support, and (4) employee training.

Below, we describe each use case in more detail, discuss its role in the customer journey and CX, and discuss the anticipated benefits B2B managers expressed before integrating the technology-enhanced customer experiences (Flavián et al., 2019). We consolidated the findings into a coherent framework (Fig. 1).²

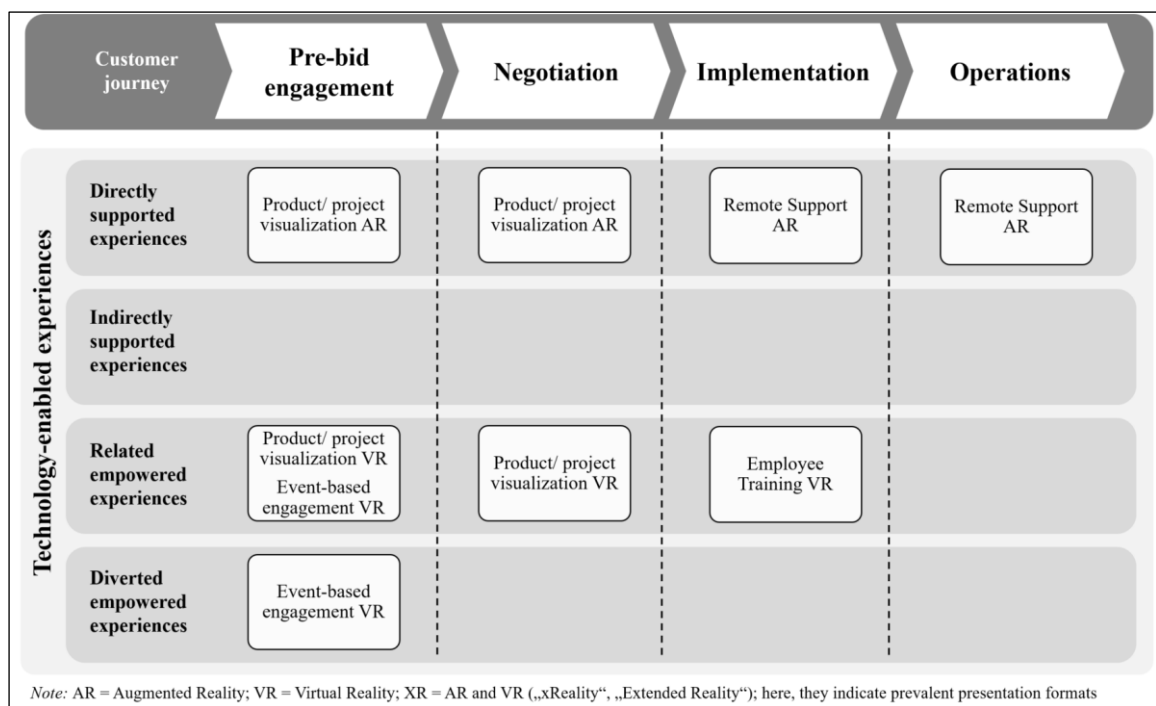


Figure 5-1. Study III – XR use cases along the B2B customer journey.

5.5.1 Product or project visualization

5.5.1.1 Description

B2B firms can utilize XR to visualize and demonstrate complex or highly customized offers tailored to individual buyer needs. For instance, a manufacturer of professional kitchen supplies in our study used an AR tool to display professional kitchen appliances

² The categorization of the use cases in the technology-enhanced experiences framework (Flavián et al., 2019) was discussed with the authors (Carlos Flavián, Sergio Ibáñez-Sánchez, Carlos Orús) of the framework. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their valuable feedback.

in restaurant kitchens. This use case extends to visualizations for substantial project proposals, such as factories or power plants. Among the manufacturing companies we interviewed, four had explored XR for product and project visualization. While three of these companies had actively integrated it into B2B customer journeys, one was still in the development and testing phases. It is important to note that, unlike many B2C use cases, XR is typically used as a supporting tool in face-to-face interactions. For example, a salesperson can have an AR app installed on their tablet and operate it together with the customer. Most likely, this is justified by the complexity of products and the “standards” of personal interactions in B2B.

AR visualization is especially valuable in situations in which the physical context matters (Von der Au, Rauschnabel, Felix, & Hinsch, 2023). For instance, an interviewee (**Michael**) from the above mentioned B2B kitchen supplier highlighted the advantages of AR in realistically visualizing the sizes and proportions of professional kitchen equipment. The company achieved this by virtually showcasing kitchen supplies, such as a professional dishwasher, within an existing kitchen or restaurant setting. Such a setting allows for a more personalized presentation of products (e.g., what does a dishwasher look like in your kitchen versus in a standard restaurant kitchen in a brochure), further information (e.g., space requirements with open versus closed doors) and by doing so, contributes to the reduction of complexity and information overload. Moreover, such tools can contribute to the innovative brand image of the seller. However, VR visualizations might prove more effective in situations in which the physical context is absent, inaccessible, or undesirable. Another informant (**Tom**) reported a possible use case in which planned factories were visualized in VR. While acknowledging VR’s potential here, such use cases were less prevalent in our study.

5.5.1.2 Role in CXM and anticipated benefits

Throughout the interviews, we observed that product or project visualization via AR and VR mainly supported the CXM in the first two engagement phases. This was because this visualization typically supported sales teams by showcasing and demonstrating complex products prior to a purchase.

In the pre-bid engagement phase, the buyer is considering possible matches of the business requirements with the supplier’s capabilities so that added value can be created

from the business relationship. Product or project visualization via AR allows a seller to show a (potential) buyer how “well” a specific product fits into the buyer’s business or the existing landscape of the buyer’s business (Kumar et al., 2024). The buyers themselves can imagine the seller’s product or service in a facilitated way and, by doing so, enhance their understanding of an offer. This can, in case the product really matches well with the customer’s business, improve brand perceptions, generate buying interest, or increase existing interest as well as a willingness to pay. In the B2C literature, such an effect has been documented repeatedly by showing that AR visualizations can trigger purchase decisions through numerous mechanisms, including reduced imagination gaps (Hilken et al., 2021), better evaluations (Von der Au et al., 2023), endowment effects (Carrozzi et al., 2019), and inspiration (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). In a nutshell, product visualizers, typically in AR, contribute to CXM by offering “directly supported experiences” that extend a brand’s core offerings (Flavián et al., 2019).

During the negotiation phase of the B2B customer journey, buyers specify their requirements regarding a product, while the seller tries to respond to these needs and possibly finds or creates a compatible product. The customer’s initial interest is already present, and the finer details of the product or project are negotiated. Traditionally, buyers have used abstract descriptions of customized products or expensive/ unpractical prototypes. Visualizations in AR can clarify how, for example, a specific industrial kitchen machine needs to be tailored in terms of size to fit a customer’s existing environment. By doing so, such AR visualizations provide benefits beyond the core experience, in particular “directly related” experiences (Flavián et al., 2019).

In addition to AR, visualizing a product or project via VR also enables new customer experiences. For instance, if a seller shows a buyer how a specific machine can be integrated into a planned factory building. The buyer can then experience and assess this machine together with other anticipated plans (e.g., interior or other machines) in the pre-bid engagement phase. Furthermore, such use cases can also assist both the seller and the buyer in understanding the product’s fit to their requirements and needs and facilitate the negotiation of details (c.f., Azuma, 1997; Hilken, de Ruyter, Chylinski, Mahr, & Keeling, 2017; Hoyer, Kroschke, Schmitt, Kraume, & Shankar, 2020; Yim, Chu, & Sauer, 2017). This leads to our suggestion that product or project visualization via VR also qualifies as a related empowered experience in the negotiation phase B2B customer journey.

The main benefits to be expected by applying XR technologies are facilitated and enhanced information exchange (e.g., more realistic, vivid, and personalized), reduced costs (e.g., 3D/CAD models exist for most products that can be integrated quite easily into XR), reduced waste, and their impact on CX. For instance, one participant stated the following:

“Because we have a lot of products that require extensive explanation and it’s incredibly difficult for customers to understand if we only show them on paper. That’s why the visualization is very helpful. It always provides an ‘aha’ moment, too” (Lisa).

5.5.2 Event-based engagement

5.5.2.1 Description

We employ the term “event-based engagement” to describe use cases that complement events, such as trade fairs. The most common approach we were able to observe was the presence of XR booths and demonstrations at physical trade fairs. In this context, XR has two main purposes: first, to present content, for example, tours through a factory or the visualization of products. Similarly, an interviewee (**Jack**) stated that XR can be used for recruitment purposes by demonstrating virtually how the firm is designed and operates, which enhances employer branding (and branding in general). Second, it can serve as an engaging attraction at events. For instance, XR can gain the attention of visitors to a brand’s booth and contribute to an emotionalized or innovative brand image. It is important to note the potential overlaps with product visualization tools because many B2B brands use XR to showcase products. However, in the previous use case, a seller typically displays customized offerings to a potential buyer, such as a particular machine, as part of negotiations or specific offers. In contrast, in the context of events, the content is typically more generic and sometimes even entertaining, and thus requires presentation of all the equipment a company offers, with more focus on the overall brand. Another potential application is to use XR to host or participate in purely virtual events, including the use of XR booths. In this context, XR does not complement a physical event but rather replaces it, typically in VR, or allows individuals to join an existing event through VR (**Tom**).

Two of the participating firms in our sample have used VR technologies for engagement at trade fairs. One participant mentioned that they had considered using AR but ultimately decided against it because the focus of the firms was on completely virtual trade show booths. Thus, we conclude that AR for event-based engagement is possible, VR tends to be more prevalent in today's B2B marketing practice.³ Conceptually speaking, VR in event-based communication can range from a simple add-on to a physical experience (i.e., a VR device at a booth) to being a core element or attraction to being the event itself (i.e., an event exclusively in VR).

5.5.2.2 Role in CXM and anticipated benefits

Our informants expressed that event-based engagement via VR could mainly support the pre-bid engagement phase. VR is most useful in scenarios in which the physical space is limited, the objects to showcase are either not yet available or too bulky for convenience, or for highly immersive—and primarily entertaining—experiences. For example, one respondent highlighted how VR could effectively showcase cleanrooms used in high-tech manufacturing. Traditional trade show booths do not have space for a full-size cleanroom. Furthermore, one of our respondents working in professional services concluded the following:

“The goal was to make it possible to display large exhibits in small areas. And to emotionalize the experience much more at that point” (Harry).

By showcasing the possible cooperation between buyer and seller, for example, in what a tailored product or project could look like, various results can be shown. In this way, enthusiasm and creativity can be fostered, and new needs and opportunities can be discovered. A joyful experience with a trade fair can enable a potential buyer to associate positive attitudes with the company, which can lead to a motivational state of inspiration and increased engagement (Nielsen, 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2019; Van Kerrebroeck, Brengman, & Willems, 2017). If the content is strongly linked to the core experience or a seller's specific offer, then event-based engagement via VR can be classified as a related, empowered experience.

³ Note: AR use cases on events are typically employed for product/project visualizations (direct supported experiences, as discussed previously).

However, there are also cases where VR at trade fairs has relatively little to do with the seller's actual offering and is mainly used for entertainment and gaming purposes. This can mainly help sellers position themselves to potential buyers as an innovative, future-oriented company and strengthen its brand image (Javornik et al., 2021; Rauschnabel et al., 2019; Rauschnabel, Babin, et al., 2022; Sung, Bae, Han, & Kwon, 2021). Because the buyer's core experience is not the focus in such cases, we assigned this type of use case to the category of diverted empowered experiences.

As discussed, also AR might be effectively used at events, yet typically for product/project visualizations and not typically for event-based engagement. Some informants reported observations of gamified AR experiences to explore the product, which informants tend to see more as a "*gimmick*" (**Julian**). Thus, we exclude the role of AR from further discussion as event-based entertainment.

5.5.3 Employee training

5.5.3.1 Description

B2B firms often offer complex products, and therefore buyers require certain skills to operate them after purchase. Thus, offering some sort of training and guidance is a core element of many B2B offerings. We identified XR's potential to support training. During employee training, VR is used as a pedagogical approach to display learning content. This can include entirely virtual learning environments, such as virtual classrooms, as well as 360-degree content.

The interviewees generally agreed that XR can be an effective training environment. We observed the training of both the seller's employees and buyers. VR is mainly used for employee training in manufacturing industries, for example, regarding the operation of certain machines, but we also found a case in the financial services industry, specifically in B2B insurance services. Four firms considered XR technologies for training, with all relying on VR. Two companies had successfully implemented this use case, while one was still in the development phase. However, in one instance, the benefits did not appear to outweigh the costs. As a result, the company decided against adopting the proposal, at least for the time being.

5.5.3.2 Role in CXM and anticipated benefits

Our respondents indicated that employee training via VR can support CXM during the implementation phase of the B2B customer journey. VR usually allows individuals to train independently of their actual environment (off-the-job training). The literature discusses the DICE criteria (Bailenson, 2018) for VR, highlighting its effectiveness in addressing topics that are dangerous (e.g., radiation exposure, as mentioned by one informant), impossible (e.g., rare situations), counterproductive (e.g., errors halting an assembly line or learning about common mistakes in sales training), or expensive (e.g., product destruction). While our informants did not explicitly mention this framework, their examples aligned with its principles. One of our informants summarized this as follows:

“We have to ensure that they receive the proper training, that they are capable of working in this area, and that it is expensive on the one hand, but also very time-consuming and theoretical, in other words, very dry. And so we thought we could make the whole thing a bit more hands-on with virtual reality and increase the learning effect. By presenting the environment virtually and then offering individual training courses in the virtual world” (Jack).

To simplify product or project implementation, the seller can also provide training to the customer’s employees. This is particularly useful in potentially dangerous situations, rare extreme cases, or when errors in handling can be counterproductive in terms of generating value for the customer or can end up being expensive (Bailenson, 2018). Most commonly, training on new products or specific projects is carried out using virtual products in VR. This allows the creation of a realistic environment with minimized risk and costs, testing scenarios (e.g., emergency situations), and a new experience that supports the buyer’s core experience. As a result, we categorized the use case of buyer’s employee training via VR as a related empowered experience, according to Flavián et al. (2019).

Although our informants only revealed use cases for VR training, we recognize that AR could also be relevant for training purposes in B2B companies. More specifically, AR learning content (e.g., work instructions or background information) could be overlaid on a machine and train a buyer’s employees on the job. Such use cases could typically represent directly supported experiences. However, as we did not identify any such use

cases for AR learning in our interviews, we do not discuss them further and leave them out of Fig. 1.

5.5.4 Remote support

5.5.4.1 Description

As B2B services are often very consulting-intensive, customer support is a core element for many B2B offerings. Traditionally, service technicians visit customers, or customers request support remotely via telephone or other communication channels. XR, in particular AR, allows a new form of remote support (sometimes also called “remote assist”). Here, service technicians can link directly to the customer’s field of vision and display information where it is needed, providing immediate assistance to customers without travel. This is especially helpful in cases of unexpected problems with the seller’s machines, resulting in costly downtime for the buyer or for regular machine inspections, without the need for a seller’s employee to be personally on site. Typically, AR headsets (e.g., Microsoft HoloLens) or handheld devices (e.g., smartphones and tablets) are utilized for this purpose, depending on the specific requirements, availability, and safety standards in factory buildings. Five of the companies participating in our study considered using XR technologies for remote support, with four of them successfully implementing AR in this area. One firm reported a lack of efficiency and decided against continued use for now. However, they remain open to future uses in general.

In the present use case, the commonly used approach was AR, the visualization of which was especially valuable in situations in which the physical context mattered (Rauschnabel, Felix, Heller, & Hinsch, 2024; Von der Au et al., 2023). One interviewee described the use of AR in such a way that in the event of problems with a machine, a support employee could connect directly to the operator via AR headsets and thus see what was happening on site with the buyer. Accordingly, the employee could supplement important helpful elements with AR features and provide instructions, for example, by referring to corresponding parts of the machine with arrows. This helps to “simplify this bidirectional communication” (**Tom**). This informant also stated the following:

“And, if you really look at the facts, yes, you have a better first-time fix rate. That means you can find the error faster and also fix it. These were the main reasons

why AR was introduced in support, besides the whole issue of communication problems” (Tom).

5.5.4.2 Role in CXM and anticipated benefits

Our results show that remote support via AR was mainly used during the implementation phase as well as during the fourth and final phase of the B2B customer journey, the operations phase. By offering remote support, the seller can respond quickly and accurately to problems encountered by the buyer during the implementation of the product while reducing travel (which implies cost savings and sustainability). This prevents, for example, cost-intensive, lengthy breakdowns in fields such as manufacturing. Therefore, a seller can offer buyers added value through AR content and increase customer loyalty through improved service in the form of cost reductions and increased communication efficiency. Remote support via AR technologies supports the customer’s experience in a targeted manner by simplifying implementation. If a specific project has already been realized, such as the construction of a factory building, or a product, such as a specific industrial machine, is already in use, the operations phase is reached. While the product is in daily use by the customer, remote services via AR can be a beneficial use case in the context of after-sales services. Costly product failures here can again be prevented by providing the buyer with prompt support without the need for a service technician from the seller traveling to the site (improved sustainability through a reduction of emissions). This can provide the buyer with assurance that the seller offers ongoing, lasting support and maintains long-term relationships. Moreover, this can simplify and improve communication between buyers and sellers during and after sales, reduce costs, and increase customer loyalty in the long run (Dacko, 2017; Rauschnabel, Babin, et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is important to note that AR remote support solutions are standard software tools offered by firms such as Microsoft, TeamViewer, and PTC; thus, the required investments can often be manageable.

For these reasons, we categorized AR remote support during both phases of the B2B customer journey as directly supported experiences (Flavián et al., 2019).

5.5.5 Consolidating the findings in a coherent framework

To summarize, the four use cases we found could be categorized as directly supported, related empowered, and diverted empowered experiences along the B2B customer journey. What is noticeable here is that no indirectly supported experiences could be achieved through the XR use cases we identified, as Flavián et al. (2019) suggested. Fig. 1 presents our framework. It is particularly striking that product or project visualization appeared to be the most versatile use case because it could provide directly supported as well as related empowered experiences during the first two phases of the B2B customer journey – pre-bid engagement and negotiation. Furthermore, AR's role lies in creating directly supported experiences. In contrast, VR applications typically enabled empowered and diverted empowered experiences.

5.5.5.1 Responsibilities for augmented and virtual reality

Our findings replicated a recent call in the B2C-literature (e.g., Rauschnabel, Felix, et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021) to separate AR and VR based on the characteristics of a use case. For example, AR was found to be more appropriate in situations where a physical object is relevant, while VR was the format of choice when something did not yet exist (e. g., a planned factory building) or existed only as a hypothetical scenario (e.g., emergency training). However, we also found that AR and VR are managed by the same people and departments in companies (commonly in digitalization, product management or innovation management) – often in cross-disciplinary collaborations (e.g., with sales, IT, data security, compliance).

5.5.5.2 Anticipated benefits of augmented and virtual reality

Our informants expressed several anticipated benefits of using AR and VR in and beyond their CXM. We grouped these benefits into five categories: (1) branding, (2) relationship, (3) transactions, (4) costs, (5) and sustainability. Table 1 summarizes these categories and lists examples of the benefits expressed in the interviews.

Table 5-1. Study III – Benefits of XR use cases along the B2B customer journey.

Benefit categories	Example benefits expressed in the interviews
Branding	• Promoting an innovative brand image • Clarifying what a brand stands for (e.g., through virtual tours)
Relationship	• Fostering interactions between buyers and seller • Improved customer service • Increased communication efficiency • Enhanced learning (e.g., among a customer's employees) • Increased loyalty
Transactions	• Facilitation of imagination and understanding of products and services • Reduction of purchase risks through clearer presentation of (complex) products • Triggering/increasing purchase interest
Costs	• Reduction of costs, for instance, by showing virtual products instead of physical prototypes or by reducing travel • Better use of space and time (e.g., by making use of event space more efficiently)
Sustainability	• Reduction of waste (e.g., by using virtual versus physical prototypes or demo products) • Reduction of carbon emissions through reduced travel

5.6 Discussion

AR and VR have gained recognition as powerful tools in B2B marketing, as evidenced by the existing literature (Boyd & Koles, 2019; Royo-Vela & Velasquez Serrano, 2021). In addition, reports from the business sector confirm that B2B companies are not only experimenting with XR, but also actively incorporating it into their marketing, and more specifically customer experience management (e.g., Adobe, 2022; LinkedIn, 2023). Despite this growing interest and relevance, there is a substantial research gap in the academic field, making the available academic material insufficient to guide practical applications.

Considering this gap, our study adopted an exploratory and theory-building approach to examine actual XR use cases within B2B marketing. Specifically, we used CXM as a foundational theoretical lens to answer our overall research question: How can AR/VR technologies support B2B customer experience management? Our research uncovered four main use cases: (1) product/project visualization, (2) event-based engagement, (3)

employee training, and (4) remote support. We closely described and examined these use cases and highlighted their current and potential impact on B2B marketing practices, including branding (e.g., creating an innovative brand image), relationships (e.g., loyalty), transactions (e.g., facilitation sales), cost reduction (e.g., lower costs for prototypes), and sustainability (e.g., reduction of emissions).

Building on the framework of technology-enabled experiences rooted in the XR literature (Flavián et al., 2019), we categorized the identified use cases into three distinct experiences (see Fig. 1): (1) direct supported experiences, (2) related empowered experiences, and (2) diverted empowered experiences. Echoing Flavián et al. (2019), we also noted that indirectly supported experiences appeared to be less relevant to the application of XR in B2B marketing. Next, we systematically integrated the use cases within a customer journey model. Our findings show that these XR can substantially contribute to CXM along the customer journey.

We also uncovered that both AR and VR have unique strengths. For instance, VR can be used in situations in which a product or situation does not exist (e.g., a planned factory building) or is not desirable (e.g., simulation of an emergency); in contrast, AR is beneficial if the physical context is existent, and the content has a specific contextual relevance (Von der Au et al., 2023; Rauschnabel, Felix, et al., 2022), such as size comparisons. Likewise, direct supported experiences are typically realized in AR, whereas most of the cases we found for related and diverted empowered experiences employed VR. Thus, while neither AR nor VR is superior to the other, each warrants different considerations from a customer perspective, highlighting the need for a differentiated approach to their application.

5.6.1 Theoretical contributions

Our research provides two key contributions to theory:

First, our research advances the B2B marketing literature, in particular with a CXM focus. Our work extends early research on new technologies and responds to numerous calls to keep up with new technological advancements. One of the key contributions of this study was to “establish or make known something that has yet to be established” (MacInnis, 2011, p. 143) by introducing and delineating XR’s role in B2B CXM. So far, the scarce

literature has discussed XR's role in B2B loosely among other technological advancements (De Jong et al., 2021) or theorized VR as a tool in the B2B post purchase phase (Boyd & Koles, 2019). We extend the literature with a more "holistic" view on XR's role by discussing several types of experiences throughout the entire customer journey. By doing so, our study shows that XR can enhance the core experience of a B2B firm in three different ways: First, through directly supporting the core experience (e.g., by supporting a customer in the early stage of the buying process through AR product visualizations at the intended place where a product will be used). Second, through related empowered experiences (e.g., visualizing product-related content in VR). Third, by using XR content that "itself creates a new experience that is not directly related to the user's core experience but influences what they are actually experiencing" (Flavián et al., 2019; p. 554) – for instance, by providing entertaining and engaging content on fairs. Moreover, we identify and describe common use objectives B2B firms aim to achieve XR. This list of objectives can guide future scholarly endeavors by presenting managerially relevant outcome variables.

Second, in addition to identifying and describing XR use cases, our study also contributes to the B2B-CXM literature with an "integration contribution" by providing "a simple and parsimonious perspective that accommodates complexity" by showing how existing practices and concepts (i.e., use cases, journey models, and CXM) are related (MacInnis, 2011, p. 146). More specifically, we contribute to the B2B CXM literature by presenting a framework that combines and integrates the technology enabled experiences framework (Flavián et al., 2019) with an established B2B customer journey model (Brady et al., 2005; Tuli et al., 2007; Witell et al., 2020). This framework organizes the identified four key use cases as digital (VR) or phygital (AR) touchpoints. It presents a parsimonious overview to better understand XR's role in a B2B context.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on AR and VR marketing in general (Kumar, 2022). Over the last few years, this stream of research has predominantly focused on B2C applications, with very few exceptions (e.g., Boyd & Koles, 2019) and documented its potential to impact core variables that marketers target, such as brand management (Rauschnabel et al., 2019), increasing sales (Tan et al., 2021), and achieving higher prices (Heller, Chylinski, de Ruyter, Mahr and Keeling, 2019b). However, we also note that, given the lack of technological prevalence, many of these studies take place in lab settings. For instance, many papers have used VR in a lab setting because the diffusion

of VR devices in mass markets is still very low. Likewise, many actual AR use cases can be employed on smartphones, but the actual benefits arise from hands-free use on a headset. B2B firms often have a core advantage, particularly by having more clearly delimited markets or fewer customers with higher sales volumes, where investments in particular devices could even be delivered by the firm. Thus, extending the XR marketing literature to B2B is an important contribution of this study because it maps many of today's real-world applications very well — maybe, in some regard, better than studies and scenarios in the B2C literature.

5.6.2 Managerial implications

Our study acknowledges the growing market relevance of AR and VR technologies within the B2B CXM context. This recognition not only underscores the theoretical significance of our research but also aligns with current industry trends, affirming its practical applicability and importance. In this context, this research offers valuable practical insights that directly cater to B2B marketing professionals who seek to enhance their CXM strategies.

First, this study outlines the specific roles that AR and VR technologies can play in enhancing the CX. This practical information guides B2B marketers in understanding where these technologies might fit best within their CXM strategies and how they can create value.

Second, we offer real-world examples of how AR and VR can be effectively leveraged to help marketers make informed decisions. For each documented use case, we offer a detailed exploration of the characteristics, manifestations, and anticipated benefits. These practical insights empower B2B marketers with information on the potential returns on investment and expected improvements in CX associated with AR and VR implementation.

Third, by categorizing use cases based on their significance at different stages of the customer journey, this research provides additional guidance for B2B marketers. This categorization allows marketers to align their AR and VR strategies with the specific demands and expectations of customers at distinct touchpoints along their journey.

5.6.3 Limitations and avenues for further research

There are several directions for further research. Some of them have their origin in the limitations of this study, others in the remaining gaps in the literature regarding exchange and interaction in business markets.

First, our qualitative study provides, in a sense, cross-sectional insights from a limited number of industry representatives. While we continued to add interviews until a point of saturation was reached, it is possible that interviews from certain industries that we did not include in our research and changes in the market could have provided additional insights that this study does not provide (e.g., AR's role in training, as discussed in Section 5.3). Replications and extensions can address this limitation.

The purpose of this research was to analyze how AR and VR technologies can support B2B CXM, and thus, we discussed the findings on a high level of abstraction (e.g., the use cases or anticipated benefits/objectives). Our insights can provide starting points for many scholarly endeavors that could go into more depth (e.g., specific manifestations of use cases) or beyond this study. Likewise, future research could study if and when XR actually leads to the expected objectives/benefits. For instance, XR's profitability could be assessed using quantitative, longitudinal research designs that include both self-reported and actual sales data. Such studies could, for instance, apply dyadic datasets with insights from both sellers and buyers. In addition to financial outcomes, research might also assess the impact on a firm's sustainability performance (e.g., does XR significantly reduce emissions?). Future studies might require specific groundwork, such as measurement scales for B2B-specific constructs, which represents another avenue for additional examination.

Alongside XR, many B2B companies currently explore the use of AI and data analytics, blockchain technology, and industrial metaverses (including digital twin technology). In the end, customer journeys and the experiences customers have encompassed all these building blocks, as well as any possible interaction effects among them. Future studies could analyze the synergies and challenges associated with combining these technologies for enhanced B2B CXM.

Finally, this research focused on the customer side of experience management along journeys. However, exchanges in business markets typically encompass a series of interactions between buyers and sellers in which both sides regularly assess their

interactions with the other actor. Consequently, industrial manufacturers and professional service providers also implement supplier relationship management in their procurement activities. To maintain stable and valuable relationships with their most important suppliers, they need to systematically manage supplier journeys by defining corresponding touchpoints and the way they wish to interact with their suppliers at these touchpoints. Here too, AR and VR technologies may constitute useful building blocks. However, to the best of our knowledge, research has not yet addressed how XR can be and is used in the context of supplier experience management. Future research may fruitfully attempt to close this gap.

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5.8 Appendix

Appendix A. Case descriptions

Table 5-2. Study III – Appendix A. Case descriptions.

Identifier	Industrial sector	Company size⁴	Headquarters	Use Cases
S1	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	Germany	Remote support
S2	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	Germany	Product visualization
S3	Professional Services	Small-sized	Germany	Product visualization
S4	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	Germany	Remote support
S5	Manufacturing industries	Medium-sized	Germany	Employee training
S6	Professional services	Small-sized	Germany	Entertainment
S7	Professional services	Large-sized	Germany	Entertainment
S8	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	France	Employee training, remote support, product visualization
S9	Financial services	Large-sized	Germany	Employee training
S10	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	Germany	Remote support, employee training
S11	Manufacturing industries	Large-sized	Germany	Remote support, product visualization

⁴ In terms of number of employees: large sized >500, medium-sized >50, small-sized <50.

Appendix B. Interview respondents

Table 5-3. Study III – Appendix B. Interview respondents.

Identifier	Gender, age	Industrial sector	Industry experience	Department	Company affiliation
Tom	m, thirties	Manufacturing industries	16 yrs	Product management	S1
Susan	f, thirties	Manufacturing industries	16 yrs	Product management	S1
Peter	m, thirties	Manufacturing industries	14 yrs	Innovation management	S1
Mark	m, thirties	Manufacturing industries	7 yrs	Product management	S1
Mary	f, twenties	Manufacturing industries	6 yrs	Sales management	S1
Michael	m, fifties	Manufacturing industries	4 yrs	Campaign management	S2
Oliver	m, thirties	Professional services	7 yrs	General management	S3
Fred	m, fifties	Manufacturing industries	2 yrs	Digitalization	S4
Jack	m, twenties	Manufacturing industries	1 yr	Innovation management	S5
Harry	m, fifties	Professional services	17 yrs	General management	S6
John	m, thirties	Professional services	7 yrs	Digitalization	S7
Lisa	f, forties	Manufacturing industries	6 yrs	Product management	S8
Edgar	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	15 yrs	Innovation management	S8
Arthur	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	16 yrs	Sales	S8
Patrick	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	8 yrs	Section management	S8
Walter	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	1 yr	Digitalization	S8
Steven	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	3 yrs	Digitalization	S8
Lucas	m, thirties	Financial services	3 yrs	Innovation management	S9
Julian	m, thirties	Manufacturing industries	11 yrs	Sales and Marketing	S10
Henry	m, fifties	Manufacturing industries	24 yrs	Automatization	S10
Ben	m, forties	Manufacturing industries	10 yrs	IT	S11

6 Contributions of this dissertation

6.1 Theoretical contributions

6.1.1 Advancing SRM research: Bridging fragmentation and integrating cross-disciplinary perspectives

This dissertation, particularly in Studies I and II, directly addresses the fragmented nature of existing SRM research and the absence of a holistic perspective, as identified by Park et al. (2010). Study I also responds to the lack of a cross-disciplinary synthesis between different research perspectives, as highlighted by Su and Yang (2017), by offering the first comprehensive scoping review and bibliometric analysis that considers both B2B marketing and supply chain management perspectives. This approach systematically maps thematic, conceptual, and methodological trends across disciplines, providing a more integrated understanding of SRM.

Although key SRM topics, such as supplier selection, performance evaluation, and trust-building mechanisms, have been widely studied, the existing literature remains fragmented. Many contributions have examined these themes in isolation and have lacked an integrative perspective that connects them across the relationship lifecycle or disciplinary boundaries (Park et al., 2010). This dissertation addresses this limitation by conducting a scoping review and bibliometric analysis that systematically maps SRM research across the topics of B2B marketing and supply chain management. As a result, it reveals how thematic silos have formed and identifies opportunities to develop more cohesive and holistic conceptual frameworks for understanding SRM.

Furthermore, the dissertation uncovers critical gaps in the existing literature, such as the underrepresentation of topics like relationship termination, conflict management, and the supplier's perspective. By identifying these "white spots," the dissertation provides a foundation for future theoretical development, highlighting areas in which existing SRM theory is either silent or underdeveloped.

Moreover, by systematically comparing the conceptualizations of SRM in B2B marketing and supply chain management research, the dissertation responds to the call from Su and Yang (2017) for greater cross-disciplinary integration. It demonstrates the distinct but complementary emphases of each field (such as relational governance in marketing and operational efficiency in supply chain management) and identifies intersections at which

synthesis is both possible and necessary, including the performance impact of SRM and sustainability concerns. This cross-disciplinary synthesis offers a path for bridging disciplinary silos and advancing a more comprehensive understanding of SRM.

Study II deepens the theoretical contribution initiated in Study I by empirically addressing the fragmented understanding of how supplier relationships are managed across their full lifecycle, an issue highlighted by Park et al. (2010) and Möller et al. (2006). Whereas Study I identifies the siloed nature of SRM, Study II operationalizes this integration by offering a structured, empirically grounded supplier journey framework. This framework extends Möller et al.'s (2006) three-phase SRM model by adding a fourth phase, reactivation, that turns the lifecycle model into one that captures a more dynamic and circular journey. Study II highlights the touchpoints, transitions, and feedback loops that carry relationships forward—or backward—over time.

In doing so, Study II addresses a critical theoretical gap: the lack of journey-oriented, empirically validated models that explain how firms manage and adapt supplier relationships over time. It responds to the calls from both Möller et al. (2006) and Park et al. (2010) for dynamic, practice-informed SRM frameworks that move beyond static or function-specific views. Moreover, by grounding the supplier journey in qualitative data from 43 semi-structured interviews across industries, the study reflects real-world SRM practices that blend strategic, relational, and technological dimensions.

Finally, by incorporating the role of digital technologies, particularly SRM platforms and AI, into the phases of the supplier journey, Study II adds a technological layer to SRM theory. Digitalization emerged not as a bolt-on but as an organizing principle, reconfiguring touchpoints, roles, and processes and enabling ecosystem-level coordination. This contribution is especially relevant given the ongoing uncertainty about how such technologies are altering buyer–supplier interactions. As Obal and Lancioni (2013) as well as Ritter and Pedersen (2020) observed, although digitalization's impact on customer relationships in consumer markets has received considerable attention, its influence on interorganizational relationships in B2B contexts—particularly between buyers and suppliers—remains underexplored.

In sum, Study II offers a theoretically robust and practically actionable model that complements the conceptual groundwork of Study I with a dynamic, journey-oriented, and technology-integrated understanding of SRM. This not only fills a persistent gap in

the literature but also provides a platform from which future research can explore supplier journey dynamics, digital transformation, and network orchestration in greater depth.

6.1.2 Advancing CXM research: Toward a more strategic, technology-enabled understanding of B2B markets

Another central contribution of this dissertation is the advancement of CXM as a strategically embedded, technology-enabled management process within B2B firms. Recent literature has acknowledged that CXM remains comparatively undertheorized in the context of B2B markets (Wirtz et al., 2025). Study III responds to this gap by examining AR and VR technologies as strategic tools within the customer journey framework and mapping their application across key stages (i.e., prebid engagement, negotiation, implementation, and operations), drawing on established models of the B2B customer journey (Brady et al., 2005; Tuli et al., 2007; Witell et al., 2020). This approach shifts the focus of research on B2B CXM from ad hoc, operational improvements toward a more holistic and deliberate strategy aligned with organizational goals, thus addressing the need for a more strategic understanding of CXM in B2B settings, as emphasized by Wirtz et al. (2025) and Wetzels et al. (2023).

The study also addresses the underexplored link between CXM and sustainable competitive advantage in B2B contexts. Although scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of customer experience as a differentiating factor (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019), empirical work examining how CXM contributes to long-term value creation remains scarce (Wirtz et al., 2025). Study III addresses this gap by theorizing the potential of AR and VR to generate strategic benefits beyond mere operational efficiency. These include enhanced brand positioning, stronger buyer-seller relationships, increased transaction clarity, cost reductions, and sustainability improvements—all of which contribute to durable competitive differentiation. In this way, the study provides a theoretical bridge between technology-enabled CXM and firm-level strategic outcomes in business markets.

Moreover, the study challenges the prevailing one-size-fits-all approach to CXM, which has been critiqued for neglecting the unique demands and contextual complexity of B2B customer journeys (Wetzels et al., 2023; Wirtz et al., 2025). It presents a contextually grounded taxonomy of AR and VR use cases and embeds each case within specific stages

of the B2B customer journey. These cases demonstrate how CXM must be adapted to varying industry dynamics, stakeholder configurations, and value-creation logics—factors frequently overlooked in consumer-focused models (Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The integration of Flavián et al.'s (2019) technology-enhanced customer experience framework strengthens this contribution by providing a robust conceptual lens for classifying AR and VR applications into directly supported, related empowered, and diverted empowered experiences, thereby enhancing the understanding of how these technologies create value in different experiential forms.

Finally, the paper responds directly to the lack of attention to emerging technologies in the academic literature on B2B CXM. Despite the increasing attention in the practitioner literature to the role of technologies such as AI, AR, and VR in shaping customer experience, academic research has lagged behind (Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Purmonen et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022; Rusthollikarhu et al., 2022; Wirtz et al., 2025). Study III is among the first empirical investigations of the role of AR and VR in real-world B2B CXM contexts. Through qualitative interviews with industry professionals, it generates theory from practice and reveals how these technologies are actively shaping customer engagement as well as training, support, and visualization. In doing so, the study not only advances the B2B marketing literature but also contributes to the growing field of AR and VR research in marketing, which has thus far examined mainly B2C models (Boyd & Koles, 2019; Kumar, 2022).

6.2 Managerial implications

6.2.1 Advancing SRM practice: Embedding journey thinking

Taken together, Studies I and II suggest that SRM benefits from the same journey and touchpoint logic that has proven useful in CRM and CXM. Instead of handling supplier selection, onboarding, performance management, and exit as isolated tasks, firms should view them as connected stages in a single relationship journey with clearly defined touchpoints and decision gates. Study I shows that the fragmentation in the literature mirrors the fragmentation in practice, and that whereas such fragmentation encourages silo solutions and weak handovers, a holistic, journey-oriented view links relational governance to operational and performance outcomes. Study II translates this into an

actionable journey perspective for SRM practice, making phases, touchpoints, and handovers explicit.

Supplier relationships evolve over time, and what happens at transitions shapes what becomes possible later. Early identification and qualification influence trust formation and the depth of collaboration, just as the quality of routine interaction affects the ease of problem solving, escalation, and, if it is necessary, dissolution. Study I emphasizes that dissolution and conflict management are underaddressed topics; this is problematic, because the way a relationship is terminated conditions future options. Study II shows that transitions are not mere administrative handovers but moments in which expectations are recalibrated and the relationship's momentum can accelerate or stall, with direct consequences for subsequent performance and risk. For managers, this implies that phase transitions should be deliberately designed and owned, using clear criteria, documented handovers, and explicit expectation resets, because the quality of these moments determines whether trust will deepen, collaboration will scale, and risk will be reduced.

Relationships do not always end in a definitive manner. Study II identifies reactivation as a distinct phase, acknowledging that former suppliers can be brought back when needs or capabilities change. In some categories, such as transport and logistics, reengaging prior partners is common practice, which underlines the managerial value of maintaining relationship memory. Firms should therefore keep structured dossiers and postexit notes, define reactivation criteria, and plan re-onboarding paths to avoid repeating earlier mistakes during reentry. Accordingly, credible reactivation presupposes a well-managed dissolution process, conducted with clear protocols and respectful communication, in which obligations are settled, knowledge is transferred, and relational goodwill is preserved as a basis for future collaboration.

It is at the seams between phases that digital tools are the most helpful. Study II shows that whereas SRM platforms and analytics can make touchpoints visible across functions, bring early risks to light, and preserve knowledge over time, AI can suggest alternatives, highlight misalignments between short-term performance and long-term expectations, and support prioritization. Used in this way, technology enables transparency and coordination during transitions; although it does not replace interpersonal judgment or trust building, it makes both more effective.

Finally, the supplier journey perspective supports ecosystem-oriented SRM strategies. Journey-phase tagging and SRM analytics can reveal cross-supplier dependencies, identify reactivation opportunities, and simulate the network effects of onboarding or dissolution. These capacities allow procurement to manage multiple supplier trajectories in parallel, anticipate risks, and coordinate collective reengagements where appropriate. Finally, a journey-oriented and digitally orchestrated SRM approach yields both relational and financial benefits.

6.2.2 Advancing CXM practice: Aligning customer experience, technology, and organizational strategy

On the downstream side of BSRs, the findings from Study III emphasize that CXM in B2B contexts should be viewed not as a marketing add-on but as a strategic, organization-wide capability. Many B2B firms still approach CXM in a fragmented or operational manner, focusing on isolated touchpoints rather than managing customer relationships holistically across the entire journey. This limits CXM's potential to support long-term differentiation, customer satisfaction, and value creation.

Emerging technologies, such as AR and VR, offer new tools for enhancing customer engagement in ways that are relevant to complex B2B settings. For instance, AR and VR can support presales walkthroughs, postsales support, remote collaboration, or immersive product demonstrations. However, technology should not be implemented merely for novelty's sake. Technology should be integrated purposefully into customer journeys to enable seamless, relevant, and empowering experiences. Managers should therefore identify specific journey phases or customer needs in which AR and VR create clear added value, such as reducing onboarding effort, improving communication of complex offerings, or enabling real-time troubleshooting.

Furthermore, this dissertation encourages managers to tailor CXM strategies to the specific context of their industry, customer base, and value proposition. Rather than applying generic experience models adapted from B2C environments, firms should consider the unique stakeholder constellations, long sales cycles, and frequently high-stakes decision-making characteristics of B2B relationships. For example, AR and VR use cases may differ significantly between industrial equipment providers, professional service firms, and software vendors, depending on product complexity and customer

familiarity. Managers should assess how technologies can enhance not only interaction quality but also trust, competence signaling, and customer co-creation.

Importantly, responsibility for CXM often remains unclear in B2B firms. To embed CXM as a strategic capability, managers should clarify ownership and accountability, integrate experience metrics into strategic key performance indicators, and foster cross-functional collaboration—particularly between marketing, sales, operations, and IT. As the technological and experiential aspects of B2B engagement become increasingly intertwined, siloed approaches risk creating fragmented customer journeys.

In sum, this dissertation calls on B2B firms to professionalize and strategically elevate their approach to CXM. This endeavor includes (1) managing the customer experience as a full lifecycle, not just as front-end touchpoints, (2) integrating emerging technologies such as AR and VR in a way that supports real business needs, and (3) aligning CXM efforts with broader strategic goals. By embedding CXM into the firm's value logic and organizational structure, companies can move toward more distinctive, durable, and technology-enabled customer relationships.

6.3 Cross-paper theoretical and managerial insights: A BMC perspective

Across the three studies, this dissertation offers theoretical and managerial contributions that emerge within and especially between the domains of upstream and downstream relationship management. By adopting the BMC (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) as an integrative framework, the dissertation makes these contributions analytically visible: The findings demonstrate how upstream and downstream relational mechanisms jointly shape the business model's architecture and how technological transformation affects both sides of the value chain in mutually reinforcing ways.

First, the findings suggest a structural interdependence between the upstream and downstream building blocks of the BMC. Studies I and II indicate that effective SRM is strongly shaped by stable key partnerships and reliable key resources, which are fostered through coordinated relational governance and shared data infrastructures (Wieland & Ivens, 2025). In this sense, suppliers can be understood as providers of critical inputs (e.g., machine components, software modules, spare parts, or field-service availability) that frame the conditions under which downstream services can be delivered consistently.

Against this background, Study III shows that advanced customer-facing processes, such as digital interaction environments, immersive configuration tools, or remote service interfaces, operate on digitally and technically integrated foundations (Wieland et al., 2024). Read through a BMC lens, this suggests that the reliability and consistency of upstream resources and data flows can be interpreted as an enabling condition for the stable functioning of such customer-facing applications. Conversely, inconsistent data, delayed updates, or incompatibilities on the supplier side can be expected to manifest downstream in the form of impaired system performance, inaccurate information display, or restricted integration into customer environments. The BMC thus facilitates the interpretation of high-quality customer experience as structurally contingent on the integrity of the supplier ecosystem: Downstream customer relationships and channels appear to be enabled—or constrained—by upstream partnership quality and resource reliability. From a managerial perspective, this implies that investments in customer-facing technologies should not be treated as isolated design decisions but rather as parts of a cross-functional alignment between procurement, IT, and sales. When deploying digital customer platforms, remote service tools, or interactive sales configurators, firms are well advised to jointly assess supplier-side enablement factors, such as system compatibility, real-time data accessibility, update cycles, cybersecurity standards, and responsiveness in collaborative problem resolution. In this interpretative sense, institutionalized technology roadmaps that align supplier development trajectories with customer-facing innovation initiatives can be seen as a promising governance mechanism for reducing the risk of upstream-induced bottlenecks, integration failures, or service inconsistencies.

Building on this structural interdependence, the dissertation's second contribution concerns the processual alignment of key upstream activities with downstream customer-facing channels. Study II suggests that digital tools substantially reshape supplier-related activities, such as evaluation, onboarding, collaboration, and termination, by structuring information flows, standardizing documentation requirements, and synchronizing decision cycles across departments. For example, the study describes digital onboarding systems as capturing quality certificates, compliance documents, and performance baselines in structured formats that become broadly accessible within the organization. Study III, in turn, shows that customer-facing channels increasingly operate on digitally structured and real-time information bases, doing so, for instance through interactive

visualizations of system performance, remote troubleshooting environments, or guided configuration tools used during sales and implementation (Wieland et al., 2024). When these insights are integrated using a BMC lens, this pattern can be interpreted to suggest that firms benefit when upstream and downstream processes do not remain functionally decoupled but instead form a continuous, data-enabled sequence. In this interpretative sense, information generated in supplier-facing processes (e.g., component specifications, maintenance intervals, or system tolerances) can be seen as a potential input for downstream customer tools such as predictive maintenance dashboards or digital configurators. From a managerial perspective, this view implies that firms may benefit from harmonizing internal and external process architectures by developing interoperable IT systems, unified data governance rules, and standardized workflows across procurement, operations, and sales. For instance, a supplier evaluation tool that records material tolerances or software versions could, in principle, feed into customer portals that require accurate data for digital twins or simulation-based decision support. Likewise, automated supplier performance reports (e.g., delivery reliability or defect rates) could be integrated into customer-facing service platforms to enhance transparency during root-cause analyses or service escalations. In this sense, process integration plans that explicitly connect SRM activities with customer-facing service and sales processes can be interpreted as an important organizational lever for ensuring that information does not remain trapped upstream but actively enables downstream value delivery.

Third, when read in combination, the studies point to an increasing reliance of both SRM and CXM on a shared set of hybrid relational–technological capabilities. Study I suggests that effective supplier management is shaped by relational forms of governance, continuous exchange of supplier-related information, and coordinated decision-making across organizational functions (Wieland & Ivens, 2025). Study II further indicates that these relational and coordinative practices are now closely intertwined with digital capabilities because SRM professionals increasingly work with real-time performance dashboards, integrated SRM platforms, and digitally mediated coordination across organizational boundaries. Study III reveals a parallel development on the downstream side. Customer-facing roles likewise operate in hybrid interaction contexts, in which employees communicate through digital interfaces, guide customers through complex visualizations, interpret data in real time, and orchestrate interactions across blended physical–digital touchpoints (Wieland et al., 2024). Read together through a BMC lens,

these findings suggest that key resources increasingly take the form of integrated relational–technological capabilities that support understanding, coordination, and problem-solving in digitally mediated interactions—regardless of whether these interactions involve suppliers or customers. From a managerial perspective, this development implies that capability-building efforts may benefit from not being functionally siloed. Rather than separating digital training paths for procurement, service, and sales, firms could develop shared training architectures that foster competencies in digital communication, platform navigation, real-time data interpretation, and collaborative problem-solving across supplier-facing and customer-facing roles. In this interpretative sense, integrated capability programs, complemented by practices such as cross-functional job rotations or joint SRM–CXM workshops, can be seen as a means to establish a unified skill base that supports value creation across the entire business model. Firms that invest in such cross-cutting capabilities are, accordingly, likely to be better positioned to manage increasingly complex, technology-enabled interactions on both sides of the value chain.

When integrated, these cross-paper insights converge on the role of the firm’s value proposition as the central linking element of the business model. The upstream mechanisms examined in Studies I and II determine what a firm can reliably promise—through stable partnerships, coordinated activities, and robust digital infrastructures—whereas the downstream mechanisms examined in Study III shape how this promise is communicated, perceived, and experienced. This suggests the emergence of a broader conceptual perspective, which can be termed as “augmented value creation”: a process through which digital technologies and relational capabilities jointly enhance the cognitive, operational, and experiential dimensions of value creation across the value chain. In this view, digital transformation does not simply optimize isolated processes but modulates the quality and depth of interactions with both suppliers and customers, thereby influencing multiple BMC building blocks simultaneously. Managers should interpret the value proposition not as a marketing statement but as an organizational contract linking supplier-facing and customer-facing decisions. Procurement, operations, sales, and IT should jointly steward the value proposition to ensure that upstream capabilities align with downstream expectations. Firms can implement cross-functional value councils or integrated steering groups to coordinate technological priorities,

relational strategies, and experience designs so that the promised value is both deliverable and differentiable.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the traditional BMC can be meaningfully extended by introducing a cross-cutting building block: ecosystem enablers. This component captures the relational, technological, and procedural mechanisms through which firms coordinate upstream and downstream actors, align digital infrastructures, harmonize data standards, and jointly steward the value proposition. Concretely, such enablers can include jointly developed technology roadmaps that synchronize supplier innovation cycles with customer-facing digital offerings; real-time performance dashboards that integrate delivery reliability, defect rates, or maintenance intervals across ecosystem partners; cross-functional escalation routines that allow procurement, operations, sales, and service teams to resolve disruptions collaboratively; and shared training and capability-building programs that equip employees with the hybrid relational–technological skills required to navigate integrated SRM and CXM systems. As the findings of Studies I–III show, value creation increasingly depends on these ecosystem-level structures, which span supplier-facing and customer-facing domains and ensure coherence across the entire value chain. Positioned as an overarching layer within the BMC, ecosystem enablers highlight the embeddedness of modern business models in interconnected value networks whose coherence relies on orchestrating partners, processes, and capabilities across the entire value chain. This extension is illustrated in Figure 6-1.

In sum, integrating the three studies within the BMC reveals that upstream and downstream relational mechanisms are more tightly interconnected than often assumed, jointly shaping not only individual building blocks but the coherence of the business model as a whole. Read in this sense, the title *in good company* points to the dissertation’s central insight: that firms create and sustain value by operating in good company—embedded in a constellation of suppliers, customers, and internal functions whose relational, technological, and experiential capabilities interlock across the entire value architecture.

Ecosystem enablers				
Key partnerships	Key activities	Value proposition	Customer relationships	Customer segments
	Key resources		Channels	
Cost structure		Revenue streams		

Figure 6-1. Extended BMC with ecosystem enablers, based on Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010).

7 Limitations and avenues for future research

Although this dissertation offers an extensive and interdisciplinary contribution, the research presented here has its limitations, and some fascinating and important questions could not be fully addressed within the scope of three studies. The individual papers discuss many of the specific limitations and suggestions for future research. Therefore, this section does not aim to reiterate those detailed omissions but rather seeks to provide a broader perspective on how future studies might build on the groundwork of this dissertation and explore the gaps that remain.

7.1 How can relationship journeys be managed when suppliers are also buyers and partners?

One of the core approaches of this dissertation is the use of journey-oriented frameworks to understand and manage supplier and buyer relationships. Both the SRM and CXM models presented here adopt a structured, journey-based approach that delineates distinct phases and touchpoints. Although this perspective has proven valuable for capturing key managerial challenges and for structuring complex relational dynamics, it necessarily simplifies the messier realities of contemporary B2B relationships. In practice, relationships between firms rarely conform to clean, sequential stages. Instead, they unfold within dense networks of interconnected actors in which roles are fluid, relationships overlap, and boundaries between upstream and downstream relationships become increasingly blurred.

The growing importance of business ecosystems and platform-based business models underscores the limitations of linear, dyadic conceptualizations. As Adner (2017) noted, value creation in ecosystems depends not only on bilateral interactions but also on the orchestration of interdependent actors. Similarly, Jacobides et al. (2018) argued that ecosystem strategies require a shift from firm-centric to network-centric thinking. In many industries, firms simultaneously assume the roles of customer, supplier, competitor, and partner (coopetition); this is the case, for example, in the technology and automotive sectors. In the automotive industry, a supplier of digital services may simultaneously act as a development partner, a subcontractor, and a direct customer of the original equipment manufacturer, and the relationship thereby resists any simple, linear mapping. These

entangled relationships give rise to complex governance challenges that cannot be fully captured by a perspective based on traditional buyer-supplier dyads.

Although this dissertation conceptualizes SRM and CXM through structured journey models, it does not address how these journeys interact in ecosystems in which the same actor simultaneously plays multiple roles. This limitation directly relates to the key partnerships building block of the BMC, which is typically predicated on stable and singular partner roles but becomes strained when firms simultaneously act as suppliers, buyers, and partners. For example, how do firms manage overlapping roles, such as when a key supplier is also a downstream buyer, in a way that enables them to apply SRM and CRM/CXM processes to the same actor? Existing frameworks treat these journeys as separate and sequential, but an ecosystems approach raises the question of whether journeys become recursive or entangled. Future research could therefore address the following questions:

1. How can firms adapt SRM and CXM journey models to scenarios in which the same partner simultaneously occupies multiple roles (e.g., supplier, buyer, and development partner) and moves between them over time?
2. How do firms reconfigure their relational capabilities when formal, contract-based governance collides with informal, trust-based coordination within overlapping journeys?
3. How does the governance imposed by powerful ecosystem actors (e.g., platforms) through performance monitoring or unilateral rule changes affect a firm's ability to design and align buyer and supplier journeys?

7.2 How do suppliers and buyers perceive and respond to SRM and CXM practices?

Another limitation of this dissertation lies in its primarily buyer-centric lens. Although it examines how buying firms design and govern SRM and CXM processes, it does not capture how these practices are received and enacted by suppliers and customers. However, suppliers are not passive recipients of buyer initiatives; they actively evaluate relationship investments, negotiate power asymmetries, and pursue their own strategic objectives (Nyaga et al., 2010). For instance, journey models assume that suppliers will follow a buyer's structured process, yet suppliers may resist being "managed" or may reinterpret stages in ways that alter outcomes. This limitation touches on two BMC

building blocks: customer relationships and key partnerships, both of which rely on mutual sensemaking and co-construction of relational practices rather than unilateral design by the focal firm. Future studies could therefore investigate the following questions:

1. How do suppliers perceive being embedded in buyer-designed journey frameworks? Do they experience them as supportive tools for collaboration or as mechanisms of control?
2. How do suppliers manage and prioritize their participation in multiple buyers' SRM programs, and what tensions arise in suppliers' resource allocation or their commitment to innovation across competing relationships?
3. How do buyers in complex B2B settings actively reshape journey stages? Do they, for instance, prolong evaluation phases or revisit earlier stages in light of new information?
4. How do buyers evaluate digital CXM initiatives such as AR/VR demonstrations or AI-driven personalization, and how do industry norms and trust considerations influence their acceptance and impact?

7.3 Is it really worth it (financially)?

A further limitation of this dissertation lies in its limited consideration of the financial implications of SRM and CXM investments. Although the studies advance the understanding of relational processes and capabilities, they do not address a central managerial question: Do these practices pay off?

In the CRM literature, many studies have examined the impact of relationship management on firm performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2004; Reinartz et al., 2004), yet these typically remain at the level of general performance correlations; concrete financial calculations or ROI assessments are largely absent, especially in B2B and journey-oriented contexts. For B2B settings and especially for journey-oriented frameworks, systematic evidence on ROI remains scarce. Managers may acknowledge the strategic relevance of SRM and CRM/CXM, yet they are often asked to justify the costs of technology, training, and coordination efforts with hard financial metrics. This limitation directly concerns the cost structure building block of the BMC, because it highlights the

gap between conceptual relational investments and their measurable financial implications within the business model.

Future research could therefore explore the cost–benefit balance of journey-based relationship management. For example:

1. Customer journey ROI: To what extent do investments in mapping and managing customer journeys translate into increased revenue, reduced churn, or higher share of wallet?
2. Supplier relationship ROI: Do SRM initiatives such as joint development projects, supplier integration platforms, or capability-building programs generate measurable savings, innovation outcomes, or risk reductions relative to their costs?
3. Cross-functional synergies: When firms invest simultaneously in SRM and CRM/CXM, do the benefits compound (e.g., faster product launches and more resilient supply chains), or do such investments instead risk duplication and inefficiency?

Answering these questions will require longitudinal and quantitative research designs that link relational capabilities to financial outcomes at both the relationship and firm level. Combining financial data (e.g., data on contract profitability, cost savings, and revenue growth) with journey-based process measures could provide much-needed evidence concerning the business case for SRM and CRM/CXM.

Without such analyses, journey frameworks may continue to be perceived as conceptually appealing but financially opaque. Establishing a clearer ROI perspective would not only advance theory but also enhance the practical legitimacy and adoption of SRM and CRM/CXM approaches in organizations.

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