

Employee Relations And Customer Satisfaction: A Systematic Review

Hubungan Karyawan Dan Kepuasan Pelanggan: Tinjauan Sistematis

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ABSTRACT

The growing recognition of employees as central actors in service delivery has intensified scholarly interest in understanding how employee relations shape customer satisfaction. Despite a substantial body of research, the literature remains fragmented across human resource management, internal marketing, and service management domains, limiting cumulative theory development. This study presents a comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) examining the relationship between employee relations and customer satisfaction, utilizing Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Drawing on 224 peer-reviewed journal articles, the review integrates theoretical perspectives, contextual settings, key constructs, and methodological approaches to map the intellectual structure of the field. The findings reveal dominant theoretical foundations such as social exchange theory and internal marketing, with empirical emphasis on service-oriented behavior, employee engagement, and service quality as critical linking mechanisms. However, notable gaps persist in relational dynamics, non-service contexts, and longitudinal and multi-level research designs. This study contributes to the literature by synthesizing fragmented insights into two integrative conceptual frameworks that clarify the pathways through which employee relations influence customer satisfaction. It further identifies theoretical blind spots, offers practical implications for managing employee–customer interfaces, and proposes a future research agenda to advance interdisciplinary integration in employee relations and service research.

Keywords: Employee Relations; Customer Satisfaction; Internal Marketing; Systematic Review.

ABSTRAK

Pengakuan yang semakin meningkat terhadap karyawan sebagai aktor sentral dalam penyampaian layanan telah meningkatkan minat akademis dalam memahami bagaimana hubungan karyawan membentuk kepuasan pelanggan. Meskipun terdapat banyak penelitian, literatur tetap terfragmentasi di berbagai bidang manajemen sumber daya manusia, pemasaran internal, dan manajemen layanan, sehingga membatasi pengembangan teori kumulatif. Studi ini menyajikan tinjauan literatur sistematis (SLR) komprehensif yang meneliti hubungan antara hubungan karyawan dan kepuasan pelanggan, dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Berdasarkan 224 artikel jurnal yang ditinjau sejauh ini, tinjauan ini mengintegrasikan perspektif teoretis, pengaturan kontekstual, konstruk kunci, dan pendekatan metodologis untuk memetakan struktur intelektual bidang ini. Temuan menunjukkan fondasi teoretis dominan seperti teori pertukaran sosial dan pemasaran internal, dengan penekanan empiris pada perilaku berorientasi layanan, keterlibatan karyawan, dan kualitas layanan sebagai mekanisme penghubung yang penting. Namun, kesenjangan yang signifikan tetap ada dalam dinamika relasional, konteks non-layanan, dan desain penelitian longitudinal dan multi-level. Studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur dengan mensintesis wawasan yang terfragmentasi menjadi dua kerangka konseptual integratif yang mengklarifikasi jalur-jalur di mana hubungan karyawan memengaruhi kepuasan pelanggan. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi titik buta teoretis, menawarkan implikasi praktis untuk mengelola antarmuka karyawan-pelanggan, dan mengusulkan agenda penelitian masa depan untuk memajukan integrasi interdisipliner dalam hubungan karyawan dan penelitian layanan.

Kata kunci: Hubungan Karyawan; Kepuasan Pelanggan; Pemasaran Internal; Tinjauan Sistematis.

1. Introduction

Employee relations and customer satisfaction have become increasingly critical in contemporary organizations as competitive advantage is progressively shaped by service quality, relational value, and customer experience. Across service and customer-facing industries, organizations are moving beyond product-centric strategies toward integrated service systems that rely heavily on employee–customer interactions (Mandagi et al., 2024; Poluan et al., 2022). Prior studies consistently demonstrate that service quality and customer service are central drivers of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Lemy et al., 2019; Juanamasta et al., 2019). At the same time, organizational performance is increasingly influenced by internal integration, process coordination, and employee-enabled systems, including technology-supported workflows and strategic alignment (Shee et al., 2018; de Sousa et al., 2014). These developments implicitly highlight employee relations as a foundational antecedent of customer satisfaction, as employees operationalize organizational systems and directly shape customers' service experiences.

Despite the growing managerial emphasis on customer satisfaction and loyalty, many organizations continue to face persistent challenges such as service inconsistency, declining customer trust, and negative service encounters (Walean et al., 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that investments in digital integration, innovation, and marketing initiatives do not automatically translate into improved customer outcomes when internal relational conditions are weak (Latifah et al., 2021). Studies in supply chain and quality management further indicate that organizational systems are only effective when employees are adequately supported, trained, and engaged (Lopes de Sousa et al., 2014; Shee et al., 2018). In practice, organizations often prioritize external engagement mechanisms while underestimating the role of employee relations in sustaining service quality and customer satisfaction, revealing a persistent disconnect between internal management practices and external performance outcomes.

Conceptually, employee relations encompass the quality of formal and informal interactions between employees and the organization, including communication, trust, support, fairness, and job satisfaction. Customer satisfaction, in turn, reflects customers' overall evaluation of service performance relative to expectations. The connection between these constructs is well established in service contexts, where employees act as the primary interface between organizational systems and customers. Research in hospitality, tourism, and banking demonstrates that customer satisfaction is shaped not only by functional service attributes but also by relational and interactional factors that are directly influenced by employees' attitudes and behaviors (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Kartika et al., 2020; Lemy et al., 2019). Moreover, customer relationship management and service recovery studies show that employee responsiveness and relational competence play a critical role in translating organizational strategies into positive customer outcomes (Juanamasta et al., 2019).

However, despite extensive empirical work, existing studies remain fragmented in their treatment of employee relations and customer satisfaction. Much of the literature examines customer satisfaction and loyalty outcomes through isolated lenses, such as service quality, CRM systems, or social media engagement, without explicitly positioning employee relations as a central antecedent (Hidayanti et al., 2018; Syaifullah et al., 2021). Similarly, studies on organizational performance and strategic integration tend to emphasize technological, process, and environmental factors while overlooking the relational and psychological conditions experienced by employees who implement these systems (Lopes de Sousa et al., 2014; Latifah et al., 2021). As a result, there is limited integrative understanding of how employee relations function as a linking mechanism between internal organizational practices and customer satisfaction across service settings.

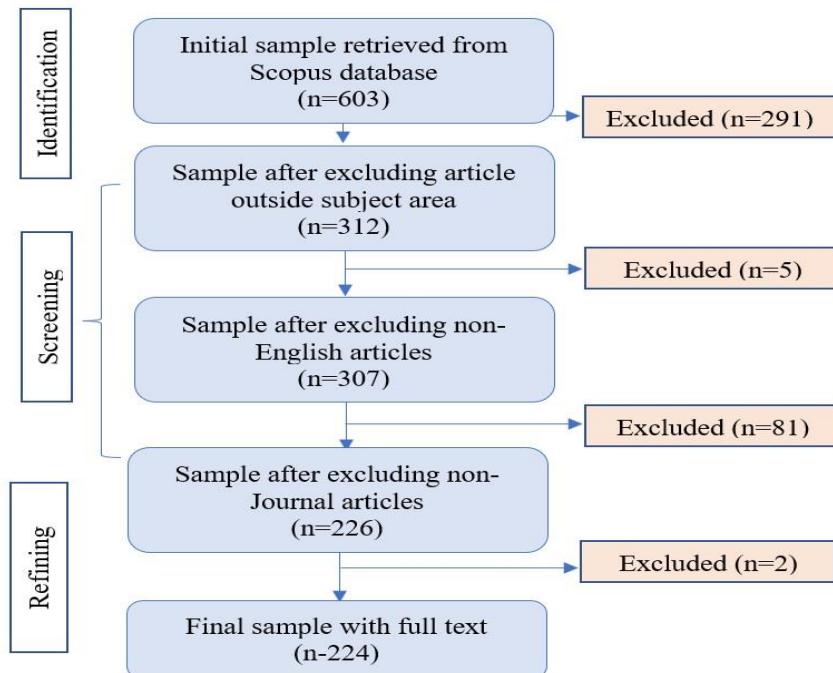
In response to this gap, the present study aims to examine employee relations as a key antecedent of customer satisfaction by integrating perspectives from service quality,

relationship management, and organizational performance research. This study contributes to the literature by advancing a more holistic and relational explanation of customer satisfaction that bridges human resource management and service marketing perspectives. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for organizations seeking to enhance customer satisfaction not only through technology, innovation, and marketing initiatives but also through sustained investments in employee relations. By positioning employee relations as a strategic driver of customer satisfaction, this study extends existing research and offers a more integrated framework for understanding service excellence and long-term organizational competitiveness.

2. Methodology

In the first stage, a comprehensive list of keywords was developed in accordance with the research objectives, with a specific focus on employee relations and customer satisfaction. To enhance content validity, two subject-matter experts from the fields of human resource management, service marketing, and organizational behavior were invited to review and refine the initial keyword set based on their academic and research expertise (Rathi et al., 2022). The keyword development process was designed to capture the conceptual breadth of the topic, encompassing constructs related to employment relations, service-oriented behavior, and customer satisfaction. Through iterative discussions and expert consensus, a carefully curated set of keywords was finalized to ensure conceptual alignment with the research objectives and to strengthen the robustness of the systematic literature search.

Following the previous studies, the systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Wulyatiningsih, & Mandagi, 2023; Kowaas et al., 2023; Mandagi et al., 2024). PRISMA structures the review process into four sequential stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, thereby ensuring transparency, methodological rigor, and consistency in the selection of relevant studies. As illustrated in Figure 1, the article selection process began with the identification stage, during which an initial sample of 603 articles was retrieved from the Scopus database using the validated Boolean search string aligned with the study's objectives. During the subsequent screening stage, 291 articles were excluded for falling outside the relevant subject areas, resulting in a refined pool of 312 articles for further evaluation.

**Figure 1. Article Selection Process**

In the next step, five non-English articles were excluded to maintain linguistic consistency, yielding a sample of 307 articles. Subsequently, 81 non-journal publications, including conference proceedings, book chapters, and other non-peer-reviewed sources, were removed to ensure publication quality and comparability. This process reduced the sample to 226 journal articles. During the eligibility stage, two articles were excluded due to the unavailability of full-text versions. As a result, the final inclusion stage comprised 224 full-text journal articles, which were retained for in-depth analysis. The complete research protocol is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Protocol

Research Protocol	Description
Document type	Scientific articles from Journal
Source	Scopus Database
Time frame	1991-2025
Search field	Title, abstract & keywords
Language	English
Search terms	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (employee AND relations) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (customer AND satisfaction))
Subject area	Business, Management and Accounting
Inclusion criteria	Articles focus on Customer Relationship Management
Exclusion criteria	Studies originating from non-peer-reviewed books, book chapters, conference papers, practical reports, theses/ dissertations, working papers and predatory journals, non-English articles and articles without full text.

Source(s): Authors' own work (2025)

By systematically applying the clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1, this study ensured that only the most relevant, rigorous, and high-quality sources

informed the analysis. The final set of selected articles represents a focused and coherent body of literature through which research trends, intellectual gaps, and future research opportunities related to employee relations and customer satisfaction can be critically examined. In particular, the review emphasizes how employee–management relations, relational climate, and internal organizational practices translate into service-oriented behavior and customer-related outcomes.

To analyze the selected literature, this study employed a multi-method analytical approach. First, bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to visualize co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence patterns, and citation relationships within the dataset. This analysis provided insights into the intellectual structure of the field, influential authors and journals, and the evolution of core themes linking employee relations and customer satisfaction.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Publication Profile in employee relations and customer satisfaction

Figure 3 depicts the annual trends in publications and citations on employee relations and customer satisfaction from 1991 to 2025, illustrating the evolution of the field over time. In the early 1990s, research output was limited, reflecting the nascent stage of scholarly interest in linking workplace relations with customer-related outcomes. A steady increase in publications emerged from the mid-2000s onward, signaling growing recognition of employee relations as a strategic factor influencing service quality, employee behavior, and customer satisfaction. Peaks in publication activity during the late 2000s and late 2010s coincide with the expansion of service-dominant logic, internal marketing, and employee engagement perspectives in both marketing and HRM research.

In contrast, the citation trajectory shows a strong and continuous upward trend, particularly after 2012, indicating increasing scholarly influence and consolidation of the literature. Even in periods where publication volumes fluctuate or stabilize, citations continue to rise, suggesting that several foundational and high-impact studies have shaped subsequent research across disciplines. This divergence between publication growth and citation accumulation reflects a maturing research domain, where theoretical frameworks such as social exchange theory and service climate are repeatedly validated and extended.

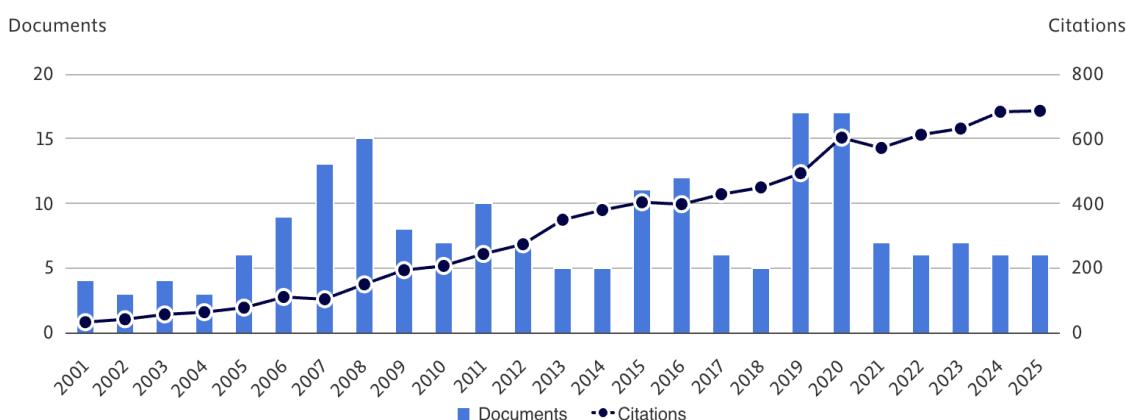


Figure 3. Publication Trend and Number of Citations

3.2. Most influential journals

Table 4 indicates that the research is mainly published in applied, service, and quality-oriented journals, rather than being concentrated in a single core marketing outlet. The *Journal of Services Marketing* and the *International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management*

dominate, highlighting the close connection between service marketing, quality management, and performance issues. The presence of hospitality- and banking-focused journals underscores the sectoral emphasis of the literature, particularly in service-intensive industries. Overall, this distribution suggests that the research is broadly interdisciplinary and practice-oriented, with opportunities for stronger theoretical consolidation within mainstream marketing journals in future studies.

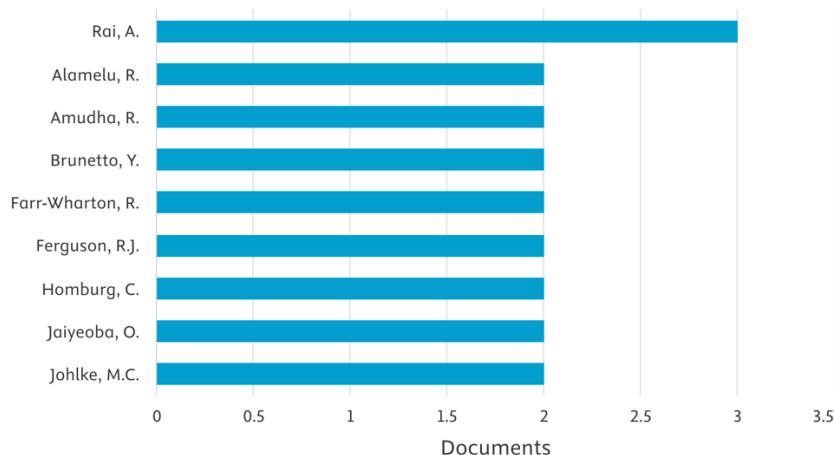
Table 4. Most influential journals by number of articles published in this field (Top 10)

Rank	Journal Title	Counts	Publisher
1	Journal of Services Marketing	6	Emerald Publishing
2	International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management	6	Emerald Publishing
3	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	4	Emerald Publishing
4	Quality Progress	4	American Society for Quality (ASQ)
5	TQM Journal	4	Emerald Publishing
6	International Journal of Applied Business and Economic Research	4	Serials Publications
7	International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management	4	Emerald Publishing
8	International Journal of Bank Marketing	4	Emerald Publishing
9	International Journal of Hospitality Management	3	Elsevier
10	European Journal of Marketing	3	Emerald Publishing

3.3. Most influential Authors

Figure 6 illustrates the most influential authors in this field, measured by the number of articles published. Rai, A. emerges as the most prolific contributor, with a higher publication count than other authors, indicating a leading role in shaping the development of the literature. A second tier of influential authors, including Alomelu, R.; Amudha, R.; Brunetto, Y.; Farr-Wharton, R.; Ferguson, R.J.; Homburg, C.; Jaiyeoba, O.; and Johlke, M.C., each contributes a comparable number of publications, suggesting a relatively balanced group of recurring contributors rather than a highly concentrated authorship structure. Overall, this distribution indicates that while the field is anchored by a small number of productive scholars, knowledge production remains moderately dispersed, reflecting a maturing research area characterized by collaborative contributions and incremental theoretical development rather than dominance by a single author or research group.

Table 6. Most influential authors by number of articles published in this field (Top 10)



3.4. Most influential journals

Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of research output by country, measured by the number of published documents. The United States clearly dominates the field, contributing a substantially higher number of publications than all other countries, which indicates its central role in advancing research and shaping scholarly discourse in this area. China and the United Kingdom follow as secondary contributors, reflecting growing research activity and international engagement, though at markedly lower levels than the United States.

Other countries such as Australia, India, Canada, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Germany contribute more modest publication counts, suggesting a broad but uneven global participation. Overall, this distribution indicates that while the field has attracted international scholarly interest, research production remains highly concentrated in a small number of countries, particularly the United States. This pattern highlights opportunities for greater cross-national collaboration and for expanding empirical and theoretical contributions from underrepresented regions in future research.

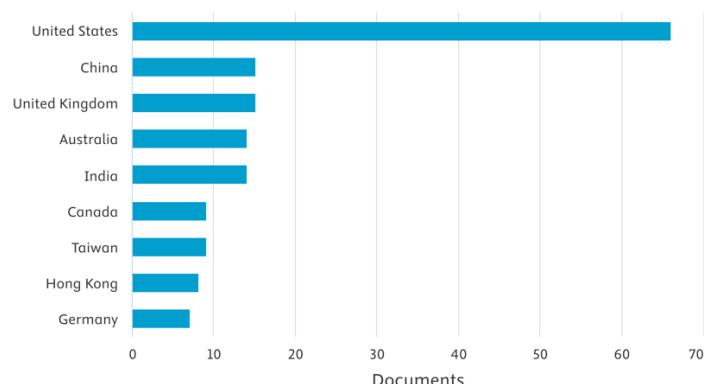


Figure 7. Most influential countries by number of articles published in this field

3.5. Seminal works on employee relations and customer satisfaction

The table highlights influential studies that, while drawn from diverse contexts, collectively inform the relationship between employee relations and customer satisfaction. The most cited work by Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000) underscores the central role of customer satisfaction in driving loyalty within service settings, implicitly pointing to the importance of employee–customer interactions as a key mechanism shaping customer perceptions. Similarly, studies emphasizing service quality, customer service, and relationship

management suggest that employees' attitudes, behaviors, and relational capabilities are critical antecedents of customer satisfaction outcomes.

In addition, research on green training, supply chain practices, digital integration, and social media marketing indicates that organizational practices affecting employees, such as training, empowerment, and system support, have downstream effects on service delivery and customer satisfaction. Within this perspective, effective employee relations enhance employees' ability and willingness to deliver consistent, high-quality service, which in turn improves customer satisfaction and loyalty. Overall, the literature reflected in the table supports the view that employee relations function as an indirect but essential driver of customer satisfaction through their influence on service quality, relationship management, and customer-oriented performance.

Table 9. Seminal work on employee relations and customer satisfaction

Title	Authors	Year	Source title	Cited by
Customer loyalty in the hotel industry: The role of customer satisfaction and image	Kandampully & Suhartanto	2000	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	706
Green training and green supply chain management: Evidence from Brazilian companies	Teixeira et al.	2016	Journal of Cleaner Production	313
Quality management, environmental management maturity, green supply chain practices and performance	Lopes de Sousa et al.	2014	Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review	157
The impact of cloud-enabled process integration on supply chain performance	Shee et al.	2018	Supply Chain Management	114
Business strategy – MSMEs' performance relationship: Innovation and accounting information system as mediators	Latifah et al.	2021	Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	92
Social media marketing and business performance among SMEs	Syaifullah et al.	2021	Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business	88
The role of customer service through customer relationship management (CRM) on customer loyalty	Juanamasta et al.	2019	International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research	83
Engaging customers through social media to improve customer loyalty	Hidayanti et al.	2018	Journal of Relationship Marketing	64
Moving out of the silo: How service quality influences tourist loyalty	Lemy et al.	2019	Journal of Vacation Marketing	61

Title	Authors	Year	Source title	Cited by
Contrasting the drivers of customer loyalty in Islamic banking	Kartika et al.,	2020	Journal of Islamic Marketing	54

* Citation counts as of December 2025

3.6. Most commonly used theories on employee relations and customer satisfaction research

Table 3 shows that research on employee relations and customer satisfaction is grounded in a diverse but uneven theoretical landscape, with a clear dominance of relational and service-oriented frameworks. Social Exchange Theory emerges as the most frequently applied theory, highlighting the central role of reciprocity and mutual obligations in explaining how employee–organization relationships translate into service behaviors and customer satisfaction (Meira & Hancer, 2021; Abdou et al., 2022; Kim & Qu 2020). Closely related, marketing and service management theories such as the Service-Profit Chain, Internal Marketing Theory, and the Job Satisfaction–Service Quality–Customer Satisfaction Model collectively frame employee relations as an internal service mechanism linking employee attitudes, service quality, and customer outcomes (e.g., Sohail & Jang, 2017; Hogreve et al., 2022; Awwad et al., 2025). The presence of Employee Engagement Theory further indicates growing attention to employees' psychological investment and discretionary behaviors as drivers of customer satisfaction (Kasekende, 2017; Sharafizad et al., 2020; Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

In contrast, other theoretical perspectives appear far less frequently. Justice- and support-based theories, including Fairness Theory and Organizational Support Theory, receive moderate attention, suggesting that perceptions of equity and organizational care are acknowledged but not fully integrated into dominant models (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Collins, 2017; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Psychological and behavioral theories and broader organizational and institutional frameworks, such as Stakeholder Theory, Neo-Institutional Theory, and Agency Theory, are only marginally represented. Overall, the pattern indicates a reliance on a narrow set of relational and service-focused explanations, with limited theoretical integration across levels of analysis. This imbalance highlights the need for future research to more explicitly and systematically integrate relational, psychological, and institutional perspectives when examining the employee relations–customer satisfaction relationship.

Table 3. Most commonly used theories

Clusters	Theories	Number of times
Social and Relational Theories	Social Exchange Theory	16
Marketing and Service Management Theories	Service-Profit Chain	12
	Internal Marketing Theory	10
	Job Satisfaction–Service Quality–Customer Satisfaction Model	8
	Relationship Marketing Theory	5
	Service Climate Theory	4
	Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)	3
Employee-Centric Performance Theories	Employee Engagement Theory	9
	Fairness Theory	7

Justice, Support, and Evaluation-Based Theories	Organizational Support Theory	6
Psychological and Behavioral Theories	Emotional Labor Theory	5
	Self-Determination Theory	3
Social and Relational Theories	Psychological Contract Theory	4
	Social Capital Theory	3
Organizational and Institutional Theories	Stakeholder Theory	2
	Neo-Institutional Theory	2
	Agency Theory	1

3.7. Most commonly used methodologies on employee relations and customer satisfaction research

Table 2 shows that research on employee relations and customer satisfaction is characterized by a strong methodological concentration, with survey-based studies overwhelmingly dominating the literature. The prevalence of surveys (90 articles) reflects a largely positivist and explanatory orientation that emphasizes hypothesis testing, model validation, and the examination of causal relationships between employee-related factors such as engagement, satisfaction, and relational climate and customer outcomes including satisfaction, service quality, and loyalty. While this approach has contributed to empirical rigor and the accumulation of generalizable findings, it also indicates a tendency toward incremental theory testing using established constructs rather than advancing new theoretical insights.

Table 2. Most Commonly used research methodology

Methodology	Total Articles	Sample Studies
Survey	90	(Demir, 2022; Bielinska-Dusza et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2021; Yee et al., 2010)
Interviews	22	(Levesque & O'Neill, 2025; Penning, 2024; King & Grace, 2006; Rubinstein & Eaton, 2009)
Case Study Approach	10	(Sahoo et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2019; King & Grace, 2006; Pil & Fujimoto, 2007)
Experiments	11	(Petrovsky et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2022; Söderlund, 2018; Mukherjee & Bhal, 2017)
Qualitative Methods	14	(Wu et al., 2024; Buch & Andersen, 2013; Frenkel et al., 1998)
Quantitative Methods	13	(Chen & Roadkasamsri, 2025; Erkmen & Hancer, 2019; Nelson et al., 2007)
Mixed Methods	1	(Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2008)
Meta-Analysis / Review	1	(Howard & Serviss, 2022)
Longitudinal Studies	5	(Monod et al., 2023; Bergami et al., 2021; Pil & Fujimoto, 2007)
Cross-Sectional Studies	3	(Crabbe & Acquaah, 2016; Iyer & Johlke, 2015; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2008)

Qualitative approaches remain comparatively limited. Interviews (22 studies) and case study approaches (10 studies) are mainly used to provide contextual insights into employee-customer interactions, managerial practices, and service processes, rather than to drive theory

development. Experimental designs (11 studies) appear only occasionally, suggesting limited use of controlled methods to capture behavioral mechanisms underlying employee-driven customer outcomes. Similarly, explicitly qualitative studies (14 articles) remain underrepresented, indicating that experiential, emotional, and relational aspects of employee relations are still insufficiently explored.

Methodologies aimed at integration and depth are particularly scarce. Mixed-methods research is represented by only one study, and review-based or meta-analytic research is similarly limited, suggesting that the knowledge base has not yet been systematically consolidated. Longitudinal studies (5 articles) and cross-sectional design labels (3 articles) are infrequently reported, highlighting the lack of temporal perspectives in the literature. Overall, this methodological pattern indicates that research on employee relations and customer satisfaction remains predominantly survey driven and organization focused, with significant opportunities for greater methodological diversity to support deeper theoretical development and more context sensitive insights.

3.8. Keywords co-occurrence analysis

Figure 3 presents a VOSviewer keyword co-occurrence network that maps the intellectual structure of the literature around customer satisfaction and its related themes. At the center of the network, customer satisfaction appears as the most dominant and highly connected node, indicating its role as a core concept linking multiple research streams. Closely connected keywords such as job satisfaction, service quality, customer relations, and employee suggest that customer satisfaction is strongly grounded in service delivery processes and employee-related factors. This central positioning reflects the consensus in the literature that employee attitudes and service performance are critical antecedents of customer satisfaction.

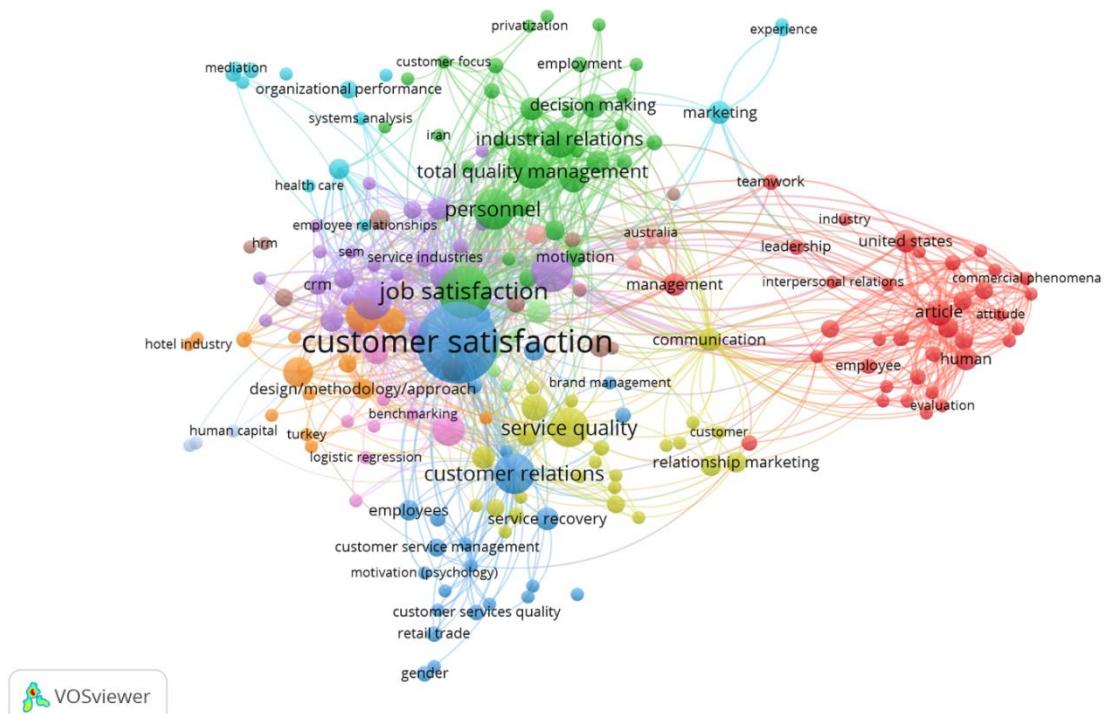


Figure 3. Keyword co-occurrence analysis.

The surrounding clusters reveal distinct but interconnected thematic areas. One cluster emphasizes employee relations and internal factors, including job satisfaction, motivation, training, and total quality management, highlighting how internal organizational practices shape

employee behavior and, ultimately, customer outcomes. Another cluster focuses on relationship and marketing-oriented themes, such as relationship marketing, communication, and customer loyalty, indicating how employee-driven interactions influence long-term customer relationships. Overall, the network illustrates that research on customer satisfaction is deeply intertwined with employee relations, supporting the view that positive employee relations indirectly enhance customer satisfaction through improved service quality, engagement, and relationship management.

Table 4. Clusters of high frequency keywords related to CRM

Cluster	Items (n)	Keywords	Issues / Thematic Focus	Sample Authors
Cluster 1: Customer Satisfaction & Service Quality	17	customer satisfaction, service quality, customer relations, customer experience, service recovery	Core determinants of customer satisfaction emphasizing service quality and customer-facing processes influenced by employee behavior	Kandampully & Suhartanto (2000); Lemy et al. (2019); Juanamasta et al. (2019)
Cluster 2: Employee Relations & Job Satisfaction	15	job satisfaction, employee, motivation, training, empowerment, industrial relations	Internal employee relations, job satisfaction, and motivation as antecedents of service performance and customer satisfaction	Teixeira et al. (2016); Lopes de Sousa et al. (2014); Hamid (2018)
Cluster 3: Relationship Marketing & CRM	13	relationship marketing, customer relationship management, communication, engagement, trust	Employee-driven relationship management practices that strengthen customer satisfaction and long-term relationships	Hidayanti et al. (2018); Japutra et al. (2022); Mardatillah et al. (2024)
Cluster 4: Organizational Management & Quality Systems	12	total quality management, organizational performance, management, internal process, decision making	Organizational and quality management systems shaping employee performance and consistent service delivery	Priyono (2017); Hernita et al. (2015); Shee et al. (2018)
Cluster 5: Marketing Performance & Outcomes	11	marketing performance, loyalty, competitive advantage, business performance	Performance outcomes resulting from effective employee relations and customer satisfaction mechanisms	Kartika et al. (2020); Syaifullah et al. (2021); Santoso et al. (2025)
Cluster 6: Sustainability & Human-Oriented Practices	9	training, human capital, sustainability, organizational culture, work environment	Sustainable HR and employee-oriented practices that indirectly enhance	Teixeira et al. (2016); Soesilowati et al. (2024)

Cluster	Items (n)	Keywords	Issues / Thematic Focus	Sample Authors
			customer satisfaction through improved service quality	

Cluster 1 (Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality)

This cluster represents the most central and conceptually dominant theme in the network and is anchored around customer satisfaction as the core outcome variable. High-frequency keywords such as customer satisfaction, service quality, customer experience, and service recovery emphasize the primacy of service performance in shaping customer evaluations. Research in this cluster consistently demonstrates that customer satisfaction emerges from employees' service delivery quality and interactional competence. Empirical studies explicitly link organizational practices and workplace systems to customer satisfaction outcomes through service quality mechanisms (Secchi et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015; Delcourt et al., 2017). More recent contributions further reinforce the role of customer experience as a mediating construct through which employee-driven service encounters translate into satisfaction and positive post-consumption responses (Glaveli et al., 2023; Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). Overall, this cluster reflects the outcome-oriented core of the literature, positioning customer satisfaction as the ultimate manifestation of effective employee–customer interactions.

Cluster 2 (Employee Relations and Job Satisfaction)

Comprising a dense set of employee-focused keywords, this cluster highlights the internal relational foundations of customer satisfaction. Dominant terms such as employee, job satisfaction, industrial relations, work systems, and motivation indicate a strong research emphasis on how employee relations shape workplace attitudes and behaviors. Studies within this cluster argue that positive employee relations enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and discretionary effort, which subsequently improve service quality and customer satisfaction (Akanbiemu, 2021; Saridakis et al., 2020). Empirical evidence shows that high-involvement work systems and supportive employment relationships are associated with improved service outcomes (Islam et al., 2023; Elorza et al., 2022). Recent research further emphasizes conflict management, employee well-being, and internal fairness as critical relational conditions that indirectly influence customer satisfaction through employee attitudes and performance (Benitez et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2021). This cluster underscores employee relations as a key antecedent of customer satisfaction.

Cluster 3 (Relationship Marketing and Customer Relationship Management)

This cluster centers on relational mechanisms that connect employee actions with customer satisfaction and retention. Key terms such as customer relationship management, relationship marketing, communication, engagement, and trust highlight the role of sustained relational interactions rather than transactional exchanges. Research in this stream emphasizes that CRM effectiveness depends heavily on employees' relational capabilities, including communication quality, responsiveness, and service recovery competence. Empirical studies explicitly demonstrate that customer satisfaction is strengthened when employee-led relationship management practices are consistently implemented (Medic et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2022). More recent contributions highlight CRM as a socio-relational system, where employee behaviors and relational norms directly influence customer perceptions and long-

term relationship quality (Bupu et al., 2023). This cluster reflects the relational bridge between employee relations and customer satisfaction.

Cluster 4 (Organizational Management and Quality Systems)

This cluster captures the organizational and managerial structures that enable effective employee relations and consistent service delivery. High-frequency keywords such as management, total quality management, organizational performance, internal processes, and decision making indicate a systems-oriented perspective. Research within this cluster argues that customer satisfaction is contingent upon organizational alignment, standardized quality systems, and supportive managerial practices that empower employees. Studies show that quality management initiatives and internal coordination enhance employees' ability to deliver reliable and high-quality service, thereby improving customer satisfaction outcomes (Al-Arafati et al., 2019; Rubinstein & Eaton, 2009). This cluster positions management systems as structural enablers that translate employee relations into customer-facing performance.

Cluster 5 (Marketing Performance and Relational Outcomes)

This cluster focuses on the downstream outcomes of employee relations and customer satisfaction, including loyalty, competitive advantage, and business performance. Key terms such as loyalty, marketing performance, and competitive advantage suggest that customer satisfaction functions as an intermediate mechanism linking employee relations to organizational success. Research in this stream provides empirical support for the argument that satisfied customers, resulting from high-quality employee interactions, contribute to stronger loyalty and performance outcomes (Li et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). This cluster reinforces the performance implications of investing in employee relations and service quality.

Cluster 6 (Human-Oriented and Sustainable Work Practices)

This cluster highlights the role of training, human capital, organizational culture, and work environment in shaping employee behavior and service outcomes. Studies in this cluster emphasize that sustainable and human-centered work practices improve employee competence, motivation, and service orientation, which in turn enhance customer satisfaction. Empirical evidence indicates that training and supportive work environments strengthen employees' capacity to deliver consistent service experiences (Licandro et al., 2024). This cluster reflects a long-term perspective in which employee relations are embedded within sustainable organizational practices.

3.9. Overlay visualization of keywords over time

Figure 5 presents a keyword co-occurrence network of research on employee relations and customer satisfaction with an overlay visualization by publication year, revealing both the conceptual structure and temporal evolution of the field. At the center of the network, customer satisfaction emerges as the most dominant and highly interconnected keyword, confirming its foundational role in the literature. Its strong links with job satisfaction, service quality, and customer relations reflect a well-established theoretical position that customer satisfaction is closely tied to employees' attitudes, work systems, and service delivery quality. Empirical studies explicitly demonstrate that internal workplace practices and employee-related factors shape service outcomes and customer satisfaction through their influence on service quality and customer experience (Rubinstein & Eaton, 2009; Al-Arafati et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019).

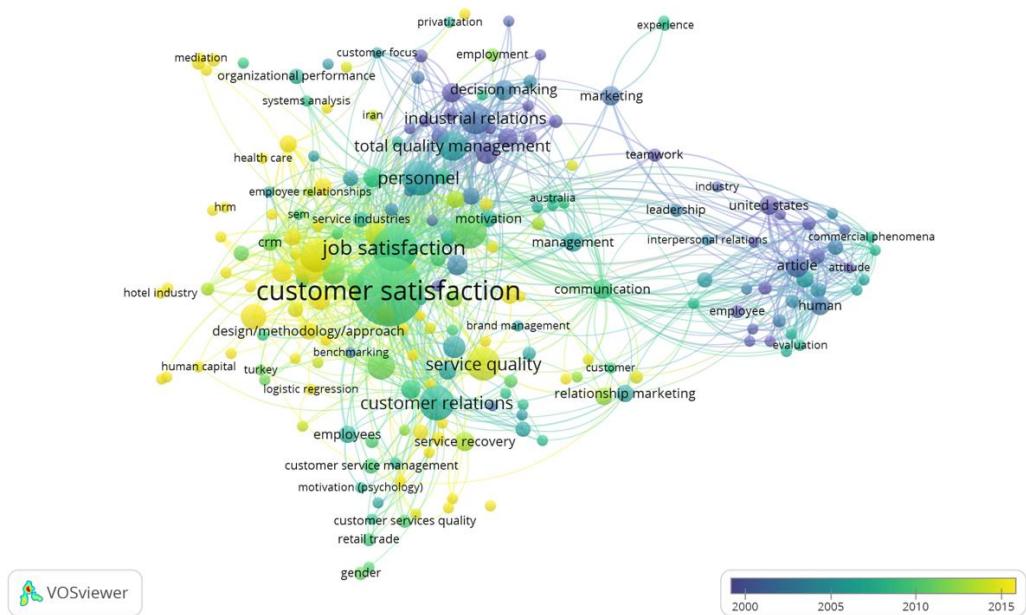


Figure 5. Overlay visualization of keywords over time

Surrounding this core, earlier research, indicated by blue and purple nodes, emphasizes structural and managerial themes such as industrial relations, total quality management, decision making, and organizational performance. These studies conceptualize customer satisfaction as an outcome of formal management systems and internally coordinated work practices that govern employee behavior (Rubinstein & Eaton, 2009). Over time, the network shifts toward more human-centered and relational constructs, with keywords such as communication, relationship marketing, service recovery, and employee engagement appearing in greener and yellow tones. More recent studies increasingly focus on customer experience and relational service processes, highlighting how employee interactions, engagement, and well-being directly influence customer satisfaction and relationship quality (Nguyen et al., 2020). Overall, the visualization indicates that while customer satisfaction remains the conceptual anchor of the field, the literature has progressively evolved from system-oriented perspectives toward more relational, employee-centered, and experience-driven frameworks that position employee relations as a central driver of customer satisfaction.

4. Conclusions and Direction for Future Research

This study synthesizes the intellectual structure and temporal evolution of research on employee relations and customer satisfaction through keyword co-occurrence and overlay visualization analysis. The findings demonstrate that customer satisfaction remains the central and most enduring construct in the literature, consistently linked to job satisfaction, service quality, and customer relations. The persistence of these linkages confirms a strong theoretical consensus that employee-related factors constitute a critical foundation for positive customer outcomes. Early research predominantly emphasized structural and managerial mechanisms, such as industrial relations, total quality management, and formal decision-making systems, framing customer satisfaction as an outcome of internally coordinated organizational processes.

Over time, the literature has evolved toward more relational, human-centered, and experiential perspectives. Recent studies increasingly focus on employee engagement, communication, service recovery, and customer experience, reflecting a shift from system-oriented explanations to interaction-based mechanisms. This evolution underscores the growing recognition that employee relations influence customer satisfaction not only through

formal management systems but also through interpersonal service encounters and relational quality. Overall, the evidence positions employee relations as an indirect yet central driver of customer satisfaction, operating through service quality, engagement, and experience-based pathways.

Despite the maturity of the field, several avenues remain open for future research. First, future studies should adopt integrative theoretical frameworks that explicitly combine employee relations theories, such as social exchange or psychological contract perspectives, with customer satisfaction and service quality models. This would strengthen causal explanations of how internal relational dynamics translate into customer outcomes. Second, more longitudinal and multi-level studies are needed to capture the dynamic interplay between employee relations, employee attitudes, and customer satisfaction over time, rather than relying predominantly on cross-sectional designs.

Third, future research should further explore contextual and sector-specific variations, particularly in emerging service contexts such as digital services, hybrid service encounters, and platform-based industries. The growing emphasis on customer experience suggests a need to examine how employee relations function when service interactions are partially or fully mediated by technology. Finally, scholars are encouraged to investigate boundary conditions and moderators, such as organizational culture, leadership style, and employee well-being, that may strengthen or weaken the employee relations–customer satisfaction link. Addressing these directions would advance the field toward a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how employee relations shape customer satisfaction in increasingly complex service environments.

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