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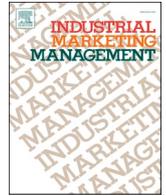
Industrial Marketing Management

Untangling value-based customer management approaches in business markets: Value-based selling, customer success management, key account management[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been increasing research attention to value-based selling, customer success management, and key account management over the last decade, these concepts have largely been explored in independent streams of literature. As a result, the boundaries and relationships between these customer management approaches remain blurred, and their implementation in business practice often leads to unclear responsibilities and conflicts across organizational units, which may adversely affect customer satisfaction and loyalty. Drawing on recent conceptualizations of customer-perceived value in business markets that build an overarching goal shared by value-based selling, customer success management, and key account management, this article unravels the existing conceptual understandings of these approaches at the specific activity level. We develop an integrated conceptual model that not only articulates the three approaches' conceptual distinctions but also illuminates their interrelationships and complementarities. This study contributes theoretical insights, offers actionable management implications, and identifies promising avenues for future research.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, three approaches to value-based customer management have emerged, from Key Account Management (KAM) to Value-based Selling (VBS) to Customer Success Management (CSM) (Hochstein et al., 2023; Kassemeier et al., 2023; Keränen et al., 2021). KAM was already introduced in the early 1990s (McDonald et al., 1997) with a focus on establishing, maintaining, and developing successful and mutually beneficial business relationships with the most important customers (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2002; Workman Jr. et al., 2003). VBS, on the other hand, is a sales approach introduced in the 2010s that aims to craft and communicate quantifiable customer value propositions (CVPs) to business customers based on a deep understanding of their goals and needs (Bischoff et al., 2023; Raja et al., 2020; Töytäri et al., 2015). Finally, CSM, which also emerged in the 2010s but only became more prominent in the early 2020s, focuses on ensuring and enhancing the value in use while customers use a product

or a service. By proactively managing customer goal attainment, CSM aims to maximize sustainable value for both a firm and its customers (Eggert et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2021; Prohl-Schwenke & Kleinaltenkamp, 2021).

With their value-oriented focus, VBS, CSM, and KAM represent an ongoing development in both business practice and academia over the past decades, which position customer value creation as a central objective of business-to-business (B2B) marketing (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1998; Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). However, their conceptual overlaps and common value-oriented focus raise several practical challenges. The blurred boundaries among VBS, CSM, and KAM often result in unclear role definitions and make it difficult to assign responsibilities across customer-facing units. This lack of clarity can lead to internal conflicts and inefficiencies. Business reports have highlighted recurring issues such as role ambiguity, fragmented ownership, misaligned objectives, and strategic disconnect when organizations form separate teams or departments to carry out

VBS, CSM, and KAM activities (Atkins et al., 2018; Gartner, 2022).

For example, recent research suggests that there are overlaps between the roles of customer success managers and key account managers as both encompass proactive, post-sale activities focusing on client retention and growth (Eggert et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2021). Although there is an understanding that key account managers take a more strategic perspective and that customer success managers are more operational by ensuring the delivery of expected value in use (Hochstein et al., 2023), the differences and complementarity of specific activities within these approaches remain unclear. Similarly, many scholars have discussed the overlaps and differences between key account managers and salespeople with partially divergent results. For instance, Wilson and Holt (2012) view key account management as an extension of the salesperson role, whereas Guenzi et al. (2007) emphasize considerable differences between key account managers and traditional salespersons.

Many studies also point to the overlaps and differences between the roles of salespeople and customer success managers. Hochstein et al. (2021) and Boghe et al. (2024) show significant variation across firms in the degree to which these roles are involved in pre-sales, sales, customer retention, and upselling or cross-selling activities. Research on the ambidexterity of salespeople also highlights the blurring of traditional organizational boundaries, as salespeople may engage in both sales and customer service activities that are typically performed by different teams or departments (Agnihotri et al., 2017; Rapp et al., 2020). These studies collectively point to an ambiguity in business practice regarding role definitions, scope of activities, and accountability structures.

Similar to our approach, Voorhees et al. (2025) also consider KAM, CSM, and sales (i.e., proactive post-sales services) in an integrated manner in their conceptual paper. They emphasize overlaps between the three approaches, though less at the level of specific activities, but rather at the level of underlying principles. They identify three core principles: (1) be proactive, (2) leverage objective data, and (3) strike a balance between data-driven and relationship-driven practices, which are reflected across all three approaches. Rather than revealing ambiguity in role definitions and responsibilities, they propose a foundation through which the three approaches can be integrated within a firm.

However, we focus on the outlined blurred boundaries and difficulties in defining the roles of sales, customer success, and key account managers, contending that they are based on an indistinct conceptual delineation of VBS, CSM, and KAM. By applying a unifying conceptual lens, we link and distinguish these customer management approaches, which is essential to delineate the activities associated with each approach and to determine which organizational units or teams should be responsible for their execution. Given the value-oriented nature of VBS, CSM, and KAM, we adopt customer-perceived value as the unifying conceptual lens in line with recent advancements in the understanding of value (Kleinaltenkamp, Prohl-Schwenke, & Keränen, 2022; Macdonald et al., 2016) and the interrelatedness of customer value concepts (Eggert et al., 2019). Therefore, our study aims to address the research question of *what are the conceptual differences and relationships of the value-based customer management approaches of VBS, CSM, and KAM in business markets*?

By answering this question, we address the research call for this special issue and contribute to the existing literature on customer management in business markets by offering a much-needed conceptual clarification of the interfaces between these important customer management approaches. To this end, we first untangle VBS, CSM, and KAM and explain their individual value contributions. Based on this foundation and drawing on recent conceptualizations of customer-perceived value in business markets, we then integrate the three concepts and demonstrate their interrelationships on the activity level. As a result, we provide an integrative value-based customer management framework, which lays the ground for both further research and practical advice on how to design and implement customer-facing business functions, particularly when B2B customer journeys are complex, non-linear, and recurring (De Keyser et al., 2025; Purmonen et al., 2023).

Importantly, it should be noted that the labels of different customer management approaches, on the one hand, and the organizational units responsible for carrying out the corresponding activities, on the other hand, are often identical but can also diverge. For example, while CSM and KAM refer to approaches to customer management, the departments in a firm can be named accordingly. In contrast, VBS activities are typically performed by sales departments. In this paper, we focus on the conceptual distinctions among VBS, CSM, and KAM as three value-based customer management approaches, rather than focusing on the organizational units responsible for executing these activities, unless otherwise specified.

Accordingly, in the following section, we first introduce the three customer management approaches of VBS, CSM, and KAM and review existing research on them. Since customer-perceived value is the common denominator of the three approaches, we build their delineation on recent conceptualizations of customer-perceived value in business markets (Eggert et al., 2019; Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022), which distinguish between *expected value in use, experienced value in use*, and *relationship value*. Therefore, we present the three value concepts and their relationships as the theoretical lens for our analysis. Based on this understanding, in the third section, we propose a conceptual model that delineates the distinctions between VBS, CSM, and KAM while highlighting their interconnections. We then present the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our study before outlining avenues for future research directions in the concluding section.

2. Literature review: value-based customer management approaches

This study does not seek to systematically review the existing literature; however, a thorough understanding of the extant research on the three value-based customer management approaches is imperative. The following sections review the existing literature on VBS, CSM, and KAM (see the steps of search strategy in Appendix I). First, we searched for relevant articles in the Web of Science database using a series of keywords: VBS (keywords: "value-based sell*" or "value based sell*" or "solution sell*" or "salesperson solution*" or "VBS"), CSM (keywords: "customer success manage*" or "customer success" or "CSM"), and KAM (keywords: "key account manage*" or "Key account*" or "KAM"). To focus on quality publications, we include articles published in journals ranked 2 and over in the British Academic Journal Guide. We completed the data collection in April 2025, yielding an initial sample of 53 articles on VBS, 42 articles on CSM, and 149 articles on KAM. Second, we conducted a manual search of journal outlets that have been key sources of articles on VBS, CSM, and KAM (e.g., Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management). We also used the Litmaps platform to explore additional relevant articles. This procedure led to the identification of 5 additional articles.

In the final step, we manually screened all articles for inclusion in our literature review, yielding a final set of 38 articles on VBS, 14 articles on CSM, and 80 articles on KAM. The search results indicate that while there is extensive literature on KAM (publication range 1995–2025), scholars have increasingly investigated CSM (publication range 2020–2025) and VBS (publication range 2011–2025) in recent years. Further, we find that despite the growing interest in all three research streams, scarce attention is paid to their differences and overlaps. The following sections untangle and summarize these research streams.

2.1. Value-based selling

Over the last decades, the selling literature has evolved from transactional selling, relational selling, and adaptive selling to solution and VBS (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Terho et al., 2012; Tienken et al., 2023; Vinhas, 2023) as the research paradigm shifted from transactions to relationships and from products to services (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014;

Viio & Grönroos, 2014). VBS has dominated the selling literature over the last years (Keränen et al., 2023; Kienzler et al., 2019; Mullins et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2017) by focusing on how firms "work with the customer to craft a market offering in such a way that benefits are translated into monetary terms, based on an in-depth understanding of the customer's business model, thereby convincingly demonstrating their contribution to customer's profitability" (Terho et al., 2012). VBS is commonly applied in situations where business problems are complex (Liu et al., 2023) and customers are uncertain about the value of an offered solution (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2024). The extant research also shows that while salespeople often adopt VBS when targeting new customers, VBS is more effective with existing customers, where relational trust has been established and access to historical financial data enables a more credible and tailored articulation of the value of an offering (Klarmann & Wouters, 2023). In general, the VBS literature increasingly emphasizes the shift from traditional product-centric sales models toward customer-centric solutions (Salonen et al., 2021). Central to this transformation is the evolving role of the salesforce, which is expected not only to adopt new selling behaviors but also to embrace the value co-creation mindset (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2024; Mullins et al., 2020). Prior research highlights four core activities that underpin effective VBS implementation.

First, *value opportunity recognition* refers to activities involved in exploring and identifying new business opportunities (Böhm et al., 2020; Töytäri et al., 2015). It is based on understanding the customer's business model, including their strategies, resources, processes, and business environment, as well as their needs and pain points (Johnson et al., 2008; Salonen et al., 2021). VBS requires salespeople to identify the customer's goals and goal structures (Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022). This becomes particularly complex when selling solutions, as typically multiple individuals form a buying center and share responsibility for the decision. Members of the buying center have distinct, situation-specific needs that must be carefully addressed (Paesbrugghe et al., 2017). Additionally, salespeople must comprehend their firms' and solutions' position within the customer's value chain, and that of their customer's customers to determine whether the goods and services offered are seen as strategically important (Wengler & Kolk, 2023). This understanding can grant a firm significant negotiation leverage, depending on its positioning and relevance within the value chain (Siemieniako et al., 2023). The ability to identify new business opportunities is crucial not only during initial sales efforts but also when firms offer a broad portfolio of products and services, thereby enhancing cross-selling potential among existing customers (Mullins et al., 2020). Regardless of whether the objective is cross-selling, upselling, or securing an initial sale, effective sales efforts must remain centered on addressing customer needs (Levihn & Levihn, 2016).

Second, *crafting the customer value proposition* refers to activities involved in articulating and quantifying the value of an offering (Payne et al., 2017; Terho et al., 2017), including technical benefits (i.e., novel solution, efficiency) and financial impact (e.g., return-on-investment analysis and total cost of ownership analysis; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020; Salonen et al., 2021). Following the outside-in CVP perspective (Day, 2020) that sees customers as active participants in the value-creation process (Eggert et al., 2018), crafting the CVP needs to be understood as an often lengthy and iterative coordination/negotiation process between a firm and its customer, particularly in the solution business, in which the CVP becomes stepwise ever more specified (Liinamaa et al., 2016). Solution business models are inherently designed for long-term customer relationships, during which customer needs and priorities may evolve over time. As a result, it is essential for firms to continuously adapt both the offering and the corresponding CVP (Elgeti et al., 2024), making VBS critical throughout the entire duration of the customer relationship (Nijssen et al., 2022). Hinterhuber (2017) emphasizes that VBS is not only important during initial sales but also plays a critical role in sustaining business relationships, highlighting the need for firms to invest in training their sales and account managers to

effectively quantify and adapt CVP over time.

Third, *communicating the customer value proposition* demonstrates the value proposition's impact on the customer's business and ensures that a firm adapts its CVPs to the specific customer goals and objectives of the individual sales encounters (Koponen et al., 2019; Terho et al., 2012). Salespeople can enhance the credibility of customer value propositions (CVPs) by using reference cases to demonstrate how similar solutions have delivered measurable benefits in comparable contexts (Terho et al., 2012; Zimmer et al., 2020). Therefore, salespeople should complement value calculation tools with effective communication approaches that align with the diverse goals and roles of the stakeholders involved in the purchasing process (Bischoff et al., 2023; Pöyry et al., 2021). Interestingly, Liu and Zhao (2021) extend the focus of VBS beyond the quantification and communication of customer value, including the verification of value in use as a key VBS capability that should be executed by frontline employees, not necessarily salespeople (Liu et al., 2023).

Finally, *internal and external networking* involves building relationships within the salesperson's own firm (internal) and within the customer's organization (external) to orchestrate the customization of the solution and monitor the delivery and installation (Böhm et al., 2020; Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2018). Such networking helps reduce uncertainties by ensuring that relevant information is shared with key stakeholders in both the supplier and customer organizations (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018). Recent research highlights the importance of salespeople's internal networking skills, enabling them to collaborate with cross-functional teams and access the information and expertise needed for developing and selling complex solutions (Bongers et al., 2025). Liu et al. (2023) emphasize that VBS should not be viewed as merely an isolated activity of salespeople, but rather as an organizational capability supported by internal networking and the orchestration of different actors. This perspective highlights the importance of cross-functional collaboration and active engagement of frontline employees in VBS practices. This view also aligns with the concept of service-sales ambidexterity, which states that frontline employees are expected to both deliver service and contribute to sales, while salespeople are increasingly required to provide service support as well (de Ruyter et al., 2020).

2.2. Customer success management

In recent years, an increasing number of B2B firms have established CSM functions by recruiting customer success experts and forming dedicated organizational units. This trend underscores the growing importance of CSM, although its organizational positioning varies widely across firms: in some cases, reporting directly to the CEO (e.g., Adobe), while in others falling under sales (e.g., Oracle), or customer service (e.g., Siemens) organizational units (see comparable examples in Hochstein et al., 2021, 2023). This evolution has, in turn, stimulated rising scholarly attention (Eggert et al., 2019). CSM focuses on ensuring that customers realize the full value potential of product offerings (Hochstein et al., 2021). It aims to fulfill the commitments outlined in the CVP during the post-purchase phase (Payne et al., 2017). CSM activities were initially adopted in industries with subscription-based models (e.g., software-as-a-service where recurring revenue is critical) and have since expanded into other sectors, including logistics and manufacturing (Hochstein et al., 2023). This expansion is particularly evident among firms providing complex solutions that create customer value throughout the entire usage lifecycle (Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022). The logic behind the developing CSM was the firms' desire to stabilize and grow their relationships with customers by demonstrating how their offerings contribute to the success of customer firms (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2023). Thus, CSM is primarily related to experienced value in use, which measures the extent to which customers achieve their goals when using a solution (Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020).

At its core, CSM is about the proactive management of the experienced value in use (Eggert et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2023). To achieve this, firms must define and monitor key value indicators that measure customer's goal achievement (Macdonald et al., 2016; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020), requiring a clear understanding of the customer's expectations and desired value outcomes (Elgeti & Kleinaltenkamp, 2022). These expectations – typically formed during the sales process – must inform CSM activities, which already show that CSM has a strong link to VBS. Key value indicators need to be regularly measured and reviewed to determine whether the customer's goals are actually being achieved and to take corrective actions in case of deviations. The continuous monitoring and improvement of experienced value in use helps firms to identify opportunities to propose new solutions to customers (Macdonald et al., 2016; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020).

The proactive management of the experienced value in use starts after a customer purchases a solution. Thus, VBS activities leading to the implementation and use of a solution are a precondition of CSM, as they form the foundation for CSM's core activities. CSM comprises mainly five core activities. First, *solution realization* through helping customers become familiar with the solution (customer onboarding) and handling technical setup and implementation (Elgeti & Kleinaltenkamp, 2022; Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2023; Voorhees et al., 2022) by guiding the representatives of a customer firm through the implementation and the early usage phase of a solution. This includes activities such as maintenance, troubleshooting, and continuous user training. Second, *value-in-use monitoring* by assessing the fulfillment of the promises made in the CVP. This activity includes identifying value indicators based on customer goals, measuring them (value-in-use identification), and regularly reporting the results to the customer (value-in-use reporting) (Eggert et al., 2020; Macdonald et al., 2016; Storbacka, 2012). Third, *value-in-use enhancement* involves identifying ways to increase customer value and promoting them within the customer firm, supporting actions like customer empowerment, resource optimization, or solution expansion (Macdonald et al., 2016; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020). Fourth, *adapting customer value propositions* by monitoring and addressing constantly the changing customer needs and emerging goals (Elgeti et al., 2024). Finally, successful CSM lays the groundwork for supporting firm growth through *customer advocacy*, encouraging existing customers to provide testimonials or participate in events (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2023). Ideally, CSM not only helps prevent customer churn and improve retention rates but also creates a foundation for solution growth, whether through upselling, cross-selling (expansion), or customer advocacy.

2.3. Key account management

KAM has emerged as a critical function within B2B marketing literature that enables firms to build and maintain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with a firm's strategically most important customers – commonly referred to as key accounts (Hochstein et al., 2023; Homburg et al., 2002; Peters et al., 2020; Sandesh et al., 2023; Wengler,

Table 1
Review of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities.

	Activity	Description	Selected articles
Value-based Selling	Value opportunity recognition	Understand the customers' business model, including their strategies, resources, processes, and business environment, as well as their needs and pain points.	Johnson et al. (2008); Terho et al. (2012); Liinamaa et al. (2016); Panagopoulos et al. (2017); Böhm et al. (2020); Raja et al. (2020); Salonen et al. (2021)
	Crafting customer value propositions	Define the firm's offering and quantify its monetary impact in terms of value in use using tools like return-on-investment (ROI) analysis and total cost of ownership (TCO) calculations.	Terho et al. (2012); Liinamaa et al. (2016); Payne et al. (2017); Prohl and Kleinaltenkamp (2020); Raja et al. (2020); Salonen et al. (2021); Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al. (2022)
	Communicating customer value propositions	Demonstrate the value proposition's impact on the customer's business, tailoring it to their goals with clear language and evidence like case studies, testimonials, and guarantees.	Terho et al. (2012); Koponen et al. (2019); Raja et al. (2020); Prohl and Kleinaltenkamp (2020); Salonen et al. (2021); Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al. (2022); Bischoff et al. (2023)
	Internal and external networking	Building relationships within the salesperson's own firm (internal) and within the customer's organization (external).	Panagopoulos et al. (2017); Terho et al. (2017); Böhm et al. (2020); Ma et al. (2024)
Customer Success Management	Solution realization	Helping customers adopt a solution by familiarizing them with the solution (customer onboarding), and handling implementation.	Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2023)
	Value-in-use monitoring	Tracking how well the firm's offering helps achieve customer goals. Involving identifying value indicators based on customer goals, measuring them, and regularly reporting the results to the customer.	Storbacka (2012); Macdonald et al. (2016); Eggert et al. (2020); Prohl and Kleinaltenkamp (2020); Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2023)
	Value-in-use enhancement	Identifying ways to increase customer value and promoting them within the customer's organization, supporting actions like customer empowerment, resource optimization, or solution expansion.	Macdonald et al. (2016); Prohl and Kleinaltenkamp (2020); Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2023)
	Adapting customer value propositions	Addressing constantly changing customer needs and emerging goals.	Elgeti et al. (2024)
	Customer advocacy	Fostering positive customer experiences and success to motivate customers to promote and recommend the firm.	Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2023)
Key Account Management	Account selection and strategic planning	Selecting key customers based on predefined criteria and strategically aligning the firm's actions with respect to its key accounts.	Wengler et al. (2006); Guesalaga et al. (2018); Ivens et al. (2018); Feste et al. (2022)
	Trust building	Showing a customer-focused attitude, performance-driven actions, conflict management skills, integrity, and trustworthiness to build relationships and expand networks.	Homburg et al. (2002); Guesalaga et al. (2018); Ivens et al. (2018)
	Inter-organizational coordination	Coordinating the buyer-seller network, involving interactions across functions to exchange information and resources.	Guesalaga et al. (2018); Gupta et al. (2019); Feste et al. (2022)
	Strategic alignment	Aligning strategies, operations, and relationships between seller and buyer organizations,	Richards and Jones (2009); Guesalaga et al. (2018); Leischnig et al. (2018); Gupta et al. (2019)
	Account performance/ health check	Monitoring and evaluating KAM performance against key account goals, setting objectives, tracking KPIs, and ensuring strategic alignment.	Wengler (2006); Wengler et al. (2006)
	Internal orchestration and project management	Orchestrating the internal seller network by coordinating resources and personnel across departments.	Ivens et al. (2016); Gupta et al. (2019); Feste et al. (2022)

2006; Workman Jr. et al., 2003). While traditional sales roles often prioritize short-term transactions, KAM seeks to foster deeper, more collaborative relationships that contribute to a firm's long-term performance with its most important customers. Over the past three decades, KAM has garnered considerable attention in academic research, with scholars examining various aspects, including the roles of key account managers, the structural implementation of KAM, and its strategic significance (Sandesh et al., 2023). While early research primarily concentrated on operational aspects such as the identification and management of key accounts (Homburg et al., 2002), recent studies have shifted toward conceptualizing KAM as a strategic capability that enables firms to maintain and foster transactional experienced value in use and relational value with their key customers (Hengstebeck et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2020; Storbacka, 2012).

The current literature has investigated the role of KAM across a broader range of activities, including account strategic planning, relationship management, strategic alignment, account health check, and internal orchestration (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020). *Account strategic planning* refers to the systematic process of identifying and selecting high-value customers that align with the organization's long-term objectives (Ivens et al., 2018; Workman Jr. et al., 2003). *Relationship management* involves establishing, coordinating, and nurturing long-term relationships with key accounts built on trust, commitment, and mutual value creation (Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015). *Strategic alignment* focuses on alignment and matching organizational objectives and processes across the focal firm and its key account, fostering a synergistic partnership that delivers value to both parties (Ivens et al., 2018; Workman Jr. et al., 2003). *Account performance check* involves monitoring and evaluating key accounts' performance against their goals, tracking KPIs, and ensuring strategic alignment. *Internal orchestration* pertains to effectively coordinating internal resources and capabilities across distinct functions (e.g., sales, marketing, finance, logistics) to meet the complex needs of key accounts (Guesalaga et al., 2018). Many studies also assert that effective KAM roles are typically held by highly experienced professionals capable of crafting strategic plans with key clients and negotiating complex contracts that align the interests of both the firm and its customers. Such key account managers work closely with C-suite executives within key accounts to ensure long-term mutual benefits (Hengstebeck et al., 2022; Workman Jr. et al., 2003).

In recent years, the link between KAM and VBS has become increasingly prominent (Sandesh et al., 2023; Sullivan et al., 2012). Unlike transactional selling, where the emphasis lies on the initial sale, KAM drives continuous engagement through value delivery, ensuring that the key accounts receive long-term benefits from the partnership.

Moreover, KAM is instrumental in ensuring the maintenance of the experienced value in use – where the perceived value by the customer is sustained over time through ongoing service, adaptation, and collaboration (Sandesh et al., 2023). Post-sale engagement, a critical aspect of KAM, ensures that value is continuously monitored and reinforced, addressing evolving customer needs and ensuring that the solutions provided remain relevant and impactful. Hochstein et al. (2023) emphasize that KAM's focus on post-sale activities, such as relationship nurturing, solution updates, and performance reviews, directly supports the ongoing realization of experienced value in use. By maintaining close contact with key accounts and proactively addressing potential challenges, KAM helps ensure that the key customers continue to derive maximum benefit from a solution, ultimately driving retention, satisfaction, and growth.

3. The conceptual differences and relationships between VBS, CSM, and KAM

3.1. Value concepts in business markets

The ultimate goal of all customer-oriented management approaches in business markets is to create value for the customers so that they establish, maintain, or even intensify business relationships with their suppliers. This resonates with the American Marketing Association's definition of marketing as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have *value for customers, clients*, partners, and society at large" (American Marketing Association, 2013), emphasis added). In our endeavor to differentiate between the sets of activities that form the core elements of VBS, CSM, and KAM, we thus take a value-related perspective assuming that these approaches, although united in their value-based orientation, differ in terms of which aspects of value for the customer they focus on.

Despite being a core concept for the marketing discipline, the extant research has developed several conceptualizations and definitions of customer-perceived value. In the realm of B2B marketing, early approaches first borrowed and adapted conceptualizations from consumer marketing (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Woodruff, 1997). Later, B2B marketing literature advanced two conceptualizations of value: A transactional value of market offerings (i.e., goods, services) and a relationship value capturing the value of ongoing buyer-seller relationships (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2022). While the former reflects the trade-off between the costs and benefits of market exchange (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016), the latter represents a summative assessment of the experiences with a business partner and expectations for the future
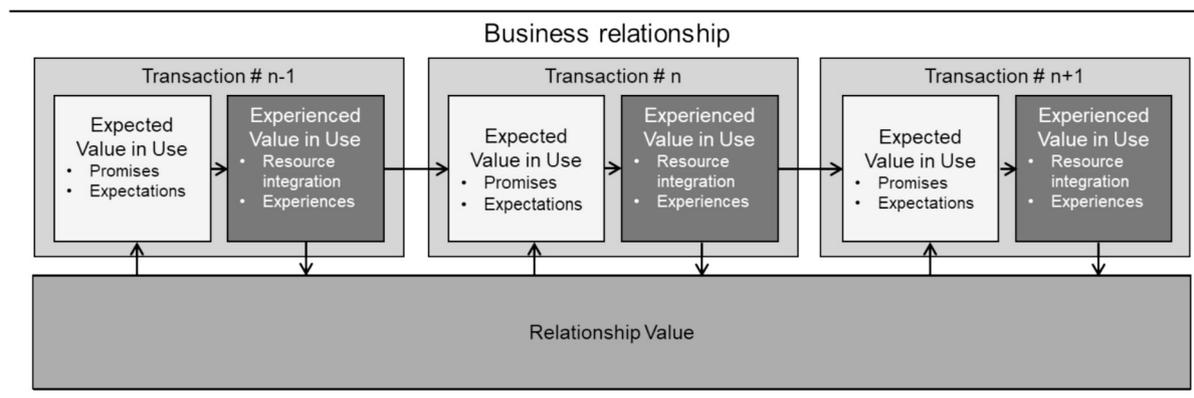
n denotes the existing transaction's number, where *n-1* represents the previous transaction, and *n+1* represents the future transaction.

Fig. 1. Concept of customer-perceived value in business markets (based on Eggert et al., 2019).

development of the relationship (Eggert et al., 2019; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

However, drawing on a goal-oriented perspective, recent research has shown that it is useful to distinguish between two forms of transactional value: (1) expected value in use that is assessed before or at the moment a (contractual) exchange agreement is made between a firm and a customer, and (2) experienced value in use that is perceived in the post-purchase phase, i.e. after the (contractual) exchange agreement has been made (Eggert et al., 2019; Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022). This understanding follows a contract theoretical perspective, according to which a market transaction consists of two phases; a first phase that includes all buying and selling activities that lead to a (contractual) exchange agreement, and a second (post-purchase) phase, that encompasses all activities that are associated with the fulfillment of the mutual obligations resulting from the very (contractual) agreement (van de Ven, 1993).

While *expected value in use* encompasses all expected consequences of an exchange as perceived by a customer arising from the promises made in a CVP and customers' experiences made in the past, *experienced value in use* comprises all customer-perceived consequences that arise from integrating customer and supplier resources in a transaction, i.e., when using a good, a service. These resources comprise all tangibles and intangibles, such as manufactured goods, energy, raw materials, human capital, financial resources, and ideas, from both the supplier and customer (e.g., Macdonald et al., 2016). Expected value in use is thus a point-in-time assessment of future value at the time the (formal) exchange agreement is made during the buying process. It drives customers to agree to an exchange with a provider (e.g., buy a product, sign a service contract, or start a subscription) and determines the expectations for future experienced value in use after purchase. Expected value in use thus raises the bar for customers' value realization in using an offering. In contrast, experienced value in use reflects the goal achievement that customers encounter and perceive when using the offering (Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022). Therefore, experienced value in use is a dynamic concept, as the customer's perception of value may change over the period of the contract. The realization of the value in use in a transaction as a key element of the customer experience

impacts the expected value in use in subsequent transactions.

Relationship value, in contrast, reflects a holistic, summative assessment of the contribution of a relationship to the customer's goal achievement (Eggert et al., 2019). It captures all assessments of the customer's past exchange and usage experiences with a supplier as well as expectations about the future of that very relationship (e.g., Hogan, 2001; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996). In an ongoing customer-supplier relationship, relationship value is thus fed by perceptions of experienced value in use, while it influences the expected value within follow-up transactions at the same time. Fig. 1 illustrates these relationships between the various value concepts that are relevant in business markets.

3.2. Mapping the activities of VBS, CSM, and KAM

Based on our previous review of the VBS, CSM, and KAM literature (Sections 2.1 to 2.3) and the differentiation of value concepts in business markets (Section 3.1), our study maps the activities associated with VBS, CSM, and KAM in Table 2. In doing so, we focus on two aspects: (1) the primary value concept targeted by each activity (expected value in use, experienced value in use, or relationship value), and (2) whether an activity is a core activity that drives a value concept or serves as a supporting activity either for the same domain or another domain (marked by "→"). We undertake two steps to develop Table 2. First, drawing on the literature, we delineate each activity with respect to its point-in-time value contribution: to expected value in use by shaping the customer's expectations during the sales phase; to experienced value in use by enhancing the customer's value experience in the post-purchase phase; and to relationship value by strengthening the overall business relationship. Second, we subsequently assessed the activity value impact, i.e., whether each activity directly influences the respective value concept—thus qualifying as a core activity of the approach—and/ or whether it exerts an indirect influence by serving as a supporting activity for either their own or another approach. This approach aligns with the literature suggesting that the B2B customer journey is nonlinear (De Keyser et al., 2025) and may involve recurring loops of purchase and usage phases (Purmonen et al., 2023), requiring firms to adapt and

Table 2
Mapping VBS, CSM, and KAM activities to the value concepts.

|	Activity	Activity aiming at…		
		Expected value in use	Experienced value in use	Relationship value
Value-based Selling	Value opportunity recognition	Core activity		
	Crafting customer value propositions	Core activity	Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	
	Communicating customer value propositions	Core activity		
	Internal and external networking	Domain support activity		
Customer Success Management	Solution realization		Core activity	
	Value-in-use monitoring		Core activity	Other domain support activity (→ KAM)
	Value-in-use enhancement		Core activity	Other domain support activity (→ KAM)
	Adapting customer value propositions	Other domain support activity (→ VBS)		Other domain support activity (→ KAM)
	Customer advocacy	Other domain support activity (→ VBS)		
Key Account Management	Account selection and strategic planning			Core activity
	Trust building		Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	Core activity
	Inter-organizational coordination		Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	Core activity
	Strategic alignment		Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	Core activity
	Account performance/ health check		Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	Core activity
	Internal orchestration and project management		Other domain support activity (→ CSM)	Domain support activity
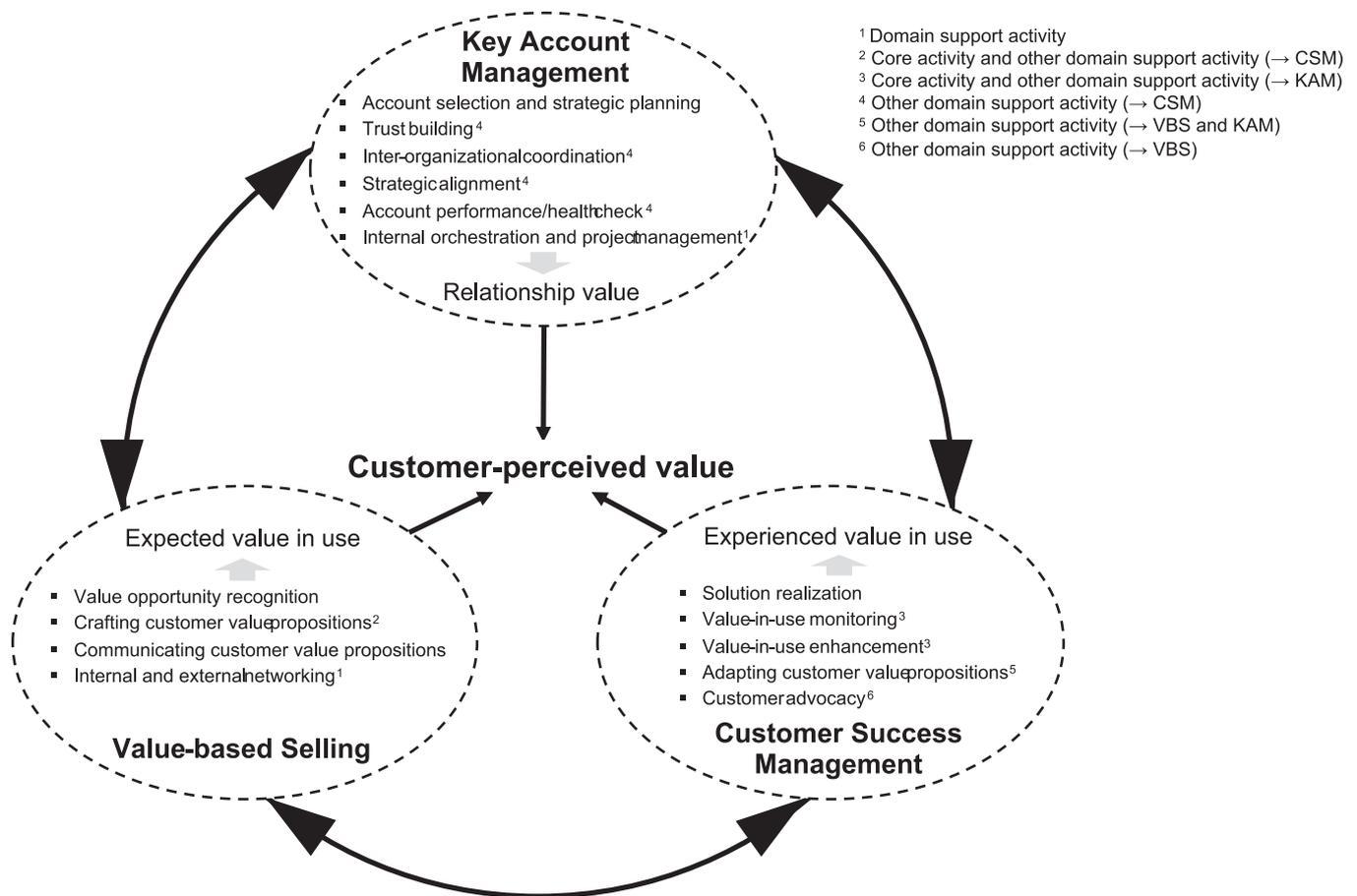
Fig. 2. The conceptual model of the relationships between VBS, CSM, and KAM activities.

integrate different customer management activities to address the complexity of the customer journey. Our classification of the activities is derived from the basic understanding of the respective customer management approaches and does not refer to organizational responsibilities within a firm, as these can be different (see Section 1). For example, firms without a dedicated CSM department may assign activities such as monitoring or reporting experienced value in use to an existing team, such as sales or technical support teams.

According to this view, the first three VBS activities listed in Table 2 (*value opportunity recognition, crafting customer value propositions,* and *communicating customer value propositions*) are core activities within this approach. *Internal and external networking* – as the fourth activity – plays a supporting role within the VBS domain, aiming to make the previous ones more effective and efficient. Moreover, *crafting customer value propositions* represents an activity that can support CSM because it lays the foundation for the realization of value in use that follows selling/purchasing. To avoid any adverse effects, VBS should not exceed CSM's abilities to meet the expected value in use outlined in the crafted CVP.

In the CSM approach, the first three activities outlined in Table 2 (*value-in-use realization, value-in-use monitoring,* and *value-in-use enhancement*) are core activities. In addition, *adapting customer value propositions* and *customer advocacy* are not core activities of CSM but rather supporting activities for VBS and KAM. For instance, *customer advocacy* may support VBS by encouraging existing customers to retain and renew their contracts and by providing testimonials to attract new customers. Similarly, *adapting customer value propositions* can also help ensure follow-up transactions within the realm of KAM and thus strengthen the customer relationship.

In the KAM approach, the first five activities listed in Table 2 (*account selection and strategic planning, trust building, inter-organizational*

coordination, strategic alignment, and *account performance/health check*) are core activities. In addition, *internal orchestration and project management* represent a support activity as they help to perform the previously mentioned set of core activities more effectively and efficiently. Except for *account selection and strategic planning,* all other activities assigned to the KAM approach can also be regarded as support activities for CSM since they are particularly capable of backing the implementation of the relevant value-in-use monitoring and value-in-use enhancement processes.

3.3. A conceptual model of the relationships between VBS, CSM, and KAM activities

The derived mapping of the three value-based customer management approaches provides the foundation to develop a conceptual model (Fig. 2) that illustrates the relationships and complementarities between VBS, CSM, and KAM activities with their common underlying objective of providing value to the customer. Consequently, customer-perceived value is the central concept to which all three approaches (VBS, CSM, and KAM) aim to contribute in one way or another. While VBS and CSM refer to individual business transactions – either in the purchase phase (VBS) or in the post-purchase phase (CSM) – KAM focuses on the key customers' relationship as a whole, encompassing several interrelated transactions taking place in a business relationship. In particular, VBS aims to provide a high expected value in use so that the customer agrees to a (contractual) exchange agreement. Based on a purchase agreement, CSM activities focus on experienced value in use, ensuring that the value promised in a CVP (i.e., expected by a customer) is realized. KAM focuses on relationship value to maintain long-term relationships with a firm's most important strategic customers.

Although the activities of the three customer management approaches can be distinguished by their focus on transaction vs. relationship and their specific value orientations, they are interrelated and interdependent in two ways: conceptually and in terms of their task content (i.e., specific activities). Conceptually, expected value in use represents the yardstick for experienced value in use to be realized in the post-purchase phase of a transaction. In turn, experienced value in use builds an important antecedent for the expected value in use of subsequent transactions (see Section 3.1). Concurrently, relationship value encapsulates both the customer's assessments of past transactions and their expectations for the future of a relationship with a supplier. In a continuing customer-supplier relationship, relationship value is informed by perceptions of experienced value in use and simultaneously influences the expected value in future transactions (see comparable view in Purmonen et al., 2023).

Regarding their task content, four of the core KAM activities (*trust building, inter-organizational coordination, strategic alignment,* and *account performance/health check*) may also contribute to the performance of CSM because they can facilitate supplier firms to realize the value in use within a transaction. In turn, the core CSM activities of value-in-use monitoring and value-in-use enhancement may contribute to KAM activities, specifically to those of *account performance/health check* and *strategic alignment.* In addition, the CSM activity *adapting customer value proposition* can support both VBS and KAM in their endeavors to retain customers by shaping CVPs according to their needs. Firms that have implemented CSM can gain relevant information for follow-up transactions, both through their insight into the customer's usage processes and the extent to which adjustments to the offered solution were necessary or value enhancements were possible. Finally, the CSM activity of customer advocacy can support VBS by identifying new prospects and generating new leads.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research extends the current literature by proposing an integrated conceptual model that untangles the blurred lines, highlights conceptual distinctions, and sheds light on complementarities between three value-based customer management approaches (i.e., VBS, CSM, and KAM). Our conceptual model emerges from a systematic mapping of activity sets derived from a comprehensive literature review and an application of customer-perceived value as a unifying conceptual lens. Despite the growing interest in VBS, CSM, and KAM over the last decade, a structured comparative framework and theoretical synthesis across these streams has been lacking. Our study is among the first endeavors to identify and explain the interrelationships between these customer management approaches at the conceptual level. This was made possible by applying a value-based perspective, as customer-perceived value builds the common denominator of the three management approaches and the common goal they aim to achieve. Given each of these customer management approaches focuses on distinct aspects of customer-perceived value (i.e., expected value in use, experienced value in use, or relationship value), their sets of activities considerably differ in tasks and objectives. The proposed conceptual delineation of VBS, CSM, and KAM is crucial to establishing the bedrock for determining which activities belong to which management approach and thus contributes to determining which organizational units or teams will perform these sets of activities.

Our study offers several theoretical implications. First, we define and differentiate between the core and supporting activities associated with VBS, CSM, and KAM (see Table 1) and map them to three forms of customer-perceived value (see Table 2). We linked and explained how a set of activities contribute to the customer's perceived expected value in use, experienced value in use, and relationship value. Our mapping and linking of sets of activities not only help to delineate the three customer

management approaches from each other but also provide an advanced understanding of whether an activity represents a core activity within one of these customer management approaches or a supporting activity either within the respective domain or for another domain. Mapping VBS, CSM, and KAM activities against different aspects of customer-perceived value extends the studies that outline and define specific sets of activities (e.g., the literature review on KAM by Sandesh et al., 2023) as well as the studies that point to the relationships between KAM and CSM (e.g., Hochstein et al., 2023) and VBS and CSM (e.g., Boghe et al., 2024; Prohl-Schwenke & Kleinaltenkamp, 2021). In investigating how firms implement the relevant units and responsibilities in practice, these studies also identify the difficulties and conflicts that arise when allocating pre-sales, sales, customer retention, and upselling or cross-selling activities to organizational units such as sales, CSM, or KAM. Our study, therefore, builds not only the long-overdue bridge between fragmented research streams on value-based customer management approaches but also offers a sound theoretical foundation that helps to overcome the obvious practical challenges in structuring and integrating the responsibilities and boundaries of organizational units responsible for their execution.

Second, we propose a conceptual model to shed light on the relationships and complementarities between VBS, CSM, and KAM approaches and their specific activities. By anchoring the model in customer perceived value, we explain how expected value in use, shaped by VBS activities, transitions into experienced value in use, which is actively monitored and enhanced through CSM activities. These realized experiences, in turn, contribute to the broader relationship value cultivated through the long-term relational and strategic efforts of KAM activities. Our model extends recent research that highlights the relationships between VBS and CSM (Boghe et al., 2024) and between CSM and KAM (Hochstein et al., 2023) by distinguishing between core and supportive activities associated with VBS, CSM, and KAM in order to explain their overlaps and complementarities. In particular, we contend that while VBS and CSM mainly focus on the customer-perceived value within individual transactions, these activities are distinct from and can be complementary to KAM activities designed for the management of key customer accounts comprising several interrelated transactions. The expected value in use from VBS serves as the benchmark for the experienced value in use facilitated by CSM. Conversely, the experienced value informs expectations for future transactions, highlighting a dynamic and cyclical relationship. Our conceptual model extends the work of Eggert et al. (2019) by explaining that relationship value encapsulates both customers' past exchange experiences, shaped by VBS and CSM, and their expectations for future interactions. This cyclical perspective positions relationship value as a connecting link to subsequent transactions, reinforcing its role in sustaining long-term business relationships.

Third, we advance the understanding of the relationships and complementarities between specific VBS, CSM, and KAM activities. VBS activities, particularly crafting customer value propositions, lay the groundwork for CSM by defining and quantifying the anticipated value, facilitating its subsequent realization. CSM activities, such as value-in-use monitoring and enhancement, can assist KAM by informing strategic alignment and evaluating account performance. Core KAM activities like trust building, inter-organizational coordination, strategic alignment, and account performance/health checks directly support the realization of value in use within CSM processes. While VBS, CSM, and KAM are distinct, they share the common and complementary goal of maximizing customer-perceived value from different perspectives.

Fourth, we offer a theoretically grounded framework for aligning customer-facing roles and organizational structures. The proposed activity-based distinctions allow firms to clearly allocate tasks and responsibilities, preventing roles from becoming conflated across sales, CSM, and KAM. This helps resolve ongoing managerial tensions related to accountability, such as which team owns post-sale relationship development or solution usage optimization. By distinguishing between

domain-specific and cross-domain activities (as shown in Table 2), our model creates clarity on overlaps and handovers, offering a theoretical foundation for the design of integrated customer management systems.

Finally, our results extend the literature on salesperson ambidexterity by clarifying the conceptual overlaps and complementarities at the sales-service interface. Prior studies (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2017; Rapp et al., 2020) have highlighted role ambiguity and conflict arising from dual service and sales responsibilities. Our model contextualizes such ambiguity by distinguishing VBS and CSM activities, helping scholars understand which tasks are inherently dual in nature and which require dedicated roles. This conceptual clarity provides a valuable starting point for future empirical work on boundary-spanning roles and hybrid sales-service configurations. Furthermore, by anchoring ambidexterity in value-based activity frameworks, we shift the discussion from behavioral flexibility to strategic role design.

4.2. Managerial implications

Across industries, firms' customer management organizations are increasingly in flux due to management's change in perspective toward customer-perceived value and the subsequent development of appealing value-based customer management approaches like VBS and CSM. While firms increasingly reconfigure their sales processes by following a VBS approach, they also consider establishing new organizational units or evolving existing units to perform CSM activities that enable customers to realize the expected value in use, which implicitly feeds into the relationship value with (key) customers. Business reports from McKinsey and Gartner point to role conflicts and ownership, goals misalignment, and strategic disconnect when firms develop teams and departments to perform VBS, CSM, and KAM activities (Atkins et al., 2018; Gartner, 2022). The insights from our study provide guidance in deciding whether and how managers should utilize existing organizational units, merge different teams, or establish new units to carry out specific VBS, CSM, and KAM activities.

First, mapping the three value-based customer management approaches to the different value concepts highlights a strong interdependence between them, especially between VBS and CSM. It becomes obvious that implementing a CSM approach without a VBS approach—and particularly without the activity of crafting a customer value proposition—makes little sense in practice. A CSM approach can only work effectively toward achieving the customer's goals and expectations regarding the value of the solutions if these goals and expectations are clearly defined and understood. A VBS approach can therefore be seen as a prerequisite for the successful implementation of CSM. Thus, firms should assess the extent to which they are already executing VBS activities before implementing CSM. If these activities are not yet in place, they should prioritize establishing the VBS approach first.

Second, our study lays the ground for managers in evaluating the status quo of their customer management approaches by allowing them to assess which of the identified activities are currently implemented and which are missing. This evaluation enables managers to pinpoint gaps and prioritize areas for improvement. Even in the absence of dedicated departments, managers can take actionable steps to implement missing activities, ensuring a more comprehensive and effective customer management approach. The insights provided can guide the allocation of resources and process development to address deficiencies, ultimately improving their customer management strategies.

Third, our conceptual model offers actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to understand differences and create synergies between different customer management approaches. For instance, it provides a basis for improving collaboration between sales and customer success teams. Practitioners often find the interface between these functions challenging, especially when it comes to the handover from pre-sales to

post-sales activities, but also vice versa. On the one hand, VBS activities shape customer expectations of future value in use, making the customer value proposition a key benchmark for customers that sales must acknowledge. Only when customers form realistic expectations during the sales process can their fulfillment be effectively managed in the usage phase through CSM activities. On the other hand, CSM activities, especially efforts to enhance value in use, often uncover cross- and upselling opportunities, but these potentials can only be fully realized through VBS if information flows seamlessly between CSM and sales. Thus, the interface needs to be well designed. By identifying the core and supporting activities of each role, firms can foster collaboration between sales and CSM, supported by shared goals and aligned incentives, to fully leverage business relationships. A clear understanding of the core and supporting activities of each role can also help define precisely when it makes sense to involve CS managers in VBS activities, and conversely, when to engage sales managers if value enhancement opportunities are identified in the customer's application.

Similarly, the distinction between KAM and CSM is often challenging for practitioners to grasp, as both approaches were developed at different times and independently of each other. Firms should use this conceptual model to define distinct responsibilities, focusing on the complementary nature of these roles. For example, while KAMs emphasize strategic account growth and relationship management, CSMs should concentrate on post-sale customer engagement, ensuring that expected value is realized during product or service usage.

Fourth, our study provides actionable insights for managers aiming to integrate value-based approaches like KAM and CSM. While many firms already have sales or KAM units, the growing adoption of CSM necessitates strategic decisions on role assignments. For firms with diverse solution portfolios where customers use multiple solutions, managers are recommended to assign customer success managers to specific solutions rather than individual customers. This enables CSMs to build deep operational expertise, enhancing customers' value in use at the transactional level. Key account managers, in contrast, should focus on overarching business relationships spanning multiple solutions. This structured distinction fosters effective collaboration between customer success managers and key account managers, ensuring comprehensive customer support while strengthening strategic partnerships. Similarly, our approach also provides guidance for organizing customer management activities in cases where certain formal structures do not exist. For example, even in a business relationship with a customer who is not classified as a key account, activities that are typically characterized as KAM activities (see Table 1) must be carried out, albeit not by individuals or departments that are formally designated as such and typically not with the same intensity as 'classic' KAMs. The same applies to CSM activities, even if there is no formal CSM department.

4.3. Directions for future research

Future research should continue to build bridges between different research streams on value-based customer management approaches. Table 3 outlines specific research questions that provide a roadmap for future research to unravel the differences, complexities, and interrelationships between distinct value-based customer management approaches.

One possible avenue is to explore the differences and interrelationships between CSM and KAM with other sales management approaches, such as personal selling (e.g., Albers et al., 2010), relational selling (e.g., Arli et al., 2018), digital selling (e.g., Mullins et al., 2023), or holistic selling (Kalwey et al., 2025). Such comparative work could reveal how these approaches complement or substitute for one another, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive framework for managing diverse sales and customer engagement strategies. In particular, the integration

Table 3
Future research agenda.

Topic	Exemplary Questions for Future Research to Address
Relationships between CSM, KAM, and different sales management approaches	• What are the differences between personal selling, relational selling, digital selling, or holistic selling from the value-based selling perspective? • What are the implications of integrating CSM and KAM activities with personal, relational, and digital selling for overall sales performance and relationship management? • How do contextual factors, such as industry type and customer complexity, influence the effectiveness of combining CSM and KAM with other sales approaches?
Organizational architecture and leadership challenges in implementing VBS, CSM, and KAM	• How do structural differentiation and cross-functional integration within organizations impact the successful implementation of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities? • What role does resource allocation play in supporting or constraining the execution of value-based customer management activities? • How can leadership practices, such as promoting a customer-centric culture, influence the effectiveness of VBS, CSM, and KAM initiatives? • What organizational and leadership barriers impede the alignment of strategic goals across departments in implementing VBS, CSM, and KAM activities?
The impact of emerging customer-facing technologies	• What are the benefits and drawbacks of using AI-enabled technologies, such as chatbots, for performing VBS, CSM, and KAM activities? • How do automated technologies impact the relational and personalized aspects of customer management, particularly in the most important customer accounts? • How can organizations balance the efficiency gains of AI-driven automation with the need for white-glove treatment in managing key customer accounts? • To what extent do AI-enabled tools reshape traditional activities, such as monitoring value in use or crafting customer value propositions, in the context of VBS, CSM, and KAM?
Future empirical studies	• What are the differences and complementarities between the antecedents (e.g., organizational resources and capabilities, individual skills) of VBS, CSM, and KAM? • What are the effects of environmental factors, such as market dynamics and competition intensity, on the outcomes of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities? • How do firm-specific factors, such as organizational culture and technological adoption, influence the effectiveness of VBS, CSM, and KAM strategies? • How do implementation patterns of VBS, CSM, and KAM vary across industries and organizational contexts, and what insights can be drawn from these variations?

of the relational selling approach is promising as it shares foundational elements with both VBS and KAM. Although our study intentionally excluded relational selling to maintain conceptual clarity, future work could address its unique contribution, especially in managing relationships with customers who may not be considered key accounts but nonetheless require systematic efforts to enhance relationship value. Examining how these activities relate to CSM and differ from KAM could yield insights into implementation strategies at the organizational level. This is in line with the call by Voorhees et al. (2025) for further research to investigate the interplays that emerge from combining post-sales relationship management strategies—particularly KAM, CSM, and pro-active post-sales services—into hybrid models, emphasizing that a deeper understanding is needed of how and under what conditions these approaches can operate effectively in combination.

Further research is also needed to explore the organizational and leadership challenges associated with implementing VBS, CSM, and KAM. Studies could investigate how different approaches and elements of organizational architecture (e.g., structural differentiation, cross-functional integration, and resource allocation) facilitate or constrain these approaches. Additionally, leadership practices that foster a customer-centric culture and align strategic objectives across departments deserve closer attention to identify effective pathways for customer management excellence. Advancing research in this area can extend our study's conceptual model and yield novel theoretical insights into how different organizational structures and leadership approaches can enhance synergies among VBS, CSM, and KAM activities while reducing potential tensions between them.

The impact of digitization and AI-enabled customer-facing technologies on the evolving roles of VBS, CSM, and KAM presents another rich area for investigation. For example, scholars could assess both benefits and unintended consequences of using digital tools like chatbots for sales advice, customer service, and high-value account management. Such studies can address critical questions such as whether automated technologies threaten the personal, relationship-based aspects of customer management (Heirati et al., 2025) or how firms can balance automation with the 'white-glove' treatment that key customers expect
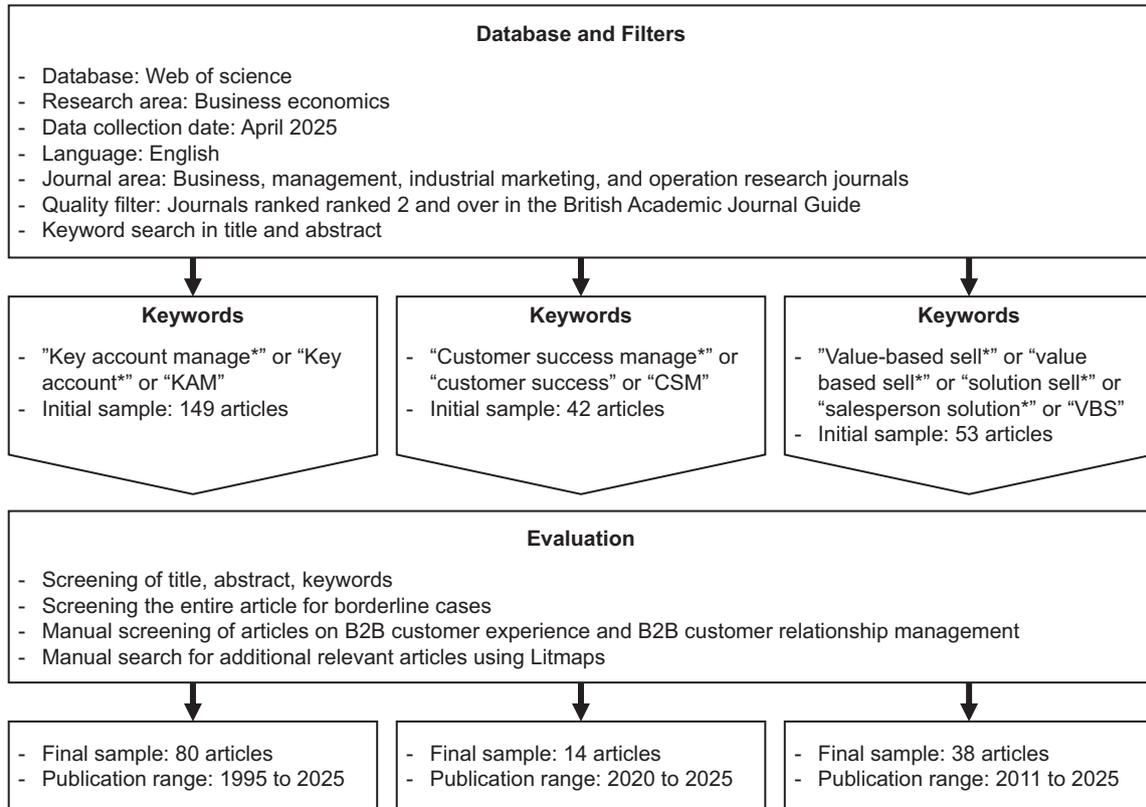
(Wünderlich et al., 2025). Furthermore, researchers could examine how AI tools are reshaping traditional activities, such as monitoring value in use, to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Advancing research in this area can extend the conceptual model developed in our study and generate new insights into how emerging technologies are reshaping the nature and scope of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities. In doing so, it can also reveal how digitalization can foster synergies among these approaches, mitigate operational tensions, and support the design of more integrated customer management systems.

Finally, scholars can empirically investigate the complementary effects of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities on distinct aspects of customer-perceived value. This could involve case studies, expert interviews, or quantitative studies to identify how these approaches collectively contribute to expected value in use, experienced value in use, and relationship value. For example, while many studies examined the impact of specific organizational capabilities and individual skills as the antecedents of VBS, CSM, and KAM, future research can explore the overlaps and distinctions among these antecedents through the lenses of the resource-based view of the firm or the dynamic capabilities perspective (Schilke et al., 2018). Furthermore, scholars can examine the impact of environmental and firm-specific contextual factors, such as market dynamics, organizational culture, or technological adoption, on the outcomes of VBS, CSM, and KAM activities. Comparative analyses across industries and organizations could further reveal implementation patterns and contextual variations, offering actionable insights for practitioners seeking to optimize their customer management strategies. Finally, the consequences and challenges emerging from the multi-actor nature of the B2B customer journey warrant further investigation, where the members of the buying center – who typically assess expected value in use – and the usage center – who typically assess experienced value in use – are often not the same people (Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, et al., 2022). Future research can examine how different customer management activities influence both buying and usage centers, particularly in contexts where the purchase and usage stages recur in a continuous cycle.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stefan Wengler: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. Michael Kleinaltenkamp: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. Nima Heirati: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. Katharina Prohl-Schwenke: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Appendix A. Appendix

Database and Filters

- Database: Web of science
- Research area: Business economics
- Data collection date: April 2025
- Language: English
- Journal area: Business, management, industrial marketing, and operation research journals
- Quality filter: Journals ranked ranked 2 and over in the British Academic Journal Guide
- Keyword search in title and abstract

Keywords

- "Key account manage*" or "Key account*" or "KAM"
- Initial sample: 149 articles

Keywords

- "Customer success manage*" or "customer success" or "CSM"
- Initial sample: 42 articles

Keywords

- "Value-based sell*" or "value based sell*" or "solution sell*" or "salesperson solution*" or "VBS"
- Initial sample: 53 articles

Evaluation

- Screening of title, abstract, keywords
- Screening the entire article for borderline cases
- Manual screening of articles on B2B customer experience and B2B customer relationship management
- Manual search for additional relevant articles using Litmaps

- Final sample: 80 articles
- Publication range: 1995 to 2025

- Final sample: 14 articles
- Publication range: 2020 to 2025

- Final sample: 38 articles
- Publication range: 2011 to 2025

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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