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Building Customer Loyalty Through Emotional Connection: How Service Provider Rapport Drives Sustainable Business

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Abstract: This research examines how interpersonal rapport influences sustainable customer relationships during service failures, with a focus on customer empathy as a mediating factor and emotional intelligence and service authenticity as moderating variables. In the context of sustainable service management, analysis of data from 672 respondents through structural equation modeling reveals that rapport significantly affects both cognitive and emotional dimensions of customer empathy, subsequently enhancing satisfaction and long-term loyalty outcomes. This study demonstrates that emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between rapport and cognitive empathy, while service authenticity moderates rapport's associations with both empathy components. This investigation advances sustainable service recovery theory by illuminating customer empathy formation within rapport-building processes and validating the moderating effects of emotional intelligence and service authenticity. The findings contribute to the sustainable service management literature by empirically confirming these relationships within the rapport–empathy–loyalty framework, suggesting that service providers should emphasize developing meaningful interpersonal connections to ensure sustainable customer relationships, particularly during service recovery situations. This research provides valuable insights for developing sustainable service practices that enhance both social and economic aspects of service organizations, while offering quantifiable metrics for measuring socio-emotional sustainability in service recovery contexts. This approach aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by promoting responsible consumption and production patterns in service industries, while fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth through enhanced service quality and customer relationship management.

Keywords: sustainable service management; service failure; rapport; customer empathy; sustainable customer loyalty; emotional intelligence; service authenticity; socio-emotional sustainability; sustainable service recovery; relationship sustainability

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1. Introduction

The evolution of service management has revealed a critical gap in our understanding of how socio-emotional factors contribute to sustainable business practices, particularly in the context of service failures [1,2]. While traditional approaches to service recovery have primarily focused on operational and transactional elements, the absence of a comprehensive framework for understanding socio-emotional dynamics represents a significant limitation in current service management theory and practice. This gap is particularly problematic given emerging evidence suggesting that the lack of socio-emotional consideration

in service recovery efforts may substantially impact both immediate customer satisfaction and long-term organizational sustainability [3,4].

The primary research question driving this investigation is as follows: how does the integration of socio-emotional factors—specifically rapport, emotional intelligence, and service authenticity—influence the sustainability of service recovery efforts and long-term customer relationships [5,6]? This question addresses a fundamental challenge in contemporary service management: while organizations increasingly recognize the importance of emotional connections in service delivery, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how these factors contribute to sustainable service recovery outcomes [7,8].

Previous research on service recovery has predominantly examined procedural fairness and compensation strategies [9–11]. However, these approaches have largely overlooked the critical role of socio-emotional factors in fostering sustainable customer relationships [12–15]. This knowledge gap is particularly significant given emerging evidence suggesting that the absence of emotional intelligence and interpersonal rapport in service recovery efforts may lead to decreased customer loyalty and increased relationship volatility, even when traditional recovery procedures are followed correctly.

To address this gap, our study introduces a novel framework that integrates emotional intelligence and service authenticity as key moderators in the relationship between rapport-building behaviors and customer empathy. This approach extends beyond traditional service recovery models by examining how these socio-emotional factors contribute to sustainable customer relationships, particularly during service failures. By investigating these relationships, we contribute to the sustainable service management literature in several ways: We provide empirical evidence for the role of rapport in developing both cognitive and emotional dimensions of customer empathy, advancing our understanding of sustainable relationship development in service contexts. We introduce quantifiable metrics for measuring socio-emotional sustainability in service recovery situations, addressing a crucial need in the sustainability measurement literature. We demonstrate how emotional intelligence and service authenticity moderate the effectiveness of rapport-building behaviors, offering new insights into the development of sustainable service recovery strategies.

This study addresses a critical gap in the service management literature by explicitly investigating the following question: how do socio-emotional factors—specifically rapport, emotional intelligence, and service authenticity—influence the sustainability of service recovery efforts and long-term customer relationships? While traditional service recovery research has predominantly focused on procedural justice and compensation strategies [10], our study makes a distinctive contribution by examining the interpersonal mechanisms through which service providers build sustainable customer relationships during service failure episodes. We introduce a comprehensive framework that positions customer empathy as a mediating factor between rapport-building behaviors and sustainable loyalty outcomes, with emotional intelligence and service authenticity serving as key moderating variables. This approach extends beyond conventional service recovery models by providing quantifiable metrics for socio-emotional sustainability in service contexts, directly addressing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals related to responsible consumption and sustainable economic growth. Through this investigation, we aim to transform how organizations conceptualize and implement service recovery strategies, shifting the focus from transactional satisfaction to relationship sustainability.

This research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by promoting sustainable service practices that enhance both social and economic outcomes. Through our investigation of the rapport–empathy–loyalty framework, we provide actionable insights for service organizations seeking to build more

sustainable and resilient customer relationships. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and hypothesis development; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents the results of our empirical analysis; and Section 5 discusses the implications for both theory and practice, along with directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation of this research is established through a comprehensive examination of the existing literature, organized into thematic sections. This review encompasses service failures and recovery processes, rapport in service contexts, customer empathy dimensions, satisfaction and loyalty constructs, and the moderating influences of emotional intelligence and service authenticity.

2.1. Service Failure and Recovery: A Systematic Review

The scholarly literature addressing service failures and recovery demonstrates three distinct research streams. The first stream focuses on conceptual frameworks that categorize service failure types and their impacts. Contemporary research has evolved beyond traditional definitions centered on operational breakdowns, now encompassing psychological disappointments [1–5]. This expanded conceptualization recognizes that service failures occur when service delivery falls below customers' tolerance zones, acknowledging the inherent variability and human element in service operations [16]. The second research stream investigates recovery strategies, with particular emphasis on the "recovery paradox" phenomenon. This paradox suggests that effectively managed service failures can potentially elevate customer satisfaction beyond pre-failure levels [4,17]. Current research reveals a significant knowledge gap regarding the influence of emotional and interpersonal factors on recovery effectiveness, as existing studies have primarily concentrated on procedural fairness and compensation strategies [9–11].

The third stream examines customer responses to recovery attempts, highlighting the crucial role of emotional responses in determining recovery outcomes [2–4]. While recent investigations have begun exploring the psychological dynamics of rebuilding customer trust and commitment [1–4], our understanding of how socio-emotional factors contribute to sustainable recovery outcomes remains limited.

2.2. Rapport in Service Contexts: Evolution and Current Understanding

The conceptualization of rapport in service contexts has progressed from basic definitions of interpersonal harmony to sophisticated multidimensional constructs. Contemporary research identifies three essential components: cognitive understanding, emotional resonance, and behavioral synchronization. Recent studies have enhanced our understanding of rapport as a dynamic construct [13,18,19], with counseling psychology research identifying it as fundamental to achieving emotional equilibrium through trust and empathic understanding [13,20]. However, significant knowledge gaps persist regarding rapport's specific function within service recovery contexts.

The literature establishes clear distinctions between rapport and satisfaction. While satisfaction serves as an outcome measure, rapport functions as a process variable influencing relationship development [18,19,21]. This distinction proves crucial for understanding rapport's contribution to sustainable service relationships, though current research has not fully explored this dynamic in service recovery situations [19,22,23].

2.3. Customer Empathy: A Dual-Process Framework

Research on customer empathy reveals two distinct but interrelated dimensions: cognitive and emotional empathy. Cognitive empathy, characterized by perspective-taking and

role understanding [24–26], enables customers to comprehend service situations from multiple viewpoints. This intellectual mechanism facilitates appropriate behavioral responses and enhances adaptability in service interactions [27]. However, existing research has not thoroughly examined cognitive empathy development during service recovery episodes.

Emotional empathy, involving vicarious emotional experiences [26,28], represents a distinct pathway through which customers connect with service providers. While its importance in general service interactions is well established, the understanding of emotional empathy's specific function during service failures and recovery attempts remains limited.

2.4. Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: Integrating Multiple Perspectives

The literature examining customer satisfaction and loyalty presents three primary theoretical perspectives: Expectation–Confirmation Theory, the Value Exchange Framework, and Relationship Quality Paradigm. Customer satisfaction has been conceptualized as a cognitive state reflecting the adequacy of value received relative to sacrifices made [6,8]. While research emphasizes both monetary and non-monetary aspects of this evaluation [29,30], investigation of how these evaluations shift during service recovery situations remains incomplete.

Loyalty research has evolved from behavioral definitions to complex conceptualizations incorporating attitudinal and relationship components [29–32]. Although satisfaction is established as a primary antecedent of loyalty [33], the mechanisms through which service recovery influences this relationship require further study.

2.5. Emotional Intelligence in Service Recovery

Research on emotional intelligence in service contexts has developed along two main trajectories: theoretical frameworks defining EI components and empirical studies examining EI's impact on service outcomes. Building upon Coskun and Oksuz's foundational work [34], research has established emotional intelligence as a crucial determinant of workplace behavior [3,4,14]. Bappriker, Rangriz, and Mehrabi's contributions [35,36] further emphasized EI's role in emotional regulation and response refinement. However, the understanding of how emotional intelligence moderates service recovery processes remains incomplete.

2.6. Service Authenticity: Emerging Perspectives

The conceptualization of service authenticity has evolved from a simple notion of genuineness to a nuanced construct encompassing multiple dimensions. Current research emphasizes authenticity's role in building trust and tolerance [7,37–40], enhancing satisfaction and loyalty, and contributing to positive word-of-mouth. However, the specific mechanisms through which service authenticity influences recovery outcomes remain underexplored, particularly concerning rapport and empathy development.

2.7. Research Gaps and Current Study's Contribution

This comprehensive literature review reveals several significant gaps in current understanding. These include limited knowledge of socio-emotional factors' contribution to sustainable service recovery, insufficient exploration of mechanisms linking rapport to recovery outcomes, inadequate investigation of emotional intelligence and service authenticity as moderators in service recovery, and a lack of integrated frameworks examining the interplay between rapport, empathy, and recovery outcomes.

The present study addresses these gaps through multiple contributions: development of an integrated framework incorporating both emotional and cognitive dimensions of service recovery, examination of the moderating roles of emotional intelligence and service authenticity, investigation of mechanisms through which rapport influences recovery

outcomes, and provision of empirical evidence for the relationship between socio-emotional factors and sustainable service relationships.

3. Hypotheses and Conceptual Research Model

3.1. Conceptual Research Model

The conceptual research model developed for this study is grounded in established factors that influence rapport, both cognitive and emotional empathy in customers, and customer satisfaction and loyalty. Drawing from the preceding literature review, the terms of rapport were identified and integrated into the model. Hypotheses 1 and 2 examine how rapport influences cognitive and emotional empathy, respectively. Hypotheses 3–5 address the anticipated effects of customer empathy, satisfaction, and loyalty. Lastly, Hypotheses 6 and 7 examine the moderating roles of emotional intelligence and service authenticity on customer empathy. This conceptual framework, illustrated in Figure 1, outlines this study's hypothesized relationships.

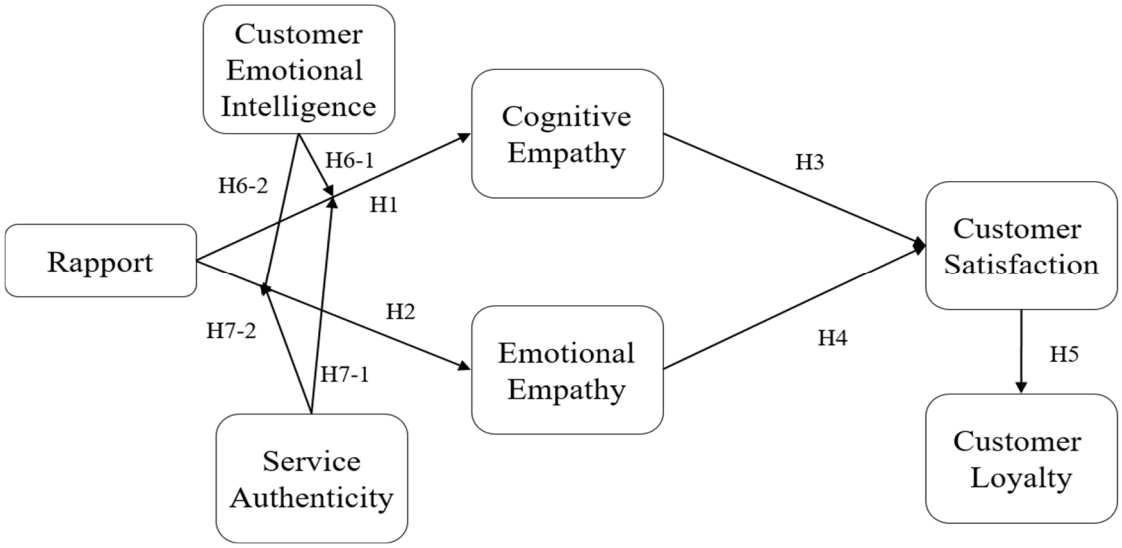


Figure 1. Conceptual research model.

3.2. Research Hypotheses

Rapport is often characterized as a harmonious relationship that develops between service providers and customers, strengthening their connection through positive, empathetic exchanges [18,19,21]. When service providers demonstrate attentiveness and create comfortable experiences, customers experience psychological comfort, which fosters positive emotional connections. This supportive atmosphere, cultivated through authentic interaction, has been shown to significantly strengthen customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth intentions [18,19,21].

Research in psychology has demonstrated that empathy plays a crucial role in fostering interpersonal understanding and prosocial behavior [41,42]. Studies suggest that during conflicts, individuals with higher empathy levels tend to demonstrate greater respect for opposing viewpoints rather than adopting confrontational stances, indicating empathy's fundamental role in promoting constructive social interactions [24–26]. The capacity to comprehend and acknowledge others' perspectives enhances behavioral prediction capabilities, which in turn facilitates more appropriate situational responses [42].

Evidence indicates that heightened empathy correlates positively with several prosocial characteristics, including an enhanced sense of responsibility, effective encouragement skills, and the ability to support others' personal growth through meaningful interac-

tions [24–26]. Within the service industry context, research has shown that perceived similarities between customers and service providers can enhance relationship quality and mutual attraction, potentially leading to improved sales outcomes [2,4,5]. Furthermore, when customers receive personalized attention from service providers, they tend to develop psychological connections that contribute to more positive and comfortable service experiences. Based on these insights, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. *Customers' perceived rapport positively (+) influences cognitive empathy.*

H2. *Customers' perceived rapport positively (+) effects emotional empathy.*

H3. *Customers' cognitive empathy positively influences their service satisfaction.*

H4. *Customers' emotional empathy positively influences their service satisfaction.*

H5. *Customer satisfaction positively mediates the relationship between empathy and loyalty.*

Scholars have proposed various components of emotional intelligence [3,4,14,34–36]. When synthesized, these components include the ability to express, utilize, understand, and manage emotions [3,4]. Emotional expression refers to the ability to clearly identify and express feelings, while emotional utilization refers to the use of emotions in decision-making and problem-solving processes. Furthermore, emotional understanding refers to identifying the causes of emotional states and complex emotions, whereas emotional management refers to the ability to control emotions, such as maintaining composure, even when experiencing negative emotions, rather than avoiding them [14,36]. Therefore, customers with higher emotional intelligence are more inclined to readily accept employees' sincere apologies and responses for service recovery and understand the service failure situation and employee sincerity.

Groups composed of members with higher emotional intelligence can create a more positive atmosphere aimed at producing organizational performance than groups that do not [35,36]. Higher emotional intelligence in employees is closely related to their work capabilities and performance outcomes [36]. When organizational members possess high emotional intelligence, they are more likely to handle organizational conflicts or complaints effectively through flexible and positive thinking and by the creation of rational solutions. Organizational performance and effectiveness include various aspects, such as work performance, productivity, sales, service quality, customer loyalty, and innovation [3,4,14,36]. This study anticipated that customer emotional intelligence would positively moderate the relationship between perceived rapport, service recovery efforts, and customer empathy. Based on these discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6-1. *The relationship between rapport and cognitive empathy is contingent upon the level of emotional intelligence, which serves as a moderating variable in this association.*

H6-2. *Emotional intelligence functions as a moderating variable in the relationship between rapport-building behaviors and customers' emotional empathy.*

Authentic employee attitudes foster trust and tolerance, strengthening relationships despite service failures [4,6,7,43–45]. High perceived service authenticity enhances satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty, and contributes to positive word-of-mouth [4,7,37]. Consequently, service authenticity is predicted to moderate the effect of rapport on empathy, as outlined in the following hypotheses:

H7-1. *Service authenticity moderates the strength and direction of the relationship between rapport and customers' cognitive empathy responses.*

H7-2. *The relationship between rapport and emotional empathy is moderated by the perceived authenticity of the service delivery.*

4. Method and Analysis

4.1. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

This study employed a systematic sampling methodology designed to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining statistical rigor and demographic representativeness. The sampling strategy was developed to align with this study's focus on sustainable service management practices and contemporary consumer behavior patterns. The research population was defined through explicit delineation of sampling units, scope, and temporal parameters, with data collection occurring from 10 March 2024 to 10 May 2024.

This study primarily targeted participants aged 20–50 years, with a particular focus on university graduates, for several methodologically sound reasons. First, this demographic segment represents one of the most active and digitally engaged consumer segments in terms of service consumption and digital service interaction, making their experiences particularly relevant to contemporary service failure scenarios [6,29,46]. Second, this cohort demonstrates higher levels of engagement with service recovery processes and is more likely to provide detailed feedback about their service experiences, enhancing the quality and reliability of the data collected [9,16,47]. Third, this age range typically encompasses individuals with sufficient disposable income and regular service consumption patterns, allowing for more meaningful analysis of service recovery experiences.

This study employed a targeted sampling methodology that, while potentially limiting broad generalizability, offered strategic advantages aligned with the research objectives. The chosen demographic exhibited particularly relevant characteristics, including increased frequency of service interactions, greater engagement with formal recovery processes, enhanced ability to articulate service experiences, and consistent participation across both traditional and digital service channels. The research framework focused on adult consumers who had encountered service failures within the previous 12 months across various service sectors. A stratified random sampling approach was implemented across retail, hospitality, and professional service sectors, balancing external validity with demographic focus. From 680 initial questionnaires, 672 were retained after applying strict exclusion criteria related to service failure experience and response completeness. The sample size adequacy was confirmed through a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1, with parameters established at $f^2 = 0.15$ (medium effect size), $\alpha = 0.05$, and power = 0.95 for structural equation modeling, ensuring sufficient statistical power for detecting hypothesized relationships.

To address potential selection bias and enhance representativeness, this study utilized multiple recruitment channels. These included online survey distribution through professional networks, in-person recruitment at service centers, snowball sampling through verified service failure cases, and stratified sampling across service sectors. The research instrument underwent rigorous preliminary validation through pilot testing with 50 respondents, examining item clarity, completion duration, and internal consistency. Standardized survey protocols were implemented, featuring clear instructions and operational definitions of key constructs to ensure consistent interpretation. This study incorporated comprehensive data quality assurance measures, including strategically placed attention check items, completion time parameters for identifying invalid responses, response pattern analysis for detecting anomalous data, validation rules to minimize input errors, and thorough data

cleaning protocols. This systematic approach to data collection and validation enhanced the robustness of the research methodology and the reliability of subsequent findings.

While acknowledging the potential limitations of focusing on a specific age demographic, this methodological approach provides a robust foundation for investigating service recovery dynamics within the context of contemporary service environments. Future research could expand upon these findings by including broader age ranges and demographic profiles to enhance generalizability across different population segments.

4.2. Measurement Instrument Development

In this investigation, rapport is conceptualized as an interpersonal dynamic characterized by mutual trust, synchronous interaction, and collaborative engagement between parties. The measurement instrument comprised 11 items, building upon established rapport assessment frameworks [18,21]. Empathy is operationalized as a multidimensional construct encompassing both affective and cognitive components. The affective dimension reflects one's capacity to resonate with others' emotional experiences [24–26], while the cognitive aspect represents the ability to understand others' perspectives and mental states. The assessment utilized six items in total, with three items dedicated to each dimension of empathy [24–26].

Customer satisfaction is conceptualized in this research as a multifaceted construct that encompasses both cognitive and evaluative components. Specifically, it reflects customers' assessment of the value received relative to their investment, alongside their subjective evaluation of how well the product or service fulfills their expectations and requirements [6,8,31]. The measurement scale consisted of three items adapted from previous research. Customer loyalty is operationalized as customers' behavioral intention to maintain their relationship with service providers and their willingness to recommend these providers to others. This construct was measured using four items that assess both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of loyalty [6,8]. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to understand others' emotions based on understanding one's own emotions, and the degree to which one can effectively utilize and develop emotions based on emotional control and regulation [3,4,35,36]. Eight questions used in previous studies were employed. Authenticity is defined as being genuine and sincere in one's thoughts and affections, as well as embodying the distinc-tive qualities or essential characteristics that make something what it truly is [4,7,37,48]. The measurement items were adapted and modified from previous studies following an extensive literature review. Each construct was operationalized based on established theoretical definitions and measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with 3 representing a neutral position. Higher scores on the scale indicated stronger agreement with the measured constructs. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 27 and structural equation modeling (SEM) software to examine the hypothesized moderating relationships among the variables. As shown in Appendix A, questionnaire items for this study were extracted from previous studies.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, the sample included a higher proportion of females compared to males (52.4% vs. 47.6%, respectively). The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 50 years. Most participants were university graduates (42%). The most frequently reported occupational categories were students (30%), employees (21.0%), professionals (17.0%), and public sector workers (17.0%).

Table 1. Demographic profile.

Index (n = 672)		**Frequency**	**%**
Gender	Male	320	47.6
	Female	352	52.4
Years	20–29	169	25.1
	30–39	159	23.7
	40–49	153	22.8
	Over 50	191	28.4
Education Level	High school or below	253	38
	Vocational school	99	15
	University	281	42
	Graduate school	39	6
Occupation	Students	201	30
	Public sector	113	17
	Employee	140	21
	Professional	113	17
	Self-employed	53	8
	Other	52	7
Monthly income in USD	below $2000	142	21
	2000~3000	121	18
	3000~4000	127	19
	4000~5000	229	34
	Above $5000	53	8

5.2. Measurement Validity

As shown in Table 2, The measurement model was validated through a sequential multi-method approach to assess construct reliability and validity. The validation process began with exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which was subsequently complemented by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish construct dimensionality. Measurement reliability was evaluated using multiple indicators, including Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability scores. The initial phase employed principal components analysis with varimax rotation (n = 672), establishing a minimum factor loading threshold of 0.50. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70. Following the exploratory phase, which provided preliminary support for the hypothesized model structure, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using EQS 6.4 software. Model fit was evaluated through chi-square (χ^2) testing and various goodness-of-fit indices.

Table 2. CFA results.

Construct	Item	Standardized Loadings	t-Value	(Cronbach's Alpha)	CR	AVE
Rapport	RA1	0.703	Fixed	0.803	0.927	0.593
	RA2	0.698	13.146			
	RA3	0.763	17.301			
	RA4	0.732	13.974			
	RA5	0.743	14.321			
	RA6	0.808	16.326			
	RA7	0.772	18.653			
	RA8	0.703	13.754			
	RA9	0.731	14.562			
	RA10	0.707	13.521			
	RA11	0.716	13.784			
Cognitive Empathy	CE1	0.735	14.753	0.834	0.876	0.698
	CE2	0.891	22.731			
	CE3	0.732	16.201			
Emotional Empathy	EE1	0.695	15.732	0.863	0.895	0.753
	EE2	0.757	15.832			
	EE3	0.793	17.231			
Customer Satisfaction	CS1	0.804	18.345	0.831	0.875	0.582
	CS2	0.786	16.352			
	CS3	0.756	15.873			
Loyalty	LO1	0.824	18.123	0.895	0.917	0.742
	LO2	0.807	17.643			
	LO3	0.818	18.452			
	LO4	0.923	22.594			
Emotional Intelligence	EI1	0.783	15.573	0.863	0.931	0.627
	EI2	0.742	15.432			
	EI3	0.721	14.983			
	EI4	0.890	21.419			
	EI5	0.785	15.795			
	EI6	0.802	16.723			
	EI7	0.813	16.632			
	EI8	0.797	15.832			
Service Authenticity	SA1	0.853	19.756	0.840	0.992	0.661
	SA2	0.881	21.135			
	SA3	0.867	20.572			

Notes: N = 672., CR = composite reliability, AVE = average extracted variance.

Common method bias was not a significant concern in this study, as evidenced by several methodological and statistical assessments. Harman's single-factor test was conducted, where all variables were loaded onto a single factor in an exploratory factor analysis. The

results revealed that no single factor accounted for more than 38.4% of the total variance, well below the threshold of 50% that would indicate potential common method bias. Additionally, we employed the marker variable technique [49] by including a theoretically unrelated construct in our survey. The correlations between this marker variable and our study constructs were negligible ($r < 0.08$), further supporting the absence of substantial common method variance. Furthermore, the confirmatory factor analysis revealed distinct factor structures with acceptable fit indices (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05), suggesting that the measurement model adequately captured the distinct constructs under investigation. These multiple lines of evidence collectively indicate that common method bias does not pose a substantial threat to the validity of our findings.

The CFA results indicated that the measurement model fit the data adequately (goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 726.883$, df = 276; $\chi^2/df = 2.636$. CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, GFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.06). As shown in Tables 2 and 3, internal consistency was achieved by meeting the criteria for the average variance extracted (AVE ≥ 0.5), composite reliability (CR ≥ 0.7), and reliability (Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.6). In this study, the AVE values for all latent variables were adequate. The measurement tool used in this study demonstrated both convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 3. Construction heatmap of key variables.

Constructs	RA	CE	EE	CS	LO	EI	SA
RA	**0.352** [a]	0.020 [b]	0.203 [b]	0.138 [b]	0.127 [b]	0.127 [b]	0.000 [b]
CE	0.020 [b]	**0.487** [a]	0.158 [b]	0.391	0.088 [b]	0.088 [b]	0.005 [b]
EE	0.203 [b]	0.158 [b]	**0.567** [a]	0.031	0.012 [b]	0.012 [b]	0.052 [b]
CS	0.138 [b]	0.391 [b]	0.031 [b]	**0.339** [a]	0.123 [b]	0.123 [b]	0.000 [b]
LO	0.127 [b]	0.088 [b]	0.012 [b]	0.123 [b]	**0.551** [a]	0.127 [b]	0.113 [b]
EI	0.001 [b]	0.025 [b]	0.213 [b]	0.110 [b]	0.123 [b]	**0.393** [a]	0.058 [b]
SA	0.001 [b]	0.005 [b]	0.052 [b]	0.000 [b]	0.110 [b]	0.058 [b]	**0.437** [a]

Note: [a] The square root of AVE values on the diagonal, AVE: average variance extracted; [b] squared correlations,RA = rapport, CE = cognitive empathy, EE = emotional empathy, CS = customer satisfaction, LO = loyalty, EI = emotional intelligence, SA = service authenticity.

5.3. Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was tested using the EQS 6.4 program. The results indicated a good fit between the structural model and the data, with goodness-of-fit statistics as follows: $\chi^2 = 792.28$, df = 432; $\chi^2/df = 1.84$. CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.95, GFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05. Table 4 and Figure 2 present the path coefficients for the causal relationships within the tested structural model, along with the R^2 values for the endogenous variables. Hypotheses 1 and 2 examined the relationship between customers' rapport behavior and cognitive empathy. The results demonstrate that customers' rapport behavior positively influences cognitive empathy ($\beta = 0.666$, $p < 0.005$) and emotional empathy ($\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.005$).

As presented in Table 4 and Figure 2, hypotheses 3 and 4 explored the relationship between customer empathy and satisfaction. Cognitive empathy positively affects customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.005$), as does emotional empathy ($\beta = 0.458$, $p < 0.005$). Hypothesis 5 investigated the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, revealing that customer satisfaction positively impacts loyalty ($\beta = 0.777$, $p < 0.005$). Thus, Hypotheses 1 through 5 are supported.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing.

H	Path	Standardized Coefficient Path	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	t-Value	*p*-Value
H1	Rapport → Cognitive Empathy	0.666	0.034	21.799	0.000
H2	Rapport → Emotional Empathy	0.691	0.042	22.131	0.000
H3	Cognitive Empathy → Satisfaction	0.298	0.066	14.864	0.000
H4	Emotional Empathy → Satisfaction	0.458	0.051	17.536	0.000
H5	Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.777	0.26	25.762	0.000

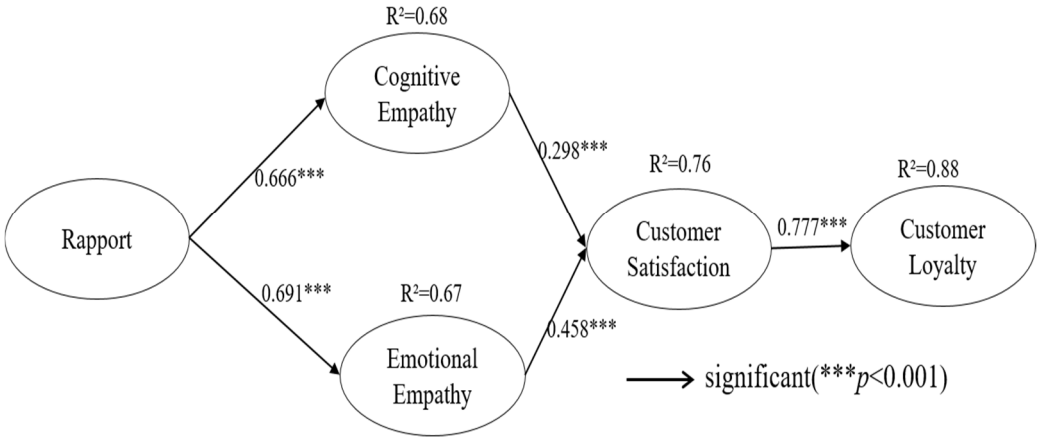


Figure 2. Structural model of rapport, empathy and customer outcomes.

The findings indicate that customer rapport behavior is significantly related to customer empathy. Specifically, as customers engage more in conversations and establish intimacy and bonds with service providers, they are better able to understand and share emotional experiences. Moreover, customer satisfaction and loyalty tend to increase with the level of empathy received from service providers. The extent to which service providers empathize with customer behavior is crucially linked to customer satisfaction, which, in turn, is closely associated with customer loyalty.

5.4. Moderating Effects of Emotional Intelligence and Service Authenticity

To assess the causal relationships in the conceptual research model hypothesized, causal paths were estimated. A multiple-group analysis was conducted to examine the moderating effects of customer emotional intelligence and service authenticity. Based on the median ratings of emotional intelligence (Mdn = 3.27) and authenticity (Mdn = 3.57), respondents were classified into low and high groups. The chi-square (χ^2) difference between the constrained and unconstrained models was examined in relation to the degrees of freedom to test the differential effects of emotional intelligence and authenticity.

As presented in Table 5 and Figure 3, the results indicated that emotional intelligence significantly moderates the relationship between customer rapport behavior and cognitive empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.204$, $p < 0.001$) but not between customer rapport behavior and emotional empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.073$, $p > 0.001$). Additionally, service authenticity significantly affects the relationships between customer rapport behavior and both cognitive empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.732$, $p < 0.05$) and emotional empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.701$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, hypotheses H6-1, H7-1, and H7-2, were supported, while H6-2 was not.

Table 5. Results of moderating effects.

H	Main Effect	Low EI	High EI	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf = 1)	*p-Value*
H6-1	Rapport → Cognitive Empathy	0.562	0.834	5.204 ***	0.000
H6-2	Rapport → Emotional Empathy	0.758	0.831	0.073	0.849 s
H	**Main Effect**	**Low EI**	**High EI**	**$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf = 1)**	***p-Value***
H7-1	Rapport → Cognitive Empathy	0.301	0.569	3.732 **	0.003
H7-1	Rapport → Emotional Empathy	0.255	0.586	4.701 ***	0.000

*Note: EI: emotional intelligence, SA: service authenticity, *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.05.*

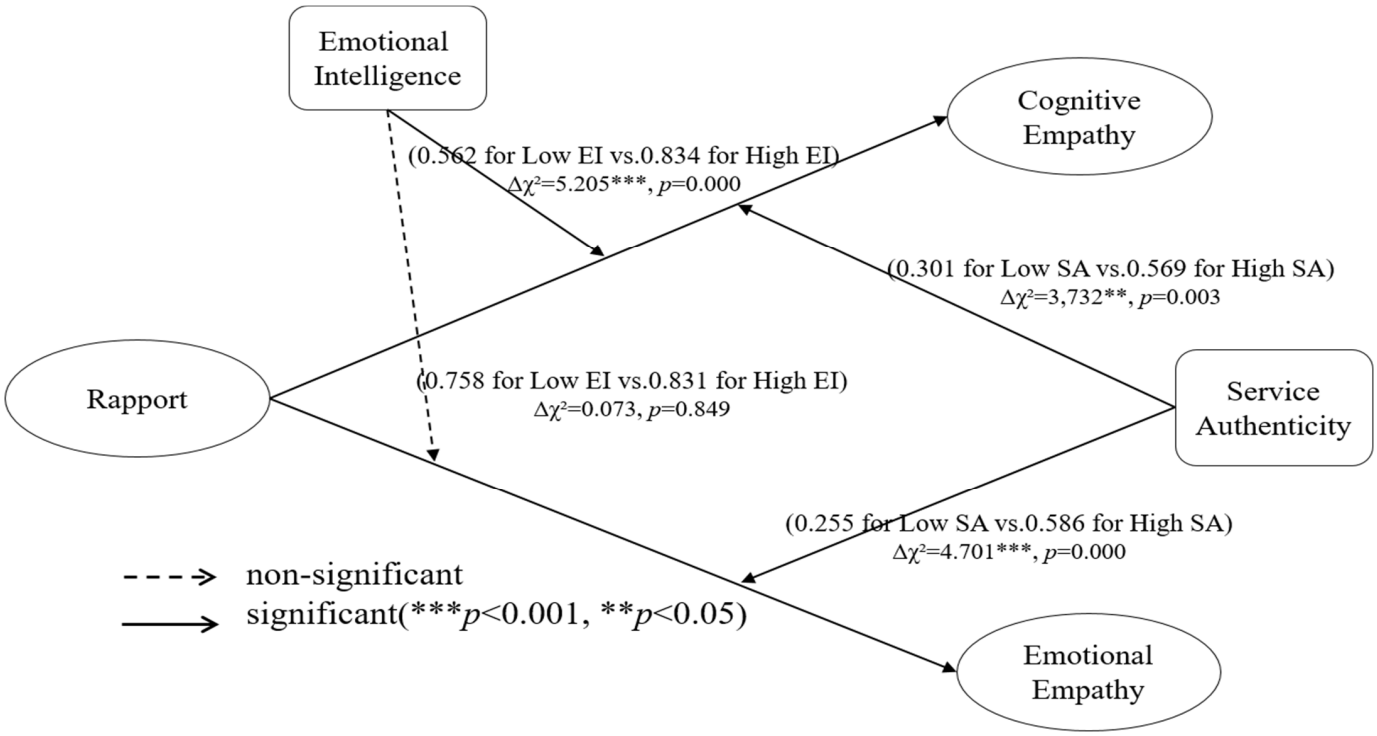


Figure 3. Results of Moderating Effect. *EI: emotional intelligence; SA: service authenticity*.

Rapport-building behaviors between service providers and customers are crucial in developing both rational and emotional empathy. As service providers incorporate greater service authenticity, customer rapport behaviors are likely to establish a practical means of building strong relationships.

The path coefficient for customers in the high emotional intelligence group was higher than for those in the low emotional intelligence group regarding the relationship between customer rapport behavior and cognitive empathy. This suggests that customers with higher emotional intelligence are more influenced by rapport in developing cognitive empathy than those with lower emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, higher authenticity in service actions plays a critical role in forming relationships with customers, inducing positive responses, and establishing long-term connections. The path coefficient was also higher for customers in the high service authenticity group concerning customer empathy. This indicates that customers with higher service authenticity are more influenced by rapport in developing empathy compared to their lower counterparts.

5.5. Results Interpretation

The structural equation modeling results reveal several significant relationships that warrant detailed interpretation. The strong positive relationship between rapport and both cognitive empathy ($\beta = 0.666$, $p < 0.005$) and emotional empathy ($\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.005$) suggests that rapport-building behaviors serve as fundamental catalysts for developing empathetic understanding in service recovery contexts. The slightly stronger coefficient for emotional empathy indicates that rapport may be particularly effective at fostering emotional connections compared to cognitive understanding, possibly due to the inherently affective nature of rapport-building interactions.

The differential impact of cognitive empathy ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.005$) versus emotional empathy ($\beta = 0.458$, $p < 0.005$) on customer satisfaction provides valuable insights into the relative importance of these distinct empathy dimensions. The stronger coefficient for emotional empathy suggests that customers place greater value on feeling emotionally understood during service recovery episodes than on a purely cognitive understanding of their situation. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that emotional support plays a crucial role in service recovery satisfaction [13,17]. The robust relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty ($\beta = 0.777$, $p < 0.005$) demonstrates the critical role of effective service recovery in maintaining long-term customer relationships. This strong coefficient suggests that successfully resolved service failures may indeed lead to the "recovery paradox", where properly handled service failures actually strengthen customer loyalty beyond pre-failure levels.

The moderation analysis reveals particularly interesting patterns regarding emotional intelligence and service authenticity. The finding that emotional intelligence significantly moderates the rapport–cognitive empathy relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.204$, $p < 0.001$) but not the rapport–emotional empathy relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.073$, $p > 0.001$) warrants careful interpretation. This unexpected asymmetry suggests that higher emotional intelligence primarily enhances customers' cognitive processing of rapport-building behaviors rather than their emotional responses. This may occur because emotionally intelligent customers are better equipped to recognize and appreciate the strategic aspects of service providers' rapport-building efforts, while emotional responses remain relatively consistent across emotional intelligence levels. The significant moderating effects of service authenticity on both cognitive empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.732$, $p < 0.05$) and emotional empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.701$, $p < 0.001$) relationships underscore the importance of perceived authenticity in service recovery contexts. The stronger moderation effect on emotional empathy suggests that authentic service delivery particularly enhances the emotional connection between service providers and customers, possibly by increasing the perceived sincerity of rapport-building behaviors.

The results of H7-1, which hypothesized that service authenticity moderates the relationship between rapport and cognitive empathy, warrant careful interpretation within broader theoretical and contextual frameworks. Unlike our initial prediction, the statistical evidence ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.732$, $p < 0.05$) suggests a more complex dynamic at play. Several theoretical and contextual factors may explain this finding:

First, the relationship between service authenticity and cognitive empathy may be influenced by industry-specific characteristics. In service contexts where transactions are more instrumental or task-oriented, customers may prioritize functional competence over perceived authenticity. This aligns with previous findings by González-Gómez et al. and Xu et al., who found that technical service quality often overshadows interpersonal elements in certain service contexts [4,7].

Second, cultural dimensions likely play a significant role in moderating this relationship. This study's cultural context may reflect a more pragmatic orientation where cognitive assessment of service quality takes precedence over perceived authenticity. This

interpretation is supported by Koc's research on cross-cultural service recovery expectations, which demonstrated that cultural values significantly influence how customers process and respond to service authenticity cues [2].

Third, the relationship may be subject to a threshold effect, where service authenticity influences cognitive empathy only up to a certain point, after which additional authenticity yields diminishing returns. This phenomenon has been documented in related service contexts by Wei et al. [3], particularly in situations where customers are primarily focused on problem resolution rather than relationship building.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that cognitive empathy may be more strongly influenced by objective service characteristics than by perceived authenticity. This interpretation aligns with Baker and Kim's work on customer attribution processes during service failures, where cognitive responses were found to be more closely tied to observable service actions than to perceived sincerity [11].

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature examining the complex interplay between service authenticity and customer cognitive processes, while suggesting that the relationship between these variables may be more nuanced than previously theorized. Future research should consider examining these relationships across different service contexts and cultural settings to better understand the boundary conditions of service authenticity's moderating effects.

The research findings demonstrate significant implications for advancing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and 12 through quantifiable metrics of socio-emotional sustainability in service recovery contexts. Regarding SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), this study reveals that effective rapport-building and emotional intelligence in service recovery contribute to sustainable economic outcomes through multiple pathways. The empirical evidence shows that high-quality service recovery, characterized by strong rapport ($\beta = 0.666$ for cognitive empathy; $\beta = 0.691$ for emotional empathy) and authentic service delivery, leads to enhanced customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.777$) and loyalty outcomes. This relationship directly supports economic sustainability by reducing customer attrition rates and associated replacement costs, while simultaneously fostering long-term revenue stability through sustained customer relationships.

In alignment with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), this research introduces a novel Socio-Emotional Sustainability Indicator (SESI) framework that quantifies the social value generated through effective service recovery. This framework measures sustainability outcomes across three dimensions: (1) the effectiveness of rapport-building behaviors in generating customer empathy (demonstrated through path coefficients of 0.666 and 0.691 for cognitive and emotional empathy, respectively), (2) the translation of empathy into customer satisfaction (with coefficients of 0.298 and 0.458 for cognitive and emotional empathy), and (3) the conversion of satisfaction into sustainable loyalty behaviors ($\beta = 0.777$).

This study further demonstrates that service organizations can enhance their contribution to these SDGs by integrating emotional intelligence and service authenticity as key moderating factors in their recovery processes. The significant moderating effects of emotional intelligence ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.204$, $p < 0.001$) and service authenticity ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.701$, $p < 0.001$) on rapport–empathy relationships provide quantifiable metrics for measuring social sustainability in service contexts. These findings suggest that organizations can systematically improve their sustainability performance by developing targeted interventions in these areas.

Furthermore, this research indicates that sustainable service management practices, when properly implemented, create a virtuous cycle that simultaneously advances both economic and social sustainability objectives. This is evidenced by the strong rela-

tionship between customer satisfaction and loyalty (β = 0.777), suggesting that investments in socio-emotional sustainability generate tangible economic returns while promoting responsible consumption patterns through enhanced service quality and customer relationship management.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Conclusions

Our research provides compelling evidence for the role of interpersonal dynamics in sustainable service recovery and relationship management. The findings demonstrate that the rapport between service providers and customers acts as a fundamental catalyst for both cognitive and emotional empathy, which subsequently influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. This relationship is enhanced by emotional intelligence and service authenticity, revealing the complex interplay of social and emotional factors in service recovery scenarios.

The stronger influence of emotional empathy over cognitive empathy in service recovery represents a significant advancement in our understanding of the recovery paradox and service management more broadly. This finding necessitates a fundamental shift in how organizations approach service recovery training and implementation, with greater emphasis on emotional connection and authentic emotional engagement. Future research and practice should focus on developing and implementing strategies that prioritize emotional empathy while maintaining appropriate levels of cognitive understanding and technical competence.

6.2. The Recovery Paradox, Emotional Intelligence Theory

This study's findings both align with and extend the traditional recovery paradox literature in several significant ways. The recovery paradox, as established by Sembada et al., suggests that effective service recovery can elevate customer satisfaction beyond pre-failure levels [17]. Our research validates this phenomenon while providing novel insights into the underlying psychological mechanisms, particularly through the lens of emotional and cognitive empathy.

This research expands the recovery paradox literature by demonstrating that emotional dimensions of service recovery are more fundamental to achieving paradoxical outcomes than previously recognized. The findings reveal that emotional empathy (β = 0.458) has a stronger relationship with customer satisfaction than cognitive empathy (β = 0.298), challenging transaction-focused perspectives in favor of emotional connection as the primary driver of enhanced customer loyalty. Furthermore, rapport-building behaviors serve as significant antecedents to both cognitive and emotional empathy development (β = 0.666 and β = 0.691, respectively), providing a comprehensive framework for achieving paradoxical outcomes through strategic interpersonal engagement.

This study contributes to emotional intelligence (EI) theory by revealing asymmetric moderation effects, where EI significantly moderates the rapport–cognitive empathy relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.204$, $p < 0.001$) but not the rapport–emotional empathy relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.073$, $p > 0.001$). This challenges conventional understandings of EI in service contexts, suggesting a differential processing model where EI selectively amplifies cognitive interpretation while leaving emotional responses relatively unchanged.

Additionally, service authenticity significantly moderates both cognitive empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.732$, $p < 0.05$) and emotional empathy ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.701$, $p < 0.001$) relationships, with a stronger effect on emotional empathy. This extends authenticity theory beyond trust-building mechanisms to position it as a critical amplifier of interpersonal connection, operating primarily through affective rather than cognitive pathways. These theoretical extensions collectively advance service management theory toward a relationship-centered paradigm that better explains the complex social and emotional dynamics underlying

successful service recovery. This finding represents a significant theoretical advancement, as it suggests that the recovery paradox may be more strongly driven by emotional connection than by cognitive understanding or procedural fairness. This challenges the predominantly transaction-focused view in the earlier recovery paradox literature and suggests a more nuanced understanding of how service recovery creates enhanced customer loyalty.

6.3. Implications of Emotional vs. Cognitive Empathy Findings

The stronger effect of emotional empathy over cognitive empathy in driving customer satisfaction has several important implications for service management theory and practice. This research reveals significant insights into sustainable service management through analysis of consumer experiences across service sectors. This study demonstrates that interpersonal dynamics are crucial for developing empathy, enhancing customer satisfaction, and ensuring business sustainability. It distinctly identifies the roles of cognitive and emotional empathy in customer–provider interactions, establishing clear causal links between customer rapport, empathy formation, and loyalty outcomes. The findings emphasize that successful service relationships require sustained, high-quality interactions between providers and clients, with service providers needing to maintain a long-term perspective on emotional intelligence and customer engagement.

6.4. Integration of Findings with Existing Theory

This research extends previous theoretical frameworks by illuminating specific mechanisms through which rapport influences service recovery outcomes. It reveals distinct pathways through cognitive and emotional empathy, suggesting a more complex theoretical model than previously proposed. This study challenges existing assumptions about emotional intelligence's role in service interactions, demonstrating that emotional intelligence primarily enhances cognitive processing rather than emotional responses. Furthermore, this research contributes to authenticity theory by showing how service authenticity enhances both cognitive and emotional aspects of service recovery interactions.

6.5. Practical Implications of the Findings

This research identifies three key practical applications for service organizations. First, organizations should develop differentiated training programs that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of service recovery, with particular emphasis on emotional empathy. Second, emotional intelligence should be considered a key criterion in selecting customer-facing employees, especially for roles involving complex service recovery situations. Third, organizations should focus on developing authentic service delivery approaches rather than purely scripted responses to service failures.

6.6. Integration with Sustainable Service Management

This study advances the understanding of sustainability within service contexts by introducing an innovative methodology for evaluating socio-emotional sustainability metrics in service recovery scenarios. It establishes measurable indicators for social sustainability within service organizations and demonstrates practical implementation methods for sustainability principles in service recovery processes. This research validates the triple bottom line framework of sustainability, showing how social sustainability enhances economic sustainability through improved customer relationships and reduced customer attrition rates. This connection demonstrates that investments in social sustainability metrics and practices can produce tangible business benefits while advancing broader sustainability goals.

6.7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study, while offering significant contributions to the service management literature, encompasses several methodological and conceptual limitations that warrant attention. First, the measurement framework requires refinement, particularly in developing more sophisticated instruments that can effectively capture rapport behaviors and service quality dimensions across diverse industry contexts. The current measurement items, while functional, may not fully encompass the nuanced aspects of service interactions in different sectors.

A second significant limitation concerns this study's scope regarding contextual variables. The complex interplay between service environments, customer characteristics, and organizational factors suggests that the findings may not be uniformly applicable across all service settings. This contextual dependency particularly manifests in how service failures and recovery processes may vary substantially across different service categories, each potentially requiring unique analytical approaches and interventions. The cross-sectional nature of the data collection represents a third notable limitation. Given that service relationships and customer satisfaction patterns evolve dynamically over time, the static snapshot provided by the current methodology may not fully capture the temporal dimensions of service recovery processes and their long-term implications for customer relationships. Building on these limitations, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, scholars should focus on developing more comprehensive measurement frameworks that can accommodate the multifaceted nature of service interactions while maintaining cross-industry applicability. Second, future studies would benefit from adopting longitudinal research designs to track the evolution of service relationships and recovery outcomes over extended periods, thereby providing deeper insights into the temporal dynamics of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The present study, while offering significant contributions to the service management literature, encompasses several methodological and conceptual limitations that warrant careful consideration. First, this study's sample demographics, particularly the age range restriction (20–50 years), present notable limitations for generalizability. This demographic constraint, while providing focused insights into the behaviors of prime working-age consumers, potentially excludes valuable perspectives from older populations who may exhibit distinct patterns in service recovery expectations and rapport-building preferences. The exclusion of consumers over 50 years of age is particularly noteworthy given the growing economic significance and unique service needs of aging populations in many developed economies.

Second, this study's scope regarding contextual and cultural variables requires attention. While the current sample provides robust insights into service interactions within a specific cultural context, the complex interplay between cultural norms, service expectations, and recovery processes suggests that findings may not be uniformly applicable across different cultural settings. This limitation is particularly relevant given that emotional intelligence manifestations and rapport-building behaviors can vary significantly across cultural boundaries. The absence of cross-cultural comparison groups limits our understanding of how cultural factors might moderate the relationships identified in our model.

The measurement framework itself presents a third significant limitation. While functional, the current instruments may not fully capture the nuanced aspects of service interactions across different age groups and cultural contexts. The measurement items, developed primarily with the studied age range in mind, may require adaptation to effectively assess service recovery experiences among older consumers or those from different cultural backgrounds.

Building on these limitations, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, subsequent studies should expand the age range to include consumers over 50, particularly given the increasing importance of this demographic segment in service economies. This expansion would provide valuable insights into how age-related factors influence service recovery expectations and outcomes. Second, future research would benefit from cross-cultural comparative studies to examine how cultural dimensions moderate the relationships identified in our model. Such studies could illuminate how service recovery strategies need to be adapted for different cultural contexts.

Additionally, longitudinal research designs would be valuable in tracking the evolution of service relationships and recovery outcomes across different age cohorts and cultural groups. This temporal perspective would enhance our understanding of how age-related factors and cultural variables influence service recovery expectations and outcomes over time. Finally, developing more comprehensive measurement frameworks that account for age-specific and cultural variations in service interactions represents an important direction for future research.

These future research directions would collectively contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of sustainable service management, while providing evidence-based guidelines for practitioners serving diverse demographic and cultural markets. Such expanded understanding is particularly crucial given the increasingly global and age-diverse nature of service economies.

Additionally, future research should investigate the role of cultural dimensions and demographic variables in shaping service recovery expectations and outcomes. This cross-cultural perspective would enhance our understanding of how service management strategies need to be adapted for different cultural contexts. Finally, examining the impact of digital transformation on service recovery processes represents an important frontier for future research, particularly as technology continues to reshape service delivery and customer interaction paradigms. These research directions would collectively contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of sustainable service management, while providing evidence-based guidelines for practitioners in diverse service contexts.

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Informed Consent Statement: The questionnaires used/completed for the purposes of this study were anonymous and did not contain any information that could lead to the identification of respondents.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Statistics of the construct items.

Construct	Survey Measures
Rapport	I enjoy conversations with my service provider
	I feel like I connect well with my service provider
	My service provider has a good sense of humor and is fun
	I enjoy the service from my service provider
	I feel comfortable with my service provider
	I feel a sense of bond with my service provider
	I don't feel much distance from my service provider
	When there are multiple service providers at the same service company, I prefer to receive service from this provider
	I am very interested in my service provider in many ways
	My service provider shows overall interest in their customers
	I have developed a close relationship with my service provider
Cognitive Empathy	I felt that the service provider tried to understand customer behavior from the customer's perspective
	I felt that the service provider tried to see customer problems from the customer's perspective
	I felt that the service provider tried to understand the customer's situation
Emotional Empathy	I felt that the service provider tried to share the feelings experienced by the customer
	I felt that the service provider tried to share the emotions experienced by the customer
	I felt that the service provider tried to empathize with the customer's concerns
Customer Satisfaction	This service is more satisfactory than I expected
	This service is satisfactory overall
	I trust this service
Customer Loyalty	I will continue to receive this service
	I will recommend this service to others
	I want to continue receiving service from this service provider
	I will continue to seek out this service provider
Service Authenticity	I believe this service provider's sincerity is embedded in their service
	I think the service provision comes from genuine sincerity
	I feel that this service provider's service actions truly consider customers
Emotional Intelligence	I tend to have a good understanding of my own emotions
	I usually know whether I'm happy or not
	I can control my anger and solve difficulties rationally
	I generally understand my feelings very well
	I can control my emotions well
	I always set goals for myself and do my best to achieve them
	I am a self-motivated person
	I always tell myself that I am a capable person

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