

The Influence of Customer Experience on Satisfaction and Loyalty among Young Adults in Themed Restaurants: An Empirical Approach Using Structural Equation Modeling

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of customer experience on satisfaction and loyalty among young adults in the specific context of themed restaurants. Drawing on an in-depth literature review, the study employs well-established theoretical frameworks to examine the role of emotions and cognitive evaluation in the loyalty-building process. A quantitative survey conducted with a targeted sample of young adults uses validated measurement scales and advanced statistical analyses, including structural equation modeling via AMOS. The results confirm significant relationships between the components of customer experience and behavioral intentions, thereby offering theoretical contributions to research in experiential marketing and practical implications for restaurant operators seeking to build loyalty among a young, digitally engaged clientele.

Keywords: Customer Experience, Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty, Young Adults, Themed Restaurants

INTRODUCTION

As a significant societal issue, the question of young adults' satisfaction in an experiential context is a recurring topic in contemporary discourse. It highlights the positive effect of satisfaction on loyalty through the establishment of a lasting relationship between the young consumer and the consumption experience itself. Our research has thus focused on the effects of satisfaction and its antecedents on consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses, with particular attention given to the role of satisfaction in generating emotional responses.

This article underscores the importance of deepening research into post-consumption processes, particularly concerning the effects of satisfaction and its antecedents on emotional and behavioral consumer responses. While the relationships between these various constructs have been studied, few works have specifically emphasized the loyalty of young adults within an experiential consumption framework. Yet, due to their age and life stage, young adults represent a key target for businesses.

Moreover, the evolving profile of these consumers—characterized by increased competence, expertise, and familiarity with consumption practices—compels marketing researchers to pay greater attention to their expectations and needs, with the aim of offering professionals truly customer-oriented value propositions.

This article aims, first, to highlight the impact of young adults' satisfaction within the post-consumption process. Subsequently, it identifies the dimensions responsible for their satisfaction in an experiential consumption context. Finally, it highlights the key factors that help sustain a long-term relationship between this young target and the company (in our case study, a themed restaurant).

The first part of this article presents the theoretical framework and offers a detailed discussion of young adults' satisfaction within a consumption context. The second part introduces the research hypotheses. The adopted

methodology is then outlined. The results of the empirical study are presented and discussed. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are proposed, along with the study's limitations and potential avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An experience can be defined as a meaning-creating interaction between an individual and a consumed object. From the perspective of the individual, an experience is a memorable and subjective event, characterized by emotional intensity, personal meaning, and potentially a transformation in perception or behavior (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Carù & Cova, 2006). Experience is understood as an interaction between a person, a consumed object, and a specific situation (Person \times Object \times Situation) (Filser, 2008). Marketing has gradually shifted—first from product to service, and then from service to customer experience (Chang & Horng, 2010). Consequently, customer experience is gaining increasing importance in marketing research as a means to better explain the chronological process leading to loyalty toward the consumption venue, as will be demonstrated in our research framework.

More specifically, this framework emphasizes the importance of segmenting young adults as a strategic opportunity to enhance loyalty to the consumption site. Targeting young adults represents a market opportunity for firms, as this group exhibits strong values, distinct purchasing motivations, and clear brand preferences. The term "young adults" is defined here as including individuals aged 18 to 34, in line with several theoretical references in developmental psychology and marketing (Arnett, 2000; Noble et al., 2009). This age group corresponds to a transitional period marked by empowerment, identity exploration, and a high sensitivity to consumption experiences. This choice is also consistent with the definitions adopted by certain national institutions (INSEE) and marketing studies that identify this group as a strategic target for experiential offerings and loyalty strategies. The inclusion of this population thus allows for the analysis of behaviors that are representative of new consumption trends in a rapidly evolving digital and social context.

The aim of this article is twofold: first, to examine the degree of influence that young adults exert within an experiential context, given their age, experience, expertise, and familiarity with the products involved in the consumption setting. These attributes enable young adults to effectively articulate judgments about products and the context itself, and to express emotions—whether positive or negative—about their consumption experience. Second, the article explores how their satisfaction impacts the continuation of the relationship between them as young consumers and the business or consumption venue (Aurier & Ngobo, 1999; Aurier & Passebois, 2002).

This article thus focuses on satisfaction derived from the lived experience during consumption. Future consumer decisions are influenced by previous pleasant or favorable experiences. A satisfying experience—one that is memorable and inspires repetition—fosters consumer loyalty. Since the development of the experiential view of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), several studies have enriched this perspective by highlighting consumers' sensory, emotional, and symbolic engagement during the act of consumption (Schmitt, 1999; Tynan et al., 2010; Holbrook, 2000; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Traditional economic theory, which portrayed consumers as purely rational decision-makers, has been revised. Today, the emotional aspect of the customer experience is regarded as equally essential (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007). The experience of dining in a themed restaurant is closely tied to emotional responses—both positive and negative—as well as to cognitive evaluations triggered by its attributes. These include the taste of the food, the presentation of dishes and tables, and even ambient scents, all of which influence emotional intensity and memory accuracy (Isen, 2000; Chuang & Lin, 2007). These dimensions activate various factors that may drive consumers to repeat the experience, perceiving the consumption site as a satisfying and desirable choice.

To address these theoretical considerations, a study was conducted with 353 consumers who frequent themed restaurants. The results of this study will be presented after laying out, in the first part, the conceptual

framework and hypotheses, followed by the methodology used to test the proposed model. Based on the results analysis, the contributions of this research will be discussed, along with its limitations and future research directions.

The literature review has led to the formulation of six hypotheses:

- **H1:** Positive emotions have a direct and positive effect on cognitive evaluation.
- **H2:** Negative emotions have a direct and negative effect on cognitive evaluation. (Based on the works of France, Shah & Park, 1994; Walliser, 1996; Izard, 1977; Wenger, 1950; Tomkins, 1962; Izard, 1972)
- **H3:** Cognitive evaluation has a direct and positive effect on satisfaction. (Based on the works of Oliver, 1980; Oliver & De Sarbo, 1988; Oliver & Westbrook, 1993; Arora & Singer, 2006; Bigné et al., 2008; Westbrook, 1980)
- **H4:** Positive emotions have a direct and positive effect on satisfaction.
- **H5:** Negative emotions attributed to the situation or the self have a direct and negative effect on satisfaction. (Based on the works of Oliver & Westbrook, 1993; Rust & Varki, 1997)
- **H6:** Satisfaction has a positive impact on loyalty. (Based on the works of Cunningham, 1961; Odin, 1998; Johnson, Herrmann & Huber, 2006; Garnier, 2006; Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 1993; Lombart & Labbé-Pinlon, 2006; Macintosh, 2007; Tuu & Olsen, 2009; Helgesen et al., 2010)

The construction of the conceptual model made it possible to illustrate the chronological sequence of relational variables in order to better understand the post-consumption process within an experiential context. At this stage, a methodological approach is developed to validate the theoretical constructs through empirical investigation.

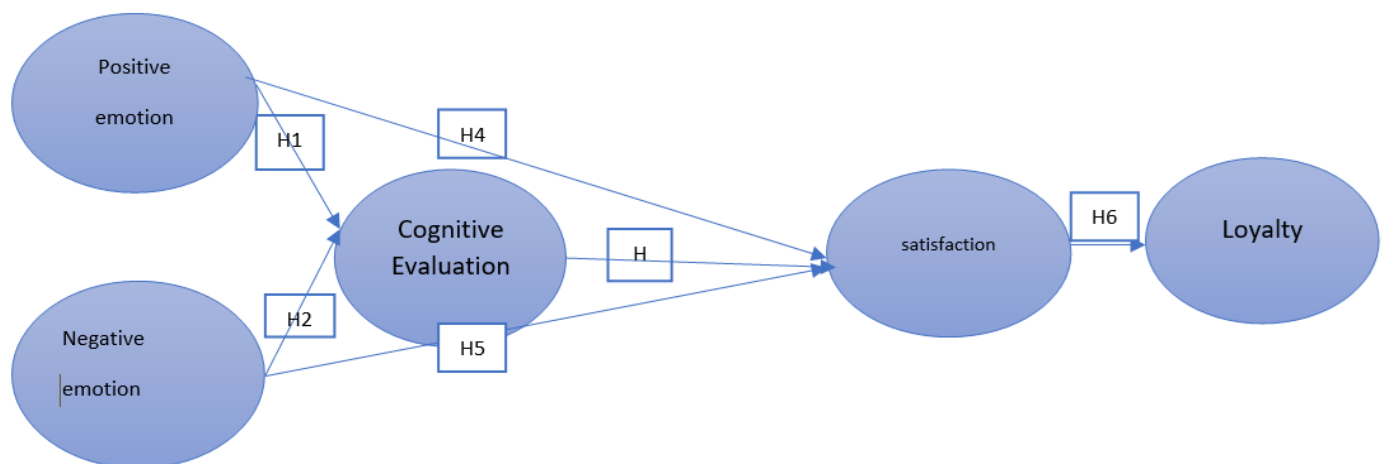


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Source: Adapted from Joëlle Vanhamme (2002)

METHODOLOGY

Regarding the research methodology, a field study was conducted in partnership with a themed restaurant (a consumption venue frequented by young adults). A quantitative study was carried out among these young adult consumers (18-34 age) through a self-administered questionnaire to assess their interest in the consumption venue, as well as to gather their knowledge, experiences, opinions, judgments, and emotions felt during the consumption experience. The decision to focus on individuals aged 18 to 34 is based on several theoretical and empirical considerations. This age group represents a transitional period characterized by

significant changes in lifestyle, consumption behavior, and expectations regarding customer experience. According to several studies in marketing and consumer psychology (Arnett, 2000; Noble et al., 2009), young adults aged 18 to 34 constitute a key segment due to their high exposure to new technologies, their preference for personalized experiences, and their tendency to share opinions online—factors that directly influence brand reputation, particularly in leisure and restaurant sectors.

Moreover, this population exhibits heightened sensitivity to the experiential dimension of offerings, especially in emotionally charged contexts such as themed restaurants. This choice is also consistent with recent literature on experiential marketing, which identifies the 18–34 age group as a strategic target for loyalty building through emotional engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Therefore, including this age range allows the analysis to focus on a highly relevant population for the study's objectives, while ensuring methodological consistency with prior research.

The questionnaire was designed with a brief introduction outlining the objectives and general nature of the study, emphasizing the absence of requests for confidential information. The questions aimed to evaluate the relationship in terms of explanatory factors for their satisfaction and what leads to their loyalty toward this consumption venue.

The questionnaires were distributed in person to young adult consumers who frequent the venue and were collected directly. A total of 353 usable responses were obtained (after eliminating outliers and incomplete questionnaires). Respondents were recruited online using survey platforms through a participation call shared on social media (Instagram, Facebook,) and marketing-related websites. Selection criteria included young adults aged 18 to 34, who had visited a themed restaurant within the last six months and had some level of activity on social media. Data collection lasted for three weeks, allowing for the creation of a sufficiently diverse sample. To control for selection biases, a randomization method was employed for participant selection, along with quotas ensuring balanced representation across age groups and cultural profiles. Additionally, the anonymity and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed, in accordance with data protection standards. The operationalization of variables was based on measurement scales validated in the literature..

The choice of measurement scales used in the questionnaire is outlined as follows: to measure the satisfaction of young adults, the cumulative satisfaction scale from Oliver (1980) was chosen, as its reliability rate is statistically high ($\alpha = 0.82$), with a (Jöreskog's $\rho = 0.815$; convergent validity $\rho = 0.53$) according to the work of Vo & Jolibert (2005). To measure both positive and negative affective reactions, which are key triggers of consumer satisfaction through positive emotions felt after consuming a product, and negative emotions, experienced as a result of the consumption process...

Bad Experience or When the Product is Not Appreciated

We based our analysis on the PAD model. Regarding the measurement of cognitive evaluation, which expresses the consumer's rational judgment during the consumption experience and is recognized as an antecedent to satisfaction, leading to a positive judgment following a positively evaluated and personally experienced event, we relied on two single-item scales. The first is Oliver's (1980) semantic scale, a 5-point scale ranging from "Overall, the themed restaurant was worse than expected" to "Overall, the themed restaurant was better than expected."

The second scale is that of Churchill and Surprenant (1982), also a 5-point semantic scale, ranging from "Overall, my expectations of the themed restaurant were very high: the themed restaurant was worse than I thought" to "Overall, my expectations of the themed restaurant were very low: the themed restaurant was better than I thought."

Finally, to measure consumer loyalty to the consumption venue, the focus was placed on the behavioral dimension of loyalty, specifically the intention to repurchase and recommend the venue. Therefore, the items

proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1996) were adopted for measuring loyalty through a scale based on 5 items, which account for positive word-of-mouth, recommendations, and encouragement to visit the consumption venue. Additionally, it measures and maintains a stable and lasting relationship with the venue.

RESULTS

The results of the principal component analysis and the confirmatory factor analysis of all the variables were compiled into two tables. Table 1 presents the results of the principal component analysis, while Table 2 presents the results of the confirmatory factor analysis of the scales for all the variables in our model (see Table 1 and Table 2 in Appendix 1 and 2).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the validation of the measurement scales, the principal component analysis helped refine the scales used. A 5-dimensional measure of satisfaction was obtained, which explained 58.968% of the total variance, with each dimension's Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding 0.8. Using structural equation modeling (with the AMOS software) ($\alpha = 0.825$), the good psychometric quality of this scale was confirmed, with an RMSEA of 0.104 (above the acceptable threshold of 0.08), a GFI close to 1, an AGFI of 0.9, and an RMR below 0.05, as recommended by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993), confirming the good fit between the theoretical and empirical models. The reliability of the scale dimensions is established with a Jöreskog rho greater than or equal to 0.890, which exceeds the 0.6 threshold. Finally, the convergent validity was verified with an index of 0.620, which is greater than the 0.5 threshold, meaning that the variance of each construct is more explained by its measures than by error (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results of the CFA for the satisfaction measurement scale of young adult consumers towards a consumption venue are summarized in Table 2. The measurements for loyalty, positive and negative affective reactions, and cognitive evaluation were also validated through PCA followed by confirmatory factor analysis. All the fit indices are acceptable, as are the reliability and convergent validity indices.

Regarding the analysis of the results, we were able to test and validate all the relationships of our hypotheses using the structural equation model constructed with the AMOS module. The results confirm that all the conditions for verifying the effect of positive and negative emotions on the cognitive evaluation of young consumers are met. We tested H1 and H2, which propose that the impact of positive and negative emotions on the cognitive evaluation of young adult consumers following their consumption experience would be positive and negative, respectively. In other words, positive emotions would have a positive impact, and negative emotions would have a negative impact on the cognitive evaluation of young consumers. The results ensure that a positive relationship exists between positive emotions and cognitive evaluation, and a negative relationship between negative emotions and cognitive evaluation. It is therefore possible to conclude that the relationship between affective reactions (positive and negative emotions) and cognitive evaluation is significant.

For H3: the effect of cognitive evaluation on the satisfaction of young consumers was tested by examining the hypothesis that the impact of cognitive evaluation on the satisfaction of young adult consumers following the consumption experience. In other words, cognitive evaluation would have a positive impact on the satisfaction of young adult consumers.

For H4 and H5: the effect of positive and negative emotions on the satisfaction of young consumers was tested. We examined the hypothesis that the impact of positive and negative emotions on the satisfaction of young adult consumers following their consumption experience would be positive and negative, respectively. The results confirm that all conditions for verifying a positive relationship between positive emotions and satisfaction, and a negative relationship between negative emotions and satisfaction, are met. It is therefore possible to conclude that the relationship between affective reactions (positive and negative emotions) and satisfaction is significant.

Finally, for H6: the effect of satisfaction on the loyalty of young consumers was tested. We tested the hypothesis that the impact of satisfaction on the loyalty of young adult consumers following the consumption experience would be positive. The results confirm that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is significant.

The results confirm that all the conditions for verifying the existence of a positive relationship between satisfaction and loyalty of young adult consumers are met. Regarding the discussion of the results, the first and second hypotheses, which propose a positive and negative impact of positive and negative emotions on cognitive evaluation, were confirmed. Indeed, when a consumer experiences positive emotions after consuming a product, it impacts their judgment of the product and the experience itself. Their positive judgment, or rather their positive evaluation, will be cognitive in nature. Conversely, when the consumer experiences negative emotions after consuming a product, this impacts their cognitive evaluation. These two findings are consistent with the works of Bless (2001), Holt (1995), Oliver (1997), and Jayanti (1996).

The third hypothesis, which posits a positive impact of cognitive evaluation on satisfaction, was also verified and validated. Indeed, based on Oliver's (1980) expectancy confirmation model, a positive cognitive evaluation occurs when there is a favorable gap between the consumer's expectations and the product's performance. Therefore, when the product's performance meets or exceeds the consumer's expectations, satisfaction with the product occurs. This result was also verified by the works of Arora and Singer (2006), Bigné et al. (2008).

The tests for the fourth and fifth hypotheses, which assert the impact of positive and negative emotions experienced during the consumption experience on satisfaction, were also verified and validated. This confirms that during the consumption experience, if the young consumer experiences positive emotions following the consumption of the product, it will lead to satisfaction with the experience they just had. In contrast, if the young consumer experiences negative emotions as a result of the consumption experience, satisfaction is not achieved. These two results are also confirmed by the works of Evrard and Aurier (1994), Morgan (1998), Dubé et al. (2000), Hui and Tse (1996), and Krishnan and Olshavsky (1995).

Finally, the test for the sixth hypothesis, which suggests a positive effect of satisfaction on the loyalty of young adult consumers, was confirmed. This hypothesis supports the idea that satisfaction not only helps maintain the relationship between young consumers and the same consumption venue but also encourages them to recommend it to others and speak highly of the venue in terms of ambiance and culinary experience. This result aligns with the works of Lombart and Labbé-Pinlon (2006), Macintosh (2007), Tuu and Olsen (2009), and Helgesen et al. (2010), who assert that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is positive, and that satisfaction leads to a lasting relationship between the young consumer and the consumption venue.

These results and the discussion lead to the following conclusion, highlighting the contributions of this work and its managerial implications. This research emphasizes the importance of young adult consumer satisfaction in fostering their loyalty to a consumption venue. It has, in this regard, demonstrated the factors responsible for consumer satisfaction, on the one hand, and for sustaining satisfaction, on the other hand, ensuring a durable relationship between young consumers and consumption venues (themed restaurants). The factors responsible for satisfaction are represented by the affective dimensions (affective reactions: positive and negative emotions) and the cognitive dimension (cognitive evaluation). These two factors, affective on the one hand and cognitive on the other, represent the direct antecedents of satisfaction. In this context, we focused on studying the effect of affective reactions on cognitive evaluation, as well as on satisfaction, while also exploring the impact of cognitive evaluation on satisfaction. Ultimately, we highlighted the favorable relationship between young adults' satisfaction and their loyalty.

To contextualize the obtained results, it is important to compare them with recent research. For example, a study by Smith et al. (2020) on the impact of emotional experiences in themed restaurants showed that sensory experience (music, decor, ambiance) plays a more significant role than expected in the loyalty of young adult

customers. This partially confirms the results of our study, which indicate that the emotional aspect of the experience (pleasure, excitement) is a key predictor of loyalty.

However, Jones et al. (2019) observed in their study that the perception of service quality was a predominant factor in the loyalty of young adults, whereas our research shows that the overall experience (including digital and social aspects) is more decisive. This suggests that the results of our study may reflect the growing impact of digital platforms and online social interactions on loyalty behaviors in a hybrid consumption context. Thus, while our results corroborate some conclusions from recent research, they also make a unique contribution by emphasizing the importance of the digital and social dimensions in the customer experience of young adults.

The results of our study show significant relationships between consumer experience, satisfaction, and loyalty, but these relationships can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, it is possible that the experience in a themed restaurant also influences brand perception or loyalty through a mediating effect, which was not explicitly tested in our analysis. There could also be unmeasured variables in our study, such as the perception of the authenticity of the restaurant theme, which may significantly influence behavioral intentions. Additionally, while the emotional impact appears to be predominant in our study, it is important to note that emotional saturation could potentially reduce the long-term impact of the experience, which was not considered in our measurements. In other words, young adults may eventually tire of experiences that are too repetitive, even if they are initially perceived as exciting and unique.

CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The contribution of our study is empirical, where we tested a model of relational quality in the context of consumption venue visits. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces experiential marketing models by highlighting the importance of integrating emotional and social dimensions in fostering loyalty among young adults. It also suggests that future research should explore more deeply the impact of digital technologies in shaping the customer experience, especially in hybrid consumption contexts. The study further contributes to consumer psychology by introducing new factors of loyalty in the digital age, which had not been fully addressed in previous research.

The theoretical contribution of our study lies in highlighting also, the importance of targeting young adults in an experiential context. Such a distinction is generally overlooked by authors studying consumer satisfaction across all age groups. Indeed, the results of our research can help operators in this sector develop relational marketing strategies by focusing on the causal links between relational variables. Our research has also allowed for a better understanding of the key success factors that enable a competitive advantage between existing consumption venues, especially in working on consumer loyalty. All the relationships addressed in our model are interesting, considering the age of our target group, specifically young adult consumers, for all the virtues we explained in the theoretical section. It would therefore be beneficial for this model, as well as the consideration of age—i.e., young adults—to be studied more frequently in human and social sciences (particularly the relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction within a virtual community when visiting a consumption venue).

From a managerial perspective, the positive influence of emotions and the judgment felt during the consumption experience, as well as the impact of extending young adult consumers' satisfaction to loyalty at the same venue, as we have previously demonstrated, leads to a variety of proposals for businesses. Among these, we mention one that considers young adults as the target group. Specifically, for a young adult audience, businesses should opt for two strategies: create an experience-based offer or differentiate the offer through the experience. The results of this study suggest also that restaurateurs should not only focus on improving service quality but also pay particular attention to the overall emotional experience experienced by young adults. The integration of immersive technologies, such as mobile apps or social media interactions, could enhance engagement and loyalty. Furthermore, personalizing the customer experience could be an effective lever, given this population's desire for unique and tailored experiences that match their preferences.

Regarding the limitations of our research, several factors must be considered. First, the sample of young adults, while diverse, may not reflect global consumption behaviors, particularly in cultures where themed restaurants are less popular. Additionally, the self-selection bias of participants, despite the use of quotas, could affect the representativeness of the results, as respondents may be more inclined to share very positive or very negative experiences, leading to potential biases in the evaluation of satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, the sample was limited to young adults aged 18 to 34, and while this group is of significant interest, it would be necessary to confirm these initial findings with other demographic groups, such as children or older young adults, as well as across different product and service categories to enhance the external validity of the conclusions.

Another methodological limitation is the small sample size relative to the broader market, which constrained the use of more advanced techniques to assess the overall model. Additionally, the variables examined only address a small portion of the issues that could be explored in relation to loyalty to consumption venues. While the measures used in this study were validated, they did not fully capture the complexity of consumer experiences in a hybrid context, where both online and in-person elements interact. To gain deeper insights into the long-term effects of these experiences in themed restaurants, a longitudinal study would be beneficial.

Our research opens up several promising avenues for future work, which appear more relevant in terms of managerial implications. The framework of our research suggests extensions related to studies on relationship marketing and loyalty to a consumption venue. Indeed, we focused on themed restaurants. Therefore, it is possible to expand the study to other categories of consumption venues and leisure activities. By varying the areas of study, we could update the different venues that provoke social influence.

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APPENDIX

Annex 1:

Table 1: Results of the PCA (Principal Component Analysis) of the Measurement Scales of All Variables

Dimension	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Positive and negative emotion	Cognitive evaluation
Items	5	4	9	2
explained variance	58.968%	64.715%	61.818%	77.847%
reliability	$\alpha = 0.825$	$\alpha = 0.818$	$\alpha = 0.825$	$\alpha = 0.715$
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	0.764	0.802	0.815	0.500

Annex 2:

Table 2: Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for all measurement scale

Dimension	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Positive and negative emotion
r de Jöreskog	0.890	0.886	0.894 et 0.857
r de validité convergente	0.620	0.662	0.633 et 0.603
RMSEA	0.104	0.000	0.061
AGFI	0.9	0.999	0.904
GFI	0.998	1.000	0.951
CFI	0.981	1.000	0.975
X ² /ddl/ Sig	7.826/3/.000	0.075/2/.000	35.775/23/.000
NB : The cognitive evaluation scale consists of 2 items, making it a just-identified factor. Therefore, the CFA in the AMOS software does not provide the fit indices or the Bollen-Stine test.			