

## Customer satisfaction, customer delight, customer retention and customer loyalty: Borderlines and insights

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### ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of customer satisfaction and customer delight on customer loyalty through customer retention. Data were collected using a questionnaire developed based on the literature and administered to a sample of restaurant customers consisting of 376 customers. Using IBM SPSS and AMOS software for data analyses, the results indicate that customer retention had a perfect mediating role in the effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and a partial mediating role in the effect of customer delight on customer loyalty. The study provided several contributions. A key contribution to researchers is that the effect of customer satisfaction on other variables, particularly customer loyalty should be assessed in terms of its direct and indirect effects. A basic contribution to managers is that both satisfied and delighted customers have potential intentions to defect, hence, retaining customers is a crucial step to ensure loyalty. Delighted customers are more likely to be retained and retained customers are ready to be loyal customers.

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### 1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction (CS) receives great attention from both scholars and practitioners. Two of its important contributions are customer retention (CR) and customer loyalty (CL). The influence of CS on CR and CL is well established in the literature as numerous studies exerted significant and positive effects of CS on CR (e.g., Liu & Keh, 2015; Alkitbi et al., 2020; Al-Gharaibah, 2020; Al-Hawary & Obiadat, 2021) as well as CL (e.g., Leninkumar, 2017; Chiguvu & Guruwo, 2017; Öztürk, 2015; Yulisetiari, 2016; Kiran & Diljit, 2017; Othman et al., 2020; Al-Hawary & Al-Fassed, 2021). CS refers to meeting or slightly exceeding customer expectations (Berman, 2005). CR assumes a continuation of customer-firm relationship (Darzi & Bhat, 2018). CL represents a promise of a customer to continue purchasing particular products or services of a firm over a specific period of time (Oliver, 1999; Al-Hawary & Al-Khazaleh, 2020; Leninkumar, 2017).

Generally, customers are divided based on their satisfaction degree into two types; i.e., dissatisfied and satisfied customers (Parasuraman et al., 2020; Alolayyan et al., 2018; Souca, 2014). Dissatisfied customers have negative perceptions of product or service performance because their expectations had not been fulfilled (Berman, 2005). Satisfied customers are those whose expectations were met or slightly exceeded (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). A third related type, though distinct, is delighted customers. Customer delight (CD) signifies those whose expectations were extremely exceeded to a surprising level (Oliver et al., 1997; Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Barnes et al., 2020; Widodo, 2021).

Distinguishing satisfied customers from delighted customers is important because it helps companies retain customers and converting them into loyal customers. Mostly, CS had been regarded as a significant antecedent of CL (Chanpariyavatevong et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Avgeli et al., 2020; Al-Hawary & Harahsheh, 2014). Nevertheless, high levels of CS do not always mean high levels of CL (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004; Bowen and Chen, 2001; Barnes et al., 2020). That is, CS does not guarantee customers with zero defect or, in other words, customers who have no intention to switch to competitors (Komalawati & Ariftio, 2021; Al-Hawary, 2013; Alshurideh et al., 2017). Therefore, CS alone is insufficient to assure CR

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and hence CL. Keeping eyes on the findings of prior works, the aim of this study is to contribute to the literature through providing insights on the borderlines between CS, CD, CR, and CL. The study instructs marketing managers to determine the position of their current customers, if they were satisfied, delighted, or retained customers then design their effective marketing programs. Specifically, the aim of this study is to investigate the effect of CS and CD on CL through CR in order to answer the following question: do CD matter for CR and CL?

## 2. Theoretical background, research hypotheses and model

### 2.1 Customer satisfaction

CS is a function of customer expectations and a product/service performance (Churchill Jr. & Surprenant, 1982; Suchánek et al., 2015; Cengiz, 2010). Customers are satisfied when the actual performance of a product/service is greater than their expectations. Satisfied customers are those who feel that their expectations were met (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). Therefore, CS has been defined as the overall customer response to a product purchase experience (Ali et al., 2021; Al-Hawary et al., 2017). Numerous benefits of CS were cited in the literature. Examples include a positive impact on CL (Oliver, 1999; Rahim et al., 2012; Leninkumar, 2017; Slack et al., 2020; Aburayya et al., 2020; Dam&Dam, 2021; Budur & Poturak, 2021), a negative effect on customer defection (Walsh et al., 2006; Komalawati & Ariftio, 2021), increase customer profitability (Rust & Zahorik, 1993; Chi & Gursay, 2009), and a positive effect on CD (Alzoubi et al., 2020). In terms of CS measurements, expectation disconfirmation is the most common concept used to assess satisfaction. The idea is that a customer's expectation is compared to product/service performance, better than expected performance results in satisfaction and lower than expected leads to dissatisfaction (Metabis & Al-Hawary, 2013; Bartikowski & Llosa, 2004).

### 2.2 Customer delight

CD has been defined as the extreme emotional state resulting from exceeding customer expectations positively to a surprising degree (Liu & Keh, 2015; Barnes et al., 2020). Delighted customers experience unexpected positive utility or value (Pallas et al., 2014) and receive a right experience (Dhevika et al., 2014). Extending the literature on customer delight, Parasuraman (2020: 22) indicated that CD is more than surprise and joy and defined it as a combination of six features related to positive emotions, customer interactions, successful problem solving, timing of the events, customer senses, and sense of control characterize the customer's encounter. CD had been conceptualized as an extreme form of CS and as a distinct construct. (Barnes & Krallman, 2019; Parasuraman, 2020). CS encompasses both emotion and cognition while CD comprises emotion (Kim et al., 2015). The most important benefit of CD is that it prevents customers from switching to competitors (Barnes et al., 2020). Other positive outcomes of CD include increasing customer repurchase intention, customer positive word of mouth, and CL (Kim and Park, 2019; Barnes & Krallman, 2019; Park, 2019). Enhancing CD requires first ensuring satisfaction through providing a good level of performance then adding attractive requirements that support CD (Kim and Park, 2019).

### 2.3 Customer retention

CR refers to customer continuity to consume the same products or to deal with a specific company (Ascarza et al., 2018; Mohammad et al., 2020). Al-Hawary et al., (2017) defined CR as "overall marketing strategies and actions aimed at retaining both new and existing customers by building, preserving, and optimizing mutual long-term gains that deepen and extend two parties' joint connection". CR was conceptualized as a contractual relationship between a customer and product/service provider (Gerpott et al., 2001). CR is a result of making a customer delighted (Oliver et al., 1997; Liu & Keh, 2015). In order to ensure CR, companies should pursue to enhance customer satisfaction from his or her first interactions (Arora&Kaur, 2018). For the current study, CR was defined as retaining satisfied customers who have zero defect intention, i.e., delighted customers. Such a definition can be justified based on the idea that a high level of customer satisfaction does not guarantee customers from switching (Chang et al., 2013; Sumaedi et al., 2014), which means that delighted customers are ready to be retained based on their superior experience. Therefore, CR can be measured using customer intention to continue or terminate the contractual relationship with the company or service provider (Gerpott et al., 2001; Qadri & Khan, 2014).

### 2.4 Customer loyalty

Watson et al. (2015: 15) defined CL as "a set of attitudes that are associated with a set of purchasing habits that favor one company over competing entities". Omeregic et al. (2019) defined CL as a firm's ability to win a customer's support over competitors. CL was considered a customer's deep commitment to repeat purchase from the same firm (Al-Hawary, S. I. & Al-Fassed). The most important features of CL are related to a customer's repurchase relationship with the firm and his or her recommendations to other customers (Aldaihani et al., 2020; Omeregic et al., 2019; Al-Hawary & Harahsheh, 2014). CL is measured using behavioral and attitudinal measures (Eldahamshah et al., 2021; Saini & Singh, 2020). The behavioral measures consist of items related to a customer's repurchase behavior, frequency of purchase (Khan et al., 2015). On the other hand, attitudinal loyalty entails positive attitudes toward a product/service or a company/service provider (Watson et al., 2015). Scholars found positive consequences of CL such as preferring the company to its competitors (Evanschitzky et al., 2012), firm profitability and image through customer positive word of mouth (Bowen and Chen, 2001). On the other side, examples of antecedents of CL include service quality (Aydin & Özer, 2005), customer commitment to the company (Rai & Medha, 2013) as well as CL (Oliver, 1999; Al-Slehat, 2021; Dam&Dam, 2021).

## 2.5 Customer satisfaction, customer delight and customer retention

CS helps business firms retain their customers (Alkitbi et al., 2020; Al-Gharaibah, 2020; Liu & Keh, 2015). Results of many studies exerted a positive link between CS and CR (Alkitbi et al., 2020; Darzi & Bhat, 2018; Tariqa et al., 2022). However, some studies (e.g., Almohaimmeed, 2019) indicated that CS had no significant effect on CR. Despite the importance of CS for CR, firms cannot retain all customers; those who are satisfied in terms of their attribute satisfaction and overall satisfaction (Woo and Fock, 2004; Kim et al., 2014). The overall satisfaction and attribute satisfaction leads to a highly satisfied customer, but it does not lead to a delighted customer. As stated above, a high level of CS does not always guarantee a customer with no defect (Chang et al., 2013; Sumaedi et al., 2014; Komalawati & Ariftio, 2021). In line with CR definition in this study, it was concluded that customers whose retention is sought are delighted customers. Efforts of CR should be directed to delighted customers (Hadiwijaya et al., 2021). Delighted customers require actual product or service performance that exceeds their expectations with a positive surprise (Oliver et al., 1997) and therefore CD has a greater influence on CR than CS. In order to assert (or reject) this conclusion, it was hypothesized that:

**H1:** CS is significantly and positively related to CR.

**H2:** CD is significantly and positively related to CR.

## 2.6 Customer retention and customer loyalty

It was acknowledged that maintaining current customers is more effective than acquiring new customers (Hennig & Thurau, 2004; Narayana & Durga, 2017; Al-Madi et al., 2018). The idea behind CR is the long-term relationships with customers (Singh, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Bramulya et al., 2016) in order to encounter their changing requirements, developing effective programs to solve their complaints, and analyzing CS data to identify the causes behind customer defection. The benefit of maintaining a closer relationship with customers is that it enables the company to explore customer needs and desires and therefore transform them into loyal customers (Zineldin, 2006). Referring to AlTaweel & Al-Hawary (2021), CR is understood as a behavioral future intention with a strong link with CL. Few empirical studies were carried out to investigate the effect of CR on CL. However, some studies (e.g., Nikhashemi et al., 2013) revealed a significant and positive linkage between CR and CL. Based on these studies, a significant relationship between CR and CL was assumed:

**H3:** CR is significantly and positively associated with CL.

## 2.7 Customer satisfaction, customer delight and customer loyalty

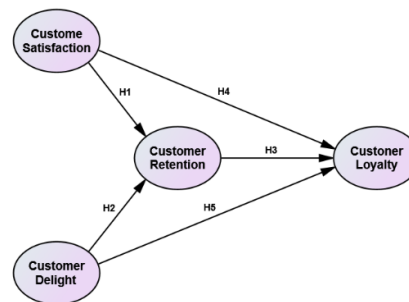
There is a significant positive association between CS and CL (Al-Hawary, 2013; Ibojo & Asabi, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2017; Leninkumar, 2017; Yazid et al., 2020; Al-Slehat, 2021). CL increases if CS is raised to a certain level, i.e., customers should be extremely satisfied to ensure a positive effect of CS on CL (Bowen and Chen, 2001). Considering the statement that a high level of CS is not good enough to ensure CL (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004; Bowen and Chen, 2001; Barnes et al., 2020), generalizing the positive effect of CS on CL should be limited to many factors such as industry, methodology, measurements and customer-related factors. Oliver (1999: 33) put it in the following statement “satisfaction is a necessary step in loyalty formation but becomes less significant as loyalty begins to set through other mechanisms”. For him, CL is affected by nonsatisfaction factors such as variety seeking. In this study, CS was conceptualized for the purpose of this study as a state in which customers are just satisfied (Oliver, 1999). CD refers to already satisfied customers who experience additional features such as positive emotions, interpersonal interactions with market actors, problem solving when face challenges, senses that influence customer experience, time of delivery, and a sense of control through mutual collaboration (Parasuraman, 2020; Alhalalmeh et al., 2020; Abu Qaad et al., 2011). In order to investigate the effects of CS and CD on CL, the following hypotheses were proposed:

**H4:** CS is significantly and positively associated to CL.

**H5:** CD is significantly and positively associated to CL.

## 2.8 Research model

Fig. 1 shows the conceptual model of the study. It consists of four constructs linked via five hypotheses.



**Fig. 1.** Research conceptual model

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1 Population and sample

Customers of ten small/medium size supermarkets comprise the population of the study. A convenience sample was recruited to gather research data. Two instruments were administered; the first one was designed to collect data on CS and CD while the second one was designed to collect data on CR and CL. That is to collect data from different sources and therefore reduce the common method bias. A total of 476 instruments were collected, 48 were excluded due to incomplete responses, and 52 were identified as extreme values. The final sample size was 376 respondents.

#### 3.2 Research instrument

CS was measured using four items related to attribute performance such as hygiene quality, food quality, responsiveness, and environment (Almohaimmeed, 2017). CD was measured through four self-developed items related to positive emotions, good interactions with employees, problem solving, and timing of delivery based on Parasuraman (2020). Four items related to customer intention to continue or terminate the relationship with the restaurant was developed based on prior works (e.g., Gerpott et al., 2001; Qadri & Khan, 2014; Alshurideh, 2016) and used to assess CR. In addition to items signifying customer repurchase intention, recommendations, positive word of mouth were adapted from Zhong & Moon (2020) and one self-developed item was used to evaluate CL of restaurant customers. The questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

#### 3.3 Common method bias and multicollinearity

Common method bias (CMB) is deemed as a key source of measurement error. In order to address CMB, data were collected from different sources (Mithas et al., 2005). The sample was divided into two groups. The first group was asked to assess CS and CD, while the second one was asked to evaluate CR and CL. Further, the current study used Harman's single-factor test. The test is applied through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to load all measurement items on one single factor with an unrotated factor solution to calculate the variance explained by a single factor. The single factor should explain less than 50 percent of the variance (Darzi & Bhat, 2018: 668). The results indicate that the total variance explained for the single factor in this study is 37.81 percent, which means that CMB is not a problem. On the other hand, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) showed that multicollinearity is not an issue as VIF values were less than 10 and tolerance values were higher than 0.1 (Al-Hawary & Al-Syasneh, 2020).

#### 3.4 Validity and reliability

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was first used to test variables factorability. The results showed that KMO value is higher than 0.50 and the approx. value of Chi-square is significant. Moreover, the results of the exploratory factor analysis showed that four components were extracted as shown in Fig. 2.

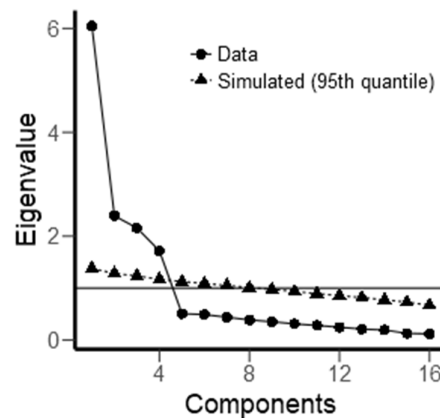


Fig. 1. Scree Plot

Validity was tested using convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE) while discriminant validity was checked by the square root of AVE values ( $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ ). Confirming what was exhibited in Fig. 1, the results in Table 1 pointed out that four factors were extracted, i.e., CS, CD, CR and CL with loadings higher than 0.75. Factor loading should be greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017; Seopela & Zulu, 2022). In terms of descriptive statistics, it was found that CS, CD, CR and CL degrees were moderate. Convergent validity was assured as AVE values were higher than 0.5 (Kim, 2022). The results indicate that the correlation coefficients between independent variables were less than the square root of AVE values (diagonal bold value with correlation matrix), which fulfills the threshold of discriminant validity (Kim, 2022; Gill et al., 2022). Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and McDonald's Omega ( $\omega$ ) were used to test reliability with threshold value of 0.70 (Baledi & Saed, 2017; Al-Hawary & Al-Syasneh, 2020). The results revealed that all

alpha and omega values were greater than 0.70. A next step after validity and reliability calculations is to test the model fit. CMIN/DF (Chi-square-to-degree of freedom ratio), GFI (the Goodness of Fit Index), CFI (the Comparative Fit Index), PNFI (the Parsimony Normed Fitindex) and RMSEA (the Root Mean Squared Approximation of Error) are five indices used for the purpose of model fit. The results in Table 1 reports that the current model fits data well. The value of CMIN/Df should be less than 3.0 (Alolayyan et al., 2018), GFI and CFI are required to be greater than 0.90 (Al-Slehat, 2020). PNFI is greater than 0.50 (Bazan et al., 2019), and RMSEA should be less than 0.08 (Abbad et al., 2019).

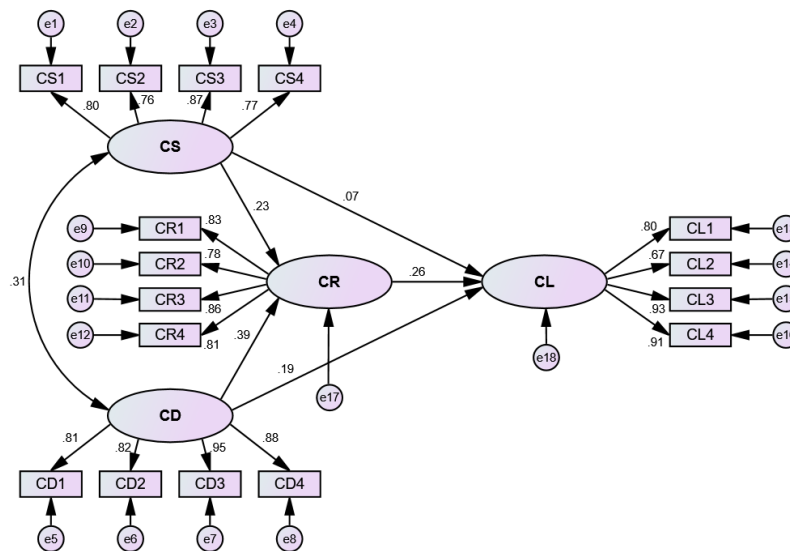
**Table 1**  
Results of EFA and correlation matrix

Rotated component matrix			Descriptive Stat.		Validity & Reliability			Correlation Matrix			
Constructs	Items	Load.	Mean	SD.	AVE	$\alpha$	$\omega$	CS	CD	CR	CL
Customer satisfaction	CS1	0.855	3.03	0.727	0.682	0.876	0.877	<b>0.826</b>			
	CS2	0.800									
	CS3	0.815									
	CS4	0.833									
Customer delight	CD1	0.849	2.85	0.756	0.753	0.924	0.925	0.285	<b>0.868</b>		
	CD2	0.856									
	CD3	0.899									
	CD4	0.866									
Customer retention	CR1	0.853	3.19	0.734	0.684	0.892	0.892	0.309	0.439	<b>0.827</b>	
	CR2	0.797									
	CR3	0.840									
	CR4	0.816									
Customer loyalty	CL1	0.864	3.32	0.818	0.730	0.900	0.902	0.207	0.301	0.357	<b>0.854</b>
	CL2	0.757									
	CL3	0.891									
	CL4	0.897									

KMO = 0.859, Approx. Chi-square = 4196.591, df = 120, Sig. = 0.000  
 Initial Eigenvalues = 6.05 (CS), 2.39 (CD), 2.16 (CR), 1.72 (CL).  
 Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
 Model fit: CMIN/DF = 2.77, GFI = 0.914, CFI = 0.958, PNFI = 0.765, RMSEA = 0.069

**4. Research findings and discussion**

The results in Table 2, which exhibited in Fig. 2, supported the hypotheses that CS is positively related to CR ( $\beta_{total\ effect} = 0.232, P = 0.001$ ), CD is positively related to CR ( $\beta_{total\ effect} = 0.392, P = 0.000$ ), as well as, CR exerts a significant effect on CL ( $\beta_{total\ effect} = 0.263, P = 0.000$ ). On the other hand, CS had a significant effect on CL ( $\beta_{total\ effect} = 0.130, P = 0.047$ ). Nevertheless, the direct effect of CS on CL was insignificant ( $\beta_{direct\ effect} = 0.069, P = 0.276$ ) while its indirect effect was significant ( $\beta_{indirect\ effect} = 0.061, P = 0.001$ ). CD had both direct and indirect significant effects on CL ( $\beta_{direct\ effect} = 0.191, P = 0.004; \beta_{indirect\ effect} = 0.103, P = 0.000$ ). Consequently, H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 were supported.



**Fig. 2.** Research structural model

Based on the results, it should be noted that there is a perfect mediation of customer retention in the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty while there is a partial mediation of customer retention between customer delight and customer loyalty.

**Table 2**  
Results of hypotheses testing

H	paths			Total effects		Direct effects		Indirect effects	
				$\beta$	P	$\beta$	P	$\beta$	P
H1	CS	→	CR	0.232	0.001	0.232	0.001	-	-
H2	CD	→	CR	0.392	0.000	0.392	0.000	-	-
H3	CR	→	CL	0.263	0.000	0.263	0.000	-	-
H4	CS	→	CL	0.130	0.047	0.069	0.276	0.061	0.001
H5	CD	→	CL	0.294	0.000	0.191	0.004	0.103	0.000

It was found that the current results were echoed in prior works. In line with the current results, one of the most important benefits of CS is its negative effect on customer defection (Walsh et al., 2006; Komalawati & Ariftio, 2021) or in other words its positive effect in retaining customers. That is, there is a significant effect of CS on CR (Darzi & Bhat, 2018; Dastane & Fazlin, 2017). Almohaimmed (2019) found no significant effect of CS on CR. Moreover, CS exerts a significant effect on CL (Yazid et al., 2020; Al-Slehat, 2021). Similarly, one of the most important benefits of CD is preventing customers from switching to competitors (Barnes et al., 2020). CR retention had also a significant effect on CL (Nikhashemi et al., 2013).

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of customer satisfaction and customer delight on both customer retention and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction and customer delight were independent variables, customer retention was the mediating one, and customer loyalty was the dependent variable. The results pointed out that both customer satisfaction and customer delight had significant effects on customer retention and loyalty. Customer retention had also a significant effect on customer loyalty. Such results assume that customer retention mediates the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as well as between customer delight and customer loyalty. This assumption is true in terms of the total effects and not in terms of direct and indirect effects. The findings indicate that the mediating role of customer retention between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is perfect, while the mediating role of customer retention between customer delight and customer loyalty is partial. That is to say, customer satisfaction had no significant direct effect on customer loyalty but had a significant indirect effect on customer loyalty through customer retention, whereas customer delight had direct and indirect effects on customer effects. Based on the results it was concluded that the effect of customer delight on customer retention is greater than the effect of customer satisfaction on customer retention, and in contrast to customer delight, customer satisfaction does not lead to customer loyalty.

## 6. Contribution to literature

There is a gap in the literature as few empirical studies were carried out to explore the effects of customer satisfaction and customer delight on customer retention and customer loyalty. The current study helps fill such a gap. Moreover, despite the importance of previous studies on customer satisfaction and its relationships with other variables such as customer loyalty, the majority of their results were extracted based on the total effects of customer satisfaction. The current results showed that customer satisfaction had a significant total effect on customer satisfaction divided into insignificant direct and significant indirect effects. Therefore, researchers are required to investigate the impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty considering some other mediating factors. In line with recent works on customer delight (Barnes & Krallman, 2019; Parasuraman, 2020), the study confirms that customer satisfaction is a distinct construct, which means that research should not regard customer delight as a state with customer satisfaction.

## 7. Contribution to management

This study contributes to customer management through providing new insights on the process of customer loyalty formation. First, it distinguishes between customers who are satisfied and those who are delighted. Customer satisfaction is a range that starts with merely satisfied customers and ends with highly satisfied customers, whereas customer delight as a second step begins with highly satisfied customers who receive additional benefits such as problem solving and experience and who have emotional attachment to the product/service/firm. Second, the results suggest that customers who are more likely to be retained are delighted customers with no defect intention. Third, loyal customers are those who already have long-term relationships with the firm. Accordingly, managers are required to develop their programs considering the following insights. First, meeting customer expectations leads to satisfied customers, and going beyond such expectations yields delighted customers. Second, satisfied customers as well as delighted customers may develop defection intentions; hence, effective CR programs are required to retain customers. Delighted customers are more likely to be retained. Retaining customers is very crucial for firms due to its role in drawing a borderline between those who have a potential defect (satisfied and delighted customers) and those who are retained by long-term relationships with zero defect intentions (retained customers). Third, retained customers are ready to be loyal customers; therefore, marketing programs should be designed to enrich their experience to reach the final step in loyalty formation, which is customer loyalty. Borderlines between CS, CD, CR and CL can be seen in Fig. 3.

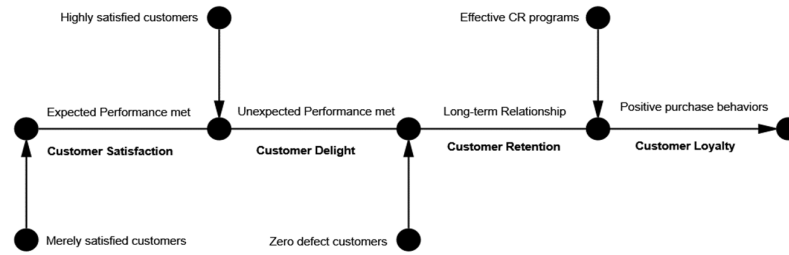


Fig. 3. Borderlines between CS, CD, CR and CL

## 8. Limitations and future research directions

The sample of the study is the first limitation. Data were collected from restaurant customers; therefore, future studies should use samples from different industries. The degree of customer satisfaction in this study was moderate, which raises a new question; is there any differences if customers were highly satisfied. More studies are required to examine the effect that highly satisfied customers have on customer retention and customer loyalty.

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