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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond boundaries: a multidisciplinary approach to understand the relationship between customer satisfaction and behavior in services

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Abstract
This article investigates the complex relationship between customer satisfaction and behavior in services, aiming to provide actionable insights for managers seeking to leverage satisfaction for improved business outcomes. The link between satisfaction and behavior is characterized by anomalies and complexities, such as satisfied customers switching brands, a disproportionate effect of low levels of dissatisfaction on behavior, non-linearity, asymmetry, and zones of low behavioral response. While these insights have significantly advanced scholarly discourse, they are often difficult to apply in practice, as they tend to focus narrowly on specific aspects—such as non-linearity or the role of emotions—or prioritize satisfaction over dissatisfaction, leaving managers without a holistic framework to navigate these dynamics. This study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of how varying satisfaction levels, from extreme dissatisfaction to extreme satisfaction, influence customer buying behavior. Using a longitudinal case study of a Fortune 500 financial services company, and adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates the above-mentioned findings with insights from behavioral economics, neuroscience and brand equity, this article proposes a preliminary integrative model of the satisfaction-behavior curve that explains its non-linearity and asymmetry, as well as the cognitive and emotional factors that drive its inflection points. Managerial implications include prioritizing actions that move customers beyond the "indifference zone"; addressing promptly and proactively even minor dissatisfaction episodes; closely monitoring defection rates and their underlying causes. As these early findings are based on a single case study in an industry characterized by high involvement, future research should validate the proposed curve across industries and contexts, and considering moderating variables like culture, competition, and market maturity.

Keywords Customer satisfaction · Service marketing · Consumer behavior · Loyalty · Advocacy

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

1 Introduction

In marketing, a critical managerial challenge is understanding and leveraging the factors that drive customer behaviors such as repurchase, brand loyalty and advocacy, as these have a direct impact on business outcomes, including customer lifetime value, profitability and retention (Keller, 2023; Kotler, 2021). For decades, it has been widely recognized that customer satisfaction correlates with economic benefits, as satisfied customers are expected to exhibit greater loyalty and higher lifetime value. Notably, even modest improvements in customer loyalty—just 5%—can result in profit increases ranging from 25 to 95% (Gallo, 2014). Reflecting this understanding, many organizations now track "repeat business" as a key performance indicator, with leading firms achieving rates as high as 80%. However, for managers, translating satisfaction into loyalty and financial performance has often revealed to be difficult and disappointing.

Research exploring the link between satisfaction and repurchase intentions found that in 85% of studies, customer satisfaction was the key antecedent of intentions, but intentions were a weak antecedent of actual behaviors (Hulland & Houston, 2021). Research on the direct link between satisfaction and behavior has unveiled many complexities that characterize the curve. The predictive power of traditional linear models (e.g., Likert scale) was found limited or inconsistent. For instance, a study revealed that 80% of customers who self-reported as "satisfied" ultimately switched brands (Chandon et al., 2005). Sharma et al. (2020) indicated that the satisfaction-behavior curve is non-linear; Pan et al. (2022) highlighted that the curve is asymmetrical and that there is a "zone of indifference", where low levels of satisfaction have no effect on behavior; Ma et al. (2019) underlined the key role of emotions in shaping the curve; Eisenbeiss et al. (2014) and Tuu and Olsen (2010) proved the predictive power of a satisfaction-behavior function with decreasing returns of satisfaction on loyalty.

These findings are extremely valuable to advance scholarly research. However, from a managerial standpoint, they are not yet combined into one single model that companies can operationalize. On the one hand side, they focus on specific aspects, e.g., asymmetry or role of emotions; on the other hand, they mainly concentrate on satisfaction rather than the full curve. Managers need practical frameworks to understand and manage the entire spectrum from severe dissatisfaction to extreme satisfaction, understand its inflection points – where they are, what drives them and how to act upon them—to generate actionable strategies for tangible business results.

Using a longitudinal case study and a multidisciplinary approach, this article integrates the findings illustrated above and incorporates insights from adjacent research fields to suggest a preliminary unified model of the satisfaction-behavior curve, capturing the full spectrum of satisfaction and its implications for financial performance. Rather than offering a fully developed theoretical framework, this article contributes to managerial discourse by consolidating relevant findings into an integrative model that encompasses emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions that influence the shape of the curve and its critical inflection points.

By developing this preliminary framework, the article proposes a way to bridge the gap between academic research and managerial practice, equipping organizations with an actionable tool to achieve business success through a customer-centric focus.

The research questions of this article are:

A) What is the shape of the satisfaction-behavior curve?

This question seeks to delve into the specific characteristics of the full curve and provide a deeper understanding of satisfaction levels and their behavioral outcomes.

B) Which are the drivers influencing the satisfaction-behavior curve?

This question focuses on customers' underlying emotional, psychological and cognitive factors that come into play in the complex relationship between satisfaction and behavior and determine changes in the curve's shape and trajectory.

2 Literature review

Customer satisfaction measurement relies on the foundational disconfirmation model, which posits that consumers evaluate experiences by comparing perceived performance against expectations. Satisfaction occurs when performance meets or exceeds expectations (positive disconfirmation), while dissatisfaction arises when performance falls short (negative disconfirmation) (Tse & Wilton, 1988). This construct is widely used, it correctly represents that satisfaction is a subjective judgement and it is not under discussion here. The focus of this article is the much more intricate relationship between perceived satisfaction and behavioral responses.

Through the longitudinal case analysis, this article identifies where asymmetries and non-linearities along the curve occur, underpinned by the effect of the deep, sometimes unconscious drivers behind how consumers form their satisfaction judgements and make behavioral decisions, to explain them. Compelling integrative findings come from neuroscience, behavioral economics and brand equity: they cover the customers' emotional, psychological and cognitive subtleties of behavioral responses to different levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, explain the underlying reasons for the inflection points in the curve and provide pragmatic approaches for decisions on how to invest in customer satisfaction to drive impact on business results.

2.1 Understanding the role of emotions in customers' decision making and behavior through neuroscience

Understanding how emotions influence customers' decision-making is fundamental in consumer behavior. In this context, emotions – in particular their valence and intensity—play a crucial role in motivating individuals to act, i.e., become loyal or defect.

A recent study by Kankam and Charnor (2023) highlights the key role of consumer emotions in decision making: emotional processing is the primary mechanism consumers use to develop quick and effective responses to external stimuli, including those coming from brands; it also plays a critical role in fostering trust, essential for lasting customer relationships.

This builds on foundational research (Damasio, 1994; Ledoux, 1996) showing that individuals receive and process all external stimuli automatically and unconsciously through the emotional part of the brain—Ledoux's "*Low Road*". Emotional decision-making is faster and requires fewer cognitive resources, a crucial adaptation in an era of information overload, where unceasing decision-making require high efficiency (Kahneman, 2011). This route is fast and resourceful, but prone to biases and heuristics. Individuals resort to the "*High Road",* which involves the cerebral cortex, only for highly complex decision-making processes that cannot be elaborated by the emotional brain. Notably, even after cognitive processing, the final response is again dealt with by the emotional part of the brain, demonstrating how emotions dominate decision-making processes, even when cognitive effort is applied.

Why is understanding the role of emotions in consumers' decision making so important in this research? Because emotions drive individuals to action. A consolidate construct from neuroscience, the arousal-motivation matrix (Bradley et al., 2018; Cudo et al., 2018; Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017), directly connects emotions to behavioral change, highlighting the role of dopaminergic systems in intrinsically motivated behaviors, especially when a reward is expected—in this case, delight from experience with the brand. The construct posits that individuals strive for emotional equilibrium in their daily lives. They need intense emotions—either positive or negative—to reach an arousal state that generates motivation to act. Mildly positive emotional states like low levels of satisfaction don't elicit arousal, hence there is no motivation to act, and customers fall in the zone of indifference when they self-declare "satisfied" but experience a minor level of satisfaction. Stronger positive emotions coming from higher levels of satisfaction, though, motivate individuals to "approaching" behaviors like loyalty, especially in high-involvement sectors (Aslam, 2021). This is where an inflection point happens on the positive side of the curve: between the zone of indifference generated by low satisfaction levels, and higher satisfaction levels that activate arousal that converts into action.

However, the arousal-motivation matrix also indicates that excessive positive arousal can be overwhelming, leading to emotional dysregulation and disengagement, which explains another inflection point, the "plateau" found by Eisenbeiss et al. (2014) illustrated earlier. Beyond a certain point, more satisfaction generates progressively lower effects on behavior, and the curve flattens toward the plateau.

Thus, the role of emotions in decision-making and the arousal-motivation matrix explain why there is a zone of indifference at mild levels of satisfaction, why more intense positive emotions are needed to drive arousal and why there is a plateau at extreme levels of satisfaction.

2.2 Understanding the disproportionate effect of dissatisfaction on behavior

On the flip side, neuroscience also highlights that individuals reach a relatively high negative state of arousal even with minor unpleasant emotions. The quick rise in arousal turns into a disproportionate motivation to avoid the source of discomfort, resulting in brand avoidance or defection. In addition to the authors mentioned above, similar findings were uncovered by Shigemune et al. (2020) and Seymour et al. (2007): negative emotions are more powerful than positive ones in motivating individuals to act (contrary to what happens on the satisfaction side, where mild positive emotions fall into the zone of indifference). Here, even mild dissatisfaction triggers negative behavioral responses. The underlying emotional mechanism is rooted in the foundational research by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) on loss aversion. An objective amount of negative stimulus ("loss") determines a disproportionate subjective perception of value "damage" compared to an equal objective amount of positive stimulus ("gain"). Seymour et al. (2007) estimated that the subjective value of an objective loss can be between 1.5 and 3 times higher than the subjective value of an equal amount of objective gain. This explains why there is an inflection point starting at minor dissatisfaction levels, and one of the reasons why the curve is asymmetric on the dissatisfaction vs. the satisfaction side: rather than falling into a zone of indifference as it happens with low satisfaction, customers experiencing even low levels of dissatisfaction over-react by distancing themselves from the brand.

2.3 Identifying levels of "delight" through brand equity research

Research on brand equity (Busacca & Padula, 2012; Keller, 2023) provide several managerial-friendly insights to identify how to drive higher satisfaction. Companies need to establish a clear brand *meaning* in consumers' mind through a combination of *Points of Parity* (POPs)—attributes that are essential for a brand to be perceived as a credible player within a category—and *Points of Difference* (PODs)—unique attributes that deliver higher value to customers and differentiate the brand from competitors. Meeting POP expectations is crucial to avoid customer dissatisfaction, while strong PODs drive satisfaction and loyalty. Hence, brands should concentrate on setting truly differential PODs and not failing customers on them, while reaching an "hygiene level" on POPs. There is an important point to underline for managerial purposes. Because PODs are determined through benchmarking with competitors, companies need to provide truly differential, not just salient attributes. With "me too" offers, even if relevant to the target segment, customers come across similar levels of satisfaction with other brands and they don't experience anything special that delights them. As underlined by Keiningham et al. (2015), satisfaction drives repeated purchase and higher share of wallet only when satisfaction is at higher levels when compared to other brands: it is the relative assessment of satisfaction—not the absolute one—that matters.

On the other side, benchmarking with best practice competitors indicates up to which point companies should invest in satisfaction with PODs to truly differentiate themselves, surpass the zone of indifference and reach customer delight.

Keller also highlights that emotion-driven PODs are the most powerful drivers of loyalty, leading to *Resonance*, the pinnacle of customer-brand attachment. Resonance incorporates both the behavioral and emotional components of loyalty, as it is defined as a combination of: (i) *behavior:* the frequency of purchases and volume bought within a category, contributing directly to business performance; (ii) *attitude*: a deep emotional bond where customers develop affection for the brand and are motivated to a sustained relationship with it; (iii) *active engagement*: the consumer's willingness to invest resources (time, energy) in the brand, e.g., through advocacy; (iv) *sense of community:* a connection with other brand users, reinforcing the emotional component through a sense of belonging, further increasing positive emotional states and engagement with the brand.

From a managerial standpoint, establishing the most appropriate levels of POPs and PODs is part of any marketing strategy: companies needs to understand where they are at par with competitors and where they deliver truly differential attributes to their target segment. Hence, comparison versus competitors helps determine when customers are in the sweet spot of arousal and motivation: at higher satisfaction with PODs compared to competitors.

3 Methodology

To investigate the shape of the satisfaction-behavior curve, this study employs a longitudinal case study, a methodology which is particularly effective in exploratory research aimed at understanding new phenomena in their natural context (Yin, 2014). Testing a new preliminary framework that combines multiple insights in real-world settings is critical for validating its applicability beyond theoretical constructs. A case study enables in-depth exploration of complex relationships and processes that are otherwise difficult to isolate in controlled environments (Yin, 2018). In this instance, there are multiple research insights that need to be connected to capture the full satisfaction-behavior curve and provide managerially useful preliminary guidelines on how satisfaction impacts behavior. Consequently, testing the model through a longitudinal case study is essential, as it allows the assessment of this relationship in a real business environment, where the full range of influencing factors can be observed and analyzed (Siggelkow, 2007). Moreover, a case study is particularly well-suited for this study because it aligns with the exploratory, qualitative nature of the research questions, while allowing for the observation of actual business outcomes. By analyzing how the proposed preliminary model was adopted in a service company undergoing a significant shift in its strategy, the study can evaluate its ability to drive measurable business results in a real-world scenario that theoretical testing would be unable to achieve (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3.1 Introduction to the case study

The case study covers how a Fortune 500 asset management company, providing pension solutions, personal investments and wealth management, revolutionized its approach from being product oriented to customer oriented, implementing satisfaction measurement and management tools to reach higher levels of loyalty and advocacy, and how this led to significant financial results over a period of 4 years. The transformation also granted the Company 2 Industry Awards for advancing research on satisfaction with customer experience.

The case draws on interviews with the Executive responsible for the development and implementation of the new approach, sanitized internal data and insights from literature used by the Executive to make the case for change. For confidentiality reasons, not all Figures are the exact ones used in the Company, but they were fully approved by Company representatives as illustrative of the actual insights driving their decision on build their transformation program.

3.2 Context

Before the transformation, the Company was a typical product-led organization, with a set of serious limitations towards the goal of understanding and managing satisfaction with customer experience. This is representative of a vast number of companies across all sectors: in the absence of a better, more reliable option like an actionable approach to customer orientation, companies resort to improving product or service according to priorities in managers' mind, in the belief that success will come from their view of product superiority.

Additionally, the three company's business lines—the Pension business, the Personal Investments business and the Wealth Management business—were, fundamentally, three different companies as they were run as siloes. The Pensions side of the business, by nature of the service, had a somewhat different approach to the relationship with customers due to its lifetime engagement nature, but all in all, the company was not attuned to the importance of effectively capturing customers' feedback when making decisions on product and/or process improvements. They just kept adding features to their offering, "shooting in the dark": one emblematic example was the company's habit of prioritizing the launch of new service features without clear evidence that they were important to customers, while the practice of understanding more fundamental customer pain points and then taking action to improve them was not systematically embedded in the process and was overall less of a priority.

The Company invested resources on extra features whose impact on customer satisfaction wasn't supported by any evidence, while downplaying or overlooking dissatisfaction. There were 30 different approaches in place, across countries and business lines, to measure satisfaction with customer experience, all of them fundamentally based on linear models. Although there were pockets of excellence, there was no way to understand whether one part of the business was doing better

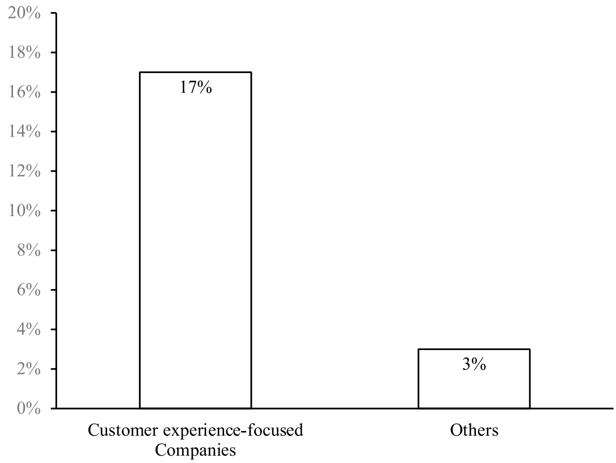

Fig. 1 Compound average annual revenue growth 2010–2015 of customer-focused organizations vs. others. *Source*: Forrester research, 2016

than another, and it wasn't clear if and how there were improvements that could be learned from one area of the business and transferred to other areas due the non-comparability of the measurements used.

Confronted with a total lack of visibility on how the brand was performing globally in customers' perception, the Company felt the urgency to implement one single approach, on a global scale, to measure satisfaction with customer experience and develop a common approach to drive improvements. To do so, they appointed a new Executive with a strong customer research background and vast experience in customer-oriented industries, to bring the customer's perspective inside the company.

3.3 Making the case for change

Getting the "customer agenda" first meant a shift towards a true customer-centric culture with customer-focused processes. The challenge was multi-faceted: siloed business lines; product-driven mentality; competing priorities; personal agendas; long-term customer relationships with many interaction points with satisfaction at stake, and a low level of understanding of the importance of satisfaction on business outcomes. The Executive head of the program had to make the case for change by using proof points and evidence from the Company's own customer data to prove that current measurements were inadequate to drive business impact. Top management was presented with various compelling prof points. The most important aspects that the Executive brought in, aligned with this article, were the focus on *business results driven by behavioral change*, rather than satisfaction per se, and an advanced approach to measure customer satisfaction. An example of evidence provided to top management is in Fig. 1.

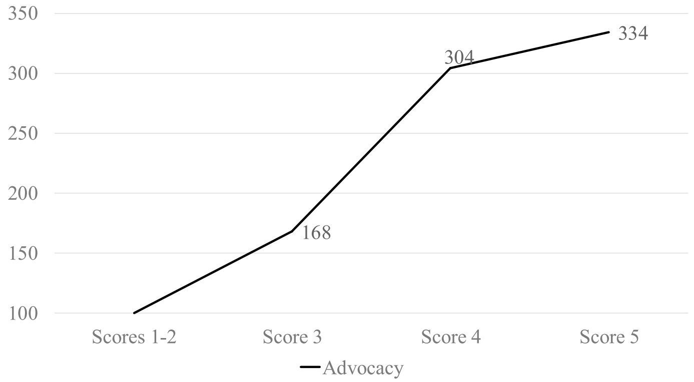

Fig. 2 Customer advocacy based on satisfaction levels, indexed. *Source*: Company analysis

Methodology[1]: data collection and processing included the creation of pairs of publicly traded companies across 500 categories (1000 companies analyzed), where one company in each of the pairs had a significantly above-average score and the other a significant below-average score in Forrester's Customer Experience Index[2]; revenue data for each company was collected from SEC filings and then normalized to isolate customer-driven revenue from other, non-operational sources. Statistical techniques applied were Paired-Samples t-Tests and Regression analyses.

Data in Fig. 1 is illustrative of the key objective of the initiative: generating financial returns from embracing a focus on satisfying customers. Later in the case discussion, we will highlight the impressive actual results achieved.

Having established the objective, two more core points needed to be addressed.

The first one was identifying the level of satisfaction that drove behavioral change, and the second was ensuring the highest ROI, given the costs involved. The analysis on the first point is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Methodology: the sample size was a longitudinal data set of 100.000+datapoints collected over 18 months. With a population size of 42 million customers, the confidence level was 99%. Data sources included satisfaction scores from post-interaction surveys conducted through digital channels and phone calls; sentiment analysis, i.e., data from unstructured sources such as customer reviews, social media and support tickets processed through NLP tools; advocacy data (indexed to 100 for satisfaction levels 1–2) from surveys and web data (referrals, brand mentions, likelihood to recommend). The platform used to combine and process the data was Medallia. Statistical techniques applied were correlation and quadratic regression analyses, with $\beta^2 < 0$ and p-value < 0.05 (exact values n.a. for confidentiality).

The chart showed that moving from a moderate level of satisfaction (3) to a higher one (4) yielded more than proportional effects on advocacy (the ultimate

[1] Full details unavailable due to proprietary methodology.

[2] Measures satisfaction with customer experience through surveys of customers who interacted with each brand over the course of the previous year. The index evaluates satisfaction with customer experience on effectiveness, ease, and emotional impact, with emotional responses being the strongest predictors of customer loyalty.

behavioral result of high satisfaction) and that beyond 4, the increase in advocacy levels started flexing towards less than proportional results. This added the notion of diminishing returns of improving satisfaction and the need for Companies to find the "sweet spot" before seeing a decline in ROI of additional investments.

On the dissatisfaction side, evidence from literature (Newell-Legner, 2016) was used to signal to management the severity of the consequences of dissatisfaction: research showed that it takes 12 positive experiences to make up for 1 dissatisfying experience, stressing the strong, disruptive effect of dissatisfaction.

The evidence from company data of decreasing returns from improving satisfaction above a certain level, and the finding of one episode of dissatisfaction being more incisive in driving defective behavior, align with the non-linear, asymmetric and plateauing satisfaction-behavior curve discussed above.

Fine-tuning and adopting this far-reaching approach to the relationship between satisfaction and behavior and creating a sense of urgency around measuring and managing customer satisfaction for improved business results took about a year. The size of the business, the diversity of business lines, the global distribution landscape and the complexity and number of stakeholders to align within a global company were the key factors making the endeavor very complex.

3.4 The satisfaction metric chosen by the Company

Once the objectives and rationales were in place, the next step was agreeing on a company-wide metric of satisfaction capable to effectively predict customer behavior. The wide experience of the Executive in charge included disappointing results with linear methods to measure satisfaction because of failure to see impact on business results. To better capture satisfaction-driven behavior, she drove the company to adopt Net Promoter Score (NPS) instead. NPS was developed by Fred Reicheld (2003), a partner at Bain & Company. It is interesting to note that this metric came from a consulting company, an entity that deals with managerial issues as its core business, and by nature has a strong managerial-oriented thinking.

On the one hand, NPS fully focuses on the behavioral consequences of satisfaction. The question asked is "*How likely are you to recommend [Company/Product/Service] to a friend or colleague?*". As discussed above, advocacy belongs to the ultimate level of satisfaction, where the emotional and cognitive attachment with the brand leads customers to act beyond loyalty to actively promote it. On the other hand, the metric captures the non-linearity and asymmetry of the satisfaction-behavior curve: it accounts for the highly negative impact coming from low levels of dissatisfaction; encompasses a "zone of indifference" and captures the sweet spot where satisfaction effectively drives behavior. On a 0–10 scale, NPS considers as "*Promoters*" customers giving scores of 9 and 10. These customers show behaviors that have a predictable positive impact on business results (increased share of wallet; loyalty; higher customer lifetime value, advocacy); "*Passives*" are customers giving scores of 7 and 8. This group, despite declaring satisfaction, might fail to develop positive behaviors or might even end up switching brands – they are in the zone of indifference; "*Detractors*" are customers giving a score from 0 to 6. The notable element is the inclusion of the mildly positive score 6 among detractors, capturing the risk coming even from low levels of willingness to advocate.

Net Promoter Score is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters, so it can have a score ranging from -100 to + 100. Passives, whose behavior is unpredictable, are taken out of the equation.

Research by Bain & Co shows that across industries, the Net Promoter Score can explain up to 60% of a company's organic growth rate, the rest being linked to market factors. As a context for the data that follow, research by Medallia and J.D. Power report that the best performing companies in Financial Services achieve NPS scores as high as 71.

Choosing NPS to measure behavior, rather than satisfaction per se, was a strong move towards business impact and capturing asymmetry and non-linearity, consistent with research findings illustrated above.

3.5 Deciding what to measure

With a metric that left no room for ambiguity, the next step was determining what to measure. Consistent with the importance of measuring an aggregated indicator of satisfaction as well as satisfaction with single service encounters for their potential impact on overall satisfaction, especially in the case of negative experiences, the Company developed two sets of measurements: one on overall satisfaction (oNPS) and one on key service encounters (eNPS).

The oNPS measured customer satisfaction with the Company as a result of all their interactions and was captured once a year by collecting at least 10.000 + oNPS scores.[3]

The eNPS measured key encounters along the customer journey, and was picked at various events or trigger points, e.g., digital interactions, client service encounters, relationships with financial advisors, key administrative experiences such as account management, and more. Each key interaction was measured through samples of at least 1.000[4] respondents.

These NPS measurement were a core part of a broader "Voice of the Customer" (VoC) program, a research method used by companies to capture insights on what customers express about a company in a wide variety of contexts and encompass structured and unstructured data. The program included understanding the underlying reasons for a given NPS score, by collecting key qualitative and operational data connecting NPS scores with customer emotions and behavior. The company analyzed data from diverse sources, including recorded call data, website behavior and heatmaps, customer reviews, live chats, social media interactions, sentiment analysis, and ad-hoc surveys. These varied data streams were integrated and processed in real-time to examine specific service encounters and to derive broader insights into the drivers of NPS scores and the underlying discrepancies between customer expectations and actual experiences. This approach aligns with findings by Ma et al.

[3] Confidence level: 95%.

[4] Confidence level: 95%.

(2019), who highlighted that the granularity and quality of data – both structured and unstructured, and especially emotional ones, are critical factors in enhancing the predictive power of satisfaction-behavior models. These programs require a strong technological backbone with powerful data integration and processing capacity, alongside AI for predictive algorithms. The company in this case study adopted Medallia as its technology platform to implement its VoC program.

Measuring behavioral outcomes of single episodes of customer experience and analyzing their impact on overall satisfaction led to a very accurate understanding of relevance and performance of service attributes: the Company didn't rely on external market research or assumptions, as it is often the case in businesses. It could directly detect and assess the "Points of Difference" that had the biggest effect on improving behavioral responses as captured by NPS scores. The process is best described in the next section.

3.6 Insights on key drivers of NPS scores

One of the main goals was identifying specific service attributes and features of service encounters that drove low, basic and high NPS scores, so that resources could be best allocated where it mattered: the delight-inducing attributes and the pain points.

The company investigated the effect of 20+ key service attributes on NPS scores. Via a digital survey, they collected data from 10.000+ customers on their experience with each key attribute and their NPS score and applied multiple regression analysis and structural equation modelling. The findings mirrored Maslow's hierarchy of needs: attributes addressing the top levels of the pyramid, typically loaded with highly positive emotions (joy, self-esteem, self-actualization) pushed NPS scores to the highest levels.

Experience with attributes linked to mere competent service, e.g., market standard features and core processes accessible online could only drive NPS scores to less than + 20: in the Executive's words, "*These were just the "hygiene" factors: they just meant that we could operate in the industry*". Satisfaction with easy-to-use interfaces and responsive handling of customer issues could only drive NPS in the range of + 20 to + 40. At this level of service, the company found that providing what customers considered "POPs" and/or mildly enhanced features were insufficient to even reach industry standards of NPS, confirming the zone of indifference where satisfaction doesn't drive positive behaviors for lack of emotional arousal.

Customization of a few service features and initial forms of personalization, i.e., making customers feel good with something especially crafted for them, could get NPS in the range of + 40 to + 60, i.e., towards industry good performance.

What really moved the needle on NPS scores was providing highly differentiated and personalized service through AI-driven anticipations of each single customer's needs. For example, nudging customers to adopt solutions that could improve their financial outcomes—solutions that they were not even aware they needed—could bring NPS in the + 60 to + 80 range.

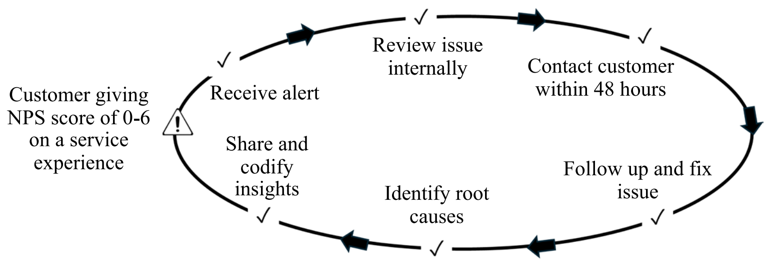

Fig. 3 "Immediate reaction loop" triggered by low NPS scores (0–6). *Source*: Sanitized company documents

Ultimately, proactively anticipating needs and providing highly personalized services designed around the customer's exact specifications across every aspect connected to the management of their financial assets, triggered customers' perception of receiving a top-performing personal service and the highly positive emotion of being considered an esteemed and appreciated individual by the Company. These attributes could drive NPS to more than + 80. As seen in literature review, these company findings confirm that behaviors (as captured by NPS) are driven by intense, highly positive emotional states.

3.7 Operationalizing improvements in NPS scores

With a solid measurement and understanding of the role of each attribute or feature on behavioral outcomes, the Company implemented the "Closed Loop" approach, part of Bain's Net Promoter system, to continuously learn and improve their business results. The Company focused on two main objectives: promptly address dissatisfying episodes to mitigate the significant effort required to restore trust after a single negative experience, and invest in service attributes and experiences to drive customers to a "Promoter" state.

To achieve these goals, the Company deployed two customers experience management processes. The first one, "Immediate reaction loop", was designed to ensure rapid responses to fix dissatisfying experiences and mitigate their fast, damaging effects on behavior. It was triggered by any service encounter receiving an NPS scores of 0–6 ("detractors") which generated a proactive outreach (call/message). This "Immediate reaction loop" is described in Fig. 3.

The second loop leveraged the collection of eNPS scores between 0 and 6 on key 10 + interaction points along the customer journey, with 3000 + data point per interaction.[5] Low NPS scores were coupled with qualitative insights coming from the customers' ticket analysis, call recordings, social media activity (processed through NLP within the Medallia platform) on each of the key interactions. By doing so, the Company was able to get an in-depth understanding of what drove low NPS in each interaction and implement a process of innovation and improvement to drive

[5] Confidence level: 95%.

customers beyond the "indifference zone" of 6. This was the "Improvement and Innovation" loop, illustrated in Fig. 4.

This investigation was re-run every 6 months, to capture potential changes in customers' expectations and assessments.

3.8 Results achieved

Internal sanitized data report that at the end of the 4 years, most of the global business lines had implemented the VoC program illustrated above, with high impact both on NPS scores and on financial results. Regarding NPS, *oNPS* increased by ~ 30 points in all business lines adopting the new approach, and *eNPS* scores doubled in a core Country. Business results included a ~ 50% increase in overall net sales in businesses adopting the new approach and net sales to Promoters were ~ 4.5 times those of Detractors. In addition, the Company was granted 2 National Awards for spearheading research and insights in satisfaction with customer experience.

4 Discussion and managerial implications

The research questions of this article were:

A) What is the shape of the satisfaction-behavior curve?
B) Which are the drivers influencing the satisfaction-behavior curve?

As far as question A) is concerned, this preliminary research depicts a non-linear, asymmetric satisfaction-behavior curve with four key inflection points, as illustrated in Fig. 5.

As far as question B) is concerned, we observe the following drivers influencing the curve.

On the satisfaction side, the curve is S-shaped because of two key inflection points. The first part of the curve is the zone of indifference, where satisfaction

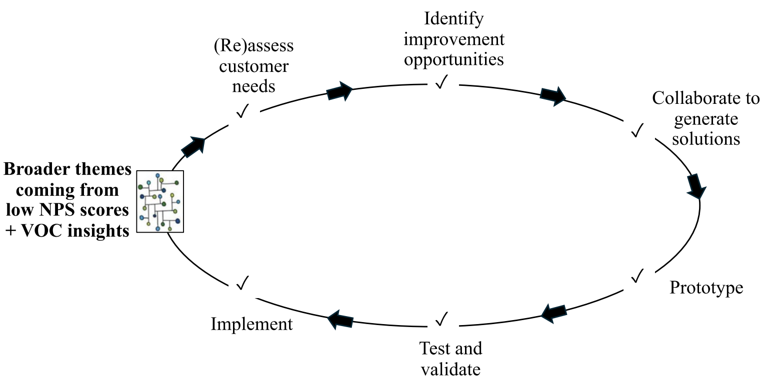

Fig. 4 Improvement and Innovation loop. *Source*: Sanitized company documents

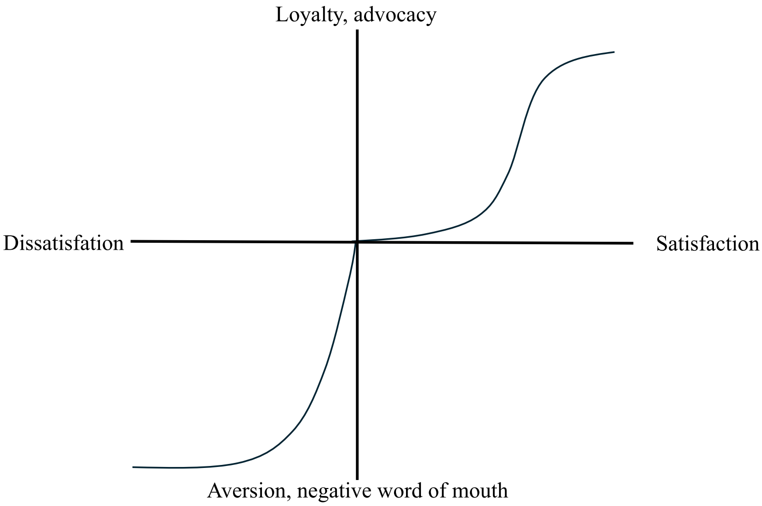

Fig. 5 Satisfaction-Behavior curve

doesn't have any significant effect on behavior. Here, individuals don't perceive a sufficient level of emotional arousal that motivates them to approach and stay with the source of the positive emotion (the brand). Factors concurring to this outcome are satisfaction with just Points of Parity or "me too" offers. Past this level, satisfaction starts producing positive emotions and arousal that motivate customers to act (loyalty/advocacy). The higher the satisfaction with these attributes, the more customers are emotionally and behaviorally attached to the brand. This "sweet spot" is characterized by satisfaction with best practice PODs and personalization that provide highly positive emotional states. The ultimate level of satisfaction is delight, coming from experiences that thrill customers, like proactive offers that anticipate their needs, well beyond what competitors offer. Beyond delight, however, the curve reaches a plateau, where satisfaction stops having further effects on behavior. From the customers' emotional point of view, too intense levels of positive arousal can lead to emotional dysregulation that customers tend to avoid; from a managerial point of view, at this point customers are receiving PODs at best practice levels in the industry and companies should stop investing in further increasing satisfaction, while ensuring they deliver industry-standard levels of POPs.

On the dissatisfaction side, two connected factors determine the steep downward curve that quickly flats out at the bottom level of aversion and negative word of mouth. Loss aversion leads individuals to disproportionate perceptions of subjective losses even at mild levels of dissatisfaction; in this state, the fast dynamic of negative emotions on arousal quicky brings up distancing behaviors. With each bit of additional dissatisfaction, from disappointment (mild dissatisfaction) to frustration (medium dissatisfaction) and anger (strong dissatisfaction), customers continue to perceive a disproportionate need to distance themselves from the source of discomfort (the dissatisfying brand), quickly reaching the bottom-level state of brand aversion.

The curve incorporates the findings on the satisfaction-behavior curve emerged from literature and provides practical insights for managers to facilitate their efforts to steer customer satisfaction towards business results. The following key managerial implications emerge.

On the satisfaction side, managers should target the zone of indifference to move customers beyond it, through improvements to PODs that will deliver highly positive emotions (i.e., delight) to trigger actual behavioral change. Once the service firm reaches a level of delivery on PODs just above best practice industry levels, it should stop investing further to avoid diminishing ROI and keep its advantage by continuously monitoring the evolving dynamics of POPs and PODs, influenced by changing consumers' attitudes and expectations and by competitors' responses.

On the dissatisfaction side, managers should act fast on mildly dissatisfying episodes and prevent strong dissatisfaction and/or multiple disappointing experiences, as these might determine severe damage to the relationship with customers, that would be difficult to recover. Companies should adopt real-time measurements for key service encounters and implement fast service recovery processes. These actions prevent that consumers' negative emotions sink in and turn into motivation to distance themselves from the brand. It is important that recovery processes are not only quick but also proactive, since only 5–10% of service customers voice their dissatisfaction through complaints (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2022). Service firms should also focus on medium–high dissatisfaction because this turns into defection: they should monitor defection rates and understand its underlying reasons. Defecting customers is a severe value loss for companies, as discussed. Research shows that profitability from retained customers grows incrementally from 25 to 144 dollars every year across industries (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2022). Yet, many companies mainly focus on customer acquisition to pursue business growth, falling in the "leaky bucket" trap. Even if the company were able to replace all lost customers and more through acquisition, losing an above-average share of existing customers significantly hits profitability. While a portion of customer loss is inevitable, benchmarking defection rates to industry and best practice levels ensures that the company is not experiencing overly high defection rates and profitability loss. Service firms should run in-depth analyses on what drives defection and take appropriate action, e.g., identify where failures typically occur along the customer journey, redesign the service blueprint in those points, review service standards and performances and train employees accordingly.

5 Limitations and future investigation

This study's preliminary insights are based on a single case study, in the specific context of the financial services sector, characterized by high emotional engagement, trust and risk perception. These factors may have amplified the role of emotions (Kankam & Charnor, 2023) in the satisfaction-behavior relationship observed in this study, and may not be entirely applicable to sectors with lower emotional intensity. These two factors inherently limit the generalizability of insights and their transferability to other industries and contexts.

To assess the validity of the proposed preliminary curve, future research should replicate this study in industries with similar high involvement such as healthcare and legal services to validate it in these contexts, and then in industries with lower emotional involvement, e.g., retail and fast food. Comparative studies across different sectors would allow to refine the curve and expand its applicability.

Additionally, as in any single-case study research, another limitation arises from the reliance on internal company data and customer feedback methods. Although extensive, these data reflect a single organization's perspective, which may introduce organizational biases. Another direction for future research would be to validate the curve with cross-organizational or industry-wide datasets to validate it across broader contexts. By diversifying data sources, biases would be mitigated (Aslam, 2021).

Finally, another limitation arises from not addressing the potential impact of moderating variables such as cultural differences, market maturity, or competitive intensity. For example, in low competition conditions, the satisfaction-behavior curve may exhibit fewer inflection points, as customers have fewer alternatives to switch to. Similarly, cultural differences may shape how customers experience and respond to satisfaction (Aslam, 2021). These variables might play a significant role in the generalizability of the curve and require exploration in future studies.

Future research along these lines would determine the validity and generalizability of the proposed satisfaction-behavior curve and/or bring additional or different elements that would provide a more solid toolkit for managers seeking to navigate the complexities of customer satisfaction in an increasingly competitive, diverse and evolving market landscape.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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