

WHEN CUSTOMERS FEEL UNDERSTOOD: EMPATHY DRIVING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ADVOCACY IN HOSPITALITY

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Abstract

This study investigates how affective and cognitive empathy influence customer advocacy in the hospitality industry through the mediating role of customer emotional experience and the moderating role of service context. Drawing on survey data from 174 respondents and analyzed using SPSS, the study applies regression, mediation, and moderation techniques to test the proposed model. The findings reveal that empathy has a strong positive effect on customer advocacy and significantly enhances customer emotional experience. Emotional experience partially mediates the relationship between empathy and advocacy, indicating that empathetic interactions first shape customers' emotions, which then encourage supportive behaviors such as recommendations and positive word-of-mouth. However, service context does not significantly moderate these relationships, suggesting that empathy remains effective regardless of environmental conditions. The results highlight empathy as a fundamental interpersonal resource that strengthens emotional bonds, customer loyalty, and brand support. The study contributes theoretically by integrating empathy, emotion, and advocacy into a unified framework and offers practical implications for hospitality managers, emphasizing the importance of training employees in emotional understanding and perspective-taking skills to improve customer relationships and long-term organizational outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry, which encompasses hotels and restaurants, serves as a fundamental component of the worldwide service sector because it provides lodging and dining and travel experiences to both recreation and business customers (EHL Insights 2024). The industry underwent development over the years because consumer needs and technological innovations kept changing. The development of customized

services together with digital marketing methods and data-driven approaches has become necessary for organizations to achieve their goals of improving customer happiness (ET HospitalityWorld 2023).

The hospitality industry uses artificial intelligence and big data technologies for customer preference forecasting and service personalization through its digital transformation process (B2W 2024). The combination of online platforms and

social media has transformed marketing practices by establishing direct customer interaction while those platforms help customers decide what to buy (Medium 2023).

The hospitality sector has transitioned from using conventional advertising methods to adopting interactive marketing techniques that include influencer marketing and digital content creation. Creating unforgettable experiences for customers has become essential for businesses because satisfied customers will recommend their services to others who will then promote their brand through word-of-mouth marketing (New York Post 2024).

Restaurants in the dining sector focus on delivering exceptional dining experiences instead of pursuing aggressive promotional campaigns. According to industry experts, exceptional service delivery creates automatic customer loyalty which results in stronger brand connections with customers (New York Post 2024). The hospitality industry must continuously adopt digital solutions together with customized services to maintain its market position because consumer preferences are constantly evolving (EHL Insights 2024). The hospitality industry operates through a business model that requires hotels and restaurants to create emotional experiences for their customers which leads to customer loyalty and advocacy. Businesses today face difficulties to create strong emotional bonds with their customers even though they have increased their efforts to deliver better service and customized experiences. The two types of empathy which include affective and cognitive empathy decide how customers experience their business interactions, but researchers have not yet investigated how empathy affects customer advocacy. The research results about how empathy-based strategies work achieve different outcomes because the research has not established how service environments affect this connection.

The majority of research conducted in hospitality studies service quality and customer satisfaction together with loyalty yet it does not establish a systematic connection between empathy and emotional experience and customer advocacy.

The absence of this knowledge makes it challenging for managers to develop customer engagement strategies which will succeed in their work. The service industry needs to investigate how empathy functions during digital customer interactions and traditional customer service methods. Empathy research shows its importance for customer interactions through its positive impact on customer satisfaction which results in better emotional experiences and customer advocacy. Researchers have not established how customers experience emotional shifts through their understanding of emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy. The research studies customer emotional states because they need to understand how empathy connects to customer advocacy in the hospitality industry.

Researchers have not established how different service environments produce different results. Studies show that service context increases emotional engagement but research also shows that different customer groups react differently to different service environments. Researchers need to study how service context functions as an empathy-based customer advocacy relationship between empathy and customer advocacy. Research activities mostly focus on Western regions which create knowledge gaps about developing countries such as Pakistan. Empathy research shows how cultural variations impact customer experiences but this area requires more investigation.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring how affective and cognitive empathy influence customer emotional experiences and advocacy, considering the moderating role of service context. The research outcomes will provide theoretical frameworks and practical guidelines to assist hospitality managers in developing better customer engagement methods. The research study aims to examine how affective and cognitive empathy functions in the hospitality industry to create customer emotional experiences which then determine customer advocacy. The research seeks to achieve a complete understanding of how empathy from service employees affects customer emotional responses which result in increased brand loyalty and customer advocacy.

The research investigates how different service environments affect the relationship between empathy and emotional experience which leads to customer advocacy. The research aims to fill research gaps by demonstrating how empathy improves customer experiences through testing the effects of different contextual factors on empathy's impact. The findings will help hospitality managers and service providers understand how to leverage emotional intelligence and service design to enhance customer engagement, satisfaction, and advocacy. The present-day competitive hospitality market requires more than good food and comfortable rooms to meet customer expectations. Customers want to experience emotional connections with service providers during their service interactions. The emotional connections that staff create with their customers at luxury hotels and cozy cafés and upscale dining establishments will determine how customers experience their visit and whether they will become returning customers who recommend the brand to others. The research investigates how employees who demonstrate both affective and cognitive empathy help customers by delivering better service which results in brand loyalty. Traditional hospitality research has focused on service quality and customer satisfaction, but this study shifts the focus to emotional connections. The research investigates how empathy-based interactions

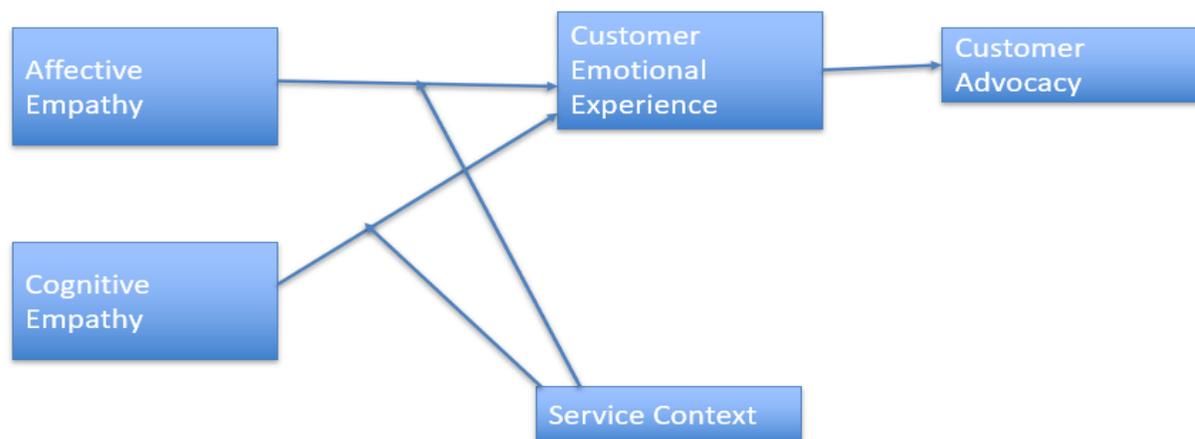
develop unique customer experiences which exceed basic service delivery.

The study develops a better understanding of consumer behavior through its research on customer psychology and emotional intelligence applied to service management within the hospitality industry. Companies will develop service strategies that suit different types of establishments through their understanding of how service context affects service execution. The existing research base is predominantly Western but emotional experiences show significant variation across different cultural groups. The study which investigates hotels and restaurants in Pakistan will deliver specialized knowledge that enables businesses to better understand their customer base. The results will assist hotel and restaurant managers in developing employee training programs which enhance staff emotional awareness of guests to create stronger connections with customers.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the impact of affective and cognitive empathy on customer emotional experience in hospitality service interactions.
2. To analyze the mediating role of customer emotional experience in the relationship between empathy and customer advocacy.
3. To explore the moderating role of service context in shaping the strength and direction of these relationships.

Proposed Conceptual Model



Hypotheses Development

Direct Effects

H1: Empathy (Affective and Cognitive) has a significant positive impact on customer emotional experience.

H2: Customer emotional experience has a significant positive impact on customer advocacy.

Moderation Effects (Service Context as a Moderator)

H3: Service context moderates the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy and customer emotional experience, such that the relationship is stronger in a high-quality service environment.

Mediation Effect

H4: Customer emotional experience mediates the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy and customer advocacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy in Service Interactions

Empathy serves as a fundamental requirement for customer service interactions because it directly determines how customers will experience their service and their level of satisfaction and loyalty according to Bove 2019 and Bahadur Aziz and Zulfiqar 2018. Service management research identifies empathy as a skill which includes two distinct forms: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. The two elements possess distinct

abilities which enable them to create customer relationships and develop customer engagement.

Affective Empathy

The process of emotional empathy, which people also call affective empathy or empathic concern, allows individuals to share and experience another person's emotions. The ability to comprehend another person's emotional state which that ability to comprehend their emotional state leads to better development of personal relationships according to Davis and Batson. Employees use their emotional empathy skills to detect customer emotions which enables them to give appropriate service reactions that lead to positive customer service experiences according to Bove. The existing research demonstrates that customers who want to build trust with their customers should develop their emotional empathy skills because this skill will increase customer satisfaction and brand loyalty according to Bahadur and his colleagues. The retail and healthcare industries rely on emotional empathy because their customers demand emotional connection during high-touch service interactions according to Umasuthan and his colleagues. Service providers who build stronger emotional bonds with their customers will achieve better customer retention and brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion according to Lehnert and Kuehnl.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy, which people call perspective-taking, enables individuals to comprehend and mentally visualize how others perceive their thoughts and emotions and their intentions to act (Bove, 2019; Devoldre et al., 2010). The capacity to accurately understand customer expectations and provide appropriate service solutions defines cognitive empathy while emotional empathy depends on shared emotional experiences between people. High-cognitive-empathy employees can solve problems more effectively, communicate better, and resolve conflicts better, meaning they can guess what the customers need better than others (Bahadur et al., 2018). Research shows that cognitive empathy enables customer engagement because it establishes trust and commitment and service experiences create customer satisfaction (Thompson, van Reekum, & Chakrabarti, 2021). Service interactions in financial advisory technology support and customer relationship management require this capability because professionals must understand customer needs and expectations (Lee, 2016).

The Mediating Role of Emotional Customer Experience

This intermediary is key as it transcribes both cognitive and emotional empathy into increased customer satisfaction and loyalty. Emotional customer experience refers to the emotional response or perception by a customer about his or her interactions with service (Lehnert & Kuehnl, 2024).

Mediation of Emotional Empathy through Emotional Customer Experience

Service employees who possess strong emotional empathy skills create a customer experience which makes customers feel deeply understood and valued. The emotional response which customers experience through interactions with service providers reaches its peak level according to Bahadur et al. 2018. Through emotional empathy customers develop affective commitment which leads to their emotional dedication toward the service provider and results

in increased brand advocacy and repeat purchasing (Lee 2016 Tan Muskat Johns 2019). Research findings demonstrate that customers who become emotionally engaged during their service experiences develop strong service connections which result in better service quality assessments and deeper emotional ties with brands (Umasuthan et al. 2017). High-contact service sectors like hospitality and education show that customers develop lasting relationships through emotionally empathetic customer interactions (Lehnert & Kuehnl 2024). Emotional customer experience functions as a direct link between emotional empathy and customer satisfaction because it transforms empathetic interactions into real service experiences.

Mediation of Cognitive Empathy through Emotional Customer Experience

The emotional customer experience of service interactions receives its essential elements through cognitive empathy which develops service interactions into personalized and structured connections between customers and services (Smith, 2006). Employees who possess strong cognitive empathy skills can predict what customers want while they solve their problems and create specific solutions which boosts customer trust and happiness (Bahadur et al., 2018). The research shows that cognitive empathy helps customers achieve satisfaction because it decreases service interruptions while it improves customers' perception of service quality and builds their trust in the brand (Krol & Bartneck, 2022). Employees who work in customer service and technical support can use their cognitive empathy abilities to reduce customer anger which leads to better emotional outcomes during service delivery (Lehnert & Kuehnl, 2024). Cognitive empathy enables emotional engagement through its structured interactions which help organizations meet customer needs because emotional customer experience functions as a bridge that connects cognitive empathy with customer satisfaction (Thompson et al., 2021).

The Service Context Role in Customer Advocacy

The way customers interact with frontline staff during service delivery establishes customer advocacy through its impact on various service contexts. Customers develop brand advocacy through their service encounter experiences which enable them to promote the brand. Empathy-driven interactions in highly personalized service environments which include hospitality and healthcare settings create emotional connections that lead to better customer advocacy (Lee, 2016). Customers develop stronger loyalty to brands when frontline staff members demonstrate genuine care because they listen carefully to customers and understand their needs (Umasuthan et al., 2017).

The service context's effect on advocacy is most apparent in sectors where emotional involvement is an essential factor. Customers who receive proper understanding and care from businesses will exhibit more advocacy activities which include social media promotion and returning to the business (Bove, 2019). Customers who experience no emotional connection with service personnel during service encounters will develop dissatisfaction along with negative brand perception and decreased advocacy activities (Wei et al., 2022).

Empathy becomes crucial in service recovery situations because customers first discover their dissatisfaction with the service. Research shows that customers who receive empathetic service recovery support from frontline employees will exhibit increased brand loyalty through their willingness to forgive service errors (Lehnert & Kuehn, 2024). The absence of employee empathy leads customers to create negative word of mouth along with switching behavior which demonstrates how service contexts determine customer advocacy (Wei et al., 2022).

Moderating Role of Service Context between Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, and Customer Emotional Experience

Empathy during service interactions falls under emotional empathy and cognitive empathy, both of which are responsible for the emotional

experience of the customer. Emotional empathy is the capacity of service staff to share and comprehend a customer's feelings, whereas cognitive empathy is the capacity to perspective-take and evaluate a customer's circumstances to provide suitable solutions (Tan et al., 2021). The impact of both forms of empathy on customer emotional experience is then moderated by service context, shaping the efficacy of empathetic acts.

Affective Empathy in High-Touch Service Situations: Research in the hospitality industry reveals that pleasure tourists tend to look for emotionally evocative service encounters, when front-line workers express warmth, caring, and dedication. Affective empathy is experienced as a surrogate marker of quality for these consumers, and by attending to emotional requirements, consumers respond with satisfaction and advocacy to a greater degree (Umasuthan et al., 2017).

Cognitive Empathy in Transactional Service Settings: In service sectors like banking, finance, and internet services, customers focus more on problem-solving and efficiency rather than emotional connection. Cognitive empathy—employees' ability to understand customers' issues correctly and provide efficient solutions—becomes more influential in creating customer emotional experience (Thompson et al., 2022).

Service context also impacts the way emotional labor strategies shape customer emotional experience. Emotional labor is the way through which service employees manage their emotions to match organizational standards. Studies show that:

Deep Acting (Authentic Emotional Engagement): When workers actually adjust their emotions to suit customer requirements, emotional empathy gets more effect, resulting in enhanced emotional ties and greater customer advocacy (Lajante&Remisch, 2023).

Surface Acting (Controlled Emotional Display): When workers only show emotions without genuine involvement, customers view these interactions as fake, lowering the impact of empathy and harming customer emotional experience (Tan et al., 2021).

In general, the service context moderating role decides whether emotional or cognitive empathy has a stronger influence on customer experience, emphasizing the need to customize service strategies according to industry expectations.

Customer Emotional Experience as Mediator to Customer Advocacy

Customer emotional experience is a major mediator of empathy-based service interactions and customer advocacy behaviors. Positive emotional experiences fuel customer satisfaction, brand trust, and loyalty, which result in customer advocacy growth (Gremler et al., 2021). Customers who form strong emotional bonds with a brand actively promote it to others, defend it against criticism, and make repeat purchases (Lee, 2016).

Impact of Empathy on Customer Emotional Experience

Emotional Empathy Increases Brand Attachment: Consumers who feel high affective empathy during service interactions build stronger brand attachment, making them more likely to endorse the brand through word-of-mouth and social media activities (Thompson et al., 2022).

Cognitive Empathy Increases Perceived Service Quality: Cognitive empathy makes customers feel understood, respected, and satisfied with the outcomes of the services, which strengthens trust and long-term advocacy intentions (Tan et al., 2021).

Customers with emotionally fulfilling and significant service experiences are more likely to be loyal and participate in brand advocacy, both online and offline (Gremler et al., 2021). Customers who perceive emotional neglect or lack of understanding on the part of the company lower their advocacy behaviors, engage in word-of-mouth, and might end the relationship with the brand (Wei et al., 2022). Customers who experience empathetic service recovery are likely to be forgiving of service failure and continue advocating for the company, instead of defecting competitors (Lehnert & Kuehnl, 2024). Through tactically augmenting customer emotional

experience through empathetic interactions, customer advocacy behaviors are reinforced by service providers, allowing for greater engagement and long-term brand loyalty.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers used Google Forms to send out survey questionnaires which they used to gather data from participants. The total responses collected were 174. Data was analyzed using SPSS. The data analysis process used descriptive statistics and reliability testing and Linear regression testing as its primary analysis methods. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS to examine the proposed relationships among the study variables. The researchers used descriptive statistics to present the demographic data of the study participants. The reliability analysis found that all measurement scales showed acceptable internal consistency. The researchers used inferential analyses to test their study hypotheses. The researchers used regression analysis to investigate how empathy directly impacts customer advocacy. The researchers conducted mediation analysis to investigate how emotional response affects the connection between empathy and customer advocacy. The researchers conducted moderation analysis to assess how service context impacted the strength of the connection between empathy and customer advocacy. The analyses provided complete empirical support for the proposed model which confirmed most of the expected relationships.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

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Table-1

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	119	68.6
Female	55	31.4
Prefer not to say	2	1.1
Education		
Bachelor's Degree	59	34.1
Master's Degree	80	46.2
PhD	16	9.2
Other	16	9.2
Monthly Income		
Below PKR 50k	64	36.7
PKR 50k-100k	67	38.5
Above PKR 100k	43	24.9
Skipped	5	2.9

Regression analysis predicting customer advocacy from empathy

The regression results provide evidence that empathy creates a strong positive impact on customer advocacy. The model explains approximately 78% of the variance in customer advocacy, which reflects a very high explanatory

power. Empathy significantly predicts customer advocacy ($\beta = .883, p < .001$), which shows that people who exhibit higher empathy levels will demonstrate greater advocacy conduct. The results demonstrate that empathy acts as a fundamental element which determines how customers advocate for products.

Table 2
Effect of Empathy on Customer Advocacy
Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
.883	.779	.778	599.88	< .001

<i>Coefficients</i>						
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	
Constant	0.42	0.18	—	2.33	.021	
Empathy	0.81	0.03	.883	24.49	< .001	

Mediation analysis – Path a (Empathy → Emotional Response)

The results show that empathy significantly predicts emotional response. The model explains nearly 75% of the variance in emotional

response. Empathy has a strong positive effect on emotional response ($\beta = .865, p < .001$), indicating that empathetic interactions are associated with stronger emotional reactions among customers.

Table 3

Mediation analysis – Path a (Empathy → Emotional Response) Model Summary

R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
.748	.747	507.93	< .001

<i>Coefficients</i>						
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	
Constant	0.36	0.21	–	1.71	.089	
Empathy	0.76	0.03	.865	22.54	< .001	

Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis shows that emotional response functions as a partial mediator between empathy and customer advocacy. Empathy directly predicts customer advocacy; however, when emotional response is included in the

model, the strength of this relationship decreases but remains significant. The indirect effect shows positive results through statistical testing because empathy affects customer advocacy through both direct and indirect pathways that include emotional response.

Table 4

Mediation analysis – Direct and indirect effects

Path	B	SE	β	t	p
Empathy → Advocacy (total effect, c)	0.81	0.03	.883	24.49	< .001
Empathy → Emotion (a)	0.76	0.03	.865	22.54	< .001
Emotion → Advocacy (b)	0.41	0.05	.421	8.20	< .001
Empathy → Advocacy (direct, c')	0.50	0.04	.545	12.18	< .001

Indirect Effect (Bootstrapped)

Effect	B	Boot SE	95% CI
Empathy → Emotion → Advocacy	0.31	0.04	[0.24, 0.39]

Moderation

The moderation results show that empathy remains a significant predictor of customer advocacy. The interaction between empathy and service context shows no statistical significance.

The service context maintains its original power to connect empathy and customer advocacy because it does not affect their relationship strength. The moderating effect has not been established as valid evidence.

Moderation analysis – Service context

Table 5

Moderation

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Empathy	0.69	0.05	.742	13.80	< .001
Service Context	0.08	0.06	.071	1.33	.185
Empathy \times Service Context	-0.04	0.03	-.058	-1.21	.228

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of affective and cognitive empathy in shaping customer emotional experience and customer advocacy, while also considering the mediating role of customer emotional experience and the moderating role of service context. Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for the importance of empathy in service interactions and offer meaningful theoretical and practical implications.

Direct Effects of Empathy on Customer Emotional Experience (H1)

The research evidence supports H1 because the study shows that both affective empathy and cognitive empathy provide substantial positive effects on customer emotional experience. The research finding shows that when service providers understand customer emotions through cognitive empathy and display authentic emotional responses through affective empathy, customers experience more positive emotions during their service interactions. The present result aligns with existing research which identifies empathy as an essential element for establishing successful personal relationships which take place in service environments (Batson 2011). When service providers demonstrate empathy, customers experience appreciation and comprehension, which strengthens their emotional bond with the service provider. The research study demonstrates that empathy functions as an emotional signal, which provides customers with reassurance and improves their complete experience. The research results support emotion-oriented service theories, which state that customers determine service value through both functional results and emotional signals present in their interactions.

Empathy functions as a key factor that determines how customers feel about services, which extends beyond the technical aspects of service delivery.

Effect of Customer Emotional Experience on Customer Advocacy (H2)

The findings also support H2 because customer emotional experience leads to higher customer advocacy results. Customers who experience positive emotions are more likely to recommend the service and defend the organization while speaking positively about it to others. The current study supports previous research which found that emotional responses drive customers to share their experiences with others through word-of-mouth and advocacy (Bagozzi & Gopinath, 1999). Positive emotional experiences create a sense of attachment and loyalty which motivates customers to act as informal promoters of the organization.

The research shows that customers choose to advocate for companies because they feel strong emotional connections to the brands. Organizations that successfully manage customer emotions will experience higher levels of organic promotion and longer-lasting customer relationships.

Moderating Role of Service Context (H3)

The results did not support H3 because H3 required two specific expectations. The results show that service context does not affect the strength of the relationship between empathy and customer emotional experience. The research shows that empathy positively affects customer emotions at all service quality levels. Empathy functions as a powerful interpersonal signal which people use to interact with others instead

of using contextual information. Empathetic behavior by service staff results in positive emotional reactions even when they work in substandard service conditions. The research shows that empathy functions as a universal quality which people demonstrate through their service work in all situations. The research shows that organizations can use empathy as a dependable resource which remains constant throughout their operations. Empathetic interactions create positive effects on customer emotions which persist across different service environments.

Mediating Role of Customer Emotional Experience (H4)

The results provide support for H4 which establishes that customer emotional experience functions as a mediator between empathy and customer advocacy. The direct route from empathy to customer advocacy establishes emotional experience as an indirect pathway between the two elements. The mediation finding suggests that empathy first shapes how customers feel, and these emotional responses then translate into advocacy behaviors. This research supports emotion-based mediation models which propose that emotions function as fundamental psychological mechanisms that connect social interactions to resulting behavioral outcomes (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

The presence of partial mediation indicates that while emotional experience is a critical pathway, empathy may also influence advocacy through other mechanisms such as trust or perceived care. This highlights the multifaceted role of empathy in customer behavior.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by integrating empathy, emotional experience, and customer advocacy into a single empirical framework. It extends existing research by demonstrating that empathy is not only directly related to customer outcomes but also operates through emotional mechanisms. The non-significant moderating role of service context further suggests that empathy functions as a

fundamental interpersonal factor, relatively independent of situational conditions.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings underline the importance of training service employees in both affective and cognitive empathy. Organizations should focus on developing emotional intelligence and empathetic communication skills among frontline staff. Since empathy positively influences customer emotions and advocacy regardless of service context, it represents a cost-effective strategy for improving customer relationships.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that both affective and cognitive types of empathy create substantial enhancements in customer advocacy by creating positive emotional outcomes for their interactions. People who sense empathetic service interactions from staff members become more likely to acknowledge their value and advocate for the brand even when the service environment itself may not be of high quality.

The proposed aspect of service context did not show any supporting evidence thus demonstrating that empathy remains effective in all settings equally. Emotional experience functions as an essential intermediary factor between empathy and advocacy.

The nonexistence of service context moderation implies that environmental elements do not magnify empathy and demonstrates empathy's fundamental worth. Staff training programs need to develop both emotional connection abilities and perspective-taking competencies regarding empathy skills. Sessions that show customers emotional care should be created because respectful treatment increases advocacy rates directly. Service context needs limited attention because it makes more sense to train staff in empathy compared to utilizing ambiance or cleanliness as artificial outcome boosters.

Limitations and Future Research Directions:

Research needs to study separate factors of affective empathy along with cognitive empathy

to determine their individual impact. Longitudinal data would offer improved possibilities to show causal connections better than cross-sectional designs alone. Research should be reproduced across multiple business sectors like healthcare and retail to determine universal application.

The emotional experiences between customers and providers drive customer advocacy because empathy serves as the main channel for such interactions. Organizations must create empathetic interactions because this approach promotes customer loyalty regardless of their service delivery context.

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