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A systematic review of theoretical, methodological, contextual, and content-related foundations of customer delight research

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This systematic review applies the Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology (TCCM) framework to critically examine the theoretical, contextual, characteristic, and methodological foundations of customer delight research over the past 26 years. The review synthesises findings from 161 publications to assess how customer delight has been conceptualised, studied, and applied across various industries and contexts, including physical and digital environments. Four dominant theoretical frameworks – emotion theory, disconfirmation theory, needs-based theory, and cognitive appraisal theory – are identified as key to understanding and operationalising customer delight. Methodologically, the review reveals a strong emphasis on quantitative and experimental research, with a noticeable gap in design-oriented studies that provide actionable insights for practitioners. Contextual analysis highlights an imbalance in research focus, with digital environments being underexplored despite their growing relevance. The review concludes by recommending future research directions, including the exploration of physical measures of delight, increased attention to practical design solutions, and a deeper investigation into customer delight in digital contexts.

Keywords: Customer delight; systematic review; TCCM framework; customer experience; customer satisfaction; customer excitement

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, research on customer experience has evolved significantly, shifting its focus from mere customer satisfaction to the more ambitious goal of customer delight. This shift emerged as both practitioners and academics recognised that customer satisfaction alone was an insufficient predictor of desirable customer outcomes (Oliver et al., 1997). Customer delight, on the other hand, has been shown to more accurately predict crucial behavioural outcomes such as repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth recommendations (Meyer et al., 2017). Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated positive correlations between customer delight and various beneficial behaviours, including increased repurchase intentions (Bartl et al., 2013), loyalty (Maria Stock et al., 2017), commitment (Al-Hawari, 2011), recommendation intentions (Ma & Scott, 2017), positive word-of-mouth (Ludwig, Heidenreich, et al., 2017), brand evangelism (Mvondo et al., 2023), higher share of wallet (Krallman et al., 2023), and willingness to pay (Barnes et al., 2010).

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The concept of customer delight is currently the subject of extensive academic investigation, leading to a re-evaluation of its core principles. Over the past 26 years, scholars have utilised a variety of theoretical frameworks, including emotion theory (Kumar et al., 2001), disconfirmation theory (Oliver et al., 1997), needs-based theory (Schneider & Bowen, 1999), and cognitive evaluation theory (Ma et al., 2013), to gain a deeper understanding of customer delight. This body of research includes conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, and experimental studies, which together form a substantial and growing body of scientific knowledge. These studies have explored customer delight across various contexts, industries, and cultures.

This systematic review seeks to reassess the foundations of customer delight research, addressing the question: ‘What theoretical, methodological, contextual, and substantive developments have taken place in the last 26 years of customer delight research in both physical and digital environments?’. The review has several key objectives: first, to provide an overview of the primary theories developed to conceptualise customer delight; second, to identify the main methodological approaches used to study this phenomenon; third, to examine the contexts in which delight has been studied, assessing the generalisability of findings; fourth, to review the antecedents and effects of delight in both digital and physical environments. Finally, the review concludes by discussing findings, highlighting key debates and research gaps, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

To address the research question, a systematic literature review was conducted using the Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methods (TCCM) framework, as outlined Paul and Rosado-Serrano (2019). A systematic review, as defined by Petticrew and Roberts (2006), is a research method aimed at synthesising a substantial body of literature within a specific research domain. This method is characterised by a clearly defined protocol for searching, collecting, and qualitatively evaluating materials (Jesson et al., 2011). The systematic review was deemed appropriate for this research due to its ability to identify relevant studies, highlight inconsistencies or research gaps, assess study quality, summarise findings, and minimise selection bias (Khan et al., 2003).

The systematic review was iteratively conducted over the period from 2018 to 2023, following a three-step process for data collection and analysis (Paul et al., 2021). The first step involved developing a search strategy to define the scope and structure of the review. In the second step, a comprehensive literature search was performed using the Scopus database to identify publications related to customer delight. The last step involved a qualitative assessment of the selected publications, ensuring that only those directly relevant to the research question were included. The findings from these publications were summarised in a literature database, focusing on theories, methods, contexts, and content related to customer delight.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection was conducted through a keyword search in the Scopus database, which was chosen for its extensive coverage of social science-related academic articles (Jesson et al., 2011). The search, completed on 6 June 2024, utilised seven keywords related to ‘customer’ but did not include synonyms for ‘delight’ due to conceptual differences in common usage. This search resulted in the identification of 397 relevant publications (See Table 1).

Table 1. Number of publications found based on systematic review.

Stage 1 – Search Parameter	
Databases:	Scopus
Parameter:	Abstract-Title-Keyword
Keywords:	‘customer delight’ or ‘consumer delight’ or ‘user delight’ or ‘client delight’ or ‘guest delight’ or ‘employee delight’ or ‘shopper delight’
Inclusion criteria:	Publication year between 1997 and 2024, Document Type = Articles and Reviews, English, Full-Text-Access, Average Citation per Year ≥ 2
Stage 2 – Results of Literature Search	
Number of results after ...	
Keyword Search	397
Applying inclusion criteria	138
Stage 3 – Results of Qualitative Assessments	
Number of results after ...	
Abstract screening	125
Content analysis	108
Snowballing	53
Total number papers included	161

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to ensure the external validity of the findings. Only English-language publications from peer-reviewed journals published between 1997 and 2023 were considered. This time frame was chosen because it includes the earliest known empirical studies on customer delight, beginning with Oliver et al. (1997). Additionally, only articles with full-text access and an average citation rate of at least two citations per year were included to ensure high-quality sources. After removing duplicates, 138 publications remained for qualitative analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

The data analysis involved a multi-step qualitative assessment process, including abstract screening, content analysis, and snowballing, aimed at extracting publications addressing the theoretical, methodological, contextual, or content-related foundations of customer delight. Initially, the abstracts of 138 publications were screened, resulting in the selection of 125 articles for detailed content analysis. This process led to the exclusion of 17 papers, with 53 additional relevant publications identified through snowballing. The final dataset included 161 publications, which were analysed to thoroughly address the research question. A detailed classification of these publications by research method and year of publication is presented in Table 2.

3. Results

3.1. Theoretical analysis of customer delight research

The theoretical analysis of customer delight research reveals that four principal theories dominate the conceptual framework in this field. Table 3 summarises the contributions

Table 2. Publications by research method and publication year.

N	Author (Year) Conceptual Works (N1 = 24)	Method
1.	Arici et al. (2022)	SR
2.	Barnes and Krallman (2019)	SR
3.	Schallehn et al. (2019)*	SR
4.	Torres and Ronzoni (2018)	SR
5.	Mandal (2022)	TD
6.	Tinakhat et al. (2022)	TD
7.	Ellis, Freeman, et al. (2019)*	TD
8.	Padma and Wagenseil (2018)	TD
9.	Leavy (2017)*	TD
10.	Jiang et al. (2016)*	TD
11.	Yanagisawa et al. (2016)*	TD
12.	Asif and Gouthier (2014)	TD
13.	Pallas et al. (2014)*	TD
14.	Sivakumar et al. (2014)*	TD
15.	Denning (2012)*	TD
16.	Chathoth (2007)	TD
17.	Torres and Kline (2006)	TD
18.	Berman (2005)	TD
19.	Mascarenhas et al. (2004)	TD
20.	Biyalogorsky et al. (2001)	TD
21.	Rust and Oliver (2000)*	TD
22.	Schneider and Bowen (1999)*	TD
23.	Jacobs et al. (1998)*	TD
24.	Cohen (1997)*	TD
Qualitative Works (N2 = 29)		
25.	Lowe et al. (2018)*	IN
26.	Kao et al. (2016)	IN
27.	Torres et al. (2014a)	IN
28.	Torres et al. (2014b)	IN
29.	Gouthier et al. (2012)	IN
30.	Crotts et al. (2008)	IN
31.	McNeilly and Feldman Barr (2006)	IN
32.	Bowman and Narayandas (2004)	IN
33.	St-James and Taylor (2004)*	IN
34.	Barnes, Mesmer-Magnus, et al. (2021)	CIT
35.	Zhang et al. (2018)*	CIT
36.	Beauchamp and Barnes (2015)	CIT
37.	Lee and Shea (2015)	CIT
38.	Swanson et al. (2015)*	CIT
39.	Barnes et al. (2013)	CIT
40.	Swanson and Davis (2012)	CIT
41.	Barnes et al. (2011)	CIT
42.	Arnold et al. (2005)	CIT
43.	Verma (2003)*	CIT
44.	Kwong and Yau (2002)*	CIT
45.	Torres et al. (2021)	CA
46.	Koetz (2019)	CA
47.	Torres Edwin et al. (2018)	CA
48.	Pera (2017)	CA
49.	Torres and Kline (2013)	CA

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

N	Author (Year)	Method
	Conceptual Works (N1 = 24)	
50.	Crotts and Magnini (2011)	CA
51.	Magnini et al. (2011)	CA
52.	Crotts et al. (2009)*	CA
53.	Keiningham et al. (1999)*	CS
Quantitative Works (N3 = 79)		
54.	Krallman et al. (2023)	SUR
55.	Mvondo et al. (2023)	SUR
56.	Selem et al. (2023)	SUR
57.	Agnihotri et al. (2022)	SUR
58.	Aityassine (2022)	SUR
59.	Anabila et al. (2022)	SUR
60.	Attig et al. (2022)	SUR
61.	Hao and Chon (2021)	SUR
62.	Hsu et al. (2021)	SUR
63.	Ji and Prentice (2021)	SUR
64.	Alzoubi et al. (2020)	SUR
65.	Behe and Fry (2020)*	SUR
66.	Christ-Brendemühl and Schaarschmidt (2020)	SUR
67.	Dubey et al. (2020)	SUR
68.	Guidice et al. (2020)	SUR
69.	Jiang (2020)	SUR
70.	Ramkissoon et al. (2020)	SUR
71.	Ahrholdt et al. (2019)	SUR
72.	Coetzee and Coetzee (2019)	SUR
73.	Foroughi et al. (2019)	SUR
74.	Ghorbanzade et al. (2019)*	SUR
75.	Kim and Chul Ju (2019)*	SUR
76.	Lee and Park (2019)	SUR
77.	Oh et al. (2019)*	SUR
78.	Rivera et al. (2019)	SUR
79.	Seranmadevi and Senthil Kumar (2019)	SUR
80.	Ali et al. (2018)	SUR
81.	Bufquin et al. (2018)*	SUR
82.	Roberts-Lombard and Petzer (2018)	SUR
83.	Stricklin and Ellis (2018)*	SUR
84.	Ahrholdt et al. (2017)	SUR
85.	Ball and Barnes (2017)	SUR
86.	Chua et al. (2017)*	SUR
87.	Dey et al. (2017)	SUR
88.	Ma et al. (2017)	SUR
89.	Maria Stock et al. (2017)	SUR
90.	Meyer et al. (2017)	SUR
91.	Wang et al. (2017)	SUR
92.	Ali et al. (2016)*	SUR
93.	Ariffin and Omar (2016)*	SUR
94.	Barnes, Collier, et al. (2016)	SUR
95.	Elias-Almeida et al. (2016)*	SUR
96.	Jin et al. (2016)*	SUR
97.	Kim et al. (2016)*	SUR
98.	Barnes et al. (2015)	SUR
99.	Bonnefoy-Claudet et al. (2015)*	SUR

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

N	Author (Year)	Method
	Conceptual Works (N1 = 24)	
100.	Collier and Barnes (2015)	SUR
101.	Hsu et al. (2015)*	SUR
102.	Kim, Vogt, et al. (2015)	SUR
103.	Kim, Knutson, et al. (2015)	SUR
104.	Barnes et al. (2014)	SUR
105.	Goswami and Sarma (2014)*	SUR
106.	Kim et al. (2014)*	SUR
107.	Koo et al. (2014)	SUR
108.	Loureiro et al. (2014)	SUR
109.	Loureiro and Ribeiro (2014)*	SUR
110.	Preko et al. (2014)*	SUR
111.	Bartl et al. (2013)	SUR
112.	Bowden-Everson et al. (2013)	SUR
113.	Ma et al. (2013)	SUR
114.	Finn (2012)	SUR
115.	Al-Hawari (2011)	SUR
116.	Bowden and Dagger (2011)	SUR
117.	Goswami and Sarma (2011)*	SUR
118.	Loureiro and Kastenholz (2011)	SUR
119.	Verhagen and Van Dolen (2011)*	SUR
120.	Yang (2011)	SUR
121.	Loureiro (2010)	SUR
122.	Chowdhury (2009)*	SUR
123.	Füller and Matzler (2008)	SUR
124.	Herington and Weaven (2007)	SUR
125.	Burns and Neisner (2006)*	SUR
126.	Finn (2005)	SUR
127.	Fullerton and Taylor (2002)	SUR
128.	Yeung et al. (2002)*	SUR
129.	Kumar et al. (2001)*	SUR
130.	Estelami (2000)	SUR
131.	Ngobo (1999)*	SUR
132.	Oliver et al. (1997)	SUR
Experiment (N4 = 17)		
133.	Li and Fumagalli (2022)	EXP
134.	Barnes, Kraemer, et al. (2021)	EXP
135.	Liao et al. (2020)	EXP
136.	Ellis, Lacanienta, et al. (2019)*	EXP
137.	Ludwig, Heidenreich, et al. (2017)	EXP
138.	Barnes, Meyer, et al. (2016)	EXP
139.	Kim and Aggarwal (2016)	EXP
140.	Wu et al. (2015)	EXP
141.	Butori and De Bruyn (2013)*	EXP
142.	Kim and Mattila (2013)	EXP
143.	Wang (2011)	EXP
144.	Barnes et al. (2010)	EXP
145.	Dixon et al. (2010)*	EXP
146.	Chitturi et al. (2008)	EXP
147.	Soscia (2007)*	EXP
148.	Tokman et al. (2007)*	EXP
149.	Andreassen (2001)*	EXP

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

N	Author (Year) Conceptual Works (N1 = 24)	Method
Mixed Method Designs (N5 = 12)		
150.	Filieri et al. (2023)	MIX
151.	Wenli Zou et al. (2022)	MIX
152.	Parasuraman et al. (2021)	MIX
153.	Kao et al. (2020)	MIX
154.	Collier et al. (2018)	MIX
155.	Dutta et al. (2017)*	MIX
156.	Ludwig, Barnes, et al. (2017)	MIX
157.	Potra et al. (2017)	MIX
158.	Chun Wang et al. (2016)	MIX
159.	Liu and Keh (2015)	MIX
160.	Arora (2012)*	MIX
161.	Brakus et al. (2009)	MIX

Abbreviations: SR = Systematic Review, TD = Theory Development, IN = Interview, CIT = Critical Incident Technique, CA = Content Analysis, CS = Case Study, SUR = Survey, EXP = Experiment, MIX = Mixed Methods; *Snowballing.

of each theory to the operationalisation of the customer delight construct and lists the associated measurement items.

First, emotion theory has been central to defining customer delight as a positive emotional state, either as a single or multidimensional construct. Researchers have approached this by measuring delight as a single emotion or as a combination of multiple emotions. Oliver et al. (1997) were pioneers in applying emotion theory to customer delight, utilising the typology of Plutchik (1980) to define delight as a combination of joy and surprise and the typology of Russell (1980) to define it as a function of arousal and positive affect. Various scholars have since tested these constructs empirically, ranging from one to eight emotion items, as detailed in Table 3. Emotion theory remains the dominant framework for understanding customer delight (Torres & Ronzoni, 2018).

Second, disconfirmation theory explains customer delight as a result of exceeding customer expectations. Oliver et al. (1997) proposed that disconfirmation occurs when a product or service surpasses initial expectations, significantly influencing surprise, positive affect, and arousal, which collectively foster customer delight. This theory has been widely supported by empirical studies (Bowden & Dagger, 2011; Finn, 2006; Liu & Keh, 2015; Loureiro, 2010) although some, like Loureiro (2014), have challenged the significance of surprise as a necessary pathway to delight, aligning with earlier critiques (Kumar & Iyer, 2001). Disconfirmation theory, therefore, is a second dominant approach in the study of customer delight.

Third, needs-based theory attributes customer delight to the fulfilment of fundamental human needs, shifting the focus from expectations to needs. Schneider and Bowen (1999) introduced this perspective, suggesting that customer delight in service contexts arises from addressing basic needs such as security, justice, and self-esteem. Later studies, such as Kwong and Yau (2002), expanded on this model, identifying five need-based categories – justice, security, self-esteem, trust, and surprise – though empirical validation of this model remains limited.

Table 3. Major theories used in customer delight research for operationalisation.

Theory	Operationalisation (Items)	Reference
Emotion theory	Delighted	Chitturi et al. (2008)
	Delighted, Enchantment	Loureiro (2010)
	Delighted, Elated	Wu et al. (2015)
	Delighted, Excited	Meyer et al. (2017)
	Exhilaration, Joy, Thrill	Kumar et al. (2001)
	Delighted, Elated, Gleeful	Finn (2012)
	Delighted, Gleeful, Overjoyed	Kim et al. (2016)
	Cheerful, Delighted, Excited	Ludwig, Heidenreich, et al. (2017)
	Delighted, Elated, Gleeful, Happy	Barnes et al. (2014)
	Delighted, Elated, Gleeful, Surprised	Kim et al. (2014)
	Cheerful, Delighted, Elated, Gleeful	Ball and Barnes (2017)
	Delighted, Exhilarating, Pleased, Thrilling	Attiq et al. (2022)
	Delighted, Elated, Gleeful, Proud, Unforgettable	Ahrholdt et al. (2017)
	Cheerful, Delighted, Elated, Excited, Gleeful	Ludwig, Barnes, et al. (2017)
	Astonished, Elated, Enthusiastic, Exited, Surprised	Hsu et al. (2021)
	Cheerful, Delighted, Elated, Excited, Gleeful, Happy	Collier and Barnes (2015)
Disconfirmation theory	Astonished, Contented, Enthused, Excited, Happy, Pleased, Stimulated, Surprised	Wang (2011)
	Disconfirmation → Surprise → Delight	Oliver et al. (1997)
	Disconfirmation → Positive Affect → Delight	
Need-based theory	Disconfirmation → Arousal → Delight	Finn (2005, 2006)
	Justice → Delight	Schneider and Bowen (1999)
	Security → Delight	
	Self-esteem → Delight	Kwong and Yau (2002)
	Trust → Delight	
Cognitive appraisal theory	Variety → Delight	
	Appetitive goal congruence → Delight	Ma et al. (2013)
	Goal importance → Delight	
	Goal interest → Delight	
	Unexpectedness → Delight	
	Goal realisation → Delight	
	Surprise → Delight	

Lastly, cognitive appraisal theory posits that external stimuli undergo cognitive evaluation, leading to emotional responses (Scherer & Moors, 2019). Applied to customer delight by Ma et al. (2013), this theory has shown that specific appraisal dimensions – appetitive goal congruence, goal importance, goal interest, and unexpectedness – positively affect customer delight. A later study by Ma et al. (2017) has reinforced these findings and added additional dimensions such as goal realisation and surprise. Despite its established role in psychological research (Scherer, 2005), cognitive appraisal theory has been applied in only a few empirical studies on customer delight.

In conclusion, these four theories – emotion theory, disconfirmation theory, needs-based theory, and cognitive appraisal theory – provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and measuring customer delight, with emotion theory being the most extensively applied.

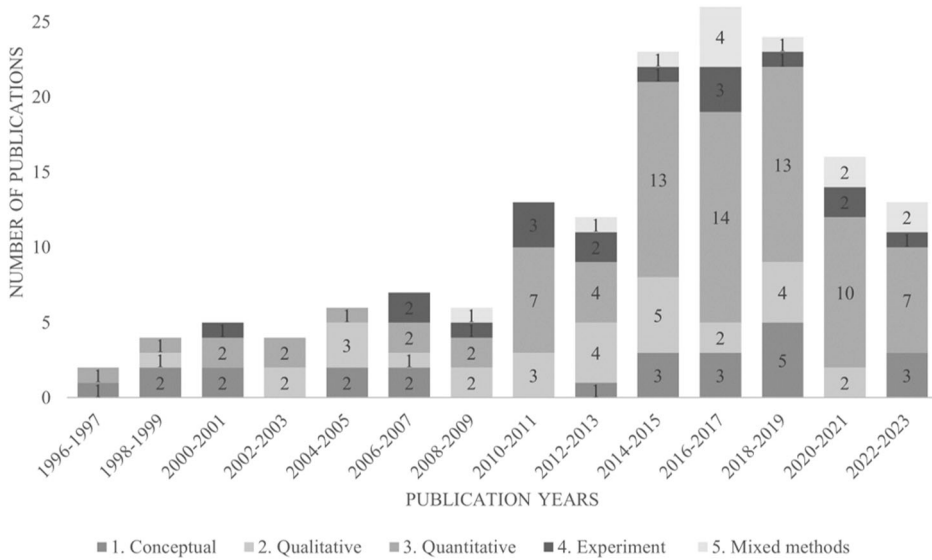


Figure 1. Number of publications by publication year and research method applied.

3.2. Methodological analysis of customer delight research

The methodological landscape of customer delight research reveals a diverse range of approaches that have contributed to understanding this phenomenon. Figure 1 presents the distribution of publications by research year and method from 1997 to 2023, highlighting a significant increase in recent years. This trend underscores the growing importance and maturation of customer delight as a field of study. The research methodologies employed include conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, and experimental designs, each advancing our understanding of customer delight in unique ways. The following section will explore how these methodologies have been applied to study customer delight and will summarise the key contributions made over the past 26 years.

Overall, 24 conceptual papers examined the theoretical underpinnings of customer delight. These papers offered varied definitions and frameworks. For example, Jacobs et al. (1998) introduced the customer satisfaction continuum, suggesting that exceeding customer expectations leads to customer delight. Contrastingly, Schneider and Bowen (1999) proposed a needs-based definition, focusing on fulfilling specific customer needs. Souca (2014) further distinguished customer delight as a unique construct, separate from customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Other conceptual studies explored the antecedents, measures, and effects of customer delight (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Barnes & Krallman, 2019; Chathoth, 2007; Chun Wang et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2016; Padma & Wagenseil, 2018; Torres & Kline, 2006; Torres & Ronzoni, 2018; Wilson et al., 2001). Moreover, mathematical models were developed to predict customer expectations (Rust & Oliver, 2000) and repurchase behaviour (Alexander, 2012).

In addition to conceptual work, 29 qualitative studies were identified, which provided insights into the mechanisms and contextual factors driving customer delight. These studies utilised interviews, critical incident analysis, content analysis, and case studies. For instance, interviews have been used to explore cultural (Kao et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2014b) and gender differences (Torres et al., 2014a). Critical incident analysis has examined customer delight across generational differences (Beauchamp & Barnes,

2015), while content analysis has identified key antecedents and outcomes (Crotts & Magnini, 2011; Magnini et al., 2011; Torres & Kline, 2013; Torres Edwin et al., 2018). Case studies have explored philosophical influences on customer delight (Yaoyuneyong et al., 2018) and delineated the boundaries between satisfaction and delight, revealing that exceeding certain thresholds leads to delight (Keiningham et al., 1999).

Furthermore, 79 quantitative studies were conducted to empirically test various scientific models of customer delight, using statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. Most of these studies relied on survey data to evaluate the effectiveness of models based on emotion theory, disconfirmation theory, and cognitive appraisal theory. For example, research has validated emotion-based and disconfirmation-based models of customer delight (Torres et al., 2020), while alternative models have been tested to explore different antecedents and outcomes (Barnes & Krallman, 2019). The consistent use of emotional terminology in these studies has enhanced the measurement and understanding of customer delight (Torres & Ronzoni, 2018).

Lastly, 17 experimental studies examined the cause-and-effect relationships between customer delight and other variables. Unlike quantitative studies, experimental research allows for manipulation and control, offering deeper insights into the dynamics of customer delight. For instance, studies have shown that surprise plays a significant role in generating customer delight (Kim & Mattila, 2013; Wu et al., 2015). Ludwig, Heidenreich, et al. (2017) found that the positive impact of providing added value is amplified when accompanied by an element of surprise. Additionally, Guchait et al. (2014) demonstrated that a multi-level apology (frontline, management, corporate) significantly enhances customer delight. Other research explored the impact of hedonic versus utilitarian product design on customer delight, concluding that products satisfying hedonic needs are particularly effective in generating delight Chitturi et al. (2008)

Figure 1 not only highlights the growth in the number of publications but also provides insights into how research methodologies have evolved over time. The earlier years of customer delight research were predominantly characterised by conceptual and qualitative studies, which laid the theoretical foundations of the field. Over the past decade, however, there has been a notable increase in the use of quantitative and experimental methods, reflecting a shift towards empirical validation and the investigation of causal mechanisms. This progression indicates that customer delight research has matured from exploratory theoretical work to a more robust and methodologically diverse field. Additionally, the growing application of experimental methods in recent years suggests an increased focus on understanding the dynamics and causal relationships underpinning customer delight, enabling the development of actionable insights and practical applications.

This comprehensive methodological analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of customer delight research and underscores the significant advancements made in this field over the past two decades.

3.3. Contextual analysis of customer delight research

The contextual analysis of customer delight research provides insights into the extent to which this concept is examined within specific research settings. This analysis focuses on the distribution of customer delight studies across various academic journals and in both digital and physical environments. It reveals how research findings may be influenced by particular contexts and highlights areas that may be underexplored. Specifically, Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of customer delight research from our sample set across several

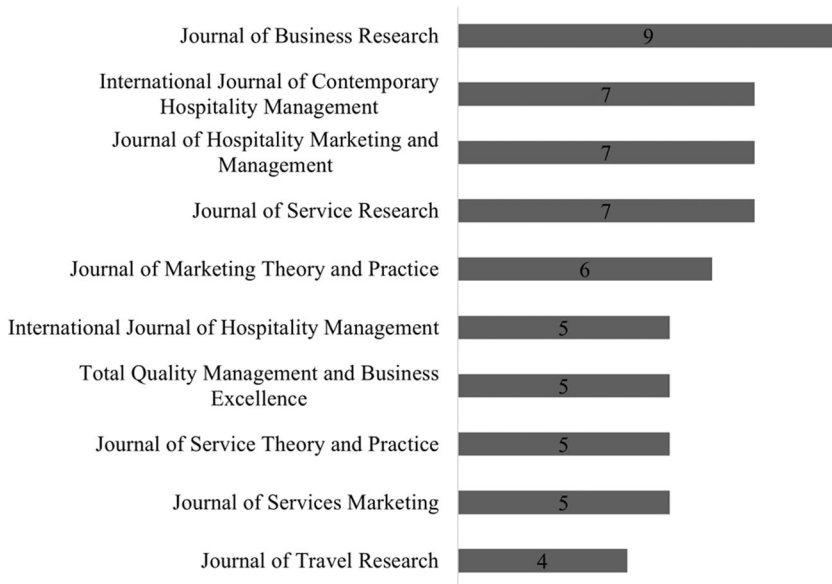


Figure 2. Distribution of customer delight research among scientific journals.

scientific journals, showing that the Journal of Business Research has the highest number of published articles (9). Following this, three journals – the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, the Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management, and the Journal of Service Research – each published seven articles. The Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice has six articles, while five other journals, including the International Journal of Hospitality Management, Total Quality Management and Business Excellence, Journal of Service Theory and Practice, and Journal of Services Marketing, each have five articles. The Journal of Travel Research has published four articles. This distribution underscores the significant contribution of journals in business, hospitality, and service management to the field of customer delight research.

Despite the recent surge in digital business transformation, there remains a limited number of empirical studies focusing on customer delight in digital consumption contexts. Figure 3 summarises the antecedents, components, and consequences of customer delight in both digital and physical environments. Only 11 empirical studies have been identified where the consumption occurred in a digital environment. These studies primarily focus on understanding the factors that contribute to customer delight in digital settings, such as websites and mobile applications. For example, Finn (2005, 2006, 2012) conducted three studies on Canadian retail website visitors, finding that surprise consumption and arousal positively influenced customer delight. Conversely, Herington and Weaven (2007) found no evidence that online service quality positively affects customer delight in online banking. Al-Hawari (2011) identified that convenience, personalisation, responsiveness, and security significantly enhanced customer delight in online banking, though the positive effect of queuing was not supported. Verhagen and Van Dolen (2011) revealed that representational delight and merchandise attractiveness were significant in driving impulsive buying decisions in online stores. Similarly, Bartl et al. (2013) found that usefulness, entertainment, and surprise on an automotive manufacturer's website positively affected customer delight and purchase intention. While these studies contribute to understanding customer delight

ANTECEDENTS	COMPONENTS	CONSEQUENCES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physical: Adventure Benefit, Affective Dimension, Affective Experience, Appetitive Goal Congruence, Behavioural Experience, Best Deal Benefit, Captivation, Cognitive Dimension, Cognitive Experience, Complaint Resolution Satisfaction, Customizing Attentive Behaviours, Customer Comfort, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Social Responsibility, Degree of Importance, Degree of Interaction, Efficiency NS, Employee CSR, Employee Helpfulness, Existential Authenticity, Extent of Satisfaction, Experiential Value, F&B Service Satisfaction, Financial Risk, FLEs' Innovative Service Behaviour, Food & Beverage Service, Fun, Gaming Service Satisfaction, Goal Importance, Goal Interest, Gratification Benefit, Gratitude, High Degree of Goal Realisation, Idea Benefit, Indoor Physical Evidence, Interpersonal Influence, Interest, Interaction with Customers, Interaction with Staff, Joy, Joy / Surprise, Outcome Quality, Open Communication Style, Outdoor Physical Evidence, Perceived Employee Service Delivery Skills, Perceived Price Fairness, Perceived Service Quality, Perceived Service Recovery, Perceived Service Value, Physical Environment, Process Quality, Professional Skills, Psychological Risk, PC Area Atmosphere, PC Area Functionality, Salesperson Expertise, Sensory Experience, Service Climate, Service Quality, Shopping Service Satisfaction, Social Benefit, Social Experience, Sincere and Gracious Behaviours, Stadium, Technostress, Ticketing, Unexpectedness ▪ Digital: Accessibility, Arousal, Big Data, Brand Coolness, Brand Engagement, Brand Love, Convenience of the Automated Banking Options, Customer Relationship Management, Entertainment, Information Cues, Information, Kids Slopes, Party & Fun, Perceived Value, Personalizing, Positive Affect, Price-Equality Ratio, Purchase Justification, Queue Management, Response Time, Responsiveness, Satisfaction, Security, Slopes, Surprise, Surprising Consumption, Usefulness, User Friendliness, Visual Cues, Well-Being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotions: Astonished, Cheerful, Contented, Delighted, Gleeeful, Elated*, Enchantment, Enthused, Excited, Exhilarating*, Happy, Joy, Happiness, Pleasure*, Pleased, Proud, Surprised, Positively Surprised, Thrill, Thrilling*, Unforgettable ▪ Expectations: Positive Disconfirmation* ▪ Needs: Justice, Security, Self-esteem, Trust, Variety ▪ Cognitive Appraisals: Appetitive Goal Congruence, Goal Importance, Goal Interest, Unexpectedness, Goal Realisation, Surprise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Affective Loyalty, Behavioural Intention, Brand Evangelism, Cognitive Loyalty, Commitment*, Customer Equity*, Customer Loyalty, Customer Psychological Well-Being*, Customer/Guest Retention, Decreased Price Consciousness, E-Loyalty*, Employee Job Satisfaction, Employee Positive Affect, Exhilaration*, Harmonious Passion, Jealousy, Job Dedication, Joy, Percent of Budget Spent, Place Dependence, Place Identity, Positive Word of Mouth, Purchase Intention*, Recommendation Intention*, Re-patronage Intention, Repurchase Intention, Repurchase Intention*, Revisit Intention, Revisit Intention*, Share of Wallet*, Switching Intention, Tolerance to Failure, Trust*, Turnover, Unfairness, Willingness to Pay, Word-of-Mouth*, Work Engagement.

* Empirically tested in a digital consumption context.

Figure 3. Antecedents, components, and consequences of customer delight in physical and digital consumption contexts.

in digital contexts, the overall research focus remains skewed towards physical consumption environments. This indicates that research on customer delight in digital settings, despite its relevance in a digitised world, is still in its early stages.

3.4. *Characteristic analysis of customer delight research*

The characteristic analysis of customer delight revealed that the field has evolved considerably, with a consistent focus on understanding its antecedents, components, and effects. This section synthesises the key discussions within the delight literature, offering a comprehensive overview of the main factors influencing customer delight as explored in earlier research.

The origins of customer delight research trace back to the period between 1997 and 2003, marked by a seminal debate on whether satisfaction and delight are distinct constructs. This discussion emerged when scholars in customer satisfaction began to identify higher levels of satisfaction that significantly influenced behavioural outcomes (Kumar & Iyer, 2001). For instance, Oliver et al. (1997) established that customer satisfaction and delight are indeed separate constructs, each contributing to behavioural intentions. Similarly, Fullerton and Taylor (2002) found that customer satisfaction's impact on loyalty intentions was particularly pronounced at extreme levels of satisfaction. These foundational works spurred further research into customer delight (Andreassen, 2001; Keiningham et al., 1999; Rust & Oliver, 2000; Schneider & Bowen, 1999), establishing it as a distinct research area.

Between 2004 and 2017, the field experienced significant growth, characterised by an increase in empirical studies. Research during this period expanded to explore the relationship between satisfaction and delight (Chitturi et al., 2008; Loureiro et al., 2014; Souca,

2014), and debated the role of surprise in creating delight. Additionally, scholars examined the influence of national culture (Torres et al., 2014b), gender (Loureiro & Ribeiro, 2014; Torres et al., 2014a), and consumption context (Pallas et al., 2014) on customer delight. Various theoretical frameworks, including equity theory (Barnes et al., 2010) and cognitive appraisal theory (Ma et al., 2013), were also employed to deepen understanding.

A decline in publications since 2018 may suggest that the field has reached a certain level of maturity. Recent research has primarily focused on the antecedents of customer delight, including factors such as purchase justification (Krallman et al., 2023), adventure benefit (Mvondo et al., 2023), indoor- and outdoor physical evidence (Selem et al., 2023), service quality (Anabila et al., 2022; Coetzee & Coetzee, 2019). Other studies have explored the influence of brand coolness (Attiq et al., 2022), existential authenticity (Hsu et al., 2021), and technostress (Christ-Brendemühl & Schaarschmidt, 2020). Additionally, psychological factors such as gratitude (Ball & Barnes, 2017), perceptions of employees' service delivery skills (Roberts-Lombard & Petzer, 2018), employee work engagement and psychological capital (Shaheen et al., 2018) have been identified as determinants of delight. Furthermore, Torres and Ronzoni (2018) systematically analysed operational measures of customer delight and Barnes and Krallman (2019) proposed a new research agenda for customer delight based on a systematic review.

4. Discussion

The preceding section synthesised the findings of the systematic review by providing an overview of the theoretical frameworks used to conceptualise customer delight, the methodologies employed to investigate this phenomenon, the contexts in which delight has been studied, and the key content discussed in the history of delight research, particularly focusing on the antecedents, components, and consequences of customer delight. Building on these findings, this section now discusses the results in greater detail.

From a theoretical perspective, customer delight research is primarily grounded in four core theories aimed at elucidating and operationalising the concept. All empirical studies reviewed have utilised an ex-post reflective measurement approach to customer delight, while little attention has been given to ex-ante or temporal measurements. Psychological research, however, suggests alternative approaches to measuring emotions such as delight. Scherer (2009) and Scherer and Moors (2019) propose a multi-component emotion process model, offering methods to measure various components of customer delight. These methods include subjective self-reports, action tendencies, physiological responses (e.g. heart rate, skin conductance, electroencephalogram), and motor expressions (e.g. facial expressions, eye movement coding, acoustic voice analysis). Considering these advances in emotion theory, it is recommended that future research in customer delight reevaluates the ex-post reflective approach and explores these alternative measurement methods.

Methodologically, the analysis revealed a predominance of quantitative and experimental studies focused on explaining the processes through which customer delight is generated. This trend indicates a strong bias towards explanatory research paradigms within the existing literature. As van Aken (2004) noted, academic management disciplines, including customer delight research, are often description-driven and based on explanatory sciences. This focus on explanation rather than prescription presents a utilisation challenge, as current research provides limited guidance for practitioners seeking to enhance customer delight in increasingly competitive markets. In contrast, research that offers practical design solutions is underrepresented. During the systematic review, only

a few studies were identified that provide actionable strategies for increasing customer delight. These include a mathematical model of customer delight (Rust & Oliver, 2000), a Delight Design Platform (Yanagisawa et al., 2016), a strategic Decision Portfolio Matrix (Pallas et al., 2014), a customer delight readiness audit (Berman, 2005), and a customer delight barometer (Yang, 2011). Therefore, it is recommended that future research focuses on design-oriented research questions (Henseler & Guerreiro, 2020) such as ‘How can customer delight be created?’.

Contextual and content analysis showed that research on customer delight has predominantly focused on its antecedents, components, and consequences within physical environments. This emphasis on physical contexts was somewhat unexpected, given the increasing digitalisation across all aspects of modern life (Coreynen et al., 2017). However, it aligns with previous research, such as Bartl et al. (2013, p. 394), who noted that ‘Extant research on delight has largely neglected its antecedents and consequences in an online environment, despite the contributions of websites to consumer relationships with service providers’. While some empirical studies have explored customer delight in digital contexts (Al-Hawari, 2011), a comparison of digital and physical environments reveals two key findings: The components and consequences of customer delight are similar across both environments, with emotional components leading to behavioural outcomes. However, the antecedents differ. In physical environments, customer delight is often driven by interactions between customers and employees, with attributes like expertise, friendliness, and helpfulness being crucial. In digital environments, the focus shifts to the attributes of the service or product itself, particularly responsiveness and ease of use. This difference is logical, given that traditional customer journeys involve face-to-face interactions, while digital journeys involve direct interaction with the product or service. Future research should address how to delight customers in online contexts and consider the increasingly complex intersections of physical, digital, and social realms in customer experiences (Bolton et al., 2018). Research exploring these interconnected pathways to delight is essential for understanding how to effectively engage customers across multiple domains.

5. Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to systematically review the theoretical, methodological, contextual, and content foundations of customer delight research across both digital and physical environments. We analysed 161 publications on customer delight from the past 26 years, synthesising the main findings. Our theoretical analysis identified four key theories that provide a conceptual understanding of customer delight. Methodologically, we categorised the research into conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, experimental, and mixed methods studies, synthesising the key insights from each approach. Contextually, our analysis revealed that customer delight research is widespread, covering academic journals in business, service, and hospitality management. However, there is a noticeable emphasis on physical consumption contexts, with limited studies focusing on digital environments. Lastly, our content analysis examined the historical development, which indicated a high level of maturity of the field.

This study also acknowledges limitations that may influence the scope and interpretation of its findings. One limitation lies in the reliance on a pre-selected set of selection criteria, which may introduce biases inherent in the sources and perspectives considered. For example, the systematic review is constrained by the availability and accessibility of relevant publications, with inclusion criteria focusing on peer-reviewed articles published

in English. This focus may exclude valuable insights from non-English sources or grey literature, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Nonetheless, the predominance of English-language research in this field helps alleviate this concern. Next, the conceptualisation of emotion terms such as ‘delight’ might vary across languages, as noted in prior research (Boster, 2005). This linguistic nuance supports the practicality of restricting the analysis to English-language sources. Future research exploring non-English sources should account for these linguistic and cultural differences to ensure meaningful comparisons.

In conclusion, this systematic review indicates that customer delight research has matured significantly over the past two decades. However, given the rapidly evolving business environments and increasingly discerning customers, we recommend reassessing the theoretical, methodological, contextual, and substantive foundations of delight research. Future research should explore physical measures of customer delight, such as bodily reactions or motor expressions, emphasise design-oriented research, and investigate how scholars and practitioners can effectively delight customers in online settings.

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