


Article

The Theoretical and Practical Evolution of Customer Journey and Its Significance in Services Sustainability

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Abstract: In the scientific literature, the concept of the “customer journey (CJ)” has only recently been introduced, and, accordingly, it lacks robust empirical evidence. Still, the number of papers concerning the CJ has increased exponentially in recent years. The aim of this paper is to fully represent the available CJ research in services and highlight its importance for service sustainability. Since the current CJ literature mainly includes qualitative data, this paper is a narrative review based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis checklist. The systematic literature review conducted by the authors is based on peer-reviewed articles published up until 2019. The main findings mostly concern the conceptualization of the CJ at a theoretical and practical level—CJ definitions and evolution for the former and customer journey mapping for the latter—as well as to present new perspectives of the examined terms in the services peer-reviewed bibliography and verify their contribution to service sustainability. CJ monitoring helps the development of a more sustainable service because it advances service innovation and effective channel management. Furthermore, it leads managers to understand their customer decision-making process and better allocate their resources by establishing a sustainable service design throughout the various service phases.



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1. Introduction

The most effective way to promote sustainability in services is to eliminate the obstacles that impede sustainability and provide incentives that encourage innovation towards more sustainable solutions [1]. The “customer journey (CJ)”, which concerns the entire experience of a customer [2], is a relatively unknown term with very few publications; however, in recent years, an increasing number of scholars have recognized the importance of the CJ. “Customer experience (CX)” is defined as a person’s subjective response to or interpretation of a firm’s offerings during the CJ when involved in interactions with other people and the environment. It is divided into six different response types: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, social, and spiritual [2–4]. Nowadays, companies are increasingly under pressure to ameliorate their sustainable business practices in the services sector [5]; thus, the service industry has been facing many challenges connected to sustainable practices [6], and a wide variety of subjects in the field of customer experience is related to sustainability. However, despite the number and variety of studies on sustainability in services, there is little study on tools that may improve sustainable service design [7]. The primary purpose of this study is to present a “Systematic literature review (SLR)” in line with the scientific peer-reviewed bibliography to provide insight into the contribution of the CJ at the theoretical and practical level for sustainable service design and generally for services sustainability.

The term CJ is growing in popularity [8], and the number of published articles concerning this topic has increased accordingly. This paper collects, combines, and presents

the definitions of CJ and “customer journey mapping (CJM)” by examining the relevant scientific peer-reviewed articles. In doing so, a narrative review is presented based on the “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA)” checklist that represents available CJ research in services and draws broad and generalizable conclusions. Thus, a more significant number of studies instead of more focused studies is chosen to be examined. In practice, articles that include the following terms in their abstract, title, or keywords were included: CJ/CJs, client journey, CJM, mapping the journey, and mapping experience. Overall, 145 articles from 2008 to 2019 were selected, as well as one article from 1999. In the existing literature, CJ is a relatively new concept, both in theory and practice, and recent studies have called for further research concerning both CJ and CJM [2,9–13].

In writing an SLR, before beginning the methodological procedure, it is crucial to specify the reason for investigating the CJ, the conclusions we wish to obtain, and the target audience. Initially, the purpose of the research should be highlighted. This paper aims to illustrate the development of the CJ—theoretically and practically—over the years and assess the significance of CJ in services sustainability. Moreover, the research questions must be thoroughly examined. Based on the reasons for conducting this research and inspired by the suggestions of preeminent researchers, the present study attempts to answer the research questions outlined below through a thorough SLR:

RQ1: How has the Customer Journey evolved over the years?

RQ2: What concepts have been identified/linked with the Customer Journey?

RQ3: How the Customer Journey and its tools contribute to services sustainability?

The current research is addressed to the academic community and researchers, as it is a conspectus of the term in question. Furthermore, since internal (quality, strategic objectives, cost, productivity, etc.) and external (profit and non-profit organizations, government, etc.) pressures promote sustainable business practices [5], it is also addressed to managers that are willing to gain CJ knowledge, which is a fundamental tool for their practices (e.g., a tool to improve their service design process) and for their service sustainability.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the literature review regarding the CJ concept. Section 3 analyses the research methodology and design. Section 4 scrutinizes the results of this study, whereas in Section 5, the results of this literature review are presented. In Section 5, the overall conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research are presented.

2. Defining the Customer Journey

2.1. *The Customer Journey Roots*

In the 1980s and 1990s, the growing importance of the service sector resulted in a significant amount of interest in service operations with respect to companies maintaining their competitive advantage. Researchers came to the conclusion that “the more satisfied customers feel about their experience in the service operations system, the more competitiveness the system possesses” [14]. Accordingly, it became commonly accepted that customer satisfaction is a major indicator of the sustainability of service operations [14,15].

Low-quality services and problems revealed the fact that systematical qualifications of the procedures in question were yet to be conducted; moreover, the instruments were lacking that ensured customer demands were met in a complete and logical way. To address this, Shostack [15] created a service blueprint scheme that depicts the concept of service operations. The service blueprint pinpoints customer interactions during the service operation processes and is used to split activities of the front office, where customers receive concrete evidence of the service from the back office, which is out of the customer’s view. In addition, the blueprint can also simplify problem solving and creativity by identifying possible failure points and pinpointing opportunities to ameliorate customer perceptions [16]. Although the service blueprint scheme [17] can identify the aforementioned interactions, it remains a “conventional work-flow concept dominated flowchart” [14]. Unfortunately, it does not focus on the entire service experience of the customer, nor does it reveal service

operations problems. In essence, the service blueprint reveals the failure of not providing researchers and practitioners with accurate and detailed information concerning the customer service experience.

An organization's competitive advantage is affected by customer satisfaction. In other words, a company's competitive advantage is maintained by customer-oriented management philosophy. However, until the 1990s, service operations were not adequately studied with systematic representations of the entire customer service in accordance with customer actions. This is because the service blueprint focuses on the provider rather than the customer [18]. Accordingly, managers and scholars changed the classical model of the service blueprint (which is a useful tool in visually describing the concept of service operations from the provider's point of view), turning it into a customer-oriented tool that visually describes the concept of service operations from the customer point of view. In 1999, Tseng, Qin Hai, and Su [14] first introduced the "customer journey (CJ)" framework by creating an innovative tool for service operations improvement by objectively mapping the service experience of customers. This was the first introduction of the CJ term in the literature.

A major component of the CJ is customer interactions with service providers [19–26]; these are commonly known as CJ touchpoints. For firms to increase engagement with customers, they should pursue various touchpoints during the CJ [27]. Touchpoints were first described in the scientific literature as encounters between providers and customers. Lockwood and Jones (1989) [28] described these encounters as interactive variables, specifically the "personal characteristics, perceptions of each other, social competence, and needs and objectives" between customers and providers. In the 1990s, researchers highlighted the social view of such encounters with respect to service providers, contact personnel, and customers [29]. They focused on the quality factors that affect said encounters during the service experience stages [15].

2.2. What Is the Customer Journey?

In understanding customer behavior, it is vital to track the individual contact points between the firm and the customer [30], which are known as touchpoints. According to Lemon and Verhoef [2], in the contact points between the customer and a firm, several responses are created: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, social, and spiritual. During the "customer journey (CJ)", a customer has multiple responses [31], and each response forms a distinct experience. The stages of the "customer experience (CX)" [2] forms the CJ. Customers create different experiences at different stages (touchpoints) during their CJ [32]. In other words, the CJ is the path that a customer takes in first identifying the need to consume to after usage behavior (stages) and includes all the contact points between the firm and the customer (touchpoints), in which they are created several responses (distinct experiences) (Figure 1). Figure 1 regards a CJ of three stages and seven touchpoints and experiences. However, it must be clarified that in a CJ, the number of stages and, as a result, the number of touchpoints and experiences are not precise, and they depend on the type of the journey. In essence, the stages are differentiated according to journey type; for instance, for the travel and tourism industry, Gretzel et al. [33] and Wang et al. [34] divided the CJ stages into the pre-trip phase, the en-route and on-site phase, and the post-trip phase. Lemon and Verhoef [2], through their extensive analysis of the CX, refer to the CJ stages as pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase.

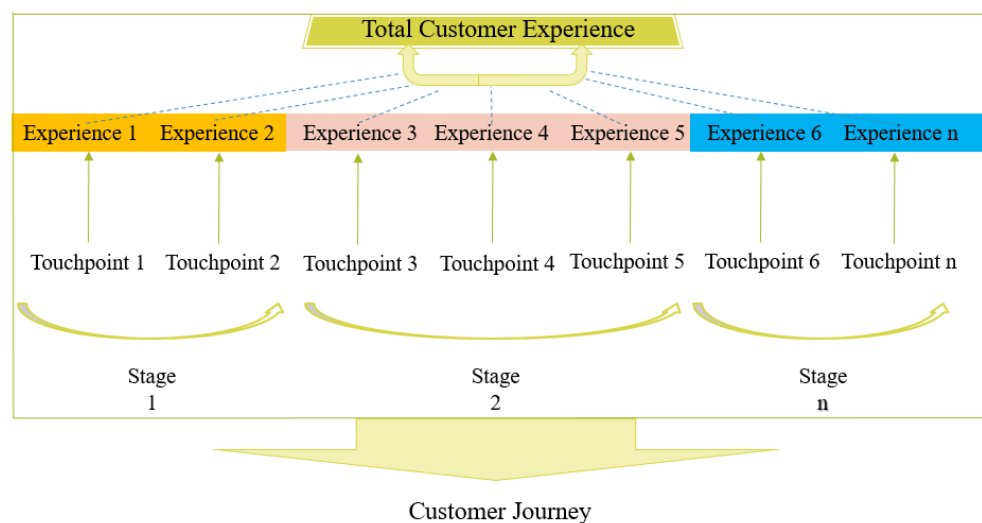


Figure 1. The Customer Journey definition.

2.3. Touchpoints: The Cornerstone of the Customer Journey

Customer interactions with the service provider through multiple touchpoints that involve several business functions [19–26] form a dynamic “Customer journey (CJ)” [35–39]. Touchpoints are defined as direct or indirect contact [40,41] and verbal and non-verbal contact [10,30,42], where customers meet and interact [43] with the brand as well as the service/product via online platforms, the physical environment, or personal interactions [42,44]. At each touchpoint, customers form an experience [45], which means that the distinct experiences created in a CJ form the total CX [2,46,47].

3. Research Methodology

This work attempts to systematically review the evolution of the “customer journey (CJ)” in services. The methodological procedure is a key factor for the successful completion of a “systematic literature review (SLR)” article. The first articles under examination for this paper are those that analyze the steps a researcher should follow to prepare a well-structured SLR. The methodological procedure for the current article is based on the contemporary bibliography for SLR articles [48–51]. The steps are described in the following paragraphs and briefly illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Methodology steps in conducting this Systematic Literature Review.

SLR Methodology Steps	
Investigation	■ Are there any relative papers?
Preparation	■ Define the search terms.
	■ Define the article types and time frame of the examined literature.
Searching	■ Choose the database.
	■ Choose the review type.
	■ Choose the SLR guideline.

3.1. Investigation

Whether the programmed SLR has already been conducted by others was deeply investigated. One relative study was found written by Følstad and Kvale [8], yet it only examined CJ articles up until 2013. However, this is not a barrier since the current SLR is based on CJ literature up until 2019; due to the numerous publications referring to CJ, the subject has been thoroughly developed. Furthermore, another relevant research by Tuenrat et al. [52] was discovered. More extensively, Tuenrat et al. [52], through the

examination of the CJ in the business literature up to 2020, identified five underlying themes of the customer journey (service satisfaction, failure and recovery, co-creation, customer response, channels, and technological disruption). Their set of search keywords was “customer journey”, “consumer journey”, and “touchpoints”. Our work does not use touchpoints as a search keyword and focuses on the contribution of CJ to service management and service sustainability.

3.2. Preparation

Before researching the article databases, potential amendments among the terms were noted to avoid excluding any valuable articles. More specifically, the following synonyms, plural forms, verbs, and adjectives of CJ were taken into account: CJ, user journey, and client journey; mapping the CJ and sketching the CJ; CJ and CJs; CJM, mapping the CJ, and CJ map. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated to restrict the search to relevant articles (Table 2).

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Articles studying the CJ and CJM in services.	Non-academic databases.
Peer-reviewed articles from well-known databases: Scopus, Science Direct, and Web of Science.	Gray literature (conference papers and reviews, book chapters, reports, etc.) and online sites.
Academic journals.	Any publication written after 2019.
Peer-reviewed articles published from the beginning of CJ research to 2019.	Articles written in a language other than English.
Articles written in English.	

The aim of this SLR is to study the CJ literature from its very beginning, as well as all article types (studies, literature reviews, and general articles), to represent the CJ in services holistically.

3.3. Searching

The articles included in the research only concern published peer-reviewed articles written in English and traced through Scopus, Web of Science, and Science Direct [48]. Using these, we traced 146 articles published in scientific journals. The peer-reviewed bibliography under examination consists of studies (89 articles), quantitative and qualitative general articles (56 articles), and literature reviews (one article) that cover the time frame in question. Figure 2 presents the examined articles in each publication year.

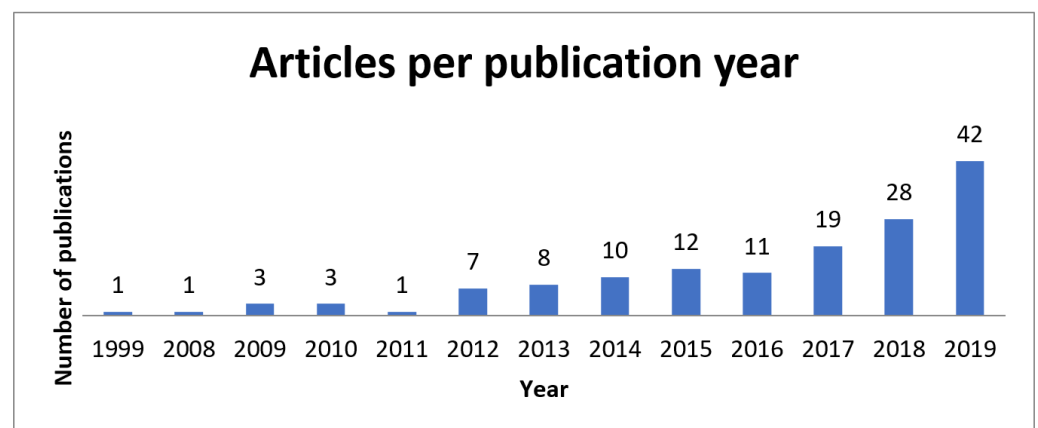


Figure 2. Number of articles from publication year.

The SLR methodological approach was selected for the present study because the traditional narrative reviews lack thoroughness and rigor [51]. The SLR adopts a scientific and transparent process [51]; thus, many literature review articles published in high-quality scientific journals are based on the SLR [53,54]. Since a general presentation of CJ in the service sector is attempted, it is essential to study the selected bibliography in its entirety without any restrictions on the contextual meanings. Specific articles would have been chosen only in cases where more specified conclusions were to be elicited or specified “variables” of CJ were to be used in the review.

The PRISMA checklist was chosen as a guideline for the review [48,50]. Accordingly, the current review consists of the following sections: Title, Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion. Figure 3 shows the PRISMA flow diagram for the literature search and screening process.

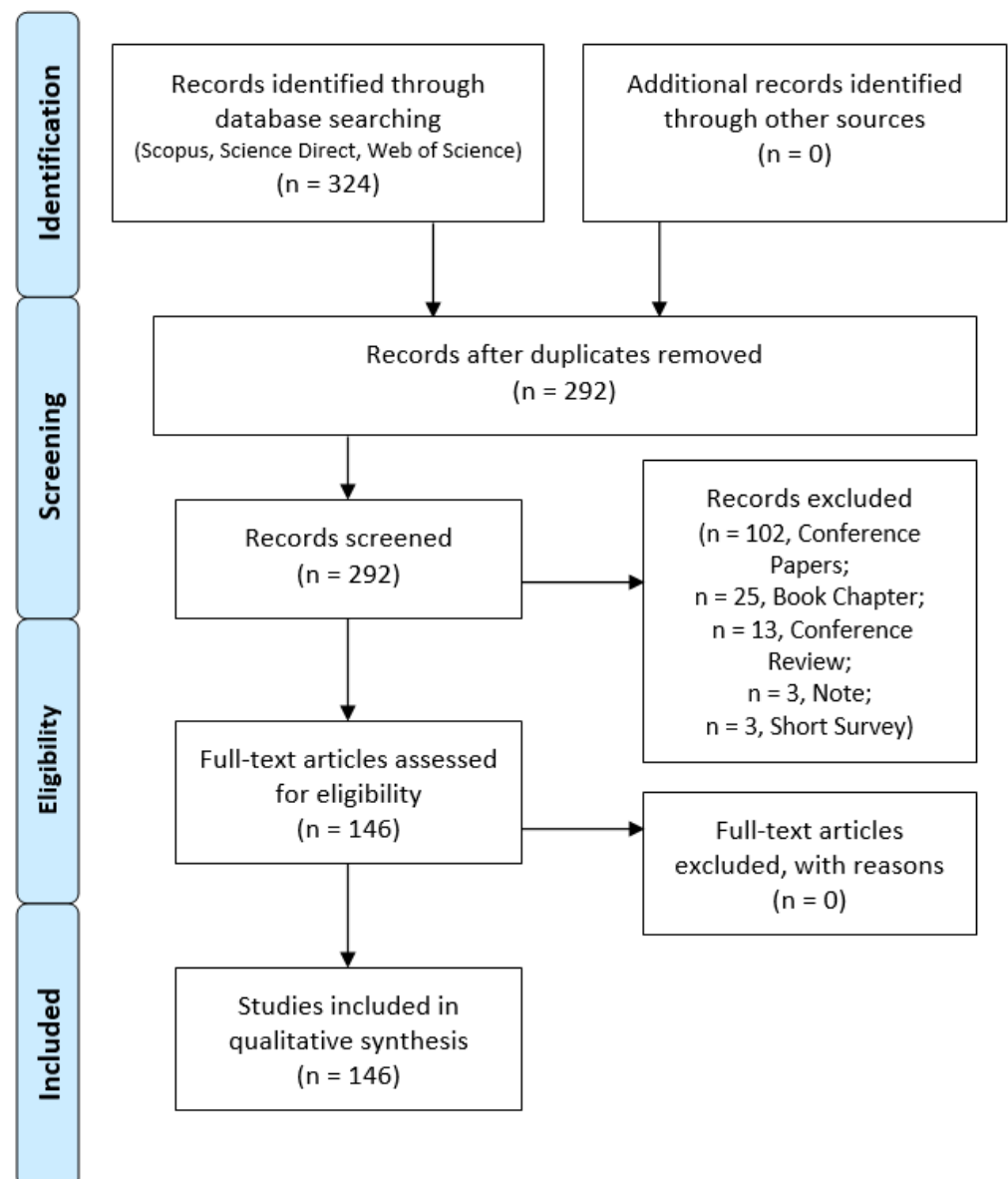


Figure 3. PRISMA flow diagram.

4. Results

The majority of the “customer journey (CJ)” peer-reviewed articles were published in scientific journals with a managerial and marketing impact, which examine the CJ from the services and businesses’ scope. The examined literature is distributed mainly across the fields of transportation, tourism, customer relations, financial and banking, quality, sustainability, productivity, technology, and behavior analysis; moreover, it includes articles from many different areas, such as non-for-profit organizations and institutions (libraries, education, museums, clinics, foundations, etc.), Business to business companies (e-commerce processes, infrastructure, etc.), and Business to consumers companies (restaurants, online stores, etc.).

4.1. Definition’s Historical Evolution

“Customer Journey (CJ)” is a relatively new term. The first references to CJ were made by Tseng et al. [14], who introduced it to improve service operations by mapping the service experience of customers from the perspective of the CJ. Over the years, many definitions have emerged as well as new perspectives. However, no differentiations in the term were traced, except for “user journey” stated by Marquez et al. [55] instead of CJ. The evolution of defining the CJ is discussed below and briefly presented in Table 3.

- First Attempts to Define the Customer Journey

The term touchpoints, as a sequence of events forming the total CJ, is dominant in the definitions of this period. From 2008 to 2010, scientists claimed that the CJ denotes customer contact with the service during the buying and obtaining process [56]. Norton and Pine II [31] furthered this idea and created a foundation for the definition of CJ stages, stating that the CJ is a sequence of events that customers experience to learn about, purchase, and interact with firms, products, and services. Indeed, in attempting to understand the subject, the idea of the CJ has been segmented and decomposed.

- Introducing the Customer Journey Stages and the Connection between the Customer Journey and Customer Experience

In this period, new terms were introduced for the CJ. Researchers linked the CJ with “customer experience (CX)” [2,10,57,58], thereby making extensive use of the term customer. In this way, an interactive definition was provided that describes the CJ as a tour, an experience in the customer’s shoes [59]. Such an interactive approach, which presents the CJ as the normal consumer decision-making process, raised awareness of creating new stages to simplify the complicated procedure of CJ analysis, which, in turn, resulted in the distinct separation of CJ stages. From 2008 to 2013, researchers made efforts to decompose the CJ—“buying and obtaining process” [56]; “learn about, purchase, and interact” [31]—until Lemon and Verhoef [2] created three distinct CJ stages: “the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stage”. Since 2014, the term CX has appeared in the CJ definitions. Researchers have highlighted not only the relation between the two terms but also their interdependence. Currently, it is clear that, for the CJ to be well-conceived, the CX must be analyzed. [57,58]. Furthermore, the procedure must include the CJ stages if the total CX is to be thoroughly studied [2]. In 2016, the term “psychological factor” was introduced in the CJ definition, thereby linking the CJ with emotional indicators [13]. By introducing an emotional aspect, the interrelation between the CJ and CX was highlighted since emotional indicators are measures of emotional responses and defining factors in the CX [2]. According to Rudkowski et al. [10], “the past fifty years of research has contributed to a holistic understanding of CX as a decision-making process or journey”.

- A holistic Approach of the Customer Journey

Since 2017, researchers have been using a holistic approach to define the CJ by using terms and definitions of prior years. Thus, the definitions have gradually become more complex as more terms have been incorporated. Overall, the following terms have been included in the CJ definition: customer, touchpoints, stages, and CX [9,10,12,60]. In

general, there is a tendency to incorporate all the terms relating to the CJ in one definition. Accordingly, especially since 2018, an emphasis has been placed on the value of touchpoints. Initially, Kranzbühler et al. [9] and Rudkowski et al. [10] used the theoretical framework for the touchpoints established by Lemon and Verhoef [2], Homburg et al. [30], and Halvorsrud et al. [13] to establish “satisfying, dissatisfying, and neutral” touchpoints [9] and “online–offline” touchpoints [10]. Their references to touchpoints involved an explanatory definition, highlighting the necessity of emphasizing the contact points between the firm/service and the customer. In 2019, the term “channel management” made an appearance. Lipowski and Bondos [11] were the first to connect the CJ with marketing channels. This was based on the work of Anderl et al. [60], who argued that the CJ encompasses multiple contacts across a variety of channels.

Customer Journey Personalization

The result of constant progress in the existing “customer journey (CJ)” literature is the evolution of existing terms and the creation of personalized CJs. Scholars specify the CJ according to its field and combine generalizable terms with specialized ones. Indeed, the idea of the CJ is constantly developing with a tendency towards the creation of new subcategories. Edelman and Singer (2015) [61] first used the term “consumers’ decision journeys” to characterize the process that starts with thinking about purchasing a product/service and ends with connecting said action with a firm. According to Hamilton et al. [62], a consumer decision journey commences with a need to address or a problem to solve and ends with a resolution or re-evaluation of that need or problem. Wooff et al. [63] introduced the term “clickstream journey”, which concerns the web path a potential client might follow to search for a service, gain information about said service, and compare about said service with similar services (according to their prices or traits). As mentioned above, the customer purchase journey was a turning point in the evolution of the CJ and the clarification of its stages that split the idea of the CJ into three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase [2]. The term “personalized CJ” makes an appearance as a procedure in which customers shape a combination of self-contained areas to explore [45] based on their own preferences. Bijmolt et al. [64] introduced the “omni-channel CJ”, which describes customer flow through the decision process, and Rai et al. [65] created the “shopping CJ”, which is a customer’s omnichannel path-to-purchase. In addition, Witell et al. [66] presented the “B2B CJ”, which is a set of relational processes that meet the customer’s business needs. On this basis, the CJ is formed according to the field or procedure it refers to. In this way, various definitions have emerged regarding “mobile CJ” [67] as well as the “CJ in travel and tourism” [33,34]. The former concerns the CJ via the mobile channel and includes different stages of the consumer decision-making process [67], whereas the latter decomposes the CJ in travel and tourism into pre-trip, the en-route and on-site, and the post-trip [33,34] by emphasizing customer engagement [68]. Finally, it is clear that the CJ can be defined according to actions and stages in the field of services since it promotes various terms, such as “service recovery journey”—which sets the stages pre-recovery, recovery, and post-recovery phases [69]—that define the result of service failure. Although it is essential to specialize in any CJ, there is also a need for the invention of new tools that contribute to the study and use of the term on a practical level. In the past few years, researchers have used CJ to study the entire customer experience to create new tools that enhance the service design and delivery process. Thus, new managerial tools have emerged, such as the “CJ framework”, which is a conceptual framework for modeling customer journeys in terms of touchpoints [13], and “CJ analysis”, which is an approach designed to support the integrated study of the service delivery process as planned for the customer by the service provider and as actually experienced by the individual customer [13].

4.2. Customer Journey Mapping: The practical Application of the Customer Journey

For managers and scholars who make use of the “customer journey (CJ)”, the real asset is the “customer journey mapping (CJM)”. Typically, the CJ is portrayed in the form of CJM [8]; in other words, the CJ is the theoretical background, and CJM is the practical application. According to Crosier and Handford [70], CJM is a technique for market research that first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s “in response to the emerging ‘consumer society’ and the marketing philosophy of customer orientation”. Similar to CJ, no differentiations of CJM were traced, except “CJ sketching” stated by Marquez et al. [55].

4.2.1. What Does Customer Journey Mapping Represent?

“Customer journey mapping (CJM)” is a recently established method [71] since the scientific community first started studying it in 2009. Although many definitions have been provided, in essence, they all propose that CJM consists of the visual depiction [55,72,73] or visual representation [8,13,40,74] of the CJ. Although the majority of scientists accept that CJM is the visual depiction of the CJ, the nature of CJM is still debated. In an effort to illustrate CJM, three categories are created that, in essence, represent the existing definitions. These are outlined below.

- Defining CJM as a function of touchpoints

According to researchers using this basis for their definitions, CJM is a presentation of the touchpoints through which customers interact with a service/organization during the purchase process [72] based on time flow [73].

- Defining CJM as a function of customer experience

According to researchers using this basis for their definitions, CJM is a depiction of the service delivery process as experienced by the customer [13]; it depicts the crucial factors affecting “customer experience (CX)” [40]. In other words, CJM visualizes how customers experience the process of interacting with distinct aspects of a business or service [74].

- Defining CJM as a representation of the CJ

The third category is similar to the second one, as it lays the same foundation for defining CJM. According to researchers, CJM is the practical application of the CJ; in particular, it is a visual representation of the CJ that describes the total CX [8,13,55]. By examining the existing literature, it is evident that CJM is a depiction of the CJ [8,13,40,55,72–74] that visualizes the total CX [2] and includes the touchpoints through which customers interact [72,73] with a firm or service during the entire decision-making process [61] and CJ stages.

4.2.2. Customer Journey Mapping: An Innovative Tool/Technique for Managers

“Customer journey mapping (CJM)” is an invaluable tool for assessing customer behavior [55,70,74–76]. Consequently, it contributes to the enhancement of the service design process [55,71,74,76–78]. Thus, apart from the academic community, which, as prior mentioned, is gradually focusing more and more on CJM, it has also become an essential tool for managers. Table 4 illustrates the researchers’ viewpoints regarding the contribution of CJM as a managerial tool. These are also discussed below.

- A tool to better understand customer behavior

CJM is a tool that can be used to enhance our understanding of customer behavior. It enables companies to gain insight into consumer motivations and behaviors and tracks emotional responses with respect to products, goods, and services [70]. In essence, by using CJM, managers can understand the total CX [75] by tracking different touchpoints, channels, and systems [76], as well as by identifying the emotions and experiences that customers have when interacting with an organization, product, or service [72,74,77]. To sum up, CJM allows practitioners “to walk in the user’s footsteps” [55].

- The service design process tool

CJM is commonly used in service design methodology [55]; it allows managers to visualize the service delivery process. By using CJM, service providers can decode the steps required to perform a given task [55] since they can capture the interactions between them and their customers and track the resultant negative or positive emotions [78]. In conclusion, it is a simple tool that enhances the design and assessment of CX in the service design field [71].

4.3. Customer Journey and Services Sustainability

Current environmental, social, and economic sustainability concerns are motivating service organizations to reinvent their business [79]. Academic and business communities have called for more research into the relationship between services and sustainability [80,81]. However, research explicitly focusing on these topics is scarce [82]. Customers are increasingly selecting and advocating for businesses that operate in accordance with sustainable values. The CJ results in managers adopting a customer-centric perspective [39], and previously there has been a lack of awareness about the necessity of a customer-centric view in services. Considering the nature of the service industry, where competition is becoming increasingly intense, enterprises' primary purpose is to develop a competitive advantage based on their knowledge of the quality of the services they provide and their image in the minds of their customers. [83]. Thus, both the competitive push to give the greatest customer experience possible—indeed, the CJ is a fundamental basis for scholars and managers to evaluate and optimize customer experience [55,76]—and the desire to make services more sustainable according to the customer needs and preventing a waste of resources, make the CJ a very valuable tool for businesses.

First, the embodiment of the CJ in service management/marketing creates a holistic depiction of the service experience [12,13,39], which, in turn, ameliorates the service design process [71]. Moreover, the integration of CJM in the consumer research field reconfigures the classic model of the customer decision journey [61] and contributes to a deeper understanding of their decision-making process [84]. Thus, CJ monitoring helps the development of a more sustainable service because it leads managers to understand their customer decision-making process and better allocate their resources by establishing a sustainable service design throughout the various service phases. Studies of sustainability show the importance of proper allocation of resources in the creation of sustainable services [85]. Second, there is a strong connection between service innovation and sustainability [79]. The CJ assessment advances service innovation [72] and service improvement [77] by ensuring that managers have an integrated view of the service process [12,71] as well as of service quality [13,73]. Third, by collecting information and observing datasets from various industries, many of the peer-reviewed articles examined in this paper attempt to connect channel management, both online and offline [86], with the CJ. More specifically, in online marketing channels, the CJ improves the mapping of the online purchase/decision-making process [87]. By visualizing the CJ, managers can evaluate the effectiveness of their multi-channel strategy [88] by reconfiguring their multi-touch attribution model and examining the channel relevance [73]. For general channel management (traditional marketing channel, not online), the CJ enables scholars and managers to customize consumer multichannel behavior [58] and specify interplay among the marketing channels [89,90]. Several studies thus far have linked sustainability with effective channel management [91]. As discussed above, the analysis of the CJ can improve the channel management strategy of a company; this observation also supports the hypothesis that CJ contributes to service sustainability.

Table 3. Evolution of “Customer Journey (CJ)” definitions from 2008 to 2021.

	Reference	Definitions
2008–2013	[56]	-Customers evaluate their experiences by means of the CJ, which is described as the customer’s sequence of touchpoints with the firm in buying and obtaining the service.
	[26]	-Companies often referred to a series of touchpoints as the CJ. The CJ involves all activities and events related to the delivery of a service from the customer’s perspective.
	[31]	-CJ, in essence, means the sequence of events—designed or not—that customers go through to learn about, and interact with, a company, as well as make purchases.
2014–2016	[58]	-CJ is a description of customer experience.
	[57]	-Customers evaluate their experiences by means of the CJ.
	[2]	-CJ involves the stages of the entire customer experience.
	[13]	-CJs (or, alternatively, CJM) are visual representations of events or touchpoints depicted chronologically, often accompanied by emotional indicators.
2016–2017	[59]	-CJ describes the tour a customer goes through before purchasing, ordering, or asking for a certain product or service.
	[2]	-CJ consists of a series of steps or stages (pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase).
2017–2021	[12]	-CJ is a customer-oriented technique that maps the touchpoints that a customer has with respect to a product/service when engaging with a company. It highlights the essential moments that a customer experiences in the entire journey, from the first step until the last step of the service trajectory.
	[10]	-CJ is the process that consumers go through across the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages [25]; it takes place across a multitude of online and offline touchpoints.
	[9]	-CJ consists of a series of firm–customer touchpoints that consumers perceive as satisfying (pleasure moments) or dissatisfying (pain moments) or neutral, based on their execution or inherent nature.
	[11]	-CJ describes the behavioral pattern of individual consumers across all marketing channels, which includes the touchpoints over all marketing channels preceding a potential service purchase decision.

Table 4. The Customer Journey Mapping contribution in services.

Reference	The “Customer Journey Mapping (CJM)” Contribution in Services
→ Customer Behavior	
[76]	-CJM is a tool used to track and analyze the user experience and assess the quality of a process or a service. It is particularly helpful and effective in examining the complex experiences and processes that connect different touchpoints, channels, and systems.
[70]	-CJM originated as a market research tool to help commercial businesses understand consumer motivations and behaviors. CJM is an established technique for eliciting emotional responses to products, goods, and services.
[77]	-CJM is a method of identifying the key processes that customers encounter when interacting with an organization.
[75]	-CJM is an analysis technique that allows one to understand the overall customer experience designed by the firm from the perspective of customers.
[55]	-CJM allows practitioners to walk in the user’s footsteps.
[72,74]	-The CJM is a tool to understand customer emotions and experiences associated with each touchpoint.
→ Service Design	
[78]	-CJM is a useful technique for visualizing the service delivery process; it captures the interactions between customers and the service provider that are either especially satisfying or especially dissatisfying.
[55]	-CJM is a tool that helps service providers understand the steps required to perform a given task.
[71]	-CJM is a recently emerged method for designing and assessing customer experience in the service design field.
[74]	-CJM is a useful tool for combining large-scale data analysis with the outcomes of in-person conversations with customers.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

As mentioned in the main body of the article, the “customer journey (CJ)” is constantly developing. Consequently, new innovative and specialized viewpoints are emerging. This “Systematic literature review” (SLR) set out to examine the evolution of the CJ—both theoretically and practically—and validate that CJ contributes to services sustainability. More specifically, having analyzed the scientific literature, this research highlights the importance of the “customer journey (CJ)” and “customer journey mapping (CJM)” for sustainable services management. Existing research recognizes the critical role of service innovation [79], effective channel management [91], and proper resources allocation [85] in service sustainability. The results of this study indicate that CJ advances service innovation [72] and improves service design [55]—which contributes to better resources allocation—and channel management [63]. In essence, it is demonstrated, for the first time, that CJ monitoring should be factored into the “equation” as organizations search for methods to deliver ever-improving sustainable services.

However, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between CJ and sustainability is more clearly understood. From this point of view, in future research, scholars should illustrate emerging tools and the development of the CJ and “customer journey mapping (CJM)” by tracking nascent terms in the existing literature. Moreover, while this SLR examines the entire existing literature, up to 2019, in an attempt to holistically present CJ development in services with an emphasis on its contribution to services sustainability, future studies should examine more recent studies to reach specific conclusions that will enrich knowledge concerning relevant fields. For example, Tuearnat et al. [52], through the examination of the CJ in the business literature up to 2020, identified five underlying themes of the customer journey (service satisfaction, failure and recovery, co-creation, customer response, channels, and technological disruption). In future research, the investigation of Tuearnat et al.’s [52] CJ themes and their contribution to services sustainability would be very interesting.

The findings of this study have a number of theoretical and practical implications. First, this SLR provides researchers with a summary of the CJ literature concerning the evolution and use of the term. Second, scholars can use the CJ theoretical framework presented in this study to further develop the CJ term. An important practical implication is that this study validates through the services literature analysis that practitioners can use CJM to better understand the customer decision-making process, visualize the service delivery process and, consequently, enhance the service design process and ameliorate both their customer service experience and service sustainability.

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Abbreviations

CJ	Customer Journey
CJM	Customer Journey Mapping
CX	Customer Experience
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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