

BEYOND SERVICE: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF EMOTIONAL QUALITY IN ENHANCING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND BRAND FIDELITY IN CASUAL DINING CHAIN RESTAURANTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how emotional and service quality impact customer satisfaction and brand fidelity in casual dining chain restaurants. Data from 222 U.S. customers were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results showed that both service quality and emotional quality positively affect customer satisfaction and brand fidelity, with emotional quality having a stronger direct influence on brand fidelity. The study recommends prioritizing both service quality and emotional quality to build sustainable customer relationships. It highlights the importance of consistent, personalized service and occasional treats. Restaurateurs should foster a welcoming atmosphere and encourage rapport-building with customers. This research offers valuable insights for enhancing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity in the restaurant industry.

Keywords: Emotional quality, Service quality, Casual dining chain restaurant, Customer satisfaction, Brand fidelity

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INTRODUCTION

A restaurant is a dynamic and highly competitive industry where the success of the business is determined by the satisfaction of customers (Kim et al., 2009; Sarooghi et al., 2015; Han & Hyun, 2017; Mun & Jang, 2018; Yusr et al., 2018). In this environment, businesses strive to create memorable dining experiences that foster customer loyalty. Traditionally, service quality has been considered the cornerstone of customer satisfaction, with numerous studies (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Parasuraman, 1997; Alonso & O'Neill, 2010; Serra-Cantalops et al., 2020) emphasizing the importance of elements such as prompt service, staff professionalism, and the physical environment of the restaurant. Moreover, recent research suggests that emotional quality, or the emotional responses and connections customers experience during their dining experience, may play a more significant role in driving satisfaction and loyalty than service quality alone (Collier & Barnes, 2015; Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Rychalski & Hudson, 2017).

Previous research has stressed the importance of emotional responses in hedonic service settings such as tourism, leisure, entertainment, and luxury (Chan et al., 2015; Jani & Han, 2015; Kim et al., 2016), however, we know of no studies that examine the role of emotional quality in a standardized utilitarian service context such as casual dining chain restaurants. This gap is particularly significant given that casual dining restaurants represent a major segment of the food service industry, characterized by consistent service formats,

moderate pricing, and broad customer appeal. Unlike fine dining or luxury experiences that may inherently evoke strong emotional responses, casual dining settings must work harder to differentiate themselves and foster emotional connections through subtle and consistent experiential cues. Understanding how emotional quality influences customer satisfaction and loyalty in this context can provide valuable insights for practitioners seeking a competitive advantage in a saturated market.

Emotional quality encompasses the range of emotions customers feel during their interaction with a restaurant, including feelings of happiness, comfort, excitement, and contentment (Han & Hyun, 2017). It encompasses the customer's feelings of joy, comfort, excitement, and even surprise during their time at the restaurant. These emotions are influenced by various factors, including the ambiance of the restaurant, the behavior and attitude of the staff, and the overall dining experience. Unlike service quality, which is often measured through tangible aspects such as speed of service or the accuracy of orders, emotional quality is inherently subjective and relates to the psychological and emotional state of the customer. It taps into the deeper, more personal aspects of the dining experience, which can have a lasting impact on customer perceptions and behaviors. Previous studies on the "service profit chain" have established a link between emotional quality, customer satisfaction, and organizational profits, but empirical research on the contribution of emotional quality to organizational profit in the food business is lacking (Pugh, 2001).

In an industry where competition is fierce and consumer preferences are constantly evolving, understanding the role of emotional quality in customer satisfaction and loyalty is critical (Cronin et al., 2000). The notion that emotional quality might outweigh service quality challenges the traditional focus of many restaurants. It suggests that restaurants should not only concentrate on delivering high-quality service but also on creating an emotional connection with their customers. This shift in focus could redefine how restaurants approach customer experience management, leading to new strategies that prioritize emotional engagement as a key driver of satisfaction, attachment, and loyalty.

Historically, customer satisfaction has been a key determinant of restaurant success (Ladhari et al., 2008). Satisfied customers are more likely to return, give word-of-mouth recommendations, and contribute to positive online reviews, all of which are crucial for building a strong brand reputation and maintaining a competitive edge (Parasuraman et al., 1991; Oh, 1999; Ladhari et al., 2008; Işçi et al., 2018). Traditionally, customer satisfaction in restaurants has been closely linked to service quality, which includes factors such as the efficiency of service, the friendliness and professionalism of the staff, the cleanliness and ambiance of the establishment, and the quality of food and beverages. These aspects of service quality are often seen as

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the foundation of a positive dining experience and have been the primary focus of customer satisfaction initiatives in the industry (Mensah & Mensah, 2018). However, as the market becomes more saturated and customer expectations continue to rise, the traditional emphasis on service quality alone may no longer be sufficient to ensure that customers heavily accommodate, make sacrifices, show tolerance and forgiveness, and reject alternative restaurants.

Consumers today seek more than just good food and prompt service; they desire a holistic dining experience that evokes positive emotions and creates lasting memories (Gaur et al., 2014). This shift in consumer expectations has led to the recognition of emotional quality as a critical factor in building consumer/brand relationships, higher than customer satisfaction, coined brand fidelity.

Brand fidelity is the customer's faithfulness to a brand partner, demonstrated by an aggregate of behaviors and cognitions that maintain relationship stability and durability (Grace et al., 2018). In recent times, customers are more likely to remain Fidel to where they feel emotionally connected and valued, even if the service quality is not perfect. This suggests that fostering positive emotional interactions between employees and customers is a key driver of long-term brand fidelity, surpassing the importance of service quality alone (Tsai & Huang, 2002; Wang et al. 2017). This emotional connection, sometimes called "brand love," is a powerful differentiator in such a competitive industry. In the restaurant industry, the Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield et al., 1993; 1994) highlights that when employees express positive emotions (such as warmth, friendliness, and attentiveness), these emotions are transferred to customers, creating a more emotionally satisfying experience. This emotional satisfaction can significantly enhance a customer's overall perception of the restaurant, often outweighing the objective quality of the service or food.

Various studies have shown that emotional quality plays a crucial role in influencing customers' perceptions and behaviors. (Hyun et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Jiang & Lau, 2022). When customers experience positive emotions during their service experience, they are more likely to be satisfied with the firm and develop a sense of fidelity (Jiang & Lau, 2022). This emotional connection can lead to repeat visits, positive word-of-mouth, willingness to sacrifice, and a willingness to recommend the organization to others. In contrast, we believe if the emotional quality of the experience is negative, even high levels of service quality may not be enough to retain the customer's brand fidelity. This study proposed a nuanced understanding that the connection customers feel toward a restaurant brand is not solely based on the quality of food or affordability but also on how the dining experience resonates emotionally. We aim to propose an integrated model demonstrating that emotional quality may exert a greater influence on customer satisfaction and brand fidelity than service quality alone. By exploring this relationship, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into the factors that drive strong customer loyalty, thereby contributing to the advancement of service quality frameworks in the restaurant industry.

The growing importance of emotional quality in the restaurant industry represents a shift in focus from the traditional emphasis on service quality. While service quality remains an essential component of customer satisfaction, it is increasingly recognized that it is not enough on its own to ensure brand fidelity (Grace et al., 2020). Emotional quality, which encompasses the emotional responses and connections that customers experience during their dining experience, is emerging as a key driver of satisfaction and brand

fidelity (Kim et al., 2013). This shift in focus has important implications for how restaurants approach customer experience management. To create a truly memorable dining experience and brand fidelity, the debate on whether restaurants must not only deliver high-quality service but also create an emotional connection with their customers is inconclusive. Whilst some researchers (Chow et al., 2007; Jin et al., 2013; Mensah & Mensah, 2018) argue service quality is enough to gain a competitive advantage, others (Oliver, 1993; Barsky & Nash, 2002; Ladhari et al., 2008) are of the view that by prioritizing emotional quality, restaurants can differentiate themselves in a competitive market, enhancing customer satisfaction, and build brand fidelity. Thus, this study aims to assess the role of emotional and service quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity in the casual dining chain restaurant. The study contributes to both service marketing literature and studies about emotions at work, emphasizing the critical role of emotions in service encounters.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Emotional Contagion Theory

Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield et al., 1993, 1994; Wood et al., 2016) posits that customers are susceptible to the emotions displayed by service employees, which directly shape their evaluations of the service. The emotions projected by employees significantly impact customers' emotional states and their perceptions of service quality. Positive emotional experiences, such as feeling valued, cared for, or delighted, often result in higher customer satisfaction, even when the objective quality of the service is average. Hatfield et al. (1993) further demonstrated that person-to-person interactions, including the mimicry of nonverbal cues like tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions, influence customers' overall service perceptions and ratings. Furthermore, the theory suggests that negative emotional contagion can lead to workplace errors and accidents, while positive emotional contagion reduces these risks, ultimately improving customer satisfaction (Petitta et al., 2019). Smith (2016) underscored the importance of promoting positive emotional states within organizations.

Literature on emotions has demonstrated that positive emotions foster customer satisfaction, increase return visits, and encourage positive word-of-mouth (Tsai & Huang, 2002; Wang et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019). Conversely, negative emotions are associated with adverse customer outcomes through negative emotional contagion (Du et al., 2011). Emotional contagion between customers and service employees is a critical factor influencing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity during service encounters (Liu et al., 2019). Building on Liu et al.'s (2019) emotion cycles in services model, this study examines the pivotal role of emotional quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity within the casual dining chain restaurant industry. Specifically, we explore how customers' emotional experiences (termed emotional quality) and perceived service quality independently affect customer satisfaction and brand fidelity. Our hypotheses, informed by the emotion cycles model and Emotional Contagion Theory, are outlined in the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1.

Emotional Quality

Emotions are "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals or events or thoughts" (Bagozzi et al., 1999, p. 184). It is a state of mind created by an individual's preexisting mood, tempered by their responses to the surrounding environment. Emotional quality reflects the overall emotional experience of the customer, encompassing feelings of joy, comfort, excitement, and even surprise during their time at the restaurant. As such, assessing the emotional

quality construct is highly intricate due to its complexity. It is a complex and multifaceted concept that goes beyond the tangible elements of service quality and delves into the realm of customer emotions and perceptions. Emotional quality in the restaurant industry is shaped by various factors, including the behavior and attitude of the staff, the ambiance of the restaurant, the presentation and taste of the food, and the overall atmosphere of the dining experience. For example, a warm and inviting ambiance can create a sense of comfort and relaxation, while friendly and attentive staff can make customers feel valued and appreciated. Similarly, the presentation and taste of the food can evoke feelings of delight and satisfaction, enhancing the overall emotional experience. These emotional responses are integral to the dining experience and can significantly influence customer satisfaction, attachment to the restaurant, and brand fidelity. Consumption experiences often evoke a complex blend of emotions, frequently marked by ambivalence (Richins, 1997). A substantial body of research suggests that emotions exert a profound, predictable, and continuous influence on individuals' decision-making processes (Lerner et al., 2015).

Drawing from Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield et al., 1993, 1994), this study posits that in the context of casual dining chain restaurants, where face-to-face interactions and service consistency are central, customers often internalize the emotions displayed by employees, such as warmth, attentiveness, or enthusiasm, which in turn affects their own emotional experiences or emotional quality. Positive emotional contagion fosters feelings of being valued and cared for, enhancing customer satisfaction even when service performance is objectively average (Hatfield et al., 1993; Petitta et al., 2019). These emotionally satisfying experiences are critical precursors to brand fidelity, as customers are more likely to return to and advocate for brands that consistently evoke positive emotional responses (Liu et al., 2019; Smith, 2016). Thus, emotional quality functions as a vital conduit between interpersonal service interactions and long-term customer commitment, reinforcing the importance of employee emotional expression in driving both satisfaction and brand fidelity.

Service Quality

The concept of service quality has obtained substantial attention both in academia and practice. Research on consumer behavior in restaurants indicates that service quality plays a pivotal role in shaping consumers' dining decisions (Clemes et al., 2013). Service quality is defined as the disconfirmation between customers' expectations and their actual service experiences (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Thus, quality is at the discretion of the customer and is greatly influenced by his/ her perception. Parasuraman et al. (1991) conceptualized service quality as a comprehensive assessment, arising from the comparison between an organization's actual performance and consumers' expectations of how it should perform. According to preliminary data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. restaurant industry experienced a net gain of 29,900 jobs in August 2024, on a seasonally adjusted basis. This figure represents an increase of approximately 0.7% compared to the industry's employment peak in February 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Restaurant Association, 2024). The expansion in employment is largely attributed to the growing number of restaurants, which has intensified competition within the industry. As a result, the provision of service quality has become increasingly critical for maintaining a competitive advantage. The ability to deliver quality services is a crucial strategic resource for achieving success in the restaurant industry (Jin et al., 2013).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as the evaluation by customers that a product or service delivers a gratifying level of achievement related to their consumption experience (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). It is the emotional response that results from comparing a product or service's performance to prior expectations, based on whether those expectations were met or not (Oliver, 1980). Customer satisfaction is the subjective psychological assessment of how satisfied customers are with goods and services received against the price they paid (Uzir et al., 2020). Hence, the customer is dissatisfied when the performance of the product or service differs from his or her expectations. Customer satisfaction plays a vital role in business management, as it significantly influences an organization's long-term profitability (Le et al., 2020; Achmadi et al., 2023). Customer satisfaction has been identified as a critical component of business strategy for restaurateurs seeking to gain a competitive advantage within the industry (Achmadi et al., 2023).

Previous research indicates that emotion plays a critical role in customer satisfaction and brand fidelity, emphasizing the need to consider a distinct emotional dimension within satisfaction assessments in a utilitarian sector such as the casual fine dining restaurant (Cronin et al., 2000). However, there are no clear models for how emotions contribute to satisfaction in this area of research. Ladhari et al. (2017) conducted research in an optometric clinic on the role of emotions in utilitarian service settings and found that positive emotional satisfaction led to higher perceptions of product quality, willingness to accommodate and forgive, higher recommendations, and greater patronage intentions. Research indicates that 60% of new restaurants fail due to their inability to satisfy their customers. Consequently, customer satisfaction emerges as a critical factor in determining a company's long-term profitability, as well as its ability to retain customers and foster loyalty (Mensah & Mensah, 2018). Restaurant customers experience emotional quality when they are offered exceptional services that exceed their expectations and differ from the average concerning the global offering. Previous studies (Prayag et al., 2017; Hosany et al., 2017) have yielded inconsistent results regarding the relationship between customer emotions and post-service elements such as satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, it is advisable to examine the robustness of the relationship between emotional quality, customer satisfaction, and brand fidelity within a specific restaurant service context. Additionally, while emotions have been identified as antecedents of customer satisfaction in prior research, there is a notable lack of studies in the restaurant industry that explore the interplay between emotional quality and brand fidelity. Based on the preceding discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Emotional quality has a significantly positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H2: Emotional quality has a significantly positive influence on brand fidelity.

In their qualitative research, Parasuraman et al. (1985) differentiated between the concepts of service quality and customer satisfaction, emphasizing that these are distinct constructs. They illustrated this distinction by providing an example where consumers expressed satisfaction with a service, yet did not perceive it as being of high quality. This highlights the nuanced relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. The debate on whether service quality is a precursor to customer satisfaction remains inconclusive. Oliver (1993) initially proposed that satisfaction precedes service quality but later reversed this stance, suggesting that

service quality is, in fact, an antecedent to customer satisfaction. This perspective is reinforced by Gotlieb et al. (1994), whose study found that perceived service quality influences satisfaction, which in turn affects behavioral intentions. Furthermore, several researchers have identified service quality as a key determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Martensen et al., 2000; Wong, 2004). Moreover, in the studies of Grace et al. (2020), satisfaction was identified as an antecedent of brand fidelity. High service quality leads to customer satisfaction, which contributes to strong brand fidelity (Bagozzi et al., 2017). Based on the preceding discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Service quality has a significantly positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H4: Service quality has a significantly positive influence on brand fidelity.

Brand Fidelity

Brand fidelity is a deeply held commitment to repurchase a preferred brand or service consistently over time, leading to repetitive purchasing behavior, even in the presence of situational influences or marketing efforts that could encourage switching (Oliver, 1999). It represents one of the latest concepts introduced in the study of consumer-brand relationships. Brand fidelity is defined as the consumer's faithfulness to a brand partner manifested through various behaviors (i.e., accommodation/forgiveness, performance, and price) and cognitions (i.e., derogation of alternatives and cognitive interdependence) that maintain relationship stability and durability (Grace et al., 2020). It refers to the cognitions and actions of "brand lovers" who are highly committed to the relationship that they have with the restaurant brand.

According to this definition, brand fidelity reflects a customer's intention to make repeat purchases and willingness to pay a premium price for a brand, willingness to forgive the brand even when there is service failure, underpinned by a strong commitment to repurchase the brand in the future, despite external factors or marketing efforts that could encourage switching. It denotes the strength of the connection between an individual's attitude toward a brand and their repeat patronage. Thus, customers who have brand fidelity are less swayed by additional information and rival marketing efforts, making them highly profitable for restaurants. The relationship between customer satisfaction and brand fidelity or loyal customers is significant in several studies (Bigne et al., 2005; Ladhari et al., 2008; Oh, 1999). Iglesias and Guillén (2004) found that for casual dining chain restaurants to thrive amid competition, ensuring customer satisfaction is essential. Their research also revealed a strong, positive link between customer satisfaction and strong brand attachment and loyalty, which in this study is coined brand fidelity. In their studies, Mensah and Mensah (2018) highlight that service quality and customer satisfaction are crucial drivers of brand fidelity in the restaurant industry.

Consistent with previous research (Chow et al., 2007; Jen & Hu, 2003; Kim et al., 2009), their findings show that enhancing service quality directly enhances customer satisfaction, significantly predicting their fidelity to the brand. For casual dining chain restaurant operators, focusing on superior service quality fosters brand fidelity and ensures long-term success. According to Gracia et al. (2011), high evaluation of service quality is positively linked to increased brand fidelity, with good service quality leading to a stronger intention to return, underscoring the importance of customer perceptions in fostering brand fidelity in hotel and restaurant settings. Grace et al. (2020) conceptualized brand fidelity as a multidimensional construct

encompassing four key factors: accommodation/forgiveness based on price, accommodation/forgiveness based on performance, derogation of alternatives, and cognitive interdependence. In this study, the authors adopted one item from each of these dimensions, as employed by Joshi and Garg (2022). These four items offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms that contribute to the durability, stability, and exclusivity of customer-brand relationships.

In the modern restaurant industry, maintaining customer satisfaction is essential for fostering customer loyalty and securing long-term success (Achmadi et al., 2023). Hassani and Taati (2020) concluded in their studies that businesses should focus on enhancing the quality of their products and services to boost customer satisfaction. To foster brand fidelity, casual dining chain restaurant managers are advised to focus on enhancing customer satisfaction and strengthening emotional attachment to the restaurant (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). Based on the preceding discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Customer satisfaction has a significantly positive influence on brand fidelity.

Subsequently, Achmadi et al. (2023) found that in renowned Indonesian restaurants, service quality positively impacts customers' faithfulness to a restaurant brand when mediated by customer satisfaction, highlighting the crucial role of customer satisfaction in fostering brand fidelity. A substantial body of research has established customer satisfaction as a critical antecedent of key behavioral intentions such as electronic word-of-mouth, repeat patronage, and brand loyalty, particularly within the travel and tourism sectors (Lii & Lee, 2012; Prayag et al., 2017; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). According to Yang (2017), organizations heavily invest in enhancing customer satisfaction as a pathway to securing customer loyalty and, consequently, improving profitability.

As scholarly attention to emotions has increased, numerous studies have highlighted the significant role of emotional responses during service encounters in shaping service evaluations, brand fidelity, and future behavioral intentions (Serra-Cantalops et al., 2020). The marketing (Ladhari, 2007) and tourism (Bigné et al., 2005) literature, in particular, has identified a strong and positive relationship between customer satisfaction and brand-related behaviors such as loyalty and advocacy. However, Prayag et al. (2017) reported mixed results concerning the direct relationship between emotional quality and loyalty or satisfaction in a tourism context, suggesting that this link may be more complex than previously assumed.

Highly satisfied customers often cognitively diminish the appeal of competing alternatives, and may even idealize their brand relationship in ways that reflect emotional conviction more than objective reality (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Rusbult et al., 2001). Nonetheless, while many studies support a positive association between customer satisfaction and brand fidelity (Lii & Lee, 2012; Prayag et al., 2017), the evidence is not entirely conclusive. For example, Yang (2017) found no significant link between customer emotions, service quality, and loyalty-related outcomes, while Dolnicar et al. (2015) also questioned the consistency of the relationship between emotional quality and brand fidelity.

These conflicting findings suggest a need for further investigation into the mechanisms by which emotional quality and service quality influence brand fidelity, particularly in standardized, utilitarian service contexts such as casual dining chain restaurants. It is posited that customer satisfaction serves as a key psychological mechanism that

reinforces the emotional or service-based connections customers form with a brand, thereby fostering long-term brand commitment. Achieving brand fidelity in such contexts is challenging, but satisfaction may serve as a critical mediating variable that sustains and enhances this relationship. Although several studies conducted in non-hospitality contexts have explored the mediating role of customer satisfaction between emotions and brand fidelity, the findings remain mixed (Serra-Cantalops et al., 2020).

For instance, Walsh et al. (2011) found that customer satisfaction partially mediated the relationship between emotional responses and brand fidelity. However, there remains a notable gap in the hospitality literature, particularly within the restaurant sector, where few studies have examined the mediating role of satisfaction in the relationship between emotions and future behavioral intentions such as brand fidelity. This study aims to address this gap by empirically testing the mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between emotional quality and brand fidelity, as well as between service quality and brand fidelity. Based on the preceding discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between emotional quality and brand fidelity.

H7: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and brand fidelity.

The conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1 below.

METHODOLOGY

Survey Instrument

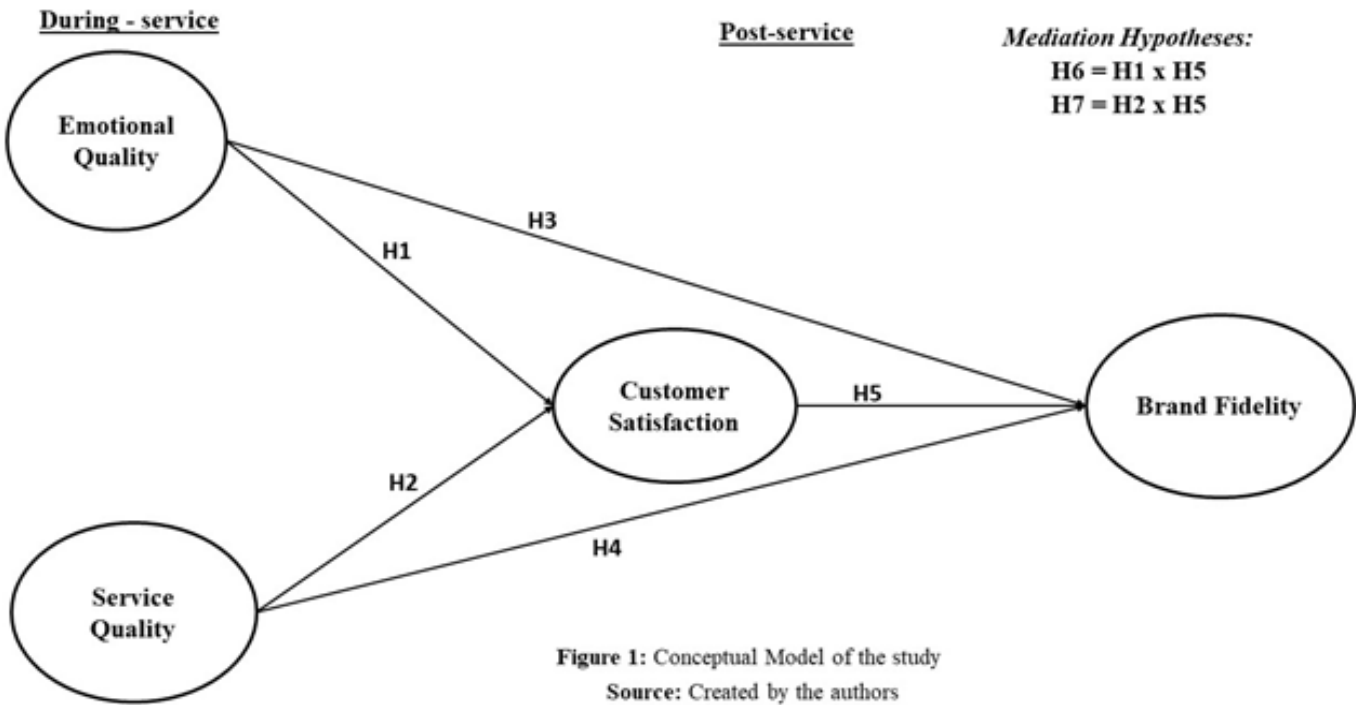
An online questionnaire was developed in Qualtrics for this study. First, a pilot study was performed before proceeding to a formal study. Based on the pilot study results, some corrections were made to some questions. The study then proceeded to formal data collection with seventeen (17) items in the online questionnaire. In the online questionnaire, participants start with an introductory page

that describes the study. To be eligible for participation, individuals must have visited and dined at a casual dining chain restaurant within the past six months. After that, participants were asked to name their favorite casual dining chain restaurant in the online questionnaire. A casual dining chain restaurant was explained to customers, and examples were cited. Then the participants were asked to respond to measurement questions of this study within a scenario of their favorite casual dining chain restaurant, which was embedded in measurement questions as piped text in Qualtrics. For instance, one of the measurement questions of this study was “Dining at $\{q://QID332/ChoiceTextEntryValue\}$ has stimulated my emotions”. The last part of the questionnaire was designed to capture information regarding respondents’ demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, education, income, and birth year.

Measurements

All measurement items employed in this study were adapted from established literature that had undergone prior validation and were subsequently modified to align with the specific objectives of this research. The study focused on a casual dining chain restaurant as the stimulus. This segment was selected due to its notable economic relevance yet limited representation in hospitality literature, particularly regarding emotional quality. Casual dining establishments uniquely blend hedonic and utilitarian experiences; thus, customers dine not only for sustenance but also for social interaction, relaxation, or a break from routine. This makes emotional quality a particularly salient construct worthy of investigation in this context. Emotional quality was measured using five items adapted from Serra-Cantalops et al. (2020), revised to suit the current study. Sample items included: “This restaurant makes me feel like a special customer,” “Dining at this restaurant has stimulated my emotions,” “Dining at this restaurant has been memorable to me,” “I have experienced positive and novel situations dining at this restaurant compared to other restaurants,” and “I am excited about the choice of this restaurant”

Service quality was assessed with four items adapted from Brady et al. (2002), such as: “This restaurant provides excellent overall



service,” “This restaurant provides service of a high quality,” “This restaurant provides a high standard of service,” and “This restaurant provides superior service in every way.”

Customer satisfaction was evaluated using four items adapted from Dam et al. (2021), including: “I am satisfied with the services provided by this restaurant,” “This restaurant meets my expectations,” “This restaurant is the right restaurant to order from,” “This restaurant meets my expectation,” and “Overall, I am satisfied with the service provided by this restaurant”

Finally, brand fidelity was measured using four items adapted from Grace et al. (2020) and modified following the recommendations of Joshi and Garg (2020). Examples include: “If this restaurant experienced some problems and was temporarily underperforming, I would continue to support the restaurant,” “When this restaurant has had a price increase, it has been well-justified,” I would feel offended if someone said something bad about this restaurant,” and “This restaurant is one of a kind and, in my opinion, has no competition.” All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)

Pilot Study

Before the main data collection, a pre-test was performed to identify potential issues in the wording of the questionnaire and test the feasibility of the proposed questionnaire. In the pilot study, data were collected from 86 participants from April 8th to April 18th from a Southwestern University in the United States. Based on the results, only a few modifications were made to the original wording used in the questionnaire. A pilot test was conducted with a sample (N = 86) to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Cronbach’s alpha analysis were performed to assess the construct validity and internal consistency of the measurement items. The results indicated that the customer satisfaction items did not load adequately onto their intended factor. Additionally, the emotional quality scale exhibited a low Cronbach’s alpha score, suggesting poor internal reliability. As a result, these scales were revised before proceeding with the formal study.

Formal Data Collection

In this study, 251 responses were collected from Prolific in April 2024. Respondents of this study had to be at least 18 years of age and located in the U.S. who had visited a casual dining chain restaurant in the last six months. Moreover, in this study, the male and female ratio was maintained as 50-50% by Prolific.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis

After data cleaning based on attention check questions, 222 responses were retained and analyzed in this study. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28, IBM, New York, NY, USA, was utilized for descriptive data analysis, Cronbach’s alpha analysis, and Pearson correlation. Then, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine how theoretical notions are represented by measured indicators. After that, Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using a maximum likelihood estimation approach with robust standard error was employed to assess this research’s hypotheses by looking at the relationships among this study’s constructs using MPLUS.

Common Method Bias

In both quantitative research and self-report surveys, the presence of common method variance (CMV) or common method bias (CMB) poses a frequent concern. CMV represents a systematic error variance

originating from the consistent method employed to measure the study’s constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Richardson et al., 2009). In line with the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003), this study addressed the CMB concern through the utilization of Harman’s one-factor test. The first factor accounted for 46.89% of the variance, which is less than the threshold of 50%, indicating that CMV did not significantly influence the outcomes of this study.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics are presented in **Table 1** In this study, most of the participants were White (69.4%) and completed bachelor’s degrees (36.5%). Moreover, 83.8% of participants’ income was between \$14,401 and \$163,300. Furthermore, most of the participants of this study belonged to Millennials (37.4%) and Gen X (34.2%).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 222)			
Characteristics		n	%
Gender	Male	112	50.5
	Female	108	48.6
	Non-binary/third gender	1	0.5
	Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Ethnicity	White	154	69.4
	Hispanic	13	5.9
	Black or African American	30	13.5
	American Indian or Alaska Native	4	1.8
	Asian	16	7.2
	Other	4	1.8
	Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Education	Do not finish high school	2	0.9
	High school diploma	28	12.6
	Some college/ Associates	68	30.6
	Bachelors	81	36.5
	Masters and above	43	19.4
Birth Year	1928-45 (Silent)	2	0.9
	1946-64 (Boomers)	34	15.3
	1965-80 (Gen X)	76	34.2
	1981-96 (Millennials)	83	37.4
	1997-2012 (Gen Z)	27	12.2
Household Income	\$0 – \$14,100	20	9.0
	\$14,101 – \$53,700	64	28.8
	\$53,701 – \$85,500	57	25.7
	\$85,501 – \$163,300	65	29.3
	\$163,301 – \$207,350	7	3.2
	\$207,351+	9	4.1

Measurement Model

Following the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Bartlett’s test of sphericity revealed that the correlation matrix was non-random, with significant results, $\chi^2(N = 222) = 4733.476$, $p < 0.001$, and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.934, exceeding the minimum threshold for factor analysis, thus confirming the suitability of the correlation matrix for this analysis. Initially, the measurement model was tested for convergent validity through factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2013). Despite a few exceptions, most item loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, as depicted in **Table 2** (Hair et al., 2013).

The reliability of our measurement model was assessed by analyzing its internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. We first evaluated internal consistency reliability using both Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR) as detailed in **Table 2**. Our findings indicate that all Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values surpass the accepted threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013), as demonstrated in **Table 2**. Next, we assessed convergent validity by examining the factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). **Table 2** illustrates that all factor loadings for the

Table 2: Measurement items

Construct	Item	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha α	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
EQ	EQ1	0.895	0.927	0.719	0.924
	EQ2	0.881			
	EQ3	0.745			
	EQ4	0.858			
	EQ5	0.853			
SQ	SQ1	0.940	0.916	0.812	0.945
	SQ2	0.902			
	SQ3	0.944			
	SQ4	0.812			
CUSSAT	CUSSAT1	0.871	0.937	0.786	0.936
	CUSSTA2	0.907			
	CUSSAT3	0.913			
	CUSSAT4	0.854			
BF	BF1	0.831	0.821	0.822	0.948
	BF2	0.918			
	BF3	0.926			
	BF4	0.946			

Notes: EQ = Emotional quality; SQ = Service quality; CUSSAT = Customer satisfaction; BF = Brand Fidelity ($p < 0.005$)

different constructs exceeded 0.7. Furthermore, all AVE values were greater than 0.5 suggesting a good convergent validity, and composite reliability (CR) values were above 0.7, confirming the reliability of our measurement model (Hair et al., 2013).

Table 3: Testing Discriminant Validity

	EQ	SQ	CUSSAT	BF
EQ	0.848			
SQ	0.680	0.901		
CUSSAT	0.645	0.564	0.887	
BF	0.573	0.482	0.556	0.907

Note: The initial values on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) value. The bottom off-diagonal values are the correlation between the constructs. EQ= Emotional quality; SQ= Service quality; CUSSAT = Customer Satisfaction; BF= Brand Fidelity

Lastly, we assessed discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (Hair et al., 2017). According to the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion, the square root of AVE (presented on the diagonal of **Table 3**) must exceed the correlations between different constructs in the construct correlation matrix (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). Our findings in **Table 3** demonstrate that all HTMT values for respective variables were lower than the square root of the AVE, thus confirming the establishment of discriminant validity.

Structural Model

Mplus version 8.8 was employed to test the structural model and hypotheses. Specifically, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation and bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples) was utilized to assess statistical significance. The structural model fit statistics indicated the data aligned with the proposed model well ($\chi^2 = 336.310$, $df = 156$, $\chi^2/df = 2.155$, RMSEA = 0.074, SRMR = 0.055, CFI = 0.968, TLI = 0.963) (Hair et al., 2021). All factor loadings were in the expected direction, of acceptable magnitude, and statistically significant, affirming the usefulness of the variables selected to measure our latent constructs. The results of the hypotheses testing are shown in **Figure 2**. Consistent with the study hypothesis, the effect of the pathway from emotional quality to customer satisfaction was positive and significant, ($\beta = 0.509$, $P < 0.005$, $R^2 = 67.1\%$), supporting H1. Also, the coefficient for the pathways from emotional quality to brand fidelity ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.005$, $R^2 = 51.3\%$) was significant indicating a positively strong impact, that is greater levels of emotional quality enhances customers' brand fidelity supporting H3. Moreover, the coefficient for the pathways from service quality to customer satisfaction was significant, with higher service quality predicting higher customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.572$, $P < 0.005$, $R^2 = 67.1\%$), supporting H2. The effect of the pathway from service quality to brand fidelity was also positive and significant, ($\beta = 0.401$, $P < 0.005$, $R^2 = 51.3\%$) thereby supporting H4. Furthermore, the main effect of the pathway from customer satisfaction to brand fidelity was both positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .480$, $P < 0.005$), thereby supporting H5. Emotional quality and service quality collectively accounted for 51.3 % of the variance in brand fidelity ($R^2 = 0.513$), affirming the assertion that, in the restaurant industry, emotional quality and service quality together have a strong and positive influence on customer brand fidelity as depicted in

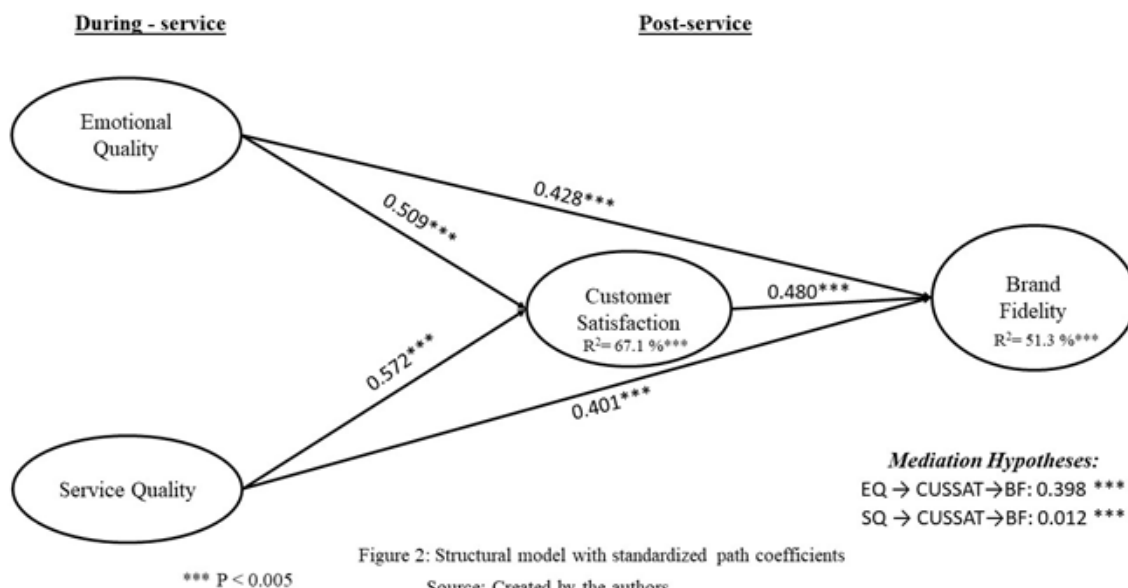
**Figure 2:** Structural model with standardized path coefficients

Figure 2. This study confirms that extending beyond service quality to enhance emotional quality provides a competitive advantage for casual dining chain restaurants.

Table 4: Hypotheses Testing				
Path	Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Hypotheses
EQ → CUSSAT	0.509	5.209	0.001	H1: supported
EQ → BF	0.428	5.033	0.000	H2: supported
SQ → CUSSAT	0.572	8.514	0.000	H3: supported
SQ → BF	0.401	4.917	0.001	H4: supported
CUSAT → BF	0.480	5.829	0.000	H5: supported
Note: EQ = Emotional quality SQ= Service quality; CUSSAT = Customer satisfaction; BF= Brand fidelity (p < 0.005)				

As shown in **Table 4**, the magnitude of the effects of emotional and service quality on customer satisfaction and brand fidelity is very strong. The results indicate that in the casual dining chain restaurant, service quality and emotional quality together account for over 67% of customer satisfaction and more than 51% of brand fidelity. These findings significantly contribute to the service quality literature, reinforcing previous research (Grace et al., 2020; Serra-Cantallops et al., 2020) on the crucial role of emotional quality in the customer-brand relationship. Casual dining chain restaurants should focus on building customer satisfaction and brand fidelity by delivering both high service quality and emotional quality. While providing either service quality or emotional quality individually contributes to customer satisfaction and brand fidelity, their combined effect is significantly stronger. Therefore, to enhance brand fidelity effectively, casual dining chain restaurants should integrate and balance both service quality and emotional quality in their customer experience strategies.

The study confirmed the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between emotional quality, service quality, and brand fidelity, as analyzed through bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples. The indirect effect of emotional quality on brand fidelity through customer satisfaction is significant ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.005$), indicating that emotional quality positively and significantly predicts customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.509$, $P < 0.005$) which in turn positively and significantly predicts brand fidelity ($\beta = .480$, $P < 0.005$) a strong mediation effect. Hence, H6 is supported. Moreover, customer satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between service quality and brand fidelity ($\beta = .012$, $P < 0.005$). Consequently, H7 is supported as depicted in **Table 5**. These findings suggest that customer satisfaction serves as a crucial mechanism in explaining how service quality and emotional quality influence brand fidelity among casual dining chain restaurant customers.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis			
	Indirect Effect	t-value	Hypothesis
EQ → CUSSAT→BF	0.398	4.413	H6: supported
SQ → CUSSAT→BF	0.012	2.167	H7: supported
Note: EQ = Emotional quality SQ= Service quality; CUSSAT = Customer satisfaction; BF= Brand fidelity (p < 0.005)			

CONCLUSIONS and APPLICATIONS

This study emphasizes the significant role of emotional quality in driving customer satisfaction and brand fidelity in the restaurant industry. The research found that the combination of emotional quality and service quality contributed to more than 67% of customer satisfaction and 51% of brand fidelity, highlighting the powerful impact these two factors have on customer behaviors. In the U.S. restaurant market, customers place a high value on emotional quality when determining their satisfaction. Emotional quality fosters a personal bond between the customer and the restaurant, creating a sense of belonging. When restaurants cater to customers’ emotional needs, such as offering warm, personalized greetings or attentive service, they evoke feelings of joy and excitement, leaving lasting impressions. These positive emotional experiences give customers a reason to choose one restaurant over others, resulting in the aggregation of behaviors and cognitions to maintain a strong and stable relationship with the restaurant. By making customers feel valued and understood, emotional quality builds a connection that fosters brand fidelity consistent with previous studies (Grace et al., 2018).

Moreover, this study reinforces previous research, such as the work by Lerner et al. (2015), which found that emotions strongly and predictably influence customer decision-making. It also helps clarify the findings of Gronroos (2001), which previously did not establish a clear model for how emotions contribute to satisfaction. In the competitive U.S. restaurant industry, many establishments provide excellent service, but emotional quality helps a restaurant stand out by offering something more personal and meaningful. This emotional connection enhances customer satisfaction and provides a competitive edge, allowing restaurants to differentiate themselves.

The study further underscores the combined significance of emotional quality and service quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity within the U.S. restaurant sector. Both factors are essential in fostering brand fidelity by making customers feel valued and secure in their relationship with a restaurant. Customers who develop a strong emotional connection with a restaurant are more likely to exhibit repeat patronage, demonstrate resilience toward performance or price fluctuations, and even make personal sacrifices to maintain their loyalty to the brand. These findings align with previous research by Ladhari et al. (2017), Martensen et al. (2000), and Wong (2004), which established that strengthening customers' emotional engagement leads to increased customer recommendations, greater patronage intentions, and a stronger commitment to the restaurant-brand relationship.

Additionally, the results of this study align with several other studies from other cultures, such as those by Mensah and Mensah, (2018), Jen and Hu, (2003), and Han and Hyun, (2017), which similarly found that emotional quality plays a critical role in customer satisfaction within the restaurant industry. The findings also support the conclusions of Wong (2004), who studied emotional quality in Australian retail customers and found that service quality is positively associated with emotional quality and significantly impacts customer loyalty and fidelity. Wong’s (2004) research further confirmed that customers’ perceptions of emotional quality are strong predictors of brand fidelity.

Finally, this study empirically shows and reaffirms that high service quality is essential for enhancing customer satisfaction, especially in casual dining chain restaurants, which in turn boosts brand fidelity. To achieve fidelity from customers, restaurant operators should focus on improving employees’ interpersonal skills and work proficiency. While providing nutritious, well-prepared meals is important, attention

should also be paid to food temperature, presentation, and the use of fresh, high-quality ingredients to further elevate customer satisfaction. These findings echo the conclusions of Han and Hyun (2017), who emphasized that service quality is a key driver of customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. By prioritizing both service excellence and product quality, restaurant managers can foster positive customer behavior, resulting in enduring commitment and fidelity.

This study examined the critical role of service quality and emotional quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity in the casual dining chain restaurant. The study provides some key strategies for casual dining chain restaurant managers aiming to enhance customer satisfaction and brand fidelity. First, restaurant managers should focus on creating emotionally engaging experiences by training staff to provide warm, personalized interactions with customers (Ladhari et al., 2017; Wong, 2004). Casual dining chain restaurants should foster a welcoming atmosphere by encouraging employees to build rapport with customers through attentive, individualized service. Second, the study reveals that combining service quality and emotional satisfaction enhances customer loyalty and fidelity more effectively than focusing on service quality alone. Casual dining chain restaurant operators should ensure that both operational excellence and emotional connection are part of their strategy. In line with findings from Han and Hyun (2017), maintaining high service standards such as food quality, presentation, and hygiene while addressing the emotional needs of customers can lead to a more holistic dining experience. Thus, this balance is essential for standing out in competitive markets and sustaining repeat business.

Third, this study reinforces the importance of employee interpersonal skills in influencing customer satisfaction and brand fidelity. As noted in research by Jen and Hu (2003), staff proficiency and emotional intelligence are critical for customer satisfaction. Casual dining chain restaurant operators should invest in ongoing training that emphasizes both technical service skills and the ability to engage with customers on an emotional level. This dual focus can help build trust, enhance brand fidelity, and create positive emotional experiences that customers will associate with the brand.

Limitations and Future Studies

However, this study is not without limitations. Previous research, such as that by Hwang et al. (2017) and Na et al. (2021), has highlighted the role of demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, and household income in moderating consumer behavior. This study, however, did not take into account these demographic factors, which could influence the proposed research framework. Future research should incorporate these control variables to provide a more nuanced understanding of how customer demographics affect emotional and service quality concerning satisfaction and brand fidelity. Moreover, future studies should consider using a more diverse sample across different cultural contexts to validate and extend these findings. This would help to further generalize the conclusions and explore how emotional and service quality influence customer behavior in various cultural environments.

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