

From interaction to experience: Sequential mechanism of rapport and swift Guanxi in driving affective brand experience

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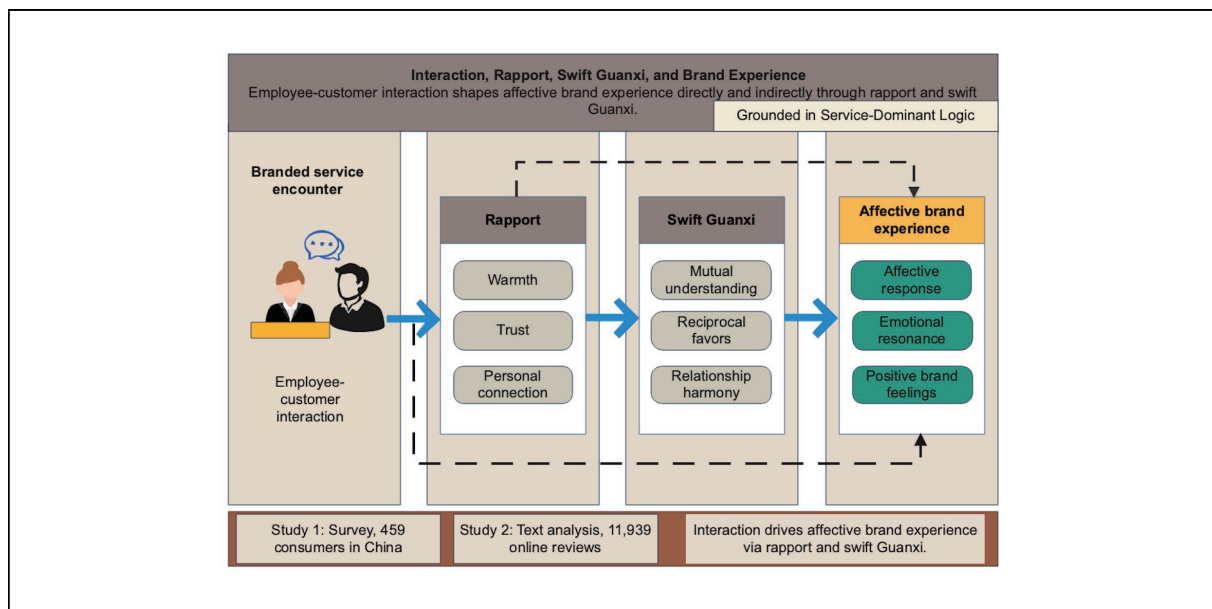
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Graphical abstract



Employee-customer interaction drives affective brand experience through rapport and swift Guanxi in branded service encounters.

Public summary

- This study develops and empirically tests a sequential model explaining how employee-customer interaction is transformed into affective brand experience in branded service encounters, thereby shifting attention from outcomes to relational antecedents.
- Grounded in service-dominant logic (SDL) theory, the findings show that rapport plays a dual role: It directly enhances affective brand experience and also facilitates the development of swift Guanxi between customers and frontline employees.
- Swift Guanxi functions as a culturally embedded relational mechanism in the Chinese context, converting positive interpersonal interaction into stronger emotional resonance, trust, harmony, and positive brand feelings.
- Using a multi-source design, the study combines a survey of 459 consumers in China with a text analysis of 11939 online reviews, providing convergent support for the proposed model and advancing understanding of value co-creation in culturally embedded service settings.

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Supporting Information

Abstract: This study examines the process through which employee–customer interaction influences the formation of affective brand experience by investigating the mediating roles of rapport and swift Guanxi. Grounded in service-dominant logic, a conceptual model is developed and tested, positing that positive interaction facilitates the formation of rapport, which subsequently enhances affective brand experience both directly and indirectly via swift Guanxi. By employing a multisource data strategy for enhanced external validity, Study 1 uses a survey of 459 young consumers in China, and Study 2 offers complementary empirical support through a text analysis of 11939 online reviews for a branded boutique hotel chain. The results confirm the hypothesized model. This study offers key contributions to service and brand theory by mapping the sequential relational antecedents of brand experience and empirically demonstrating how value is cocreated through operant resources, thereby bridging service-dominant logic with cultural branding to articulate value co-creation process in cultural contexts.

Keywords: affective brand experience; branded service encounter; online customer review; rapport; relationship quality; service-dominant logic (SDL) theory; swift Guanxi

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1 Introduction

In increasingly competitive and service-oriented markets, firms are shifting their strategic focus from delivering functional value to creating memorable customer experiences. As consumers interact with brands across multiple online and offline touchpoints, creating positive brand experiences has become an important source of competitive advantage and long-term customer relationships. Consequently, brand experience has emerged as a central construct in branding and consumer behaviour research. The concept of brand experience was fundamentally developed by Brakus et al.^[1], who distinguished it from shopping, service, and consumption experience, defining it as a response to brand-related stimuli, as opposed to utilitarian attributes. Theoretical elaboration of the brand experience concept was undertaken by Andreini et al.^[2], who divided brand experience research into three theoretical streams. At the micro level, relationship theory treats a brand as a relationship partner, and consumers can build relationships with brands at the level of individual experience^[3,4]. At the meso level, brand experience can be activated contextually by different resource integrators through a set of unique actors and their linkages^[5], such as those involved in firm–customer interactions. This theoretical approach leads to research questions such as “How do consumer practices and brand stimuli interact with contexts to create brand experi-

ence?” and “What contingencies contribute to the development of brand experience?”^[2] At the macro level, consumer culture theory conceptualizes brand experience as part of the creation, maintenance, and change of culture^[6].

While prior research has extensively examined the outcomes of brand experience, a notable gap remains in understanding its antecedents. Addressing this gap is critical because it fundamentally refines brand experience theory by shifting the focus from a firm-controlled output to a dynamically cocreated process. Specifically, by identifying rapport and swift Guanxi as key relational mechanisms, our study challenges the prevailing, more static view of experience and instead operationalizes the service encounter system—a core meso-level concept—by demonstrating how affective value is generated through microlevel, interpersonal interactions. This provides a novel, process-oriented explanation for affective brand experience formation, grounded in service-dominant logic. Through our analysis, we have compared and contrasted our findings with recent studies identified using keyword searches on platforms such as Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and high-quality journals. This approach not only situates our study within the existing body of research but also highlights its originality, as we focus on the relational drivers of brand experience rather than its outcomes. There has been a particular focus on outcomes such as behavioral intentions^[7], brand attachment^[8], customer satisfaction^[9], brand

equity^[10], and brand loyalty^[11,12].

Furthermore, our analysis of recent literature on employee–customer interactions in branded service encounters highlights the evolving role of rapport, swift Guanxi, and relationship quality as critical determinants of consumer outcomes (see Table 1). However, despite these advances, existing research often overlooks the interplay between traditional service contexts and online environments, limiting a comprehensive understanding of affective brand experience. Our study addresses this gap by adopting service-dominant logic (SDL) because of its unique capacity to frame service encounters as dynamic systems of resource integration. This perspective is essential, as it theoretically grounds the entire process through which discrete interpersonal interactions are transformed into broader experiential value. SDL provides the necessary framework to conceptualize how microlevel exchanges culminate in a cocreated affective brand experience, a progression that narrower theoretical lenses cannot fully articulate.

Focusing on the affective dimension to explore the antecedents of brand experience is important because emotions and feelings are central to human experience and significantly influence the perception of value in service encounters^[28,29]. The affective dimension captures the emotional responses^[30] triggered by brand interactions, which are crucial for creating memorable and meaningful brand experiences^[1]. These emotional responses not only contribute to the immediate perception of value but also play a significant role in shaping long-term relationships between consumers and brands^[31]. By focusing on the affective dimension, researchers can gain deeper insights into how emotional connections are forged and maintained, thereby enhancing our understanding of the mechanisms through which value is cocreated in the SDL context^[32–34]. Therefore, exploring the antecedents of brand experience from the affective dimension offers a rich and nuanced understanding of how brands can effectively engage with consumers to cocreate meaningful and lasting value^[35].

To this end, within the theoretical framework adapted from Brakus et al.^[1] and Andreini et al.^[2], our study delves into the interplay between employee–customer interactions and affective brand experiences, emphasizing the roles of rapport^[36–39] and swift Guanxi^[40,41], which refers to the rapid development of social connections and trust. To the best of our knowledge, research that specifically investigates the impact of rapport and swift Guanxi in service encounters on the development of affective brand experiences is lacking. This gap in research can be attributed to the historical focus of marketing research on service quality and tangible product attributes, which has often overlooked the nuanced roles of consumer relationships and emotions^[42,43]. The significance of interpersonal relationships and emotional connections in shaping consumer perceptions and brand experiences has not been fully explored, particularly in the context of brand experience^[3]. Rapport and swift Guanxi are crucial in service encounters, especially in cultures where personal relationships strongly influence business and consumer interactions^[44,45]. These concepts are pivotal in creating affective brand experiences that resonate with consumers at an emotional level, thereby fostering

loyalty and enhancing overall satisfaction^[46].

Finally, to empirically investigate this process, the present research employs a multisource data strategy comprising two complementary studies. This approach is adopted not solely to enhance external validity but also to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive examination of the proposed model. Study 1 uses a quantitative survey to formally test the hypothesized relationships and establish generalizable causal sequences. Study 2 then complements this by employing a qualitative text analysis of authentic online reviews. This second study serves a critical explanatory purpose: It explores the specific contextual expressions of the core constructs—employee interaction, rapport, and swift Guanxi—in naturalistic service narratives. By integrating these methods, the research design moves beyond establishing that relationships exist to uncovering how and why the relational mechanisms operate as theorized, thereby offering deeper theoretical insight.

2 Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1 Service-dominant logic as a theoretical lens

The SDL framework highlights that value is not embedded in products or services alone but emerges from collaborative exchanges between firms and customers. This theoretical approach fits well with our focus on employee–customer interactions and the development of customer–employee rapport, as these interpersonal exchanges represent key touchpoints where value and brand experiences are cocreated. In addition, the emphasis of the SDL on the context of value-in-context^[5] aligns with the inclusion of swift Guanxi in our model, which reflects the rapid development of trust and relational ties in specific service environments. This relational component corresponds to the idea that customer experiences are shaped dynamically through interactions between multiple resource integrators. Furthermore, by applying the SDL, our research can explore contingencies that influence the development of affective brand experiences and how firm–customer interactions drive emotional responses to brands within service ecosystems.

2.2 Effect of interaction on rapport between employees and customers

Service encounters function as dynamic systems of social exchange where interpersonal behavior fundamentally shapes relational outcomes. Within these systems, employee–customer interaction represents the primary mechanism for service cocreation and relational bond formation. The marketing literature consistently recognizes such interaction as a necessary component of service delivery that influences crucial outcomes ranging from word-of-mouth recommendations^[47] to overall customer satisfaction^[48]. The conceptual link between interaction and rapport emerges from their inherent connection; rapport is itself defined by an intense, direct communicative interaction that fosters a positive personal connection, culminating in mutual feelings of friendliness, caring, and behavioral coordination^[49,50]. This relational state is systematically constructed through specific interactional behaviors that

Table 1. Comparative analysis of key literature and the present study on employee–customer interactions in branded service encounters.

Study	Focus of the study	Research approach	Theoretical framework	Service context	Branded service	Perspective on key constructs		
						Rapport	Guanxi	Relational outcomes
Ref. [13]	Role of frontline employee–customer incidental similarities in service failure and recovery	Empirical	Social identity theory	Service recovery; service failure	Nonbranded restaurant	Mediating between similarities and service outcomes	Not mentioned	Customer satisfaction and repatronage intention
Ref. [14]	New customer's reaction toward small talk at the beginning of service encounters	Empirical	Relationship orientation theory; relationship marketing	First-time new customer to a service	Mixed. Amazon mechanical turk; branded yoga studio; nonbrand legal service online, i.e., lawyer	Mediating between employee–customer small talk and customer future intentions	Not directly mentioned, but relationship orientation (high vs low)	Customer future intentions
Ref. [15]	Employee engagement, rapport building and customer gratitude drive customer engagement	Empirical	Social exchange theory; service logic	Generic multiple services	Branded (across multiple industries)	Mediating between employee engagement and customer gratitude toward the firm	Not directly mentioned, but customer gratitude as affective feelings; reciprocity's emotional core	Customer engagement toward a brand or firm
Ref. [16]	Digital employee, i.e., conversational agents' communication style on relational outcomes	Empirical	Human–computer interaction: computer as human actors	Online services: holiday destination; tax declaration	Nonbranded online experiments	Mediating between social cues and future intentions	Not directly mentioned, but customer satisfaction of service encounter	Intention to use future services
Ref. [17]	Digital presence in service recovery toward aggrieved customers	Empirical	Digital presence theory; unified theory of social relations	Service recovery using email	Branded crowdsourcing platform; branded car rental	Mediating between digital presence and repatronage intention	Not mentioned	Recovery satisfaction; repatronage intention
Ref. [18]	Literature review and research agenda for salesperson rapport building	Conceptual	Literature review	Generic multiple services/industries	Not mentioned	Rapport is a fundamental building block for sales process	Not mentioned	Performance, behavioral and affective outcomes
Ref. [19]	Swiftly formed interpersonal relationships with sellers in online marketplaces	Empirical	Traditional Guanxi theory	Generic multiple business on Taobao	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Swift Guanxi	Repurchase intention; actual repurchase
Ref. [20]	How swift Guanxi as part of uncertainty reduction strategies facilitate online shopping	Empirical	Uncertainty reduction theory	Social commerce platform	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Swift Guanxi	Purchase intention and behavior (by reducing uncertainty due to swift Guanxi)

(To be continued on the next page)

(Continued)

Study	Focus of the study	Research approach	Theoretical framework	Service context	Branded service	Perspective on key constructs		
						Rapport	Swift Guanxi	Guanxi
Ref. [21]	Effects of key social commerce affordances on swift Guanxi dimensions and subsequent purchase intention	Empirical	Social exchange theory	Agricultural products in social commerce	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Swift Guanxi	Social commerce platform purchase intention
Ref. [22]	Friend-to-friend (Fr2Fr) social commerce transactions	Empirical	Role theory	Social commerce transactions	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Guanxi	Social commerce engagement intention
Ref. [23]	Impact of interpersonal interaction factors on consumers' purchase intention in social commerce	Empirical	Relationship quality; social exchange theory	Social commerce	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Swift Guanxi	Purchase intention
Ref. [24]	Leader's crossover impact to frontline employees' customer stewardship behavior	Empirical	Conservation of resources theory	4/5 start hotels; alumni managers	Yes for hotel sample	Indirectly referred as 'customer stewardship'	Indirectly referred as 'customer stewardship'	Not measured
Ref. [25]	Impact of the misalignment between customer orientation and service climate on employee commitment and customer loyalty	Empirical	Need-supply fit perspective	Retail stores	Highly likely	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Employee commitment and customer loyalty WOM
Ref. [26]	Impact of exploitative leadership on service employees' emotional labor	Empirical	Conservation of resources theory	One retailer and two hotels	Yes	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Service employees' acting behavior
Ref. [27]	Impact of inclusive leadership on frontline service employees' customer-oriented boundary spanning behaviors	Empirical	Social exchange theory	Six hotels in China	Highly likely	Not mentioned	Cited in reference	Service employees' spanning behaviors
Our study	Role of employee-customer interaction, rapport and swift Guanxi drive affective brand experience	Empirical	Service-dominant logic (SDL)	Traditional offline service & online service	Yes	Yes	Yes	Affective brand experience

researchers have categorized into coherent groups, including attentive, imitative, courteous, and common ground behaviors^[51]. These behaviors, manifested through actions such as empathic listening, eye contact, and courtesy^[52], constitute the core substance of high-quality service interactions rather than peripheral courtesies. Thus, the transition from basic interaction to established rapport represents a theoretically coherent sequence wherein interactive behaviors provide the necessary conditions for a harmonious relationship to emerge. Therefore,

H1: In a branded service encounter, employee–customer interaction positively affects customer–employee rapport.

2.3 Effect of rapport on affective brand experience

The connection between interpersonal rapport and affective brand experience is rooted in the fundamentally social and emotional nature of service encounters. While brand experience encompasses multiple dimensions^[1], the affective dimension, pertaining to internal feelings and emotions, holds particular salience in interpersonal service contexts where emotions are central to the exchange. Customer–employee rapport, characterized by trust, empathy, and personal connection^[49], serves as a primary mechanism for generating these emotional responses. This relationship is supported by evidence that positive service interactions can emotionally engage customers, with successful encounters directly linked to the cultivation of brand affection^[53,54]. Research further confirms that customer–employee rapport significantly influences affective responses and brand perceptions^[55], with positive interpersonal relationships consistently emerging as critical factors in enhancing the customer’s overall brand experience^[56]. The theoretical connection suggests that the emotional quality established through interpersonal rapport transfers directly to the customer’s affective evaluation of the brand itself. Therefore,

H2a: In a branded service encounter, customer–employee rapport positively affects customer affective brand experience.

2.4 Rapport as an antecedent to swift Guanxi

Guanxi, a cornerstone of Chinese business culture, refers to a system of social networks and influential relationships that facilitate business and ensure trust and cooperation^[57]. It is often translated simply as a “relationship”, but it implies a deeper, reciprocal bond. In response to modern, fast-paced service environments, Ou et al.^[19] advanced the concept of swift Guanxi, which they define as “a buyer’s perception of a swiftly formed interpersonal relationship that comprises mutual understanding, reciprocal favors, and relationship harmony”. This concept captures the rapid formation of personal connections in contexts where time is limited but interpersonal interaction remains critical. The three dimensions of swift Guanxi are mutually reinforcing. The first, mutual understanding, is achieved through communication between the buyer and seller and is seen as key to the concept^[19,58]. The second dimension, reciprocal favors, refers to the positive benefits exchanged during interactions, such as a seller providing a small gift in return for positive buyer feedback^[59,60]. The foundation for these exchanges is the third dimension, relationship harmony, as Guanxi cannot survive without har-

mony between two parties in a relationship^[61].

Here, the established construct of customer–employee rapport becomes critically relevant. This theoretical distinction is key: rapport represents a universal, foundational interpersonal bond of trust and mutual enjoyment, whereas swift Guanxi is its context-specific manifestation, reflecting the culturally embedded norms of reciprocal exchange and social harmony paramount in Chinese society. As discussed in prior sections, rapport is an emotional bond characterized by mutual enjoyment, trust, and a personal connection built through positive interaction^[49]. The mechanisms of rapport-building—empathic communication, mutual attentiveness, and genuine personal engagement—directly furnish the interactivity and presence identified by Ou et al.^[19] as the prerequisites for swift Guanxi. Thus, in the Chinese service context, rapport provides the essential relational “fuel”, whereas swift Guanxi represents the culturally specific “engine” through which this interpersonal connection is converted into a form of value cocreation that resonates deeply with local consumers. While distinct constructs, rapport acts as a catalyst that enables the rapid development of mutual understanding, sets the stage for reciprocal favors, and establishes the foundational harmony required for a Guanxi relationship to form. Therefore, we argue that in the condensed timeframe of a branded service encounter, customer–employee rapport provides the essential interpersonal foundation upon which swift Guanxi is built:

H2b: In a branded service encounter, customer–employee rapport positively affects swift Guanxi.

2.5 Effect of swift Guanxi on affective brand experience

Academic literature has examined swift Guanxi as an antecedent to outcomes such as social commerce affordances^[21], as a mediator between interpersonal interaction factors and buyer purchase intention^[62], and as a consequence of factors such as perceived online service quality^[63]. This study, however, posits swift Guanxi as a key antecedent to brand experience, particularly its affective dimension.

Building on the dimensions of swift Guanxi established previously—mutual understanding, reciprocal favors, and relationship harmony—this study argues that these components directly enhance consumers’ emotional responses during brand interactions. This assertion is supported by three key points. First, drawing on processing fluency theory, fluency is known to positively affect brand choice and judgment^[64], as consumers prefer to process sensory and affective brand attributes with ease. By enabling more fluent and harmonious communication between customers and employees, swift Guanxi should thus directly contribute to a more positive affective brand experience. Second, the mechanisms of reciprocal favors and mutual interest inherent in swift Guanxi foster a greater state of involvement within the servicescape^[49]. When this involvement is affective in nature, it strengthens the customer’s emotional engagement, thereby enhancing the affective brand experience. Third, the relationship harmony dimension facilitates increased intimacy, stronger attachments, and positive emotional ties between the customer and the employee. As the employee represents the brand, these positive emotions are directly transferred to and shape the customer’s affective experience of the brand itself.

Therefore, we argue that the mutual understanding, reciprocity, and harmony of swift Guanxi collectively create an interpersonal context that amplifies the customer's emotional response to the brand:

H3: In a branded service encounter, swift Guanxi developed between the service employee and the customer positively affects customer affective brand experience.

On the basis of the preceding literature review and hypothesis development, the proposed conceptual model is presented in Fig. 1.

3 Research methodology: a multimethod study

This research employs a multisource data strategy, comprising two distinct studies to establish robust external validity and provide a comprehensive perspective. The study adopts a pragmatic epistemological stance, recognizing the value of multiple paradigms in addressing the research context^[65]. This philosophy allows the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of the other, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the research findings^[66]. Study 1 utilized a quantitative approach by administering a questionnaire to a convenience sample of 459 young consumers in China. In this phase, a positivist approach is adopted to objectively test the hypotheses derived from the literature review. While this method offers efficiency and the capacity to generalize findings from numerical data to a broader population, we acknowledge the inherent weakness that quantitative methods may lack contextual depth^[66].

To address this limitation, Study 2 involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data through a systematic text analysis of 11939 user-generated reviews from a prominent Chinese online travel agency (OTA). During this phase, an interpretive perspective is employed to explore the nuanced and context-specific experiences of customers in their interactions. This complementary approach focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and perceptions that individuals attach to their experiences, providing insights into consumer sentiments that quantitative methods alone might overlook^[66].

Furthermore, this design enables complementarity, where the qualitative data from Study 2 enrich and elaborate upon the findings from the quantitative Study 1, yielding a deeper understanding of the results. Soffer and Hadar^[67] exemplify this by using a qualitative study to gain additional insights from quantitative analysis, thereby enriching the overall interpretation of the research findings. By combining these perspectives, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis of the research context.

3.1 Study 1: quantitative survey

3.1.1 Sample and data collection

The first study involved administering a questionnaire to a

convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled at an AMBA-accredited business school that operates as a Sino-foreign joint venture. This setting, within the broader cultural and geographical context of China, is particularly relevant, as it is immersed in a culture where practices such as swift Guanxi are integral to both business and social interactions. This demographic provides a pertinent lens through which to explore the significance of such cultural constructs, given their prominence in the Chinese context.

Selecting a sample from an AMBA-accredited Sino-foreign joint business school in China is strategically aligned with our study's focus on the impact of rapport and swift Guanxi in service encounters on affective brand experiences. The students at this institution embody the cultural practices of Guanxi, offering an authentic perspective crucial for our investigation. Their unique position, at the intersection of Chinese cultural practices and international business education, provides a dual perspective that is both culturally insightful and globally conscious. The youthful, educated population is likely to actively participate in branded service encounters wherein these dynamics are at play, offering valuable insights into the interplay of these factors^[19, 62]. This group represents a crucial consumer segment for numerous brands, given their increasing purchasing power and capacity to influence market trends, particularly in the digital and social media spheres^[68]. Consequently, their participation enhances the representativeness and relevance of our study, offering valuable insights into the dynamics between cultural constructs and brand experiences. The respondents were asked to consider a specific service brand and answer twelve questions about their encounters with it, using adapted measurement scales for the latent variables within our conceptual model (see Table A1 in the Appendix). A total of 483 completed questionnaires were obtained, and after data cleaning, 459 usable responses remained, with 53% female respondents and 47% male respondents.

3.1.2 Measurement development

To measure customer-employee rapport, we employed the scale developed by Hennig-Thurau et al.^[69], which is well recognized for its focus on the nuanced aspects of service relationships, such as emotional contagion and emotional labor^[70]. This scale is particularly suitable for our study because it captures the complexity of interpersonal dynamics in service contexts, emphasizing how employees' expressions and management of emotions influence customer responses. For the swift Guanxi variable, we adapted the scale from Ou et al.^[19] The concept of swift Guanxi, which pertains to the rapid development of trust and mutual understanding in online marketplaces, is highly relevant in digital and cross-cultural interactions. This scale incorporates three key conceptual dimensions: mutual trust, reciprocal favor exchange, and shared understanding. By including items from each of these dimensions, the adapted scale allows us to capture the distinct

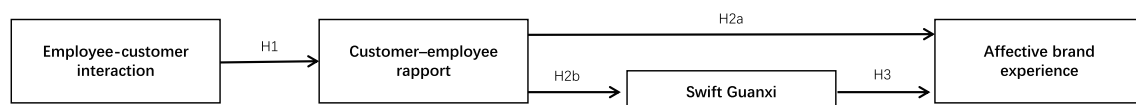


Fig. 1. Conceptual model and hypotheses.

mechanisms that facilitate quick and meaningful relationship-building in a mediated environment, aligning well with the fast-paced nature of digital customer interactions. To measure affective brand experience, we utilized the affective dimension scale from Brakus et al.^[1], which is considered a seminal framework in brand experience research. This scale has been widely validated and effectively measures the emotional reactions that consumers experience when they interact with a brand. The affective dimension is especially important in our context, as it emphasizes feelings of joy, excitement, and pleasure, which are elements that are critical in driving brand loyalty and customer satisfaction.

3.1.3 Survey data analyses

Similarly, we employed SmartPLS 3.0^[71] to perform structural equation modeling using the partial least squares modeling technique. The analyses revealed that all four latent variables received strong statistical support for internal validity. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.786 to 0.938, the R^2 values ranged from 0.635 to 0.807, the composite reliability values ranged from 0.878 to 0.956, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.708 to 0.844.

All four hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. Specifically, we found support for H1: Employee–customer interaction positively affects customer–employee rapport ($\beta = 0.459$; $p < 0.05$). We also found support for H2: In a branded service encounter, (a) customer–employee rapport positively affects customer affective brand experience ($\beta = 0.213$; $p < 0.05$), and (b) swift Guanxi ($\beta = 0.854$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, we confirmed H3: In a branded service encounter, swift Guanxi developed between the service employee and the customer positively affects customer affective brand experience ($\beta = 0.597$; $p < 0.05$). Tables 2 and 3 provide more details of the analyses.

We conducted discriminant validity assessments in response to the theoretical relationship between our core constructs. The Fornell–Larcker criterion was met, as the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations

with all others. However, the more robust heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio indicated a high value of 0.949 between rapport and swift Guanxi, exceeding the 0.90 threshold. This suggests that while our measures are conceptually distinct, they share significant empirical variance, which is consistent with our theoretical model where rapport is a key direct antecedent to swift Guanxi.

3.1.4 Ad hoc Test 1

We re-estimate Study 1 using generalized structural component analysis (GSCA-SEM), which represents a component-based approach to structural equation modeling^[72–74]. GSCA can potentially provide a stronger overall measure of model fit^[73], thereby complementing other structural modeling techniques, such as SmartPLS.

Model fit: Our GSCA results first provide a few useful measures of the overall fit and the number of free parameters: FIT = 0.699, AFIT = 0.697. The values of FIT range from 0 to 1 (*GeSCA User Manual*, available at <http://www.sem-gesca.org/manual.php>); therefore, our FIT index of 0.699 indicates that reasonably more variance in the variables is accounted for by our model specification. Our AFIT index of 0.697 is similar to that of FIT but takes the model complexity into account. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.036, and a score close to 0 is taken as an indicator of a good fit. Our GeSCA analyses of our structural model reveal a few important findings regarding our hypotheses reported in the PLS outputs. First, we found support for all the hypothesized relationships, and the estimates are very close to those of the PLS results. Tables 4 and 5 provide more details.

3.1.5 Ad hoc Test 2

All the respondents were provided with an opportunity to provide the name for their specific brand within their service encounter. A total of 182 respondents expressed explicit names for their branded service encounters (Group 1), and the remaining 277 did not (Group 2). This multigroup analysis was conducted to test whether the ability to explicitly name a

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1).

	Mean	SD	α	R-square	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Affective brand experience	4.377	1.11	0.792	0.635	0.878	0.708	1			
2. Customer–employee rapport	4.446	1.335	0.938	0.774	0.956	0.844	0.723**	1		
3. Employee-customer interaction	3.893	1.464	0.786	0.765	0.903	0.824	0.343**	0.459**	1	
4. Swift Guanxi	4.383	1.309	0.892	0.807	0.933	0.822	0.779**	0.853**	0.395**	1

α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). $n = 459$.

Table 3. Results of the partial least squares (PLS) analysis (Study 1).

Hypothesis	Relationships	Path loadings	t values	p values	Conclusions
H1	Employee-customer interaction $\rightarrow$ customer-employee rapport	0.459	9.530	0.000	Supported
H2a	Customer-employee rapport $\rightarrow$ affective brand experience	0.213	3.650	0.000	Supported
H2b	Customer-employee rapport $\rightarrow$ swift Guanxi	0.854	51.433	0.000	Supported
H3	Swift Guanxi $\rightarrow$ affective brand experience	0.597	10.714	0.000	Supported

We used a bootstrapping procedure with 459 cases and 5000 subsamples to calculate t values. $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Component correlations (generalized structured component analysis, GESCA) (Study 1).

	Alpha	Rho	PVE	1	2	3	4
1. Affective brand experience	0.792	0.878	0.708	1			
2. Customer–employee rapport	0.938	0.955	0.843	0.726	1		
3. Employee–customer interaction	0.786	0.903	0.824	0.342	0.460	1	
4. Swift Guanxi	0.892	0.932	0.821	0.779	0.862	0.398	1

Basic GSCA/single group; number of bootstrap samples: 100; the ALS algorithm converged in 4 iterations (convergence criterion = 0.0001); $n = 459$. Alpha indicates Cronbach's alpha. The Rho is Dillon–Goldstein's rho or the composite reliability. The percentage of variance explained (PVE) is the average amount of the total variance of indicators explained by their corresponding component, as in principal component analysis.

Table 5. Path coefficients (generalized structured component analysis, GESCA) (Study 1).

Hypothesis	Relationships	Estimate	SE	95%CI	Conclusions
H1	Employee–customer interaction → customer–employee rapport	0.460	0.045	0.372 0.539	Supported
H2a	Customer–employee rapport → affective brand experience	0.214	0.058	0.115 0.344	Supported
H2b	Customer–employee rapport → swift Guanxi	0.862	0.016	0.833 0.895	Supported
H3	Swift Guanxi → affective brand experience	0.595	0.056	0.483 0.706	Supported

Basic GSCA/single group; number of bootstrap samples: 100; the ALS algorithm converged in 4 iterations (convergence criterion = 0.0001); $n = 459$.

brand serves as a proxy for the salience or vividness of the service encounter in memory. We reasoned that respondents who could readily recall the brand name likely had a more cognitively accessible experience, allowing us to examine whether the strength of the hypothesized relationships differed on the basis of this clarity of recall. We ran several multigroup analyses to test whether the two groups differed in our hypothesized relationships. The details are shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Collectively, the results of Study 1 provide robust empirical support for the hypothesized sequential model. The primary PLS–SEM analysis confirmed all the direct and mediating relationships, establishing that employee–customer interaction fosters rapport, which in turn enhances affective brand experience both directly and through the critical mechanism of swift Guanxi. The importance of these findings is further substantiated by two key ad hoc analyses. First, the GSCA model fit indices ($FIT = 0.699$, $SRMR = 0.036$) affirm that the proposed model structure accurately represents the data, mitigating concerns about model misspecification and bolstering confidence in the theoretical framework. Second, the multigroup analysis revealed that the structural paths remain consistent regardless of a respondent's ability to explicitly name the service brand. This finding is critically important, as it demonstrates that the psychological process of transforming interaction into affective experience is robust and operates effectively even when the brand memory is less cognitively salient. Therefore, the core contribution of Study 1 lies not only in validating the proposed relationships but also in establishing, through complementary analytical approaches, the model's internal validity and generalizability across variations in brand recall clarity.

3.2 Study 2: qualitative analysis of user-generated reviews

The primary objective of Study 2 is to validate the findings of the initial study while introducing a complementary

dimension^[66]. This complementary aspect is intended to deepen, illustrate, or clarify the outcomes of Study 1. To address specific limitations of Study 1, such as the narrow demographic range of the sample, Study 2 employed a different methodological approach. Its goals included (a) engaging a broader demographic spectrum in branded service encounters and (b) exploring how innovative methods of collecting user-generated data can enhance the breadth and depth of data analysis. Consequently, Study 2 aimed to provide further empirical support for our hypotheses. It is important to note that this methodological progression is not a departure from the value of survey research but rather a strategic extension that enriches our understanding of consumer–brand relationships within the service marketing domain. The initial survey served as a critical foundation, providing structured insights into consumer perceptions and experiences with rapport and swift Guanxi in service encounters.

We focused our research on a branded boutique hotel chain in China, owing to its unique position within the hospitality industry. In the hospitality literature, a boutique hotel is characterized as a smaller establishment that provides highly themed, intimate, and personalized services to its guests^[75]. This selected hotel chain has been identified as one of the most successful market players in the region, seamlessly integrating high-quality service with the distinct cultural characteristics of the local context. This emphasis on local culture and personalized service makes boutique hotels particularly suitable for examining branded service encounters. Moreover, the popularity and business success of boutique hotels in engaging customers through unique experiential and interactive offerings make them an ideal case for studying the dynamics of customer interactions and the formation of customer perceptions in a high-touch service environment^[76]. The rich and diverse customer experiences provided by boutique hotels, resulting from their distinctive characteristics, such as design, service, and marketing strategies, offer ample data for analyzing the nuances of branded service encounters.

Table 6. Multigroup measurement model assessment (Group 1 vs. Group 2).

	Alpha	Rho	PVE	1	2	3	4
1. Affective brand experience	0.827 0.712	0.897 0.838	0.744 0.635	1	0.752	0.342	0.813
2. Customer–employee rapport	0.937 0.941	0.954 0.957	0.838 0.849	0.678	1	0.432	0.856
3. Employee–customer interaction	0.851 0.700	0.930 0.869	0.870 0.768	0.353	0.518	1	0.368
4. Swift Guanxi	0.902 0.878	0.938 0.924	0.835 0.803	0.717	0.875	0.458	1

Alpha indicates Cronbach’s alpha. The Rho is Dillon–Goldstein’s rho or the composite reliability. The percentage of variance explained (PVE) is the average amount of the total variance of indicators explained by their corresponding component, as in principal component analysis. Values for Group 2 (nonexplicit brand expression, $n = 277$) are in italics. In the interconstruct correlations, the italicized coefficients correspond to Group 2 ($n = 277$); the coefficients for Group 1 (explicit brand expression, $n = 182$) are in regular font.

Table 7. Multigroup analysis: path coefficients (generalized structured component analysis, GESCA).

Hypothesis	Relationships	Full sample estimate	Group 1 estimate	Group 2 estimate	Conclusions
H1	Employee–customer interaction → customer–employee rapport	0.460	0.518	0.432	Supported
H2a	Customer–employee rapport → affective brand experience	0.214	0.216	0.212	Supported
H2b	Customer–employee rapport → swift Guanxi	0.862	0.875	0.856	Supported
H3	Swift Guanxi → affective brand experience	0.595	0.528	0.631	Supported

Basic GSCA/single group; number of bootstrap samples: 100; the ALS algorithm converged in 4 iterations (convergence criterion = 0.0001).

3.2.1 Data collection

We harvested user-generated reviews of the focal boutique hotel chain from China’s three largest online travel agencies (OTAs)—Ctrip, Qunar, and eLong—using a Python crawler that mimicked human browsing behavior^[77]. Because the three OTAs belong to the same corporate group and share their review database, we retrieved the full review set directly from Ctrip^[78]. The crawl yielded 13441 Chinese-language reviews posted between January 2018 and December 2023.

Data preprocessing followed established practices^[79–81]. We first removed garbled characters, misspellings, duplicates, and reviews shorter than ten Chinese characters, leaving 11939 usable reviews. The texts were then tokenised with Jieba^[82], and common stop words were eliminated. Finally, the cleaned corpus was translated into English with DeepL. Following the procedure outlined in Ref. [83], two bilingual scholars crosschecked a 10% random subsample to ensure semantic fidelity.

3.2.2 Data analysis—Stage 1

The measurement protocol unfolded in three tightly integrated phases. We began by importing the boutique-hotel lexicon and adapting it to the present research context. That seed list already captured a broad range of action verbs, rapport adjectives, and brand-image expressions, but it did not reflect the kinship appellations and personalized references—such as “小哥” or repeated staff names—that signal swift Guanxi in contemporary Chinese usage. Incorporating these culturally specific tokens produced a provisional dictionary. To verify and enrich this provisional list with empirical evidence from the corpus, we next estimated an unsupervised latent Dirichlet allocation model with twenty coherence-optimized topics on the full collection of Chinese-language reviews. Three

bilingual coders independently inspected the high-probability terms of each topic and determined whether the lexical core of a given topic unambiguously represented one of the four focal constructs: employee–customer interaction, customer–employee rapport, swift Guanxi, or affective brand experience. Whenever that condition was met, any salient term that was absent from the provisional list was appended to the appropriate construct dictionary; topics that lacked a clear conceptual anchor were discarded. In this manner, the data-driven inspection added forty-seven previously overlooked tokens—for example, “前台” (reception) and “提行李” (carry luggage) to the interaction domain or “亲切” (friendly) and “温馨” (cozy) to the rapport domain—bringing the final dictionary to 117 entries, as documented in Table A2 of the Appendix. Crucially, the probabilistic topic weights generated by the LDA were not retained as measurement variables: Topic modeling served exclusively as a lexical sieve and as a cross-validation device for constructing boundaries.

Intercoder reliability procedure: To ensure methodological transparency in mapping the latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topics to the four focal constructs—employee–customer interaction, customer–employee rapport, swift Guanxi, and affective brand experience—three bilingual coders independently inspected the high-probability terms of each topic and assigned them to a construct label. Agreement among the coders was evaluated using Fleiss’ kappa, which accounts for chance agreement in multirater settings. The resulting coefficient ($\kappa = 0.82$) indicated strong agreement^[84], demonstrating the robustness of construct identification and minimizing subjective bias in the lexicon development stage. Any residual disagreements were resolved through discussion until full consensus was achieved prior to finalizing the constructed dictionaries.

Having established a theoretically grounded and empiric-

ally saturated dictionary, we operationalized each construct at the level of the individual review by counting the number of lexical hits it received. Formally, for review d and construct j ,

$$m_d^{(j)} = \sum_{w \in \text{lex}_j} \mathbb{1}\{w \in d\}, \quad (1)$$

where $\mathbb{1}\{\cdot\}$ denotes the indicator function and lex_j is the final dictionary for construct j . These raw counts constitute the manifest indicators that enter the structural model, in line with the theoretical premise that repeated mention of a construct within a bounded text segment signals heightened cognitive–emotional salience. By deliberately decoupling dictionary formation from variable construction, this study preserves the conceptual clarity of lexicon-based measurement while exploiting topic modeling only where it is methodologically most defensible—namely, in identifying and validating corpus-specific vocabulary.

3.2.3 Data analysis—Stage 2

We employed SmartPLS 3.0^[72] to conduct structural equation modeling using the partial least squares modeling technique. The latent variables—ffective brand experience, customer–employee rapport, employee–customer interaction, and swift Guanxi—were operationalized as single-item indicators. This approach is supported by the methodological literature, which recognizes single-item measures as a pragmatic and parsimonious solution in specific research contexts, such as follow-up studies designed to validate structural models across new populations^[85]. The correlations among the four variables ranged from 0.116 to 0.344, $p < 0.01$.

All four hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. Specifically, we found support for H1: Employee–customer interaction positively affects customer–employee rapport ($\beta = 0.344$; $p < 0.05$). We also found support for H2: In a branded service encounter, (a) customer–employee rapport positively affects customer affective brand experience ($\beta = 0.118$; $p < 0.05$) and (b) swift Guanxi ($\beta = 0.235$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, we confirmed H3: In a branded service encounter, swift Guanxi developed between the service employee

and the customer positively affects affective brand experience ($\beta = 0.074$; $p < 0.05$). Tables 8 and 9 provide more details of the analyses. Descriptive data differ from those used in Study 1, as the variables were measured in count numbers rather than on a Likert scale.

3.2.4 Ad hoc Test 3

Like with Ad hoc Test 1, we re-estimated Study 2 using generalized structured component analysis (GSCA-SEM). Our GSCA results first provide a few useful measures of the overall model fit and the number of free parameters: FIT = 0.525 and AFIT = 0.525. The values of FIT range from 0 to 1; therefore, our FIT index of 0.525 indicates that the model accounts for a moderate proportion of the variance in the variables. Our AFIT index of 0.525 is similar to that of FIT but takes the model complexity into account. A standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.00 and a score close to 0 are taken as indicators of a good fit.

The GSCA analysis confirms the key PLS findings regarding our hypotheses reported in the PLS outputs. In addition to the expected identical path loading estimates, owing to single-indicator measures for the constructs, all the hypotheses were supported. Tables 10 and 11 provide more details.

Studies 1 and 2 provide convergent and complementary evidences for the proposed model. Study 1, capturing active perceptions through a survey, established a foundational sequential model with strong, immediate relational signals, particularly from interaction to rapport. Study 2, analyzing recalled experiences in online reviews, validated this structure within authentic narratives from a broader demographic perspective. The differing effect sizes between the studies offer a richer interpretation: The generally stronger path coefficients in Study 1 likely reflect the focused, introspective nature of surveying specific perceptions. In contrast, the coefficients in Study 2, while statistically significant, are embedded within holistic customer narratives where the relational process is one of many experience elements (e.g., room quality, location), naturally tempering its isolated strength. This divergence does not indicate inconsistency but rather reveals the

Table 8. Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 2).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Affective brand experience	0.16	0.464	1			
2. Customer–employee rapport	0.49	0.790	0.135**	1		
3. Employee–customer interaction	0.36	0.814	0.116**	0.344**	1	
4. Swift Guanxi	0.14	0.496	0.328**	0.235**	0.328**	1

** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). $n = 11939$.

Table 9. Results of the partial least squares (PLS) analysis (Study 2).

Hypothesis	Relationships	Path loadings	t values	p values	Conclusions
H1	Employee–customer interaction → customer–employee rapport	0.344	26.934	0.000	Supported
H2a	Customer–employee rapport → affective brand experience	0.118	10.170	0.000	Supported
H2b	Customer–employee rapport → swift Guanxi	0.235	16.692	0.000	Supported
H3	Swift Guanxi → affective brand experience	0.074	4.703	0.000	Supported

We used a bootstrapping procedure with 11939 cases and 5000 subsamples to calculate t values. $p < 0.05$. Single-indicator measure in SmartPLS3.

Table 10. Component correlations (generalized structured component analysis, GESCA) (Study 2).

	Unstandardized component means	Unstandardized component variances	R squared	1	2	3	4
1. Affective brand experience	0.164	0.215	0.024	1			
2. Customer–employee rapport	0.495	0.624	0.119	0.135	1		
3. Employee–customer interaction	0.356	0.663	NA	0.116	0.344	1	
4. Swift Guanxi	0.137	0.246	0.055	0.102	0.235	0.328	1

Basic GSCA/single group; single indicator; number of bootstrap samples: 100. The ALS algorithm converged in 2 iterations (convergence criterion = 0.0001).

Table 11. Path coefficients (generalized structured component analysis, GESCA) (Study 2).

Hypothesis	Relationships	Estimate	SE	95%CI	Conclusions
H1	Employee–customer interaction → customer–employee rapport	0.344	0.013	0.317 0.368	Supported
H2a	Customer–employee rapport → affective brand experience	0.118	0.011	0.099 0.143	Supported
H2b	Customer–employee rapport → swift Guanxi	0.235	0.014	0.21 0.263	Supported
H3	Swift Guanxi → affective brand experience	0.074	0.016	0.044 0.106	Supported

Basic GSCA/single group; single indicator; number of bootstrap samples: 100. The ALS algorithm converged in 2 iterations (convergence criterion = 0.0001).

contextual fluidity of value cocreation. This finding shows that the core pathway from interaction to experience is robust, but its perceptual emphasis can shift between the immediate service moment and its subsequent recollection. Ultimately, this methodological triangulation confirms that the model captures a fundamental service encounter dynamic. The synthesis operationalizes service-dominant logic, with Study 2’s culturally specific lexicon demonstrating how universal rapport is contextually translated into value within the Chinese service environment, establishing a pathway that is both statistically robust and culturally nuanced.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes several key theoretical contributions by addressing a critical gap in the brand experience literature: the limited understanding of its relational antecedents and the specific process of its operation. Our findings empirically establish a sequential model that reveals how affective brand experience is cocreated within service encounters, offering three primary advancements. First, we provide a precise contribution to SDL by identifying and modeling specific operant resources that drive value cocreation. We demonstrate that employee–customer interaction is a process of resource integration in which the interpersonal skills of employees and the cultural knowledge of customers are applied. The resulting rapport and swift Guanxi are not merely outcomes but are themselves dynamic operant resources—relational and cultural competencies that are mutually enacted and integrated to cocreate the affective brand experience as the ultimate value-in-use. This shifts the view of brand experience from a firm-controlled output to a phenomenologically determined outcome of specific, sequenced resource integration processes. Second, this research connects the SDL with consumer culture theory (CCT) to articulate a theory of “value-in-culture-context”. While the SDL provides a framework for

value cocreation, the CCT provides tools for understanding the sociocultural milieu that gives this value its specific meaning. Our model empirically demonstrates that value is not created in a cultural vacuum; the universal resource of rapport gains its potent efficacy in the Chinese context by being culturally translated into the institution of swift Guanxi. This integration shows that cultural forces are not static but are active, operational elements in the service ecosystem, directly shaping how resources are integrated and value is determined. Consequently, this study challenges the universality of context-neutral branding frameworks by quantifying how culturally embedded constructs directly shape emotional outcomes. It offers a meso-level explanation that connects microlevel interactions (resource integration) to macrolevel cultural systems (Chinese relationalism), addressing the call to understand how brand experiences are contextually activated. By doing so, we equip theorists with a refined, process-based model that clarifies the formation of emotionally resonant brand relationships within a globalized yet culturally particular marketplace.

4.2 Managerial implications

By focusing on the specific relational process revealed in this study, the confirmed sequential model provides managers with a clear, actionable blueprint for cultivating affective brand experiences. The findings indicate that managerial action should be targeted sequentially at three critical stages.

First, given that employee–customer interaction directly builds rapport, recruitment and training must prioritize demonstrable interpersonal competencies. Beyond generic customer service, training should focus on the specific rapport-building behaviors identified in the literature, such as attentive listening, using customer names, and identifying common ground to foster a sense of personal connection. This establishes the essential foundational bond.

Second, the finding that rapport leads to swift Guanxi is particularly crucial in the Chinese context. Managers should equip employees to consciously transition from generic

friendliness to behaviors that activate the core dimensions of swift Guanxi. This involves training staff to recognize opportunities for small, personalized favors or discretionary gestures (reciprocal favors) and to communicate in a way that emphasizes shared understanding and harmony, thereby transforming universal rapport into a culturally resonant connection.

Finally, since swift Guanxi directly enhances affective brand experience, managers must recognize that these interpersonal moments are not merely pleasant but are active cocreation of brand value. Empowering frontline employees with the autonomy to make on-the-spot decisions that foster this swift Guanxi—such as personalizing a service recovery or remembering a repeat customer's preference—is not an operational cost but a direct investment in the brand's emotional equity.

By strategically managing this sequential process—fostering interaction that builds rapport, which is then channeled into culturally nuanced swift Guanxi—firms can systematically engineer service encounters, consistently generate the positive affective responses, and underpin deep brand loyalty.

4.3 Limitations and future research

This study offers valuable insights but is not without limitations, which correspondingly outline productive avenues for future inquiry. First, the research is deliberately framed from a meso-level perspective, focusing on the service encounter ecosystem. While this provides necessary focus, it intentionally sets aside macrolevel influences from broader cultural and market forces. Second, the cultural context presents a defined scope. The construct of swift Guanxi is inherently specific to the Chinese cultural milieu, which is a strength of this study, as it identifies a potent relational variable within a critical market. However, this specificity necessarily limits the direct generalizability of the findings. Future research should test this model across diverse cultural settings, for instance, in other East Asian societies with analogous relational norms (e.g., inhwa in South Korea) or in individualistic Western cultures, to establish the model's boundary conditions and cross-cultural applicability. Third, the methodological approach in Study 2 involves a strategic trade-off. The use of single-indicator variables, while a valid and parsimonious approach for modeling complex textual data, does not correct for measurement error. A key implication is that the path coefficients are likely conservative, attenuated estimates of the true effect sizes. This provides a robust test of the theoretical model, but future research should aim to develop refined multi-item measures from textual data to obtain more precise parameter estimates. Fourth, while our multimethod approach robustly establishes what occurs, the quantitative core of Study 1 is less suited to uncovering the underlying how and why. Qualitative investigations, using methods such as critical incident technique interviews or ethnographic shadowing, are needed to elucidate the nuanced microprocesses through which an interaction is transformed into rapport and then into swift Guanxi. Fifth, our findings have significant conceptual implications. The exceptionally strong relationship between rapport and swift Guanxi, while validating H2b, suggests a deeper theoretical structure. It is plausible that

rapport—as an immediate, enjoyable connection—acts as a catalyst that enables the rapid establishment of trust, which is a foundational component of the broader swift Guanxi construct. The omission of trust as a distinct measured variable is a limitation of this study. Future research should explicitly model and measure trust as a mediating construct between rapport and swift Guanxi to disentangle their unique contributions and refine our understanding of this relational sequence. Finally, the methodological approach in Study 2, while rigorous through its validated lexicon and strong intercoder reliability, inherits the limitations of lexicon-based text analysis. It primarily captures explicit linguistic cues and may overlook deeper contextual semantics. Subsequent studies could employ transformer-based deep learning models (e.g., BERT) to better grasp the contextual nuances of relational language in user-generated content.

In conclusion, this research has delineated a sequential pathway from interaction to affective experience, establishing the critical mediating roles of rapport and swift Guanxi. By addressing these limitations, future work can further refine and extend our understanding of the relational mechanics that underpin successful branded service encounters.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table A1 presents the full measurement scales used in Study 1. The items were adapted from established studies to measure the latent variables in the conceptual model. The table reports the constructs, item codes, measurement items, and corresponding sources, thereby documenting the operationalisation of each construct used in the questionnaire. Table A2 presents the final lexicon used for the dictionary-based text analysis in Study 1. The lexicon was developed by adapting an existing boutique-hotel dictionary and supplementing it with corpus-derived terms identified through LDA-assisted topic inspection. The table lists the original Chinese tokens and their corresponding English translations for each focal construct, documenting the operationalization of textual indicators.

Table A1. Measurement scales used in Study 1.

Construct	Item code	Measurement item	Source
Employee-customer interaction	ECI1	To what extent were you involved by employees in close collaboration on development projects?	Adapted from Ref. [86]
	ECI2	To what extent were you communicating intensively with employees?	
Customer-employee rapport	CER1	In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee.	Ref. [69]
	CER2	This employee created a feeling of “warmth” in our relationship.	
	CER3	This employee related well to me.	
	CER4	I was comfortable interacting with this employee.	
Swift Guanxi	SG1	We can understand each other’s needs.	Adapted from Ref. [19]
	SG2	If I buy from this seller, he/she would provide a discount to me.	
	SG3	We maintain harmony.	
Affective brand experience	ABE1	This brand induces feelings and sentiments.	Ref. [1]
	ABE2	I do not have strong emotions for this brand. (Reverse)	
	ABE3	This brand is an emotional brand.	

All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = to a very large extent.

Table A2. Lexicon development in Python (in original Chinese text).

Employee–customer interaction		Customer–employee rapport		Swift Guanxi		Affective brand experience	
Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation
前台	Reception	舒心	Comforting	小哥哥	Young man	物超所值	Great value for money
提行李	Carry luggage	家一样	Like home	小哥	Younger brother	高端	High-end
拿行李	Pick up luggage	家的感觉	Feels like home	哥	Brother	高大上	Luxurious
主动	Initiative	住家	Homelike	小姐姐	Young lady	满意	Satisfied
沟通	Communicate	回家	Going home	姐	Sister	不会后悔	No regrets
升级	Upgrade	家的氛围	Homey atmosphere	妹妹	Younger sister	推荐入住	Recommended stay
打扫	Clean	亲切	Friendly	小妹妹	Little sister	还会选	Will choose again
安排	Arrange	热情	Warm	哥哥	Older brother	继续住	Continue to stay
礼物	Gift	温馨	Cozy	姐姐	Older sister	继续入住	Continue to check in
欢迎茶水	Welcome drink	家的温暖	Warmth of home	小弟弟	Little brother	继续选择	Continue to choose
甜汤	Sweet soup	贴心	Thoughtful	老板	Boss	不二选择	The only choice
照顾	Take care	暖心	Heartwarming	小伙子	Young guy	不会失望	Will not be disappointed

(To be continued on the next page)

(Continued)

Employee–customer interaction		Customer–employee rapport		Swift Guanxi		Affective brand experience	
Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation	Original Chinese texts	English translation
帮忙	Help	温暖	Warmth	朋友一样	Like a friend	还会来	Will come again
甜点	Dessert	体贴	Considerate	像朋友	Like a friend	体验很好	Good experience
赠送	Present	好客	Hospitable	像伙伴	Like a partner	性价比高	High cost-performance ratio
登记快	Quick check-in	细心	Attentive	像家人	Like family		
退房快	Quick check-out	体贴	Considerate	小伙伴	Little buddy		
有求必应	Accommodating	笑容	Smile	阿姨	Aunt		
送餐	Deliver meals	业务熟悉	Familiar with business	店家	Shopkeeper		
订餐	Order meals	服务质量好	Good service quality	店长	Manager		
接机	Airport pickup	效率高	High efficiency	帅哥	Handsome guy		
接送	Shuttle service	周到	Thoughtful	美女	Beautiful lady		
		周全	Comprehensive	Vicky*	Vicky		
		细致	Meticulous	Damon*	Damon		
		热情	Enthusiastic	刘现强*	Xianqiang Liu		
		到位	Appropriate	陈凤*	Feng Chen		
		贴心	Heartfelt				
		暖心	Heartwarming				
		可圈可点	Remarkable				
		主动积极	Proactive				
		和蔼	Amiable				
		亲切	Kind				
		人性化	Humanized				
		礼貌	Polite				
		耐心	Patient				
		和善	Kind				
		温柔	Gentle				
		面带微笑	Smiling				
		有求必应	Accommodating				
		客气	Polite				
		用心	Attentive				
		态度好	Good attitude				
		服务好	Good service				

* These words are names of hotel staff members that frequently appear in customer feedback. Chinese–English translations were facilitated through the use of ChatGPT 4.0.