Proceeding of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium: Critical Perspectives on Global Education and Psychological Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT30193

Patience and Hostile Attribution: The Mediating and Moderating Roles of Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Impulsivity

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Abstract. In high-contact service industries, waiting is a critical moment that often triggers negative customer emotions. Research shows that it is not the actual duration of waiting but how customers interpret the cause that shapes their emotional and behavioral responses. When delays are seen as systemic or unavoidable, customers remain relatively calm; when attributed to employee indifference or negligence, anger and complaints become more likely. This suggests individual traits may influence attribution patterns. This study focuses on patience as a personality trait to examine its role in shaping customers' hostile attributions. Patience involves emotional regulation and tolerance for delay and is linked to positive emotions, satisfaction, and well-being. Using a nationally representative sample, 1,179 individuals were surveyed, yielding 689 valid responses. Results indicate that patience enhances perceived service quality and overall satisfaction but does not directly reduce hostile attribution toward service staff. Service quality and satisfaction do not mediate this relationship. However, impulsiveness significantly moderates the link between satisfaction and hostility: dissatisfied customers high in impulsiveness are more likely to view delays as intentional misconduct. Overall, the findings suggest that hostile attribution is driven more by cognitive evaluation than emotional stability. While patience improves subjective service experiences, it does not alter interpretations of service providers' intentions. This study contributes to service management and personality psychology by highlighting how individual traits shape customer reactions.

Keywords: Patience, hostile attribution, service quality, life satisfaction, impulsivity

1. Introduction

Customers' emotions during the waiting period are not directly caused by the delay itself [1], but from their psychological interpretation of situational clues [2]—that is, how they understand the meaning of the delay [3,4]. Consumer behavior studies consistently show that uncertainty and lack of clear explanation during waiting are more likely to trigger negative emotional reactions than waiting time [5,6]. When customers lack enough information, they will infer the reason for the delay and use these attributions to interpret the intentions of the service staff. This cognitive process significantly affects their evaluation of service quality and subsequent behavioral intentions [7].

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT30193

Empirical research shows that when information is vague or lacking, people tend to fill the cognitive gap with subjective assumptions, often interpreting ambiguous behavior as intentional harm—known as hostile attribution bias [8]. Once triggered, hostile attribution intensifies negative emotions, decreases service evaluations, and leads to complaints, negative word-of-mouth, and even aggression [2,9]. Hostility attribution is considered a core psychological mechanism in service conflicts because customers often misattribute systemic failures to the personal motivations of frontline employees [10]. However, not all customers make such attributions; some consider structural factors, while others quickly conclude that "the staff does not value me." This shows that hostility attribution is a cognitive process shaped by individual differences [11].

People with high patience are more likely to use cognitive reappraisal rather than reactive emotional regulation [12], enabling more understanding and tolerance in service interactions. Patience is also associated with more positive evaluations and fewer negative emotions [4]. These findings suggest that patience may influence customers' interpretation of service staff intentions during waiting. However, existing studies mainly examine patience in relation to well-being and stress recovery [13], with little attention to attribution tendencies in service settings. Customers also form judgments of service quality and satisfaction based on the interaction experience [14,15], but it remains unclear whether such evaluations can mitigate cognitive interpretations of service providers' intentions.

Moreover, personality traits play a crucial role in shaping service experiences and attribution processes. Highly impulsive individuals rely more on immediate emotional reactions rather than deliberative reasoning [16] and are more prone to negative interpretations in ambiguous situations [17,11]. Therefore, even individuals with high patience may have their regulatory effects offset by impulsiveness, increasing susceptibility to hostile attribution.

In a word, this study aims to explore two key research issues: (1) Does patience affect the attribution of customers to the intentions of service personnel? (2) Will impulsiveness regulate the impact of patience on the attribution of hostility?

In order to answer these questions, we have built a conceptual model to examine the relationship between personality traits (patience, impulsiveness),experience evaluation (service quality, satisfaction) and hostility attribution with the background of the waiting scene in the restaurant. The model has been verified through scenario simulation and quantitative analysis. The study emphasizes that the negative emotions shown by customers in the service process are not just an emotional reflex, but also come from the complex interaction between personality traits and the cognitive attribution process. The research results provide practical suggestions for service managers to help them identify the psychological risk factors of conflicts and provide a basis for the design of targeted communication and emotional regulation strategies during waiting.

2. Literature review

In consumer psychology research, customers' emotional and behavioral responses are considered to be influenced by their interpretation of service processes and subjective meaning construction [18]. During the service process, waiting is the most likely stage to trigger cognitive processing, as customers assess whether they are being treated fairly [19]. If customers perceive the waiting time as controllable and reasonable, they are more willing to accept delays; however, feelings of being ignored or left without explanation significantly heighten negative cognitive and emotional reactions [20]. Thus, waiting becomes a psychological event that prompts customers to seek meaning, responsibility attribution, and explanation [21].

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Individuals also adopt different coping mechanisms when facing the same uncertainty. Such differences influence not only emotions but also inferences about others' motives. People with higher patience rely on slower and more deliberate cognitive assessments, reducing immediate emotional reactions to uncertainty [22]. Research further shows that highly patient individuals tend to use cognitive reappraisal rather than impulsive responses when encountering setbacks [23], suggesting that patience may reduce negative inferences about service staff intentions during waiting.

Impulsiveness is another key personality trait. Studies show that impulsive individuals rely more on fast, intuitive thinking systems in stressful or ambiguous situations [24] and are more likely to make judgments based on emotion rather than rational evaluation [25]. In service interactions, impulsive customers exhibit more anger, hostility, and aggressive communication [26] and show a "reactive attribution tendency," accusing others even without evidence [27]. This implies that impulsiveness may weaken the protective role of patience, causing even patient customers to infer malicious intent when momentarily dissatisfied.

Service management research generally holds that perceptions of service quality and satisfaction predict behavioral responses such as return visits or complaints [28,29]. However, recent perspectives suggest that satisfaction alone does not fully explain judgments about employee motivation. In interactions requiring communication, trust and motivational inference are more decisive than satisfaction in predicting conflict between customers and service employees [30]. Evidence indicates that when service fails, complaints and aggression often stem from perceived disrespectful intentions rather than dissatisfaction with the outcome [31]. This suggests that perceived intention may influence customer behavior more strongly than emotional experience.

In summary, previous research has shown that waiting time, personality traits, and customer cognitive appraisal all affect service interactions. However, there is a lack of research integrating these variables to explain why some customers exhibit hostile attributions in the same waiting situation, while others do not. This study constructs a psychological mechanism model of patience—service experience evaluation—hostile attribution and further examines the moderating role of impulsivity to fill the research gap regarding "how personality influences attribution judgments" in service interactions.

3. Research sample

The questionnaire was distributed online, employing a screening mechanism to ensure participants had genuine dining and waiting experiences. For example, a screening question asked: "Have you experienced waiting at a restaurant within the past 30 days?" If participants answered no, the questionnaire automatically terminated. A total of 746 questionnaires were collected. After excluding cases with reverse-scoring anomalies, random responses, or extremely short completion times (<90 seconds), 689 valid samples remained. The sample included students, office workers, and participants with varying dining frequencies, enhancing the generalizability of the results. This sample size meets the minimum statistical power requirements for structural equation modeling and mediation/moderation analyses, significantly exceeding the recommended sample strength of 500 [32].

Before the formal questionnaire survey, we conducted a small-scale pre-test (N = 60) to verify the understandability of the situation description and the confidence of the scale. This ensures that the wording of the questionnaire will not mislead the participants, and confirms that the research situation can successfully stimulate the emotions and attribution imagination of the participants.

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4. Research design

This study adopts the method of scenario simulation experiment combined with questionnaire survey. Taking the restaurant as the research scenario, it examines the impact of patience on the attribution of customer hostility, and explores the intermediary mechanism of service quality, satisfaction and impulsiveness. The reason why scenario simulation is chosen is that isometric situations have high emotional sensitivity, which can easily trigger customers' cognitive and attribution reactions, while ensuring the consistency of experimental operations. Each participant read a description of a simulated dining scenario and imagined that he was experiencing waiting in the restaurant, but did not get any explanation. Then, they completed the scale for measuring variables such as patience, service quality, satisfaction, hostility attribution and impulsiveness. In order to manipulate the situation, this study adopts 2 (food quality: high vs. Low) × 2 (Restaurant reputation: high vs. Low) experimental design. This ensures that the emotional arousal of customers comes not only from the equal position itself, but also from the key situational factors - different expectations of the restaurant. This design is widely used in service management research, which can expose participants to consistent psychological stimulation without sacrificing authenticity.

The theoretical model takes patience as an independent variable, hostility attribution as the main result variable, service quality and satisfaction as potential mediating variables, and impulsiveness as the moderating variable. The framework can test whether the path “patience → service experience score → hostile attribution” is valid and further examine whether impulsiveness influences the strength of this mediating pathway. To test these multi-path relationships, this study adopts the PROCESS 3.0 macro [33]. This analytical framework allows simultaneous testing of both mediation and moderation effects, avoiding potential statistical bias that may arise from separate analyses.

4.1. Research instruments

All variables in the questionnaire employed a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Measurement items were adapted from existing literature and fine-tuned for the present study context. The Patience Scale, adapted from [3], assessed participants' emotional regulation and self-control abilities in delay-inducing situations. The hostile attribution bias scale referenced [8,11], measuring participants' tendency to infer malicious intent from service personnel in ambiguous situations. Service quality was assessed using the condensed SERVQUAL version [14], evaluating customers' perceptions of the service process. Satisfaction was measured using the single-dimensional overall satisfaction approach [15]. Impulsivity was assessed via the Barratt scale [16], gauging individuals' tendency toward spontaneous reactions during emotional states or decision-making. All scales demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .80$), meeting academic research standards.

4.2. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26 and PROCESS v4.0, proceeding in three stages according to research objectives:

(1) Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis: Examining whether variables exhibit theoretically expected directions and significance to establish foundations for subsequent model analysis. (2) Mediational analysis (Model 4 and Model 6): Examined whether patience influences hostile attribution through service quality or satisfaction, further validating the chained mediational

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path: “Patience → Service Quality → Satisfaction → Hostile Attribution.” (3) Moderation-mediated analysis (Model 59): Examines whether impulsivity moderates the effect of satisfaction on hostile attribution, thereby addressing the question “Why do individuals with similar patience exhibit different reactions?” To enhance analytical robustness, this study employs the Bootstrap method (1000 samples, 95% CI). If the confidence interval does not include zero, the mediating or moderating effect is considered established [33].

5. Research findings

5.1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

The results of the study show that the overall patience score of the participants is at the medium-high level (M = 28.0958, SD = 5.17039), while the average score of service quality and satisfaction is 20.7126 (SD = 5.44548) and 17.3309 (S D = 4.14275). The average score of hostility attribution is 24.8055 (SD = 4.52846), indicating that the research situation has successfully triggered the customer's inference of the potential malicious behavior of the service staff. In addition, the results of the impulsive and irritable scale showed that some participants showed a higher tendency to react immediately (impulsive M = 10.7504; irritable M = 11.4920), which provided further support for the subsequent regulatory effect test.

The correlation analysis further reveals that there is a significant positive correlation between patience and service quality ($r = .319$, $p < .001$) and satisfaction ($r = .279$, $p < .001$), indicating that more patient customers tend to evaluate the service experience more positively. On the contrary, the correlation between patience and hostile attribution is not significant ($r = −.023$, $p = .549$). This means that although highly patient customers show positive emotional evaluation in subjective experience, this positive experience does not naturally extend to the explanation of behavioral motivation - that is, they do not automatically reduce the negative inference that attributes delays to service personnel. This finding provides important guidance for subsequent intermediary analysis, showing that the mechanism affecting hostility attribution does not only come from emotional evaluation or experience perception.

5.2. Chain mediation model

The results show that patience significantly positively predicts service quality ($\beta = .336$, $p < .001$) and overall satisfaction ($\beta = .224$, $p < .001$), suggesting that more patient customers are more likely to make a positive evaluation of the whole service process. However, when service quality and satisfaction are included in the model for predicting hostile attribution at the same time, both regression coefficients do not achieve statistical significance (service quality → hostile attribution: $p = .335$; satisfaction → hostile attribution: $p = .178$). In addition, the Bootstrap confidence interval of both coefficients contains zero, indicating that the mediation path is not valid. In other words, although patients experience more active service, the improvement of this experience will not further affect their judgment of the behavioral motivation of service personnel.

The analysis of the chain mediation model shows that the overall effect of the chain path is also not significant, and the confidence interval contains zero, indicating that the mechanism is still invalid. This study integrates two intermediary analysis methods and finds that the emotional response and evaluation of customers to the service experience cannot be automatically converted into inferences of the intentions of service personnel. That is to say, the customer may be satisfied with the service process, but at the same time perceive that the service staff may be negligent. This

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT30193

shows that service experience evaluation and hostility attribution represent two independent psychological processes: the former is an emotional response, while the latter involves cognitive reasoning about motivation. The intermediary analysis of this study shows that patience affects the mood and evaluation of customers, but hostile attribution involves higher-level inferences, and these inferences do not change just because of positive experiences.

5.3. Analysis of the moderated mediation model

In order to further understand why patience can improve the service experience but not reduce the attribution of hostility, this study integrates impulsiveness into PROCESS model 59 for adjustment intermediary integration analysis. The analysis examines whether impulsiveness affects the relationship between satisfaction and hostility attribution. The results show that there is a significant interaction between satisfaction and impulsiveness ($\beta = -0.0254$, $p = .046$), suggesting that whether customers will make hostile inferences after experiencing emotional experiences depends on their level of impulsiveness. Further simple slope analysis shows that for highly impulsive customers, even a slight decrease in satisfaction will significantly enhance the attribution of hostility; in other words, these customers are more likely to quickly interpret delays as employee mistakes, which directly triggers emotional and automatic "blame reasoning". On the contrary, customers with low impulsiveness will retain a certain amount of cognitive evaluation space even if they are not satisfied with the service process. They tend to attribute service delays to external factors such as crowded menus or late kitchen servings, rather than immediately questioning employees' attitudes or intentions. This finding shows that satisfaction is not a direct determinant of hostility attribution; on the contrary, it depends on whether the customer has impulsive personality traits. Patience will affect the customer's subjective emotional experience, and impulsiveness determines whether these emotions will be further interpreted as malicious inferences about the service staff. Therefore, the attribution of hostility essentially depends on the cognitive reasoning model, not on the experience or emotion itself.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying hostile attributions in restaurant waiting situations, focusing on whether patience, a personality trait, could reduce customers' tendency to attribute waiting to malicious behavior by waiters. The study found that patience does indeed enhance customers' positive evaluations of the service process, including higher perceived service quality and higher overall satisfaction, consistent with the view that patience promotes positive experiences [3,4]. However, the study also found that patience did not directly reduce hostile attributions, nor did it indirectly affect customers' interpretation of service personnel's intentions through service quality or satisfaction. Therefore, patience affects how customers "feel" during the service process, but does not determine how customers "interpret the event," meaning that customers' emotional experience of the service process and their attributional judgments of service personnel belong to two different psychological systems.

This result shows that attribution is a cognitive reasoning process, which is not completely equivalent to emotional experience. Customers may think that the service is satisfactory at the same time, but they also suspect that the long waiting time is caused by the waiter's negligence or unwillingness to serve. This disconnect between experience and reasoning reveals the "dual-system psychological structure" in the consumption process: the emotional system determines subjective feelings, and the reasoning system determines the attribution of responsibility. In other words, the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT30193

high satisfaction of patient customers is an emotional response, while hostility attribution is a motivational reasoning; the two work independently. This structure explains why in real service situations, even if customers express satisfaction, they may eventually leave the impression of "bad waiter attitude".

More importantly, this study found that whether hostile attribution occurs hinges on differences in customers' impulsive personality. When customers are highly impulsive, a decrease in satisfaction significantly increases hostile attribution; conversely, for customers with lower impulsivity, changes in satisfaction have little effect on hostile attribution. This result reveals that the trigger for hostile attribution is not purely from waiting or dissatisfaction, but rather stems from the cognitive shortcut of whether emotions are immediately translated into blaming behavior. Impulsive individuals are more inclined to rely on immediate reactions and intuitive inferences [17], and may readily activate a "rapid blaming" mode when evaluating events, interpreting ambiguous situations as malicious or inappropriate behavior by service personnel. This means that in service management, the real risk customers are not "dissatisfied people," but rather "dissatisfied and impulsive people."

Based on these findings, this study proposes a more explanatory perspective: hostile attribution is a reasoning behavior, not an emotional one; patience influences emotions, but impulsivity influences reasoning. Patient individuals experience slower emotional changes, but if they also possess high impulsivity, they may quickly interpret it as "the waiter deliberately neglected me." Therefore, the key to reducing hostile attribution is not to increase customer satisfaction, but to reduce the space for hostile explanations in the reasoning process. This study also provides the first empirical support for the "motivational hypothesis" in hostile attribution bias research, namely that customers, without sufficient information, are more likely to infer others' intentions in an aggressive manner [8,11].

Furthermore, the findings also indirectly correct a long-standing implicit assumption in the field of service management: many customer satisfaction models suggest that improving the service experience or increasing satisfaction will reduce customer complaints or negative reactions [15,14]. However, this study shows that increased satisfaction does not necessarily equate to reduced hostile attribution. Customer satisfaction and complaints are not necessarily contradictory; a customer may be "satisfied" with the service process while simultaneously "having complaints" about the service personnel. Therefore, the traditional goal of "increasing satisfaction to reduce complaints" is not entirely accurate; the service industry should focus more on "reducing reasoning errors to lower conflict." This is particularly important for strategies when dealing with queues, waiting, temporary delays, or uncontrollable service events.

In summary, this study reveals the formation path of customer hostility attribution from the three aspects of personality traits, emotional experience and attribution logic, and proves that it is not waiting itself that affects customer behavior, but the customer's interpretation of waiting. This discovery is of great practical significance to service management. If enterprises want to reduce complaints and conflicts caused by customer hostility, they should focus on how to reduce the space for customers to make malicious inferences about service personnel, such as providing clear waiting reasons, updating service progress in real time, and making customers feel cared for, rather than just focusing on shortening the waiting time. Reducing uncertainty and enhancing customers' sense of control is the key to reducing hostile attribution.

7. Conclusion

This study, using a restaurant waiting scenario as the experimental background, explored how customers interpret the intentions of service personnel during a wait lacking explanatory information, focusing particularly on whether patience, a key personality trait, influences hostile

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attribution. Through analysis of 689 valid samples and the PROCESS algorithm, this study yielded three main findings: (1) Patience significantly improved customers' evaluation of service quality and overall satisfaction; (2) Service quality and satisfaction could not explain the impact of patience on hostile attribution, indicating that the mediating path was not valid; (3) Impulsivity moderated the relationship between satisfaction and hostile attribution, and under conditions of dissatisfaction, highly impulsive customers were more likely to generate hostile attributions than low-impulsive customers. These findings suggest that whether customers generate hostility while waiting is not directly determined by emotional experience, but rather influenced by attributional reasoning style and personality reaction inertia.

The results show that patience can indeed improve customers' subjective experience, such as feeling better served and experiencing greater emotional stability, but this experience does not change how customers interpret the intentions of service personnel. In other words, customers may be satisfied with the service, but they may not necessarily trust the service staff's motives. Hostile attribution is a reasoning behavior, not an emotional reaction; therefore, patience does not automatically reduce hostile inferences. On the other hand, impulsivity is a crucial factor in determining whether hostile attribution occurs; highly impulsive customers are more likely to jump quickly from dissatisfaction to the conclusion that "the waiter deliberately neglected me." This study therefore proposes a dual-system structure for customer behavior: patience influences feeling, impulsivity influences interpreting, and hostile attribution belongs to the cognitive reasoning process, not the emotional process.

7.1. Theoretical contributions

This study makes three contributions to consumer behavior and service management theory. First, this study incorporates personality traits (patience) into service psychology research, expanding the previous understanding of customer satisfaction and emotional reactions, and breaking through the limitations of traditional research that only focuses on service processes or environmental cues. Secondly, this study confirms that service evaluation and hostile attribution are two different psychological systems, and there is no necessary conversion relationship between customer satisfaction and inferred service personnel intentions.Third, this study reveals the crucial moderating role of impulsivity in the formation of hostile attributions, responding to the interaction mechanism between "immediate emotional processing" and "motivational inference" in personality psychology [17], explaining why, in real-world service situations, even when customers objectively "have no reason to be angry," they may still engage in negative inferences or aggressive behavior.

7.2. Management implications

This study offers valuable insights for practical implementation in the service industry. First, since patience cannot alter a customer's inference about responsibility for an event, businesses should not rely solely on "appeasing emotions" when handling waiting situations, but rather reduce the space for inference. Therefore, transparent communication is superior to emotional appeasement; for example, displaying estimated waiting times, order progress bars, or simply explaining the reason for the wait can significantly reduce malicious inferences from customers. Second, the study reveals that highly impulsive customers are particularly prone to attributing responsibility to service personnel when dissatisfied. Therefore, restaurant front desk or customer service personnel should identify high-risk customer groups in the system, such as customers who continuously urge service, repeatedly inquire about the status, or speak in an agitated tone, and prioritize explanatory

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT30193

communication rather than emotional responses. Third, businesses should avoid treating customer satisfaction as the sole service objective, as satisfaction does not equate to trust and cannot prevent hostile attribution. While improving satisfaction is important, reducing customer misunderstandings of service personnel is even more crucial.

7.3. Research limitations and future directions

While this study provides important findings, several limitations remain, and future research directions are suggested. First, this study used a situational simulation experiment, allowing participants to imagine the scenario, but it was not a real consumption process. Future research could employ field experiments, such as manipulating waiting explanations in a real restaurant, to improve ecological validity. Second, this study measured patience as a personality trait, but future research could further distinguish between trait patience and state patience to verify whether short-term emotional patience training can reduce hostile attributions. Finally, this study used impulsivity as a moderating variable; future research could incorporate broader socio-cognitive factors, such as stereotypes about service personnel, trust biases, or cultural differences, to further understand why different customers interpret the same wait in completely different ways.

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