



Literature Review

Key characteristics of perceived customer centricity in the passenger airline industry: A systematic literature review



Stephan Soklaridis*, Alexander M. Geske, Sebastian Kummer

Institute for Transport and Logistics Management, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

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ABSTRACT

The airline industry is operating in a highly competitive and saturated market and is considered to be one of the most dynamic service industries in the world. Maintaining a high level of passenger satisfaction and incorporating customer centricity into an airline's strategy can be the key competitive advantage. Despite the growing interest of scholars and managers in customer centricity, research on this topic in the airline industry has just started. However, it is key to understand how a firm's intentions to become customer-centric finally translate into customer perceptions. For this purpose, the authors developed a perceived customer centricity framework which is tailored to the environment of the passenger airline industry. A systematic literature review was conducted to review and analyze key characteristics and measures of perceived customer centricity in the airline industry. The authors identified 15 distinct key characteristics (measures) in literature and conclude that airlines need to focus on various aspects to truly be customer-centric. Investing in sustainable practices, employee training, modern in-flight experiences, competitive pricing, technological infrastructure, and positive brand associations all contribute to customer centricity. Understanding how these elements are interconnected allows airlines to customize their efforts, meeting current and future passenger needs, and ultimately creating a standout customer-centric culture in the competitive airline industry. By formulating concrete measures this paper establishes a foundation for future perceived customer centricity research, such as surveys, and presents alternative measures to the widely adopted net promoter score (NPS).

1. Introduction

Customer centricity – putting the customer into the center of attention – has been referred to as “one of the most popular business concepts today” (Mitreanu, 2005, p. 1) and as the “holy grail of retail marketing” (Latinovic & Chatterjee, 2019, p. 1). Even beyond the discipline of marketing, customer centricity plays an important role in a firm's overall business strategy (e.g., Lee et al., 2015; Zakir Hossain et al., 2017). The goal of customer-centric approaches (unlike product-centric approaches) is to establish a long-term relationship between customers and companies (Lamberti, 2013; Shah et al., 2006). This appears crucial in achieving a competitive advantage in the service industry, where competition is on the rise due to the introduction of new business models and new technologies (Davis & Nag, 2020; Sun et al., 2024). Gaining a competitive edge is especially challenging in the airline industry, as airlines are competing in a rapidly changing, highly competitive and saturated market (Lucini et al., 2020). This service industry is referred to as one of the most dynamic in the world (Davis & Nag, 2020) and airlines are in constant competition to survive in the present business environment. Maintaining a high level of passenger satisfaction can be the key competitive advantage (Lucini et al., 2020).

1.1. Overview of research on customer centricity

Since 2000, various contributions offering valuable insights into customer centricity have been published in academic literature and even though each holds significant value, the topic and definitions still remain ambiguous and fluid. However, while different articles define customer centricity in different ways, three well-accepted characteristics of customer centricity presented in Table 1 can be identified in all definitions. Based on these well-established characteristics, Habel et al. (2020, p. 27) define **customer centricity** as “putting customers' interests at the center of a firm's actions” and, subsequently, define **perceived customer centricity** as “the degree to which a customer perceives a firm to put customers' interests at the center of all actions” (Habel et al., 2020, p. 28). These definitions are used for the purpose of this article.

Even though customer centricity has its theoretical antecedents in market orientation theory, the concept extends beyond mere market orientation by implementing the principles of customer focus and cross-functional collaboration, as suggested by Narver & Slater (1990). It takes a more individualized and personalized approach to serving customers, which incorporates elements of co-creation to enhance innovation in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: stephan.soklaridis@s.wu.ac.at (S. Soklaridis).

Table 1

Key characteristics of customer centricity according to current literature (Habel et al., 2020).

Characteristic	Mentioned by
firm's focus on customers' interests	Bolton (2004), Cheng & Dogan (2008), Crecelius et al. (2019), Frankenberger et al. (2013), Habel et al. (2020), Jayachandran et al. (2005), Lamberti (2013), Lee et al. (2015), Liang & Tanniru (2006), Shah et al. (2006) and Sheth et al. (2000)
entire firm as the unit of analysis	Bolton (2004), Crecelius et al. (2019), Frankenberger et al. (2013), Habel et al. (2020), Jayachandran et al. (2005), Lamberti (2013), Lee et al. (2015), Shah et al. (2006) and Sheth et al. (2000)
active prioritization of customers as the core principle	Bolton (2004), Habel et al. (2020), Jayachandran et al. (2005) and Shah et al. (2006)

the process (Lamberti, 2013). Therefore, customer centricity implies the prevalence of market orientation, but not vice versa.

Current research mostly adopted a firm-centric view on customer centricity by examining management levers (Habel et al., 2020). Habel et al. (2020) were first to propose that in-between customer-centric firm decisions (analysis of the firm) and desirable outcomes (analysis of outcomes), the category of customer perceptions (analysis of customers) should be introduced. For this purpose, the authors introduced a scale for measuring perceived customer centricity in a business-to-business environment. The introduction of a validated scale seems to be a significant contribution to current customer centricity research, as it allows to monitor how intentions and measures to develop customer centricity finally translate into customer perceptions (Habel et al., 2020). While firms may have high ambitions to act in a customer-centric manner, these ambitions might not be realized due to a lack of congruence between the firm's intended customer centricity and customers' perceived customer centricity.

1.2. Overview of customer centricity in the airline industry

Technological advancements since the 2000s have led to the public availability of substantial quantities of information and thus to airline customers highly aware of the airline market and its competing forces. Due to their enhanced bargaining power, customers occupy a dominant position in the firm-customer relationship, pushing the airlines to constantly adapt to meet their evolving needs (Davis & Nag, 2020). Extreme and rapid challenges for the industry (e.g., changing customer requirements, environmental regulations, and a changing market environment) and major disruptions (e.g., past financial crises or COVID-19 pandemic), necessitate continual adaptation to survive (Davis & Nag, 2020).

Amidst challenges such as low-profit operation and fierce competition, airlines actively seek competitive advantages, with customer centricity emerging as a potential contributor (Kim & Lee, 2019; Kuo & Jou, 2017). Lemon et al. (2001, p. 22) emphasize that "a company's current customers provide the most reliable source of future revenues and profits." The focus on long-term customer relationships, encapsulated by Çavdar and Ferhatosmanoglu (2018) as customer lifetime value, has gained prominence across industries. At the same time, the issue of infrequent touchpoints between airlines and their customers needs to be addressed. This infrequent nature of interactions presents a particular challenge as it limits the ability of airlines to build and maintain meaningful relationships with their customers. Considering the infrequency is crucial to realizing the full potential of customer-centric initiatives and ensuring sustainable competitiveness amidst the competitive and changing landscape of the passenger airline sector.

As discussed by Ulaga (2018), current research has focused on the *why* and *what* of customer centricity, but what is still needed is a better understanding of *how* one can measure customer centricity in order to effectively build customer-centric organizations. Despite the challenging environment of the airline industry, little research has yet explored the role of customer centricity in this industry. The publications available on the subject are primarily from the disciplines of revenue management (e.g., Boudia et al., 2021; Daft et al., 2021; Hoff, 2008; Mathies et al., 2013; Vinod, 2021) and marketing (e.g., Camilleri, 2018;

Kim & Lee, 2019; Park et al., 2020). Notably, to date, no study has clarified measures of customer centricity specific to the airline industry.

1.3. Relevance and contribution

In an attempt to address customer centricity in the airline industry, an essential task of future research is finding concrete measures of perceived customer centricity in this industry. We argue that the clarification of concrete measures provides opportunities for both marketing and service science scholars to advance and disseminate knowledge between academic research and managers. For this instance, the present review focuses on the management perspective and addresses the research question: "What are measures of perceived customer centricity in the airline industry?"

Given that there is still a gap in the customer centricity research in business-to-customer environments and especially in the passenger airline industry, the aim of the present research is to conduct a systematic literature review. Based on research available to date, this review intends to provide an initial overview of customer centricity measures in the airline industry. Hence, the paper's academic contribution is twofold: current research on customer centricity done by Habel et al. (2020) is extended to an entirely new industry and a foundation for subsequent research on customer centricity in the passenger airline industry is established. On the managerial side, the present paper provides managers with a perspective for integrating customer centricity measures into their decision-making processes as well as for better understanding and actively steering customer perception. Building on the foundational work of the present research project, future research could design and validate a measurement scale tailored to the passenger airline industry, which can be employed in customer surveys. This would provide an additional perspective on an airline's customer base beside the commonly used net promoter score (NPS). Even though the NPS has been widely utilized as a benchmark for measuring customer satisfaction in the airline industry, its singular focus on the likelihood of recommendation may oversimplify the multidimensional nature of customer experiences and thus represents a major limitation. The call for an alternative to the NPS arises from the acknowledgement that customer centricity includes a broader range of factors than just recommendation intent.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the subsequent section describes the construct of customer centricity, its key characteristics as well as related constructs in detail to provide the foundation for the following research framework. This is followed by a description of the methodology used for the systematic literature review. Next, the findings of the systematic literature review are presented and assigned within the developed framework. Finally, the implications of the results are discussed and directions for future research are suggested.

2. Scope and conceptualization of customer centricity

The focus of the following section is on a more detailed description of the construct customer centricity and its relationship to adjacent constructs as well as on the development of an initial theoretical framework for the subsequent literature review. Durach et al. (2017) note that one should start from a theoretical viewpoint and thus suggest the devel-

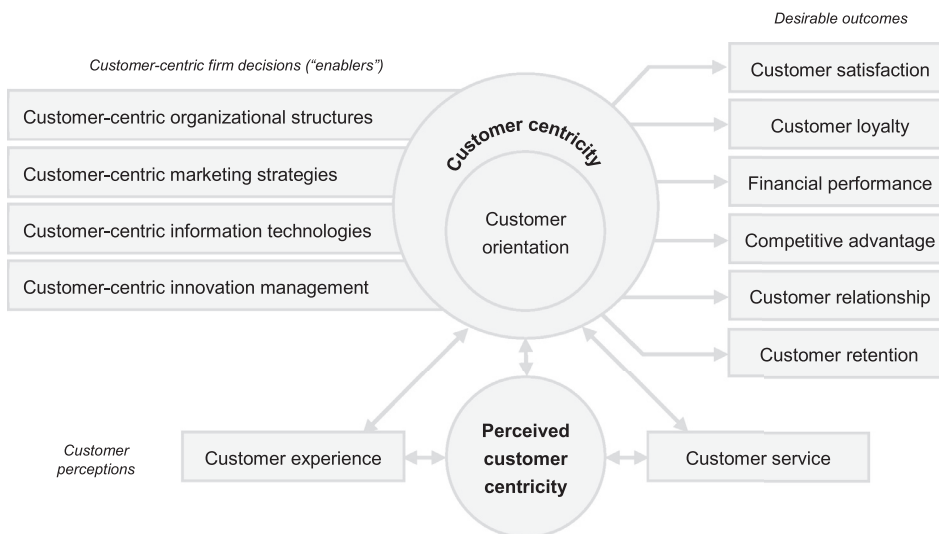


Fig. 1. Conceptualization of customer centrality and adjacent constructs (based on Ban & Kim, 2019; Brown et al., 2002; Habel et al., 2020; Heinonen et al., 2010; Jauhari, 2017; Lamberti, 2013; Laming & Mason, 2014; McMullan, 2005; Söderlund, 2006).

opment of an initial theoretical framework reflecting the relationships between the concept and the phenomenon with the aim of refining it throughout the ensuing systematic literature review. A framework reveals the scope by specifying definitions, the study's context as well as the unit of analysis (Durach et al., 2017). In the following section, customer centrality is first conceptualized, and the definition and unit of analysis are addressed. The conceptualization is followed by the introduction of a framework specifying the study's context and serving as the basis for the analysis of perceived customer centrality in the subsequent literature review.

2.1. Conceptualization of customer centrality and adjacent constructs

When speaking about the conceptualization of customer centrality on a firm or customer level, the question of how this concept differs from the concept of customer orientation (or customer focus) may arise. Customer centrality and customer orientation are similar concepts, because both can be “conceptualized on the level of firms and on the level of subunits (e.g., salespeople, functions) and entail a strong focus on customer needs” (Habel et al., 2020, p. 28). According to the authors, one major difference between both concepts is the degree to which an active prioritization of a firm's customers is pursued. While customer orientation is characterized as a tendency to meet customer needs and refers to a firm's strong orientation towards addressing and fulfilling current customer needs (Brown et al., 2002), customer centrality goes deeper by additionally focusing on future needs (Heinonen et al., 2010), incorporating a customer's lifetime value, recognizing the customer as “an active and central participant in the value creation process” (Ambaram, 2014, p. 9) and by putting the customer in the center of all actions (Habel et al., 2020; Jayachandran et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2006).

In Fig. 1, a conceptualization of customer centrality and related concepts is proposed to provide an overview of their interrelationships and differences based on a synthesis of existing literature. Current research on customer centrality has primarily focused on customer-centric firm decisions or the desirable outcomes of these firm decisions. With regard to customer-centric firm decisions, four main domains have been investigated in more detail as shown in Figure 1 (Habel et al., 2020; Lamberti, 2013). These four domains are referred to as “enablers” and are important areas of interest for building a customer-centric organization. On the desirable outcomes side, research has mainly focused on financial performance, retaining customers, marketing performance and customer relationship performance (McMullan, 2005; Nadube & Makelele, 2019; Parniangtong, 2017; Shah et al., 2006; Söderlund, 2006). Generally speaking, customer centrality aims to re-

tain business and customers, enhance growth, and create customer loyalty. As previously shown, the desire to achieve a competitive advantage is particularly relevant to the airline industry.

There are several touchpoints between an airline customer and the airline along the entire customer journey, resulting in three distinct constructs for analysis: customer experience, customer service and perceived customer centrality. Both customer experience and customer service are well-researched constructs (generally as well as in the airline industry), demonstrated by numerous academic contributions (e.g., Ban & Kim, 2019; Jauhari, 2017; Laming & Mason, 2014) and well-established scales (e.g., SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and SERVPERF; see Robledo, 2001 or Zhang et al., 2023). Customer centrality research, however, is still in its early stages, again, generally as well as specifically in the airline industry. This article adheres to the definition established by Habel et al. (2020, p. 28), who define perceived customer centrality as “the degree to which a customer perceives a firm to put customers' interests at the center of all actions”.

2.2. Framework for classifying customer centrality measures

Companies of different industries aim to be perceived as customer-centric by their customers, but the majority still follows a product-centric approach (Shah et al., 2006). Academia has responded to the growing interest of firms in customer-centric approaches and several frameworks and paradigms have been proposed. However, none of them focuses on the classification of perceived customer centrality measures in the airline industry.

Shah et al. (2006) introduced a framework for the organizational barriers a firm needs to overcome in order to move from product centrality to customer centrality. When considering the perspective of customers and thus emphasizing perceived customer centrality, neither organizational structure, financial metrics nor organizational processes are areas of interest. The authors further refer to culture as an organizational barrier which, according to the customer centrality definition of Habel et al. (2020), plays a vital role for the construct of perceived customer centrality. Especially in marketing literature, customer journey maps are widely used as a basis for customer touchpoint research. Such concepts map the entire customer journey – from the first contact of the customer with the airline (e.g., on a price comparison website) to the final and last touchpoint (e.g., crediting of bonus miles to the customer's frequent flyer account) (e.g., Marquez et al., 2015; Moon et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Per definition of perceived customer centrality, prioritizing customers and placing the customer's interest at the center of all actions suggests that all touchpoints along the passenger

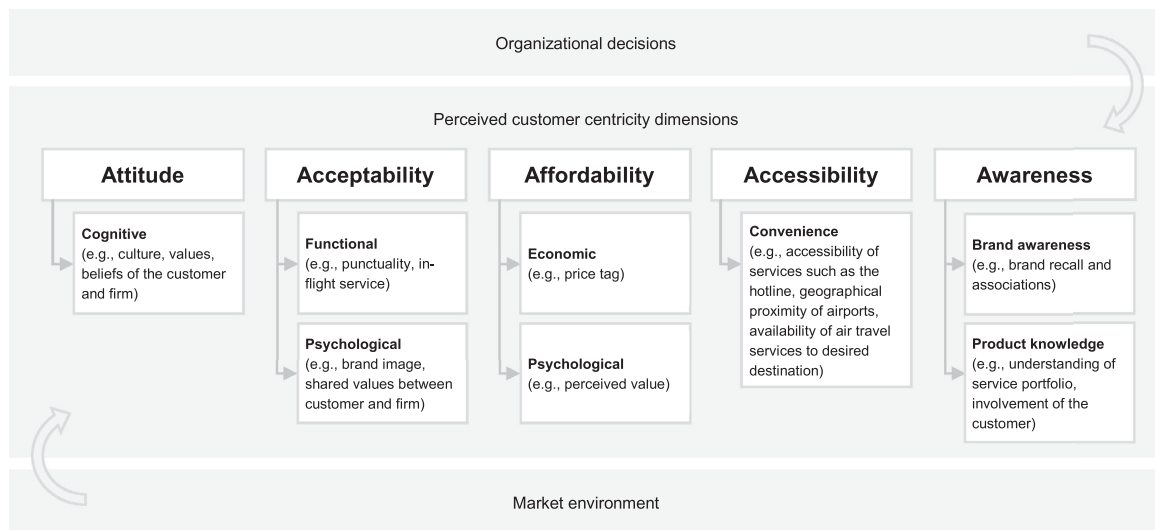


Fig. 2. Perceived customer centricity framework (PCCF) (based on the 4A's framework by Sheth & Sisodia 2012 with category "Attitude" added).

journey are vital points, contributing to perceived customer centricity. However, customer centricity goes beyond the customer journey and incorporates not only current, but also future needs (see Fader, 2012) as well as values and beliefs (see Frankenberger et al., 2013). In this regard, Heinonen et al. (2010, p. 544) point out that customer centricity emerges in the customer's life and that a customer-dominant logic also "considers invisible and mental actions". Several variants of the 4A's framework have been discussed in academic literature (e.g., Anderson & Billou, 2007; Sarkar & Pareek, 2013). The most relevant variant for the construct of perceived customer centricity is the 4A's framework proposed by Sheth & Sisodia (2012). The authors discuss the following four A's and their connection to available market solutions as well as to internal and external resources, incorporating two dimensions for each A: functional and psychological **Acceptability**, economic and psychological **Affordability**, available and convenient **Accessibility** as well as brand and product knowledge **Awareness**. This variant of the 4A's framework captures the essence of outcomes that customers value in a firm. Still, this framework is not tailored to customer centricity or more specifically, to perceived customer centricity in the airline industry.

As shown and discussed, so far, no suitable framework for assessing and categorizing measures in perceived customer centricity has been developed. Earlier, we discussed the definition of perceived customer centricity (Section 1.1) and distinguished the concept from adjacent concepts (Section 2.1). Now, we will focus on categorizing measures of perceived customer centricity. In considering the limitations of existing frameworks, the 4A's framework by Sheth & Sisodia (2012) emerges as the most relevant. This framework outlines four key aspects that are linked to market solutions and internal/external resources. However, it lacks tailoring to the airline industry's perceived customer centricity.

Given this gap, our study introduces a perceived customer centricity framework (PCCF) based on the well-established 4A's framework by Sheth & Sisodia (2012) with tailored adjustments. The four original A's and their dimensions are incorporated but the framework is extended by an additional 'A'—Attitude. This fifth dimension, theoretically justified and inspired by the works of Frankenberger et al. (2013) and Wang and Sun (2010), delves into the alignment of culture, values, and beliefs between the airline and its passengers. The addition is motivated by the unique characteristics and complexities of the relationship between airlines and passengers, where cultural factors, values, and beliefs play a key role. The addition reflects the alignment of shared values and beliefs between the airline and the passenger, acknowledging the importance of a deeper connection beyond transactional interactions, and therefore addressing the dynamic nature of customer attitudes. This enables air-

lines to proactively adjust to changes in customer preferences, ensuring long-term relevance. It also provides a more holistic and tailored framework for our analysis.

Some may argue that an investigation of culture, values and beliefs requires an a priori segmentation (e.g., by demographic, psychographic, geographic or behavioral dimensions as suggested by Pandit, 2015). However, we argue that a general attitude-match between firm and customer is in the center of investigation and that a possible segmentation should be done while conducting a survey.

As presented in Fig. 2, the proposed perceived customer centricity framework tailored to the airline industry consists of the following five categories:

- **Attitude** refers to customer's individual attitudes and an attitude-match between firm and customer on the cognitive dimension (e.g., culture, values, beliefs of the customer and firm).
- **Acceptability** refers to meeting customer's needs and exceeding expectations on both functional (e.g., punctuality, in-flight service) and psychological (e.g., brand image, shared values between customer and firm) dimension.
- **Affordability** refers to both economic (e.g., price tag) and psychological (e.g., perceived value) value of a specific service.
- **Accessibility** refers to the ability to use a specific service (e.g., time and effort to acquire a ticket) as well as to the spatial proximity of the service offered (e.g., geographical proximity of airports and the availability of air travel services to the passenger's desired destination) and is captured on the convenience dimension.
- **Awareness** refers to both brand awareness (e.g., brand recall and associations) and product knowledge (e.g., understanding of service portfolio, involvement of the customer).

Perceived customer centricity is influenced by both organizational decisions and the market environment. The perceived customer centricity framework (PCCF) shown in Fig. 2 guided the study's systematic literature review and was used for categorizing perceived customer centricity measures.

3. Methodology

This research follows a systematic literature approach adapted from Durach et al. (2017) (see Fig. 3). According to Gereia et al. (2021), a systematic literature review in academia aims to provide a broad perspective on a given subject by using a repeatable and transparent process. The aim of the present study is to understand and identify measures



Fig. 3. Systematic literature review approach (adapted from Durach et al., 2017).

Table 2
Inclusion criteria.

	Inclusion criteria	Rationale
1	Peer-reviewed articles	The peer-review process increases the quality of the paper (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) and ensures quality control (Light & Pillemer, 1984).
2	Papers published between 1990 and February 2023	The nineties were selected as a starting point because this decade was marked by the widespread adoption of communication technologies and led to an acceleration of commoditization, resulting in the “third generation customer-centricity” as discussed by Mitreanu (2005).
3	Summary/Abstract must address at least one PCCF dimension (as proposed in the PCCF framework)	The aim of the review is to analyze and synthesize the different measures of perceived customer centricity to improve conceptual clarity and understanding.
4	Article must have a focus on the airline or aviation industry	As the aim of this research is to identify measures of perceived customer centricity in the passenger airline industry, the focus is on papers that specifically address this industry. Customer centricity in other industries (e.g., IT service industry) may comprise different measures that could bias the results.
5	Different types of articles are considered (e.g., conceptual)	The focus of the research project is to synthesize and evaluate measures to the concept of perceived customer centricity, regardless of the research method.
6	Article must be written in English	English is the dominant research language in the field of marketing and airline management.

of customer centricity in the airline industry in more detail. As suggested by Durach et al. (2017), first the perceived customer centricity framework (PCCF) was introduced as a prerequisite for the following review. In order to avoid both a potential research bias and a potential expectancy bias as discussed by Durach et al. (2017), this literature review comprised two different databases and involved two different researchers with different research focuses.

3.1. Definition of the research aim

The PCCF framework proposed earlier (see Section 2.3.) was used to synthesize existing literature on both customer centricity and adjacent constructs in order to identify and cluster perceived customer centricity measures in the airline industry accordingly. As customer centricity research in the airline industry is still in its infancy, this paper aims to make both an academic and managerial contribution (see Section 1.3.).

3.2. Craft inclusion/exclusion criteria

To follow a rigorous methodological approach, an inclusion criteria list which was agreed upon by all authors of this research paper was developed (see Table 2). Our research focused on peer-reviewed articles only, as the peer-review process ensures quality control (Light &

Pillemer, 1984) and therefore increases the quality of an article compared to non-peer reviewed articles (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Only papers published between 1990 and February 2023 were selected. The nineties were chosen as the starting period because this decade was marked by the widespread adoption of communication technologies (Mitreanu, 2005) and led to an acceleration of commoditization, with the result that due to a deeper understanding of the customer, companies reinvented offers. This era introduced a new generation of customer centricity (Mitreanu, 2005). As the aim of this review is to analyze and synthesize different measures of perceived customer centricity in order to improve conceptual clarity and understanding, only articles that address at least one of the dimensions proposed in our PCCF framework were selected. As such, articles had to demonstrate a relevant focus on the impact of customer centricity for customers and a focus on the airline industry. Furthermore, only articles in English were included as this language is the dominant research language in the field of marketing and airline management. Articles that did not fulfil these criteria were not included.

3.3. Retrieve the ‘baseline sample’

In accordance with other literature review articles in the domain of airline management (e.g., Alper & Karsh, 2009; Geske et al., 2022),

Table 3

Keywords and search string.

Construct	Original search string	Databases
Perceived customer centrality in the airline industry	(airline" OR aviation) AND [(customer AND centric") OR (customer AND orient") OR (customer AND retent")]	Business Source Premier (accessed through EBESCO) and Scopus

the initial search for articles used the keyword “customer centrality” together with “airline”. The search results on these keywords however indicate the lack of customer centrality research in the airline industry to date. It was therefore decided to expand the scope in order to cover all relevant topics. The keywords “aviation” and “customer orientation” were added to the search string. As discussed in Section 2.1., the concept of customer orientation (focus on current customer needs) is closely linked to the concept of customer centrality (focus on current and future customer needs), and we argue that customer orientation is a subset of customer centrality. Also, based on our conceptualization of customer centrality and related concepts in Section 2.1., we argue that customer retention is a desirable outcome of customer-centric firm decisions (as noted by Shah et al., 2006). However, it is acknowledged that some scholars may view customer retention as a separate construct focused on maintaining and strengthening relationships with existing customers. Customer retention was thus included in the search string as well.

Two academics with expertise in airline management evaluated these search keywords based on the research objective and the inclusion criteria. The final search string is presented in Table 3 and was adjusted to each database’s specific search guidelines. In order to reduce a possible sampling bias as discussed by Durach et al. (2017), both the Business Source Premier database (accessed through EBESCO) and the Scopus database were used for the literature search. Both databases are widely recognized as two of the largest and most comprehensive business databases, including management and marketing research and ensuring a broad representation of publications on customer centrality in the airline industry (Carter et al., 2019). The strategic choice was intended to maximize the inclusivity of perspectives within the systematic literature review. To ensure that the baseline sample covered all relevant articles, we also conducted citation searches and manually added relevant articles to the sample. The search was carried out in March 2023.

3.4. Select pertinent literature (‘synthesis sample’)

In a fourth step, relevant articles were identified and unrelated articles excluded according to the inclusion criteria defined in step two (Durach et al., 2017). The Online-Tool CADIMA was used for literature synthesis (Kohl et al., 2018). To retrieve the study’s ‘synthesis sample’, the ‘baseline sample’ was first retrieved according to the criteria defined in step three. 103 articles in the Business Source Premier database and 200 articles in Scopus were identified (= ‘baseline sample’). The different number of articles found in each database is due to different literature listings in the databases. We removed duplicates (111 articles) and for validity reasons blindly reviewed the abstracts based on the inclusion criteria. This step reduced the number of articles from 168 to 66 articles for the following analysis. To assess the actual significance of the articles, the whole manuscripts were studied by both authors of the present paper individually to reduce a possible selection bias as discussed by Durach et al. (2017). Again, 30 articles were excluded but through cross-referencing, additional 6 relevant articles were found, which led to a ‘synthesis sample’ of 42 articles as shown in Fig. 4.

3.5. Synthesize literature

The final sample of 42 articles (‘synthesis sample’) was analyzed with the goal of providing a consolidated overview of articles that address

perceived customer centrality in the airline industry. For this purpose, the content of the articles was categorized according to the eight dimensions of the proposed PCCF framework. An interpretative synthesis technique was used for the subsequent categorization, as advised by Briner et al. (2009) when articles of a heterogeneous character are synthesized and when a sizable portion of the sample consists of qualitative studies. The articles’ allocation to and categorization into the dimensions of the PCCF framework provides the foundation for future perceived customer centrality research and helps proposing directions for further research.

3.6. Report the results

This final stage includes the presentation of the results from all chosen studies and their relationship to each other. The synthesis and categorization to be made is an “informed interpretation” of the scientific results in relation to the overall research aim (Briner et al., 2009). The following section aims to present the findings on the current state of measures of perceived customer centrality in the airline industry.

4. Results

This section provides an extensive overview of our findings from all 42 articles included in the analysis. First, a descriptive analysis of the synthesis sample is conducted, followed by an extensive overview based and structured according to the PCCF framework and its 8 dimensions (see Fig. 2).

4.1. Descriptive analysis of synthesized literature

The study’s synthesis sample consists of 24 articles focusing on customer orientation, 15 articles focusing on customer centrality and 6 articles focusing on customer retention. Addressing diversity of the sample, 8 articles focused on the EMEA region, 6 focused on NA, and 13 had a focus on the APAC region. Out of the synthesis sample, 9 articles focused on network carriers, 3 articles on point-to-point carriers, and 15 articles on both types of carriers. The remaining articles did not address a specific region or carrier type. Since 1995, academic research has started investigating the concept of customer orientation in the airline industry in more detail. This is in line with the “new generation of customer centrality” discussed earlier, which was first pointed out by Mitreanu (2005). In the synthesis sample customer retention was first mentioned in 2005. The first article on customer centrality was also published in 2005 and as shown in Figure 5, the number of publications on customer centrality in the airline industry has grown especially in recent years, while the number of publications on customer orientation has remained constant. From these findings, we draw two main conclusions:

- In recent years, the number of articles on customer centrality with a focus on the airline industry has grown. This trend does not only show the increasing importance and academic’s growing interest in this topic, but can also be seen as a justification for interpreting customer centrality as a stand-alone concept, related to, yet distinct from customer orientation.
- The percentage of articles on customer centrality in the synthesis sample has increased between 2015 and 2023, which suggests a shift from customer orientation to customer centrality. Still, as the numbers of contributions show, both concepts are of importance in the airline industry.

4.2. Qualitative analysis of perceived customer centrality dimensions

In total, 15 distinct passenger airline industry-related measures of perceived customer centrality were identified in the synthesis sample. The results and their sources, categorized by the articles’ focus on customer centrality as well as customer orientation and customer retention, are summarized in Table 4.

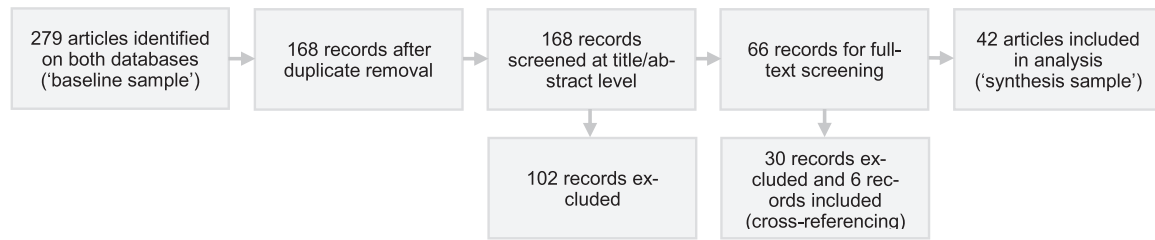


Fig. 4. Article selection process.

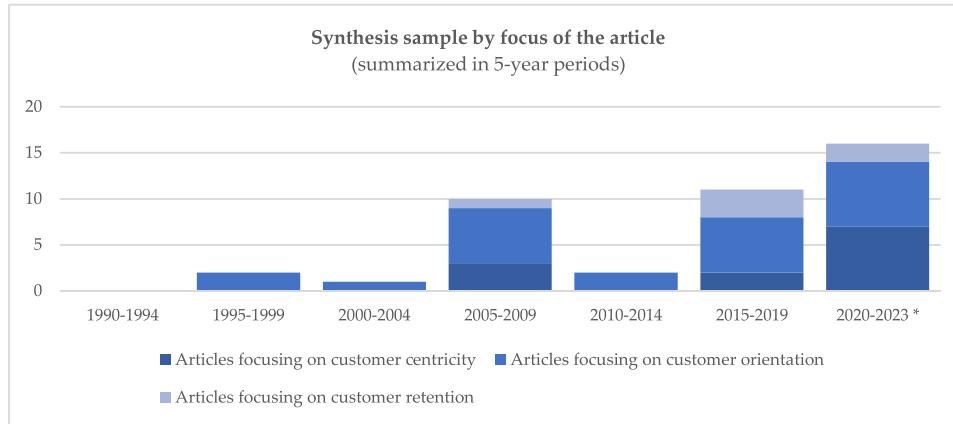


Fig. 5. Synthesis sample broken down by focus and year.

Table 4
Perceived customer centrality measures with reference details.

Category	Dimension	Measure	Based on articles with a focus on customer centrality	Based on articles with a focus on (A) customer orientation and (B) customer retention
Attitude	Cognitive	building green corporate reputation	(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Le Bel, 2005; Park et al., 2020)	A: (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2018)
		ensuring adequate information flow and emotion management		
Acceptability	Functional	building empathy and interpersonal relationships	(S. Kim et al., 2016; J. N. Sheth et al., 2024; Walia et al., 2021)	A: (Aziz et al., 2016; Bieger et al., 2007; Ekdahl et al., 1999; Nwankwo, 1995)
		delivering superior service through empowerment		
	Psychological	ensuring a state-of-the-art tangible in-flight experience	(S. Kim et al., 2016)	A: (Aziz et al., 2016; J.-H. Cheng et al., 2008; Fu, 2013; Shadiyar et al., 2020)
		ensuring efficient boarding processes		
Affordability	Economic	ensuring brand credibility	(Boudia et al., 2021; Mathies & Gudergan, 2007; Vinod, 2021)	B: (Climis, 2016)
		developing innovative offers		
	Psychological	offering competitive price & fees	(Boudia et al., 2021; Mathies & Gudergan, 2007; Vinod, 2021)	B: (Azad & Sadeghifar, 2019)
Accessibility	Convenience	ensuring a dense schedule & high reliability	(Nenem et al., 2020; Thakkar & Palaniappan, 2024; Vinod, 2021)	A: (Agariya & Tikoria, 2017)
		creation of individual airfare bundles		
Awareness	Brand awareness	offering surprise items	(Madireddy et al., 2017)	B: (Climis, 2016)
		developing high-standard self-service capabilities that give passengers control	(Boudia et al., 2021)	
	Product knowledge	building positive brand associations	(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2021)	A: (Agariya & Tikoria, 2017; Ekdahl et al., 1999)
Awareness	Brand awareness	ensuring customer involvement and empowerment	(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Le Bel, 2005)	B: (Shiwakoti et al., 2022)
Awareness	Product knowledge	building positive brand associations	(Le Bel, 2005)	A: (Laroche et al., 2005; Rasool & Pathania, 2021)
		ensuring customer involvement and empowerment		
Awareness	Product knowledge		(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Le Bel, 2005)	B: (Simarmata et al., 2017)
Awareness	Product knowledge		(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Le Bel, 2005)	A: (J.-H. Cheng et al., 2008; Laroche et al., 2005; Loo, 2020; Nwankwo, 1995; Rasool & Pathania, 2021)
Awareness	Product knowledge		(Büyükoğkan et al., 2020; Le Bel, 2005)	B: (Azad & Sadeghifar, 2019)

Attitude

Three distinct cognitive measures of attitude have been discussed in literature:

- **Building green corporate reputation:** Wu et al. (2018, p. 20) argue that a higher level of perceived eco-friendly corporate reputation decreases passengers' intentions to switch airlines, thereby increasing satisfaction. Rodríguez-García et al. (2020, p. 67) emphasize that a sustainable corporate reputation cultivates long-lasting and enduring customer loyalty.
- **Ensuring adequate information flow and emotion management:** Addressing information flow and emotion management, Aziz et al. (2016) stress that emotions influence social processes, affecting service encounters and quality. Customers should not be emotionally overwhelmed, but rather provided with the right information at the right point of time (Ekdahl et al., 1999). Transparent processes (Ekdahl et al., 1999) as well as customer-tailored communication and marketing strategies (Bieger et al., 2007; Büyüközkan et al., 2020; Nwankwo, 1995; Park et al., 2020) complement an adequate information flow. Büyüközkan et al. (2020) further note that the customers decide which communication channel works best on their terms and so airlines should offer a wide range of communication channels for the customer to choose from.
- **Building empathy and interpersonal relationships:** The vital role of empathy and interpersonal relationships is underscored by Cheng et al. (2008), Kim et al. (2016), Shadiyar et al. (2020), Walia et al. (2021), Aziz et al. (2016), Climis (2016), Sheth et al. (2024), and Fu (2013), emphasizing that empathy and attitude of airline personnel is of key importance for strengthening the interpersonal relationship. Aziz et al. (2016) and Fu (2013) add that deep acting and surface acting of staff members, each used in the right situation, have a significant effect on customer orientation and therefore perceived customer centricity.

Acceptability

Regarding acceptability three measures on the functional dimension and two on the psychological dimension were identified:

- **Delivering superior service through empowerment:** Davis & Nag (2020) argue that the customer service provided by airlines' employees is crucial for a strong customer relationship. Nwankwo (1995) adds that customer service employees must be both trained and empowered to create a superior customer experience, leading to a high level of customer centricity. Al-Kwafi et al. (2020), Gountas & Gountas (2007), Oyewole et al. (2007), Azad & Sadeghifar (2019), Ravishankar & Christopher (2023) and Park et al. (2020) state that a general orientation of an airline towards high quality service and a prioritization of customer service is crucial for the level of perceived customer centricity. Sukwadi et al. (2021) and Walia et al. (2021) identify responsiveness to standard and nonstandard requests as further contributing to customer satisfaction. J.-H. Cheng et al. (2008) note that the proactiveness of customer service, defined by the "ability to be responsive to the expectations of customers via digital channels and to give quick resolutions for the first time without customers' follow up" (Büyüközkan et al., 2020, p. 7), also adds to perceived customer centricity. J. N. Sheth et al. (2023) adds that "customer support should be incorporated into the business strategy, focusing on support needs at every point of the customer experience journey" (Sheth et al., 2023, p. 1).
- **Ensuring a state-of-the-art tangible in-flight experience:** Speaking about tangible in-flight experience elements, modern aircraft (Al-Kwafi et al., 2020; Plötner, 2006), food and its presentation (S. Anderson et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2016), as well as availability and selection of options in the in-flight entertainment system (Shadiyar et al., 2020) are considered important for perceived customer centricity. Park et al. (2020) name cleanliness as another aspect of customer satisfaction.

- **Efficient boarding processes:** An efficient boarding scheme through e.g., efficient queueing systems (Agariya & Tikoria, 2017; Wittmann, 2019) also complements the level of perceived customer centricity.

On the psychological dimension, the following measures were identified:

- **Ensuring brand credibility:** Brand credibility is part of a company's image and is mainly driven by the quality of information transported through the company's marketing strategies as well as the trustworthiness and commitment of the brand (Davis & Nag, 2020; Gountas & Gountas, 2007; Wang et al., 2017).
- **Developing innovative offers:** The development of product and service innovations based on new technologies, such as innovative plans or features, helps building and strengthening different customer segments and enhances the overall image of the airline (Agariya & Tikoria, 2017; Bieger et al., 2007; Ekdahl et al., 1999).

Affordability

On the economic side, one measure was identified:

- **Offering competitive price & fees:** The importance of both ticket prices and fees, including seat selection fees and cancellation fees, in influencing customer satisfaction is emphasized (Azad & Sadeghifar, 2019; Boudia et al., 2021; Mathies & Gudergan, 2007; Vinod, 2021). However, besides looking solely at the economic price tag, Park et al. (2020) and Shadiyar et al. (2020) advise taking the perceived value of the offered service ("value for money") into consideration, too.

On the psychological side, three distinct measures have been mentioned in the literature:

- **Ensuring a dense (high frequency) schedule & high reliability:** Offering a dense schedule is of importance for both leisure and business travelers according to Vinod (2021). Agariya & Tikoria (2017), Nenem et al., (2020), Thakkar & Palaniappan (2024), and Vinod (2021) add that also high reliability affects traveler choice of air service.
- **Creation of individual airfare bundles:** Individual airfare bundles comprise product bundles including multiple ancillaries and help to satisfy different aspects of the customer's requirement according to Madireddy et al. (2017). Ancillaries include, for example, baggage, the transport of medical and hobby equipment, lounge entry or upgrades to premium cabins.
- **Offering surprise items:** Boudia et al. (2021) discuss the importance of surprising the customer, e.g., by an unexpected complimentary upgrade or free travel neck pillows during flight. Such surprise items are drivers of increased customer's perceived value.

Accessibility

In the dimension of convenience, one measure was identified:

- **Developing high-standard self-service capabilities that give passengers control:** Self-service capabilities such as chatbots contribute to customer satisfaction and customer centricity according to Büyüközkan et al. (2020), Ekdahl et al. (1999) and Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2021). Such capabilities are needed to give passengers control of processes and can be achieved by convenient technological infrastructure, such as RFID-based baggage handling (Agariya & Tikoria, 2017; Shiwakoti et al., 2022).

Awareness

On the brand awareness dimension, we identified one key measure in literature:

- **Building positive brand associations:** Positive brand associations can be achieved by maintaining a consistent positive experience throughout the entire customer journey (Le Bel, 2005;

Simarmata et al., 2017) but are also driven by external sources of information, like word of mouth or implicit promises of the airline (Laroche et al., 2005). One may argue that ensuring a positive experience overlaps with the previous measure of delivering superior service through empowerment. However, the study's focus is on the customer's perspective (*perceived* customer centrality) and measures may therefore overlap and may not have clear delineations.

On the product knowledge dimension, literature in our sample also identifies one key measure:

- **Ensuring customer involvement and empowerment:** Customer involvement and empowerment aims to achieve customer awareness of airline services and to increase perceived customer centrality (Azad & Sadeghifar, 2019; Loo, 2020; Nwankwo, 1995). Customer empowerment refers to engaging customers to use social media or other tools and is “*enabling customers to influence marketing decisions through the interaction between brands and customers*” (Büyükköçkan et al., 2020, p. 7). Customer involvement also helps airlines to enhance their knowledge about current and future customer needs (Cheng et al., 2008).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Given that the airline industry is one of the most challenging and dynamic service industries in the world, it is crucial for airlines to develop sustainable strategies in order to remain competitive. This research paper argues that being perceived as customer-centric by customers is one key element for airlines to enhance their competitiveness in an industry operating in a saturated market. Customer-centric innovativeness is a strong driver of brand loyalty leading to long-lasting customer relationships which can further help gain a competitive advantage.

To achieve its interconnected goals, this research started with a review of academic literature on customer centrality in general as well as of literature with a distinct focus on the airline industry and gave an overview of the status quo. Second, a perceived customer centrality framework (PCCF) which can help both to conceptualize and categorize perceived customer centrality characteristics was proposed. And third, this PCCF was used as the basis for a systematic literature review on perceived customer centrality characteristics in the airline industry to synthesize research that has been published to date. By identifying and categorizing key characteristics (or measures) of perceived customer centrality in the airline industry, this paper is the first to discuss concrete manifestations in the airline industry and thereby tries to contribute to the tangibility of the concept.

Airlines should be aware that customer centrality is based on several dimensions, and that in order to be perceived as customer-centric a focus on each element is essential. The research indicates that investing in sustainable practices, employee training, modern in-flight experiences, competitive pricing, technological infrastructure, and positive brand associations collectively contribute to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty. This understanding implies that airlines should align with customer expectations across various touchpoints. By recognizing the interrelatedness of the identified dimensions, airlines can tailor their efforts to meet current and future needs of passengers and finally create a customer-centric culture that sets them apart in the competitive airline industry.

5.1. Contribution to science and economic world

A significant contribution of this paper is that it tries to render the concept of perceived customer centrality within the unique context of the airline industry. Acknowledging its increasing importance, the study emphasizes customer centrality as a distinct standalone concept, complementing but differing from customer orientation. The categorization of key characteristics further provides concrete measures,

laying the groundwork for future research, particularly in the form of surveys, and offering alternatives to prevalent metrics like the net promoter score (NPS). While the NPS has been widely utilized as a benchmark for measuring customer satisfaction in the airline industry, its singular focus on the likelihood of recommendation may oversimplify the multidimensional nature of customer experiences and may represent a major limitation. The call for an alternative to the NPS arises from the acknowledgement that customer centrality includes a broader range of factors than just recommendation intent. In contrast, the Perceived Customer Centrality Framework (PCCF) offers deeper insights, including Attitude, Acceptability, Affordability, Accessibility, and Awareness, recognizing that various factors influence satisfaction and loyalty. The PCCF therefore helps managers pinpoint specific strengths and weaknesses, leading to strategies for improving satisfaction and loyalty.

Hence, the paper's academic contribution is twofold: it extends current research on perceived customer centrality by Habel et al. (2020) to an entirely new industry and offers a basis for subsequent research on customer centrality in the passenger airline industry. On the managerial front, this paper provides managers with useful insights into the key characteristics of perceived customer centrality and points out how to build mutually beneficial and long-lasting relationships with their customers. This research can give practical guidance to industry practitioners for integrating perceived customer centrality measures into their decision-making processes as well as for better understanding and actively steering customer perception.

5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

As with any newly proposed extension of a well-established framework, empirical validation of the 5A's framework is an essential next step to confirm its effectiveness. While this study extends the well-established 4A's framework by Sheth & Sisodia (2012) with a theoretically justified fifth 'A', we acknowledge the limitation of not providing empirical validation within the current scope. This theoretical development is a crucial first step for customer centrality research, and we encourage future studies to empirically test the extended framework to enhance its robustness. Potential methods for empirical validation may include surveys with airline managers and customers, or case studies.

Building on the foundational work performed during this research project, future studies could design and validate a measurement scale that is tailored to the passenger airline industry and can be employed in customer survey. This would provide an additional perspective on an airline's customer base beside the commonly used net promoter score (NPS). Comparing the performance of the PCCF with the NPS in practical settings is the next essential step – this would involve collecting and analyzing data from customer surveys to assess how well the metric capture the multidimensional nature of customer experiences compared to NPS. The foundational work of this paper did not differentiate between customer segments. We argue that the characteristics (or measures) of different customer segments differ only in the magnitude of their expression and should be considered when the findings of this research are applied in future research, e.g., when conducting survey experiments. Moreover, future research could use the proposed perceived customer centrality framework (PCCF) to investigate potential novel measures such as the geographical proximity of airports and the availability of air services to the passenger's desired destination as these could be relevant for the accessibility category.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stephan Soklaridis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alexander M. Geske:** Conceptualization. **Sebastian Kummer:** Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

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