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Customer satisfaction after the milestone revolutions: Why a mature field requires a new theoretical breakthrough

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction has long been regarded as a cornerstone construct in marketing and service research. Over several decades, the field has evolved through multiple milestone revolutions, moving from cognitive evaluation models to multidimensional and experiential frameworks, relational perspectives, and increasingly advanced analytical techniques. Despite these developments, satisfaction research now faces a paradox of maturity, where methodological sophistication continues to expand, while theoretical innovation has become increasingly limited. Adopting a conceptual and problematization-oriented approach, this article reinterprets customer satisfaction research through the lens of milestone revolution. It argues that the cumulative success of past theoretical breakthroughs has unintentionally produced a condition of paradigm closure, in which satisfaction is treated as a stabilized managerial metric rather than an evolving theoretical problem. By critically examining dominant frameworks alongside emerging digital and post-crisis service contexts, this study identifies structural limitations that constrain the explanatory power of contemporary satisfaction theory. In response, the article outlines directions for a new theoretical breakthrough grounded in five core principles: 1) satisfaction as socio-institutional judgment; 2) configurational causality; 3) dynamic evaluative trajectories; 4) contextual intelligence; and 5) a tripartite conceptualization of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight. Rather than proposing a single dominant model, the study advances a renewed research program that emphasizes conceptual governance, contextual sensitivity, and theoretical renewal. This repositioning restores customer satisfaction as a theoretically consequential lens for understanding customer experience, organizational legitimacy, and market governance in increasingly complex service systems.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, theoretical paradigm, milestone revolutions, socio– institutional judgment, configurational dynamics

Introduction

Customer satisfaction has long occupied a central position in business and management scholarship and is widely regarded as a fundamental indicator of customer evaluation, service performance, and organizational success. Across disciplines, it has been routinely employed as a proxy for perceived quality, value, and relationship strength, making it one of the most frequently used constructs in marketing and service research (Brown & Zahn, 2010; Oliver, 2010). Despite this prominence, customer satisfaction is not a theoretically simple concept. It has been variously conceptualized as a cognitive judgment, an effective response, an attitudinal state, and a behavioral precursor—often simultaneously (Martínez–Tur et al., 2000). While this conceptual plurality has facilitated broad empirical application, it has also generated persistent ambiguity regarding what satisfaction fundamentally represents.

Over time, satisfaction research has gradually shifted from theoretical exploration toward methodological stabilization. The widespread adoption of standardized measurement scales, benchmarking systems, and managerial dashboards has transformed satisfaction into a routine performance indicator rather than a contested theoretical construct (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001). Although the field has expanded substantially in volume and technical sophistication, its foundational assumptions have remained largely unchanged. Satisfaction is frequently treated as self– evident, universal, and context– invariant, even as customer experience is increasingly shaped by digitalization, institutional complexity, and socio–cultural variation (Hult et al., 2022). Large–scale reviews indicate that satisfaction research has reached a stage of maturity characterized by theoretical repetition and incremental methodological refinement rather than conceptual innovation (Nunkoo et al., 2025). Moreover, satisfaction continues to be framed primarily as an individual psychological response, despite evidence that social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional conditions significantly shape how satisfaction is expressed and interpreted (Martínez–Tur et al., 2000). The managerial dominance of satisfaction metrics has further reinforced this conceptual closure, rendering satisfaction technically reliable but theoretically under–examined (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001).

This condition is particularly problematic in contemporary digital, hybrid, and globally interconnected service environments. Satisfaction today reflects not only personal experience but also perceptions of system reliability, fairness, and institutional legitimacy (Hult et al., 2022). Yet prevailing theoretical frameworks remain largely rooted in earlier transactional and cognitively oriented assumptions. Consequently, customer satisfaction research now faces a paradox of maturity: empirical success has generated methodological confidence while simultaneously reducing theoretical curiosity and limiting conceptual renewal (Nunkoo et al., 2025). In response, this article argues that customer satisfaction should no longer be treated as a settled construct. Instead, it should be re– examined as an evolving theoretical problem shaped by cultural, institutional, and technological transformations. Adopting a conceptual orientation, the article reconstructs customer satisfaction research through a milestone revolution perspective and critically examines how successive theoretical developments have

advanced, stabilized, and constrained the field, to reposition customer satisfaction from a routine metric to a theoretically consequential lens for understanding contemporary customer experience.

Milestone Revolutions in Customer Satisfaction Research

The evolution of customer satisfaction research has not proceeded through linear accumulation alone, but through a sequence of milestone revolutions that reoriented its theoretical assumptions and methodological practices. These milestones progressively expanded satisfaction from a narrow evaluative judgment into a complex, multidimensional construct, while simultaneously reshaping what counted as legitimate explanation within the field.

Early milestone developments emphasized analytical structure and dimensional clarity. Multidimensional frameworks enabled researchers to decompose satisfaction into interpretable latent components, thereby shifting inquiry from descriptive assessment toward structured explanation and empirical validation (D'Ambra & Ciavolino, 2014). This transition strengthened theoretical precision, yet it also anchored satisfaction increasingly within measurement-centered logic, privileging model fit and variance explanation over conceptual interrogation.

A subsequent milestone emerged with the integration of cognitive and affective antecedents. By recognizing that customer evaluation reflects both rational appraisal and emotional experience, satisfaction research moved beyond purely cognitive paradigms and introduced psychological realism into its explanatory foundations (Palací et al., 2019). However, this expansion also produced conceptual layering, as satisfaction came to be treated simultaneously as judgment, emotion, attitude, and behavioral precursor without a clearly specified hierarchy among these roles.

As the literature expanded further, satisfaction research entered a phase of diversification and fragmentation. Bibliometric and thematic analyses reveal that satisfaction studies are dispersed across disciplines, sectors, and analytical traditions, generating intellectual richness alongside conceptual dispersion (Ahlawat et al., 2023; Kokins & Straujuma, 2020). In parallel, service quality models institutionalized satisfaction as a managerial and organizational performance indicator. By embedding satisfaction within quality management systems and strategic dashboards, these frameworks reinforced practical relevance while shifting scholarly attention away from foundational conceptual questioning toward performance optimization.

More recently, the rise of big data and digital analytics, together with growing interest in customer delight, constituted further milestones. Algorithmic approaches enhanced predictive accuracy and measurement sensitivity (Pérez–Pérez et al., 2023), while delight frameworks highlighted emotional intensity, surprise, and nonlinear experiential responses beyond satisfaction alone (Stange et al., 2025). Collectively, these milestone revolutions transformed customer satisfaction research into a sophisticated and methodologically advanced field. Yet each milestone expanded analytical capability without fully integrating prior insights. Satisfaction became richer in measurement and broader in scope, but increasingly diffuse in theoretical identity—thereby laying the groundwork for its current condition of theoretical closure.

Current Theoretical Frameworks and Their Limitations

The milestone revolutions outlined above established the dominant theoretical frameworks that continue to structure customer satisfaction research. Although these frameworks remain empirically productive, their underlying assumptions increasingly constrain explanatory power in contemporary service and digital environments. What once functioned as theoretical strengths have gradually become sources of rigidity.

A central limitation lies in the continued reliance on cognitive–affective integration. While this dual perspective enriched early satisfaction theory, it typically treats cognition and emotion as parallel contributors rather than as structurally ordered processes (Hartono & Raharjo, 2015). As a result, satisfaction remains ontologically ambiguous—simultaneously defined as judgment and feeling—without a clear account of how evaluative meaning is actually constructed from experience.

Prevailing frameworks further emphasize product and service attributes as primary drivers of satisfaction. Attribute–based models explain variance effectively in stable contexts, yet they implicitly assume that attributes possess intrinsic evaluative meaning. Such models devote limited attention to how customers interpret attributes through contextual, relational, and institutional lenses (Antonides & Hovestadt, 2021). Consequently, satisfaction becomes anchored in observable features rather than theorized as an interpretive and meaning–laden judgment.

These limitations intensify in digitally mediated and continuously delivered services. Emotional reactions, usability frustration, and interface experience strongly shape satisfaction formation, yet traditional models struggle to integrate these experiential dynamics coherently (Ding & Chai, 2015). Relationship–oriented approaches attempt to address continuity through repeated encounters, but many remain grounded in static, cross–sectional assumptions that fail to capture satisfaction as an evolving evaluative trajectory (Briggs et al., 2016). Satisfaction is thus operationalized as an outcome rather than theorized as a dynamic process.

Organizational perspectives introduce further complexity by showing that satisfaction reflects internal systems, service climate, and governance arrangements (Martínez–Tur et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2005). However, these insights are typically treated as contextual modifiers rather than as core components of satisfaction theory. A related limitation concerns behavioral outcomes: dissatisfaction does not consistently lead to defection, nor does satisfaction guarantee retention, as switching behavior is shaped by inertia, alternatives, and perceived risk (Mittal, 2016). Collectively, these limitations indicate that dominant frameworks are not incorrect, but incomplete. Designed for environments characterized by stability, discrete transactions, and clear organizational boundaries, they increasingly struggle to explain satisfaction in fluid, digitally mediated, and institutionally complex service systems. Their theoretical strength has therefore become their constraint.

Emerging Trends and Theoretical Gaps

Recent socio–economic disruptions and technological transformations have further exposed the limitations of existing satisfaction theory. These developments do not merely extend prior models but reveal structural gaps that prevailing frameworks cannot resolve. In particular, the growing prevalence of crisis, uncertainty, and systemic disruption has altered the basis on which customers form evaluative judgments.

A major driver of this shift is the increasing role of crisis response in shaping customer evaluation. Organizational actions during disruption influence perceptions of reliability, responsibility, and trust more strongly than traditional service attributes (Hallencreutz et al., 2024). Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this transformation clearly. In hospitality, tourism, and food services, satisfaction became closely linked to safety, hygiene, digital adaptation, risk perception, and reduced service contact, indicating a fundamental redefinition of evaluative criteria (Ababneh et al., 2022; Gheibdoust et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2022; Zibarzani et al., 2022). Post-crisis demand further reflects anticipatory evaluation, as customers increasingly emphasize transparency, adaptability, institutional communication, and future preparedness rather than immediate experiential outcomes (Al-Kumaim et al., 2025; Haque, 2025).

Collectively, these developments expose three interrelated theoretical gaps. First, dominant frameworks remain oriented toward stable environments and transactional logic, limiting their capacity to explain satisfaction as an institutional judgment. Second, satisfaction has become volatile and continuously re-evaluated, yet most models remain cross-sectional and static. Third, evaluative effects are asymmetric: negative signals related to safety, trust, or system failure exert disproportionately strong influence, while nonlinear logic remains weakly theorized. Taken together, these trends indicate that satisfaction research is entering a new empirical reality without an adequate theoretical core. Rather than calling for incremental adjustment, they demand theoretical reorientation. Customer satisfaction can no longer be understood solely as a reaction to service quality but must be conceptualized as an evolving judgment of institutional reliability, systemic care, and future security.

Directions for the Next Theoretical Breakthrough

The emerging trends and theoretical gaps identified in the preceding sections indicate that customer satisfaction research can no longer progress through incremental model extension alone. What is required is a theoretical breakthrough that redefines how satisfaction is conceptualized, structured, and explained in contemporary service and digital environments.

A first direction concerns the reconceptualization of satisfaction and dissatisfaction as analytically distinct rather than bipolar opposites. Evidence from unipolar models demonstrates that satisfaction and dissatisfaction can coexist and independently influence continuance and discontinuance behavior (Yu & Davis, 2024). This challenges the long-standing bipolar assumption embedded in dominant satisfaction scales and causal models.

Building on this insight, approach-avoidance frameworks reveal that customer behavior is shaped by simultaneous attraction and repulsion forces rather than a single evaluative continuum (Yu & Davis, 2025). Satisfaction theory must therefore incorporate dual motivational processes capable of explaining evaluative ambivalence and asymmetric behavioral responses.

A second breakthrough direction lies in buyer-user role differentiation. In many consumption contexts, the decision-maker and the actual user are not the same individual. Buyer-user synergy models show that these roles generate distinct evaluative criteria, expectations, and behavioral consequences (Datta & Kapoor, 2016). Treating satisfaction as role-neutral obscures these dynamics and limits theoretical precision.

Conceptual progress further requires clearer differentiation among satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight. Prior research demonstrates that delight is not simply extreme satisfaction, but a qualitatively distinct emotional state characterized by surprise, intensity, and nonlinear effects on loyalty (Finn, 2012). Similarly, dissatisfaction and outrage involve cognitive and emotional mechanisms that differ from low satisfaction (Liu & Keh, 2015). Measurement advances reinforce this distinction, showing that delight operates through emotional amplification rather than rational performance comparison (Torres et al., 2020).

All mentioned above, these insights indicate that the next theoretical breakthrough in customer satisfaction research requires a reorientation of around five interrelated principles. First, satisfaction and dissatisfaction should be conceptualized as independent dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single continuum, allowing for a more precise explanation of mixed or ambivalent evaluations. Second, customer evaluation needs to be understood as role-sensitive, recognizing that judgments vary according to situational roles and relational positions rather than assuming role-neutral assessment. Third, delight should be treated as a distinct experiential construct with its own antecedents and consequences, not merely as an extreme form of satisfaction. Fourth, customer responses are better explained through nonlinear and threshold-based behavioral logic, where incremental changes do not always produce proportional effects. Finally, satisfaction should be framed as a dynamic motivational balance that evolves, instead of a static post-consumption judgment. Taken together, this framework does not seek to replace traditional satisfaction theory; instead, it moves beyond its inherited boundaries by reorganizing established constructs within a fundamentally different evaluative logic, thereby opening new directions for theorizing and empirical inquiry.

Research Contributions

This study makes three interrelated contributions to customer satisfaction research. First, it advances theory by reconceptualizing customer satisfaction as part of a broader experiential-motivational architecture rather than as a terminal psychological outcome. By demonstrating that cognitive and emotional processes operate as interacting systems, the study positions satisfaction as a complex antecedent that shapes, but does not mechanically determine, downstream outcomes such as loyalty. This reframing helps explain persistent empirical inconsistencies observed in multidimensional loyalty research, where emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components often diverge.

Second, the article extends conceptual boundaries by repositioning satisfaction as a socio-institutional judgment. Beyond functional appraisal, satisfaction is shown to incorporate perceived meaning, identity alignment, and normative evaluation embedded within service systems. This contribution moves satisfaction theory closer to legitimacy, trust, and institutional evaluation perspectives, thereby broadening its explanatory relevance beyond transactional service encounters.

Third, the study contributes methodologically at the level of theorizing by challenging linear, static, and context-neutral assumptions that dominate satisfaction modeling. By articulating satisfaction as a dynamic and

configurational construct, the article opens conceptual space for new forms of empirical inquiry that treat satisfaction as an evolving system of interdependent signals rather than a single latent variable.

Research Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings imply that customer satisfaction should no longer be treated as a direct predictor of loyalty or performance outcomes. Instead, satisfaction functions as a mediating and structuring condition within a broader motivational system, shaping how emotions, cognitions, and behaviors align or misalign over time. This perspective encourages future theory to move beyond bipolar satisfaction–dissatisfaction logic toward multidimensional and role–sensitive evaluation models that better reflect lived service experiences.

Methodological Implications

The proposed reorientation necessitates analytical approaches capable of capturing dynamic, nonlinear, and explainable relationships. Traditional linear models are ill–suited to represent threshold effects, feedback loops, and configurational causality inherent in satisfaction processes. Methods such as explainable AI, hybrid network modeling, and adaptive optimization provide promising pathways for operationalizing satisfaction as an evolving system. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of cultural reflexivity in measurement design, as satisfaction constructs may not retain conceptual equivalence across institutional and cultural contexts.

Managerial and Policy Implications

For managers, satisfaction metrics should be interpreted as diagnostic signals rather than confirmatory indicators of success. Satisfaction reflects not only service performance but also emotional resonance, experiential coherence, and institutional trust. Internally, this places greater emphasis on employee experience and service climate as upstream conditions shaping customer evaluation. At the policy level, satisfaction can serve as a governance–relevant indicator, informing regulatory oversight, platform accountability, and service equity, particularly when supported by transparent and explainable analytical models.

New Knowledge

This article contributes a new body of knowledge by reconceptualizing customer satisfaction as a socio–institutional and motivational judgment rather than a purely psychological or transactional outcome. Through a milestone revolution perspective, it demonstrates how satisfaction research has advanced through successive theoretical breakthroughs that simultaneously enabled methodological sophistication while constraining conceptual renewal. This perspective provides a novel analytical lens for diagnosing theoretical maturity and paradigm closure in established research fields.

The study further advances satisfaction theory by proposing a tripartite and role–sensitive evaluative framework that treats satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight as analytically independent yet interacting constructs. By integrating buyer–user role differentiation and nonlinear motivational logic, the framework challenges the bipolar

and role–neutral assumptions embedded in dominant models, offering a more precise explanation of evaluative ambivalence, asymmetric behavior, and divergent loyalty outcomes.

This body of knowledge establishes customer satisfaction as a dynamic, configurational, and institutionally embedded construct, transforming it from a stabilized managerial metric into a theoretically revitalized lens for interpreting customer experience, organizational legitimacy, and market governance in complex service systems.

Conclusion

This article has reconceptualized customer satisfaction research through a milestone revolution perspective, demonstrating that the field has advanced through substantial theoretical and methodological developments while simultaneously approaching a condition of conceptual closure. Although customer satisfaction has become one of the most extensively operationalized constructs in business research, its very familiarity has obscured unresolved theoretical tensions and limited further conceptual advancement.

By tracing the evolution of satisfaction theory, identifying structural limitations within dominant frameworks, and engaging with emerging empirical realities, this study argues that customer satisfaction can no longer be understood as a stable psychological outcome alone. Rather, satisfaction should be recognized as a dynamic, multidimensional, and socio–institutional judgment shaped by emotional experience, role differentiation, contextual meaning, and systemic trust. These dimensions are integrated in Figure. 1 which conceptualizes satisfaction as a configurational outcome emerging from the interaction of experiential and institutional forces.

The central contribution of this article lies in its call for theoretical renewal rather than theoretical replacement. Satisfaction theory must move beyond linear causality, bipolar logic, and context–neutral assumptions toward a configurational, dynamic, and context–intelligent orientation. More importantly, this article positions customer satisfaction as a construct of broader societal relevance—a signal through which individuals evaluate the legitimacy, reliability, and ethical alignment of the systems in which they participate.

Customer satisfaction research is therefore not approaching its end, but its next beginning.

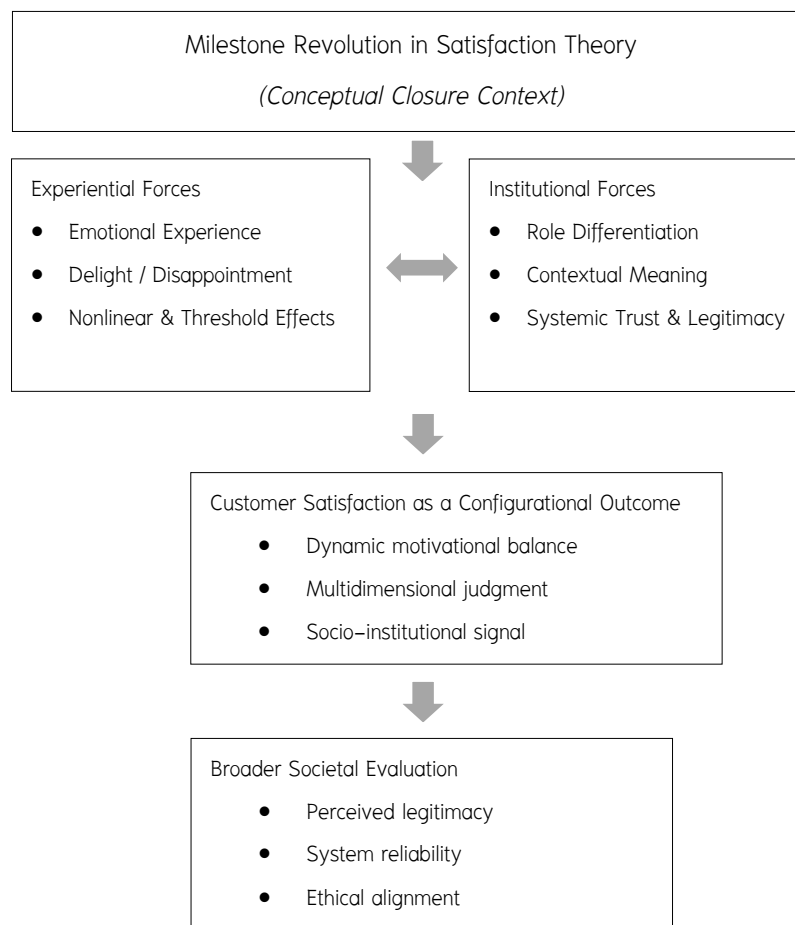


Figure. 1 Customer Satisfaction as a Configurational Socio-Institutional Judgment

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