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Santosh Kumar Pandey, Amit Mookerjee,

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# Assessing the role of emotions in B2B decision making: an exploratory study

B2B decision making

Santosh Kumar Pandey and Amit Mookerjee  
*Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, India*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Emotions in business-to-business (B2B) interactions are relatively unexplored when compared with business-to customer (B2C) industry wherein sufficient evidence implicating the role of emotions in decision-making is available. This study aims to explore the role of emotions in B2B decision-making, and a customer experience model is suggested for the B2B industry.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The qualitative research methodology using structured and semi-structured interviews along with a repertory grid technique was followed during the study. Purposive sampling was done to identify respondents who were involved in the vendor choice process either as a buyer or a seller in their respective organizations.

**Findings** – Exploratory research conducted during this study supports the presence of five dimensions of customer experience – sensory, emotional, relational, behavioural and intellectual – in a B2B context. The study further indicates that the experiential value for B2B decision-making is derived from functional, symbolic, emotional and cost values which are assessed by the buyer during their interaction with the product or the service ecosystem and has an impact on the purchase intentions of an industrial buyer.

**Originality/value** – This paper identifies the role of specific customer experience dimensions in a B2B environment and proposes the role and mechanism of emotional factors affecting the decision-making process in B2B exchange.

**Keywords** B2B, Experiential value, Purchase intention, Customer experience

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Research in marketing, particularly business-to-business (B2B), generally exhibits assumptions that consumer choices, including repeat purchases, relationship continuity and partnering, are guided mostly by cognitive elements such as perceived quality and price (Zeithaml, 1988), perceived risk (Taylor, 1974; Peter and Ryan, 1976), quality (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996), trust (defined as beliefs) and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), or by criteria such as economic costs and technical specifications mainly. The aforementioned research does not directly indicate the role played by affective processes in consumer decisions.

Traditional decision theories in B2B were driven by rational choice processes described in economics and statistics which primarily stressed on profits being the main criteria driving a B2B choice decision (Cyert *et al.*, 1956). Cyert *et al.* (1956), in their narrative on “observation of a business decision”, suggest that search and information-gathering processes in B2B decision constitutes major portion of the decision-making process and results in the selection of a satisfactory alternative, leading to a specific (technical/economic) goal achievement that satisfies a number of auxiliary conditions. Levitt (1965) explored perceived risk as the driving force in organizational buying behavior (OBB). Cardozo and Cagley (1971), through a controlled experiment, found that industrial buyers have a preference for types of bidders, and bids are influenced by the amount and type of risk.



[Ammer \(1972\)](#) explored reciprocal buying agreements between organizations. The available literature on early decision models indicate that cognitive factors are highly studied in OBB.

Early research has also brought out certain non-task factors along with the task-related factors ([Webster and Wind, 1972](#)), as well as individual psychology, power play and interpersonal conflict resolution ([Sheth, 1973](#)), in organizational decisions. [Tosi \(1966\)](#) and [Weigand \(1968\)](#) explored interpersonal interaction in organizational buying, and [Wind \(1970\)](#) explored source loyalty. These issues are more persona-based and psychologically inclined, and these also indicate interpersonal situation-based factors affecting B2B decisions. These studies indicate the significant role of factors that are distinctly different from highly cognitive processes and technical/economic factors, such as personal characteristics, psyche and affective factors and social and interpersonal dynamics. However, these factors exhibit far less research when compared with studies based on the paradigm of B2B as a rational, cognitive process.

The basic premise of various frameworks of B2B decisions proposed in the literature reflects the cognitive process, and research was primarily viewed through this lens and has dominated the discourse at the expense of focus on other types of factors. For instance, traditionally, service satisfaction, leading to vendor renewal/rejection decisions, was projected as a consequence of service quality, a noticeably cognitive process of comparing perceptions of performance and expectations ([Oliver and Westbrook, 1993](#); [Parasuraman et al., 1994](#)); whereas, satisfaction could also be considered as an affective outcome. Research focussed primarily on what leads to satisfaction, through usually cognitive antecedents, and not on the outcome of satisfaction. Few research studies focused on the possible reasons why the affective state of satisfaction exhibited inconsistent proof of the linkage with its proposed consequent effect on loyalty. Factors such as trust are defined as beliefs, and commitment refers mainly to structural, financial and other cognitive choice-driven elements ([Morgan and Hunt, 1994](#)) in the B2B space. The limited mention of role of affect is in constructs such as affective commitment.

Prior literature on non-task factors in B2B, the role of individual psychology, power play and other factors cited above is supported by recent work on the role of affective factors. There is evidence of multiple processes of arriving at decisions, including emotional processing ([Kaufmann et al., 2017](#)). Affective factors may hence play a significant role, and these have now started receiving attention while discussing the organizational buying behaviour.

An exploration of research on affective factors in consumer choices shows that the business-to-customer (B2C) domain literature on affective factors in consumer choices has evolved significantly. The role of emotions in B2C service consumption and its inclusion in traditional models of cognitive evaluation have been stressed; studies range from exploring affect and expectancy value together ([Bagozzi, 1982](#)) to understanding the interplay between affect and cognition ([Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999](#)) and particularly service evaluations ([Liljander and Strandvik, 1997](#)). There is now a growing body of evidence that postulates the role of the consumer's heart along with mind. Service encounters are now considered as "breeding grounds" for emotion ([Grace, 2007](#); [Maguire and Geiger, 2015](#)).

Research on emotions and its impact on consumer behaviour in a B2C environment has gathered momentum, with extensive studies in retail environment ([Spence et al., 2014](#); [Gilboa et al., 2016](#)), online behaviour and service markets like banking and airlines ([Chahal and Dutta, 2015](#); [Song, 2015](#); [Chauhan and Manhas, 2014](#)) and emotional branding ([Akgün et al., 2013](#)), leading to the establishment of a generally accepted customer experience (CX) framework in the B2C space. However very few frameworks of CX are found for the B2B

space, and these focus on net promoter score and customer satisfaction scale, leaving a wide gap in exploring emotions as a primary construct in B2B purchase decision-making.

Emotions in an industrial buying scenario is still relatively unexplored. Although the initial research in B2B decisions did highlight the role of these non-task, affective factors, it is only now that research such as that of Kaufman *et al.* cited above shows evidence of the significance and mechanism of affective factors in B2B choices.

Given the earlier work on psychological factors in the B2B framework and looking into the role of emotions brought out by research in experiential frameworks (B2C), non-cognitive factors may be taken up for further study in the B2B context. Studies on the role of emotions have often used experiential framework, and it may be highly relevant to study the impact of emotions in B2B decision-making by using an experiential framework as well. Experiential framework is also becoming the leading paradigm in the services sector in B2B, and in all areas where relationship marketing for practitioners while dealing in the B2B environment and where relationship marketing for vendor and customer management are already well-established paradigms (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995a, 1995b; Ford *et al.*, 1996). Building upon the existing framework of customer experience, this study explores the affective nature of consumer behaviour and the impact of emotions in the consumer decision-making process for the B2B service industry.

### Research gap and research problem

Considerable research has been done on OBB. Traditionally, the decision-making process was the most researched area in OBB (Dempsey, 1978; Lynn, 1987; Kohli, 1989; Dholakia *et al.*, 1993; Schmittlein and Peterson, 1994), although buyer–seller relationships, supplier partnerships, quality and supply chain partnering were also studied (Nicosia and Wind, 1977a, 1977b; Bagozzi, 1978; Bonoma and Johnston, 1978; Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Dabholkar *et al.*, 1994; Anderson *et al.*, 1994). A gradual shift of OBB from pure transaction-centred to relationship-centred approach is evident from the literature review. It is also evident from these studies that emotions/sentiments have been part of most of the OBB models proposed in the past. Webster and Wind (1972) proposed that variables influencing organizational buying decisions can be classified into “task-related” and “non-task-related”. While “task-related” variables addressed the rationality aspect of decision-making, the “non-task-related” variables focused on factors such as personal values and needs, emotions, relationships and political conditions. According to their model, sentiments get generated and influence both task- and non-task-related variables. While economic- and task-based variables were considered to be the driving force behind OBB during this period, scholars had also started exploring non-task-related variables. Sheth (1973) proposed the “integrative model of industrial buyer behaviour” which highlights three aspects of industrial buying situation – psychology of the individuals involved in the buying centre, conditions under which a joint decision is taken amongst them and the process of decision-making including the conflicts and their resolution. These studies have pointed out the role of the individual’s psyche and their persona and their assessment of social, interpersonal and power dynamics in a situation, with a clear role of assessments of non-technical factors, presumably through a lens of more personal likes and feelings, and of a distinctively affective nature as against a purely cognitive assessment. This may help prove the premise; however, there is a limited array of work, and we do not find sufficient studies exploring the role of “emotions” in B2B decision-making.

Other recent studies in emotion-influenced choices range from studying consumer switching behaviour owing to negative emotional experience (Roos and Friman, 2008), impact on customer loyalty (Wong, 2004; Roos *et al.*, 2009), influence on word of mouth

(WOM) (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997), attitude towards the company (Davidow, 2003) and role of emotions in customer complaints (Svari and Erling, 2012).

Theoretically, based on the above evidence, it may be posited that consumer emotions affect satisfaction (particularly dissatisfaction), switching behaviour (owing to negative experiences) or attitude modulation (attitudes by definition including both cognitive and affective components), and because the variables of satisfaction and attitude also affect B2B consumer choices (as evidenced by the widely used CSAT measurements in the B2B domain for enhancing service delivery and value); hence, it may be deduced that emotions play a role in B2B decisions as well. Going further, it is highly likely that in B2B decision-making, the role of factors cited earlier such as persona- and situation-related individual differences may be reflected in emotions, and these factors are a part of the mechanism of choice. This is reflected in the work of Kaufmann *et al.* (2017) and in the research on role of brand equity, value, customer attitudes and satisfaction in B2B literature (Bolton *et al.*, 2008; Lee and Kwon, 2006; Cano *et al.*, 2005; Kivetz *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b; Harrison-Walker and Neeley, 2004; Kleindorfer and Wu, 2003; La *et al.*, 2009).

However, there are few integrated frameworks in the B2B literature, which capture the nuances of both affective and situational, psyche-driven factors. There is also limited research in B2B experiential phenomena.

This study aims to bridge this gap, by examining whether emotions play a role in the B2B decision-making process. The objective of this study is to theoretically assess the role of emotions as an antecedent to CX in B2B purchase decision-making process.

### Literature review

Organizational buying is a complex process when compared to individual purchases, as it involves many stakeholders playing varied roles in the buying centre, multiple goals and potentially conflicting decision criteria. The decision-making process extends over a period of time and passes through various stages before the final purchase decision is made. Webster and Wind (1972) viewed an organizational buyer as a constrained decision maker motivated by a combination of personal and organizational goals with dependency on others to satisfy these needs. Underlying motivation behind buying centre members at times may conflict, as it is a complex interaction of individual, departmental and organizational goals. Organizational buying behaviour is determined by four classes of variables – environmental, organizational, social and individual influences (Webster and Wind, 1972). Within each class of variable proposed by Webster and Wind (1972), there are two sub-classes of task-related and non-task-related variables. Task-related variables directly address the buying problem such as lowest price, meeting specifications, local policies, while non-task-related variables extend beyond the buying problem and addressing factors like personal values and needs, social interactions, personal factors and political scenario. Sheth (1973), while addressing the psychological factors, specified five processes which create differential expectations amongst buying centre individuals. This includes background of the individuals, information sources, active search, perceptual distortion and satisfaction with past purchases. Company-specific factors like company orientation, size and degree of centralization also affect buying decisions (Sheth, 1973). The cognitive factors have an impact on the affective components and may influence individual behaviour while making the joint decision, clearly indicating that affect may drive the final decision.

According to Johnston and Bonoma (1981), dynamics and power relationships of the group involved in organizational buying matters as power, politics and influence can be central social variables in the buying centre. Six prominent influence strategies in a buying

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centre have been proposed by Venkatesh, Kohli and Zaltman (1995), and their findings indicate that the recommendation strategy is more effective than other influence strategies. Also strategies attempting to intimidate, solicit or buy out tend to encounter resistance from targets. This clearly indicates that affect has a role to play in B2B. Personal likes and dislikes owing to social interactions may affect the decision in the B2B context as well. While constructive models of OBB discussed above present a logical approach towards decision-making, they fail to take into account the dynamism caused by parallel processing of information.

The theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977) posits behaviour intention, an immediate antecedent of behaviour, to be drawn from behaviour beliefs and normative beliefs. Attitude (behaviour belief) builds up based on the evaluation that certain behaviour will lead to expected outcome, while subjective norm (normative belief) builds up based on the motivation to comply or not comply with the expectations on performance of a specific behaviour. In the B2B context, the aforementioned factors can be replaced with corporate values, norms and rules.

These discussions highlight the fact that there is a significant impact of affective influence on B2B decision-making. Given the traditional notion of B2B being highly cognitive in nature, the aforementioned role of affect shows that B2B is a dual-process approach involving affective and cognitive processes. Validating this duality of influences, Kaufmann *et al.* (2017) have introduced the concept of multiple process approaches in B2B decision-making by conceptualizing intuition as a two dimension construct involving experience based and emotional processing. Their findings indicate that while rational processing by the individual decision maker is positively related to financial and non-financial performance of the supplier, experience-based and emotional processing show no such relation. This emphasizes not only the use of financial/technical heuristics in B2B decision-making but also the critical role of emotional processing in B2B. Further the conclusion that multiple decision processes might interact validates the concept of involvement of different classes of variables including affect, proposed earlier (Webster and Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973).

Drawing from both relationship models and social psychology, Berghäll (2003) proposed a model of socio-economic exchange which captures the processes that take place within the individual involved in exchange. This model proposes calculative commitment (based on economic performance) and emotional commitment (based on relationships) as emotional mediators to decision-making. Emotional commitment also has a positive impact on calculative component. This study highlights the likely mechanism through which emotions may play a role, as well as the nature of interactive processes affecting decisions.

In recent years, the role of emotions has also been studied from various angles such as complaint behaviour on experiencing a negative service incident (Svari and Erling, 2012) and customer switching (Roos and Friman, 2008). Negative experience which can be completely attributed to the company, increases the likelihood of consumers complaining to the company, while negative experiences which are attributable to the consumer are generally reported anonymously through social media (Svari and Erling, 2012). It has also been shown that emotional expressions feature in the switching process and negative emotions act as a trigger to customer switching (Roos and Friman, 2008), indicating a clear role of emotions in consequent customer actions and choices in the contextual or spatial perspective. The study was done primarily to study the switching behaviour of telecom customers wherein the trigger is generally in the form of annoyance, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction, distress, depression, rage, stress and tension with the kind of service being provided by a mobile operator. During a negative service experience, the



consumer can have negative emotions towards the self (internal), the company (external) or the situation depending on who the consumer holds accountable for their experience. The negative emotions extend during service recovery phase as well when firms try to attend to customer complaints (Svari *et al.*, 2011). Because a negative service experience is also usually experienced in an industrial buying situation, these phenomena will be relevant in B2B, and we may extend the basic premise of the role of emotions to B2B decision-making.

It may be assumed that consumer emotions are not only influenced during the service encounter but may also extend well beyond the service event conclusion and be influenced by a totality of self and external agency factors. This may thus impact actions well afterwards, and like rational influences be retained for use during customer choices such as switching, etc. This implies an emotional residue which might be long term in nature and impact and which may influence choices over time and not just as an immediate reaction. Thus emotions could be a stable and common ingredient of B2B choices. This leads one to suggest the following:

*P1.* Customer emotions act as an antecedent to customer behaviour/s.

Given the above, understanding what causes emotions may also be relevant. Further exploration of literature shows “emotion”, which was once considered as a confounding variable by social-cognitive psychologists, as it disrupted rational thought processes, is now believed to motivate people to behave in ways that facilitate survival and well-being. Humans depend on one another for their physical survival and psychological well-being, and emotions constitute the currency of human relationships (Fitness, 2015). It is the human cognition of environs that elicit arousal (flight or fight) and other varied emotions experienced. The cognitive appraisal approach is an emerging theory according to which evaluation of a situation combines with elicit-specific emotions (Watson and Spence, 2007). The event appraisal is done on factors like outcome desirability, agency (self, other or situation which may be relational in nature), fairness, certainty, attention and coping potential. Emotion is seen as an outcome of this evaluation, particularly coping potential (Scherer, 2009), and it leads to a specific behaviour. Watson and Spence (2007) found that most of the variance in emotion is caused by outcome desirability and agency factors. Akgün *et al.* (2013) studied the antecedents and consequences of emotional branding, and their findings indicate that emotional branding improves brand loyalty, purchase intention and affective commitment. It may be concluded from the aforementioned that customer experience may lead to appraisals which include emotions, and they affect choices. “Emotional” experience is a cause-effect process where there is always a trigger for emotions. Based on this experience-appraisal-emotion sequence discussed above, it is proposed that:

*P2.* Event appraisals such as customer experience episodes will lead to emotions being generated.

Customer experience, a relatively new concept in marketing, compared to concepts like attitude, satisfaction and brand, has as yet varied definitions. Verhoef *et al.* (2009) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define it as the total experience across all stages of the purchase cycle created by elements both within and outside the seller’s control. Richardson (2010) considers it as the sum totality of the engagement experience by a customer over the entire customer life cycle. While Gupta and Vajic (2000) stated that experience occurs when there is knowledge acquisition from the interaction between consumer and supplier, the emotional consequences are brought out by Rawson *et al.* (2013) who define it as the cumulative impact of multiple touchpoints over time, resulting in a real relationship feeling. These findings are

also aligned with the findings of research conducted in neurosciences which suggest decision-making to be associated with that part of the brain which deals with affect rather than cognition (Damasio, 1994; Zajonc, 1980). Schmitt (2010) referred to it as the perceptions, feelings and thoughts consumers have at the time of consumption and also the memory of such experiences. Klaus and Maklan (2013) define it as the cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect interactions between the consumer and supplier.

The prominent dimensions of customer experience which come out from all these studies are sensory, emotional, behavioural, relational and intellectual. Gentile *et al.* (2007) proposed that customer experience should be created such that it contributes to value creation for customers and the company. The customer experience dimensions they explored were sensory, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational. Schmitt (1999) proposed five experiential modules to be relevant for experiential marketing. These included sensory experiences (Sense), affective experiences (Feel), creative cognitive experiences (Think), lifestyles, physical experiences and behaviours (Act) and social identity experiences (Relate). While cognitive, sensory and affective dimensions have been considered in almost all studies of customer experience (Klaus and Maklan, 2013; Rose *et al.*, 2011; Frow and Payne, 2007), Verhoef *et al.* (2009) included the relational dimension and Puccinelli *et al.* (2009) included consumer attitude amongst other dimensions. Webster and Wind (1972) in their OBB model specified non-task variables as a significant part of decision-making as discussed above. Further, Czinkota *et al.* (2014) proposed that there are multiple processes which are interactive. In this context, the multiplicity of processes is clearly delineated by Sheth (1973) when he integrates functional, social, emotional, situational and curiosity criteria as part of the B2B decision-making. While functional criteria represent the product- and company-specific factors in the model, social criteria are represented by the conflict-resolution activities, active search indicates the curiosity criteria and perceptual distortions indicate the emotional aspect. The situational criteria represented in the model imply factors other than rational behaviour.

The multiplicity of criteria in the B2B situation is borne by various studies over the years Czinkota *et al.* (2014). A comparison of the criteria proposed by various models with Schmitt's proposal of sensory, relational, emotional, behavioural and intellectual dimensions shows that Schmitt captures most of these criteria under these five heads. Each of these five heads also finds adequate support from the models proposed in the past; for example, sensory and functional reflecting task-related aspects of Webster and Wind (1972) or functional aspects of model proposed by Sheth (1975), emotional dimension supported by non-task variables of Webster and Wind (1972) and emotional dimension proposed by Gentile *et al.* (2007) and Sheth (1975). Similarly, relational and behavioural dimensions in the model proposed by Webster and Wind (1972) when they talk about non-task factors like social, politics, etc. The prominent customer experience dimension which stand out from all these studies can be grouped under the five experiential modules suggested by Schmitt. The conceptualization of experience by Schmitt is identified as the most comprehensive dimensionalization, and given its support in earlier OBB literature, this conceptualization is proposed as a suitable framework for representing CX in B2B. It is proposed that:

*P3.* Customer experience in B2B has sensory, relational, emotional, behavioural and intellectual dimensions.

Given that CX would be appraised and will have emotional consequences for choice, it will be relevant to explore the mechanism of how these factors lead to B2B choices. The notion of perceived value has long been considered as a useful framework for understanding consumer decisions. Carlson *et al.* (2015) explored the notion of perceived value while



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exploring key determinants which drive future intentions of group travellers. Their findings indicate perceived value of previous experience a key construct for future travel intentions. The value dimensions empirically tested by them include social, emotional, monetary, functional, novelty and convenience value. The decision mechanism seems to therefore involve a residual part of the experience in the psyche, which may lead to evaluations of the services provided, much after the experience, and it may lead to decisions such as switching and other choices. With the common notion of value expectations and customer-perceived value emerging from consumption being a determinant of choices such as repeat purchase, the argument may be extended to cover consumer experience-based consequences such as repeat purchase. Thus, it may be assumed that experiences lead to some evaluation akin to value (Woodruff, 1997; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Gale and Wood, 1994), which, in turn, leads to choices. Various scholars have interpreted and defined customer value differently. It was conceptualized by Zeithaml (1988) as a customer's perception of what they get as compared to what is given away by them. Anderson and Sullivan (1993) conceptualized it as perceived worth in monetary units of benefits received by the customer, while Gale and Wood (1994) conceptualized it as a market-perceived quality vs product price. Butz and Goodstein (1996) brought in the affective behavioural aspects and conceptualized it as an emotional bond between customer and producer after consumption of the product. Smith and Colgate (2007) expanded beyond the cost-sacrifice concept for defining value and suggested that value is derived not only post purchase of the product or service but also during the entire purchase cycle. Hence sources of customer value are not limited to the product but have extended to information, interactions, ownership and environment. A consumer evaluates not only the cost and functional value but also the symbolic and experiential value. This evaluation leads to the formation of a value perception. Palmatier (2008) developed a model of customer value in B2B based on relationship quality, contact density and contact authority. Their findings indicate that value from interfirm relationships derives both from the quality of customer ties (trust, commitment, etc.) and the interactions between relational drivers. This indicates that the experience during a relational transaction is evaluated by the customer and an experiential value is derived from it.

Based on these discussions and drawing from the organizational buying behaviour models (Webster and Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973) and value frameworks in the literature, this study considers social, emotional, monetary and functional dimensions relevant to B2B, and it is proposed that:

*P4. Customer experience influences experiential value perceived by B2B consumer.*

As mentioned earlier, the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977) posits behaviour intention, an immediate antecedent of behaviour, to be drawn from behaviour beliefs and normative beliefs. It was also mentioned that attitude (behaviour belief) builds up based on the evaluation that certain behaviour will lead to an expected outcome, while subjective norm (normative belief) builds up based on the motivation to comply or not comply with the expectations on the performance of a specific behaviour. This can be compared to the normative significance stage in Scherer's model (Scherer, 2009), wherein an overall assessment of the event is carried out and its compatibility assessed with self-concept, values, social norms and moral rules. In the B2B context, these can be replaced with corporate values, norms and rules. This model was further improved by conceptualizing the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) which introduced perceived behavioural control as a moderator to behavioural intention and behaviour. This takes into consideration the belief that people have about their control on performing a behaviour.

The behaviour model integrating attitude (experiential and instrumental), perceived norm (injunctive and descriptive) and personal agency (perceived control and self-efficacy) as antecedents of behavioural intention leading to a specific behaviour has been extensively researched and appears to be an established model to explain human behaviour.

With the concept of experience leading to behavioural intention, a new school of thought has started building up in the behaviour intention theory. Cohen and Reed (2004, 2006), while discussing the multiple pathway anchoring and adjustment model of attitude, have highlighted various mechanisms of attitude development which include direct/imagined experience with the object. Analytical attitude construction, analogical/categorical reasoning, value-driven attitudes and social identity-based attitude generation further develop this theory. Their findings indicated that a combination of socially anchored attitude formation mechanism and semantically linked retrieval cue leads to behaviour rather than a coexisting initial attitude alone. While their framework proposes an integrative treatment of attitude formation, storage, retrieval and reliance, it also addresses the traditional view of attitude. They argue that while evaluative judgements are context-specific, stored attitude are rarely sufficiently diagnostic to guide behaviour and provide a better indication of actual behaviour. Their model proposes an anchoring and adjustment process instead of a pure constructive process as proposed in the integrated behaviour models. Inconsistency between one's evaluative judgement and one's feeling leads to attitude ambivalence with consequent questions about their influence on final choices made by the consumer (Fabrigar *et al.*, 2005; Sengupta and Johar, 2002). Hence there is a need to conceptualize a broader construct leading to behavioural intention instead of attitude, possibly incorporating the contextual (experiential) anchoring of evaluative processes proposed by Cohen and Reed. This study posits experience value (EV) as a broader and more comprehensive construct leading to behavioural intention specific to a conscious behaviour. The higher-order cognition process as defined in the model proposed in this study leads to experiential value (EV) which is pegged or anchored to a specific product, service or experiential context in the long-term memory to which the residual customer experience is also pegged. Purchase intention is the behavioural intention explored in this study, and it is proposed that:

*P5.* Experiential value influences purchase intention in B2B.

### Customer experience model

The above discussions (*P1* and *P2*) indicate that emotions have a role to play in consumer behaviour and emotions act as an antecedent to customer experience. Emotions along with other dimensions of customer experience act as an antecedent to experiential value (*P3* and *P4*), leading to purchase intentions (proposition 5). While the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and the multiple pathway model (Cohen and Reed, 2006) describe the consumer evaluation process to a great extent, this study extends the framework to include customer emotions and construct an overall value framework from relevant contextually grounded choice frameworks, addressing the limitations of the attitude model.

Customer experience in the B2B scenario is a holistic construct that has both cognitive and affective dimensions as discussed above. The cognitive dimension comprises the physical element in terms of features, quality and price of the supplier's offering, and affective dimension is the emotional element involving customer feelings about the supplier and their offering after interacting with them. Consumers evaluate their experience along five dimensions of customer experience – sensory, emotional, behavioural, intellectual and relational – while assigning a functional, symbolic, cost and emotional value to that

experience. The overall experiential value is then determined by considering each of the value dimensions, which in turn, leads to purchase intention of the consumer.

The customer experience model proposed for a B2B scenario is represented in [Figure 1](#).

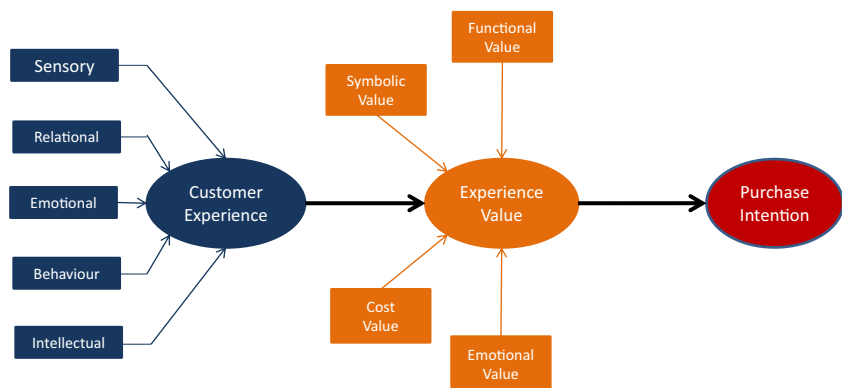
To seek further exploration of the concepts adopted from the literature for customer experience and experiential value along with their relationship with purchase intentions and as an initial empirical exploration of the phenomenon, exploratory research was planned to explore in depth the dimensionality and nature of constructs proposed above. In addition to this, it would help in identifying other factors which may impact customer experience and experiential value while deepening the insight into nature of the phenomena at the same time.

### Research methodology

Qualitative research has been found useful to gain insights for developing an approach to the problem. Usually laddering and open-ended questions asked during this method help researchers identify the root cause factors relevant to the situation in hand. [McCracken \(1988\)](#) in his book *The Long Interview* describes an interview method as the most powerful tool in qualitative research, as it can help a researcher step into the mind of the respondent and be able to experience the situation from their viewpoint. There are various methods for qualitative research like participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and so on. We have used the in-depth interview method for our research.

This study used purposive sampling method to identify a sample of ten respondents involved in vendor choice process either as a buyer or a seller. Purposive sampling involves identifying samples which are relevant to the research questions ([Lee and Lings, 2008](#)). All the ten respondents are residents in India where the interviews were conducted. A homogeneous mix of respondents working in B2B or both B2B and B2C industries was identified.

Although there is no specific recommendation on the sample size for qualitative research, it is suggested that the interview process should cease once similar kind of data starts building up and saturation is reached. In developing the sample for this study, the primary aim was to maximize diversity in terms of the role and type of industry the sample belonged to so that customer experience dimensions could be verified across different industries, ruling out the possibility of bias in the results. Because selecting decision makers and influencers for this study was critical, senior managers with an experience of more than 15 years in their profession were targeted. Three techniques of exploratory research were



**Figure 1.**  
Customer experience  
model for B2B

adopted during the study – highly structured repertory grid method, with each interview lasting about 60 min; semi-structured personal interviews lasting about 30 min for half the number of respondents; and unstructured interviews lasting about 30 min for the remaining respondents of the sample. All interviews were conducted face to face, and 15-h worth of material was generated at the end. The industry and role of each respondent are summarized in [Table I](#).

The repertory grid technique is useful when respondents know the answer indirectly, and the tacit knowledge of the respondent needs to be elicited to obtain a true picture. This method has been widely used by researchers ([Lemke, Clark and Wilson, 2011](#); [Hair et al., 2009](#)). [Kelly \(1955\)](#) developed this method while working on the personal construct theory. It helps the respondent uncover constructs in their own way without much intervention from the interviewer. This study followed the triadic methodology used by [Lemke et al. \(2011\)](#) while using the repertory grid method with the respondents.

The first step involved asking the respondent to identify three companies with which he had good experience, three with which he had bad experience and three with which he had an average experience. This resulted in a total of nine companies being identified by the respondent. Nine flash cards, one for each company, were prepared for further discussion with the respondents. A repertory grid was constructed with 11 columns, with the first column labelled as the construct pole and the last column labelled as the contrast pole. The remaining nine columns were assigned to one company each.

In line with Kelly's triadic method, three cards were chosen at random and shown to the respondent. The respondent was asked what was similar in two of these companies and missing in the third one in terms of his experience with them. The response received was recorded in the construct pole column. The respondent was then asked what would be the opposite of what he just mentioned and this was recorded in the contrast pole column. The respondent was then asked to rate each of the nine companies on a five-point scale, where 1 represented poor experience and 5 represented excellent experience. These ratings were recorded in the cell against each company, and the process was repeated with the next set of three random cards. A series of constructs were generated at the end of the interview.

Open-ended questions were asked during the semi-structured interview to cover all aspects of the customer experience model which were under exploration. In situations where some of the dimensions of experience or value were not highlighted by the respondents, a laddering technique was used to further probe and check if the respondent really did not consider it relevant or if articulating it was a challenge. For the unstructured interviews, views on proposed antecedents of vendor experience and purchase intention as per the customer experience model for B2B were shared with the respondents who were then asked to share their

Respondent	Industry	B2B interactions type	Role
1	Telecom service provider	Product and services	Sourcing
2	Soft skills trainings	Services	Marketing
3	IT	Services	Marketing
4	IT	Product and services	Marketing
5	Footwear	Product	Marketing
6	Telecom service provider	Product and services	Sourcing
7	IT	Product and services	Operations
8	Telecom vendor	Product and services	Operations
9	Telecom vendor	Product and services	Operations
10	IT	Services	Operations

**Table I.**  
Qualitative study  
sample

views and experience on what was stated. Notes were taken for all the interviews and some of the interviews were recorded as well with permission from the respondent.

### Data analysis

The repertory technique generated about 20 constructs in total from the respondents. There were some constructs which implied the same meaning in all the interviews. Such raw constructs were grouped and a verbal label was given to them thematically, given the context of the study. Similarly, other raw constructs which were elicited during the interview were also given a more meaningful verbal label. An optimized and reduced construct list of about 17 constructs evolved finally from the tabulation of labels on the similarity of the thematic representation and/or grouping under similar but more comprehensive dimension. Each of these 17 constructs was then analysed for its relevance and a conceptual association with the dimensions of customer experience as per the model was proposed. Content analysis method (Curtis *et al.*, 2008) was adopted to place the constructs into each of the customer experience and experiential value dimension. The analysis also aimed at identifying any new dimension of customer experience which may emerge from the aforementioned 17 constructs. Each of these customer experience dimensions was then mapped to relevant dimensions of customer EV in the context of respondents' reported construct. Some of the constructs affected more than one dimension of customer experience and experiential value. For example, "response time" and "on-time delivery" lead to both intellectual and behavioural experience as per the linkages expressed by respondents. On-time delivery or a good response time helps the buyer meet his own commitments on time and is in line with what was expected from the vendor as per contract – hence this can be classified as an intellectual experience (based on rational thought process). It also triggers behavioural experience – which is how an individual behaves after experiencing the offering, and experiencing that professional goals are also met in terms of task/goal achievement in a satisfactory way. Because in this case the "time of delivery" is as per expectation, the buyer would like to continue the association with this vendor. This experience by the buyer is assessed both at intellectual and behavioural levels and the value derived is both functional (it meets the contractual obligations) and emotional (as the vendor delivered on time, the buyer may experience that this leads to personal goal achievement and rewards at the workplace, and the buyer will prefer this vendor and will like to continue the association). The data analysis of raw constructs generated from repertory grid is shown in Figure 2 (colours in the figure are used to show how similar raw constructs were grouped into one to optimize the final construct list [reduced constructs]).

Notes taken during the interviews were reviewed along with the recordings. Among the interesting facts which came up on different aspects of B2B engagements during these discussions, a few are highlighted below. One of the respondents mentioned:

Customers are ready to pay a premium if they have confidence on the vendor capabilities. Relationship builds over a period of time. Assessment does not matter. A vendor assessed at a lower level during evaluation may be awarded a contract if the company has a better "confidence" on their capability.

This indicates that in addition to cognitive factors, intuitive factors (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2017) and affective factors (Damasio, 1994; Zajonc, 1980; Klaus and Maklan, 2013) also have a role to play in B2B relationships. This was further supplemented by the following remarks from another respondent:

Assessment is a formality as decisions would be at top level. However basic criteria should be met. Soft skills come into picture when the competition is neck to neck. In deciding a vendor, 90%

B2B decision  
making

Raw Constructs	Reduced Constructs	Experience Dimension	Value Dimension
Response Time Good	Response Time	Intellectual, Behavioural	Functional, Emotional
High Commitment	Mutual Commitment	Behavioural	Emotional
On Time Delivery	Timely delivery	Intellectual, Behavioural	Functional, Emotional
High Quality	Product/ Service Quality	Intellectual	Functional
Good interpersonal relations	Interpersonal Relations	Emotional	Emotional
High Functionality - forward and backward integration	Product functionality	Intellectual	Functional
Good Product Roadmap	Product Roadmap	Intellectual	Functional
High investment in R&D	Innovation/ Future investments	Intellectual	Functional
Highly compatible with other products	Compatibility with other products in the system	Intellectual	Functional
Company representatives can be trusted as per previous experience	Trust	Behavioural, Intellectual	Functional, Emotional
Comfortable while dealing with representatives of the company	Comfort Level in personal dealings	Emotional	Emotional
Upgradable technology leading to longer shelf life	Product shelf life	Intellectual	Functional
High institutional respect and support	Respect and Support to representatives	Behavioural	Emotional
High Commitment to training			
Good at operational management			
Ontime payments with no followups	Timely payments	Intellectual	Cost
Good value systems of the institute	Organization values	Relational	Symbolic
Good hospitality to visiting faculty			
High ethics in the institute with low levels of politics	Organization culture	Relational	Symbolic
Conducive training room and institute infrastructure	Organization Infrastructure	Sensory	Emotional

**Figure 2.**  
Repertory grid data  
analysis

of the decision is made based on functional aspects, quality, price etc. The last 10% to clinch a deal depends on the relationships between the vendor organization and the company.

Another respondent shared similar insights on the affective part in B2B relations:

Regular customers are more understanding. Culture impacts experience. Relationship matters and is prime decider. Quality, price etc. are the qualifying criteria.

From these discussions, it emerges that cognitive factors like price, quality, warranty, etc. are hygiene factors, while affective factors like relationships, emotional bond between vendor and the consumer play deciding role in B2B transactions.



In total, 59 raw constructs evolved from these interviews which could be reduced to about 28 constructs for further analysis. The reduction principle used was to group thematically similar raw constructs under one group and a meaning assigned to it. These were then linked to the customer experience dimensions proposed by us, using the content analysis method (Curtis *et al.*, 2008), to verify whether all dimensions were covered and to also check whether any new dimension evolved from our study. Each customer experience dimension was then mapped to relevant dimensions of customer EV in the context of respondents' construct. The data analysis of raw constructs generated from these interviews is shown in Figure 3 (colours in the figure are used to show how similar raw constructs were grouped into one to optimize the final construct list [reduced constructs]).

The unstructured discussions stressed on other concepts in the literature which could not be covered during personal interviews and repertory techniques. These included discussions on the effect of factors like primacy/recency on EV and the role of mediators like culture, demographics, social and psychological factors on purchase intention. The concepts discussed and inference drawn from these discussions are summarized in Table II.

### Findings

The findings of this study indicate that emotions have a role to play in B2B decision-making. Further it was found that all constructs elicited by respondents during the study could be linked to customer experience dimensions proposed in the customer experience model for B2B. The findings of the literature on customer experience (Schmitt, 1999; Gentile *et al.*, 2007; Klaus and Maklan, 2013; Rose *et al.*, 2011; Frow and Payne, 2007; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009; Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009), experiential value (Woodruff, 1997; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Gale and Wood, 1994; Butz and Goodstein, 1996; Smith and Colgate, 2007) and behavioural intent (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977; Ajzen, 1985; Cohen and Reed II, 2004, 2006; Fabrigar *et al.*, 2005; Sengupta and Johar, 2002) strongly supports the findings from qualitative research and point towards the need to test these propositions as hypothesis.

Literary evidence on customer value having both cognitive and affective dimensions is discussed in the literature review section. Some of the affect-inducing dimensions like relationship, courtesy and word of mouth, which were highlighted by the respondents during this research, can be associated with the affective dimensions already discussed by Kim *et al.* (2008) and Parasuraman *et al.* (1985). This further reinforces the proposed model wherein customer experience and experiential value have been conceptualized to have both cognitive and affective components. It was also found that affective elements are relevant in B2B scenarios and hence the proposed model can be explored further.

Discussions also highlighted that customer experience is relevant in the decision-making process and has a role to play when the experiential value is arrived at. While social and personal factors had a negligible role, culture and psychological factors influence experiential value along with other factors like primacy, recency and asymmetric nature of negative emotions. Few comments provided by respondents which support the presence of primacy and recency factors in a B2B scenario are reproduced below:

First meeting is always important as we can make out how serious a vendor is. It also helps to get clarity on the product and see if it meets our requirement.

We take feedback from the operations team about how good or bad a vendor support has been in the past before taking a decision on extending a contract. This helps us in better negotiation of price and contract terms in case we want to extend a contract or change the vendor if there are too many complaints and miserable performance by the vendor.

Raw Constructs	Reduced Constructs	Experience Dimension	Value Dimension
Delivery of product/ service	Product Delivery	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional, Cost
Uptime of the service	Service availability	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional, Cost
Availability of company representatives for support	After Sales Support	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional, Cost
Customer satisfaction	Customer Satisfaction	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional
Cost of customer satisfaction	Cost of the product/ service	Intellectual	Cost
Top management involvement	Top level relationships	Emotional	Emotional
Empathy	Empathy	Emotional	Emotional
Timely information	Feedback	Behavioural	Emotional, Cost
Information availability/ accessibility	Information availability	Intellectual	Functional
Cost of the product/ service			
Capabilities of the product	Product Capabilities	Intellectual	Functional
Customer confidence on your company	Comfort level	Behavioural, Emotional, Relational	Emotional, Symbolic
Customer perception about your company			
Trust on vendor	Trust	Behavioural, Intellectual	Functional, Emotional
Brand equity	Brand Value	Emotional, Relational	Emotional, Symbolic
Offer Looking Good	Value perception	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional
Liking			
Prior Experience			
Word of mouth	Word of mouth	Sensorial, Intellectual	Functional, Emotional
Market baselining	Market Value	Intellectual	Functional
Reliability	Reliability	Intellectual	Functional
Product quality	Quality	Intellectual	Functional
Social quotient	Social Factors	Relational	Symbolic
Risk	Risk	Intellectual, Emotional	Functional, Emotional
Currency Fluctuations			
Top level relationships			
Working level relationships	Working level relationships	Emotional	Emotional
Trust Barrier			
Soft skills			
Brand			
Cost			
Social Factors			
Quality			
Comfort			
Emotional Bonding	Emotional Bonding	Emotional	Emotional
Recommendations of customers			
Word of mouth			
Brand			
Customer satisfaction			
Product testing labs			
International product norms	Product specifications	Intellectual	Functional
Technical specifications			
Product finishing	Aesthetics	Sensorial	Emotional
Delivery timelines			
Failed delivery timelines, take care of freight	Contractual Obligations	Behaviour, Emotional, Intellectual	Emotional, Functional, Cost
Information on website			
Company Culture	Culture	Relational	Symbolic
Technical compliance			
Price			
Product roadmap			
After sales support			
Company background - financial health	Company background	Relational	Symbolic
Business ratio globally and in the current segment	Market Segment	Relational	Symbolic
Quality			
Previous experience on meeting commitments			
Previous experience on support in crisis			
Professional relationships			
Brand value			
Feedback from other customers			

Figure 3. Personal interview data analysis

**Table II.**  
Unstructured  
discussions data  
analysis

Concept discussed	Questions (B2B scenario)	Inference
Overall value of an offering	Remembers all interactions during the purchase cycle First experience and a few others are all which are remembered Effect of negative incident in the current interaction	As a seller, all interactions are important because you never know which one will be remembered First experience (primacy) and ongoing experiences should be good (recency) Negative incidents can have a greater effect compared to positive ones
Role of mediators in the final decision	Social (household, peers) Cultural (culture, social class) Personal (age, occupation, education) Psychological (beliefs, motivation)	Has no role, may be because a thorough evaluation is done Affects the final decision Has no role, may be because a thorough evaluation is done Affects the final decision
Miscellaneous factors influencing the B2B decision	Risk appetite Compromised decision/role of hierarchy	Risk appetite is low as people want to play safe There is always an overriding factor

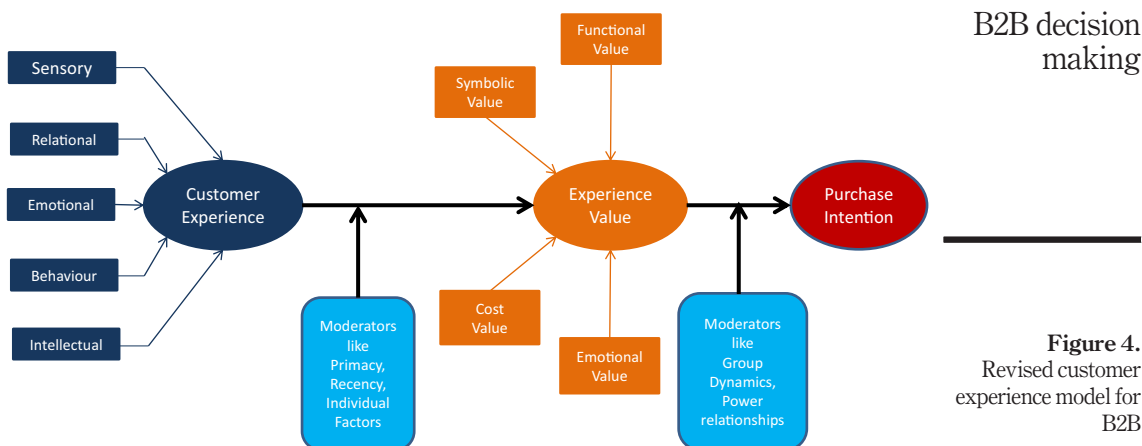
There are instances where we do not prefer a vendor because of a previous bad experience in another country.

There was one incident where a contract came up for renewal and a global RFP was floated. All of us from the purchase committee recommended a specific vendor due to the issues we were facing with the incumbent supplier. However the top management decided to continue with the incumbent.

These comments indicate that the first meeting with the vendor is important, as customers expect them to be fully aware of their requirements and come prepared with a customized solution. Similarly, feedback is taken from the teams which have been served by the vendor. While positive feedback helps vendors maintain or slightly improve their chances of being shortlisted, negative feedback weakens their position and negotiation power. Any positive or negative incident which would have happened in the recent past will have chances of influencing the negotiation. Extant literature also suggests that the overall evaluation is strongly influenced by momentary experiences at most intense and final interactions (Ariely and Carmon, 2000; Fredrickson and Kahneman, 1993; Varey and Kahneman, 1992). These discussions also indicated the role of group dynamics and power relationships (Johnston and Bonoma, 1981) that influence the purchase intent.

Primacy and recency, which constitute feedback from a previous experience, affect the experiential value derived from the ongoing experience and hence moderate the path between customer experience and experiential value. Similarly, individual factors, primarily attitude, culture or background of the individuals in a buying centre, will affect the way an experience is interpreted and hence moderate the path between customer experience and experiential value. Factors like power relationships and group dynamics come into play when members of the buying centre come together to arrive at a purchase decision (Jackson *et al.*, 1984; Kohli, 1989). These factors hence moderate the path between experiential value and purchase intention.

A revised customer experience model for B2B based on these findings is proposed in Figure 4.



### Academic contributions

Extensive literature available on organizational buying behaviour primarily focusses on the buying process adopted in the industry, people involved in the buying centre, types of purchases, conflicts and power dynamics in the buying centre and the vendor–buyer relationships. While various viewpoints have been integrated into different organizational buying behaviour models in the past, a customer experience model highlighting the experiential value in an organizational set-up is still unexplored. This study attempts to add to the existing knowledge of customer experience by exploring its dimensions and bridging all known dimensions to build a more comprehensive customer experience model, especially for the B2B industry. This study identifies the role of specific customer experience dimensions in the B2B environment and proposes the role and mechanism of emotional factors affecting the decision-making process in B2B exchange. The B2B product evaluation has often been considered a rational evaluation. Preliminary investigations during this study strongly support the fact that emotional factors influence decision-making in B2B markets as well. This study also demonstrates the use of the repertory grid technique to identify constructs relevant to customer experience and maps them to the experience and value dimensions.

### Managerial contributions

This study helps marketers understand customer experience dimensions and how experiential value encompasses all value components of customer experience in the B2B market. Marketers can use the findings from this research which includes hitherto little explored dimensions of customer experience, to strategize their offering so as to hit the right emotional chord with consumer. To be relevant and competitive in the market, marketers need to ensure that customers always have a positive experience at all touchpoints right from the start of the purchase cycle to its end.

### Limitations and future research direction

Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that the world economy has progressed through three levels – the earliest stage being commodity economy which involved extracting substances from the world around us, followed by manufacturing economy where products were made and lastly

the service economy which involved intangible deliverables. According to them we have now entered the fourth stage of experience economy where all other factors like cost, after-sales support, product features, quality, etc. have become hygiene factors, and customer experience is the differentiating factor for a product choice. Customer experience has developed as an important construct of consumer behaviour and industries, and scholars are showing interest because it directly affects the overall sales. Our study indicates that emotions do play a role in B2B decision-making. Researchers can further explore this area by carrying out an empirical study to confirm the existence of emotions in a B2B scenario. The model proposed by us can be further refined and tested to check its validity in global markets. The study can also be used by marketing practitioners in the industry to improve the win probability of their products or services by applying these findings to strengthen their emotional bond with existing and new customers.

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### Corresponding author

Santosh Kumar Pandey can be contacted at: [efpm02017@iiml.ac.in](mailto:efpm02017@iiml.ac.in)

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