# CUSTOMER DELIGHT AS MEDIATOR OF SERVICE QUALITY AND REVISIT INTENTION: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN'S RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

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**ABSTRACT**
*Despite substantial growth in Pakistan's restaurant sector, the psychological mechanisms linking service quality to customer retention remain inadequately understood. This research examines customer delight as a mediating variable between service quality and revisit intention among restaurant patrons in Peshawar. Survey data from 395 customers were analyzed using established measurement instruments and Baron and Kenny's mediation framework. Results demonstrate that service quality significantly influences customer delight (β = .457), which subsequently predicts revisit intention (β = .739). When customer delight enters the model, service quality's direct effect on revisit intention becomes negligible, confirming full mediation. These findings indicate that service quality improvements generate return patronage primarily through emotional pathways rather than cognitive evaluation. The study reveals geographic limitations, as data collection focused solely on Peshawar restaurants. Restaurant operators should recognize that meeting basic service standards alone cannot sustain competitive advantage; creating emotionally engaging experiences proves essential for customer retention. Theoretically, this research clarifies that in emerging market contexts, affective responses to service encounters outweigh rational quality assessments in shaping behavioral loyalty. The emotional mediation pathway identified here challenges conventional direct quality-loyalty models prevalent in hospitality literature.*

**Keywords:** service quality, customer delight, revisit intention, restaurants, Pakistan, mediation analysis, hospitality management

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry represents one of the fastest-growing economic sectors globally, with projected annual growth rates exceeding 5% through 2027 (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). This expansion reflects fundamental shifts in consumer behavior, as individuals increasingly allocate discretionary income toward dining experiences rather than home meal preparation. In Pakistan specifically, the restaurant sector has emerged as the second-largest employer, engaging approximately 16% of the national workforce and serving a market of 180 million consumers (Zeb et al., 2021). Pakistani households now direct roughly 40% of their food expenditure, exceeding USD 114 billion annually, toward restaurant meals and prepared foods (Satti et al., 2020). These figures position Pakistan as the eighth-largest restaurant market worldwide, underscoring both the sector's economic significance and its competitive intensity.

This remarkable growth trajectory, however, has not been accompanied by corresponding advances in scholarly understanding of consumer behavior within Pakistani restaurant contexts. While operators compete aggressively for market share, empirical research examining the drivers of customer retention in this setting remains scarce. Peshawar, the

provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, exemplifies this disconnect between market dynamism and academic inquiry. Rapid urbanization has transformed the city's dining landscape, yet systematic investigation into what motivates customers to return to particular establishments lags behind these developments. For restaurant managers operating in increasingly saturated markets where customer acquisition costs escalate while margins compress, this knowledge gap poses tangible strategic challenges.

Understanding customer retention requires examining how service quality shapes behavioral intentions. Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) seminal SERVQUAL framework established five dimensions, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, that continue guiding service quality assessment across industries. Extensive evidence documents service quality's influence on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and financial performance (Clow & Vorhies, 1993; Ryu & Lee, 2017; Sun & Pang, 2017). However, conventional models typically posit direct relationships between service quality and behavioral outcomes, overlooking potential mediating mechanisms through which quality perceptions translate into customer actions.

Recent scholarship increasingly questions whether customer satisfaction alone adequately explains loyalty and retention. Oliver (2014) argues that satisfaction represents a necessary but insufficient condition for sustained patronage, particularly in markets characterized by quality parity among competitors. This recognition has directed attention toward customer delight, defined as a profoundly positive emotional response that exceeds expectations and generates feelings of joy, surprise, and arousal (Oliver et al., 1997; Plutchik, 1980). Grounded in expectation-disconfirmation theory, customer delight occurs when service performance substantially surpasses anticipated standards, triggering affective reactions beyond cognitive satisfaction (Torres & Kline, 2013).

Evidence suggests that delighted customers exhibit stronger repurchase intentions, greater word-of-mouth advocacy, and higher resilience to competitive offerings compared to merely satisfied customers (Barnes et al., 2017; Bartl et al., 2013). Yet despite theoretical advances recognizing delight's potency, empirical examination of delight as a mediating mechanism linking service quality to behavioral intentions remains sparse. This gap proves particularly acute in non-Western contexts, where cultural factors may moderate the relationships among quality perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral outcomes differently than patterns documented in developed Western markets.

This study addresses these limitations by investigating customer delight's mediating role in the relationship between service quality and revisit intention within Peshawar's restaurant industry. The research makes several contributions. First, it extends service quality literature beyond conventional direct-effect models by examining the emotional pathway through which quality influences behavior. Second, it provides empirical evidence from an emerging market context where hospitality research remains underdeveloped, testing whether relationships documented in Western settings generalize to South Asian cultural and economic environments. Third, it offers practical guidance for restaurant operators in competitive developing markets, clarifying whether investments should prioritize incremental quality improvements or experience design initiatives aimed at generating emotional engagement.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 Service Quality

Service quality constitutes a fundamental determinant of competitive advantage and long-term profitability in service-oriented organizations (Clow & Vorhies, 1993; Sun & Pang,

2017). Parasuraman et al. (1988) conceptualized service quality as the discrepancy between customer expectations and perceptions of service delivery, operationalizing this construct through the SERVQUAL instrument comprising five dimensions: tangibles (physical facilities and equipment), reliability (ability to perform promised service dependably), responsiveness (willingness to help customers promptly), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees), and empathy (individualized attention to customers). This framework has demonstrated robust validity across diverse service contexts and continues guiding both research and practice three decades after its introduction (Namin, 2017; Slack et al., 2020).

In restaurant settings specifically, service quality extends beyond functional attributes to encompass experiential dimensions. Research identifies multiple factors shaping customer quality perceptions, including food quality, physical environment, waiting time, and interpersonal interactions (Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Ryu & Jang, 2008). More recent investigations emphasize atmospheric elements such as ambience, lighting, layout, and design as critical quality components (Sunghyup & Han, 2012; Makanyeza et al., 2023). Collectively, evidence establishes service quality as strongly associated with customer satisfaction, loyalty intentions, and actual repurchase behavior, though the mechanisms mediating these relationships warrant further examination (Miranda et al., 2018; Yuen et al., 2020).

## 2.2 Customer Delight

Customer delight emerged as a distinct construct when scholars recognized that satisfaction alone inadequately explained loyalty variance (Oliver et al., 1997). Grounded in expectation-disconfirmation theory, delight occurs when service performance substantially exceeds expectations, generating positive affect characterized by joy, surprise, and arousal (Plutchik, 1980; Torres & Kline, 2013). Unlike satisfaction—which reflects cognitive evaluation of whether service met standards—delight encompasses emotional elevation beyond mere expectation fulfillment (Finn, 2012; Kao et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence demonstrates delight's superior predictive power relative to satisfaction for behavioral outcomes. Kim and Knutson (2015) found that delighted hotel guests exhibited significantly stronger return intentions than satisfied guests, while Barnes et al. (2017) documented delight's incremental contribution to word-of-mouth advocacy beyond satisfaction's effects. In restaurant contexts, Magnini and Crotts (2011) established that unexpected positive experiences generate emotional responses translating into heightened loyalty and recommendation behaviors. More recent work by Parasuraman et al. (2021) identifies six factors associated with customer delight: problem-solving capability, interpersonal connection, sensory experiences, emotional resonance, timing, and perceived control. Torres and Ronzoni (2018) developed a comprehensive measurement instrument for assessing customer delight across service industries, facilitating more rigorous empirical investigation.

Despite theoretical advances, research examining delight as a mediating mechanism remains limited. Coetzee and Coetzee (2019) demonstrated that delight fully mediates service quality's effect on attitudinal loyalty in South African banking, while Anabila et al. (2022) found similar patterns in Ghana's hotel industry. These studies suggest that service quality may influence behavioral outcomes primarily through emotional pathways rather than direct cognitive evaluation, though generalization to other contexts requires empirical verification.

## 2.3 Revisit Intention

Revisit intention refers to customers' expressed likelihood of returning to a service establishment and recommending it to others (Chen & Hu, 2010; Chow et al., 2013). In

hospitality contexts, revisit intention serves as a crucial indicator of relationship quality and future revenue potential, as retaining existing customers proves substantially less costly than acquiring new ones (Hanai et al., 2008). Research consistently identifies revisit intention as influenced by service quality perceptions, satisfaction levels, perceived value, and affective responses to service encounters (Ryu et al., 2012; Lee & Park, 2019; Ramkissoon & Shoukat, 2022).

In restaurant settings, Bujisic et al. (2014) demonstrated that overall satisfaction critically determines whether customers return and refer others. More recent investigations emphasize experiential factors beyond functional service dimensions. Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence (2015) documented that memorable dining experiences generate stronger return intentions than merely satisfactory meals, while Li et al. (2020) found that delightful service encounters predicted both revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth. This evidence suggests that emotional engagement may drive loyalty behaviors more powerfully than cognitive satisfaction assessments, particularly in competitive markets where quality parity prevails.

## 2.4 Hypotheses Development

Drawing on expectation-disconfirmation theory and extant empirical evidence, this study proposes four hypotheses regarding relationships among service quality, customer delight, and revisit intention. First, service quality should predict customer delight, as high-quality service delivery exceeds expectations and generates positive emotional arousal. Research across hospitality contexts supports this linkage (Anabila et al., 2022; Coetzee & Coetzee, 2019; Kim & Knutson, 2015). Therefore:

*H1: Service quality positively influences customer delight.*

Second, service quality should directly affect revisit intention, as customers who perceive high service quality exhibit greater willingness to return (Miranda et al., 2018; Yuen et al., 2020). Decades of hospitality research document this fundamental relationship (Crompton & Baker, 2000; Ryu & Lee, 2017). Thus:

*H2: Service quality positively influences revisit intention.*

Third, customer delight should predict revisit intention more strongly than satisfaction alone. Delighted customers experience emotional peaks generating heightened loyalty (Barnes et al., 2017; Bartl et al., 2013; Kim & Knutson, 2015). Accordingly:

*H3: Customer delight positively influences revisit intention.*

Finally, customer delight should mediate service quality's effect on revisit intention. If service quality generates revisit intention primarily by creating delightful experiences that exceed expectations, then accounting for delight should substantially reduce or eliminate service quality's direct effect. Evidence from banking and hospitality sectors supports this mediation pattern (Anabila et al., 2022; Coetzee & Coetzee, 2019). Therefore:

*H4: Customer delight mediates the relationship between service quality and revisit intention.*

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Sample and Design

A cross-sectional survey collected data from 395 restaurant customers in Peshawar, Pakistan using convenience sampling. The sample size exceeds minimum requirements for regression analysis and provides adequate power for detecting mediation effects (Hair et al., 2006). Respondents had recently dined at full-service restaurants where service quality dimensions manifest more clearly than in fast-food contexts.

### 3.2 Measures

Three validated instruments measured the constructs. Anabila et al.'s (2022) seven-item scale assessed service quality dimensions adapted from SERVQUAL for hospitality contexts.

Coetzee and Coetzee's (2019) six-item instrument captured customer delight. Ryu et al.'s (2022) six-item scale measured revisit intention. All items used five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). These instruments demonstrated strong psychometric properties in prior service industry research.

## 3.3 Analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS. Cronbach's alpha assessed scale reliability ($\alpha$ > 0.70 threshold). Pearson correlations examined bivariate relationships. Hypothesis testing employed Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation framework through hierarchical regression. This method requires: (1) independent variable predicts dependent variable, (2) independent variable predicts mediator, (3) mediator predicts dependent variable controlling for independent variable, and (4) independent variable's direct effect diminishes when mediator enters the model. Full mediation occurs when this direct effect becomes non-significant.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha coefficients assessed internal consistency for all measurement scales. Service quality demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha$ = .854), as did customer delight ($\alpha$ = .855) and revisit intention ($\alpha$ = .886). All values exceeded the recommended 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), confirming adequate scale reliability for subsequent analyses.

### 4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents correlation coefficients among study variables. Service quality correlated positively with customer delight (
r = .458, p < .001) and revisit intention (r = .407, p < .001). Customer delight showed a strong correlation with revisit intention (r = .738, p < .001). All relationships achieved statistical significance, supporting further hypothesis testing.

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Service Quality | — | | |
| 2. Customer Delight | .458** | — | |
| 3. Revisit Intention | .407** | .738** | — |

*Note. N = 395. **p < .001.*

*Table 1*

*Correlations Among Study Variables*

### 4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Hierarchical regression analysis tested the hypothesized relationships following Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation framework. Table 2 presents regression results for all hypotheses.

**H1** predicted that service quality positively influences customer delight. Results confirmed this hypothesis ($\beta$ = .457, t = 7.291, p < .001), with service quality explaining 20.9% of variance in customer delight ($R^2$ = .209).

**H2** proposed that service quality positively influences revisit intention. This hypothesis received support ($\beta$ = .409, t = 6.347, p < .001), with service quality accounting for 16.7% of variance in revisit intention ($R^2$ = .167).

**H3** hypothesized that customer delight positively influences revisit intention. Strong support emerged for this relationship ($\beta$ = .739, t = 15.573, p < .001), with customer delight explaining 54.7% of variance in revisit intention ($R^2$ = .547).

**H4** predicted that customer delight mediates the service quality-revisit intention relationship. When customer delight entered the regression model alongside service quality, service

quality's direct effect on revisit intention became non-significant (β = .089, t = 1.675, p = .095), while customer delight retained strong significance (β = .699, t = 13.145, p < .001). This pattern confirms full mediation, supporting H4.

| Hypothesis | β | t | R² | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1: SQ → CD | .457*** | 7.291 | .209 | Supported |
| H2: SQ → RI | .409*** | 6.347 | .167 | Supported |
| H3: CD → RI | .739*** | 15.573 | .547 | Supported |
| H4: SQ → CD → RI (Mediation) | .089 | 1.675 | — | Supported |

*Note. SQ = Service Quality; CD = Customer Delight; RI = Revisit Intention. ***p < .001.*

*Table 2*

*Regression Results for Hypothesis Testing*

These results demonstrate that customer delight fully mediates the relationship between service quality and revisit intention. While service quality directly influences both customer delight and revisit intention, its effect on behavioral outcomes operates primarily through the emotional pathway of delight rather than through direct cognitive evaluation.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion of Findings

This study examined customer delight as a mediating mechanism linking service quality to revisit intention in Peshawar's restaurant industry. Results confirm all hypothesized relationships, demonstrating that service quality influences behavioral outcomes primarily through emotional pathways rather than direct cognitive evaluation. These findings advance understanding of how quality perceptions translate into customer loyalty in emerging market contexts.

The strong relationship between service quality and customer delight (β = .457) aligns with expectation-disconfirmation theory, which posits that exceeding service expectations generates positive emotional arousal (Oliver et al., 1997). This finding supports prior research in hospitality settings documenting quality's role in creating delightful experiences (Anabila et al., 2022; Kim & Knutson, 2015). In Peshawar's competitive restaurant environment, delivering high-quality service across tangible and intangible dimensions appears essential for generating emotional responses that transcend mere satisfaction.

Customer delight's substantial influence on revisit intention (β = .739) demonstrates that emotional engagement drives loyalty more powerfully than cognitive satisfaction assessments. This effect size exceeds those reported in Western contexts (Barnes et al., 2017; Bartl et al., 2013), suggesting that affective responses may prove particularly salient in cultures emphasizing interpersonal relationships and emotional connections. Pakistani consumers' dining decisions appear heavily weighted toward experiences generating positive emotional peaks rather than those simply meeting functional standards.

The full mediation pattern constitutes this study's central contribution. When customer delight enters the model, service quality's direct effect on revisit intention becomes non-significant, indicating that quality improvements influence return patronage almost exclusively through emotional mechanisms. This challenges conventional service quality models positing direct quality-loyalty linkages (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and suggests that in competitive markets where quality parity prevails, differentiation occurs through emotional engagement rather than incremental quality enhancements. Service providers investing resources in meeting basic quality standards without creating memorable experiences may achieve satisfaction without securing loyalty.

## 5.2 Theoretical Implications

These findings extend service quality theory by illuminating the psychological process through which quality perceptions influence behavior. While decades of research established quality's importance for outcomes (Crompton & Baker, 2000; Ryu & Lee, 2017), the intervening emotional mechanism remained underexplored. This study demonstrates that quality matters primarily because it creates opportunities for delight, not because customers rationally evaluate whether standards were met. This shifts theoretical focus from quality assessment processes to emotional response generation.

For emerging market research, the findings suggest that Western models may underestimate emotional factors' influence on consumer behavior. The particularly strong delight-intention relationship observed here indicates that cultural contexts emphasizing relational and affective dimensions may exhibit different quality-loyalty dynamics than individualistic Western markets. Future hospitality research should account for cultural moderators when examining service quality's behavioral consequences.

## 5.3 Practical Implications

Restaurant managers in Peshawar and similar emerging markets should recognize that acceptable service quality represents a necessary but insufficient condition for customer retention. Competitive advantage requires strategies creating emotional peaks that surprise and engage customers beyond expectation fulfillment. This implies reorienting training programs from protocol compliance toward empowering employees to craft memorable moments. Rather than standardizing service delivery, operators should encourage personalized interactions that generate authentic emotional connections.

Resource allocation decisions should prioritize experience design initiatives over incremental quality improvements in establishments already meeting acceptable standards. Investments in atmospheric elements, surprise amenities, and personalized touches likely yield stronger returns than marginal enhancements to already adequate facilities or service speed. Additionally, performance metrics should capture emotional engagement alongside traditional satisfaction measures, as delight proves more predictive of loyalty than satisfaction scores.

## 5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant consideration. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, though theoretical grounding and mediation patterns provide reasonable causal interpretation. Longitudinal designs tracking customers across multiple visits would strengthen conclusions about how delight influences actual return behavior versus stated intentions. Additionally, data collection focused exclusively on Peshawar, limiting generalizability to other Pakistani cities or international contexts. Cultural factors specific to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa may shape these relationships differently than patterns in other regions.

Future research should examine boundary conditions moderating the mediation effect. Restaurant type (casual versus fine dining), customer characteristics (age, income, dining frequency), and cultural dimensions (individualism-collectivism, power distance) may influence whether quality translates into loyalty through emotional versus cognitive pathways. Experimental designs manipulating specific service quality dimensions while measuring resulting delight would clarify which quality attributes most effectively generate emotional responses. Finally, comparing these relationships across multiple emerging markets would establish whether the strong emotional pathway observed here represents a Pakistan-specific pattern or generalizes to other developing economies.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This study advances understanding of service quality's behavioral consequences by demonstrating that customer delight fully mediates quality's influence on revisit intention in Pakistan's restaurant industry. While service quality remains essential, its impact on loyalty operates primarily through generating emotional peaks rather than through direct cognitive evaluation. For restaurant operators in emerging markets, these findings underscore the importance of experience design strategies that create memorable, emotionally engaging encounters beyond merely acceptable service delivery. In competitive environments where quality parity increasingly prevails, differentiation occurs through emotional connection, not incremental quality enhancements. Managers prioritizing delight creation over satisfaction achievement position their establishments for sustained competitive advantage and customer loyalty.

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