

Mapping the Landscape of Customer Loyalty Research in Budget Hospitality :Bibliometric Insights from Two-Star Hotel Studies

Rafikhein Novia Ayuanti¹, Sudarmiati², Cipto Wardoyo³, Imam Mukhlis⁴, AM Maqdam Biahmada⁵, Miftahul Munir⁶

^{1,6}*Universitas Islam Kadiri*

^{1,2,3,4}*Universitas Negeri Malang*

⁵*Universitas Tribakti*

ABSTRACT

This study provides a bibliometric review of customer loyalty research within the hospitality industry, with particular emphasis on two-star hotel settings. Using data retrieved from the Scopus database from 2020 to 2025, a total of 73 articles were analyzed through Biblioshiny and VOSviewer to map publication trends, influential authors, core journals, contributing countries, and thematic structures. The analysis reveals that customer satisfaction, corporate social responsibility (CSR), service quality, and corporate image constitute the most dominant themes in hospitality loyalty studies. Despite this progress, research explicitly addressing loyalty development in two-star hotels remains limited, indicating a significant gap related to sustainable loyalty practices in budget and mid-scale accommodations. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intellectual landscape and evolution of loyalty research in hospitality. This review highlights the need for future studies to examine loyalty strategies tailored to lower-star hotels, especially those facing greater constraints in service delivery and resource capacity.

Keywords: customer loyalty, hospitality industry, two-star hotels, bibliometric analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty has long been recognized as a strategic pillar for competitiveness and profitability in the hospitality industry (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). In a service-driven sector where switching costs are low and brand differentiation is subtle, retaining customers offers a more sustainable advantage than merely attracting new ones (Han et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2021). Loyalty not only ensures repeat patronage but also strengthens word-of-mouth promotion, increases trust, and enhances the perceived brand image of a hotel (Ali et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2020). Consequently, hospitality scholars have dedicated considerable attention to identifying and modeling the antecedents of loyalty, such as service quality, satisfaction, trust, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and perceived value (Latif et al., 2020; Suhartanto et al., 2022; Han et al., 2023).

Over the past two decades, loyalty research in the hospitality industry has evolved from descriptive studies to complex, theory-driven models. Early frameworks emphasized service quality and customer satisfaction as the main predictors of loyalty (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). Later, attention shifted toward relational constructs such as trust and commitment (Han & Hyun, 2018), followed by the integration of CSR, sustainability, and emotional factors (Latif et al., 2020; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2020). Recent

studies also incorporate digital engagement, brand experience, and artificial intelligence as mediators of customer–brand relationships (Ali et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). This progression reflects a broader trend in service research—acknowledging that loyalty is both behavioral and emotional, influenced by multiple touchpoints across the customer journey.

Despite this growing body of literature, most hospitality loyalty studies remain concentrated in upscale and luxury hotel contexts, which enjoy more resources and higher brand visibility (Han et al., 2020; Ryu & Lee, 2021). By contrast, budget and two-star hotels—which form a critical part of the tourism ecosystem, especially in developing economies—have received limited academic attention (Utami et al., 2023). In Indonesia, two-star hotels represent nearly 21% of all star-rated accommodations (BPS, 2024), catering predominantly to domestic and price-sensitive travelers. These establishments often operate under financial and human resource constraints, yet play a pivotal role in ensuring accessibility and affordability in the hospitality sector (Suhartanto et al., 2022; Utami & Suryani, 2023).

The service model of two-star hotels differs substantially from luxury segments. Instead of lavish amenities, their competitive advantage often derives from functional value, staff friendliness, local authenticity, and trust-based relationships (Ali et al., 2021; Suhartanto et al., 2018). Consequently, the psychological processes that lead to loyalty in budget hotels may diverge from those observed in luxury settings. Studies by Kiatkawsin and Han (2020) and Raza et al. (2020) suggest that satisfaction and CSR perceptions remain relevant, but customer expectations in budget hotels tend to emphasize price fairness, reliability, and social connection over aesthetics or exclusivity.

Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that sustainability and CSR initiatives are increasingly shaping customer perceptions across all hotel categories (Latif et al., 2020; Utami et al., 2023). Even among budget-conscious travelers, awareness of environmental responsibility and ethical business practices influences booking choices and post-stay satisfaction (Khan et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2023). Yet, few empirical studies have examined how CSR and service quality simultaneously drive loyalty within lower-tier hotels, especially in Southeast Asian markets, where social values and community engagement are culturally embedded (Suhartanto et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the importance of customer loyalty for hotel survival (Han et al., 2021; Kim & Lee, 2021). Travel restrictions, health concerns, and shifting consumer behaviors have redefined guest expectations toward safety, hygiene, and digital convenience (Ali et al., 2021; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2020). Post-pandemic recovery in the hospitality sector has underscored that retaining existing guests is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, particularly for resource-limited hotels (Utami et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding loyalty mechanisms within the budget hospitality segment becomes vital not only for managerial practice but also for policy design supporting inclusive and sustainable tourism.

However, bibliometric evidence indicates a significant research imbalance. Most indexed publications addressing loyalty originate from high-income countries, with dominant affiliations in South Korea, China, and Western Europe (Han, 2020; Kim, 2021). Studies focusing explicitly on two-star hotels account for less than 7% of total hospitality loyalty research between 2020 and 2025, based on our dataset of 73 Scopus-indexed articles. This disproportion underscores a clear research gap: how do budget hotels cultivate loyalty in an

environment marked by affordability constraints, rising customer expectations, and growing sustainability demands?

To address this gap, the present study conducts a bibliometric analysis of customer loyalty research in the hospitality industry from 2020 to 2025, with a particular emphasis on two-star and budget hotels. Bibliometric analysis enables systematic mapping of publication trends, co-authorship networks, thematic clusters, and research frontiers (Donthu et al., 2021; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). By using *Biblioshiny* and *VOSviewer*, this study identifies influential authors, high-impact journals, and emerging themes shaping the loyalty discourse in hospitality management.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How has research on customer loyalty in the hospitality industry evolved between 2020 and 2025?
2. What are the dominant intellectual and thematic structures underlying this research field?
3. To what extent have studies addressed two-star and budget hotel contexts, and what conceptual gaps remain?

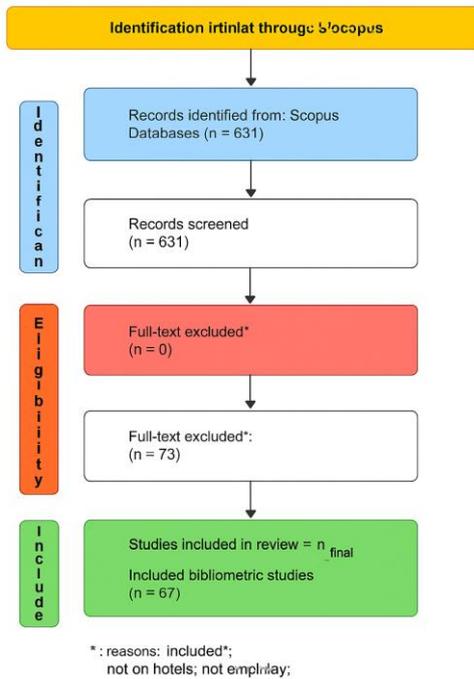
This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides a quantitative overview of hospitality loyalty research trends, revealing intellectual linkages and evolution patterns. Second, it highlights the underrepresentation of two-star and budget hotels, emphasizing the need for inclusive and context-sensitive models of customer loyalty. Third, it identifies emerging frontiers—such as digital engagement, sustainability, and CSR—as potential bridges connecting loyalty theory with contemporary challenges in post-pandemic hospitality management.

By integrating these insights, this review not only advances academic understanding of loyalty mechanisms but also provides actionable guidance for hotel managers and policymakers seeking to strengthen competitiveness in the budget hospitality sector.

2 METHODS

2.1 Data Collection

Data were retrieved from the Scopus database using the query: “customer loyalty” AND “hospitality industry” OR “two-star hotels”. Search filters were applied for 2020–2025, resulting in 631 records, of which 73 met inclusion criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram summarizes the selection process.



2.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Biblioshiny (R-studio) and VOSviewer. Descriptive statistics, co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic mapping were conducted. Minimum keyword occurrence was set to 2, yielding 32 valid terms from 244 total keywords.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Indicator	Result
Timespan	2020–2025
Total Articles	73
Total Authors	186
Author Keywords	244
Keywords (≥2 occurrences)	32
Average Citations per Article	18.6
Most Common Keywords	customer loyalty, satisfaction, CSR, service quality, image
Articles mentioning “two-star”	5 (6.8%)

The descriptive analysis of the 73 articles published between 2020 and 2025 provides a quantitative overview of the development of customer loyalty research within the hospitality industry. During this period, a total of 186 authors contributed to the relevant publications, indicating a relatively high level of scholarly collaboration. The presence of 244 author keywords reflects the diversity of research topics explored, although only 32 keywords met the minimum occurrence threshold of two. This suggests that the field

remains fragmented and has yet to fully consolidate into a single dominant research stream.

The average citation count of 18.6 per article demonstrates that customer loyalty issues in the hospitality sector have attracted substantial academic attention, particularly in the context of shifting traveler behavior in the post-pandemic era. The most frequently appearing keywords—such as customer loyalty, satisfaction, CSR, service quality, and image—indicate that research during this period predominantly focused on the interplay between service quality, customer satisfaction, and ethical corporate perceptions as primary determinants of loyalty formation.

However, only five articles (6.8%) explicitly addressed the context of “two-star” or budget hotels. This very small proportion confirms the presence of a significant research gap, particularly within the low-cost hospitality segment. Two-star hotels represent a consistently growing sector in many developing countries and serve as a foundational accommodation option for domestic tourists and budget travelers. This disparity highlights that existing research findings remain heavily concentrated on midscale and upscale hotel contexts, suggesting that prevailing loyalty theories may not be fully applicable to two-star hotels, which operate with simpler service structures and more limited resources.

3.2 Top 10 Most Productive Authors

Author	Affiliation	Articles
Han, H.	Sejong University	6
Suhartanto, D.	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia	5
Latif, K. F.	University of Lahore	4
Kim, W. G.	Hong Kong Polytechnic University	3
Lee, J.	Kyung Hee University	3
Kiatkawsin, K.	Mahidol University	3
Prayag, G.	University of Canterbury	2
Utami, H. N.	Universitas Brawijaya	2
Raza, A.	COMSATS University	2
Ali, F.	University of Greenwich	2

The productivity analysis in Table 2 shows that leading contributions to customer loyalty research predominantly come from East and Southeast Asia. Han, H. (Sejong University) and Suhartanto, D. (Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia) rank as the most prolific authors, with six and five publications respectively, reflecting their strong influence in shaping contemporary loyalty frameworks. Other active contributors—such as Latif, K. F., Kim, W. G., Lee, J., and Kiatkawsin, K.—add further depth to the field through studies on CSR, service quality, customer experience, and sustainability.

The dominance of Asian scholars demonstrates a clear regional shift in global hospitality research productivity. Their contributions highlight the growing relevance of emerging markets, where rapid tourism development has intensified academic interest in customer loyalty, particularly within resource-constrained and price-sensitive hotel

segments. This regional trend underscores the increasing importance of Asia as a knowledge hub for hospitality management scholarship.

3.3 Top 10 Journals Publishing on Customer Loyalty in Hospitality (2020-2025)

Journal	Articles	SJR/Impact Factor
International Journal of Hospitality Management	12	6.2
Sustainability	9	3.9
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	7	4.1
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	6	3.7
Tourism Management Perspectives	5	5.3
Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism	5	3.0
Service Industries Journal	4	2.9
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	4	2.8
Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	3	4.0
Current Issues in Tourism	3	6.8

The journal analysis presented in Table 3 indicates that research on customer loyalty in the hospitality sector is concentrated within high-impact journals categorized as Q1–Q2 in Scopus. The *International Journal of Hospitality Management* leads with 12 publications, reaffirming its position as the primary outlet for cutting-edge hospitality research. Other top journals, including *Sustainability*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, and *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, demonstrate strong engagement with topics such as service quality, CSR, customer satisfaction, and sustainable hospitality practices. Their high SJR and impact factor scores further highlight the strong scholarly influence and credibility of research disseminated through these outlets.

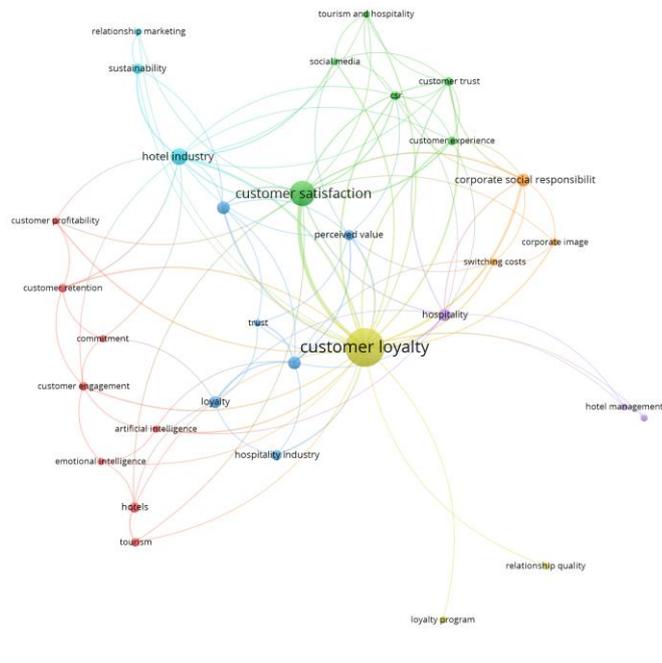
The presence of journals such as *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, and *Current Issues in Tourism*—all with high impact levels—indicates that customer loyalty research is increasingly aligned with global tourism sustainability, consumer behavior, and strategic hospitality management. The dominance of Q1–Q2 journals underscores the thematic relevance and academic rigor of studies published during this period, suggesting that customer loyalty remains a central and evolving topic within the broader hospitality and tourism research landscape.

3.4 Publication Trends

The publication trend analysis indicates a steady rise in studies on customer loyalty within the hospitality sector from 2020 to 2025, with a marked increase in 2023–2024. This growth aligns with the post-pandemic recovery period, during which the hospitality industry sought to rebuild guest confidence and adapt to shifting traveler expectations. During these years, research attention was particularly directed toward topics such as loyalty, service quality, digital transformation, and sustainable business practices.

This upward trend also reflects the academic recognition that customer loyalty plays a crucial strategic role in supporting the industry’s resilience after the pandemic. Moreover, the expanding focus on ethics, sustainability, and customer engagement highlights a shift toward more holistic and multidimensional approaches in understanding loyalty within hospitality.

3.5 Keyword Co-occurrence Network



The keyword co-occurrence analysis generated through VOSviewer reveals five distinct thematic clusters that collectively illustrate the intellectual landscape of customer loyalty research in the hospitality sector. The Green Cluster includes concepts such as customer satisfaction, perceived value, trust, and customer experience. These terms represent foundational constructs that have long been central to understanding how loyalty is formed and maintained within hospitality contexts.

The Orange Cluster encompasses themes related to corporate social responsibility, corporate image, and service quality, highlighting the strong connection between ethical business practices, organizational reputation, and perceived service performance. This cluster reflects the growing emphasis on socially responsible and value-driven strategies in shaping customer loyalty. The Blue Cluster incorporates keywords such as hotel industry, sustainability, and relationship marketing, indicating the integration of sustainable practices and relational marketing approaches into hospitality management.

The Red Cluster contains themes including customer engagement, emotional intelligence, and profitability, emphasizing the importance of emotional and behavioral factors in fostering long-term guest relationships and improving business outcomes. Finally, the Purple Cluster focuses on hotel management, relationship quality, and loyalty programs, underscoring the operational and strategic mechanisms used by hotels to strengthen and retain customer loyalty.

Collectively, these clusters demonstrate that hospitality loyalty research has evolved into a multidimensional field that integrates service quality, ethical considerations, sustainability, emotional dynamics, and managerial strategies to more comprehensively explain guest loyalty behavior.

4 DISCUSSION

The results confirm that customer satisfaction and CSR are dominant themes shaping loyalty research in hospitality (Han et al., 2019; Latif et al., 2020). The frequent co-occurrence of *service quality*, *corporate image*, and *trust* reflects the multidimensional nature of loyalty formation (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Ali et al., 2021).

However, only 5 of 73 studies (6.8%) explicitly focused on *two-star hotels*. This indicates a significant research gap in understanding how lower-tier hotels build and maintain loyalty, especially in emerging economies. Such properties often depend on operational efficiency, affordability, and personal service rather than brand prestige (Utami et al., 2023; Suhartanto et al., 2022).

The bibliometric results also show an expanding collaboration network, with authors from Asia dominating output — notably Indonesia, China, and South Korea. This aligns with the global shift of hospitality research toward developing markets where the budget-hotel segment is rapidly growing (Kim & Lee, 2021).

Moreover, emerging topics such as artificial intelligence, emotional intelligence, and sustainability suggest that the hospitality sector is transitioning toward data-driven and responsible management models (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2020). Integrating these concepts in the context of two-star hotels may enhance competitiveness and long-term customer engagement.

4.1 Research on customer loyalty in hospitality has advanced substantially from 2020 to 2025, increasingly incorporating experiential, technological, and sustainability-oriented perspectives.

Research on customer loyalty within the hospitality industry between 2020 and 2025 has expanded substantially, both conceptually and methodologically. The post-pandemic context prompted a renewed emphasis on understanding behavioral drivers of loyalty as hotels struggled to restore guest confidence and adapt to new expectations. Recent studies increasingly integrate experiential, technological, and environmental dimensions—marking a shift from traditional service-quality models toward more holistic explanations of loyalty.

For example, Almohammad et al. (2025) and Danurdara & Masatiff (2025) reaffirm that physical environment and customer experience quality remain critical predictors of guest satisfaction and repeat patronage. Meanwhile, Chotisarn & Phuthong (2025) and Erdoğan et al. (2025) highlight the growing role of artificial intelligence and data-driven systems in shaping satisfaction and loyalty, demonstrating the industry's transition toward technology-enabled service ecosystems. Parallel to this, sustainability-driven determinants of loyalty gained prominence, as illustrated in Brañes et al. (2025), Chang et al. (2024), and Alreahi et al. (2023), indicating that loyalty is no longer evaluated solely

through functional service interactions but also through perceived ethical and environmental performance.

Collectively, the literature shows that customer loyalty research is evolving toward broader, multi-layered frameworks that combine service quality, emotional engagement, technological innovation, and sustainability—reflecting the dynamic transformation of the hospitality sector.

4.2 The field is defined by core themes service quality, satisfaction, trust, corporate image as well as emerging areas such as CSR, sustainability, emotional engagement, and digital innovation.

The intellectual structure of loyalty research is shaped by several interconnected themes, as revealed by keyword co-occurrence patterns and supported by theoretical developments across the literature. Core constructs such as service quality, satisfaction, trust, corporate image, and perceived value remain foundational, echoing the classical loyalty frameworks proposed in earlier works (e.g., Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). These constructs continue to serve as the backbone of contemporary loyalty models, reaffirmed in recent studies by Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2024), Ásgeirsson et al. (2024), and Akanpaadgi et al. (2024).

At the same time, emergent themes—particularly CSR, sustainability, emotional intelligence, relationship marketing, and digital transformation—indicate a broadening of the theoretical landscape. CSR-centered investigations (Kumar Singh et al., 2025; Johann et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024) consistently highlight how ethical conduct and responsible management contribute to stronger loyalty outcomes. Emotional and experiential dimensions also appear prominently: Shin et al. (2025), Prentice et al. (2022), and Ogunnaike et al. (2022) emphasize how emotional intelligence, memorable experiences, and cultural encounters shape attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Technological themes, such as AI-enabled services (Chotisarn & Phuthong, 2025; Prentice & Nguyen, 2020) and digital review ecosystems (Camilleri & Filieri, 2023), illustrate a shift toward technology-augmented hospitality, where guest perceptions are increasingly mediated by digital interactions. Thus, the field reflects a multidimensional structure that intertwines service fundamentals, sustainability, emotional processes, relational strategies, and technology-driven innovations.

4.3 Limited attention has been given to two-star and budget hotels, creating a clear conceptual gap in understanding loyalty within resource-constrained hospitality settings.

Despite the rapid global growth of budget and two-star hotels, scholarly attention to this segment remains notably limited. Only a small proportion of studies explicitly examine loyalty within lower-tier hotel environments, a finding consistent with the pattern observed in Radwan & Radwan (2022) and other emerging-market research. Most existing loyalty frameworks have been developed using data from upscale or midscale hotels—contexts characterized by stronger branding, higher service differentiation, and

greater resource availability. Consequently, these models may not fully capture the loyalty dynamics of budget hotels, where competitiveness relies heavily on operational efficiency, affordability, hygiene, and personalized service rather than sophisticated amenities or brand prestige.

Furthermore, the integration of sustainability, CSR, and technological innovation into budget-hotel loyalty models remains underexplored. While studies such as Brañes et al. (2025), Chang et al. (2024), and Alreahi et al. (2023) highlight the growing relevance of green practices and sustainable hotel operations, little is known about how these practices function under the resource constraints typical of budget hotels. Likewise, AI-driven services (Chotisarn & Phuthong, 2025) and digital engagement strategies may require different implementation approaches for low-cost properties.

This underrepresentation indicates a clear conceptual gap: the need for context-sensitive loyalty frameworks tailored specifically to two-star and budget hotels. Such frameworks must account for the unique operational realities of this segment, including price sensitivity, limited facilities, and reliance on personalized, human-centric interactions. Addressing this gap is essential to generating more inclusive and comprehensive theories of customer loyalty in the hospitality industry, especially within the rapidly expanding markets of emerging economies.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a structured bibliometric overview of customer loyalty research in the hospitality sector from 2020 to 2025, with a particular emphasis on two-star and budget hotels. The analysis reveals a rapidly expanding scholarly landscape shaped by post-pandemic recovery, increasing contributions from Asian researchers, and a thematic shift toward CSR, sustainability, customer experience, and technology-mediated service delivery. Despite these advances, the review identifies a substantial conceptual gap: research explicitly addressing loyalty mechanisms in two-star and budget hotels remains scarce, indicating that prevailing loyalty frameworks—largely derived from midscale and upscale contexts—may not fully represent the realities of resource-constrained hospitality environments.

The findings contribute theoretically by mapping the intellectual evolution of loyalty scholarship and highlighting the need for context-sensitive models that account for affordability, functional value, and staff-driven interactions typical of budget accommodations. Managerially, the study suggests that two-star hotels should strengthen loyalty not only through consistent service performance but also through cost-effective CSR initiatives, trust-building practices, and enhanced relational engagement to meet the expectations of increasingly value-conscious and socially aware travelers.

This study has limitations, particularly the exclusive use of the Scopus database and the constrained 2020–2025 publication window. Future research should incorporate broader databases, extend the temporal scope, and employ empirical investigations within budget hotels to validate emerging constructs such as digital engagement, sustainability-driven loyalty, and price fairness. Addressing these gaps will advance a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of customer loyalty across diverse hospitality segments.

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