

# THE INFLUENCE OF TIME INVESTED ON INITIAL STAGES OF THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY ON SATISFACTION WITH A SERVICE EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract:

This research explores the influence of time spent in the information search and booking phases on consumer satisfaction during the service experience focusing on the hospitality industry. Utilizing Process modeling tool, the study investigates how greater time invested in these pre-service activities can lead to superior expectations, which may reduce satisfaction when experiencing the service. The research also analyzes the moderating role of emotional experience during the service, finding that positive experiences can mitigate the negative effects of extended pre-service time by helping confirm consumer expectations. Data were collected from 1,000 tourists in Istanbul, Türkiye, regarding their experience in several hotels and restaurants. The findings suggest that optimizing digital platforms to reduce the time invested in them is critical for enhancing satisfaction. Additionally, the importance of fostering a positive emotional experience during the service is crucial for confirming previous expectations and guaranteeing consumer satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Satisfaction, customer journey, hospitality services, emotional experience, engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

Hospitality consumers are increasingly relying on digital platforms to search for information and make reservations. The emergence of new technologies in the travel customer journey has provided consumers with unparalleled access to information, allowing them to make more informed decisions. However, this abundance of information can create challenges, especially when it comes to managing consumer expectations. As consumers increasingly rely on digital platforms to plan their travel experiences, the ability to efficiently manage and meet their expectations becomes a key differentiator for businesses. The prolonged search and booking times not only risk overwhelming consumers with choices but also heighten their expectations, making it challenging to deliver a satisfactory service experience. This phenomenon, known as information overload, indicates that when consumers are faced with an overwhelming amount of information, they may have difficulty making decisions, leading to anxiety and lower satisfaction (Sharma et al., 2023). In the hospitality sector, this can manifest itself in consumers developing unrealistic expectations which, when not met, result in lower satisfaction during the actual service experience.

Similarly, the booking process plays an important role in shaping consumer satisfaction. The time spent during this phase can significantly influence expectations, particularly as consumers increasingly turn to digital platforms to make reservations. Factors such as the ease of use and functionality of online booking systems directly impact consumer satisfaction, as long interaction times can lead to frustration and lower satisfaction if the booking process is perceived as cumbersome (Kourtesopoulou et al., 2019). Even the sheer volume of choice during a booking, which involves increased time comparing possibilities, negatively affects their overall satisfaction (Perinotto et al., 2022).

Despite the potential negative impact of long search and booking times, positive emotional experiences during service can mitigate these effects. Emotional experiences are critical in shaping consumer satisfaction, and positive emotions often override prior frustrations or unmet expectations (Ali et al., 2015). Emotional responses to service encounters significantly influence overall satisfaction, particularly in the hospitality industry, where experiences are often laden with emotional meaning (Alarcón-López et al., 2023). Positive emotional engagement during the service experience can recalibrate consumer perceptions, making prior frustrations seem less significant.

Furthermore, consumer satisfaction during the service experience has implications for consumer engagement. Satisfied consumers are more likely to engage with the brand, show loyalty, engage in word-of-mouth advocacy, and interact with the brand on digital platforms. Satisfaction serves as a precursor to consumer engagement, particularly in service industries where the consumer experience is paramount (So et al., 2016). Engagement behaviors, such as sharing experiences on social media, are strongly influenced by the level of satisfaction during the service encounter (VO et al., 2019). The central question of this research seeks to shed light on how time spent searching for information and booking hospitality services affects consumer satisfaction during the experience. Addressing this research question is essential because it helps to identify the critical points in the customer journey where interventions can be made to enhance satisfaction.

## 2. Literature review and hypothesis development

The hospitality industry is undergoing a significant transformation driven by advancements in digital technology and the increasing reliance of consumers on online platforms for information gathering and booking services. These changes have introduced new challenges and opportunities for understanding consumer behavior, particularly how the time spent in these phases influences satisfaction during the actual service experience. As consumers engage more deeply with online content before making decisions, the potential for information overload and heightened expectations grows, raising important questions about the impact of these pre-service activities on overall satisfaction.

Extended time spent searching for information, particularly in online environments, can lead to heightened expectations, which are often difficult to meet in the actual experience. This effect has been studied in the context of hospitality, where the diversity of information available, combined with the potential to over-analyze options, can lead to what is known as information or choice over-load. These conditions can cause consumers to set unrealistically high expectations, which, when not met, contribute to lower satisfaction during the actual service experience. Kolodinsky research (1990) explores the concept that time spent in search activities can directly generate utility, but also notes that this increased engagement often increases expectations. In the context of the hospitality industry, where consumers have access to a wide range of online reviews, detailed descriptions, and competitive pricing, time spent searching can amplify expectations. When these heightened expectations are not met during the service experience, the result is often markedly decreased satisfaction (Oh, 2008). Furthermore, the rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) and e-commerce in the hospitality sector has further intensified this phenomenon. The increased availability of personalized experiences and the demand for value-for-money and time-efficient services have made consumers more demanding, often resulting in a paradox where more information leads to greater dissatisfaction if the service does not match the high expectations formed during the search phase (Damunupola, 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: **H1a:** Increased time spent in the information search phase has a negative effect on consumer satisfaction during service encounter.

Furthermore, there is a relationship between the booking process and consumer expectations in the hotel industry. The booking phase is a critical touchpoint where consumers make important decisions, and the amount of time spent in this phase can significantly influence their overall satisfaction with the service experience (Kourtesopoulou et al., 2019). A key aspect is the relationship between consumers and online booking channels. When consumers spend an extended period of time booking, various factors can amplify expectations, generating greater chances of dissatisfaction if the experience does not match those expectations (Burke, 2020). One of these factors is the consumer's relationship with the booking platform itself, resulting in the fact that the more time consumers spend interacting with these platforms, the more critical it becomes that the experience meets or exceeds their expectations. Likewise, the increasing reliance on online reviews and social media during the booking process further exacerbates this effect. According to Anderson (2012), the percentage of consumers who consult reviews before booking has steadily increased, as has the number of reviews they read. This extensive review-reading process can create an exaggerated perception of the service, which, if not met during the actual experience, can lead to disappointment and lower levels of satisfaction (Perinotto et al., 2022). The more time consumers spend examining reviews and comparing options, the more

likely they are to develop unrealistic expectations, making it harder for the actual service to meet them. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: **H1b:** Increased time spent in the booking phase has a negative effect on consumer satisfaction during service encounter.

Positive emotions are fundamental in determining how consumers perceive their overall experience and subsequent satisfaction levels. Positive emotions felt during service experiences significantly impact customer satisfaction (Ali et al., 2015). Specifically, emotional experiences are crucial in determining consumer satisfaction, particularly in contexts where service quality and price acceptance are closely linked to the emotions experienced by the consumer during the interaction with the service. Furthermore, when positive emotions are experienced during the enjoyment of hospitality services, they serve as critical determinants that enhance customer satisfaction (Alarcón-López et al., 2023). That is, positive emotional engagement during service interactions not only improves satisfaction but also fosters a stronger connection between the consumer and the service provider, leading to a more favorable overall experience and long-term customer loyalty (Ahmad et al., 2023). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: **H2:** A positive (vs. negative) emotional experience during service encounter has a positive effect on consumer satisfaction at that stage.

Positive emotions also have the ability to enhance overall satisfaction by overshadowing or diminishing the impact of previous negative experiences or frustrations, such as those that may arise from a prolonged and challenging information search process. Cognitive dissonance theory provides a useful framework for understanding this interaction (Yassin & Soares, 2023). Cognitive dissonance occurs when there is a discrepancy between what consumers expect and what they experience. A prolonged search phase can lead to high expectations that are difficult to meet, but a positive emotional experience during service can resolve this dissonance by realigning expectations with satisfaction from the current experience (Terrah et al., 2022). This alignment is crucial because it allows the positive emotions experienced to overcome any lingering dissatisfaction from the search process. This suggests that when consumers have a positive emotional experience during service, it can act as a buffer against any dissatisfaction that may have stemmed from an earlier phase of their journey, such as a time-consuming information search (Burkov & Gorgadze, 2023). Essentially, the joy or satisfaction derived from the current experience can recalibrate their overall perception of the service, making the negative aspects of the search phase less salient. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed: **H3a:** A positive emotional experience during service encounter reduces the negative effect of time spent in the information search phase on consumer satisfaction during service encounter & **H3b:** A positive emotional experience during service encounter reduces the negative effect of time spent in the booking phase on consumer satisfaction during service experience.

Consumer satisfaction plays a crucial mediating role in enhancing consumer engagement in the hospitality industry (Vidyanata, 2022), which is vital for building long-term relationships and loyalty (So et al., 2016). When consumers are satisfied with their service experience, they are more likely to engage, displaying behaviors such as loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, which are indicators of engagement (VO et al., 2019). Specifically in the context of luxury hotels, customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between website service quality and consumer engagement behaviors. This implies that satisfaction derived from high-quality service experiences not only directly enhances engagement but also amplifies the effects of other factors, such as digital interactions, on consumer engagement. In essence, satisfied customers are more

likely to actively engage with the brand, whether through repeat visits, social media interactions, or recommendations to others (VO et al., 2019). Even this engagement can be seen reflected in social media. Satisfied, happy customers are more likely to share their positive experiences online, engage with the brand's social media content, and even influence the purchasing decisions of others, which are all critical aspects of consumer engagement in the digital age (Majeed et al., 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: **H4:** Increased consumer satisfaction during service enjoyment has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

### 3. Data collection and methodology

The data for this research were collected between 20 November and 30 December 2023, facilitated by İzlem Arastirma, a professional research company based in Istanbul, Türkiye. The study focused on gathering responses from tourists visiting the vibrant city of Istanbul, a major hub for hospitality services, including numerous hotels and restaurants. Given the research's aim to explore how time spent searching for information and booking hospitality services affects consumer satisfaction, the data collection process was designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of tourist experiences in both hotels and restaurants.

The sample for the study was carefully segmented to include both international and domestic tourists, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives. Two separate questionnaires were employed, one tailored for hotel guests and the other for restaurant patrons. The hotel survey reached a total of 600 participants, evenly split between 300 international tourists and 300 domestic tourists. These respondents were guests at either 4-star or 5-star hotels. Similarly, the restaurant survey was conducted with 400 participants, also divided equally between international and domestic tourists. To ensure the reliability of the data, the research team personally visited these locations to verify that respondents had indeed dined at the restaurants or stayed at the hotels, collecting information at the point of their visit. The questionnaire was divided into four different parts of the customer journey: (1) Inspiration and search, (2) Decision-making, (3) Consumption experience and, (4) After the consumption experience. Regarding the variables, the time spent searching for information and doing the reservation have been based on several studies for the final classification. On the one hand, some authors measure time in a lot and a little, in order to classify travelers (serendipity behavior and structured travelers) (Zarezadeh et al., 2023). Other authors speak of months as the time spent searching for information (Fodness & Murray, 1997). However, there are also users who classify it in minutes (Mieli, 2023). Therefore, our research has classified time in minutes (less than 10; 10-20; 20-30; 30-60; more than 60), since it is the option most suited to the reality of users today. To understand the emotions felt during the experience, we have used some of the emotions described by Burns & Neisner (2006) in which they describe 24 different emotions, and Kim & Fesenmaier (2017), in which they describe ten positive emotions, and ten negative ones. Respondents had to select the emotion that most represent their experience, which was classified as positive or negative in a dichotomous variable. Likewise, to measure overall satisfaction with the experience, we have adapted to 1 to 5 the scale of Busser et al., (2022). Regarding how the experience is shared during a hospitality service, that is the engagement, we have based our scale on three studies, given the importance of how experiences are shared. Nowadays, experiences can be shared during the experience (for example, on social media), and after the experience (for example, on TripAdvisor). Regarding the experiences that are shared while they are happening, Hysa et al., (2022) asked, first about whether users use social media to share experiences from a tourist trip, and then about the use of

social media to share the experience of a travel trip by different means. However, the experiences that are shared after the end of the experience must also be taken into account. That is why we have also taken into consideration the studies Meijerink & Schoenmakers (2021) and Lin et al., (2022), since they analyze experiences completed through reviews. We also take into account offline recommendations to friends, relatives and so on. The responses collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using Process modeling tool, which is appropriate for testing direct and indirect effects, as well as mediations and moderations, as our research model implies.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The analysis of the collected data provides valuable insights into the complex relationships between time spent in the information search and booking phases, consumer satisfaction during the service experience, and the moderating effects of positive emotional experiences.

The results of the study confirm that the time spent searching for information negatively affects consumer satisfaction during the service experience (**H1a**). This finding aligns with previous research on information overload, where pro-longed engagement in information search leads to heightened expectations that are difficult to meet. The literature suggests that when consumers invest significant time in searching for information, they tend to develop more specific and often unrealistic expectations, which, when unmet, lead to lower satisfaction (Kolodinsky, 1990; Oh, 2008). These results reinforce the importance of managing the duration and complexity of the information search phase to prevent dissatisfaction stemming from unfulfilled expectations.

Results support the hypothesis that increased time spent during the booking process negatively impacts consumer satisfaction (**H1b**). Consistent with the literature, this effect is primarily due to the frustration and decision fatigue that consumers experience when navigating cumbersome booking systems or when faced with an overwhelming number of choices (Burke, 2020; Anderson, 2012). The results indicate that the ease of use and efficiency of online booking platforms are crucial factors in ensuring consumer satisfaction (Kourtesopoulou et al., 2019; Perinotto et al., 2022). As consumers spend more time comparing options and interacting with booking systems, their satisfaction declines, particularly if the process is perceived as difficult or overly time-consuming.

The analysis confirms that positive emotional experiences during the service experience significantly enhance consumer satisfaction too (**H2**). This finding is in line with previous research emphasizing the role of emotions in shaping consumer perceptions and satisfaction in the hospitality industry satisfaction (Ali et al., 2015; Alarcón-López et al., 2023). Positive emotions can mitigate the effects of prior negative experiences, such as those arising from prolonged search or booking times, by recalibrating consumer expectations and enhancing the overall enjoyment of the service. This result highlights the critical importance of fostering positive emotional engagement during service encounters to improve consumer satisfaction.

The study finds that positive emotional experiences during service enjoyment can indeed reduce the negative impact of extended information search times on consumer satisfaction (**H3a**). This outcome aligns with cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests that positive emotions help to resolve discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences (Yassin & Soares, 2023; Terrah et al., 2022). The buffering effect of positive emotions indicates that even when consumers have invested significant time in searching for information, their satisfaction can be maintained or even enhanced if the service experience itself is emotionally rewarding.

The results confirm that positive emotional experiences during the service experience also mitigate the negative effects of extended booking times on consumer satisfaction (**H3b**). Similar to the findings for H3a, this effect underscores the importance of emotional engagement in overcoming the potential dissatisfaction that can arise from a lengthy and complex booking process. The study supports the idea that emotional satisfaction during the service experience plays a critical role in managing consumer perceptions and maintaining overall satisfaction, despite earlier frustrations (Burkov & Gorgadze, 2023).

Finally, the results validate the hypothesis that increased consumer satisfaction during the service experience positively influences consumer engagement (**H4**). This finding is consistent with existing literature that identifies satisfaction as a key driver of consumer loyalty, word-of-mouth advocacy, and digital engagement behaviors (So et al., 2016; Vidyanata, 2022). Satisfied consumers are more likely to engage with the brand, both in terms of repeat business and through positive online interactions, further reinforcing the importance of ensuring high levels of satisfaction during the service experience.

## **5. Conclusions**

The findings of this research carry significant managerial implications for the hospitality industry. First, there is a clear need for businesses to optimize their digital platforms, particularly the information search and booking processes. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of managing consumer expectations by ensuring that the information provided during the pre-service stages is clear, concise, and realistic. This approach can prevent the formation of expectations that are difficult to meet during the actual service experience. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the broader understanding of consumer behavior in the hospitality industry by extending existing theories and highlighting new interactions. The research adds clarity to the cognitive dissonance theory by applying it to the hospitality context, demonstrating the adverse effects that prolonged information search and booking phases can have on consumer satisfaction. Additionally, the findings underscore the significant role that emotions play in shaping consumer satisfaction, particularly as a mitigating factor against the negative impacts of extensive pre-service activities. The study also offers a more holistic view of the customer journey, revealing how pre-service and service phases interact to influence overall satisfaction. Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The geographic scope of the research, being limited to Istanbul, Türkiye, may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different cultural and economic contexts. Moreover, the sample composition focused on tourists staying in 4-star and 5-star hotels and dining at selected restaurants, which may not fully represent the experiences of customers in lower-tier accommodations or other types of hospitality services. Additionally, the data collection occurred over a relatively short period, potentially overlooking seasonal variations in consumer behavior and satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Looking ahead, future research could build on this study by exploring these dynamics across different geographic locations and cultural contexts to gain a more global understanding of how information search and booking times affect consumer satisfaction. Additionally, expanding the scope to include a broader range of hospitality services, such as budget accommodations, would help assess whether the findings hold true across different market segments. Finally, further studies should take into account more variables that affect the customer journey of users in the tourism context, such as the rationality of their emotions, commitment, consumer delight or other crucial factors.

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