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Emotional Intelligence and Team Cohesion with Service Quality Orientation Mediation on Brand Trust Development in MSMEs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of emotional intelligence and team cohesion on brand trust among micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), with service quality orientation as a mediating variable. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the study conceptualizes brand trust as an outcome of positive interpersonal and service exchanges shaped by individual emotional capabilities and team-level relationships. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among MSME employees and business actors with direct customer interaction and teamwork responsibilities. Data from 250 respondents were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with a bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 resamples. The results demonstrate that emotional intelligence has a significant positive effect on service quality orientation, while team cohesion also has a significant positive effect on service quality orientation. Service quality orientation shows a strong positive effect on brand trust. Furthermore, service quality orientation significantly mediates the relationships between emotional intelligence and brand trust and between team cohesion and brand trust. These findings indicate that brand trust is not developed solely through external marketing communication but also through internal emotional capabilities, cohesive teamwork, and consistent service-oriented behavior. The study contributes theoretically by extending Social Exchange Theory into an integrated employee–team–service–brand framework and provides practical implications for MSMEs seeking to strengthen customer trust through internal organizational capabilities.

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Kata Kunci:
Kecerdasan Emosional
Kohesi Tim
Orientasi Kualitas Layanan
Kepercayaan Merek

ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh kecerdasan emosional dan kohesi tim terhadap kepercayaan merek pada usaha mikro, kecil, dan menengah

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(UMKM), dengan orientasi kualitas layanan sebagai variabel mediasi. Berlandaskan Teori Pertukaran Sosial, penelitian ini mengonseptualisasikan kepercayaan merek sebagai hasil dari pertukaran interpersonal dan layanan yang positif, yang dibentuk oleh kemampuan emosional individu serta hubungan di tingkat tim. Survei kuantitatif cross-sectional dilakukan terhadap karyawan dan pelaku usaha UMKM yang memiliki tanggung jawab interaksi langsung dengan pelanggan dan kerja sama tim. Data dari 250 responden dianalisis menggunakan *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) dengan prosedur bootstrapping sebanyak 5.000 resample. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kecerdasan emosional memiliki pengaruh positif yang signifikan terhadap orientasi kualitas layanan, sementara kohesi tim juga memiliki pengaruh positif yang signifikan terhadap orientasi kualitas layanan. Orientasi kualitas layanan menunjukkan pengaruh positif yang kuat terhadap kepercayaan merek. Selain itu, orientasi kualitas layanan secara signifikan memediasi hubungan antara kecerdasan emosional dengan kepercayaan merek serta hubungan antara kohesi tim dengan kepercayaan merek. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa kepercayaan merek tidak hanya dibangun melalui komunikasi pemasaran eksternal, tetapi juga melalui kemampuan emosional internal, kerja sama tim yang kohesif, dan perilaku berorientasi layanan yang konsisten. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dengan memperluas Teori Pertukaran Sosial ke dalam kerangka kerja terintegrasi yang mencakup karyawan, tim, layanan, dan merek, serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi UMKM yang ingin memperkuat kepercayaan pelanggan melalui kapabilitas organisasi internal.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) increasingly compete not only through product quality and price but also through the quality of interpersonal service provided to customers. In service-intensive MSMEs, employees frequently become the primary point of contact between the business and its customers, making their emotional capabilities and collaborative behaviors critical to consistent service delivery. Emotional intelligence enables employees to recognize, regulate, and respond appropriately to their own emotions and those of others, while team cohesion facilitates cooperation and shared commitment in accomplishing organizational tasks. Previous research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is associated with team cohesion and team effectiveness, suggesting that emotional capabilities can shape the quality of interactions within work teams (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009; Kim, 2021). However, many MSMEs still rely on informal teamwork and individual employee initiative rather than systematic mechanisms for managing emotional and relational processes. This condition may create inconsistencies in how employees respond to customers, coordinate service activities, and maintain service standards. Consequently, the challenge for MSMEs is not merely to possess competent employees but to transform individual emotional capabilities and team relationships into a consistent orientation toward service quality.

Empirically, MSMEs often operate with small teams in which employees perform multiple functions simultaneously, requiring frequent interpersonal coordination and direct customer interaction. Under such conditions, emotional intelligence becomes particularly important because employees must manage pressure, understand customer expectations, and maintain constructive relationships with colleagues. Research has shown that emotional intelligence can contribute to team functioning by facilitating emotion regulation, interpersonal understanding, and collaborative behavior (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009). Similarly, recent evidence indicates that team emotional intelligence contributes to team cohesion through mechanisms such as trust and self-efficacy, while team cohesion itself can become an important predictor of team performance (Kim, 2021). Nevertheless, MSMEs frequently lack formal structures for developing these interpersonal capabilities. Employees may therefore possess different levels of emotional awareness and different approaches to handling customer interactions. Such variation can result in fragmented service practices and inconsistent customer experiences. This phenomenon indicates that emotional intelligence and team cohesion should not be considered only as

internal employee characteristics but also as potential foundations for developing a collective service orientation.

The importance of service quality orientation becomes more apparent because customers evaluate MSMEs not only according to what they purchase but also according to how the service is delivered. Service quality orientation refers to the extent to which employees and organizations prioritize service excellence, customer needs, and behaviors that support consistent service delivery. Prior research conceptualizes service orientation as involving customer focus, organizational support, and employees' ability to maintain service behavior under pressure (Brown et al., 2002). Furthermore, research on service quality orientation demonstrates that employees' perceptions of organizational orientation toward service quality are associated with training, service concepts, customer service orientation, and service performance (Bhatti, Zafarullah, Awan, & Bukhari, 2011). In MSMEs, where employees frequently interact directly with customers and organizational boundaries are relatively informal, a strong service quality orientation can help translate internal employee capabilities into visible service behaviors. Without such an orientation, emotional intelligence and team cohesion may improve interpersonal relationships without necessarily producing consistent customer-oriented service. Thus, service quality orientation represents an important mechanism through which internal human and team resources can be transformed into customer-facing value.

Despite the growing literature on emotional intelligence and teamwork, research has rarely integrated emotional intelligence, team cohesion, and service quality orientation into a single explanatory framework for understanding brand trust development in MSMEs. Existing studies have predominantly examined emotional intelligence in relation to individual performance or team outcomes, while service orientation research has focused more strongly on service performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and customer satisfaction (Kim, 2021; Chiang & Birtch, 2011). For example, Kim (2021) demonstrated that trust and self-efficacy mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and team cohesion, but the study did not examine service quality orientation or brand trust as downstream outcomes. Similarly, research on service orientation has established its relevance to service quality and customer loyalty but has generally treated employee orientation as a service-management construct rather than as a mechanism linking emotional and team-level resources to brand-related outcomes (Kim et al., 2011). This creates a significant research gap concerning how internal emotional and relational capabilities are converted into service-oriented behavior and ultimately into customer trust in the MSME context.

This study is theoretically grounded in the Social Exchange Theory, which explains organizational relationships as processes of reciprocal interaction in which positive interpersonal experiences generate trust, cooperation, and continued relational commitment. Emotional intelligence can facilitate positive exchanges because employees who understand and regulate emotions are more capable of responding constructively to colleagues and customers. Team cohesion further strengthens reciprocal relationships by encouraging cooperation, mutual support, and shared responsibility. These conditions can foster a stronger service quality orientation because employees are more likely to internalize service expectations and coordinate their behaviors around customer needs. Prior research supports the importance of trust and relational mechanisms in the connection between emotional intelligence and team cohesion (Kim, 2021), while service research demonstrates that organizational service orientation plays an important role in shaping service-related outcomes (Bellou, 2017). Therefore, Social Exchange Theory provides a suitable framework for explaining how emotional and relational resources within MSMEs can develop into service-oriented behaviors that subsequently strengthen customers' trust in the brand.

The urgency of this research is further strengthened by the increasing importance of trust in MSME competitiveness. MSMEs often operate with limited resources and relatively low levels of brand recognition compared with larger firms, making customer trust particularly important for sustaining repeat relationships and positive market perceptions. Recent evidence from MSME research indicates that service quality and brand trust are closely connected to customer responses, including satisfaction and purchasing-related outcomes. For example, research on batik MSMEs in Indonesia found that brand trust and service quality were important factors associated with customer satisfaction, demonstrating the relevance of service and trust mechanisms in MSME markets (Azarah et al., 2024). In addition, research in service SMEs suggests that interpersonal service interactions are central to the development of customer trust and that trust is closely related to perceived service reliability and brand reputation (Sirodjudin et al., 2026). However, trust cannot be built solely through external marketing communication; it is also shaped through repeated service encounters in which employees represent the brand directly. Therefore, understanding the internal factors that enable MSMEs

to consistently deliver trustworthy service is both timely and strategically important.

Another reason for examining this model lies in the fragmented empirical evidence concerning the relationships among emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service orientation, and customer-related outcomes. Although emotional intelligence has been linked to team cohesion, the strength and mechanism of this relationship may depend on contextual factors such as trust, self-efficacy, and team interaction (Kim, 2021). Similarly, service orientation does not automatically translate into superior outcomes because the alignment between employee values, organizational priorities, and customer expectations determines whether service orientation produces meaningful service experiences (Chiang & Birtch, 2011). Research also indicates that service orientation can influence perceived service quality and subsequent customer responses, suggesting that employee-oriented service behaviors have consequences beyond internal organizational outcomes (Kim et al., 2011). These findings indicate that the pathway from employee emotional capabilities and team relationships to brand trust requires further empirical clarification. In particular, service quality orientation may provide the missing mechanism explaining how internal team resources are converted into customer perceptions of reliable and trustworthy brand behavior.

From a practical perspective, MSME owners and managers need evidence-based guidance on how to develop brand trust through internal human-resource and team-management practices rather than relying exclusively on promotional activities. Emotional intelligence development can help employees manage customer complaints, communicate more effectively, and maintain emotional stability during demanding service encounters. At the same time, stronger team cohesion can encourage employees to coordinate service responsibilities and support one another when facing operational pressures. These capabilities become more valuable when reinforced by a strong orientation toward service quality. Research on organizational service orientation emphasizes that service quality orientation should be supported through organizational practices and employee development because service quality depends substantially on how employees interpret and enact service priorities (Bhatti et al., 2011; Bellou, 2017). Thus, investigating the interaction between emotional intelligence, team cohesion, and service quality orientation can provide MSMEs with practical insights for strengthening customer trust through internal organizational processes.

Specifically, this study aims to examine the effects of emotional intelligence and team cohesion on brand trust development among MSMEs, while testing the mediating role of service quality orientation in these relationships. By integrating individual emotional capabilities, team-level relational dynamics, and service-oriented organizational behavior, the study develops a more comprehensive explanation of how brand trust can emerge from internal MSME processes. The model extends previous research that has separately examined emotional intelligence and team cohesion (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009; Kim, 2021), service orientation and service quality (Kim et al., 2011), and service quality orientation and employee outcomes (Chiang & Birtch, 2011). The study therefore contributes theoretically by positioning service quality orientation as a mediating mechanism connecting internal employee and team capabilities with brand trust. Practically, the findings are expected to help MSME owners and managers design employee-development and teamwork practices that strengthen service quality and, ultimately, establish more sustainable brand trust among customers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains social relationships as processes of reciprocal exchange in which individuals develop relationships through interactions involving benefits, obligations, trust, and mutual support. The theory proposes that individuals tend to maintain relationships when interactions generate positive outcomes and when the behavior of one party encourages reciprocal responses from another party (Blau, 1964). Within organizational settings, social exchange is reflected in the quality of interpersonal relationships between employees, coworkers, managers, and customers. Positive social exchanges can generate trust, cooperation, commitment, and willingness to contribute beyond formal role requirements. Consequently, organizational behaviors and outcomes can be understood not only through economic exchanges but also through the quality of social relationships developed through repeated interactions.

The application of Social Exchange Theory to organizational behavior emphasizes that positive interpersonal experiences create reciprocal behavioral responses. When employees experience supportive and constructive relationships, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes and engage in behaviors that benefit their coworkers and organization. Trust represents an important outcome of social exchange because repeated positive interactions reduce uncertainty and strengthen expectations of reliability and mutual consideration (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In service organizations, these exchange

processes are particularly important because employees continuously interact with customers and coworkers. The quality of employee interactions can therefore influence how organizational values are enacted and how customers subsequently evaluate the organization or brand.

In relation to this study, Social Exchange Theory provides an appropriate framework for explaining how emotional intelligence and team cohesion can contribute to service quality orientation and ultimately strengthen brand trust among MSMEs. Emotional intelligence enables employees to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions during interpersonal exchanges, thereby facilitating constructive interactions with colleagues and customers. Team cohesion strengthens social exchange by encouraging mutual support, cooperation, and shared responsibility among employees. These internal relational conditions can encourage employees to prioritize service quality and consistently enact customer-oriented behaviors. When customers repeatedly experience reliable, responsive, and emotionally appropriate service, positive exchange experiences can accumulate into greater confidence in the brand. Therefore, Social Exchange Theory explains the sequential process through which internal employee and team resources can be transformed into service-oriented behavior and, subsequently, customer brand trust (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability of individuals to recognize, understand, regulate, and appropriately utilize emotional information in themselves and others. Emotional intelligence enables employees to identify their own emotional states, understand the emotions of other people, and regulate emotional responses in ways that support effective interpersonal interactions (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). In organizational environments, these capabilities are particularly relevant because employees frequently encounter emotionally demanding situations involving coworkers, supervisors, and customers. Employees with stronger emotional intelligence are generally better positioned to manage interpersonal tensions, respond constructively to emotional cues, and maintain appropriate behavior under pressure. Thus, emotional intelligence represents an important individual capability for effective workplace interaction.

From the Social Exchange Theory perspective, emotional intelligence can facilitate positive social exchanges by enabling employees to manage interpersonal interactions more effectively. Employees who can recognize the emotional needs of others are more likely to respond with empathy and consideration, while effective emotional regulation reduces the likelihood of inappropriate reactions during stressful interactions. These behaviors can strengthen interpersonal trust and encourage reciprocal cooperation among employees. In service-intensive MSMEs, emotional intelligence is particularly important because employees often interact directly with customers while simultaneously coordinating activities with coworkers. Their ability to maintain constructive interactions can influence not only individual relationships but also the broader service environment within the organization.

Previous research supports the relevance of emotional intelligence to interpersonal and team-related outcomes. Quoidbach and Hansenne (2009) demonstrated that emotional intelligence is associated with team-related functioning, suggesting that emotional capabilities can influence how individuals interact and cooperate within work teams. Similarly, research has indicated that team emotional intelligence can contribute to team cohesion through relational mechanisms such as trust and self-efficacy (Kim, 2021). These findings suggest that emotional capabilities provide an important foundation for constructive interpersonal relationships. When employees are better able to understand and regulate emotions, they may be more capable of cooperating with colleagues, managing service-related pressure, and maintaining customer-oriented behavior. Accordingly, emotional intelligence is expected to contribute positively to service quality orientation because emotionally capable employees are more likely to recognize customer needs and maintain appropriate service behavior during interpersonal exchanges.

H1: Emotional intelligence has a positive effect on service quality orientation.

Team Cohesion

Team cohesion refers to the degree to which members of a work team experience unity, interpersonal attraction, commitment, and willingness to remain connected while pursuing shared objectives. Cohesive teams are characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, cooperation, mutual support, and a shared sense of belonging. Team cohesion is particularly important in organizations where employees must coordinate their activities and depend on one another to accomplish operational tasks. In service-intensive MSMEs, employees often perform multiple functions simultaneously, making effective cooperation essential for maintaining smooth service delivery. Therefore, team cohesion represents an important team-level resource that can shape how

employees coordinate their behavior and respond to organizational and customer requirements.

Social Exchange Theory provides an explanation for why cohesive teams can generate stronger service-oriented behavior. Positive relationships among team members create reciprocal expectations of support and cooperation. Employees who perceive their coworkers as supportive are more likely to reciprocate by assisting others, sharing information, and contributing to collective goals. These exchanges can strengthen trust and shared responsibility within the team. As team members become more connected and committed to one another, they are more likely to coordinate their activities around common service objectives. Thus, team cohesion can create a social environment in which employees collectively recognize the importance of customer needs and service quality.

Empirical research has demonstrated the relevance of emotional and relational processes to team cohesion. Quoidbach and Hansenne (2009) found that emotional intelligence is associated with team functioning, while Kim (2021) demonstrated that team emotional intelligence can contribute to team cohesion through mechanisms including trust and self-efficacy. These findings indicate that cohesive teamwork is partly shaped by the quality of interpersonal relationships within teams. Strong team cohesion can facilitate information sharing, mutual assistance, and coordination during customer service encounters. When employees perceive that service responsibilities are shared collectively, they may be more willing to maintain service standards and assist colleagues in addressing customer needs. Consequently, team cohesion is expected to positively influence service quality orientation because cohesive teams provide a relational environment that supports consistent and collective commitment to service excellence.

H2: Team cohesion has a positive effect on service quality orientation.

Service Quality Orientation

Service quality orientation refers to the extent to which employees and organizations prioritize service excellence, customer needs, responsiveness, and behaviors that contribute to consistent service delivery. Service orientation emphasizes the importance of placing customers at the center of organizational activities and encouraging employees to enact behaviors that support positive service experiences (Brown et al., 2002). Service quality orientation extends this perspective by emphasizing the consistent pursuit of high-quality service as an organizational and behavioral priority. It therefore reflects more than employees' willingness to interact positively with customers; it also concerns the extent to which service quality is embedded in employees' daily decisions, interactions, and work practices.

Within Social Exchange Theory, service quality orientation can be viewed as an important behavioral mechanism through which positive internal relationships are translated into customer-facing behaviors. Employees who experience constructive interpersonal relationships may develop stronger willingness to reciprocate through behaviors that support organizational objectives. Emotional intelligence can help employees understand customer emotions and regulate their own responses, while team cohesion can encourage employees to coordinate responsibilities and provide mutual assistance. When these internal resources are combined with a strong service quality orientation, employees are more likely to consistently enact behaviors that prioritize customer needs and service excellence. Thus, service quality orientation provides a mechanism for converting internal emotional and relational resources into observable service behavior.

Prior research supports the importance of service orientation for service-related outcomes. Brown et al. (2002) conceptualized service orientation as a meaningful employee characteristic associated with customer-oriented service behavior. Similarly, Bhatti et al. (2011) demonstrated the relevance of service quality orientation to training, service concepts, customer service orientation, and service performance. Research has also emphasized that organizational service orientation can influence employees' attitudes and behaviors by establishing service as an organizational priority (Bellou, 2017). These findings indicate that service quality orientation can function as an important organizational mechanism for translating employee capabilities into consistent service delivery. In MSMEs, where employees have frequent direct contact with customers, such an orientation may be particularly important because employee behavior represents the brand during everyday service encounters.

Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to customers' willingness to rely on a brand based on the expectation that the brand is dependable, honest, and capable of fulfilling its promises. Trust develops when customers perceive that a brand consistently behaves in a reliable and credible manner and that the brand can be depended upon to meet customer expectations. Brand trust is particularly important in markets where customers face uncertainty regarding product quality, service performance, and organizational reliability. When customers trust a brand, they are more likely to perceive lower relational risk and develop stronger

willingness to maintain their relationship with the organization (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

From the Social Exchange Theory perspective, brand trust develops through repeated positive exchanges between customers and the organization. Customers continuously evaluate whether the organization fulfills its promises and whether interactions with employees are reliable, responsive, and fair. Positive service encounters can create favorable expectations about future interactions, while consistent fulfillment of service expectations strengthens confidence in the brand. Because employees frequently represent the organization during direct customer interactions, their behavior becomes an important component of the exchange process through which customers form trust. Consequently, brand trust should not be viewed solely as an outcome of marketing communication but also as a consequence of repeated interpersonal service experiences.

Service quality is particularly relevant to the development of brand trust because customers use service experiences to evaluate organizational reliability. Research has shown that brand trust and service quality are closely related to customer responses in MSME contexts. For example, research involving Indonesian batik MSMEs demonstrated the importance of service quality and brand trust in shaping customer satisfaction (Azarah et al., 2024). Similarly, research on service SMEs has emphasized the role of interpersonal service interactions in developing customer trust and perceptions of reliability (Sirodjudin et al., 2026). These findings suggest that employees' service-related behaviors can have consequences that extend beyond immediate service satisfaction. When service quality is consistently delivered, customers may develop stronger confidence that the brand will fulfill its promises, thereby strengthening brand trust.

H3: Service quality orientation has a positive effect on brand trust.

The Mediating Role of Service Quality Orientation

Service quality orientation is proposed as the central mediating mechanism linking emotional intelligence to brand trust. Emotional intelligence provides employees with the capacity to recognize and regulate emotions, but these capabilities do not necessarily produce customer trust unless they are translated into consistent service behaviors. Service quality orientation provides the behavioral and organizational mechanism through which emotional capabilities can be directed toward customer needs and service excellence. Employees with stronger emotional intelligence are better able to understand customers' emotional states, regulate their own reactions during difficult interactions, and communicate appropriately. These capabilities can encourage a stronger orientation toward maintaining service quality, which subsequently contributes to more reliable customer experiences and stronger brand trust.

The mediating mechanism can be explained through Social Exchange Theory. Emotionally intelligent employees are more capable of producing positive interpersonal exchanges because they can respond appropriately to emotional signals and manage interpersonal tensions. Positive exchanges with customers can reinforce employees' willingness to maintain constructive service behavior. When such behaviors become consistently directed toward service excellence, they contribute to a stronger service quality orientation. Customers then receive more consistent and responsive service, which reduces uncertainty and strengthens their confidence in the brand. Thus, emotional intelligence is expected to influence brand trust indirectly through service quality orientation rather than solely through a direct employee-to-customer relationship.

Previous research provides support for the individual components of this mechanism. Emotional intelligence has been associated with interpersonal and team functioning (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009; Kim, 2021), while service orientation research demonstrates the relevance of employee service orientation to service quality and service performance (Brown et al., 2002; Bhatti et al., 2011). Research on service-related outcomes further suggests that consistent service experiences contribute to customer trust and favorable customer evaluations. However, previous research has rarely integrated these relationships into a single model in which service quality orientation mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and brand trust within MSMEs. Therefore, examining this mediation can provide a more comprehensive explanation of how individual emotional capabilities are transformed into customer-related brand outcomes.

H4: Service quality orientation mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and brand trust.

Team cohesion is also expected to influence brand trust indirectly through service quality orientation. Although cohesive teams create stronger cooperation and interpersonal support, team cohesion alone may not necessarily guarantee that customers receive consistent service. The key mechanism is whether the positive relationships developed within the team are directed toward shared service objectives. Service quality orientation provides this mechanism by aligning team cooperation with customer needs and service standards. Cohesive employees are more likely to coordinate tasks, support coworkers, exchange

information, and share responsibility for service outcomes. When these behaviors are oriented toward service quality, customers are more likely to encounter consistent and dependable service, which can strengthen their confidence in the brand.

Social Exchange Theory explains this process through reciprocal relationships within the team and between employees and customers. Team cohesion creates positive internal exchanges characterized by cooperation, mutual support, and shared commitment. These positive exchanges can encourage employees to reciprocate through behaviors that support collective organizational goals, including maintaining service standards and responding effectively to customer needs. Service quality orientation subsequently directs these collective efforts toward customer-facing service excellence. Repeated positive service encounters can then contribute to customers' perceptions that the brand is reliable and trustworthy. Accordingly, service quality orientation represents an important mechanism connecting internal team relationships with external customer trust.

Empirical research provides a foundation for this proposed relationship. Studies have established that team emotional intelligence, trust, and self-efficacy can contribute to team cohesion and team performance (Kim, 2021), while service orientation research has demonstrated the importance of employee and organizational service orientation for service-related outcomes (Bhatti et al., 2011; Bellou, 2017). Nevertheless, limited research has examined whether service quality orientation functions as the mechanism through which team cohesion contributes to brand trust, particularly within MSMEs. This research therefore extends existing literature by connecting a team-level relational capability with a customer-level brand outcome through service quality orientation.

H5: Service quality orientation mediates the relationship between team cohesion and brand trust.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and brand trust in MSMEs. The unit of analysis is individual employees or MSME actors who are directly involved in customer service and daily operational activities. The study focuses on MSMEs operating in Indonesia, particularly service-intensive MSMEs in which employees have frequent interpersonal interactions with customers and coworkers. This context is considered appropriate because employees represent an important interface between MSMEs and their customers, making emotional capabilities, teamwork, and service-oriented behavior particularly relevant to brand trust development. Data are collected using structured questionnaires distributed directly and through online channels. The cross-sectional design enables the study to capture respondents' perceptions of emotional capabilities, team relationships, service quality orientation, and brand trust at a single point in time.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of employees and business actors working in MSMEs that involve direct interaction with customers and teamwork in daily business operations. The target respondents include employees, staff members, supervisors, or business actors who have sufficient experience in interacting with customers and collaborating with other members of the organization. A purposive sampling technique is employed to ensure that respondents possess relevant experience for evaluating the research variables. The inclusion criteria are that respondents must (1) work in an MSME, (2) have direct interaction with customers as part of their work, (3) work or coordinate with at least one other member of the business team, and (4) have a minimum of one year of work experience in the MSME. These criteria ensure that respondents have adequate experience to assess emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and customer-related brand trust.

The minimum sample size is determined based on the requirements of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Considering the complexity of the proposed structural model, which includes two exogenous constructs, one mediating construct, and one endogenous construct, the study targets a minimum of approximately 200 valid respondents. A larger number of responses is preferred to increase statistical power and improve the stability of the parameter estimates. Purposive sampling is considered appropriate because the study requires respondents who have direct experience with customer-facing service activities and teamwork rather than individuals who are only formally registered as MSME workers.

Data Collection Procedure

Data are collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consists of two main sections. The first section collects demographic and occupational information, including gender, age, length of employment or business involvement, type of MSME, and role within the organization. The second section measures emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and brand trust.

Before the main survey, the questionnaire is reviewed and pilot-tested with a small group of MSME employees to assess the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the measurement items. Revisions are made when respondents identify ambiguous wording or difficulties in understanding particular statements. The final questionnaire is then distributed through direct visits to MSME locations and through online communication platforms. Respondents are informed that participation is voluntary and that their responses will be used only for academic research purposes. The combination of direct and online distribution is intended to increase accessibility and obtain responses from MSMEs with different operational characteristics.

Data Analysis Technique

The data are analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is selected because the study aims to examine predictive relationships among multiple latent constructs and to evaluate the mediating role of service quality orientation. The technique is also appropriate for models involving multiple constructs measured through several indicators and does not require multivariate normality assumptions to the same extent as covariance-based SEM.

The analysis is conducted in two major stages: measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation. The measurement model is assessed to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs. Convergent validity is evaluated using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while construct reliability is assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Indicator loadings above 0.70 and AVE values above 0.50 are considered evidence of adequate convergent validity. Reliability values above 0.70 are considered acceptable for established constructs.

Discriminant validity is evaluated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. HTMT values below the recommended threshold are used to establish that the constructs are empirically distinct from one another. This procedure is particularly important because emotional intelligence, team cohesion, and service quality orientation represent conceptually related but theoretically distinct constructs.

The structural model is subsequently evaluated by examining collinearity, path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The significance of direct and indirect relationships is tested using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. A relationship is considered statistically significant when the bootstrapped t-statistic exceeds the critical value and the corresponding p-value is below 0.05. The direct paths from emotional intelligence and team cohesion to service quality orientation, as well as the path from service quality orientation to brand trust, are evaluated to test H1–H3.

The mediating effects proposed in H4 and H5 are examined through the indirect effects obtained from the bootstrapping procedure. Specifically, the indirect effect of emotional intelligence on brand trust through service quality orientation is tested, followed by the indirect effect of team cohesion on brand trust through service quality orientation. The mediation analysis evaluates whether service quality orientation functions as the mechanism through which individual emotional capabilities and team-level relational resources contribute to the development of brand trust. This analytical procedure enables the study to provide a comprehensive explanation of both the direct structural relationships and the indirect mechanisms underlying brand trust development in MSMEs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Respondent Profile

Descriptive analysis was conducted to present the demographic and occupational characteristics of the respondents and to ensure that the sample adequately represented the MSME context examined in this study. Respondent profiling focused on gender, age, educational background, MSME sector, and length of employment or involvement in the business. Because the study examines emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and brand trust, respondents were required to have direct experience interacting with customers and working collaboratively with other members of the MSME.

A total of 250 valid respondents participated in the study. All respondents were employees, supervisors, managers, or business actors working in MSMEs with direct customer interaction and involvement in daily service activities.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics (n = 250)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	132	52.8
Female	118	47.2
Age		
< 30 years	78	31.2
30–40 years	105	42.0
> 40 years	67	26.8
Education		
High School	87	34.8

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Diploma/Bachelor	137	54.8
Postgraduate	26	10.4
MSME Sector		
Food & Beverage	103	41.2
Retail/Fashion	62	24.8
Services	85	34.0
Length of Employment/Involvement		
1–3 years	83	33.2
4–6 years	96	38.4
> 6 years	71	28.4

The results indicate that male respondents slightly dominated the sample, representing 52.8% of the total respondents, while female respondents accounted for 47.2%. The largest age group was respondents between 30 and 40 years old, representing 42.0% of the sample. This composition indicates that most respondents were within a productive working age and were likely to possess sufficient experience in dealing with customers and performing organizational tasks.

Regarding educational background, respondents with a diploma or bachelor's degree represented the largest group at 54.8%, followed by high school graduates at 34.8%. The food and beverage sector accounted for the largest proportion of respondents (41.2%), followed by services (34.0%) and retail/fashion (24.8%). In terms of employment or business involvement, the largest group had between four and six years of experience (38.4%). Overall, the respondent profile indicates that the sample consisted of individuals with sufficient exposure to customer interactions, teamwork, and MSME service activities, making the sample appropriate for subsequent PLS-SEM analysis.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed to determine whether the indicators adequately represented their respective latent constructs. The assessment was based on outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). An outer loading value above 0.70 indicates that an indicator has an adequate contribution to its construct, while an AVE value above 0.50 indicates that the construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators.

The four constructs examined in this study were emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and brand trust. The results of the convergent validity assessment are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Convergent Validity Results

Variable	Indicator Loadings	AVE
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.74–0.89	0.68
Team Cohesion (TC)	0.72–0.88	0.64
Service Quality Orientation (SQO)	0.75–0.91	0.69
Brand Trust (BT)	0.77–0.92	0.71

The results demonstrate that all indicator loading values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Emotional intelligence showed loading values ranging from 0.74 to 0.89, while team cohesion demonstrated values between 0.72 and 0.88. Service quality orientation recorded loading values ranging from 0.75 to 0.91, and brand trust showed the strongest indicator representation, with loading values between 0.77 and 0.92.

The AVE values were also above the recommended minimum of 0.50 for all constructs. Emotional intelligence achieved an AVE of 0.68, team cohesion recorded 0.64, service quality orientation achieved 0.69, and brand trust recorded the highest AVE at 0.71. These findings indicate that each construct explained a substantial proportion of the variance in its indicators. Therefore, all constructs satisfied the requirements for convergent validity, and no indicators were removed from the measurement model.

Reliability Test

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the indicators used to measure each construct. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used as the primary reliability measures. Values exceeding 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency, while higher values indicate stronger consistency among indicators within the same construct.

Table 3. Reliability Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.89	0.92
Team Cohesion (TC)	0.87	0.91
Service Quality Orientation (SQO)	0.91	0.93
Brand Trust (BT)	0.92	0.94

The results indicate that all constructs achieved Cronbach's alpha values substantially above the recommended threshold of 0.70. Emotional intelligence recorded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, while team cohesion achieved 0.87. Service quality orientation demonstrated a reliability coefficient of

0.91, and brand trust recorded the highest Cronbach's alpha value at 0.92.

The Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.91 to 0.94, further confirming the strong internal consistency of the measurement model. Brand trust demonstrated the highest Composite Reliability value at 0.94, followed by service quality orientation at 0.93. Overall, the reliability results indicate that the measurement instruments consistently measured their respective constructs and were therefore suitable for subsequent structural model evaluation.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. HTMT was selected because it provides a rigorous assessment of whether conceptually distinct constructs are empirically distinguishable. An HTMT value below 0.90 indicates adequate discriminant validity.

This assessment is particularly important in the present study because emotional intelligence, team cohesion, and service quality orientation are conceptually related to interpersonal and organizational behavior. The analysis was therefore conducted to ensure that these constructs represented distinct theoretical concepts rather than measuring substantially overlapping phenomena.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Results (HTMT)

Variable	EI	TC	SQO	BT
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	—			
Team Cohesion (TC)	0.67	—		
Service Quality Orientation (SQO)	0.71	0.74	—	
Brand Trust (BT)	0.58	0.62	0.79	—

The HTMT results demonstrate that all values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90. The HTMT value between emotional intelligence and team cohesion was 0.67, while the relationship between emotional intelligence and service quality orientation recorded 0.71. Team cohesion and service quality orientation produced an HTMT value of 0.74.

The highest HTMT value was observed between service quality orientation and brand trust at 0.79, which remained below the threshold of 0.90. The remaining values ranged from 0.58 to 0.71. These results confirm that all constructs were empirically distinguishable and that the measurement model demonstrated adequate discriminant validity.

Collinearity Test

Collinearity analysis was conducted to determine whether excessive correlations existed among predictor constructs in the structural model. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to assess potential multicollinearity. VIF values below 5.0 indicate that serious collinearity problems are unlikely to bias the structural estimates.

Table 5. Collinearity (VIF) Results

Predictor Relationship	VIF
Emotional Intelligence → Service Quality Orientation	1.82
Team Cohesion → Service Quality Orientation	1.82
Service Quality Orientation → Brand Trust	1.00

The results show that all VIF values were substantially below the threshold of 5.0. Emotional intelligence and team cohesion each recorded a VIF value of 1.82 when predicting service quality orientation. This indicates that the two predictor constructs did not exhibit problematic multicollinearity.

Service quality orientation recorded a VIF value of 1.00 when predicting brand trust because it was the only direct predictor of brand trust in the proposed structural model. Therefore, the results indicate that collinearity was not a concern and that the structural model could be evaluated without substantial bias arising from excessive predictor overlap.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to evaluate the explanatory power of the structural model. The R^2 value indicates the proportion of variance in an endogenous construct that can be explained by its predictor variables. In this study, service quality orientation was predicted by emotional intelligence and team cohesion, while brand trust was predicted by service quality orientation.

Table 6. R^2 Values

Endogenous Variable	R^2
Service Quality Orientation	0.61
Brand Trust	0.55

The R^2 value for service quality orientation was 0.61, indicating that emotional intelligence and team cohesion jointly explained 61% of the variance in service quality orientation. This result demonstrates substantial explanatory power and indicates that individual emotional capabilities and team-level relational conditions provide meaningful explanations for service-oriented behavior among MSMEs.

Brand trust recorded an R^2 value of 0.55, indicating that service quality orientation explained 55% of the variance in brand trust. This finding demonstrates that service quality orientation represents an important explanatory mechanism for understanding how customers develop confidence in MSME brands. Overall, the R^2 results indicate that the proposed structural model provides adequate explanatory power for both endogenous constructs.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The analysis examined the direct and indirect relationships proposed in the structural model. The significance of each relationship was assessed using the path coefficient (β), t-statistic, and p-value. A hypothesis was considered supported when the t-statistic exceeded 1.96 and the p-value was below 0.05.

The proposed model consisted of three direct relationships and two indirect mediation relationships. The direct relationships examined the effects of emotional intelligence and team cohesion on service quality orientation and the effect of service quality orientation on brand trust. The indirect effects assessed whether service quality orientation mediated the relationships between emotional intelligence and brand trust and between team cohesion and brand trust.

Table 7. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	EI → SQO	0.39	7.184	0.000	Supported
H2	TC → SQO	0.46	8.731	0.000	Supported
H3	SQO → BT	0.74	18.526	0.000	Supported
H4	EI → SQO → BT	0.29	6.684	0.000	Supported
H5	TC → SQO → BT	0.34	7.916	0.000	Supported

The results indicate that emotional intelligence had a significant positive effect on service quality orientation (β = 0.39, t = 7.184, p < 0.001). Therefore, H1 was supported. This finding indicates that employees with stronger emotional intelligence tended to demonstrate a stronger orientation toward maintaining service quality. Their ability to recognize and regulate emotions and understand customers' and coworkers' emotional conditions appears to facilitate more appropriate and customer-oriented service behavior.

Team cohesion also demonstrated a significant positive effect on service quality orientation (β = 0.46, t = 8.731, p < 0.001), supporting H2. The coefficient indicates that team cohesion had a somewhat stronger relationship with service quality orientation than emotional intelligence. This result suggests that cooperation, mutual support, team unity, and shared commitment among employees contribute substantially to the development of a collective orientation toward service excellence.

Service quality orientation demonstrated the strongest direct relationship in the model with brand trust (β = 0.74, t = 18.526, p < 0.001). Therefore, H3 was supported. The finding indicates that MSMEs with stronger service quality orientation are more likely to generate customer confidence in the reliability, consistency, and credibility of their brands. Consistent customer-oriented service appears to be an important mechanism through which customers develop trust in MSME brands.

The indirect effect of emotional intelligence on brand trust through service quality orientation was also statistically significant (β = 0.29, t = 6.684, p < 0.001). Thus, H4 was supported. This finding indicates that service quality orientation mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and brand trust. Employees' emotional capabilities contribute to brand trust not merely through interpersonal emotional competence but through their ability to translate those capabilities into consistent service-oriented behavior.

Similarly, the indirect effect of team cohesion on brand trust through service quality orientation was significant (β = 0.34, t = 7.916, p < 0.001), supporting H5. The result indicates that team cohesion contributes to brand trust through the development of a stronger service quality orientation. When employees cooperate effectively, support one another, and share responsibility for service outcomes, their collective behavior is more likely to produce consistent service experiences that strengthen customers' confidence in the brand.

Overall, all five hypotheses were supported. The findings demonstrate that emotional intelligence and team cohesion are significant antecedents of service quality orientation, while service quality orientation represents a strong predictor of brand trust. The significant indirect effects further demonstrate that service quality orientation functions as an important mediating mechanism through which both individual emotional capabilities and team-level relational resources contribute to the development of brand trust in MSMEs.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that emotional intelligence has a significant positive effect on service quality orientation among MSMEs. This result indicates that employees who are better able to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions are more likely to maintain behaviors that prioritize service quality and customer needs. Emotional intelligence enables employees to remain calm when dealing with demanding customers, understand emotional cues, and respond appropriately during service encounters.

These capabilities are particularly important in MSMEs, where employees frequently perform multiple functions and interact directly with customers. The finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that emotional intelligence contributes to interpersonal and team functioning by facilitating emotional regulation, interpersonal understanding, and constructive interaction (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009; Kim, 2021). From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, emotionally appropriate behavior facilitates positive interpersonal exchanges because employees are better able to respond to others in ways that encourage cooperation and reciprocity. Therefore, emotional intelligence represents an important individual resource for transforming interpersonal competence into a stronger orientation toward service excellence.

The significant positive effect of team cohesion on service quality orientation demonstrates that service quality is also shaped by the quality of relationships among employees. The relatively stronger coefficient of team cohesion compared with emotional intelligence suggests that cooperation, mutual support, shared commitment, and team unity may play a particularly important role in establishing collective service priorities. In MSMEs, where teams are generally small and employees often depend directly on one another to complete operational tasks, weak coordination can immediately affect the customer experience. Conversely, cohesive teams can distribute responsibilities more effectively, assist coworkers during periods of high demand, and collectively respond to customer problems. This finding is consistent with Kim (2021), who highlighted the importance of relational mechanisms such as trust and self-efficacy in the development of team cohesion. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, cohesive teams are characterized by reciprocal support, in which employees contribute to one another and develop shared expectations of cooperation. These positive exchanges can subsequently encourage employees to align their activities around common service quality objectives.

The findings further demonstrate that service quality orientation has a strong and significant positive effect on brand trust. This relationship represents the strongest direct path in the proposed model, indicating that consistent service-oriented behavior is highly relevant to customers' perceptions of brand reliability and credibility. When employees consistently respond to customers, fulfill service expectations, solve problems appropriately, and maintain service standards, customers are more likely to perceive the brand as dependable. This result supports the broader service literature emphasizing that service orientation contributes to service quality and customer-related outcomes (Brown et al., 2002; Bhatti et al., 2011). It is also consistent with research showing the importance of service quality and brand trust in MSME customer responses (Azarah et al., 2024). From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, repeated positive exchanges between customers and employees create favorable expectations concerning future interactions. When these expectations are repeatedly confirmed, uncertainty is reduced and customer confidence in the brand becomes stronger. Thus, brand trust can emerge as a cumulative outcome of consistent service exchanges rather than solely from external branding and promotional communication.

The significant mediation effect of service quality orientation in the relationship between emotional intelligence and brand trust provides a deeper explanation of how individual emotional capabilities contribute to customer-related outcomes. Emotional intelligence alone does not automatically create brand trust. Rather, its value becomes more visible when employees translate emotional awareness and regulation into consistent service-oriented behavior. Employees who understand customers' emotional states can respond more empathetically, while employees who regulate their emotions can remain professional during difficult service encounters. These behaviors strengthen service quality orientation, which subsequently influences customers' perceptions of brand reliability. This finding extends previous research on emotional intelligence by connecting an individual psychological capability to a customer-level brand outcome through a service mechanism. The result is also consistent with Social Exchange Theory because emotionally appropriate interactions can generate positive exchanges that encourage continued trust between employees and customers. Accordingly, service quality orientation functions as an important behavioral pathway through which emotional intelligence is converted into brand trust.

The mediation effect of service quality orientation between team cohesion and brand trust provides further evidence that internal team relationships can influence external customer perceptions through service-related behavior. Team cohesion creates a supportive internal environment, but cohesion itself does not necessarily guarantee that customers will perceive the brand as trustworthy. Its influence becomes meaningful when team members transform cooperation and shared commitment into consistent service delivery. Cohesive employees can coordinate responsibilities, share information, support colleagues during customer problems, and collectively maintain service standards. These behaviors strengthen service quality orientation and subsequently contribute to brand trust. The finding extends the existing literature by connecting team-level relational resources with a

customer-level brand outcome through service quality orientation. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, reciprocal support among team members creates a positive relational environment that encourages employees to contribute to collective service objectives. These internal exchanges are subsequently reflected in customer-facing interactions, allowing positive relational processes within the MSME to influence customers' trust in the brand.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that brand trust development in MSMEs is best understood as an integrated process involving individual emotional capabilities, team-level relational resources, and customer-oriented service behavior. Emotional intelligence provides employees with the emotional capacity required to manage interpersonal interactions, while team cohesion creates a supportive environment for cooperation and collective responsibility. Service quality orientation then serves as the central mechanism that transforms these internal resources into consistent customer-facing behaviors. The strong relationship between service quality orientation and brand trust indicates that customers ultimately evaluate the brand through their repeated experiences with service delivery. This integrated pattern supports Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that positive internal and external interactions can progressively generate trust and relational commitment. The findings therefore move beyond the conventional view that brand trust is primarily created through advertising or brand communication and demonstrate that brand trust can also emerge from internal organizational processes.

The findings also provide an important contribution to the MSME literature. MSMEs often operate with limited financial resources, informal organizational structures, and relatively small work teams. Under these conditions, sophisticated human-resource systems may be difficult to implement. The present findings suggest that MSMEs can nevertheless strengthen brand trust by focusing on relatively fundamental organizational capabilities: employees' emotional competence, team cohesion, and a shared commitment to service quality. Rather than treating these factors as separate organizational concerns, MSME owners and managers should understand them as interconnected components of a service-based trust-building process. Developing employees' emotional intelligence, strengthening teamwork, and establishing clear service quality expectations can collectively improve the consistency of customer experiences. This perspective provides a more internal and relational explanation of brand trust development and highlights the importance of human and social resources in MSME competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications.

This study extends Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating how individual emotional capabilities and team-level relational resources can be transformed into customer-related outcomes through service-oriented behavior. The findings show that emotional intelligence and team cohesion significantly contribute to service quality orientation, while service quality orientation strongly enhances brand trust. More importantly, the significant mediation effects demonstrate that service quality orientation functions as the mechanism connecting internal employee and team resources with an external customer perception. This contributes to the literature by integrating individual, team, service, and brand perspectives into a single explanatory framework. The study therefore demonstrates that brand trust is not exclusively an external marketing outcome but can emerge from reciprocal social exchanges and service processes occurring within and beyond the MSME.

Managerial Implications.

For MSME owners and managers, the findings suggest that strengthening brand trust requires more than promotional communication or brand-building activities. Managers should invest in employee development programs that improve emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal communication. At the team level, MSMEs should encourage mutual support, open communication, shared responsibility, and cooperation in handling customer-related problems. These practices should be accompanied by clear service quality standards and continuous attention to customer needs. By integrating emotional intelligence development, team cohesion, and service quality orientation, MSMEs can create more consistent customer experiences and strengthen customer confidence in their brands. Such an approach is particularly valuable for resource-constrained MSMEs because it emphasizes the effective utilization of internal human and relational resources rather than dependence on costly external marketing activities.

Limitations and Future Research.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among emotional intelligence, team cohesion, service quality orientation, and brand trust. Longitudinal research could provide stronger evidence regarding how these relationships develop over time. Second, the study relies primarily on self-reported perceptions, which

may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. Future research could combine employee-level data with customer evaluations of service quality and brand trust or use objective service-performance indicators. Third, the study focuses on MSMEs and therefore its findings may not be directly generalizable to large organizations with more formalized human-resource and service-management systems. Future studies could compare MSMEs with larger firms or examine differences across service, retail, hospitality, and other MSME sectors. Finally, future research could incorporate additional mechanisms such as employee engagement, organizational support, customer orientation, or service climate to further explain how internal organizational resources contribute to brand-related outcomes.

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