

The role of emotions in B2B context: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Emotions play a key role in determining business results in various sectors. Its function as cause, effect, mediation, and moderation of behaviors has been a key element in the actions of consumers and marketers, mainly in B2C studies. However, in B2B perspective, the buying behavior has mostly been approached as a rational activity. This article provides a background for researchers and practitioners who seek to understand how emotion has been explored in B2B through a systematic literature review that covered 38 papers. Results suggest a rational-emotional paradigm shift with the latent recognition of emotions' role in B2B both in buyer and seller contexts, addressing five main research categories: (1) **brand**, (2) **sales-buyer dyad**, (3) **purchase decision-making**, (4) **relationship**, and (5) **service experiences**. We also provide a synthesis and outcomes of main emotions advocated in literature (joy, empathy, pride, anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness), as well as avenues for future research.

Keywords: *B2B; Emotions; Systematic Literature Review*

Track: *Business-To-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management*

1. Introduction

Emotions play a key role in determining business results in different sectors. Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer (1999) bring a first view on the influence of emotional behavior in marketing and its function as a cause, effect, mediation, and moderation of behaviors. Since then, the topic has been widely studied, especially in business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing studies. However, in the current human-centered era, it is surprising to note that customer behavior in business-to-business (B2B) is still mostly approached as a rational activity based on a cognitive analysis (Kemp, Briggs & Anaza, 2020; Pandey & Mookerjee, 2018; Zehetner, Hengstberger & Kraigher-Krainer, 2012). Nevertheless, emotional factors might comprise up to 70% of economic decision making in B2B and companies that apply the principles of behavioral economics can effectively outperform their peers by 85% in sales growth and more than 25% in gross margin (Gallup, 2018).

In the extent literature on interorganizational transaction and relational selling, the importance of interpersonal relationships is largely recognized, and demonstrates that besides the more complex decision making process compared to B2C contexts, the buyer-seller relationship is paved on physiological and sociological aspects such as trust, commitment and shared values (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Arli, Bauer & Palmatier, 2018). Among herein mentioned interpersonal traits, emotions play a key role in several levels in B2B: individual, intergroup, and interorganizational (Andersen & Kumar, 2006). Additionally, emotions are an intrinsic part of the businesses and do not need to be avoided or limited, but understood and managed (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017).

This paper's purpose was to systematically review the role of emotions on B2B literature and, given the dearth of research about this topic contexts, identifies and categorize the main research categories, emotions advocated, outcomes for buyer and sellers, as well as opportunities for future studies. The article is organized in four sections including this introduction, methods, the literature review findings, and final remarks.

2. Method

This study has been undertaken as a systematic literature review (SLR) aiming to apply a critical analysis of the existing literature, identifying prior research approaches, empirical methods and possible knowledge gaps in order to determine an agenda for future research (Paul & Criado, 2020).

The SLR were conducted into Scopus e Web of Science databases, considering the initial search criteria: (a) publication period between 2005 and June 2020; (b) written in English. The search terms applied were: “B2B”, “business-to-business” and “organizational buying behavior” combined with the term “emotion”, and they should exist in at least one of the fields: title, keywords and abstract. The initial search retrieved 42 papers, excluding the duplicates from each database. For a more in-depth analysis, we expanded the search in the main industrial journal, the Industrial Marketing Management, adding 11 papers, culminating in 53 papers in this first search round. As a second screening, we read their titles, abstracts, or if more information was needed, the full text. This process excluded 19 papers that approached emotions solely as a component of (1) business environment; (2) company's internal management; (3) technologies to interpret emotions. Additionally, we carried out an analysis of the article’s references considering the relevance of the study and the adherence to the research theme, adding 4 papers. The final sample constituted of 38 articles.

3. Results

This section presents and discuss the main findings retrieved from the SLR summarized in Table 1. Besides the bibliometric method overview, we organized the prior literature into five research categories discussed in section 3.2. Central emotions advocated in the literature as well as their outcomes for buyers and sellers are presented in section 3.3.

Table 1
Representative research on emotions in B2B contexts

References	Journal	Method	Category	Emotions
Kiely (2005)	Service Industries Journal	Qualitative	Service	Sadness
Bagozzi (2006)	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	Qualitative	Sales-buyer	Empathy, joy, pride, anxiety, anger
Andersen & Kumar (2006)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Relationship	Fear, anxiety, and anger
Lynch & De Chernatony (2007)	Journal of Marketing Management	Qualitative	Sales-buyer	N/I
Wang & Huff (2007)	European Journal of Marketing	Quantitative	Relationship	Fear
Čater & Čater (2009)	The Service Industries Journal	Mixed	Service	N/I
Peterson & Limbu (2009)	Journal of Business-to-business Marketing	Quantitative	Sales-buyer	N/I
Bagozzi, Belschak & Verbeke (2010)	Psychology and Marketing	Quantitative	Sales-buyer	Envy
Čater & Čater (2010)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Relationship	N/I
Korhonen & Kaarela (2011)	International Journal of Innovation Management	Qualitative	Service	N/I

Tähtinen & Blois (2011)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Relationship	Empathy, joy, pride, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness
Leek & Christodoulides (2012)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Brand	N/I
Salomonson, Åberg & Allwood (2012)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Service	N/I
Zehetner et al. (2012)	Contributions to Management Science	Qualitative	Decision	Joy, pride, fear, anxiety, and anger
Prior (2013)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Service	Anxiety
Wang & Beise-Zee (2013)	Managing Service Quality	Mixed	Service	Empathy and anxiety
Vidal (2014)	European Journal of Marketing	Quantitative	Relationship	N/I
Candi & Kahn (2016)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Service	N/I
Siadou-Martin, Vidal, Poujol & Tanner (2017)	Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing	Quantitative	Sales-buyer	Joy
Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf & Donthu (2017)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Brand	N/I
Koporčić et al. (2017)	Econviews	Qualitative	Brand	Pride, fear, anxiety, and anger
Pansari & Kumar (2017)	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	Qualitative	Relationship	N/I
Blessley, Zacharia & Aloysius (2018)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Relationship	N/I
Bourassa, Cunningham, Ashworth & Handelman (2018)	Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences	Qualitative	Relationship	Gratitude and anger
Hutchins & Rodriguez (2018)	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	Qualitative	Brand	Empathy and joy
Yieh, Yeh, Tseng, Wang & Wu (2018)	Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing	Quantitative	Brand	N/I
Kemp, Borders, Anaza & Johnston (2018)	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	Qualitative	Decision	Joy, pride, fear, anxiety,
Mogaji, Czarnecka & Danbury (2018)	International Journal of Bank Marketing	Mixed	Decision	N/I
Österle, Kuhn & Henseler (2018)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Brand	N/I
Pandey & Mookerjee (2018)	Journal of Indian Business Research	Qualitative	Decision	N/I
Soscia, Bagozzi & Guenzi (2018)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Sales-buyer	N/I
Briggs, Kalra & Agnihotri (2018)	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	Quantitative	Sales-buyer	N/I
Hsieh & Yuan (2019)	Total Quality Management and Business Excellence	Mixed	Service	Joy
Kleinaltenkamp, Karpen, Plewa, Jaakkola & Conduit (2019)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Relationship	N/I
McCull-Kennedy, Zaki, Lemon, Urmetzer & Neely (2019)	Journal of Service Research	Mixed	Service	Joy, fear, anger, and sadness
Wilson (2019)	Industrial Marketing Management	Qualitative	Decision	N/I
Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Kadic-Maglajlic & Miocevic (2020)	Industrial Marketing Management	Quantitative	Service	N/I
Kemp et al. (2020)	European Journal of Marketing	Mixed	Decision	Fear

N/I: not identified

3.1 Publications overview and Research methods

In the last 15 years, the highest number of articles (26%) appeared in 2018, while during 2005-2016, the production was linear with an average of 1-2 papers per year. Considering this research was completed in June 2020, it is interesting to note that emotions is gaining momentum in the last three years. There is a concentration of 37% of publications in *Industrial Marketing Management*, the main global journal dedicated to B2B marketing, followed by *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* (10%), *European Journal of Marketing* (8%) and *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* (8%), and others (37%).

As for the origin of papers, authors from Europe and North America (mostly the United States of America) have studied the topic with greater intensity having published 19 and 13 articles, respectively, followed by Asia (mostly Taiwan and India) with 4 articles and Oceania (Australia) with 2 articles. No articles were found from South America.

Across the 38 articles, 18% were theoretical and addressed exclusively the role of emotions in B2B or investigate other constructs, such as customer engagement, and identified emotions as their mediating variables, moderators, or results. Most papers (82%) are empirical and employed qualitative and quantitative approaches in a balanced way. Interviews and questionnaires dominate the research collection methods.

3.2 Research categories

This study identified five research categories: (1) **brand**, (2) **sales-buyer dyad**, (3) **purchase decision-making**, (4) **relationship** (5) **service experiences**, as presented in Table 1.

3.2.1 The role of emotional attributes in the B2B brand

B2B branding professionals have also adopted the conventional view that B2B decision-making is rational, leaving no room for emotional attributes. In general, most of studies challenged this argument, by proposing conceptual models to integrate emotion as a relevant attribute of a B2B brand and confirmed its influence for buyers (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Lynch & De Chernatony, 2007). The incorporation of emotional elements into the communication strategy adds brand value (Hutchins & Rodriguez, 2018), increase customer attraction and retention (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2007) and provide positive experiences to influence decision-making (Österle et al., 2018).

3.2.2 Role of emotions in the sales-buyer dyad

The sales force is mostly the first brand interaction. The ability to adapt sales strategies and messages according to customer needs is key, and, a balance between

emotional and functional attributes in this relation is required (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2007). Given the importance of emotions in this dyad, it is recommended specific sales training to develop the individual capacity to recognize and regulate emotions with the aim to create a positive perception and increase customer satisfaction (Siadou-Martin et al., 2017)

3.2.3 Role of emotions in the purchase decision-making process

Most studies confirm that positive and negative emotions can influence the decision-making process. Zehetner et al. (2012) indicate that rational elements lead the decision making, but emotions can impact the process, being more relevant in the initial stages and most neglected in the final phase. However, when it is not possible to make a rational comparison between the purchase options or the alternatives are equals, emotions arise to guide the final decision. B2B buyers experience a high degree of risk, uncertainty and the purchasing process is collaborative with different levels of autonomy and organizational status, which can contribute to evoke emotions (Zehetner et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2020).

3.2.4 Emotions relevance in relationship

B2B transactions gradually changed from discrete to relational (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Thus, the relationship becomes an additional element of company's differentiation and intangible variables such as needs, values and emotions emerged. Positive and negative emotions shape the actors' behavior and their perceptions of mutual reliability, playing a crucial role in initiating, developing, and sustaining relationships over time (Andersen & Kumar, 2006). It is confirmed that loyalty depends not only on the product quality but on the emotional motivation in the form of affective commitment (Čater and Čater, 2010). On the other hand, the lack of personal "chemistry" or the existence of emotions can boost trust building or even cease the relationship (Andersen and Kumar, 2006).

3.2.5 Emotions manifestation in service experiences

Companies must not only provide adequate services but establish an atmosphere that fosters the arousal of positive emotions to achieve customer satisfaction (Candi & Kahn, 2016; Hsieh & Yuan, 2019). As the services occurs through multiple contact points (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019), with an extensive and repeated human interaction (Salomonson et al. 2012), with higher unpredictability, the potential for setbacks is abundant. In this context, the role of employees to regulate emotions in dealing with customers is equally important as customer's emotions (Kiely, 2005). The ability to recognize emotional needs that are not necessarily expressed can derive a careful and personalized service response (Wang & Beise-Zee, 2013). Thus, emotional intelligence skill should be considered when recruiting, selecting, and evaluating service professionals (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2020).

3.3. Emotions map

We have identified in the literature 41 emotions regarding buyer and seller, which we grouped into 7 key emotions, namely: joy, pride, empathy, anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness.

Table 2
Emotions advocate in B2B literature

Emotion	Context which evoke emotions	Outcomes (B=buyer; S=seller; N/A=not applicable)
Joy	Positive decisions; meet customer needs; test and experience products.	B: brand affection and brand compliments. S: N/A
Pride	Result of a good deal or achievement. Experience and self-regulation might differ according to the origin or cultural context.	B: secure, assertive, creative, flexible, and altruistic relationship S: motivation, and engagement; relationship damage (if excessive)
Empathy	Appreciation of a particular partner and a joint history; understand, experience, and share other's personal perspectives and backgrounds.	B: positive relationship; affective responses in negative incidents; quality perception in service experience; relationship recovery. S: positive, affective, and accurate communication; interpersonal commitment.
Anger	Incompetence in task execution; sequence of negatives incidents; blame; lack of respect; breach of trust; errors in decision-making; uncertainty; communication problems; and conflict.	B: hostile reaction; complaints; supplier retaliation; temporary order reduction; negative WOM; reduced levels of cooperation; lack of motivation; relationship dissolution. S: N/A
Fear	High risk perception; breach of trust and confidence; customer loss; lack of innovation and competitiveness; failure at problem solving; lack of self-confidence.	B: alert behavior; interaction reduction; search for products and services to prevent a potential threat. S: draw attention to key events, boost positive actions to repair a problem and maintain the relationship.
Anxiety	High risk perception; deal with negative results; performance discussion; new relationships; change in existing practices.	B: usage of rational criteria to avoid impulses; caution behavior; motivation for extra efforts. S: Negative effect in sales and customer communication.
Sadness	Delivery and quality problems; Lack of effort to solve problems; customer loss.	B: disappointment and complaints.

4. Final Remarks

This study examined and categorized 38 emotion-related articles in B2B contexts published in the last 15 years and provided an overview of annual production, journals, research categories and emotions advocated in literature. Although emotion has received scant treatment in B2B studies, we found that the topic has gaining momentum in the last three years addressing five main research categories: (1) **brand**, (2) **sales-byer dyad**, (3) **purchase decision-making**, (4) **relationship**, and (5) **service experiences**.

The literature review demonstrates a trend and a paradigm shift between rational and emotional with the latent recognition that emotions play a key role in B2B both in buyer and seller contexts. Although some studies have shown that functional and utilitarian attributes remain the main assessment element, emotions cannot be ignored. We also identify seven key emotions advocate in B2B literature and their outcomes for buyers and sellers, namely: joy,

pride, empathy, anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness. It is worth to note that emotions arise in an individual level and might have a salient effect on the sales performance. However, few studies focused on seller's emotional perspective in the B2B context and specifically no research was identified in Latin America. Most of the studies addressed the role of emotions in a single context or specific relationship stage, and none focused on its holistic impact on B2B customer journey. In addition, there is a lack of a broader overview of outcomes and management practices recommendations for emotions regulation. This calls for a research agenda that explains:

- whether the impact of emotions in decision-making differs according to market industry, organization type, or even across multiple actors (comparison between C-level, buyer and user), as well as the interference between organizational and individual level;
- how B2B companies are considering emotions in their marketing approach, and which strategies are being adopted;
- the holistic and integrated impact of emotions in B2B customer journey; and
- the emotions impact in B2B businesses in emergent countries, including Latin America.

Finally, it is necessary to take account of this study's limitations. Considering the lack of consistency in emotional terminology with the usage of the words "affectivity", "feeling", "humor" (Bagozzi et al., 1999), papers that used only these words in the abstract and title, were not considered in the analysis. In addition, even though it was a representative sample of papers, the number of articles analyzed was relatively low, making it difficult to use more sophisticated statistical tests.

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