



When Services Fail: Mapping Consumer Protection and Ethical Vulnerability Through Bibliographic Coupling and Co-Word Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In an era where service breakdowns are increasingly visible and digitally amplified, understanding how firms manage consumer protection, ethical risk, and post-failure recovery has become a critical area of inquiry. Service failures threaten customer trust and satisfaction and expose systemic vulnerabilities in ethical service delivery and complaint resolution. This study aims to map the intellectual and conceptual landscape of research at the intersection of service failure, consumer protection, and ethical vulnerability. Using a data-driven bibliometric approach, it seeks to identify thematic clusters, evolving discourse patterns, and knowledge gaps. A bibliometric analysis was conducted on 677 peer-reviewed journal articles from the Scopus database, published between 2005 and 2025. Two complementary techniques were employed: (1) bibliographic coupling, to identify intellectual linkages among recent publications, and (2) co-word analysis, to map the conceptual structure of recurring themes. The dataset was processed and visualized using VOSviewer software. The bibliographic coupling analysis revealed five thematic clusters, ranging from emotional and tangible strategies in service recovery to customer retaliation and systemic value co-creation/destruction. Co-word analysis identified four thematic clusters: (1) service failure and social media-driven recovery strategies, (2) justice and emotional mechanisms of satisfaction and loyalty, (3) trust, human-centered design, and decision-making in digital service environments, and (4) complaint behavior and service quality in post-recovery evaluation. Across both analyses, concepts such as fairness, emotional regulation, trust, and digital transparency emerged as central constructs linking service ethics with customer experience. The findings reveal a paradigmatic shift in service recovery scholarship from isolated transactional models to emotionally intelligent, culturally contextualized, and digitally networked frameworks. Service failure is increasingly understood as an operational breakdown and an ethical flashpoint, implicating fairness, transparency, and consumer dignity. The study offers a structured knowledge map for future research and managerial innovation at the nexus of ethics, service design, and consumer protection.

Keywords: Consumer Protection; Service Failure; Ethical Vulnerability; Service Recovery; Bibliometric Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer protection refers to the legal, institutional, and ethical mechanisms designed to safeguard buyers from unfair, deceptive, or harmful practices in service transactions (Chow & Ho, 2025; Emmanuel et al., 2024). In the contemporary service economy, protecting consumers has become increasingly critical as service failures defined as the inability of a service provider to meet customer expectations (Bitner et al., 1990) remain pervasive and consequential across multiple industries. Service failures not only erode consumer trust and satisfaction but also raise fundamental questions about ethical accountability and organizational responsibility toward vulnerable populations (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Liao, 2007). A service failure triggers a cascade of negative consequences, including customer dissatisfaction, complaints, negative word-of-mouth, and switching behavior (Gyung Kim et al., 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). As a result, consumer protection and ethics have emerged as central concerns in service marketing, bridging behavioral science, organizational theory, and public policy.

The relevance of consumer protection and service ethics has intensified in the digital era, where algorithmic decision-making, platform-based service delivery, and artificial intelligence have introduced new dimensions of consumer vulnerability (Ha et al., 2021; Chow & Ho, 2025). Digital service environments create asymmetries of information, limited recourse mechanisms, and heightened exposure to data misuse and privacy violations, all of which undermine consumers' capacity to make informed and autonomous decisions (Emmanuel et al., 2024). Furthermore, the proliferation of social media has transformed service failure incidents into highly visible, public events, amplifying the reputational and ethical stakes for service organizations (Balaji et al., 2016; Gregoire et al., 2015). In emerging markets, these challenges are compounded by regulatory gaps, inconsistent enforcement, and differential consumer literacy, rendering certain demographic segments acutely vulnerable to service exploitation (Joireman et al., 2013). Scholars and practitioners alike have therefore called for greater integration of ethical frameworks into service design, recovery strategy, and consumer rights governance, making this an especially timely domain of inquiry.

The current study is motivated by two main reasons. First, the intersection of consumer protection, service failure, and ethics represents a substantively rich but intellectually fragmented body of knowledge. While individual studies have examined discrete constructs such as justice-based recovery (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Hocutt et al., 2006), customer retaliation (Gregoire et al., 201), complaint behaviour (Sparks & Browning, 2010), and digital consumer protection (Ha et al., 2021) no study has yet synthesized this landscape through a rigorous science mapping approach. Existing review studies in adjacent domains have addressed service recovery and customer complaint handling (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) and the role of justice in service interactions (Liao, 2007), yet these are primarily narrative or systematic in orientation, and are limited in their ability to uncover the broader intellectual structure and co-evolutionary trends of the field. A bibliometric approach, by contrast, enables a large-scale, objective mapping of the domain's thematic clusters, citation networks, and emergent trajectories that qualitative reviews cannot provide (Donthu et al., 2021).

Second, despite growing academic interest in this domain as evidenced by a steady increase in annual publications from fewer than 25 documents in 2005 to a peak of 62 in 2024 there is a notable absence of bibliometric studies that comprehensively examine the knowledge structure of consumer protection and service ethics using both bibliographic coupling and co-word analysis. Prior bibliometric reviews in related fields, including service quality (Fauzi et al., 2023), service marketing (Donthu et al., 2021), and customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009), have demonstrated the value of science mapping in revealing conceptual evolution and identifying future research directions. However, these studies do not specifically address the nexus of

consumer protection, ethical vulnerability, and service failure, leaving a critical gap in the field's collective understanding. The present study therefore applies two complementary bibliometric analyses bibliographic coupling and co-word analysis to uncover the current and future intellectual landscape of this domain.

Hence, three objectives are proposed:

- (1) To determine current and emerging research streams on consumer protection and ethical vulnerability through bibliographic coupling analysis;
- (2) To investigate prospective future trends through co-word analysis; and
- (3) To derive theoretical and managerial implications from the dual bibliometric frameworks for advancing research and practice at the intersection of service failure, consumer protection, and ethical vulnerability

Context and underscores the importance of consumer protection and service ethics in contemporary service environments. Section 2 elucidates the bibliometric methodology applied, including the bibliographic coupling and co-word analysis procedures. Section 3 elaborates on the findings and discussion based on the network visualizations and cluster structures. Section 4 presents the theoretical and managerial implications derived from the cluster analysis. Subsequently, Section 5 outlines the limitations encountered, Section 6 elaborates on future research directions, and Section 7 presents the conclusion.

METHOD

Bibliometric Approach

The bibliometric approach is a quantitative method that analyses bibliographic databases using a science mapping technique (Donthu et al., 2021). Bibliometric analysis complements the qualitative nature of systematic literature reviews and the quantitative nature of meta-analysis by introducing objectivity into the evaluation of scientific literature and mitigating researcher-induced bias through the aggregation of multiple scholarly outputs (Zupic & Čater, 2015). Unlike systematic reviews, bibliometric analysis does not require article exclusion during sampling, thereby reducing the possibility of selection bias and subjectivity (Rogers et al., 2020). In alignment with this study's objectives, two bibliometric analyses were applied as follows:

- 1) Bibliographic coupling: Bibliographic coupling occurs when two publications cite a third common publication, thereby establishing a bibliographic link that signals thematic alignment (Kessler, 1963; Donthu et al., 2021). The strength of this linkage measured by Total Link Strength (TLS) reflects the degree of intellectual proximity between publications. Bibliographic coupling is particularly suited to uncovering the most current and emerging research streams within a field, as it prioritizes recent publications' citation behavior (Budler et al., 2021; Bretas & Alon, 2021). The analysis posits that the higher the shared references between two documents, the more closely they belong to a similar thematic domain (Rojas-Lamoren et al., 2022).
- 2) Co-word analysis: Co-word analysis, also known as co-occurrence of keywords analysis, is a content-based bibliometric technique that quantifies the frequency with which pairs of keywords appear together across the dataset's titles, abstracts, and author-assigned keywords (van Eck & Waltman, 2014; Fauzi, 2023). The underlying assumption is that the higher the co-occurrence frequency of two keywords, the stronger their conceptual association within a given field (Khaldi & Prado-Gascó, 2021). Co-word analysis enriches and validates the thematic clusters produced by bibliographic coupling, while also predicting forthcoming trajectories and future research trends (Donthu et al., 2021; Bernatovic et al., 2022).

Research Design and Data Collection Procedure

This study adopts a bibliometric methodology, offering a quantitative lens to systematically examine large academic literature using science mapping techniques (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The dataset was retrieved from the Scopus database using a predefined search string: ("consumer protection" OR "consumer vulnerability" OR "service failure" OR "customer mistreatment" OR "service recovery") AND (services OR "service marketing" OR "service delivery") AND (ethics OR "deceptive practices" OR fairness OR complaint OR "service experience").

The bibliometric data used in this study were extracted from the Scopus database, which is one of the largest and most comprehensive repositories of peer-reviewed literature. The search was conducted on June 27, 2025, resulting in the retrieval of 983 documents. Several refinement steps were undertaken to enhance the relevance and consistency of the dataset. Initially, the results were filtered to include only publications written in English, reducing the dataset to 961 documents. After that, a document type filter was applied to retain only journal articles, narrowing the dataset further to 743 records. A publication year filter was applied to ensure temporal relevance and capture developments within the last two decades, restricting the dataset to documents published between 2005 and 2025. This final filtering stage resulted in a total of 677 documents.

These 677 documents form the foundation of the bibliometric analysis conducted in this study. The data were exported in CSV format and analyzed using VOS Viewer (version 1.6.20), a specialized software tool for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks. Two complementary analytical techniques were employed: bibliographic coupling, which identified thematic structures and intellectual linkages among the recently published articles, and co-word analysis, which aimed to uncover underlying conceptual patterns through the co-occurrence of author keywords. Together, these methods provide a robust foundation for mapping the intellectual and conceptual landscape of the selected research domain.

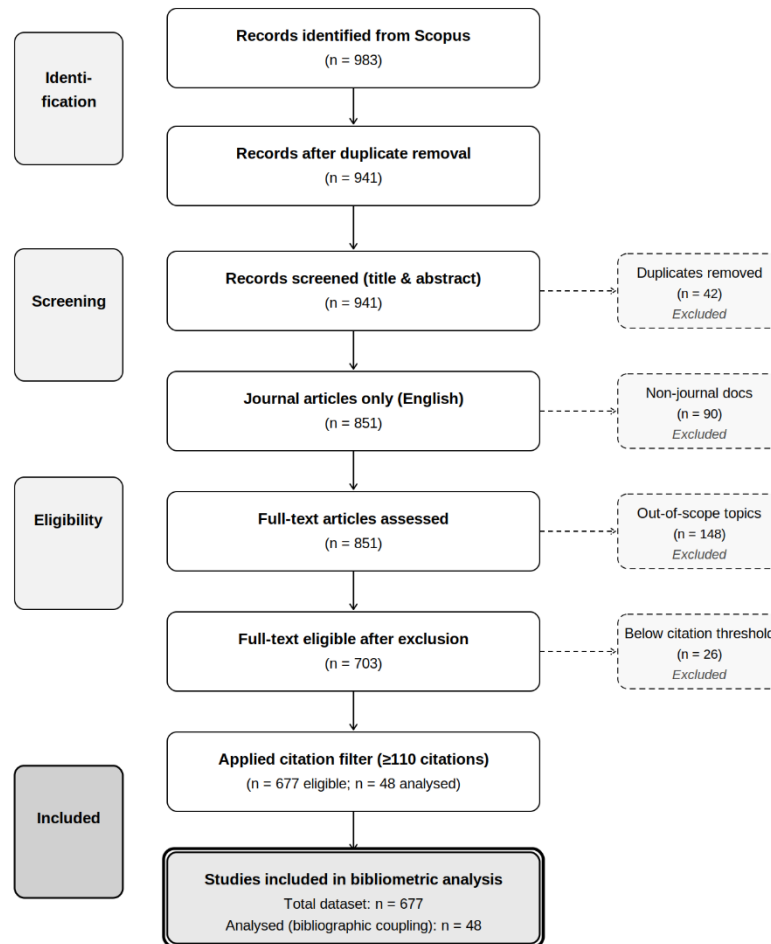
Table 1
Search string in Scopus database

No	Keywords	Justification
1	("consumer protection" OR "consumer vulnerability" OR "service failure" OR "customer mistreatment" OR "service recovery")	To identify studies discussing consumer vulnerability and negative service experiences, helping explore consumer risk.
2	(services OR "service marketing" OR "service delivery")	To focus on literature related to service contexts, especially service marketing and delivery interactions.
3	(ethics OR "deceptive practices" OR fairness OR complaint OR "service experience")	To capture research on ethical concerns such as deception, fairness, complaints, and service experiences.

Source: Primary data, 2025.

Figure 1 presents the flowchart of the article selection process, illustrating the stepwise reduction from the initial 983 records to the final analytical dataset of 677 documents. The exclusion of non-journal publications and non-English documents constitutes the primary filtering

criteria, consistent with established practice in bibliometric science mapping studies (Fauzi et al., 2023; Khaldi & Prado-Gascó, 2021).



Source : Author Own Work (2025)

Figure 1. Flowchart of Article Selection Process

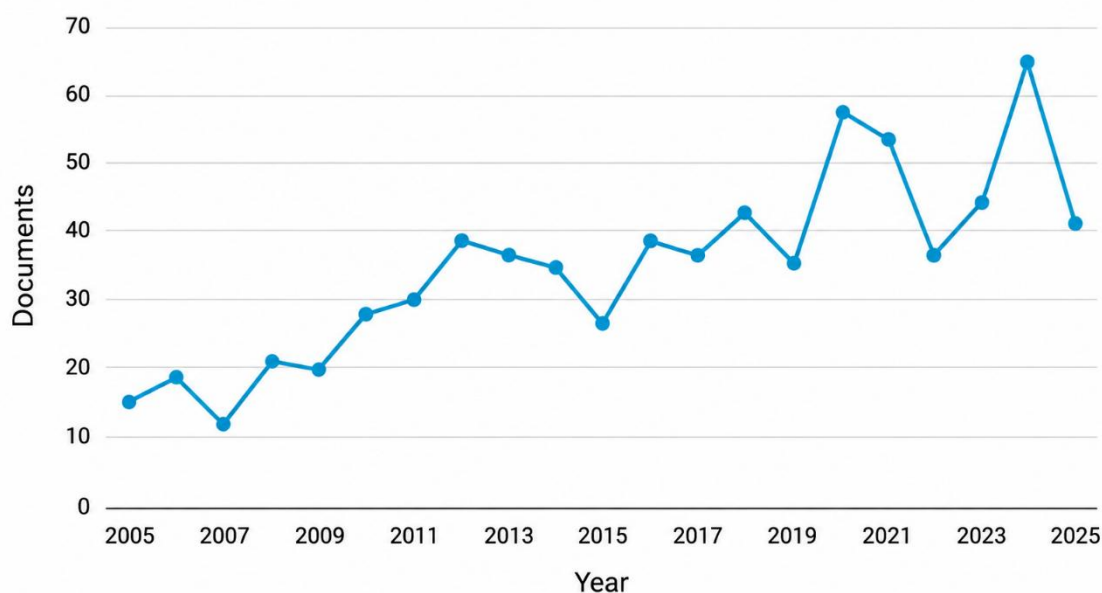
VOSviewer software (version 1.6.18), developed by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University, was employed to visualize the network structures generated by both bibliographic coupling and co-word analyses (van Eck & Waltman, 2014). VOSviewer constructs similarity-based network maps in which nodes represent publications or keywords, and the connecting links reflect the strength of bibliographic or co-occurrence relationships. The software applies a clustering algorithm to partition the network into thematically coherent groups, enabling the identification of distinct research streams within the field of consumer protection, service ethics, and service failure. The visualization parameters including minimum citation thresholds for bibliographic coupling and minimum keyword occurrence thresholds for co-word analysis were determined iteratively to optimize network clarity and analytical granularity, as detailed in Section 3.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data extraction was conducted using the Scopus database on June 21, 2025. The initial search returned 983 documents. After applying some filters, this resulted in a final dataset of 677 documents. These records span multiple disciplines, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of research on consumer protection, services, and ethics.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the annual distribution of publications from 2005 to 2025 related to consumer protection, vulnerability, service failure, ethics, and service delivery. Over the two-decade period, there has been a generally upward trajectory in scholarly output, indicating sustained and growing academic interest in the intersection of ethics and service marketing. Between 2005 and 2010, the volume of publications remained modest, ranging from approximately 15 to 25 documents annually. A steady increase began in 2011, with notable growth in 2013 and 2015, where publication counts reached 35 to 40 documents per year. Although minor fluctuations occurred between 2016 and 2020, the trend continued upward. A significant surge is observed in 2020 (55 documents) and again in 2024, which marked the peak of scholarly output with 62 publications. The consistent growth trend highlights the expanding relevance of this research domain in contemporary service marketing literature.

Documents by year



Source: Scopus, 2025.

Figure 2. Number of Publications Related to Consumer Protection, Ethics and Service

Bibliographic coupling

In this study, multiple citation thresholds ranging from 94 to 110 were evaluated to establish a reliable network structure. A threshold of 110 citations was identified as the most suitable, resulting in five distinct clusters comprising 48 documents in the bibliographic coupling analysis. This threshold was selected to strike an optimal balance between granularity and clarity, minimizing the risk of over-filtering or introducing analytical noise (Fauzi et al., 2024). In bibliographic coupling, the strength of linkage between documents is measured by Total Link

Strength (TLS), which reflects the degree of thematic alignment among the connected publications.

Table 2
Top 10 documents in Bibliographic Coupling Analysis

Rank	Publication	Citation	Total Link Strength
1.	(Gyung Kim et al., 2010) - The relationship between consumer complaining behavior and service recovery: An integrative review	122	274
2.	(Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011) - A Meta-Analysis of Organizational Complaint Handling and Customer Responses	346	202
3.	(Augusto De Matos et al., 2009) - Consumer reaction to service failure and recovery: The moderating role of attitude toward complaining	135	199
4.	(Liao, 2007) - Do it right this time: The role of employee service recovery performance in customer-perceived justice and customer loyalty after service failures	411	194
5.	(Kim et al., 2009) - The effects of perceived justice on recovery satisfaction, trust, word-of-mouth, and revisit intention in upscale hotels	489	188
6.	(Namkung & Jang, 2010) - Effects of perceived service fairness on emotions, and behavioral intentions in restaurants	176	178
7.	(Roschk & Kaiser, 2013) - The nature of an apology: An experimental study on how to apologize after a service failure	150	167
8.	(Grégoire et al., 2010) - A comprehensive model of customer direct and indirect revenge: Understanding the effects of perceived greed and customer power	387	161
9.	(Joireman et al., 2013) - When do customers offer firms a “second chance” following a double deviation? The impact of inferred firm motives on customer revenge and reconciliation	219	157
10.	(Kau & Wan-Yiun Loh, 2006) - The effects of service recovery on consumer satisfaction: A comparison between complainants and non-complainants	310	138

Source: Primary data, 2025.

Figure 2 presents the bibliographic coupling network visualization for the 48 most-cited documents, revealing five distinct and well-defined clusters. Each cluster represents a thematic concentration within the literature, indicating relatively independent but interlinked streams of research. The clusters were identified based on citation linkages and labeled through an inductive review of key publications in each group, focusing on their conceptual themes and scholarly contributions to consumer protection, ethics, and service.

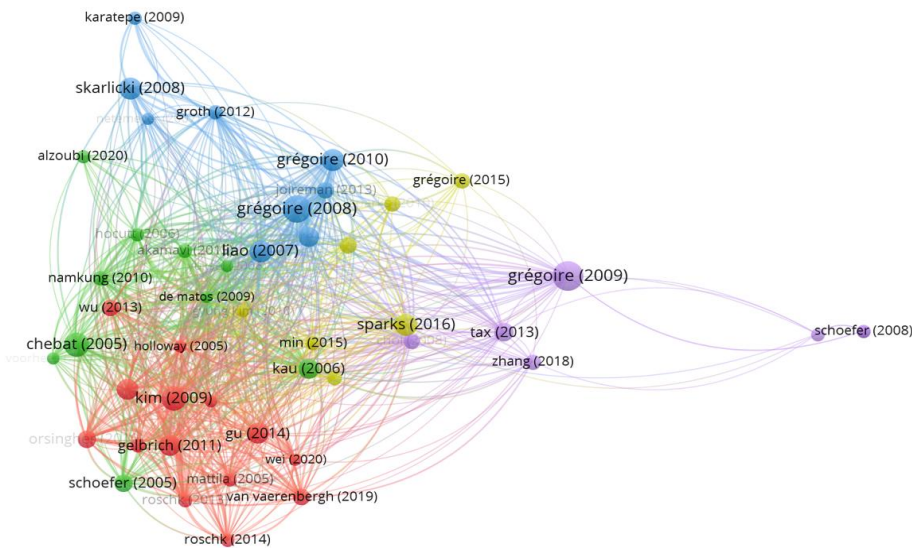


Figure 3. Bibliographic Coupling Network of Consumer Protection, Ethics, and Service

- Cluster 1 (red)**, labeled "Emotional and Tangible Strategies in Service Recovery," comprises 14 documents investigating how organizations manage consumer dissatisfaction through emotional (e.g., apologies, empathy) and tangible (e.g., monetary compensation, service re-performance) recovery efforts, and how these responses shape consumer forgiveness, satisfaction, and loyalty. Wei et al. (2020) demonstrate that emotional recovery is generally more effective than economic recovery, particularly when it elicits empathy and fairness perceptions, with consumer power moderating forgiveness pathways reflecting a broader shift from provider-centric to consumer-driven recovery mechanisms. Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019) reconceptualize recovery as a temporally dynamic process through the Service Recovery Journey (SRJ) framework, composed of pre-recovery, recovery, and post-recovery phases, encouraging a holistic understanding of the entire recovery experience rather than isolated organizational responses. Roschk and Gelbrich (2014) further demonstrate, through meta-analytic and experimental evidence, that matching compensation type to failure type guided by resource exchange theory — significantly enhances recovery outcomes, reinforcing the importance of contextual alignment in recovery design. Collectively, this cluster advances theoretical understanding by integrating emotional and cognitive mechanisms (empathy, fairness), consumer heterogeneity (power perceptions), and compensation-fit principles. It establishes a growing consensus that effective service recovery transcends transactional fixes — it must address relational, psychological, and situational dimensions to genuinely restore consumer-firm relationships post-failure.
- Cluster 2 (green)**, labeled "Fairness Perceptions and Post-Recovery Customer Emotions," comprises 10 documents centered around the conceptual and empirical exploration of justice-based evaluations in service interactions. This cluster emphasizes how consumers' perceptions of fairness, especially in service recovery, affect emotional responses, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions such as loyalty or negative word-of-mouth. A central contribution is made by Namkung and Jang (2010), who extend fairness research beyond service failure contexts by investigating fairness perceptions in general service delivery. Drawing from the Mehrabian-Russell model, they demonstrate that fairness in pricing,

procedures, outcomes, and interactions significantly influences positive and negative emotions, shaping behavioural intentions in restaurant settings. Their work reframes fairness as an essential evaluative lens for ongoing service experiences, not merely post-failure episodes. Hocutt et al. (2006) focus more specifically on recovery efforts following service failures. Their study examines how dimensions of justice redress (distributive), responsiveness (procedural), and courtesy/empathy (interactional) affect consumer satisfaction and word-of-mouth intentions. The findings provide empirical validation for the service recovery paradox, suggesting that effective recoveries can mitigate dissatisfaction and enhance overall evaluations beyond pre-failure levels. Alzoubi et al. (2020) further explore the relationships among perceived service value, service quality, price fairness, and recovery in shaping customer satisfaction and delight within the telecommunications sector, confirming that fairness is pivotal in eliciting emotional uplift beyond mere satisfaction. Cluster 2 contributes to the service marketing literature by integrating fairness theory with emotional and affective responses in service consumption. It highlights how consumers interpret routine and remedial service experiences through multi-dimensional fairness lenses, triggering specific emotional and behavioural outcomes. The cluster reflects a shift toward emotionally intelligent service design, where fairness is both an ethical imperative and a strategic tool for sustaining customer relationships.

- **Cluster 3 (blue)**, labelled “Customer Retaliation, Inferred Motives, and the Dynamics of Service Breakdown,” consists of 9 documents focusing on the psychological mechanisms and behavioral outcomes following unresolved or poorly managed service failures. This stream explores how customers perceive organizational intent (e.g., inferred greed or indifference) and how such inferences shape revenge, reconciliation, or further relational breakdown. Joireman et al. (2013) developed an expanded process model examining customer reactions following double deviations — a service failure followed by an unsatisfactory recovery. Their findings show that reactions are driven by perceived fairness, failure severity, and inferred firm motives. When customers believe the firm had positive intentions, reconciliation is more likely than revenge; conversely, inferred negative motives fuel anger and retaliatory behaviour. Importantly, strategic apology and compensation can still earn firms a “second chance” by reframing customer perceptions. Grégoire et al. (2010) present a comprehensive model distinguishing between direct and indirect customer revenge, identifying perceived greed as the most potent retaliatory trigger more so than procedural injustice or blame particularly among consumers with high perceived power. By conceptualizing revenge as either direct (e.g., verbal aggression, vandalism) or indirect (e.g., negative word-of-mouth, public complaining), they provide nuanced insight into how customers “fight back” after service failures. Groth and Grandey (2012) approach the issue from a dyadic organizational psychology angle, introducing the concept of negative exchange spirals in service encounters, where poor employee-customer interactions evolve into open-loop conflicts that escalate across service contexts. They advocate for integrated dyadic models that consider both employee and customer perspectives, shifting focus from isolated incidents to the broader relational dynamics that fuel service breakdowns..
- **Cluster 4 (yellow)**, labelled “Customer Complaints and Negative Word-of-Mouth in the Social Media Era,” encompasses 7 documents that investigate the dynamics of customer dissatisfaction, digital complaint behaviours, and the diffusion of negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) through online platforms. The central concern across this cluster is how consumers leverage social media and review platforms to express dissatisfaction following service failures, often with significant reputational consequences for firms. Balaji et al. (2016),

drawing on cognitive dissonance and social support theories, developed and empirically validated a model identifying the antecedents of NWOM on social networking sites (SNS). Their study revealed that perceived injustice, firm attribution, face concern, and tie strength are critical predictors of consumers' intentions to post NWOM, highlighting the interplay of emotional, cognitive, and social factors in online complaint behaviours. Sparks and Browning (2010) complemented this by conducting a qualitative content analysis of 200 hotel reviews to explore online complaints' motives and narrative forms. Their findings suggested that online complaints serve multiple functions—from venting and seeking revenge to altruistic warning of others and tend to be vividly detailed, persuasive, and emotionally charged, amplifying their influence on potential consumers' booking intentions. Gregoire et al. (2015) provided a managerial typology of social media complaints, categorizing them into six forms, ranging from constructive directness to destructive “spite” and “feeding the vultures.” They argue that the rise of SM has transformed isolated service failures into potential public crises, emphasizing the urgency for firms to develop targeted strategies for monitoring and responding to complaints at each escalation stage. Collectively, the studies in this cluster underscore the reputational risks and strategic implications of consumer dissatisfaction in the digital era, particularly as NWOM moves beyond private conversations to public, viral, and often consequential arenas.

- **Cluster 5 (purple)**, labeled “Customer Engagement, Relationship Dynamics, and the Networked Nature of Value Co-Creation and Destruction,” encompasses 7 documents advancing understanding of how customer relationships, service network configurations, and emotional reactions to firm behavior shape outcomes across the service experience continuum. Central to this cluster is the recognition that customer engagement is relational, networked, and bidirectional capable of generating both co-creation and co-destruction of value. Zhang et al. (2018) conceptualized this duality through a qualitative investigation of 350 critical incidents, identifying conditions under which online customer engagement leads to value-enhancing or value-eroding outcomes. Their findings revealed that value co-creation is facilitated by empathy, responsiveness, and customer participation opportunities, while co-destruction emerges from indifference, technological failures, and unmet service expectations. Tax et al. (2013) introduced the Service Delivery Network (SDN) as a customer-centric framework for understanding service encounters across multiple providers. Rather than viewing service experiences as isolated dyadic exchanges, they argue for a systems-based view wherein firms must coordinate across organizational boundaries to deliver cohesive customer journeys, highlighting provider interdependence in shaping perceived service quality and recovery processes. Grégoire et al. (2009) expanded the emotional dimension by examining longitudinal effects of online complaints, demonstrating that customers in strong firm relationships experience a “love-becomes-hate” effect following service failures where revenge tendencies decline but avoidance increases, particularly among customers who feel betrayed. Their experimental evidence further suggests that timely apologies and compensation can mitigate these adverse reactions. Collectively, this cluster bridges emotional engagement, service design, and network orchestration, reinforcing that service outcomes are co-produced through firm-consumer interaction and broader systems of interconnected actors.

Table 3
Bibliographic coupling analysis on Consumer Protection, Ethics, and Service

Cluster No and colour	Cluster label	Number of publications	Representative publication
1 (red)	Emotional and Tangible Strategies in Service Recovery	14	Wei et al. (2020) Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019) Roschk and Gelbrich (2014)
2 (green)	Fairness Perceptions and Post-Recovery Customer Emotions	10	Namkung and Jang (2010) Hocutt et al. (2006) Alzoubi et al. (2020)
3 (blue)	Customer Retaliation, Inferred Motives, and the Dynamics of Service Breakdown	9	Joireman et al. (2013), Grégoire et al. (2010) Groth and Grandey (2012)
4 (yellow)	Customer Complaints and Negative Word-of-Mouth in the Social Media Era	7	Balaji et al. (2016) Sparks and Browning (2010) Gregoire et al. (2015)
5 (purple)	Customer Engagement, Relationship Dynamics, and the Networked Nature of Value Co-Creation and Destruction	7	Zhang et al. (2018) Tax et al. (2013) Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux (2009)

Source : Primary data, 2025.

Co-word Analysis

From the extracted keyword dataset, a total of 2,658 unique keywords were identified. Only those keywords that occurred at least 9 times were included in the co-word analysis to ensure network clarity and thematic relevance. After testing the threshold value, a final threshold of 56 keyword occurrences was selected, resulting in a stable and meaningful network structure consisting of 56 keywords and four distinct clusters. This threshold provided an optimal balance, excluding low-frequency noise while retaining sufficient diversity to reflect the main research directions. Table 4 presents the top co-occurring keywords: consumer protection, ethics, and service.

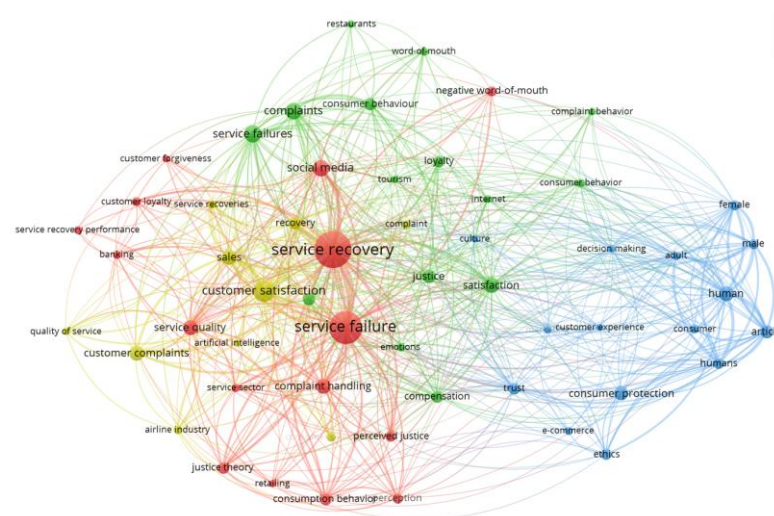
Table 4
Top 15 Keywords in The Co-Occurrence of Keywords Analysis

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength
1	Service Recovery	197	350
2	Service Failure	153	268
3	Customer Satisfaction	67	153
4	Human	34	145
5	Sales	34	117
6	Article	26	111
7	Satisfaction	37	111
8	Service Failures	42	90

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength
9	Humans	18	88
10	Service Quality	31	85
11	Social Media	39	85
12	Complaints	38	81
13	Male	14	80
14	Female	14	77
15	Customer Complaints	32	76

Source: Primary data, 2025.

Figure 3 presents the network map derived from the co-word analysis, revealing four well-defined clusters, each representing a unique thematic orientation. Cluster labels were assigned through inductive interpretation by the author, based on the keywords' conceptual alignment and co-occurrence patterns. The subsequent discussion delves into each cluster's specific structures and emerging themes.



Source : Primary data, 2025.

Figure 4. Co-word Analysis of Consumer Protection, Ethics and Service

- Cluster 1 (red)**, labeled *"Service Failure and Recovery Strategies in the Social Media Era,"* encompasses 16 keywords centered on evolving recovery mechanisms in digital, customer-empowered environments. The co-word structure reveals tight interlinkages among service failure, recovery strategies, complaint handling, and service quality, converging with the pervasive role of social media. Ozuem et al. (2024) demonstrated that social media influencers (SMIs), through source credibility and personalized messaging, can moderate consumers' negative responses to service failures and facilitate faster recovery introducing digitally embedded third-party actors into the service encounter. Tran (2024) found that while politeness, apologies, and recovery speed enhance recovery satisfaction in the airline industry, only recovery speed predicted attitudinal loyalty, with brand authenticity moderating these relationships. Foroudi et al. (2025) further showed that timely, equitable recovery responses in peer-to-peer accommodation platforms reduced relationship termination and increased repurchase intentions, particularly when communicated via social

media. Collectively, this cluster marks a paradigmatic shift from internal organizational responses toward a networked recovery ecosystem involving brands, customers, and digital communities, where visibility, timeliness, and emotional resonance are paramount.

- Cluster 2 (green)**, labeled "Emotional and Justice-Based Drivers of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty," comprises 15 keywords centered on how fairness perceptions and emotional engagement shape recovery satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. The thematic structure reveals strong co-occurrence among compensation, justice, satisfaction, and emotions, reflecting an evaluative-cognitive-emotional framework rooted in justice theory. Lajante et al. (2023) argued that service robots, though lacking genuine empathy, can simulate normative interactional justice behaviors such as politeness, apology, and respect sufficient to mitigate customer anger and maintain fairness perceptions in standardized recovery contexts. Jones et al. (2024) found that interpersonal justice exerts a stronger influence on return satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth than informational justice, with procedural justice further conditioning these relationships through perceived process convenience and policy restrictiveness. Filho et al. (2023) revealed a dual-path dynamic in brand relationship quality: strong relational bonds foster tolerance during failure ("love-is-blind"), but intimacy can intensify dissatisfaction when recovery falls short ("love-becomes-hate"). Together, this cluster illustrates a justice-emotion nexus where satisfaction and loyalty hinge not solely on outcomes, but on the felt sense of being treated fairly and valued.
- Cluster 3 (blue)**, titled "Trust, Human-Centred Design, and Decision-Making in Customer Experience and Protection," captures 15 keywords coalescing around consumer trust, regulatory fairness, and empathetic digital service delivery. Rather than focusing on satisfaction or loyalty as endpoints, this cluster interrogates the ethical and psychological underpinnings of trust formation in algorithmically mediated environments. Chow and Ho (2025) demonstrated, within Hong Kong's retail banking context, that institutionalized consumer protection principles fairness, transparency, data privacy, and governance drive customer satisfaction, brand love, and advocacy through trust-based mediation, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework. Emmanuel et al. (2024) confirmed, in Nigeria's e-commerce sector, that robust consumer protection positively influences purchase decisions and customer trust, with privacy assurance and brand awareness functioning as core antecedents to loyalty. Ha et al. (2021) identified five critical e-consumer protection dimensions information disclosure, data security, privacy, redress, and jurisdiction arguing that trust is structurally contingent on institutional assurances and platform design features communicating integrity, competence, and benevolence. This cluster repositions consumer protection as a fulcrum of trust production: trust is no longer a consequence of satisfaction but an infrastructural condition engineered through policy, ethical design, and emotional resonance.
- Cluster 4 (yellow)**, titled "Linking Service Quality, Complaints, and Post-Recovery Customer Satisfaction," brings together 10 keywords emphasizing the interplay between perceived service quality, complaint behavior, and recovery effectiveness. Stokburger-Sauer and Hofmann (2023) demonstrated, in the hospitality industry, that frontline employees' emotional expressions and distributive and interactional justice significantly shape guests' positive emotions and post-recovery evaluations establishing emotional tone and fairness perceptions as central, not peripheral, to recovery effectiveness. Edström et al. (2022) quantified the service recovery paradox threshold at approximately 80% of the original service value, offering practical guidance on calibrating recovery efforts to achieve

satisfaction restoration without overcompensation. Lee et al. (2024) added cultural nuance by showing that collectivist consumers in Hong Kong are especially sensitive to face concerns and attribution stability, making cultural alignment in recovery communication essential to sustaining loyalty. Taken together, this cluster positions post-recovery satisfaction as co-constructed through technical resolution, emotional dynamics, and cultural congruence advocating a holistic, context-sensitive recovery design that transcends transactional fixes.

Table 5
Summary of co-word analysis of Consumer Protection, Ethics and Service

Cluster No and Color	Cluster Label	Number of Keywords	Representative Keywords
1 (red)	Service Failure and Recovery Strategies in the Social Media Era	16	service recovery, service failure, complaint handling, service quality, social media
2 (green)	Emotional and Justice-Based Drivers of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty	15	satisfaction, justice, compensation, loyalty, emotions
3 (blue)	Trust, Human-Centered Design, and Decision Making in Customer Experience and Protection	15	consumer protection, customer experience, decision making, human, trust
4 (yellow)	Linking Service Quality, Complaints, and Post-Recovery Customer Satisfaction	10	recovery, customer satisfaction, sales, quality of service, consumer complaints

Source : Primary data, 2025.

Implications

1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical development of consumer protection and ethical vulnerability in service failure contexts by offering an integrated and data-driven map of the evolving intellectual and conceptual structure. The bibliographic coupling analysis reveals a paradigmatic shift from transactional recovery models to frameworks grounded in fairness, emotional regulation, and digital visibility. For instance, Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 highlight how emotional and justice-based constructs, such as : perceived fairness, empathy, and consumer power interact in service recovery outcomes, reaffirming and extending the theoretical propositions of service justice (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Wei et al., 2020). By synthesizing insights from disparate domains such as social media complaint behavior (Balaji et al., 2016), digital trust (Chow & Ho, 2025), and revenge psychology (Grégoire et al., 2010), this study advances a relational-ethical framework that treats service failures as ethical inflection points rather than operational anomalies. Furthermore, the co-word analysis reinforces that trust, consumer protection, and transparency have evolved as cross-cutting constructs that mediate consumer experience across digital platforms. This positions service recovery research within a broader interdisciplinary nexus spanning marketing ethics, behavioral decision-making, and human-centered design inviting scholars to theorize customer–firm relationships not only through

justice lenses but also through emotional and governance mechanisms (Filho et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024). Overall, this study encourages the refinement of service failure theories by integrating emotional intelligence, ethical governance, and platform-mediated consumer behavior into future theoretical models.

2. Practical implications

This study offers crucial managerial implications for service providers operating in digitally networked environments where service failures are increasingly visible and ethically consequential. First, managers must recognize that emotional recovery, such as sincere apologies and empathetic communication is often more effective than monetary compensation in restoring customer trust and mitigating negative word-of-mouth, especially among high-power consumers who evaluate fairness before forgiveness (Wei et al., 2020). Therefore, frontline staff training should emphasize emotional intelligence, tact, and culturally sensitive communication to handle complaints offline and across social platforms. Second, the findings emphasize the urgency for firms to monitor and manage negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) on social networking sites. Establishing dedicated social media teams with real-time listening tools like Hootsuite or Brandwatch allows for timely reactive and proactive webcare interventions (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), thereby preventing viral escalation and reputational crises. Third, organizations should embed fairness, transparency, and data protection into their service recovery protocols, particularly for digital or AI-mediated services (Chow & Ho, 2025; Ha et al., 2021). These principles fulfill ethical obligations and promote brand love, advocacy, and consumer loyalty in highly surveilled digital markets. Lastly, given the systemic nature of value co-creation and destruction (Zhang et al., 2018), service recovery efforts should be coordinated across networks of stakeholders internal teams, technology partners, and even social media influencers to preserve long-term customer equity. This systems-oriented, emotionally intelligent, and ethically grounded approach to service recovery management is essential for sustaining competitive advantage in the digital service economy.

Limitations

While this bibliometric study comprehensively maps the intellectual and conceptual landscape of service failure, consumer protection, and ethical vulnerability, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis is confined to data retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database. Although Scopus is highly reputable and widely used in bibliometric studies, excluding other databases such as Web of Science or Dimensions may limit the comprehensiveness of the dataset. Future reviews could adopt multi-source integration to enhance inclusivity and ensure broader coverage of the research field (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Second, although the study spans 20 years (2005–2025), it does not apply a temporal bibliometric technique such as historiographic analysis or longitudinal citation tracking. As such, it cannot fully capture the evolution of key constructs, such as: perceived fairness, empathy, and digital trust over time. This limitation constrains our understanding of how external shifts (e.g., digitization, pandemics, AI adoption) influence research trends and theoretical paradigms.

Third, the study is limited in its contextual generalization. The thematic clusters and co-word mappings blend findings from varied service sectors (e.g., banking, hospitality, retail), potentially obscuring industry-specific insights. Furthermore, the study does not differentiate between traditional and digital service environments, despite growing evidence that service recovery dynamics differ substantially between human-driven and AI-mediated contexts (Lajante et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024).

Fourth, cultural and geographic variations were not specifically analyzed. Consumer attitudes toward justice, complaint behavior, and trust vary considerably across cultural and institutional environments (Chow & Ho, 2025). The lack of a comparative lens restricts our ability to draw nuanced insights applicable across global service markets.

Future Research Avenues

Building upon the limitations noted, this study opens several compelling directions for future research. First, future studies should broaden the scope of bibliometric datasets by integrating publications from multiple databases (e.g., Web of Science, Dimensions, Google Scholar). This would help address coverage bias and ensure a more representative view of the literature.

Second, there is a need for temporal and historiographic analyses that explore how dominant themes have evolved over distinct phases of academic discourse. For example, mapping the rise of emotionally intelligent service recovery or digital trust frameworks in response to social media and AI adoption would yield rich historical insights.

Third, scholars are encouraged to pursue cross-sectoral and cross-cultural comparative studies to explore how contextual factors shape consumer reactions to service failure. For instance, emotional recovery strategies may work differently in collectivist versus individualist cultures or regulated versus unregulated service industries. Such comparative studies would enhance theoretical frameworks' external validity and cultural adaptability.

Fourth, future research could empirically investigate the interactive effects of emotional and economic recovery strategies, particularly through experimental or longitudinal designs. For example, researchers might explore the optimal combination of apology and compensation in eliciting forgiveness without incurring excessive recovery costs (Wei et al., 2020), or examine when repeated apologies lead to "apology fatigue" and consumer reactance.

Fifth, research on AI-mediated service recovery remains underdeveloped. The simulation of empathy, perceived fairness in algorithmic decision-making, and trust in autonomous systems are emerging themes that warrant deeper investigation. Studies could explore how service bots, digital agents, or recommender systems influence recovery satisfaction and trust compared to human agents (Lajante et al., 2023).

Finally, future work should operationalize and test the conceptual constructs identified in this bibliometric study. Variables like digital transparency, inferred firm motives, and co-destruction of value offer fertile ground for theory building and quantitative validation. Developing measurement models and predictive frameworks based on these constructs would advance the service marketing literature theoretically and managerially. In conclusion, this study establishes a robust conceptual foundation that scholars can build upon using diverse methodological lenses, contextual domains, and empirical strategies to advance further the ethical, emotional, and digital dimensions of service failure research.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive bibliometric mapping of the intellectual and conceptual evolution at the intersection of service failure, consumer protection, and ethical vulnerability. By employing bibliographic coupling and co-word analysis on 677 peer-reviewed articles published between 2005 and 2025, the research identifies five distinct thematic clusters in the intellectual structure and four conceptual clusters that shape scholarly discourse in this domain. The findings reveal a paradigmatic transition from operational and transactional recovery models to frameworks centered on emotional intelligence, fairness, digital trust, and consumer

empowerment. Service failure is increasingly viewed as an operational lapse and an ethical event that challenges organizations to uphold transparency, justice, and consumer dignity. Furthermore, integrating emotional mechanisms, justice theory, and digital interactional dynamics into service recovery models indicates the need for interdisciplinary approaches that align marketing strategy with ethical governance and technological advancement. This study provides a structured knowledge base supporting academic inquiry and managerial innovation by consolidating fragmented research streams and surfacing underexplored thematic areas. The implications extend beyond academic contribution, offering actionable insights for designing emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and digitally responsive service ecosystems.

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