

Impact of Customer Experience on Loyalty and WOM: A Mediation Mechanism of Positive Emotions

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Abstract

Though word-of-mouth (WOM) intention has been checked as a dependent variable of some constructs such as loyalty, satisfaction, and trust in retail businesses no study investigated the effect of product and staff experience on behavioral outcomes i.e. loyalty and WOM intentions. In this article, researchers checked how customers' product and staff experience affect customers' loyalty and WOM intention through the mediating role of customer positive emotions. The study was cross-sectional in nature, the data was collected from customers, and a total of 275 responses were used for analysis. Data was analyzed by using the structural equation modeling technique. The findings indicate that product and staff experience have an indirect effect on loyalty and WOM intention through the mediation of positive emotions. The current study only observed product and staff experience whereas there are many other experiences that a customer faces during shopping. Secondly, data was collected from Sialkot city only due to time constraints. Researchers just checked the mediating role of positive emotions. The role of moderating variables can also be checked in the future.

Keywords: *Customer Experience, Positive Emotions, Loyalty, WOM Intentions*

Introduction

Initially, the low price of items was the significant attraction factor for retail stores because of the advantage of economy of scale (Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021). However, these days, because of the expansion in the number of these stores and therefore the increase in competition among them, now it is impossible to compete just with low price strategy (Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021). To create loyal customers, other factors such as delivering the best quality and service, gaining trust and satisfaction, and making a pleasant customer experience also contribute (Terblanche & S., 2018; Thuan, Ngoc, & Trang, 2017; Madeline & Sihombing, 2019; Kim, Lee, & Suh, 2015).

The last century is viewed as the time of the experience economy, where the main focus of marketing was to make the customer experience valuable (Chen & Lin, 2018). In that period, the customer was considered a cogent and passionate individual. The marketers tried to create an emotional bond between the customer and the brand by focusing on the creation of an emotional connection (Chen & Lin, 2018). Brand experience originates from a bunch of customer connections with the brand, and includes sensations, sentiments, and social reactions (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). The brands create long-lasting connections with the customers by providing and creating unique services and experiences. Sensory, emotional, and social experiences are the indicators of customer experience (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). According to the study by Kim, Lee, and Suh (2015), shoppers are looking for a positive and enjoyable experience in stores. A study by Pine and Gilmore (1999) shows that a great "shopping" experience increases clients' willingness to pay for a product. Creating enhanced shopping experiences for consumers appears to have assumed a vital role in the retail environment. (Verhoef et al., 2009). These researchers define customer experience as a more holistic term. According to their findings, a consumer's response to stimuli in the retail environment involves cognitive, emotive, social, and physical qualities.

Torabi, Hamidi, and Safaie (2021) checked the impact of sensory experience on loyalty and WOM. The results indicated that sensory experience has a positive and direct effect on loyalty and WOM. Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) examined the impact of customer experience quality on satisfaction, loyalty, and brand loyalty. The findings showed a positive direct relationship between customer experience quality on satisfaction, loyalty, and brand loyalty.

Many researchers have checked the impact of customer experience on satisfaction and loyalty. But the relationship between customer experience during shopping with products and staff as an independent variable is not examined. Torabi, Hamidi, and Safaie (2021) checked the impact of customer sensory experience on loyalty and WOM through the mediation of customer satisfaction. The product and staff experience may generate positive emotions and due to these positive emotions, customer behavioral outcomes may change. The impact of positive emotions as an independent variable on customer behavioral outcomes is not checked. This gap is addressed by taking positive emotions as mediating variable.

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) developed the stimulus-organism-response model, which explains that emotional response is caused by environmental stimulus and the behavioral response of the individual is the result of that emotional response. Stimulus-organism-response model has three components: stimulus, mediator variable, and response variable. Researchers use this model to analyze customer behavioral outcomes. Choi and Kandampully (2019) conducted a study on the impact of atmosphere on customer behavior by using this model and the findings indicate that customer satisfaction and WOM intention are influenced by hotel atmosphere. This study is based on the S-O-R model. Researchers took the product and staff experience as an external stimulus, positive emotions as an organism, and loyalty and WOM intention as the response variables.

Significance of the study:

This is the first study that investigates the mediating effects of positive emotions on product and staff experience, loyalty, and WOM intentions. The main objective of this study is to analyze the impact of product and staff experience on customer behavioral outcomes. The sub-objective is

- To explore the mediation effect of positive emotions between product experience and loyalty and WOM intention.
- To explore the mediation effect of positive emotions between staff experience and loyalty and WOM intention.

The purpose of this study is to address three primary research questions:

RQ1: Is loyalty influenced by product and staff experience either directly or indirectly (through the mediation of positive emotions)?

RQ2: Is WOM intention influenced by product and staff experience either directly or indirectly (through the mediation of positive emotions)?

RQ3: Does loyalty mediate the relationship between positive emotions and WOM intention?

Literature Review

Customer Experience and Emotions

The concept of customer experience was introduced in the mid of 1980s. Customer experience has been defined by different researchers in different contexts. Hult, Nidhi, V., and Yufei (2019) defined customer experience as an internal and personal response of a customer during direct and indirect interaction with the service provider. Sebald, Kathrin, and Frank (2020) defined customer experience as customers' feelings on different levels, including rationale, sensation, consciousness, and mindset.

Emotions are defined as a state of willingness as a result of the mental assessment of feelings and judgments (Ding & Tseng, 2015). The buying decision is influenced by customer emotions.

Positive emotions result in a positive response toward a product or service and negative emotions lead to a negative response (Barsky & Nash, 2002). Customer emotions are the customers' responses toward environmental stimuli that are available in the store during shopping.

Amin and Ali (2014) investigated the impact of experience with the store environment on emotions, satisfaction, and behavioral outcomes. Data was collected from the visitors who stayed at Resort Hotels in three cities in China for at least one night. The findings showed that customers' positive experience with the store environment has a positive impact on emotions and emotions are positively related to behavioral intentions. A study was conducted by Bravo, Martinez, and Pina (2018) in the hotel sector to check the impact of service experience on customer response. Data was collected from 300 individuals via a telephone conversation and the findings indicated that service experience has a positive and direct impact on customer emotions.

Chen and Lin (2018) conducted a study to examine the effect of sensory experience on emotions. The findings indicated that sensory experience has a significant and direct relation with the customers' positive and negative emotions. Furthermore, according to the ranking of the results it became clear that taste experience has the most impact on customers' positive emotions as compared to other experiences. A study concluded that customer perceptions about price, outcome, and interactional fairness, have a positive impact on positive emotions (Candus &

Debra, 2018). The study was conducted to examine the impact of customer experience on emotions in the banking sector. Data was collected from generation Y customers using banking services. 211 responses were received and the results indicated that customer experience with banking services has a direct and significant impact on customer emotions (CorreiaLoureiro & Sarmiento, 2017). The social environment has an impact on emotions. Individuals who interact with each other can affect the emotions of one another (Dixon-Gordon, Bernecker, & Christense, 2015). Customer perception of interaction with staff, store design, and ambiance have a positive impact on customer emotions (Bigdelia, Bigdelib, & Bigdelia, 2014). A study was conducted to examine the customers’ expectations about services and how staff can satisfy those expectations. The results indicated that services provided by staff play a major role to satisfy customers (Pratten, 2004). The findings of the study of Torabi, Hamidi, and Safaie (2021) showed that customer sensory experience is positively related to emotions during in-store shopping. Hana, et al. (2018) checked the impact of Cognitive drivers on pleasure and arousal. The findings indicate that cognitive drivers result in pleasure and arousal. Different research has shown the impact of product quality, service quality, atmospheric experience, and website design on customer emotions (Jang & Namkung, 2009; Kim & Moon, 2009; Liu & Jang, 2009). In this research, we classified customer experience into two dimensions based on available literature: product experience and staff experience.

Table 1
 Empirical research on available literature

Related Studies	S-O-R Variables	Research Area
(Chen & Lin, 2018)	S: Sensory Experience O: positive and negative emotion R: Buying behavior	Coffee house
(Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021)	S: Sensory Experience O: positive and negative emotions, Satisfaction R: WOM intention and loyalty	Retail chain store
(Huang, Ali, & Liao, 2017)	S: Functional, hedonic, and social experience O: Emotions	Online game user

	R: WOM	
(Norman, Annie, & Kuang-Peng, 2016)	S: chefs, service staff, other customers, food quality, and atmosphere O: Emotions R: Loyalty	Restaurants
(Ha & Lm, 2012)	S: Website design O: Pleasure, Arousal, Perceived quality of information R: Satisfaction and WOM intention	Online Shopping Websites

Based on available literature and to address the gap in previous studies, researchers formulated the following hypotheses,

H1: Product experience has a positive and direct effect on positive emotions.

H2: Staff experience has a positive and direct effect on positive emotions.

Relationships between Emotions, Loyalty, and Word of Mouth

Loyalty is an intention to repetitive behaviors that shows the intention to maintain a bond with the company (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). Loyalty is the attribute of satisfied customers who use the same product or service again and again (Kim, Lee, & Suh, 2015). Loyal customers have a habit of repurchasing a specific product or service over a longer period. Despite of increase in cost associated with a product or service, loyal customers continue shopping for the same brand (Oliver, 1999). A Loyal customer shares positive experiences with others. WOM refers to person-to-person communication about the evaluation of a product or service (Gupta & Harris, 2010). WOM is the exchange of experience and information with one another that assists in making a buying decision (Kim, Chan, Siew, & Park, 2015). A study was conducted by Lin and Liang (2011) to examine the impact of the environment on satisfaction, emotions, and customers' behavior. The findings indicated that emotions have a direct and positive effect on satisfaction which ultimately results in behavioral outcomes such as loyalty and WOM. According to the study by Hana, et al. (2018) pleasure and arousal, both have significant and positive effects on satisfaction, loyalty, and relationship commitment and pleasure has a stronger effect as compared to arousal. Visitors' assessment of the winery environment results in emotions and emotions then result in satisfaction which in turn results revisit intention and positive WOM (Leri & Theodoridis, 2019). The findings of previous

research showed that positive emotions result in behavioral intention such as WOM and loyalty (Jang & Namkung, 2009; Liu & Jang, 2009; Amin & Ali, 2014; Candus & Debra, 2018; Bigdelia, Bigdelib, & Bigdelia, 2014; SooCheong (Shawn) Jang, 2009).

Based on this literature, the following hypotheses were formulated,

H3: Positive emotions have a direct and positive effect on loyalty.

H4: Positive emotions have a direct and positive effect on WOM intention.

Relationships between Loyalty, and WOM

Torabi, Hamidi, and Safaie (2021) conducted a study on the impact of sensory experience on loyalty and WOM intention. Data was collected from 306 customers and the findings indicated that loyalty has a direct and positive impact on WOM intention. The study of Matos and Rossi (2008) showed that loyal customers give positive suggestions to other customers. On the other hand, disloyal customers provide unfavorable WOM. Past studies supported loyalty's impact on WOM intention, then it can be said that after service recovery from failures, WOM intention will be positively affected by customer loyalty (Choi & Choi, 2014). Rehman et. al. (2020) examined the impact of satisfaction and loyalty on WOM intention. Data was collected from 299 students of the final year. The findings indicated that loyal and satisfied students spread positive WOM. The findings of Ali, Puah, Ayob, and Raza (2020) showed that food, environment, and service quality significantly impact tourist satisfaction. Furthermore, satisfaction affects loyalty, and loyalty further has a direct impact on WOM. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis was formulated

H5: Customer loyalty has a significant and positive impact on WOM intention.

H6: Customer loyalty acts as a mediator between positive emotions and WOM intentions.

Mediating Role of Positive Emotions

The mediating impact of positive emotions between product and staff experience and loyalty and WOM intention is the missing part of the literature. Previous studies have checked the mediating impact of positive and negative emotions on different types of independent variables and behavioral intention as a dependent variable (Amin & Ali, 2014; Candus & Debra, 2018; Bigdelia, Bigdelib, & Bigdelia, 2014). Mediating role of pleasure, arousal and dominance was checked between online game user experience and WOM by (Huang, Ali, & Liao, 2017). The study of Amin and Ali (2014) proved that emotions act as a mediator between physical

environment and behavioral intention. A study was conducted to check the effect of restaurant stimuli on loyalty (directly and through the mediation of emotions). The results indicated that positive emotions mediated the relationship between restaurant stimuli and loyalty of customers (Norman, Annie, & Kuang-Peng, 2016). Customer emotions i.e. pleasure, passion and dominance proved as a mediator between store atmosphere and purchase decision (Madjid, 2014).

Based on the available literature, researchers formulated the following hypotheses

H7: Customer positive emotions mediates the relationship between product experience and loyalty.

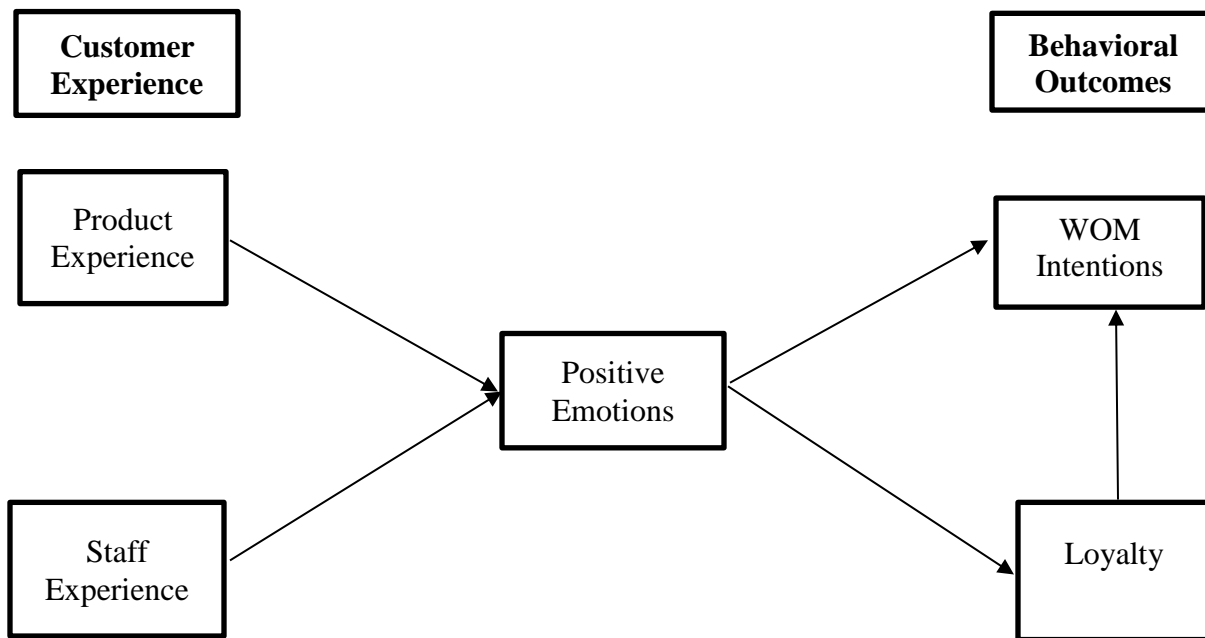
H8: Customer positive emotions mediates the relationship between product experience and WOM intention.

H9: Customer positive emotions mediates the relationship between staff experience and loyalty.

H10: Customer positive emotions mediates the relationship between staff experience and WOM intention.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Research Methodology

Sample and data collection

The study was quantitative in nature and data was collected using questionnaire from the individuals of Sialkot city having shopping experience with any brand store. Data was collected using non probability sampling technique. Questionnaire were distributed among individuals using convenience sampling and google form was also created. Total of 100 questionnaire were distributed among customers and 83 questionnaire were received. Out of which 7 questionnaires were incomplete and hence 74 questionnaires were used for data analysis. Total responses from google link were 201. So total 275 questionnaire were used for data analysis (distributed physically and online responses).

Procedural Remedies

The survey questionnaire was thoughtfully prepared, and procedural fixes were implemented during the data collecting process in order to mitigate common method variation issues that arose during the comprehension stage of the data gathering process (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, Podsakoff, & P., 2003). The questionnaire came with a set of instructions on how to respond to the various questions. We respectfully asked respondents to answer the questions as honestly as they could without stating their identities while assuring them of the survey's anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. We also let them know that there was no right or incorrect response. We carefully scrutinized each item's design to eliminate any unclear, vague, or unfamiliar words while maintaining the language's simplicity and clarity.

Measurement and Analysis

Positive emotions were measured using the information given by (Chen & Lin, 2018). We used the information of (Choi & Choi, 2014; Choi, Ok, & Hyun, 2017) to measure loyalty. WOM intention was measured by 4 items used by (Choi & Choi, 2014). Staff experience was measured by (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) and (Waltera, Auerb, & Ritter, 2006). Product experience was measured by (Yoganathan, Osburg, & Akhtar, 2019) and (Chen & Lin, 2018) two questions developed by researchers. Overall value of reliability was 0.820.

The responses were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale. Confirmatory factor analysis was measured, and measurement validity and reliability were assessed using Smart PLS. To examine

the causal linkages between the investigated hypotheses, consistent PLS bootstrapping was employed.

Discussion and Analysis

Respondents' demographic information

Of the respondents, 52% were men and 48% were women. Concerning age, 67.5% were between 21 and 25 years of age, 19.3% were between 25 and 30 years, 8.7% between 31 and 35 years and 4.4% were older than 35 years. Regarding Education, 52% had an education of graduation, 25.5% had masters, and 20.7% had MPhil, whereas 1.8% had PhD.

Table 2

Respondents' demographic information

Items	Categories	Response	Percentage
Age	21-25	186	68
	26-30	53	19
	31-35	24	9
	Above 35	12	4
Gender	Male	143	52
	Female	132	48
Education	Graduation	143	52
	Masters	70	26
	M.Phil/MS	57	21
	PhD	5	1

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Positive Emotions	275	1.00	3.60	2.104	0.579	0.027	0.147	-0.261	0.293
Product Experience	275	1.00	3.80	2.052	0.613	0.366	0.147	-0.016	0.293
Staff Experience	275	1.00	4.17	2.006	0.607	0.403	0.147	0.546	0.293
Loyalty	275	1.00	4.00	2.265	0.635	-0.180	0.147	-0.240	0.293
WOM Intention	275	1.00	3.50	2.006	0.604	0.160	0.147	-0.329	0.293
Valid N (listwise)	275								

Normality of data is confirmed from the table. As the values of skewness and kurtosis are within the range of (-1, 1) so the data normal (Chavoshi & Hamidi, 2019). The mean values of all the variables are 2 except negative emotions, which shows that that responses of the respondents are towards agree.

Table 4

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct	Outer loading	VIF	Cronbach'a Alpha	CR	AVE
Loyalty			0.819	0.829	0.734
LOY1	0.851	1.874			
LOY3	0.830	1.672			
LOY4	0.890	2.078			
Positive Emotions			0.727	0.830	0.651
PE1	0.670	1.273			
PE2	0.786	1.577			
PE3	0.740	1.325			
PE4	0.768	1.412			
Product Experience			0.734	0.833	0.656
PRO1	0.757	1.371			
PRO2	0.700	1.432			
PRO3	0.801	1.601			
PRO4	0.721	1.336			
Staff Experience			0.858	0.894	0.684
STAFF1	0.737	1.642			
STAFF2	0.735	1.751			
STAFF3	0.790	2.023			
STAFF4	0.771	1.898			
STAFF5	0.750	1.829			
STAFF6	0.801	2.032			
WOM Intention			0.816	0.879	0.645
WOM1	0.773	1.596			
WOM2	0.819	1.817			
WOM3	0.836	1.908			
WOM4	0.782	1.563			

Smart PLS was used for these results. The minimum value of factor loading, CR and AVE is 0.60, 0.70 and 0.50 respectively (Khurshid, Ahmed, & Irrum, 2021). The findings show that

instrument meets the minimum acceptable standards. Some items with factor loading less than 0.5 were removed. Researchers also checked the discriminant validity of the instrument was also checked by HTMT method. The discriminant validity of an instrument demonstrates that variables are independent of one another.

Table 5

Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Loyalty	0.857				
2. Positive Emotions	0.538**	0.742			
3. Word of Mouth Intentions	0.668**	0.565**	0.803		
4. Product Experience	0.394**	0.455**	0.384**	0.746	
5. Staff Experience	0.574**	0.545**	0.609**	0.538**	0.764

As all the values are less than 0.9, so the discriminant validity of the instrument is also proved.

Assessment of Structural Model

In the previous section Researchers checked the reliability and validity of the instrument. In structural model, relationship between independent and dependent variables is checked. Significance of relationship between variables is checked by PLS-SEM. Indirect effect of positive emotions was also checked to confirm the mediating effect.

Table 6

Results of R²

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Loyalty	0.290	0.287
Positive Emotions	0.334	0.329
Word of Mouth Intentions	0.320	0.317

R² confirms the predictive accuracy of the model. The results of R² show the impact of independent variables on dependent variable. The findings showed that 29%, 33.4% and 32% change in loyalty, positive emotions and WOM intention is due to the independent variables of the current research.

Table 7

Path Coefficients

Hypothesized Path	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Decision
Loyalty -> WOM Intention	0.515	9.73	0.000	Accepted
Positive Emotions -> Loyalty	0.538	12.164	0.000	Accepted
Positive Emotions -> WOM	0.287	5.255	0.000	Accepted
Product Experience -> Positive Emotions	0.229	3.627	0.000	Accepted
Staff Experience-> Positive Emotions	0.422	7.302	0.000	Accepted

As all the values are significant at 0.000 level of significance so the results of path coefficients support H₁, H₂, H₃, H₄ and H₅.

Table 8

Mediation Verification

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Decision
Staff Experience -> Positive Emotions -> Loyalty	0.227	5.385	0.000	Accepted
Positive Emotions -> Loyalty -> WOM Intention	0.277	7.663	0.000	Accepted
Product Experience -> Positive Emotions -> Loyalty	0.123	3.515	0.000	Accepted
Product Experience -> Positive Emotions -> WOM Intention	0.066	2.927	0.003	Accepted
Staff Experience -> Positive Emotions -> WOM Intention	0.121	3.830	0.000	Accepted

The table shows that positive emotions mediates the relationship between Product and staff experience and loyalty and WOM intention. Also loyalty mediates the relationship between positive emotions and WOM intentions. So H₆, H₇, H₈, H₉, and H₁₀ are also accepted.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to check the impact of product and staff experience on customer behavioral outcomes with the mediation of positive emotions. The results proved that product and staff experience have an impact on loyalty and WOM intention. Same results were found in previous researches where different customer experience have an impact on customer behavioral outcomes through mediating variable (Ali, Puah, Ayob, & Raza, 2020; Alnawas & Hemsley-

Brown, 2019; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010; Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021). The other objective was to check the mediating effect of positive emotions between product and staff experience and loyalty and WOM intention. These hypotheses were also supported. Same results were found in previous researches where customer experience have an impact on loyalty and WOM through other mediating variables (Amin & Ali, 2014; Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Candus & Debra, 2018; Lin & Liang, 2011; Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021; Huang, Ali, & Liao, 2017). Furthermore, loyalty acts as a mediator between positive emotions and WOM intention. Same results were found in previous studies where loyalty leads to WOM (Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021; Diallo, Riviere, & Zielke, 2015; Al-Refaie, Ko, & Li, 2012).

It can be concluded that better product and staff experience as an external stimuli generate positive emotions and that emotions result in customer behavioral outcomes. On the basis of proposed model, better customer experience can be used to develop customer loyalty and afterward loyalty and create positive WOM.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has important contribution in the literature but at the same time have some limitations. Firstly, the current study only observed product and staff experience whereas there are many other experience that a customer faces during shopping. Secondly, data was collected from the Sialkot city only due to time constraints. Researchers just checked the mediating role of positive emotions.

Future studies can be conducted to check the impact of other factors such as service quality, price, and technological facilities on behavioral outcomes. Role of moderating variables can also be checked in future. Future researches can also check the mediating role of negative emotions.

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