# Test of Mediation and Moderation between Employee Empathy and Customers' Advocacy

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the impact of employee empathy on customers' advocacy directly and indirectly through customers' loyalty. Moreover, the interacting effect of customers' trust was verified between the association of customers' loyalty and advocacy. The attributes of the proposed model were examined in the context of first line employee and patients' interactions. A total of 220 responses were collected for analysis from the private hospitals of Peshawar. The model fitness was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis and hypotheses were examined. Findings confirmed the positive and significant impact of employee empathy on customers' advocacy. Further, the mediating effect was examined and found that loyalty partially mediates employee empathy and customers' advocacy. Additionally, trust was found a significant moderator between the association of customer loyalty and advocacy. Furthermore, findings revealed that trust based loyalty significantly and positively mediates employee empathy and customers' advocacy. Findings of the present study provide understanding for the service sector, particularly in healthcare, to enhance customers' loyalty, advocacy, and trust through service employee's empathic aptitude.

**Keywords:** Employee empathy, Service Eco-system, Customers' Loyalty, Customers' Advocacy, Trust-Based Loyalty, Healthcare, S-D Logic

Rapid growth of the service sector has made consumers more demanding which means that the concept of loyalty and advocacy is gaining more importance for marketing personnel (Van Lierop & El-Geneidy, 2016). Scholars and business society firmly believe that customers' satisfaction is essential for making customers' loyal (Vera & Trujillo, 2017), that is why companies are working hard to retain customers (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018). Furthermore, with the service-dominant (S-D) logic the consumer is seen as an active agent that engages and integrates resources with the brand to co-create the service (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Vargo, 2008; Wajid, Raziq, Malik, Malik, & Khurshid, 2019). Consumers interact through co-creation behaviors (Yi & Gong, 2013) in service contexts, that include dyadic service encounters, the servicescape and the wider service system (Akaka & Vargo, 2015). Although conceptual research has pointed towards the integration of resources, research is limited on the account as to how consumers' interactions in dyad lead towards their co-creation behaviors in the larger eco-system.

Service sector such as hotel, banks, restaurants or healthcare includes customer interaction with frontline employees. If customers' are dealt with care, courtesy, and empathy in service encounters, then such interactions may lead to a successful service outcome (Wieseke, Geigenmüller, & Kraus, 2012). Since service nature requires numbers of interactions to complete a single transaction, these interactions of frontline employees with customers are very crucial for successful outcomes (Lee, Comer, Dubinsky, & Schafer, 2011). Due to the importance of such interactions, frontline employees are held responsible, as they have the ability to make or damage the image of brand/service (Huang & Miao, 2016).

Previous research on frontline employee and customers' interactions proclaim that customer-centric approach is crucial in a service encounter for a successful service outcome and making customers loyal and advocate(Drollinger & B. Comer, 2013; Guenzi, De Luca, & Troilo, 2011; Wieseke et al., 2012). Similarly, Job Demand Control (JDC) theory and Job Demand Resource (JDR) theory suggest that a service employee in a service encounter may use empathic attitude for a successful service outcome (Bahadur, Aziz, & Zulfiqar, 2018; Itani & Inyang, 2015). Studies suggest that empathic behaviors of a frontline employee lead to customers' satisfaction and loyalty(Lee et al., 2011) and if the frontline employee behavior lacks empathy it may lead to customers' dissatisfaction (Agnihotri & Krush, 2015).

Likewise, companies work hard to build a positive connection by imparting trust and commitment, in order to make customers loyal, who eventually turn into advocates. Therefore, trust is considered one of the essential elements for relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) as its role in making customers' loyal is well documented (Bricci, Fragata, & Antunes, 2016; Hassan, Rafi, & Kazmi, 2016; Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra, 2018). Moreover, SD-Logic (SDL) theory suggests that service encounters such as healthcare, where customers actively involved in co-creation practices by interacting with first line employee, trust is considered crucial for a successful service outcome (R. J. Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Though loyalty is considered as one of the important elements for sustainable competitive advantage, but in healthcare loyalty alone may not be enough (Bleich, Gudzune, Bennett, Jarlenski, & Cooper, 2013). Hence, trust is very crucial in physician-patient relationship (Gilson, 2003) and a critical antecedent to behavior change and is connected to patient loyalty to physician advice, patient satisfaction, and continuity of care (Thom, Hall, & Pawlson, 2004). The direct relationship of trust and loyalty (Platonova, Kennedy, & Shewchuk, 2008; Ribbink, Van Riel, Liljander, & Streukens, 2004), employee empathy and loyalty (Bahadur et al., 2018) and empathy and trust (Feng, Lazar, & Preece, 2004; Halpern, 2003) has already been established in various context. However, empirical study on trust based loyalty in general and particularly in healthcare is very scarce. Hence, the present study aimed to examine the direct and indirect effect of employee empathy on customers' advocacy. Furthermore, to verify the mediating and moderating effect of trust based loyalty between the association of employee empathy and customers' advocacy.

## Problem Statement

Radical fluctuations in environmental factors and the rapid evolution of service sector over the last few years have forced the companies to focus more on relationship marketing by making customers' loyal and advocates. Since employees' empathy is related to customers' concern, therefore, it has received considerable attention from academicians and service sector(Agnihotri & Krush, 2015). Though employees' empathy is considered one of the significant variables in employee-customer interaction for a successful service encounter (Bahadur et al., 2018), efforts to investigate its effect on customers' loyalty and advocacy empirically is limited. Moreover, empirical evidence relating to the importance of trust as an interacting variable between the link of customers' loyalty and advocacy is very scant. Additionally, literature concerning trust based loyalty particularly in healthcare is equal to naught. Hence, the present research is an effort to fill that gap. This research aims to add the literature to service marketing by examining the effect of Employee Empathy on customers' advocacy through customers' loyalty in the healthcare context. Moreover, this research will contribute in verifying the role of trust based loyalty as a mediator between the relationship of employee empathy and customers' advocacy.

## Research Questions

1. Whether there is any significant impact of employee empathy on customers' advocacy in the healthcare context?
2. How customers' loyalty mediates the association between employee empathy and customers' advocacy?
3. Does customers' trust significantly moderates the relationship between loyalty and customers' advocacy
4. Whether the interaction of trust based loyalty significantly mediates the association of employee empathy and advocacy?

## Literature Review

**Employee Empathy**

Service production and delivery require social interaction between customer and employee (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). Empathy is considered an essential element for the success of such social interactions (Bahadur, Aziz & Zulfiqar, 2018). Empathy is defined as "a person's ability to sense another's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, to share other's emotional experience, and to react to the observed experiences of another person" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 317). Notwithstanding, a certain level of confusion concerning the nature of empathy, the social and psychological literature provides extensive evidence on the agreement of the two attributes of empathy first cognitive and second emotional (Jones & Shandiz, 2015; Wieseke et al., 2012). The cognitive ability is related to the employee capability to understand the mind and intentions of the customers (Daniels, et al., 2014). Whereas, the emotional attribute of empathy relates to the interpersonal concerns (Mayshak, Sharman, Zinkiewicz, & Hayley, 2017). Hence, the present study is seeing empathy as an independent variable and examines its effect on customers' advocacy through customers' loyalty.

**Employees Empathy Impact on Customers' Advocacy**

Based on the S-D logic literature actors within an ecosystem interact and integrate resources within a service system at the dyadic, servicescape and the ecosystem level (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Frow, McColl-Kennedy, & Payne, 2014). Customers for that matter engage on a dyadic level with the service front line employees to integrate resources in order to co-create the service (Plé, 2016). Customer also interacts through co-creation behaviors within these dyads (Yi & Gong, 2013) and larger eco-systems (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Furthermore, these interactions within particular employee-customer dyads can lead towards interactions across the wider eco-system(Brodie, Fehrer, Jaakkola, & Conduit, 2018; Li, Juric, & Brodie, 2017). Customer advocacy of the brand in social circles outside the immediate service encounter represents such behavior in the wider eco-system (Laud & Karpen, 2017). Based on the relationship theory in marketing Morgan and Hunt (1994) state that the perception of the interaction between the front line employee and the customer might lead to advocacy of the brand in the larger service ecosystem. Hence this study argues the perception of employee empathy in the customer dyadic interaction with them will lead to advocacy of the brand. Hence, it is assumed that (H1) Employee empathy optimistically effects customers' advocacy.

**Employees Empathy Impact on Customers' Loyalty**

Increase in competition and the rapid evolution of service sector over the past few years, customers become more demanding and hence the concept of relationship marketing, customers' loyalty and advocacy have gain importance in academic research and business context (Van Lierop & El-Geneidy, 2016). Employees' empathy is considered as one of the essential elements in a successful service encounter that leads towards customers' satisfaction and long lasting relationship (Vera & Trujillo, 2017). Studies on frontline employee-customer interaction suggest that employee empathic behavior contributes to customers' loyalty (Drollinger & B. Comer, 2013). In the lights of the above discussion, it is presumed that (H2) employee empathy is positively associated with customers' loyalty.

**Customers' Loyalty Impact on Customers' Advocacy**

Customers who feel comfortable in their relationships with their service providers can be expected to act as advocates for the service organization (Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001). Lawer and Knox (2006) define customer advocacy as "an advanced form of market-orientation that respond to the new drivers of consumer choice, involvement and knowledge". They further suggested that advocacy is a strong element for building and maintaining long term relationships. Positive word of mouth is considered as an ingredient of customers' loyalty (Amine, 1998) and customers' advocacy is considered as its extreme form (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hill, Provost, & Volinsky, 2006). Hence, it can be assumed from the above discussion, that (H3) customers' loyalty positively influences customers' advocacy.

**Employee Empathy, Customers' Loyalty and Advocacy**

Since employee empathic behavior is considered as an important element for a successful frontline employee and customer interaction in a service encounter for it leads towards customers' satisfaction and loyalty (Vera & Trujillo, 2017) and loyal customers may remain with the company for a longer period while using positive word of mouth. Positive word of mouth is considered as an extreme form of customers' advocacy(Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hill et al., 2006). Hence, from the above literature, it can be assumed that (H4) employee empathic behavior may lead to customers' loyalty that further leads to customers' advocacy.

**Customers Loyalty, Advocacy and Trust**

As discussed earlier, Service-dominant logic (SDL) suggests that in the service ecosystem various actors interact with each other, that leads to value co-creation practices (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Frow et al., 2014). Customer advocacy of the brand in social circles outside the immediate service encounter represents such behavior in the wider eco-system (Laud & Karpen, 2017). Based on the relationship theory in marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) that the perception of the interaction between the front line employee and the customer might lead to advocacy of the brand in the larger service ecosystem. Similarly, relationship marketing literature suggests that trust is an important factor in such interaction for building long term relation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Hence, keeping in view the above literature, it can be assumed that the strength of the association of customers' loyalty and advocacy will be increased with the moderating effect of trust.

**Theoretical Framework**

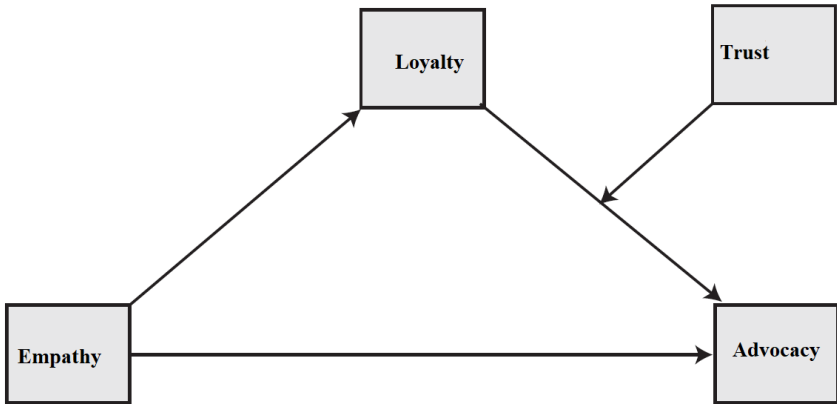Based on the literature review the theoretical framework for this study is as follows:



*Figure No. 1: Theoretical Framework*

**Hypotheses**

H1: Employee Empathy has an optimistic and straight effect on customers' advocacy.
H2: Loyalty significantly mediates the relationship between Employee Empathy and advocacy.
H3: customers' trust significantly moderates the relationship between loyalty and customers' advocacy even though the relationship is controlled for the effects of empathy
H4: The interaction between Loyalty and Trusty mediates the relationship between Empathy and advocacy.

**Research Methodology**

A total of 220 questionnaires were circulated in patients of private hospitals of Peshawar through convenient sampling technique. Three private hospitals selected for data collection. The target population consisted of those people who visited private hospitals for different treatments such as; hospitalized patients and their attendants. The variables selected for the study are employee empathy, customers' loyalty, advocacy, and trust.

**Research Instrument**

Employee empathy was measured with four items scale adopted from Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, and Sierra (2015). Scale adopted to measure customer loyalty was from the study of Foster and Cadogan (2000) which comprises of 9 items. Customer advocacy was measured through the scale adopted from Walz and Celuch (2010). Similarly, customers' trust scale contains 9 items and was adopted from Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010). The instrument was divided into two parts; ( 1) demographic characteristics and (2) items related to the present study variables. The sociodemographic variables were used as control variables in the hierarchal regression analysis.

**Data Analysis and Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table no 1 presents the descriptive properties and reliability of the variables. The Cronbach's alpha value for all selected variables is more than 0.70 shows that the instrument is reliable to adopt it for the survey.

Table No.1: Descriptive statistics, correlation, and reliability of the instruments

|  | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EMPT | 5.992 | 1.643 | (0.77) |  |  |  |
| TRUST | 28.484 | 5.768 | 0.569** | (0.839) |  |  |
| LOYL | 28.978 | 5.253 | 0.421** | 0.600** | (0.77) |  |
| Advocacy | 9.937 | 2.377 | 0.344** | 0.375** | 0.550** | (0.77) |

P<0.001

It is also noticed that Advocacy is positively related to all the variables of the study. All the correlation values are significant at a level of less than 0.001.

**Model Fit Indices**

Hu and Bentler (1999) Cutoff Criteria for Fit Indexes was used to evaluate the model fit indices. CMIN/DF between 5 and 3, CFI less than 0.95, SRMR less than 0.06, RMSEA less than 0.08 and PClose greater than 0.05 are the acceptable thresholds for model fitness.

Table 2: Model Fit Indices

|  | CMIN | DF | CMIN/DF | CFI | SRMR | RMSEA | PClose |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Factor Model | 1090.991 | 119 | 9.168 | 0.666 | 0.099 | 0.129 | <0.001 |
| 2 Factor Model | 804.506 | 118 | 6.818 | 0.764 | 0.082 | 0.109 | <0.001 |
| 3 Factor Model | 615.736 | 116 | 5.308 | 0.828 | 0.072 | 0.094 | <0.001 |
| 4 Factor Model | 432.998 | 112 | 3.866 | 0.9 | 0.055 | 0.076 | <0.001 |
| Model 1 | 1st factor (EMPT, TRUST, LOYL, Advocacy) | | | | | | |
| Model 2 | 1st factor (EMPT, TRUST), 2nd Factor (LOYL, Advocacy) | | | | | | |
| Model 3 | 1st factor (TRUST), 2nd Factor (LOYL, Advocacy), 3rd factor (EMPT) | | | | | | |
| Model 4 | 1st factor (TRUST), 2nd Factor (LOYL), 3rd factor (EMPT), 4th factor (Advocacy) | | | | | | |

It is observed that Model 4 that is the four-factor model has the best model fit indices (CMIN/DF=3.866, CFI = 0.9, SRMR = 0.055, RMSEA= 0.076, PClose <0.001) fulfilling the criteria presented by Hu and Bentler (1999).

**Direct and indirect effects**

SPSS process template was used to assess the moderated mediation model of the study. The hierarchal regression was used to evaluate the effects. The results are as follows in Table 3:

Table 3

|  | Model 1 | Model2 |
|---|---|---|
| Independent Variable | Loyalty | Advocacy |
| EMPT | 1.345** | 0.215** |
| LOYL |  | 0.342** |
| TRUST |  | 0.125* |
| LOYL x TRUST |  | 0.0045* |
| $r^2$ | 0.177** | 0.324** |
| F | 105.483 | 58.3589 |

*p<0.05, **p<0.01

Table 3 shows significant effects of independent variable empathy on the mediator loyalty (β=1.345, p<0.01). Furthermore, the effects of independent variable empathy (β=0.215, p<0.01), mediator loyalty (β=0.342, p<0.01), moderator trust (β=0.125, p<0.05) and the interaction term between loyalty and trust (β=0.0045, p<0.05) on the dependent variable advocacy are also significant. Based on the results of table 3 the direct effects of the empathy on advocacy were calculated which are also significant (β=0.215, p<0.01, LLCI=0.084 and ULCI=0.346). Conditional indirect effects of empathy on advocacy through loyalty and moderated by trust are also significant (β=0.288, p<0.01, LLCI=0.214 and ULCI=0.375). These effects were plotted in figure 2 which is as follows:
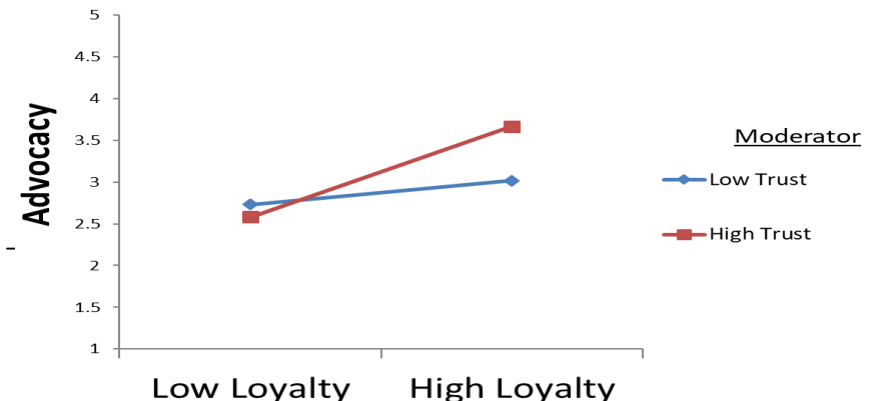
This figure shows that when loyalty is acting as a mediator and being positively and significantly influenced by empathy, its effect on advocacy is moderated by trust. These moderating influences of trust are strengthening in nature that is trust strengthens the positive relationship between loyalty and advocacy. Finally, the index of moderated mediation test was conducted to test this study model in which we have integrated both moderation and mediation. The index of moderated mediation calculated for our study is 0.060 and is significant with LLCI= 0.0014 and ULCI=0.011.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the fact that employee empathy is considered one of the important elements in value co-creation practice and in employee-customer interaction (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Frow et al., 2014), an empirical examination regarding employee empathy is limited (Meneses & Larkin, 2017). Since services are diverse, intangible and inseparable (Markovic et al., 2015), the healthcare service sector is an important sector for such study to be conducted due to the intensive nature of service employee-patients interaction.

The present study documented the impact of employee empathy on customers' advocacy and loyalty in the healthcare context. It further verifies the mediating and moderating effect of "trust-based loyalty" between the association of employee empathy and customers' advocacy.

The findings of the present study verify the role of employee empathy in making customers' advocates. Since, SDL suggests that customers are engaged in a service ecosystem through co-creation behavior (Plé, 2016; Yi & Gong, 2013). Customer advocacy of the brand in social circles outside the immediate service encounter represents such behavior in the wider eco-system (Laud & Karpen, 2017). Moreover, Relationship marketing suggests that interaction between frontline employee and customers might lead towards advocacy (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Loyal customers are those they use the services on a regular basis with going for alternatives (Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2017). The current study verified that the empathic behavior of frontline employee positively and significantly influences the customers' loyalty which is supported by preceding researchers (e.g,Bernardo, Llach, Marimon, & Alonso-Almeida, 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Su, Swanson, & Chen, 2016; Wieseke et al., 2012).

Moreover, the mediating effect of customers' loyalty was examined. Empirical findings confirm the significant positive effect of employee empathy on customers' advocacy (direct effect) and a positive significant impact on customers' loyalty that leads to customers' advocacy (Indirect effect). The findings supported by relationship theory (Laud & Karpen, 2017; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) that the interaction of service employee and customers might lead to advocacy. The empirical findings suggest that customers' loyalty partially mediates the link between employee empathy and customers' advocacy, an indicator that there may be another variable that may lead to advocacy.

Likewise, the moderating effect of trust was examined and it was found that trust significantly moderates the line between customers' loyalty and advocacy. It suggests that trust strengthens the positive effect of loyalty on advocacy which is supported by relationship marketing theory Morgan and Hunt (1994). Furthermore, the interaction of trust based loyalty significantly mediates the relationship of employee empathy and customers' loyalty (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Frow et al., 2014; Laud & Karpen, 2017; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Similarly, the mediating effect of trust based loyalty was examined and it was found that trust based loyalty significantly mediates the association of employee empathy and customers' advocacy. Hence, the findings of the present study propose that trust is more important than loyalty in healthcare. One may be loyal to a doctor and want him to treat ones' patient as the physician is very empathic, yet if trust level is not present he/she might not prefer that physician.

## Theoretical Contribution

The present study added literature regarding employee empathy and its outcomes such as customers' loyalty, advocacy, and trust in the healthcare context. Healthcare is providing services where patients' and frontline employee interaction is very crucial. The present study verifies the role of customers' loyalty as a mediator between the link of employee empathy and customers' advocacy. Furthermore, findings of the current study revealed the moderating effect of trust on the association of customers' loyalty and advocacy. Lastly, it contributed theoretically by proposing a new term "trust-based loyalty" particulary for healthcare, that significantly mediates employee empathy and customers' advocacy relationship.

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**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

       Though the research has some contribution towards knowledge, it has some limitation as well. Firstly, the data were collected from 220 patients is too low as compared to the number of patients as a whole in Pakistan. Moreover, data were collected only from patients, their attendants and recently discharged patients only, however, future research may consider the management and physician to overcome common method baisness. Further, the current study was limited to one employee characteristic that is employee empathy. Other employee characteristics such as employee expertise and reliability may also be considered to get a broader perspective of employee characteristics on customers behavior (Khan, Abbas, Gul, & Raja, 2015).

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