



An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Study On Customer Lived Experiences Of Emotionally Intelligent Service Agents

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Abstract: *This study aims to examine how the emotional intelligence of customer service agents influences problem resolution, customer satisfaction, and repurchase intention within Platform X, a major ride-hailing and food-delivery service in Indonesia. As customers increasingly encounter service failures such as delayed refunds, repeated driver cancellations with charges applied, and double payment incidents, understanding how they experience emotionally intelligent responses becomes essential. This research employs a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore customers' meaning-making processes during emotionally charged interactions. The population of this study consists of active users of Platform X. A homogeneous purposive sample of six participants aged 20–35 years was selected based on their experience with at least one of the identified service failures and direct communication with a human service agent. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary instrument, complemented by field notes. All interviews were conducted online and audio-recorded with participant consent. The results reveal three key themes: experiencing emotional understanding and recognition, interpreting the agent's intentions during the resolution process, and forming emotional and relational outcomes that shape satisfaction and repurchase intention. These findings demonstrate that emotionally intelligent service behaviours help restore trust, reduce emotional distress, and strengthen long-term customer loyalty.*

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Service Recovery, Customer Satisfaction, Repurchase Intention, IPA.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of digitally mediated services, customer service interactions play a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction, problem resolution effectiveness, and long-term behavioural outcomes. As ride-hailing and food delivery platforms become increasingly embedded in daily life, customers regularly encounter service failures such as delayed refunds, repeated driver cancellations, and double charges issues that often generate emotional distress and require effective handling by service agents. Recent studies highlight that the quality of interpersonal engagement during service recovery contributes significantly to customers' perceptions of fairness, trust, and loyalty (Voorhees et al., 2017; Smith et al., 1999). However, the human element in digital



customer service remains underexplored, particularly regarding how customers experience the emotional intelligence (EI) of agents handling their complaints.

Emotional intelligence has been widely recognized as a critical skill in service industries, influencing conflict management, empathy expression, emotional regulation, and customer satisfaction (Giardini & Frese, 2008; Kidwell et al., 2011). Service agents with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to recognize emotional cues, acknowledge frustration, and respond in supportive and humanized ways. Prior empirical research has shown that EI positively affects service recovery performance and customer evaluations (Xu et al., 2022). Yet, existing studies tend to rely on quantitative approaches that measure EI through standardized scales, leaving a gap in understanding how customers interpret and derive meaning from emotionally intelligent behaviours exhibited during complaint interactions.

Furthermore, research on digital service recovery often focuses on outcome variables such as compensation, refund duration, and problem resolution time (Hess et al., 2003; Holloway et al., 2005). While these dimensions are important, they fail to capture the subjective, emotional, and relational aspects of service recovery encounters. Customers' lived experiences especially in high-stress scenarios like delayed refunds, financial losses, and repeated operational failures may shape satisfaction and repurchase intention independently from the technical quality of the resolution. This suggests the need for an interpretive approach that goes beyond transactional metrics and instead explores customers' meaning-making processes.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how customers experience the emotional intelligence of service agents when dealing with three distressing service failures: delayed or missing refunds, repeated cancellations with charges applied, and double payment incidents. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research contributes to service management literature by offering a deeper understanding of the psychological and relational processes through which emotionally intelligent service behaviours influence problem resolution quality, satisfaction, and repurchase intention. The findings aim to advance theoretical discussions on service recovery and EI while offering practical insights for improving digital customer care strategies in Platform X and similar service ecosystems.



METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore customers' lived experiences when interacting with emotionally intelligent service agents during problem resolution. IPA is suitable for examining how individuals make sense of emotionally significant events and how subjective interpretations shape their perceptions and behavioural responses (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021). Given that service failures such as delayed refunds, repeated driver cancellations, and double charges often provoke strong emotions, IPA provides the methodological depth needed to understand how customers interpret the agent's emotional intelligence in these stressful contexts.

The population of this study includes active users of Platform X, a major ride-hailing and food-delivery service in Indonesia. From this population, the researchers selected participants using homogeneous purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in IPA to ensure participants share a similar meaningful experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The study involved six participants, aged 20–35 years, who met the following criteria:

- (1) Active users of Platform X for at least three months;
- (2) Had experienced at least one of the following service failures: delayed or missing refund, repeated driver cancellations with fees charged, or double charge incidents;
- (3) Had communicated with a human service agent (not only chatbot interactions) to resolve the issue.

This sampling ensured that all participants had rich, comparable experiences suitable for phenomenological interpretation.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to describe their emotional, cognitive, and relational experiences in detail. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted online via video call. An interview guide was prepared to explore participants' perceptions of agent behaviour, emotional exchanges, expectations, satisfaction, and post-interaction behavioural intentions. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent.

To strengthen contextual understanding, the researcher also created field notes to capture non-verbal cues, emotional tones, and reflective observations during the interview process.



Data analysis followed the established IPA framework. The researcher first conducted repeated readings of the interview transcripts to familiarize themselves with the participants' emotional expressions, contextual narratives, and meaning structures. Initial exploratory notes were developed focusing on descriptive content, linguistic patterns, and conceptual reflections. From these notes, emergent themes were identified for each participant, capturing the essence of their lived experiences. Throughout the analysis, the researcher engaged in reflexive interpretation, acknowledging their role in co-constructing meaning while staying grounded in participants' accounts. This iterative process enabled the development of a coherent thematic structure that reflects how customers experience emotionally intelligent service behaviours and how these interpretations influence problem resolution, satisfaction, and repurchase intention.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through IPA-based analysis of six participants' narratives, this study identified three superordinate themes illustrating how the emotional intelligence of Platform X service agents shaped customers' experiences during problem resolution. The themes describe how customers interpreted agents' emotional cues, how these interpretations influenced their satisfaction with the recovery process, and how they shaped repurchase intentions.

1. Experiencing Emotional Understanding and Recognition

1.1 Feeling Understood in Moments of Distress

Participants experienced strong emotional responses frustration, anxiety, and disappointment due to the stressful nature of the service failures. When agents responded with emotionally attuned language, participants perceived a sense of being understood.

“Aku sudah panik karena uangnya nggak balik. Tapi agen-nya bilang mereka paham aku cemas dan langsung bantu cek. Itu bikin aku agak tenang.” (P2)

This reflects the role of empathy, a core component of emotional intelligence, in de-escalating negative emotions (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Empathic recognition from the agent became the first step toward psychologically restoring the customer's sense of control. When customers feel understood, their perception of the agent and platform shifts from simply



“technical support” to “human support.” This improves the customer’s emotional state before the technical resolution stage begins.

1.2 Comfort Through Emotionally Sensitive Communication

Participants described feeling calmer when agents used polite, emotionally sensitive language particularly during complicated or lengthy refund checks.

“Bahasanya lembut dan sabar banget. Jadi aku nggak tambah marah walaupun prosesnya lama.” (P5)

This aligns with literature on emotional labor showing that sensitive communication increases customers’ perceived service fairness and satisfaction (Giardini & Frese, 2008). The emotional tone itself becomes part of the service recovery experience. Sensitive communication creates a safe emotional space for customers, which then contributes to service satisfaction even when the technical result is not yet complete.

2. Interpreting Agent Intentions Behind the Resolution Process

2.1 Distinguishing Sincere Effort from Scripted Responses

Participants interpreted emotionally intelligent behaviour as a sign that the agent was genuinely trying to help, distinguishing it from “template replies” that felt robotic.

“Aku bisa bedain mana jawaban template dan mana yang beneran dia mikir buat bantu. Yang ini kerasa banget niatnya.” (P3)

Customers perceived emotional intelligence as evidence of sincerity, consistent with research indicating that authenticity strengthens trust and perceived credibility (Kidwell et al., 2011). The sincerity felt by customers strengthens the belief that their problems are being treated personally, not just as a queue ticket number.

2.2 Reframing the Service Failure as Manageable

Despite the negative initial experience double charge, unexpected fees, or multiple cancellations participants reported that emotionally intelligent agents helped them reframe the problem.

“Awalnya aku pikir ini bakal ribet banget, tapi dia jelasin pelan-pelan tahapnya. Jadi lebih yakin masalahnya bisa beres.” (P1)



According to service recovery research, explanation and emotional reassurance provide cognitive clarity, reducing perceived severity of failures (Holloway et al., 2005). Emotional intelligence helps change the customer's perception from “this is a disaster” to “this can be resolved,” thereby increasing satisfaction with the resolution process.

3. Emotional Outcomes Shaping Customer Loyalty Intentions

3.1 Satisfaction Emerging from Emotional and Relational Quality

Participants reported that their satisfaction was influenced not only by whether the issue was resolved, but by how the agent emotionally supported them.

“Uangnya memang baru balik besok, tapi cara agen-nya bantu itu yang bikin aku puas.”
(P4)

This supports research arguing that emotional quality in service encounters is a major predictor of satisfaction, often outweighing technical efficiency (Xu et al., 2022). Customer satisfaction is the result of a combination of technical success and emotional warmth. Emotional intelligence strengthens perceptions of fairness, comfort, and appreciation.

3.2 Recovered Trust Leading to Repurchase Intention

Even after negative service failures, customers indicated they would continue using Platform X when the agent demonstrated high emotional intelligence.

“Sempat kesel banget, tapi karena dilayaninya bagus, aku tetap pakai Platform X lagi.”
(P6)

This reflects findings that effective, emotionally sensitive recovery restores trust and stimulates repurchase intention (Voorhees et al., 2017). Agents' emotional intelligence facilitates the restoration of trust which ultimately drives repeat commitment and long-term loyalty.

Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis of findings reveals a multistage relational process through which customers interpret and respond to emotionally intelligent behaviours demonstrated by service agents during problem resolution. Across all narratives, emotional intelligence (EI) emerges not merely as an interpersonal skill but as a meaning-making catalyst that shapes how customers evaluate both the resolution process and their ongoing relationship with Platform X. The IPA approach highlights



that customers' judgments are grounded in the emotional, cognitive, and relational interpretations constructed during moments of service distress.

At the initial stage of interaction, customers experiencing stressful service failures delayed refunds, repeated cancellations, or double charges arrive with heightened emotional vulnerability. The findings show that empathic acknowledgment from the agent plays a critical role in moderating this emotional intensity. When agents recognized customers' frustration, anxiety, or confusion, participants interpreted such responses as signs of genuine understanding. This aligns with emotional intelligence theory, which emphasizes the importance of perceiving and responding to emotional cues to foster relational harmony (Mayer et al., 2008). The emotional reassurance provided at this stage establishes psychological safety, allowing customers to engage more openly and constructively in the recovery process.

As interaction progresses, customers begin evaluating the intentions behind the agent's behaviour. The data show that emotionally intelligent communication characterized by clarity, patience, warmth, and authenticity prompted customers to infer sincerity and personal effort. This interpretive shift reflects cognitive appraisal processes, where individuals make sense of interpersonal cues to judge trustworthiness and fairness (Kidwell et al., 2011). Customers perceived agents not as anonymous representatives but as supportive relational partners. This reframing transformed the service failure from a purely technical disruption into a manageable and even collaborative process. Such cognitive reinterpretation is essential, as trust is a central mediator linking recovery quality to satisfaction and loyalty intentions (Voorhees et al., 2017).

Emotionally intelligent exchanges ultimately culminate in relational and behavioural outcomes. The findings show that customers experienced satisfaction not solely due to successful problem resolution, but because the agent's emotional support restored their sense of control and dignity. Even when technical resolutions were delayed, relational warmth significantly enhanced perceived fairness and service quality. This supports research arguing that emotional aspects of recovery often outweigh procedural components in determining satisfaction (Xu et al., 2022). As customers' emotional states stabilized and trust was rebuilt, they reported willingness to continue using Platform X and even recommend it to others.



CONCLUSION

This study investigated how the emotional intelligence of service agents influences customer experiences during problem resolution on Platform X, focusing on refund delays, repeated cancellations with charges, and double payment incidents. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings reveal that emotionally intelligent behaviors play a crucial relational role in shaping customer evaluations of service recovery. Customers consistently interpreted empathic acknowledgment, calm communication, and sincere expressions of support as indicators of genuine effort, which helped reduce frustration and promote a sense of psychological safety during stressful service failures.

The results further show that emotional intelligence contributes to cognitive reframing, enabling customers to perceive the failure as manageable and the resolution process as fair. This interpretive shift strengthened trust, which emerged as a central mechanism linking emotional intelligence to satisfaction. Importantly, participants expressed that satisfaction stemmed not only from the technical success of the resolution but from the relational quality of the interaction. Even when financial issues required time to resolve, emotionally intelligent communication preserved customers' confidence in Platform X.

The study demonstrates that emotional intelligence is essential for building positive recovery experiences and fostering repurchase intention. These findings extend service recovery literature by highlighting the interpretive, emotional, and relational dimensions of digital customer care. Practically, they underscore the need for organizations to integrate emotional intelligence training into customer service operations to enhance both recovery effectiveness and long-term customer loyalty.

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