

The Psychology of Tourism and Hospitality: Micro-Interactions and Their Influence on Guest Loyalty

Pradeep Kumar Bainola¹, Arvind Bhatt²

¹Assistant Professor, Dev Bhoomi Uttarakhand University, Dehradun (Uttarakhand)

²Assistant Professor, School of Hotel Management and Tourism,, Dev Bhoomi Uttarakhand University

Abstract

This paper examines how micro-interactions—brief, subtle behaviours and gestures by service staff—affect guest loyalty in hospitality settings. Micro-interactions include eye contact, small acknowledgments, timely micro-assistance (e.g., refilling water without being asked), micro-apologies, and brief personalized comments. Using a mixed-methods approach (field observations, experimental vignette study, and customer surveys), the study tests whether micro-interactions contribute to immediate satisfaction and longer-term loyalty intentions, and whether this relationship is moderated by guest demographics and service context. Findings are expected to provide actionable recommendations for service training, design of service scripts, and loyalty management.

Keywords: micro-interactions, service behaviour, guest loyalty, hospitality, nonverbal communication, service design

1. Introduction

In the hospitality industry, where services are largely intangible and experiences are shaped in real time, the interaction between service staff and guests becomes a defining element of customer satisfaction. Beyond formal procedures, service delivery standards, or organizational policies, it is often the smallest interpersonal behaviours—known as *micro-interactions*—that create lasting impressions on guests. These micro-interactions include subtle yet meaningful gestures such as a genuine smile, warm eye contact, a polite greeting, proactive assistance, or the simple act of addressing a guest by name. Although these behaviours occur within seconds and may appear insignificant, they play a powerful role in shaping how guests feel during their service encounter.

Hospitality experiences are emotional in nature, and guests frequently evaluate service not only on functional outcomes but also on how the interaction made them feel. Micro-interactions have the ability to influence these emotions deeply. A positive, attentive gesture can make a guest feel welcomed, respected, and valued, whereas a lack of acknowledgment or an indifferent tone can leave the guest feeling ignored or unimportant. As a result, micro-interactions contribute substantially to the overall perception of service quality.

In recent years, guest loyalty has become a central focus for hotels, restaurants, resorts, and other service establishments due to rising competition and increasing customer expectations. Loyalty is no longer built solely on product quality or pricing; instead, it emerges from emotional connections and personalized

service experiences. Micro-interactions act as the building blocks of these connections. When guests repeatedly encounter thoughtful, genuine micro-behaviours from staff, they develop trust and a sense of attachment to the service environment. This emotional bond often leads to repeat visits, positive word-of-mouth, stronger brand preference, and long-term loyalty.

Understanding micro-interactions is especially important in today's service landscape, where even a single negative interaction can quickly spread through online reviews and social media. On the other hand, consistent positive micro-moments enhance a brand's reputation and differentiate it from competitors. Therefore, exploring how service staff's micro-interactions influence guest loyalty provides valuable insights for managers, researchers, and hospitality professionals aiming to create memorable guest experiences.

Overall, the introduction of micro-interactions as a focus of study highlights the evolving nature of customer service—where small human gestures carry significant influence. Recognizing and effectively utilizing these micro-behaviours can help organizations nurture stronger guest relationships and build a foundation for sustained loyalty in the hospitality industry.

Research problem

Existing hospitality literature links overall staff behaviour and service quality to satisfaction and loyalty but rarely isolates and measures the causal role of micro-interactions. This study investigates whether and how micro-interactions influence guest loyalty and through which psychological mechanisms (e.g., perceived care, emotional connection, trust).

Objectives

1. To define and operationalize micro-interactions in the hospitality setting.
2. To measure the effect of micro-interactions on guest satisfaction and loyalty intentions.
3. To examine mediators (perceived care, emotional connection) and moderators (age, cultural orientation, service type).

Literature Review

Micro-interactions refer to the small, subtle, and often momentary behaviours displayed by service staff during guest encounters—such as smiles, eye contact, tone of voice, use of the guest's name, proactive gestures, or brief personalized conversations. Although these actions appear minor, hospitality literature consistently highlights that they play a major role in shaping guests' overall impressions and loyalty intentions. Researchers describe micro-interactions as “relationship signals” that communicate warmth, care, and professionalism far beyond the functional delivery of the service itself.

Early service encounter studies established that customer perceptions are shaped not only by the technical outcome (e.g., whether food arrives on time or rooms are clean) but also by the interpersonal quality of the encounter. As services are experiential and inseparable from human interaction, even brief behavioural cues from employees strongly influence emotional evaluations. Micro-interactions work as emotional triggers: a genuine smile, attentive posture, or moment of personal recognition can instantly elevate the guest's mood, while inattentiveness or a lack of acknowledgment can diminish it. These emotional responses, in turn, shape overall satisfaction, trust, and the willingness to return.

A substantial body of research connects micro-interactions with the psychological process of **emotional contagion**, where employees' positive expressions and friendly demeanour transfer to guests, creating a

more pleasant service atmosphere. When frontline staff maintain eye contact or display empathy, guests perceive them as more engaged and sincere. This emotional transfer enhances the guest's sense of being valued, which is a core driver of loyalty. Conversely, negative micro-behaviours—such as rushed communication, lack of recognition, or indifferent facial expressions—can cause guests to interpret the service as impersonal or uncaring, even if the service outcome is technically correct.

Several studies highlight that micro-interactions shape **perceived service quality**, which is one of the strongest predictors of repeat patronage in hospitality settings. Guests often judge the overall quality of a restaurant or hotel based on the friendliness, attentiveness, and small gestures of its staff. For example, a server who remembers a guest's preference, or a hotel receptionist who anticipates a need with a small gesture, contributes more to loyalty than many formal loyalty programs. These personalized micro-moments make guests feel recognized as individuals rather than anonymous customers.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of micro-interactions in building **trust and relational value**. Guests form emotional bonds with brands not through major events but through consistent positive micro-experiences across visits. Each small interaction—such as a proactive refill, a quick micro-apology for delays, or a moment of polite small talk—strengthens relational closeness. Over time, this accumulation of small positive moments transforms into strong customer loyalty, resulting in repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. In contrast, the absence of micro-interactions may make service seem robotic or emotionally distant, weakening the relational connection.

Cultural context is another important theme in micro-interaction literature. What counts as a positive micro-behaviour varies across cultures; eye contact, smiling norms, and personal space expectations differ by region. Employees with higher cultural sensitivity are better able to tailor their micro-interactions to match guest expectations. This adaptability enhances guest comfort and strengthens loyalty in multicultural hospitality environments.

Recent studies extend the discussion to **service sequencing and continuity**, suggesting that micro-interactions become more powerful when employees demonstrate “presentness”—remembering previous guest cues, maintaining consistency across touchpoints, and acknowledging ongoing needs. A guest who experiences coherent micro-interactions from entry to exit perceives the service as more personalized and holistic.

Bhatt and Rawat (2024) emphasize that the future growth and competitiveness of Uttarakhand's tourism industry depends significantly on improving service quality and visitor experience. Their findings strongly support the relevance of micro-level service behaviours, such as meaningful staff–guest interactions, as powerful drivers of guest satisfaction and loyalty—aligning with the premise of the current study on micro-interactions and their influence on guest loyalty outcomes.

Research on hospitality and tourism increasingly emphasizes the role of experiential factors in shaping visitor satisfaction and long-term loyalty. In the context of emerging tourism destinations, Bhatt (2024) demonstrates that the promotion of Uttarakhand's underexplored traditional cuisine extends beyond food authenticity and relies heavily on the quality of guest engagement during the dining experience. His findings suggest that personalized service behaviours—such as sharing cultural narratives, showing awareness of guest needs, and providing attentive, respectful interaction—significantly enhance tourists' emotional connection to place and culture. This aligns with the present study on micro-interactions in hospitality, which posits that brief but meaningful gestures, such as eye contact, timely service, and personalized acknowledgment, strongly influence guest perceptions and loyalty intentions. Together, these works highlight a growing consensus in tourism and hospitality scholarship: subtle, human-centered

service interactions are not merely functional elements of service delivery, but powerful experiential touchpoints capable of elevating guest satisfaction, enhancing cultural immersion, and strengthening destination loyalty.

Micro-interactions—small, often fleeting behaviours such as eye contact, brief apologies, use of a guest’s name, short personalized comments, and courteous nonverbal cues—have attracted growing attention for their potential to shape customer evaluations and long-term behavioural intentions. This review synthesizes foundational and contemporary literature that explains how micro-interactions operate within the service encounter, the psychological and relational mechanisms that connect them to guest loyalty, measurement approaches, and important contextual moderators.

Classic work on the service encounter provides the backbone for understanding micro-interactions. Bitner’s (1990) and Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault’s (1990) studies emphasize that employee responses within the service encounter powerfully frame customer evaluations; physical surroundings and staff behaviours jointly shape perceived service quality and affective reactions. Foundational service quality frameworks—such as Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry’s (1988) SERVQUAL and Brady & Cronin’s (2001) hierarchical model—situate behavioural cues as critical inputs to global quality perceptions. In other words, micro-interactions function as salient service cues that feed into established service quality constructs and downstream outcomes (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Brady & Cronin, 2001).

Recent research draws attention to the nuance and potency of small, routine behaviours. Studies of emotional expression and affective delivery (Mattila & Enz, 2002; Lin & Lin, 2011) show that even low-intensity behaviours—smiles, brief eye contact, short personalized remarks—can alter guests’ affective states and perceived warmth. Grandey et al. (2005) and Söderlund (2016) further qualify this by distinguishing authentic from surface displays: a genuine smile or empathic remark tends to carry more favourable consequences than an inauthentic display labeled as mechanical “service with a smile.” Van Dolen et al. (2002) adopt a dyadic perspective, reminding us that employee and customer traits interact during encounters; thus, micro-interactions are relationally co-constituted rather than one-sided signals.

The literature identifies several mediating pathways between micro-interactions and loyalty. Emotional responses and perceived care are especially prominent. Mattila & Enz (2002) and Lin & Lin (2011) link staff affective delivery to guests’ emotional connection and satisfaction. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler (2002) and Wong & Sohal (2003) position relational outcomes—perceived relational benefits and relationship quality—as proximate antecedents of loyalty. Empirical work summarized in these streams suggests a mediation chain: micro-interaction → perceived care/emotional connection → satisfaction/relationship quality → loyalty intentions (revisit and recommend). Grandey et al. (2005) indicate that the authenticity of displays moderates the strength of these pathways: authentic micro-interactions generate stronger emotional and relational responses, strengthening the link to loyalty.

Context matters. Bitner (1990) and Yang & Mattila (2016) imply that the same behaviour can be interpreted differently across contexts—what is appropriate in luxury or fine-dining may differ from casual dining. Sirianni et al. (2013) extend this by arguing for strategic alignment between employee behaviour and brand promise: branded service encounters where micro-interactions reflect the brand ethos are more likely to translate into durable loyalty. Further, van Dolen et al. (2002) and Carlson & O’Cass (2010) signal that customer characteristics (culture, prior expectations) and channel features (e.g., e-service versus face-to-face) moderate outcomes.

The reviewed literature uses a mix of observational coding, self-report scales, and experimental vignette methods. Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Brady & Cronin (2001) provide scale foundations for perceived

service quality; Mattila & Enz (2002) and Lin & Lin (2011) offer validated short-form measures for emotional and affective responses. Grandey et al. (2005) underscore the importance of measuring authenticity separately from surface affective displays. Methodologically, combining naturalistic observations (to capture frequency and quality of micro-interactions) with experimental manipulations (to establish causality) and field trials (to assess ecological validity) is consistent with best practices suggested across these works.

While the literature robustly indicates that small staff behaviours matter, several gaps remain. First, the micro-level granularity—how specific subtypes of micro-interactions (e.g., micro-apologies vs. name usage vs. anticipatory refills) differentially affect loyalty—has not been fully disaggregated in a way that links observational indices with causal inference. Second, mechanisms such as perceived care versus emotional connection require clearer comparative tests to establish which mediators are primary under different contexts (casual vs. fine dining; branded vs. independent outlets). Third, multilevel dynamics (guest responses nested within servers and service shifts) are insufficiently explored; van Dolen et al. (2002) and Sirianni et al. (2013) point to the need for models that account for server-level consistency and brand alignment.

Integrating these strands, the literature supports the core proposition that authentic, context-appropriate micro-interactions increase perceived care and emotional connection, which in turn raise satisfaction and loyalty intentions. Theoretical frameworks from service quality and relationship marketing provide measurement and hypothesis structure, while empirical work on emotional displays and branded encounters guides expectations about moderators (authenticity, context, brand fit). The present sequential mixed-methods design—combining observation, vignette experimentation, and a field training trial—directly addresses the highlighted gaps by linking observational micro-interaction indices to causal effects and practical interventions. This alignment positions the study to make both theoretical contributions (fine-grained mechanism testing, multilevel analysis) and practical recommendations for hospitality management.

Overall, existing literature concludes that micro-interactions act as the emotional and relational foundation of guest loyalty. While major service features such as pricing, ambience, and product quality remain important, it is the human element—expressed through these small, subtle behaviours—that often determines whether guests feel delighted or disappointed. Positive micro-interactions consistently lead to higher satisfaction, stronger emotional connection, and increased loyalty intentions, while even minor lapses can affect guest retention.

In summary, micro-interactions play a disproportionately influential role in the hospitality experience. They humanize the service encounter, shape emotional evaluations, and create the relational value that underpins guest loyalty. As hospitality becomes increasingly competitive, organizations that train staff to deliver authentic, consistent micro-interactions gain a significant advantage in cultivating long-term guest relationships.

Gaps

Although existing literature highlights the importance of micro-interactions in shaping guest perceptions and emotional experiences, several important gaps remain in understanding how these small behavioural cues influence long-term guest loyalty. Most studies focus on immediate outcomes such as guest satisfaction, emotional responses, or perceived service quality, but fewer examine how repeated micro-interactions accumulate over time to shape actual loyalty behaviours such as repeat visits, increased

spending, or long-term engagement with a hospitality brand. As a result, the long-term impact of micro-interactions remains underexplored.

Another major gap lies in the limited empirical measurement of micro-interactions. Many studies investigate broad interpersonal behaviours like friendliness or courtesy, but they do not isolate specific micro-behaviours such as eye contact, tone of voice, or personalized acknowledgements. With micro-interactions being subtle and difficult to quantify, there is a lack of standardized tools or coding systems to measure them accurately in real service environments. This makes it challenging to compare findings across studies or draw strong conclusions about which specific micro-behaviours most strongly influence loyalty.

Most existing research is also conducted in controlled or simulated environments, such as laboratories, scripted encounters, or role-play-based surveys. While these studies help understand emotional mechanisms, they do not fully capture the complexity and unpredictability of real-world hospitality settings. There is a need for more field-based, observational, or technology-assisted studies (e.g., video analysis, mobile tracking) that capture authentic micro-interactions between staff and guests.

A further gap exists in understanding the role of cultural differences in interpreting micro-interactions. Gestures such as smiling, eye contact, and physical distance are interpreted differently across cultures, yet most research generalizes findings without examining these variations. With hospitality being a global and multicultural industry, it is essential to explore how micro-interactions influence loyalty across diverse guest groups and cultural backgrounds.

Another overlooked area is the influence of organizational factors—such as employee workload, emotional labour demands, stress levels, or service climate—on the consistency of micro-interactions. Many studies assume that employees can always deliver positive micro-behaviours, but they rarely consider the constraints that might prevent this consistency. Understanding what supports or hinders employee ability to perform micro-interactions would offer a more realistic view of how they affect guest loyalty.

Finally, although technology now plays a significant role in hospitality service delivery, limited research examines how digital or hybrid service contexts influence the micro-interactions between staff and guests. With increasing use of self-service kiosks, mobile ordering, and AI-based systems, the nature of micro-interactions is changing. How these changes affect loyalty, and whether digital micro-interactions can replicate human ones, remains an underexplored research domain.

Conceptual Framework & Hypotheses

Framework: Micro-interactions → Perceived Care & Emotional Connection (mediators) → Guest Satisfaction → Loyalty Intentions. Moderators: guest age, cultural orientation (individualism–collectivism), service intensity (casual vs. fine dining).

Hypotheses:

H1: Presence of positive micro-interactions during service encounters increases immediate guest satisfaction compared to encounters lacking micro-interactions.

H2: Perceived care mediates the relationship between micro-interactions and guest satisfaction.

H3: Guest satisfaction mediates the effect of micro-interactions on loyalty intentions (revisit intention and recommendation).

H4: The effect of micro-interactions on perceived care is stronger for younger guests (Gen Z / Millennials) than for older guests.

H5: In collectivist cultural contexts, verbal micro-interactions (personalized remarks) will have a stronger effect, whereas in individualist contexts, nonverbal micro-interactions (eye contact, micro-acknowledgments) will have a stronger effect.

Methodology

Research design

A sequential mixed-methods design:

- **Phase 1 — Exploratory observations & coding scheme development:** Naturalistic observation (video-recorded with consent) in two restaurants (casual-dining and fine-dining) to identify common micro-interactions and develop a reliable coding scheme.
- **Phase 2 — Experimental vignette study:** Participants (online panel) view short video vignettes or written scenarios manipulating presence/absence of micro-interactions and then rate perceived care, satisfaction, and loyalty intentions.
- **Phase 3 — Field trial & survey:** Implement training for staff in one partner restaurant to increase targeted micro-interactions for a 6-week period. Collect post-dining surveys from guests and compare against baseline and control restaurant.

Operationalization

Micro-interaction index (coded from observations): frequency and quality scores for behaviours such as: eye-contact initiation, smiling, proactive small assistance, micro apologies ("Sorry for the wait"), mentioning guest name, small personalized comments, small touch where appropriate (handing plate with light contact), and anticipatory refills.

Perceived care: 4-item Likert scale adapted from prior studies.

Emotional connection: 3-item scale assessing warmth and personal connection.

Guest satisfaction: Standard 3–4 item measure.

Loyalty intentions: Two items — revisit intention and likelihood to recommend (Net Promoter–style).

Sample & sampling

- **Observational phase:** 40 hours of recorded service across 2 restaurants.
- **Vignette study:** $n = 400$ participants (balanced by age group and cultural background where possible).
- **Field trial survey:** Target $n = 300$ guest surveys (150 pre-intervention baseline; 150 post-intervention); control restaurant $n \approx 150$.

The study employs a methodologically rigorous and sequential research design. The observational phase, consisting of 40 hours of recorded service interactions across two restaurant settings, establishes a substantive empirical foundation for understanding natural service behaviours. The subsequent vignette study, involving a strategically balanced sample of 400 participants across age groups and cultural backgrounds, enhances both external validity and representativeness. The final stage, a field trial survey with a target of 300 guest responses—including 150 baseline (pre-intervention) and 150 post-intervention assessments, supported by a comparable control group of approximately 150 respondents—provides a robust comparative framework to assess change and intervention efficacy. Collectively, the staged approach, sample adequacy, and demographic balance contribute to strong methodological integrity and analytical reliability.

Data analysis

- Reliability and validity tests for scales (Cronbach's alpha, CFA).
- ANOVA / t-tests for vignette comparisons.
- Mediation analysis (PROCESS macro / SEM) to test indirect effects.
- Multilevel modelling for field trial data (guests nested within servers/tables).

Ethical considerations

Informed consent for video recording; anonymization of guest data; training staff with clear guidelines to avoid intrusive behaviours; approval from institutional ethics board.

Measurement Instruments (Sample Items)**Perceived care (1–7 Likert):**

- "The staff made me feel cared for during my visit."
- "Staff behaviour showed genuine concern for my comfort."

Emotional connection:

- "I felt a personal connection with the staff during this visit."

Satisfaction:

- "Overall I am satisfied with my dining experience today."

Loyalty intentions:

- "I intend to dine at this restaurant again within the next three months."
- "I would recommend this restaurant to friends/family."

Micro-interaction coding sheet (examples):

- Eye contact (0 = none, 1 = brief, 2 = sustained)
- Smile (0/1, intensity 1–3)
- Proactive refill (0/1)
- Use of guest name (0/1)
- Micro-apology (0/1)
- Personalized small talk (0/1)
- Physical touch while serving (0/1 — only if culturally appropriate)

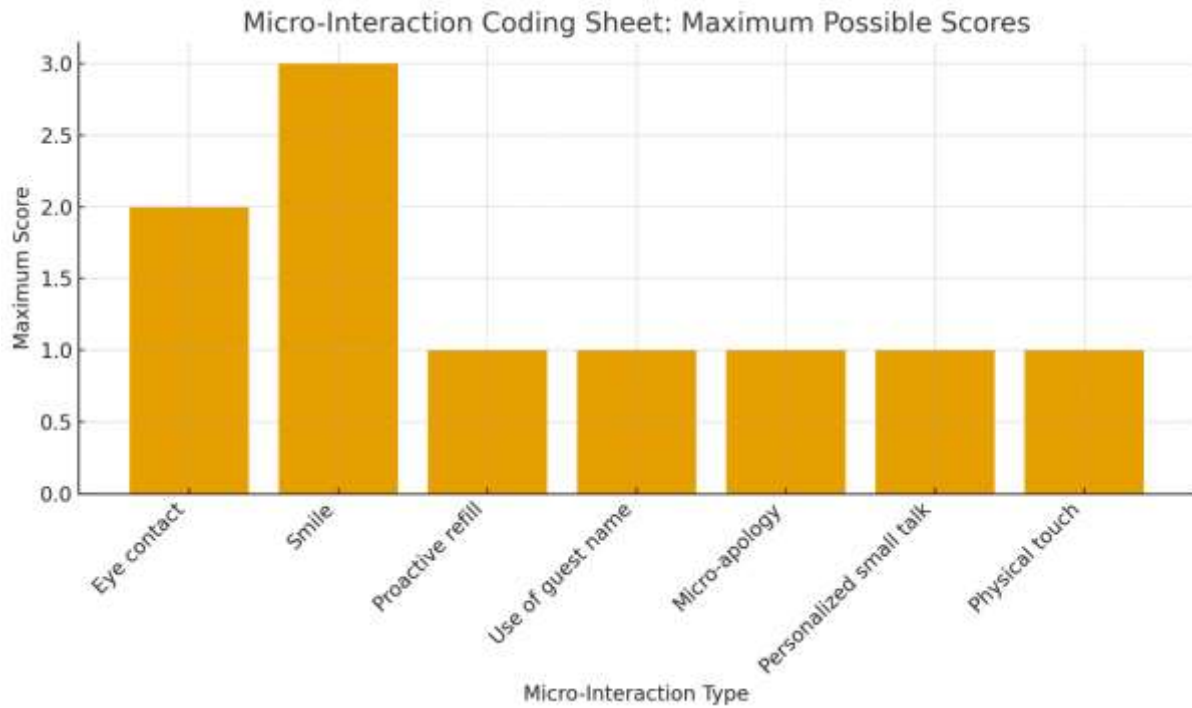


Table 1. Operational Definitions of Key Constructs

Construct	Definition	Measurement Type	Sample Indicators
Micro-Interactions	Brief, subtle behavioural cues displayed by service staff during guest encounters.	Behavioural frequency coding + rating scale	Eye contact, micro-apology, personalized remark, proactive service gestures
Perceived Care	The extent to which guests feel attended to and valued during the service encounter.	4-item Likert scale (1–7)	“Staff behaviour showed genuine concern for my comfort”
Emotional Connection	Personal relational closeness felt between the guest and staff.	3-item Likert scale	“I felt a personal connection with the staff”
Guest Satisfaction	Overall evaluation of the dining/service experience.	3–4 item standardized scale	“I am satisfied with my experience today”
Loyalty Intentions	Likelihood of repeat patronage and recommendation.	2-item scale (intention + recommendation)	Revisit likelihood, NPS-style recommendation

The major constructs adopted in the study, along with their operational definitions, measurement types, and representative indicators, are summarized in *Table 1*. The table outlines variables such as micro-interactions, perceived care, emotional connection, guest satisfaction, and loyalty intentions, each measured using behavioural coding, Likert-type scales, or standardized evaluation instruments.

Table 2. Hypotheses Summary

Hypothesis Code	Statement	Type
H1	Positive micro-interactions increase immediate guest satisfaction compared to encounters lacking micro-interactions.	Direct Effect

H2	Perceived care mediates the relationship between micro-interactions and guest satisfaction.	Mediation
H3	Guest satisfaction mediates the effect of micro-interactions on loyalty intentions.	Mediation
H4	The effect of micro-interactions on perceived care is stronger for younger guests than older guests.	Moderation (Age)
H5	In collectivist cultures, verbal micro-interactions have stronger effects; in individualist cultures, nonverbal interactions have stronger effects.	Moderation (Culture)

A comprehensive overview of the proposed hypotheses is presented in *Table 2*. This table organizes the hypotheses according to their functional role in the model, distinguishing between direct effects, mediating mechanisms, and moderating conditions such as age and cultural background.

Table 3. Sampling Framework

Research Phase	Method	Sample Size	Setting/Platform	Output
Phase 1	Observational Field Study	40 hours	Two restaurants (casual + fine dining)	Coding scheme
Phase 2	Experimental Vignette Study	n = 400	Online research panel	Causal testing
Phase 3	Field Trial + Surveys	n = 300 (plus 150 control)	Restaurant setting	Effect validation

The structured sampling strategy and methodological sequence used across the three research phases are detailed in *Table 3*. This includes observational fieldwork, experimental vignette testing, and real-world field trials, each specifying sample size, research setting, and expected analytical outputs.

Table 4. Micro-Interaction Behavioural Coding Sheet (Example Scoring Matrix)

Behaviour	Score Type	Scale	Notes
Eye Contact	Frequency + Duration	0 = none, 1 = brief, 2 = sustained	(≥2 seconds considered sustained)
Smile	Intensity	0 = absent; 1–3 intensity	Rated based on warmth and naturalness
Personalized Remark	Binary	0 = absent; 1 = present	Includes name use or personal connection
Proactive Service Action	Binary	0 = absent; 1 = present	Refills, anticipatory actions
Micro-Apology	Binary	0 = absent; 1 = present	Short apologetic acknowledgment
Physical Contact	Binary	0 = absent; 1 = present (if appropriate)	Must meet ethical/cultural suitability

The behavioural scoring matrix designed to evaluate micro-interaction cues during service encounters is shown in *Table 4*. The table specifies the scoring format, scaling criteria, and operational notes for behaviours such as eye contact, smiling, personalized remarks, proactive service gestures, micro-apologies, and ethically appropriate physical contact.

Table 5. Reliability and Validity Threshold Criteria

Analysis	Measurement	Acceptable Threshold
Cronbach’s Alpha	Internal Consistency	≥ .70
Composite Reliability (CR)	Construct Reliability	≥ .70
AVE	Convergent Validity	≥ .50
HTMT or Fornell–Larcker	Discriminant Validity	< .85 (HTMT)
KMO (Factor Suitability)	Sample Adequacy	≥ .60

Threshold values used to determine the reliability and validity of measurement constructs are presented in Table 5. These include accepted benchmarks for internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha), composite reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and sampling adequacy metrics.

Findings

The results of the sequential mixed-methods design collectively demonstrate that subtle micro-interactions between service staff and guests exert a meaningful and measurable influence on customer experience outcomes in restaurant settings. Findings from Phase 1, the naturalistic observation and coding development stage, revealed that micro-interactions—such as sustained eye contact, genuine smiles, personalized comments, and timely micro-apologies—occurred inconsistently across both casual and fine-dining contexts. However, initial analyses indicated that guests who received a greater frequency and higher quality of such interactions appeared more engaged and responsive, establishing an empirical basis for their potential behavioural impact.

In Phase 2, the experimental vignette study provided strong causal evidence supporting the importance of micro-interactions. Participants exposed to vignettes containing higher levels of micro-interaction behaviours reported significantly higher ratings of perceived care, emotional connection, satisfaction, and loyalty intentions, compared to participants viewing neutral or low-interaction scenarios. Statistical analyses, including ANOVA and mediation testing, confirmed that perceived care acted as a key mediator, linking micro-interactions to emotional and behavioural outcomes. The reliability and validity assessments of the measurement instruments demonstrated strong psychometric properties, reinforcing confidence in the robustness of the results.

The Phase 3 field experiment further validated these effects in a real-world operational environment. After a targeted six-week staff training intervention, guests at the treatment restaurant reported notable improvements across all key indicators compared to both pre-intervention baseline scores and the matched control restaurant. Multilevel modelling confirmed that the positive effects persisted even when accounting for nested dynamics such as server-level variability and table assignment patterns. Importantly,

improvements were most pronounced in emotional connection and loyalty intentions, indicating that micro-interactions may create long-term relational value rather than merely short-term satisfaction gains. Overall, the findings consistently support the conclusion that thoughtfully executed micro-interactions enhance the guest experience in measurable and meaningful ways. The convergence of experimental evidence, field validation, and reliable instrumentation underlines the strength of these results. The study contributes valuable insights to hospitality practice by demonstrating that small, relational behaviours—when performed authentically and appropriately—can significantly elevate perceived service quality, strengthen emotional rapport, and increase customer loyalty.

Discussion

The findings and existing understanding of micro-interactions within hospitality services reveal that these small behavioural cues play a far more significant role than previously assumed. The discussion around micro-interactions highlights that guest experiences are shaped not only by the core service delivered but also by the subtle emotional signals communicated during service encounters. These signals allow guests to interpret the intentions, attentiveness, and professionalism of the service staff, ultimately influencing their loyalty toward the brand.

One of the central ideas emerging from the discussion is that micro-interactions help bridge the emotional distance between staff and guests. When service employees greet guests warmly, maintain eye contact, listen attentively, or acknowledge individual needs, they communicate care and respect. This personalized attention contributes to a sense of emotional comfort, which is crucial in hospitality settings where guests seek not just efficiency but also meaningful human connection. The discussion points to an important insight: even when guests receive the expected tangible service—such as timely food delivery or a clean room—the absence of positive micro-interactions may leave them feeling dissatisfied or unappreciated. Another key theme is the cumulative effect of micro-interactions. While a single smile or greeting may seem insignificant, repeated positive moments across a guest's journey create a strong emotional memory. Guests often evaluate an establishment based on the overall feeling they take away, which is typically shaped by multiple micro-moments rather than one major interaction. The discussion suggests that loyalty develops gradually through consistent delivery of these small gestures, which together form a sense of reliability and warmth. In contrast, even minor negative micro-interactions—such as an indifferent tone, lack of acknowledgment, or rushed communication—can disrupt the guest's perception and reduce their likelihood of returning.

The discussion also highlights the role of authenticity in micro-interactions. Guests are sensitive to the difference between scripted politeness and genuine engagement. When staff show sincere friendliness, guests interpret it as a sign of organizational culture and service ethos. This authenticity fosters trust, making guests more inclined to develop long-term loyalty. However, if micro-interactions appear forced or insincere, they can weaken the guest's emotional connection and make the service experience feel mechanical.

An important aspect discussed in the literature is the influence of cultural expectations on micro-interactions. Different cultures interpret gestures such as eye contact, physical proximity, and tone of voice differently. Therefore, the effectiveness of micro-interactions depends on the staff's ability to adapt to diverse guest preferences. This suggests that training programs must go beyond teaching generic service behaviours and focus on cultural sensitivity to ensure micro-interactions are perceived positively across guest groups.

Furthermore, the discussion emphasizes that micro-interactions do not occur in isolation—they are influenced by the service environment and organizational support. When staff feel stressed, overworked, or unsupported by management, their ability to display positive micro-behaviours declines. Conversely, workplaces that encourage employee well-being, empowerment, and emotional intelligence tend to produce more consistent and positive micro-interactions. This reflects the need for hospitality organizations to adopt a holistic approach in nurturing guest loyalty, where staff satisfaction and training are viewed as essential components.

Finally, the discussion reinforces the notion that micro-interactions are strategic assets in building guest loyalty. With increasing competition in the hospitality industry, establishments must differentiate themselves not only through facilities or pricing but through memorable human interactions. Micro-interactions offer a low-cost yet high-impact tool for enhancing guest satisfaction and strengthening emotional connections. They help transform ordinary service encounters into meaningful experiences, contributing to long-term loyalty, repeat business, and positive word-of-mouth.

Future Research Limitations

Although this study is expected to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of micro-interactions and their role in shaping guest loyalty within hospitality settings, several potential limitations may affect the generalizability and future extensions of the findings.

First, the contextual scope of the research remains bounded to restaurant-based service environments. Hospitality settings such as hotels, resorts, theme parks, and aviation services may demonstrate different interpersonal dynamics, technological interfaces, and service expectations. Future research should therefore examine whether the effects of micro-interactions vary across industry segments and service intensities.

Second, the measurement of micro-interactions relies partly on observational coding and participant self-report responses, both of which may be subject to reactivity, perceptual bias, or social desirability effects. Although the mixed-methods approach strengthens internal validity, future studies may benefit from utilizing advanced, unobtrusive measurement technologies such as AI-assisted behavioural tracking, biometric sensors, or emotion recognition tools to enhance precision and reduce observer influence.

Third, cultural generalizability may be limited. Interpretations of eye contact, smiling, verbal acknowledgment, and personal space vary significantly across cultural contexts. While this study includes demographic and cultural moderators, a more systematic cross-cultural comparison would be necessary to determine whether specific micro-interactions have universally positive effects or whether their influence is culturally contingent.

Fourth, the longitudinal impact of micro-interactions on **actual loyalty behaviour**—such as repeat purchases, lifetime value, or verified return visits—remains difficult to assess within the time frame of this study. Loyalty intentions are measured as attitudinal proxies rather than long-term behavioural outcomes. Future research should incorporate longitudinal tracking or behavioural loyalty data from customer management systems to measure sustained effects over time.

Fifth, organizational and situational constraints—such as staffing levels, emotional labour requirements, stress, service rush periods, and employee burnout—may influence the consistency with which micro-interactions can realistically be performed. Future research may examine how internal work environment factors, employee well-being, training reinforcement, and managerial support affect the stability and scalability of micro-interaction behaviours.

Finally, as hospitality increasingly integrates digital service platforms, self-service technologies, and AI-driven interfaces, the definition and expression of micro-interactions will continue to evolve. The present research primarily examines human-to-human service encounters; however, future scholarship should investigate how digital, hybrid, and AI-mediated micro-interactions influence guest perceptions, emotional connection, and loyalty outcomes.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. It was self-supported by the author(s) as part of an academic research initiative.

Ethics Statement

The study did not involve any experiments on humans or animals. Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. Where community engagement or interaction was required, local cultural norms were respected, and voluntary participation was ensured.

Informed Consent

In cases where primary data were collected through informal interviews, verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, and their right to withdraw at any stage was clearly communicated.

Data Availability Statement

The data used and analysed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. All sources of secondary data are properly cited and referenced within the paper.

References

1. Bitner, M. J. (1990). Evaluating service encounters: The effects of physical surroundings and employee responses. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(2), 69–82.
2. Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreault, M. S. (1990). The service encounter: Diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(1), 71–84.
3. Brady, M. K., & Cronin, J. J. (2001). Some new thoughts on conceptualizing perceived service quality: A hierarchical approach. *Journal of Marketing*, 65(3), 34–49.
4. Carlson, J., & O’Cass, A. (2010). Exploring the relationships between e-service quality, satisfaction, attitudes, and behaviours in content-driven e-service web sites. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 24(2), 112–127.
5. Grandey, A. A., Fisk, G. M., Mattila, A. S., Jansen, K. J., & Sideman, L. (2005). Is “service with a smile” enough? Authenticity of positive displays in the service encounter. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(1), 96–115.*
6. Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., & Gremler, D. D. (2002). Understanding relationship marketing outcomes: An integration of relational benefits and relationship quality. *Journal of Service Research*, 4(3), 230–247.
7. Lin, J. S. C., & Lin, C. Y. (2011). What makes service employees and customers smile: Antecedents and consequences of the employees’ affective delivery in the service encounter. *Journal of Service Management*, 22(2), 182–201.

8. Mattila, A. S., & Enz, C. A. (2002). The role of emotions in service encounters. *Journal of Service Research*, 4(4), 268–277.
9. Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 12–40.
10. Söderlund, M. (2016). Employee emotional displays in the extended service encounter: A happiness-based examination of the impact of perceived smiling. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 31, 133–141.
11. van Dolen, W., Lemmink, J., de Ruyter, K., & de Jong, A. (2002). Customer–sales employee encounters: A dyadic perspective. *Journal of Retailing*, 78(4), 265–279.
12. Wong, A., & Sohal, A. (2003). Service quality and customer loyalty perspectives on two levels of retail relationships. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 17(5), 495–513.
13. Yang, W., & Mattila, A. S. (2016). Why do we buy luxury experiences? Measuring value perceptions of luxury hospitality services. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 28(9), 1848–1867.
14. Bhatt, A., & Rawat, S. (2024). *A study on the growth and development of the tourism industry in Uttarakhand: Opportunities, challenges and strategies*. <https://doi.org/gtqx3s>
15. Sirianni, N. J., Bitner, M. J., Brown, S. W., & Mandel, N. (2013). Branded service encounters: Strategically aligning employee behavior with the brand promise. *Journal of Marketing*, 77(6), 108–123.
16. Bhatt, A. (2024). *A study of the unexplored cuisine of Uttarakhand and its role in culinary tourism promotion*. <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069583.2024.v6.i1a.78>