

*Academic Articles***FROM SATISFACTION TO SATURATION: RE-THEORIZING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
IN MATURE RESEARCH FIELDS***Taisith Kruasom¹, Rattanaporn Saelee^{2*}, Pornpirat Kantatasiri³**Faculty of Management Science, Ubon Ratchathani University¹**Faculty of Business Administration and Management, Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University^{2*}**Mahidol University, Nakhonsawan Campus³**Email: taisith.k@ubu.ac.th¹, rattanaporn.s@ubru.ac.th^{2*}, pornpiratk@gmail.com³***Abstract**

Customer satisfaction has long occupied a central position in marketing and service research. While methodological sophistication has advanced substantially, theoretical development has not progressed at a comparable pace. This article addresses this imbalance by conceptualizing customer satisfaction as a theoretically saturated construct and treating saturation not as exhaustion, but as a signal for re-theorization. Using conceptual synthesis informed by field-level diagnostic mapping of prior studies, the article develops a new theoretical architecture that reconceptualizes satisfaction through three lenses: dynamic adjustment, socio-emotional contract, and legitimacy and risk signaling. These reframing shifts satisfaction from a static evaluative outcome toward a dynamic, relational, and context-embedded construct. The framework is translated into a measurement agenda emphasizing multidimensional, longitudinal, nonlinear, and internal–external integrated designs.

The article also proposes a research agenda focused on (i) distinguishing satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight, (ii) extending trust and security beyond financial services, and (iii) modeling satisfaction trajectories across relationship life cycles. It concludes that customer satisfaction cannot be revitalized through more precise measurement alone, but requires meaningful conceptual redefinition aligned with contemporary service realities.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, Theoretical saturation, Re-theorization, Dynamic adjustment, Socio-emotional contract, Legitimacy and risk signaling

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Introduction

Customer satisfaction continues to occupy a central position in contemporary marketing and service research, functioning as a core construct in explaining customer experience, loyalty formation, and organizational performance. Recent reviews demonstrate that satisfaction remains deeply embedded in models of service quality, perceived value, trust, and behavioral intention across industries, including banking, hospitality, tourism, healthcare, and digital platforms (Aazib Afraz & Geetha, 2025; Ramdhansya et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2022). Yet, despite the field's empirical productivity, customer satisfaction theory shows signs of conceptual stagnation—an issue this article frames as field-level theoretical saturation.

As the field has matured, satisfaction research has expanded along three major trajectories. First, it has diffused across diverse service contexts and technological environments, particularly in digitally mediated and platform-based services (Ayinaddis et al., 2023; Qureshi et al., 2024). Second, methodological sophistication has intensified through fuzzy logic models, hybrid predictive analytics, text mining, and mixed method designs for satisfaction measurement and modeling (Ferrentino & Boniello, 2020; Jiang et al., 2024; Sahhar et al., 2023). Third, satisfaction metrics have become institutionalized within organizational monitoring systems and strategic dashboards, where they are treated as central indicators of retention, continuity, and market performance (Leong et al., 2024; Murdock et al., 2025).

At the same time, contemporary research increasingly recognizes that satisfaction is shaped by both cognitive evaluation and affective experience, and that it evolves across repeated interactions rather than representing a fixed attitude. Empirical studies using time-series, mixed-method, and adaptive modeling approaches indicate that satisfaction exhibits recalibration, learning, and dynamic fluctuation over time (Strydom et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2024; Sahhar et al., 2023). These findings challenge the adequacy of purely cross-sectional and static representations.

Despite these advances, a persistent paradox has emerged. Measurement of satisfaction has become increasingly sophisticated, while its conceptualization remains largely anchored in static evaluative assumptions. Much contemporary work continues to treat satisfaction as a stable latent variable captured by a single global score and positioned as a mediator between quality or value and loyalty. However, evidence shows that different operationalizations and analytical transformations of satisfaction yield systematically different predictive relationships with behavioral outcomes, implying that measurement choices can shape construct meaning rather than merely reflect it (Li et al., 2020; Ramdhansya et al., 2025). This paradox is practically consequential because it encourages “better measurement of an unchanged construct,” limiting theoretical branching and reducing explanatory returns—especially in digitally mediated services where satisfaction is increasingly intertwined with trust, privacy, transparency, and perceived risk.

This condition reflects what the present study terms theoretical saturation. At the field level, saturation refers to a situation in which a research stream generates large volumes of studies that repeatedly reproduce similar causal architectures across contexts while rarely revising underlying assumptions, causal

logic, or boundary conditions. Bibliometric and conceptual mapping studies of satisfaction research in tourism and hospitality, for example, reveal high topical density but limited conceptual differentiation (Lanke & Varsha Paul, 2022). Importantly, this notion differs from qualitative data saturation, which concerns when additional data cease to generate new themes within a particular study (Fofana et al., 2020; Ortega-Bastidas, 2020).

Three structural forces appear to contribute to this condition. First, dominant evaluative templates frame satisfaction primarily as an outcome of perceived performance relative to expectations. Second, multidimensional customer experience is frequently reduced to single-score indicators for managerial convenience. Third, most empirical models remain time-blind and linear, despite evidence of nonlinearity, asymmetry, and temporal dependence in satisfaction processes (Strydom et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2024). Together, these forces stabilize a narrow conceptual architecture even as analytical techniques become more advanced.

Given this diagnosis, the central problem is not whether satisfaction remains useful, but whether the construct's theoretical architecture still matches contemporary service realities. This article, therefore, asks three guiding research questions: (RQ1) What does field-level theoretical saturation mean in mature customer satisfaction research, and how can it be diagnosed conceptually? (RQ2) Why has customer satisfaction become theoretically saturated despite methodological escalation and contextual expansion? (RQ3) How can customer satisfaction be re-theorized to restore conceptual differentiation under conditions of digital mediation, relational continuity, and heightened risk sensitivity?

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are threefold: (1) to conceptualize and diagnose customer satisfaction as a theoretically saturated research stream; (2) to develop a re-theorization that reconstructs satisfaction as (a) a dynamic adjustment process, (b) a socio-emotional contract, and (c) a legitimacy and risk signal; and (3) to translate this architecture into a measurement and research agenda that specifies testable pathways for future empirical work.

This article argues that measuring satisfaction more precisely is no longer sufficient; the construct itself requires theoretical re-specification. Accordingly, the study repositions customer satisfaction within a broader theoretical architecture that reflects contemporary service realities characterized by digital mediation, relational continuity, and heightened perceptions of risk. In digitally mediated and AI-enabled services, issues of privacy, security, transparency, and technological trust increasingly shape customer evaluations, making satisfaction function not only as an experiential judgment but also as a risk-reducing and legitimacy-signaling mechanism (Dias et al., 2025; Gui et al., 2024; Wirtz et al., 2023).

Rather than abandoning existing theories, this article advances a re-theorization of customer satisfaction through three complementary lenses: satisfaction as a dynamic adjustment process, satisfaction as a socio-emotional contract, and satisfaction as a legitimacy and risk signal. This reconceptualization

repositions customer satisfaction as a dynamic, relational, and context-embedded construct rather than a static evaluative outcome.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section elaborates on the logic of theoretical saturation in mature research fields. A subsequent section diagnoses why customer satisfaction became saturated. The following section develops the re-theorization. Another section translates the framework into a measurement agenda. The article then proposes a future research agenda and concludes with a synthesis of the central argument.

Literature Review

Theoretical Saturation in Mature Research Fields

In mature research fields, the accumulation of empirical findings does not necessarily translate into theoretical advancement. Literature may expand rapidly through new datasets, contexts, and analytical techniques, while simultaneously exhibiting theoretical saturation—a condition in which dominant conceptual frameworks are repeatedly reproduced with only marginal modifications to assumptions, causal logic, or boundary conditions. Contemporary meta-scientific analyses show that many disciplines experience high empirical productivity alongside limited conceptual diversification, resulting in extensive replication of familiar model structures rather than explanatory reconstruction (Ioannidis, 2005; Nosek et al., 2015). In such fields, progress often shifts from “rebuilding explanations” to “refining routines,” where increasingly advanced methods are used to reconfirm stable theoretical templates.

Customer satisfaction research exemplifies this pattern. Large-scale reviews in tourism, hospitality, and service management demonstrate dense clustering around stable constructs, recurring causal paths, and incremental extensions rather than genuine theoretical branching (Lanke & Varsha Paul, 2022; Ramdhansya et al., 2025). Over time, research communities increasingly emphasize exploitation—refining estimation, improving prediction, and expanding contextual coverage—rather than exploration that challenges foundational premises. The result is not failure, but the transformation of theory into taken-for-granted infrastructure. For example, satisfaction is frequently positioned as a central mediator between service quality/value and loyalty or continuance intention, even when settings shift from physical services to platform-based and AI-enabled services.

It is important to distinguish field-level theoretical saturation from qualitative (data-level) saturation. Qualitative saturation refers to a methodological judgment that additional data no longer generate new themes within a particular study (Fofana et al., 2020; Ortega-Bastidas, 2020). Field-level saturation, by contrast, denotes a disciplinary condition in which methodological variety coexists with conceptual immobility: studies become more precise without becoming more conceptually diverse. This distinction matters because field-level saturation can occur even when empirical novelty is high (new sectors, new datasets, new analytics) if the same causal architecture is repeatedly reproduced.

Several indicators signal field-level theoretical saturation. First, structural replication, where core model architectures are repeatedly reproduced with minor contextual substitutions (Nosek et al., 2015). Second, predictable empirical patterns, in which relationships remain consistently positive and significant, reducing theoretical tension and falsification pressure (Ioannidis, 2005). Third, metric dominance, where a limited set of standard measures stabilizes what counts as the construct, thereby narrowing its conceptual boundaries (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). Fourth, methodological escalation without conceptual escalation, in which increasingly advanced analytics are applied to essentially unchanged constructs, producing technical sophistication without parallel theoretical deepening (Suddaby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Finally, reviewer and community fatigue, as evaluative attention shifts from novelty of ideas toward compliance with technical and reporting standards (Wright & Naylor, 2024). Together, these indicators describe a field that becomes increasingly efficient at producing confirmatory evidence, while becoming less capable of generating conceptual surprise.

Paradoxically, saturation is often a byproduct of success. When a framework delivers stable explanatory power and managerial usability, intellectual stabilization becomes rational. Quantification and dashboard logics further intensify this tendency by privileging comparability and operational simplicity, compressing complex social phenomena into standardized indicators that travel easily across contexts (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Espeland & Stevens, 2008). As a result, constructs may become “operationally stable” while their underlying meanings gradually narrow toward what is most measurable and comparable.

The consequences are substantial. Explanatory returns diminish, constructs undergo conceptual thinning, and novel contexts are absorbed into existing templates without adequate re-specification. A persistent measurement–theory mismatch can emerge, in which instruments become more complex while construct definitions remain comparatively static, generating distorted inference about what is being measured (MacKenzie et al., 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2016). In practical terms, this mismatch can lead researchers to interpret improved prediction as theoretical progress, even when the construct’s meaning has not been updated to reflect new service realities.

Importantly, theoretical saturation should not be interpreted as exhaustion. Rather, it signals that progress can no longer rely on incremental extension alone. Advancement now requires conceptual reconstruction—redefining what a construct represents, how it operates, and why it matters under changing technological, social, and institutional conditions. In this sense, saturation functions as an analytical trigger: it identifies where theoretical premises have become infrastructural and therefore require deliberate rebuilding.

Accordingly, this article treats saturation as an analytical entry point for re-theorization. The next section explains why customer satisfaction became theoretically saturated by examining three structural forces—framework dominance, metric reductionism, and time-blind linear modeling—and uses this diagnosis as the bridge to the re-theorization developed thereafter.

Why Customer Satisfaction Became Theoretically Saturated

Building on the diagnosis of field-level saturation, this section explains why customer satisfaction research has reached a stage of conceptual stagnation despite extensive empirical accumulation and methodological sophistication. Three structural forces are central: theoretical dominance, metric reductionism, and time-blind linear modeling. Together, these forces stabilize the architecture of satisfaction research in ways that systematically discourage conceptual renewal. In what follows, each force is explained with a concrete implication for how satisfaction is theorized, measured, and modeled across mature streams.

First, satisfaction research remains anchored in a dominant evaluative template in which satisfaction is treated as an appraisal of experience relative to prior standards. Recent bibliometric and conceptual reviews in tourism, hospitality, and service research demonstrate strong clustering around confirmation-based and performance-evaluation logics, with limited diversification of underlying assumptions (Lanke & Varsha Paul, 2022; Ramdhansya et al., 2025; Stange et al., 2025). As this template becomes embedded in doctoral training, measurement practices, and journal expectations, alternative conceptualizations face high entry barriers. Empirical effort is therefore concentrated on extending established models—adding moderators, mediators, and contexts—rather than reconsidering what satisfaction fundamentally represents. The core problem is not empirical failure, but infrastructural success: the evaluative template becomes routine rather than theoretically contested. In practice, this dominance encourages “template portability,” where satisfaction is transported across sectors (e.g., hospitality, banking, platforms) while preserving the same causal role (typically as an outcome and mediator), even when the underlying evaluative basis shifts toward risk, trust, and governance concerns.

Second, theoretical saturation is reinforced by metric reductionism. Contemporary satisfaction research continues to rely heavily on global or near-global satisfaction indicators, even as service experiences become more complex and multidimensional. Large-scale reviews show that, despite recognition of multidimensionality, most empirical studies still operationalize satisfaction as a single latent variable or index (Ramdhansya et al., 2025; Stange et al., 2025). This practice compresses cognitive, affective, relational, and contextual meanings into numerical convenience and gradually allows the metric to define the construct. Recent work on construct development and measurement warns that when operationalizations narrow faster than conceptual definitions evolve, construct meaning drifts toward what is easiest to measure rather than what is theoretically intended (Rathor et al., 2025; Wright & Naylor, 2024). Under such conditions, satisfaction is implicitly reinterpreted as a stable attitude, even when scholars acknowledge its experiential and relational complexity. A recurring outcome is “single-score governance”: organizations and researchers privilege a comparable satisfaction score for dashboards and benchmarking, which in turn incentivizes models that treat satisfaction as a stable, generalizable index rather than a context-sensitive evaluative process.

Third, satisfaction research is shaped by time-blind linear modeling. Most studies continue to rely on cross-sectional designs and linear specifications, treating satisfaction as a snapshot outcome rather than as a process that unfolds through repeated interactions. Contemporary service and experience research emphasizes that satisfaction dynamics often exhibit time lags, nonlinearities, and asymmetric effects, especially in digitally mediated environments (Strydom et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2024). Nevertheless, dominant analytical routines still privilege single-wave data and symmetric effect assumptions. As a result, adaptation, recalibration, and recovery processes remain under-theorized, and satisfaction continues to be interpreted as momentary rather than processual. This time-blindness is especially limiting in settings characterized by repeated use and episodic disruptions (e.g., service failures, privacy incidents, AI errors), where satisfaction can “recover,” “decay,” or “recalibrate” across episodes rather than move linearly.

Collectively, these forces shift satisfaction research from an exploratory, theory-building enterprise toward predictive routine science. The field becomes increasingly proficient at confirming stable directional relationships while becoming less capable of generating conceptual surprise. The central paradox is therefore that the more precisely satisfaction is measured, the less clearly it is theoretically understood. Satisfaction becomes technically refined, widely predictive, and managerially indispensable, yet conceptually diffuse. In short, methodological escalation (advanced analytics) coexists with conceptual stabilization (unchanged construct architecture).

Recognizing these structural sources of saturation creates the conditions for conceptual renewal. If customer satisfaction can no longer be adequately explained as a static evaluative outcome, it must be reconceptualized in ways that restore temporal sensitivity, recover socio-emotional meaning, and incorporate legitimacy and risk signaling under digitally mediated conditions. Accordingly, the next section develops a re-theorization of customer satisfaction through three complementary lenses: satisfaction as a dynamic adjustment, satisfaction as a socio-emotional contract, and satisfaction as a legitimacy and risk signal. To support this transition, the next section treats each lens as a deliberate response to one or more sources of saturation: dynamic adjustment counters time-blind linearity, socio-emotional contract counteracts metric reductionism, and legitimacy/risk signaling addresses the limits of the dominant evaluative template under digital uncertainty.

Research Agenda for Post-Saturation Customer Satisfaction Theory

This part demonstrates that customer satisfaction research has reached a stage of maturity in which theoretical renewal cannot be achieved through methodological refinement alone. What is now required is a forward-looking agenda that treats satisfaction as a dynamic, socio-emotional, and legitimacy-sensitive construct whose meaning varies across contexts, technologies, and relationship stages. In post-saturation fields, the central question shifts from “Which variables predict satisfaction?” to “What kind of phenomenon is satisfaction becoming, and under what conditions does its causal role change?” Three

research frontiers are proposed. For each frontier, the propositions below are paired with indicative empirical strategies (data type and analytical approach) to facilitate testable extension by future researchers.

1. Differentiating Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Delight

Post-saturation research should move beyond the assumption that satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight represent different intensities on a single continuum. Instead, these states should be theorized as qualitatively distinct evaluative phenomena with different emotional structures, cognitive mechanisms, and behavioral consequences. Recent evidence increasingly treats delight as a discrete construct associated with positive surprise, emotional uplift, and gratitude-like responses, while dissatisfaction is linked to perceived violation, negative attribution, and asymmetric behavioral reactions (Aityassine, 2022; Stange, Scheffler, & Henseler, 2025; Tremblay, 2024). Empirical studies in hospitality, telecommunications, and automotive services further show that satisfaction and delight exert different pathways to loyalty and retention, supporting a non-continuum view (Anabila et al., 2022; Leong et al., 2024; Masoma & Maduku, 2025). Methodologically, this frontier benefits from designs that separate evaluative states rather than treating them as a single latent continuum, such as multi-construct measurement models, asymmetric effect estimation, and state-based segmentation.

RP1: Satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight are structurally distinct evaluative states rather than continuous levels of a single construct.

Suggested empirical test: multi-group SEM or latent class analysis using customer survey + experience episode data; test discriminant validity and compare structural paths across classes.

RP2: Dissatisfaction exerts stronger behavioral effects than equivalent positive changes in satisfaction due to violation-based and negativity-weighted mechanisms.

Suggested empirical test: nonlinear/asymmetric modeling (e.g., spline regression, quantile regression, or asymmetric SEM) using complaint, churn, and repurchase outcomes; compare marginal effects of negative vs positive changes.

2. Trust, Legitimacy, and Governance in High-Risk Digital Services

As services become increasingly digital and AI-mediated, satisfaction should be theorized less as a reward for performance and more as a signal of legitimacy under uncertainty. Recent research in digital banking, chatbots, and platform services shows that technology security, privacy protection, transparency, and governance practices significantly shape satisfaction and continuance intentions alongside perceived usefulness (Gui et al., 2024; Qureshi, Wilkins, & Iqbal, 2024; Dias, Wisker, & Alani, 2025). Moreover, work on digital service technologies emphasizes that customer evaluations increasingly integrate perceptions of institutional reliability, accountability, and ethical system behavior (Wirtz et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2025). This frontier, therefore, requires measurement that explicitly captures perceived legitimacy (fairness, accountability, transparency) and perceived risk, rather than treating them as peripheral moderators.

RP3: In AI-mediated and high-risk services, customer satisfaction increasingly reflects perceived legitimacy, transparency, and accountability rather than only perceived usefulness.

Suggested empirical test: survey + behavioral trace data in AI-mediated services (chatbots, digital banking); SEM comparing relative effect sizes of legitimacy/risk vs usefulness on satisfaction and continuance.

RP4: Trust strengthens the satisfaction–loyalty relationship more strongly in high-risk digital services than in low-risk physical services.

Suggested empirical test: multi-context design (digital vs physical) with interaction tests or multi-group SEM; compare satisfaction to loyalty path coefficients under different risk intensities.

3. Temporal and Relational Trajectories

Post-saturation theory must treat time as a theoretical object rather than a methodological add-on. Emerging studies model satisfaction as evolving across service episodes and relationship phases using time-series, nonlinear, and trajectory-based approaches (Jiang, Sabetzadeh, & Zhang, 2024; Strydom, Ewing, & Heggen, 2020). Evidence from tourism and hospitality further demonstrates that satisfaction during disruption, recovery, and post-crisis phases carries different meanings and behavioral implications than satisfaction during stable periods (Leoni & Moretti, 2024; Yu et al., 2022; Matijević, Zielinski, & Ahn, 2025). These findings suggest that static snapshots obscure important relational dynamics. Trajectory-oriented research designs can capture decay, recovery, and recalibration patterns that remain invisible in single-wave models.

RP5: Satisfaction trajectories across relationship stages provide stronger predictive power for loyalty than static satisfaction levels.

Suggested empirical test: panel/longitudinal data with growth-curve modeling or latent growth SEM; compare predictive performance of trajectory parameters vs static scores for loyalty/retention.

RP6: Recovery satisfaction exerts stronger long-term loyalty effects than initial satisfaction because it signals reliability under vulnerability conditions.

Suggested empirical test: event-based design around service failures (pre-failure, post-recovery) using difference-in-differences or interrupted time-series; estimate long-run effects on retention/advocacy.

Taken together, these frontiers reposition customer satisfaction as a phenomenon whose meaning is contingent, dynamic, and institutionally embedded. Future research should therefore prioritize designs capable of capturing qualitative state differences, legitimacy mechanisms under digital risk, and temporal trajectories, rather than further replication of static satisfaction models.

Discussion

This article responds to a central paradox in mature customer satisfaction research: methodological sophistication has accelerated, while conceptual development has progressed more slowly. By diagnosing

customer satisfaction as a theoretically saturated construct, the article argues that saturation should not be treated as exhaustion, but as a signal that the construct's theoretical architecture requires reconstruction. The proposed re-theorization reframes satisfaction through three complementary lenses—dynamic adjustment, socio-emotional contract, and legitimacy and risk signaling—thereby shifting satisfaction from a static evaluative outcome toward a dynamic, relational, and context-embedded phenomenon. This repositioning aligns with earlier arguments that satisfaction formation is inherently dynamic, involving shifting contributions of cognition and affect over time rather than a fixed post-consumption judgment (Homburg et al., 2006).

The discussion highlights three implications for theory development. First, treating satisfaction as a dynamic adjustment restores time sensitivity to a construct that has often been modeled as a cross-sectional snapshot. This lens aligns satisfaction with processes of recalibration, learning, and adaptation across repeated interactions, enabling theorizing about trajectories (e.g., decay, recovery, and stabilization) rather than relying on single-point indicators. Consistent with evidence that customer touchpoints can exert different short-term versus long-term effects on perceptions, a trajectory view is more theoretically informative than single-wave inference (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2021). Second, conceptualizing satisfaction as a socio-emotional contract expands the construct beyond cognitive appraisal, emphasizing relational meaning, perceived fairness, emotional investment, and moral expectations. This move directly counters metric reductionism by clarifying that satisfaction is not merely a score, but a relationship judgment shaped by emotional and normative commitments. Such socio-emotional mechanisms are also compatible with findings that “delight” can involve gratitude-like responses that are not reducible to linear increases in satisfaction (Ball & Barnes, 2017). Third, framing satisfaction as a legitimacy and risk signal updates satisfaction theory for digitally mediated services in which trust, privacy, security, transparency, and perceived accountability increasingly shape evaluations. In such contexts, satisfaction functions as a governance-relevant signal of whether a service system is perceived as reliable and institutionally acceptable under uncertainty. This argument is reinforced by research showing that security, privacy, usability, and reputation are foundational in shaping evaluations in online banking environments (Casaló et al., 2007).

These theoretical moves also clarify why “better measurement alone” cannot revitalize customer satisfaction research. When measurement becomes more advanced while the construct definition remains static, empirical precision may increase without conceptual differentiation. The present framework, therefore, treats measurement design as downstream from conceptual meaning: multidimensionality, nonlinearity, longitudinal specification, and internal–external integration are not optional technical upgrades, but methodological requirements implied by what satisfaction now represents. This is consistent with evidence that different customer feedback metrics vary in their predictive ability for retention, implying that “which metric is used” shapes what organizations learn and manage (de Haan et al., 2015).

Practical implications

For managers and practitioners, the framework suggests that improving satisfaction scores is insufficient if organizations do not understand what satisfaction is signaling. Under the dynamic adjustment lens, managers should monitor satisfaction as a trajectory rather than a single KPI, focusing on rate of change, volatility, and recovery patterns after disruptions. Under the socio-emotional contract lens, practitioners should interpret satisfaction declines as potential relational breaches (e.g., perceived unfairness, unmet moral expectations, or disrespect), which require communication and relationship repair—not only service process improvement. Under the legitimacy and risk signaling lens, satisfaction becomes a proxy for perceived system trustworthiness in digital services; therefore, transparency, privacy governance, explainability, and accountability mechanisms become central drivers of satisfaction rather than peripheral compliance concerns. A processual orientation to satisfaction measurement and management supports this shift from “score tracking” toward “governance and learning loops” that interpret satisfaction as an evolving managerial object.

Practically, this implies three actionable shifts: (i) from single-score dashboards to trajectory dashboards (episode-based tracking and recovery curves); (ii) from generic satisfaction surveys to instruments that separate satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight as distinct states; and (iii) from performance-only drivers to governance drivers (trust, security, transparency, fairness) in AI-mediated and high-risk services. However, organizations should avoid treating delight as a universal remedy, as evidence suggests it can function as a double-edged sword depending on context and expectation dynamics (Ludwig et al., 2017).

Boundary conditions and limitations

This article is conceptual and does not present new empirical tests of the proposed lenses or research propositions. Accordingly, the framework should be interpreted as a theory-building contribution that proposes testable pathways rather than confirming causal effects. A second limitation concerns context heterogeneity: the relevance of legitimacy and risk signaling is likely stronger in high-risk digital services (e.g., digital banking, health platforms, AI-enabled decision systems) than in low-risk routine services. Third, although the framework emphasizes temporal dynamics, many organizations—particularly resource-constrained SMEs—may lack the data infrastructure to conduct longitudinal tracking, trajectory modeling, or advanced analytics. In such settings, simplified designs (e.g., short panel surveys, periodic pulse checks, episode-based feedback) may serve as feasible approximations, but they may capture only partial dynamics.

Finally, the proposed re-theorization does not aim to replace expectation–performance traditions; instead, it repositions them as one lens among broader mechanisms. Future research should therefore specify when classic evaluative mechanisms dominate versus when socio-emotional and legitimacy mechanisms become primary.

Directions for future research

The research agenda developed in this article translates conceptual reconstruction into testable directions. Future studies can empirically validate the distinctness of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and delight (RP1) and examine asymmetry in negative reactions (RP2) using nonlinear and state-based models. In digital and AI-mediated services, researchers can test whether legitimacy perceptions (transparency, accountability, ethical governance) outperform usefulness as predictors of satisfaction (RP3), and whether trust amplifies satisfaction–loyalty links under risk (RP4). Longitudinal and event-based designs can then evaluate satisfaction trajectories across relationship stages (RP5) and the loyalty effects of recovery satisfaction after disruptions (RP6).

Taken together, these directions reposition customer satisfaction as an evolving phenomenon shaped by time, relational meaning, and institutional trust. In post-saturation fields, the payoff is not incremental confirmation of familiar models but renewed explanatory depth through re-specified construct meaning and context-sensitive causal logic.

Conclusion: From Measuring Better to Meaning Re-definition

This article addressed a central paradox in customer satisfaction research within mature fields: methodological sophistication has advanced faster than theoretical renewal. While satisfaction continues to be measured with increasing precision, its conceptual meaning remains overly anchored in static evaluative traditions. The result is a growing gap between contemporary service realities and the inherited explanatory template that still dominates satisfaction theory. In such conditions, empirical accumulation can reinforce conceptual routine rather than generate theoretical branching.

By diagnosing customer satisfaction as a theoretically saturated construct, the article argued that saturation should be understood not as exhaustion but as a signal for re-theorization. The problem is not that satisfaction has become irrelevant; it is that its conceptual container has not evolved in step with service systems shaped by digital mediation, relational continuity, and heightened perceptions of risk. Accordingly, this study contributes as a conceptual (non-empirical) re-theorization that proposes testable pathways for future research rather than reporting new causal estimates.

The study advances three integrated contributions. First, it reconceptualizes customer satisfaction as a dynamic adjustment process, shifting attention from single-point judgments toward temporal trajectories. Second, it reframes satisfaction as a socio-emotional contract, emphasizing relational and moral meaning beyond performance appraisal. Third, it extends satisfaction into a legitimacy and risk signaling framework, particularly salient in digitally mediated and high-risk services. Together, these moves reposition customer satisfaction from a static managerial indicator into a construct with renewed explanatory depth. This architecture clarifies how satisfaction can function simultaneously as an adaptive process (time), a relational evaluation (meaning), and a governance signal (trust under uncertainty).

These conceptual advances imply that satisfaction should no longer be treated as a stable attitude, a single-score index, or a universal predictor with invariant meaning. Instead, satisfaction must be theorized as a dynamic, socio-emotional, and legitimacy-sensitive evaluation embedded in relational and technological conditions. Methodologically, this implies privileging multidimensional architectures, longitudinal designs, nonlinear specifications, and internal–external integration so that measurement remains aligned with construct meaning. Put differently, measurement sophistication should follow construct re-specification, not substitute for it.

For practice, the implication is equally clear. Improving satisfaction scores alone is insufficient. Organizations must understand how satisfaction evolves, why it collapses, and when it becomes fragile or resilient. In contemporary service systems, satisfaction functions as a governance object that reflects perceived fairness, safety, and trustworthiness, not merely experiential quality. Managers should therefore complement KPI tracking with trajectory monitoring (recovery and volatility), relational diagnosis (breach and repair), and governance design (privacy, transparency, accountability), especially in AI-mediated services.

This article, therefore, resolves the initial paradox by emphasizing that customer satisfaction cannot be revitalized by being measured more precisely. It can only be revitalized by being redefined more meaningfully. In mature research fields, progress lies not in asking whether customers are satisfied, but in clarifying what satisfaction now represents under conditions of digital mediation, emotional complexity, and institutional uncertainty.

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