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# Is There Anything New? Exploring the Conceptual Structure of Customer Satisfaction Research in Tourism and Hospitality

## Abstract

This research paper explores the conceptual structure of the literature published on "customer satisfaction" and identifies novel research gaps. For the purpose of the study, we create the co-occurrence networks and conduct thematic analysis as well as factorial analysis of the content of the papers published on customer satisfaction in the last two decades (2000-2020) in tourism and hospitality journals. We use 'R' software to conduct the analysis based on the data retrieved from the web of science database. Findings from the network analysis and thematic analysis are discussed to identify novel research gaps to further advance the ever-evolving field of research on "customer satisfaction". Our purpose with this paper is to bring to light the research gaps using a systematic, quantitative and objective technique of drawing the conceptual structure. Findings reveal that research on customer satisfaction in emerging contexts and restaurant research prominently deserve further attention, including work that compares customer expectation and satisfaction pre-and-post COVID in a context such as restaurants, destination tourism, and sharing economy, to name a few.

*Keywords:* customer satisfaction, tourism, hospitality, conceptual structure, network analysis, clustering

## 1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction is core to the hospitality industry and has been a well-researched topic for over four decades, and is an ever-evolving field (Wikhamn, 2019). Customer satisfaction in the hospitality and services industry is characterized as "the function of the customer's perception of the value received in a transaction or a relationship - where value is the perceived quality relative to the price and customer acquisition cost" (Hallowell, 1996). The research on the topic began in the early 1980s. It was introduced to the hospitality and services industry practitioners as a critical driver of their firm performance (see McCleary & Weaver, 1982; Cadotte, 1979). Customer satisfaction has been studied in varied disciplines apart from core hospitality research, including human resource management (Chand, 2010), operations and logistics (Chow et al., 2007), and marketing (Giese & Cote, 2000). Studies reveal several factors that are affected by customer satisfaction, such as customer loyalty (Gonçalves & Sampaio, 2012), relationship with the firm (Goodman et al., 1995), and profitability of the firm (Chi & Gurse, 2009). The hospitality industry is continuously evolving in terms of the nature of services offered and customer touchpoints; hence continuous research is imperative to understand the concept of customer satisfaction in light of these new contemporary contexts. A field advances when scholars and researchers add to the body of knowledge. It becomes necessary to periodically analyze the accumulated knowledge to understand the current state of research (Li et al., 2017). We acknowledge the past studies that have

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reviewed the concept using a systematic review (Oh, & Kim, 2017; Prayag et al., 2018), a meta-analysis (Ladeira et al., 2016), and a narrative review (Pizam et al., 2016), this study uniquely situates itself by using quantitative techniques, with high replicability, for investigating the conceptual structure of the literature to explore possible novel research gaps.

## 2. Method

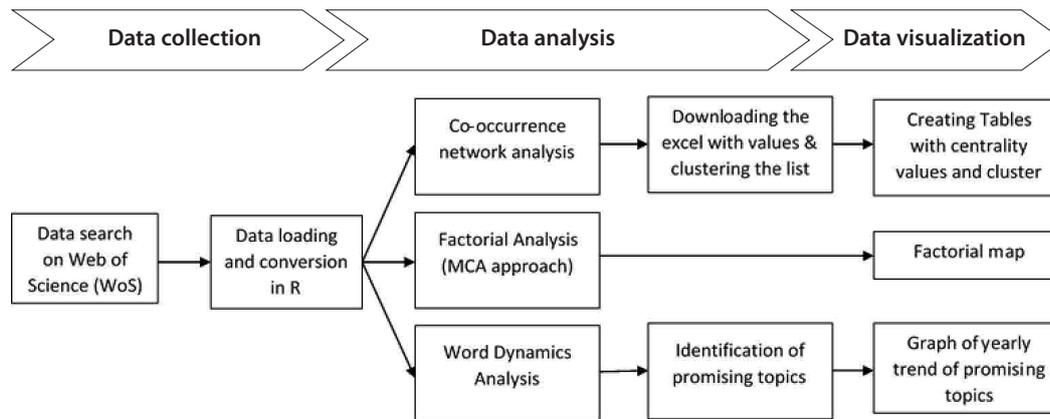
This study used the data downloaded from the Web of Science, a reliable source of literature (Cunillera & Guilera, 2018). The search query used the term "customer satisfaction" as the topic and the period of 2000-2020 in all the indexes. The search was refined to the "hospitality leisure sport tourism" category of the web of science to scope the literature. The search returned 1309 papers which included both articles and reviews. Table 1 shows the top 10 journals that have been covered by the data and their international standings/rankings. From table 1, it can be observed that the International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management has published the most papers on the topic, followed by the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management. The list covers journals that are primarily highly rated in international rankings, such as the Australian Business Deans Council's rankings (ABDC) and top in Scopus Quartile Categories. These journals could be the "go-to" references for scholars working or publishing on the topic of "customer satisfaction" within the discipline of tourism, hospitality, and services.

**Table 1**  
*Top 10 journals covered by the dataset*

S. No.	Journal title	Articles	ABDC ranking	Scimago quartile
1	International Journal of Hospitality Management	211	A*	Q1
2	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	147	A	Q1
3	Tourism Management	112	A*	Q1
4	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	83	A	Q1
5	Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	48	A	Q1
6	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	46	A	Q1
7	Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	45	A	Q1
8	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	41	A	Q1
9	Current Issues in Tourism	40	A	Q1
10	Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism	37	B	Q2

The data downloaded from the web of science were analyzed using the 'Bibliometrix' package (Aria & Cucurullo, 2017) in the statistical software 'R' (R core team, 2013) and the VOS viewer™ (Van Eck & Waltman, 2013) used for co-citation analysis. It aids in creating conceptual structure and network maps of the literature published on the topic in the last two decades. A conceptual structure of the literature on the topic helps trace the evolution in terms of concepts. It provides an overview of the themes and their network representing the cognitive structure (Zupic & Čater, 2014). The use of software analysis coupled with the web of science database provides a systematic and objective approach to the literature on the topic (Atabay, & Güzeller, 2021). Figure 1 shows the flow of the study.

**Figure 1**  
*Flow of work*



A conceptual structure of the literature on customer satisfaction was generated using co-occurrence network maps, thematic analysis of the content of the papers, and factorial analysis of the author-supplied keywords. Co-occurrence network analysis provides a 'betweenness centrality value for each node/topic. The 'betweenness centrality is the importance of a node through the shortest path in a network (Golbeck, 2013). It is calculated as the fraction of the number of shortest paths between two nodes and the number of times a node appears on that path. In the context of the current study, these values indicate the degree to which a topic has been studied or researched, along with other topic pairs. Similarly, observing the clusters within the thematic analysis using co-occurrence analysis (Liu, & Mei, 2016; Kraus et al., 2020) helps to conclude the subfields of research within the domain of customer satisfaction. The occurrence count that accompanies it helps in identifying the topics that could be probable for future research. Network analysis, earlier validated by Al, Taşkın, and Duzyol (2012) and utilized by Li et al. (2018), reveals the 'betweenness centrality' which gives the idea of topics that are not yet studied in conjunction with other topics within the field. Factor analysis in bibliometric works on the same assumptions as in other statistical analyses, and it helps in segregating topics into factors based on their similarity (Araújo et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2019). The factors with a lesser number of topics within could be potential gaps. A trend diagram of topic occurrence over the years helps budding scholars in the field identify topics reaching saturation and others that are becoming a trend recently. It also helps identify topics that have remained worth exploring over the years.

### 3. Results

The thematic analysis revealed 12 topic clusters in the literature in the past two decades. Each cluster is named based on the broader themes the topics within it represent. These topics in thematic clusters are based on co-occurrences. It is reasonable to assume that the topics that occur together belong to a similar research domain within the discipline. Table 2 shows the details of the clusters, their names, and the corresponding topics within them. It could be observed that in the last two decades, research on customer satisfaction has majorly focused on the "behavioral and perception aspects" (cluster 1), which has the maximum topics under it, followed by "tourism" (cluster 8), and "services" (cluster 7). Cluster titled "emerging contexts" (cluster 5) which lists "sharing economy" as a prominent topic, could be further explored from the tourism and hospitality perspective as it may show promising growth (Kraus et al., 2020). In the cluster titled "methodology" (cluster 4), specific contemporary topics have been featured, such as "text mining" and "sentiment analysis." These are computer-assisted techniques that are being heavily utilized in customer satisfaction research to mine data from online reviews and forums to understand the factors that contribute to or come from customer satisfaction. Other

clusters are based on the topics that cover the marketing and branding aspects (cluster 2); Financial aspects of tourism, hospitality, and service management (cluster 3); Hotel Industry (cluster 6); countries specific research (cluster 9); IT aspects (cluster 10); Customer relationships within tourism, and services (cluster 11); and Miscellaneous (cluster 12).

Table 2 also details the 'betweenness centrality' value of the topics. This value in the context of developing the conceptual structure of the literature on this concept points to promising and novel research areas that scholars in the field could explore. The novelty lies in the topic not being studied in conjunction with the customer satisfaction concept.

**Table 2**  
*Thematic cluster, topic, and centrality value*

Cluster name	Cluster #	Topic	Btw cent.
Behaviour, perception & emotion	1	Job satisfaction	0.844
	1	Perceived justice	0.856
	1	Perception	1.008
	1	Perceived price	1.020
	1	Attitude	1.318
	1	Commitment	1.578
	1	Experience	2.005
	1	Consumption emotions	4.584
	1	Perceived quality	5.075
	1	Trust	19.487
	1	Emotions	34.889
	1	Perceived value	58.098
	1	Behavioral intentions	74.083
Marketing & branding	2	Image	0.973
	2	Brand experience	1.111
	2	Co-creation	1.275
	2	Experiential value	1.504
	2	Brand loyalty	3.775
Finance	3	Financial performance	0.195
	3	Revenue management	0.925
	3	Price	1.277
	3	Corporate social responsibility	6.157
	3	Performance	6.682
	3	Value	8.991
Methodology	4	Importance-performance analysis	0.339
	4	Sentiment analysis	0.599
	4	Text mining	0.637
	4	Content analysis	2.645
	4	Data mining	3.442
	4	Moderating effect	10.313
	Emerging contexts	5	Sharing economy
5		Airbnb	2.971
Hotel industry	6	Hotel attributes	0.291
	6	Hotel performance	0.702
	6	Casino	3.153
	6	Resort hotels	3.227
	6	Restaurants	13.004
	6	Hotels	79.178

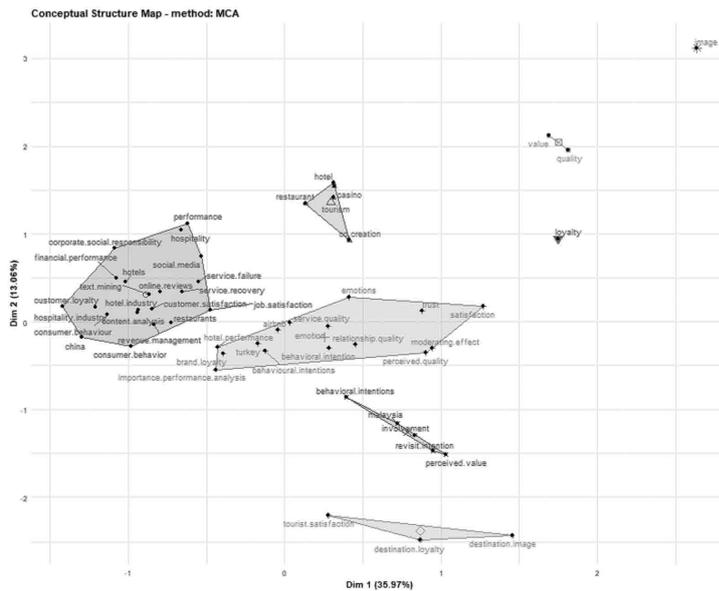
**Table 2 (continued)**

Services	7	Servqual	2.175
	7	Service failure	2.810
	7	Servicescape	4.065
	7	Service recovery	12.980
	7	Service quality	578.328
Tourism	8	Tourist experience	0.354
	8	Rural tourism	0.420
	8	Package tour	0.869
	8	Destination loyalty	5.602
	8	Destination image	6.518
	8	Destination	8.799
	8	Tourist satisfaction	10.034
	8	Tourism	43.579
Countries	9	Turkey	4.017
	9	China	8.773
	9	Malaysia	12.077
Information technology	10	Social media	2.169
	10	E-wom	8.311
	10	Online reviews	36.394
Customers & relationships	11	Customer service	0.204
	11	Relationship marketing	1.362
	11	Customer experience	1.457
	11	Relationship quality	12.669
	11	Involvement	16.965
Miscellaneous	12	Physical environment	0.188
	12	Food quality	0.208
	12	Gender	0.506
	12	Sustainability	1.199
	12	Culture	3.519
	12	Authenticity	8.743

Note: Cluster #: Cluster number; Btw Cent.: Betweenness centrality.

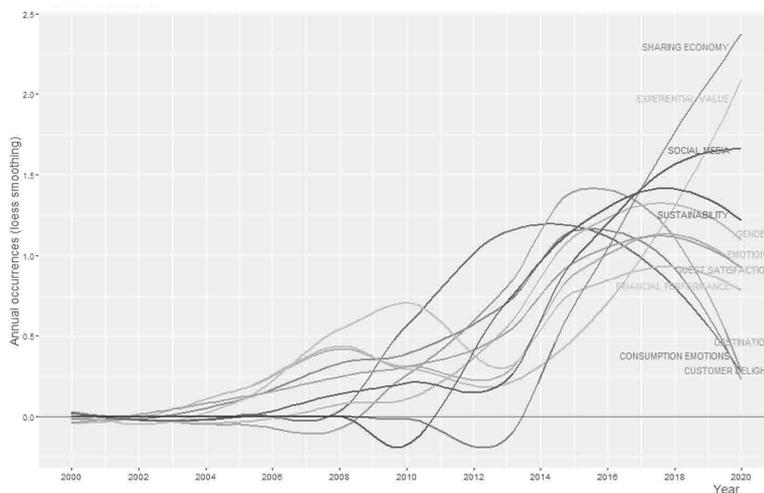
Factorial analysis of the content reveals the conceptual map of the literature on customer satisfaction. We used multiple corresponding analyses (Greenacre & Blasius, 2006) to factor topics into clusters. Figure 2 shows the factorial map of the themes. There are a total of 8 factors identified. The larger the factor structure (i.e., more the topics within), the higher the chances of the area being of interest to the scholars in the field. The most significant factor (factor 1, red color) contains multiple topics, including corporate social responsibility, service failures, revenue management, and consumer behavior, to name a few. The next factor is coded in "green" color and belongs to topics such as emotions, service quality, relationship quality, and behavioral intentions, to name a few. The next two factors of the same size (based on the topics) are coded "blue" and "purple." The blue factor relates to hotels, restaurants, and casinos, while the purple-colored factor refers to the involvement, revisit intentions, and perceived value, to name a few. The next bigger factor is color-coded as orange and lists tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, and destination image. In contrast, the smaller factors are made up of two and then even one topic, and they are color-coded in pink, black, and brown.

**Figure 2**  
*Factorial\_analysis*



Topics in any research field have varying popularity across the years. Figure 3 shows the yearly trend of the ten promising topics based on their occurrence count. This graph would aid in identifying topics that are gaining popularity in customer satisfaction research. Figure 3 shows that certain topics such as "sharing economy," "experiential value", and "social media" are picking the interest of scholars, while some other topics such as "Gender"; "Emotions"; "Guest Satisfaction" are losing their relevance." Regarding the trend for the topic "financial performance," it is interesting to note that the topic has largely been stable, but was able to gain significant relevance in the period post the 2008 financial crisis. In the same way, it could be expected that the research on financial performance may see another growth spurt in the post-COVID-19 era. It is also observed that some topics have shown a complete downfall, such as work on customer delight or customer emotions. Future researchers could largely ignore these topics.

**Figure 3**  
*Word growth*



## 4. Discussion and future directions

The network analysis (refer to Table 2) reveals cluster-wise topics less explored in the customer satisfaction domain. Cluster 3, titled "Finance," shows that work on financial performance & revenue management is promising, supported by the evolutionary curve in Figure 3. A paper by Ye, Xiao, and Zhou (2019) might give a primary understanding of financial performance in hospitality and rural tourism (tourism cluster), which is another interesting topic left unexplored. Understanding aspects of customer satisfaction in emerging contexts such as sharing economy (see Ju et al., 2019) & information technology are promising areas for future work. Certain methodologies are also worth exploring, such as sentiment analysis (see Chatterjee, 2020), importance-performance analysis (see, Albayrak, 2015; Back, 2012), and natural language processing techniques, such as text mining to understand various factors that indicate or contribute to customer satisfaction. Other clusters, especially "miscellaneous," are also worth the attention of researchers from the discipline.

The factorial analysis map (refer to Figure 2) has two axes (dimensions), and the map summarizes 35.97% ( $\tau_1$ ) for the first dimension and 13.06% ( $\tau_2$ ) for the second. Certain factors such as "image" and "loyalty" are separate dots in the map, which explains that research on those topics is in isolation from any other when explored in conjunction with customer satisfaction. Topics under the cluster in blue (restaurant, hotel, casino, tourism, co-creation) and purple (behavioral intention, Malaysia, involvement, revisit intentions) would be interesting to explore in future research, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 aftermath. A recent article has shown that tourism and hospitality research requires attention as it is highly affected by the pandemic (Dube et al., 2021). A paper by Rodríguez-López et al. (2019) explores the literature on restaurant research and could serve as a helpful reference for scholars interested in exploring the blue cluster.

Figure 3 reinforces the findings from the previous analyses and shows that work on financial performance, sharing economy, experiential value, and social media could be worthwhile. Work on gender has appeared in the marketing discipline but is scarce in hospitality research (see Kim et al., 2019). Future research may want to explore the role of gender in reported satisfaction and how other factors, such as intentions, emotions, and social media, explore it.

Although bibliometric analysis is not a complete in-depth review of the topic, it has undoubtedly helped gain exciting insights into the field of research on customer satisfaction. There are a number of future research directions that could be proposed from this review study, and there are certain associated challenges as well. At the outset, it could be observed that, in this post-pandemic world, there will be a renewed interest in many topics that are losing relevance. Hospitality and Tourism have been one of the worst-hit industries due to COVID-19 (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2022). Work on the macro aspects, such as the relevance of sharing economy, the financial performance of the tourism and hospitality sector and the companies within, as well as micro aspects, such as behavioral and emotional nuances of the guest, would take the front seat in the conversation on customer satisfaction research in tourism, hospitality, and services. Future research may also help understand and redefine the meaning of sustainability, satisfaction, and loyalty in the post-pandemic world, such as the paper by Planinc and Kukanja (2022) on the comparison of customers' quality expectations from restaurants in the pre and post-pandemic world.

But these future direction foci are not devoid of challenges. A significant challenge associated is data collection. Due to the highly contagious nature of the COVID-19 disease, the world is grappling with lockdowns and limited human interaction. Much of the work in the field requires access to primary data from individuals (travelers/guests/customers) using interviews and surveys. With the risk of getting infected, the best destinations are seeing a plunge in tourist arrivals. This poses a challenge to developing new knowledge for the field. Social Media and secondary data may emerge as a potential solution to the problem of access to primary data. Another challenge for research on customer satisfaction in the tourism, hospitality, and services sector is a higher reliance on techniques that either are quantitative or only scrap online content for data

collection (evident from cluster 4 of Table 2). As the new world order will require the exploration of many known phenomena and concepts afresh, the scholars in the field must undertake extensive ethnographic and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) work to theorize better the concept of customer satisfaction in tourism, hospitality, and services discipline.

## 5. Limitations and conclusion

The use of other databases might reveal differing results. The clusters formed in Table 2 are a result of quantitative analysis coupled with manual investigations, while factorial analysis is completely software generated. The study is limited to hospitality, leisure, and tourism-related research and does not include studies from the marketing domain. The aim is to keep the whole study as objective as possible.

In conclusion, this paper explores the conceptual structure of literature on customer satisfaction to identify novel research gaps. We use network analysis, factorial maps, and word evolution maps to meet that purpose. Findings suggest several topics, such as rural tourism, sharing economy, social media, gender, and food quality, as promising to explore in future research.

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