Relationship Between Happiness-Based Emotional Branding and Customer Retention in Cafés and Casual Dining Restaurants Among Young Consumers: A Correlational Study

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***Abstract*—This study examined the relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among young consumers visiting cafés and casual dining restaurants. It assessed perceived positive emotional experiences, examined retention-related intentions, and tested whether happiness-based emotional branding was associated with and statistically predicted customer retention. A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was used. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire from consumers aged 18–35 who reported visiting the selected establishment at least two to three times during the previous three months. Of 186 responses received, 185 eligible responses were analyzed. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression were applied. The mean score was 3.14 (SD = 0.69) for happiness-based emotional branding and 3.16 (SD = 0.74) for customer retention. The two scales showed acceptable internal consistency (α = .796 and α = .792, respectively). Happiness-based emotional branding had a moderate positive association with customer retention, r = .517, p < .001. Regression analysis was statistically significant, F(1, 183) = 66.683, p < .001, and explained 26.7% of the variance in retention scores. The findings indicate that stronger positive emotional experiences are associated with stronger retention intentions. Because the study was cross-sectional and relied on convenience sampling and self-reports, the findings do not establish causality or actual future repeat visits.**

***Index Terms*—Happiness-Based Emotional Branding; Customer Retention; Emotional Experience; Cafés; Casual Dining Restaurants; Young Consumers**

I. INTRODUCTION

Cafés and casual dining restaurants offer more than food and beverages. Customers also encounter a physical setting, service interactions, sensory cues, social opportunities, and brand communications. These elements can shape how a visit feels and how the establishment is remembered. As a result, understanding customer relationships in hospitality requires attention not only to functional evaluations, such as food quality and price, but also to the emotional experiences associated with a visit.

Emotional branding describes efforts to build meaningful emotional connections between consumers and brands. Akgün et al. (2013) discuss emotional branding as an experience that can strengthen consumer–brand connections, while Kim and Sullivan (2019) explain how emotional appeals can shape consumers' relationships with brands. Brand experience research likewise treats consumer responses as extending beyond product attributes and has examined their relationship with loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009).

In cafés and restaurants, positive feelings may arise from comfort, relaxation, ambience, staff interactions, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging. Environmental design is relevant because sensory and physical features can form part of the customer experience (Chen & Lin, 2020). Hospitality research has also examined associations between restaurant atmospherics, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Rathnasiri et al., 2025). These findings make the café and casual dining context useful for

examining how an experience perceived as happy or emotionally positive relates to intentions to return.

Happiness, emotional branding, satisfaction, loyalty, and retention are related but distinct concepts. Happiness in this study refers to respondents perceived positive emotional experience at a selected establishment. Customer retention is assessed through self-reported intentions and preferences, including revisit intention, choosing the same establishment again, recommendation, and resistance to switching. The study's measure of happiness-based emotional branding is broader than a measure of happiness as an isolated psychological state: it includes comfort, relaxation, enjoyment, atmosphere, staff interaction, emotional connection, and positive memories.

Prior work provides relevant but not identical evidence. Chen and Lin (2020) consider sensory experience in café environmental design. Alves (2023) examines meal experience, memory, happiness, mindfulness, and revisit intention in fine dining. In a fast-food setting, Swee Yen and Latip (2024) investigate restaurant-related factors, satisfaction, and customer happiness. Research on service value and repurchase intention also indicates the importance of customers' evaluations of restaurant services (Doeim et al., 2022). However, these studies do not all examine the same construct combination, population, or setting.

The present study addresses this contextual question by examining the association between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among consumers aged 18–35 who visit cafés and casual dining restaurants. Its contribution is focused and empirical: it tests the relationship between the two study variables in a combined café and casual dining sample, while recognizing that the design cannot demonstrate cause and effect.

1.1 Aim and objectives

The aim was to examine the relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among young consumers visiting cafés and casual dining restaurants.

The study had four objectives:

- To assess perceived happiness-based emotional branding in café and casual dining restaurant experiences.
- To examine customer retention intentions among young consumers.
- To analyze the relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention.
- To determine whether happiness-based emotional branding statistically predicts customer retention.

1.2 Research hypothesis

H0: There is no significant relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among young consumers of cafés and casual dining restaurants.

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among young consumers of cafés and casual dining restaurants.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Emotional branding and brand experience research suggests that brand relationships may be shaped by consumers' feelings and experiences, not only by functional product assessments. Akgün et al. (2013) discuss emotional branding as an emerging consumer experience, and Brakus et al. (2009) provide a framework for understanding brand experience and its relationship with consumer responses, including loyalty. Kim and Sullivan (2019), studying fashion brands, further discuss the role of emotional branding in connecting with consumers. Although these studies are not specific to cafés, they provide a conceptual basis for examining emotional responses in experience-led consumption.

The physical and sensory environment is particularly relevant to hospitality settings. Chen and Lin (2020) examined sensory experience in the environmental design of sustainable cafés. Their work highlights the importance of considering the setting as part of the experience rather than treating consumption as a purely functional transaction. Hoppu et al. (2020), in a multisensory food environment, studied food consumption and emotions, illustrating the relevance of emotional and sensory context to food-related experiences. More broadly, Rathnasiri et al. (2025) examined restaurant atmospherics in relation to customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in an emerging economy.

Studies also connect emotional experiences with future behavioral intentions. Alves (2023) explored meal experience and the roles of memory, happiness,

and mindfulness in fine dining. Doeim et al. (2022) examined service value and repurchase intention in Egyptian fast-food restaurants. Swee Yen and Latip (2024) studied satisfaction in Sarawak's fast-food restaurants and its relationship with customer happiness. These studies provide hospitality context for investigating positive experiences and intentions to return, but their constructs and methods differ from those used in the present study.

Emotional brand relationships may also be supported by communication and storytelling. Crespo et al. (2023) studied storytelling and the consumer–brand relationship experience, while Dessart (2018) examined the conditions under which storytelling advertisements perform effectively. Zhang et al. (2023) examined the relationships between storytelling, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty. This literature suggests that emotional meaning can be communicated, but the effectiveness of communication may depend on how consumers interpret and experience it. In a café or restaurant, therefore, brand communication should be understood alongside the experience delivered through the setting and service.

Taken together, the literature supports examining the association between positive emotional experiences and retention-related intentions in hospitality. However, the present study does not assume that happiness alone determines retention. Price, food quality, convenience, location, service quality, satisfaction, and competing options may also affect customers' decisions. The conceptual proposition tested here is narrower: respondents reporting stronger happiness-based emotional experiences are expected to report stronger customer retention intentions.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was used. The study measured respondents' perceptions at one point in time and examined the association between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention. Simple linear regression was used to assess the statistical predictive relationship. The design does not establish temporal order or causation.

3.2 Participants and sampling

The target population was consumers aged 18–35 who visited cafés or casual dining restaurants. Convenience sampling was used, and participation took place through an online questionnaire. Eligibility required respondents to have visited the selected establishment at least two to three times during the previous three months. A total of 186 responses were received. One response marked as ineligible was excluded, leaving 185 valid responses for analysis.

3.3 Instrument and measures

Data were collected using a structured Google Forms questionnaire. The questionnaire included respondent information, visit frequency, the type of selected establishment, number of visits to that establishment during the previous three months, and the length of the respondent's relationship with it. The main measures consisted of 11 positively worded items for happiness-based emotional branding and eight items for customer retention. Responses used a five-point agreement scale, with higher scores representing stronger agreement. The final customer-retention item was negatively worded— "I would easily stop visiting this café/restaurant and choose another similar place instead" and was reverse-scored before the composite score was calculated.

Happiness-based emotional branding was operationalized as a composite measure of perceived happiness, feeling good, comfort, relaxation, positive feelings, atmosphere, enjoyment, staff interaction, emotional connection, positive memories, and leaving the establishment feeling more positive. Customer retention was operationalized through revisit intention, choosing the same establishment again, preference, loyalty-related intentions, continued patronage, recommendation, and resistance to switching. Thus, customer retention in this study represents reported intentions rather than verified repeat visits.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The questionnaire informed participants that email addresses would not be collected, that responses would be kept confidential and used for academic purposes, and that participation was voluntary. Respondents were asked to proceed only if they consented to participate. The analysis used the survey responses for the stated academic research purpose.

3.5 Data analysis

Data were screened for eligibility and completeness. Descriptive statistics were used to summaries participant characteristics and the main study variables. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson's product–moment correlation was used to test the association between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention. Simple linear regression was used to examine whether happiness-based emotional branding statistically predicted customer retention. Statistical significance was evaluated using the reported p-values.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Participant profile

The analysis included 185 eligible respondents aged 18–35. The largest age group was 26–30 years (34.05%), followed by 31–35 years (30.27%), 22–25 years (25.41%), and 18–21 years (10.27%). Male respondents accounted for 49.73%, female respondents for 46.49%, and 3.78% preferred not to disclose gender. Cafés were selected by 61.62% of respondents, while 38.38% selected casual dining restaurants.

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–21 years	19	10.27
	22–25 years	47	25.41
	26–30 years	63	34.05
	31–35 years	56	30.27
Gender	Male	92	49.73
	Female	86	46.49
	Prefer not to say	7	3.78
Selected establishment	Café	114	61.62
	Casual dining restaurant	71	38.38

Note. Percentages are based on 185 valid responses.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and reliability

The mean score for happiness-based emotional branding was 3.14 (SD = 0.69). The highest-rated item concerned feeling comfortable and relaxed during visits (M = 3.24), followed by enjoying the overall experience (M = 3.22). The mean score for customer retention was 3.16 (SD = 0.74). The intention to choose the same establishment again received a mean of 3.25, and revisit intention received a mean of 3.24. The direct loyalty-related item had a lower mean of 2.98, suggesting that intentions to revisit and stronger loyalty should not be treated as identical.

Measure	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Happiness-based emotional branding	11	3.14	0.69	0.796
Customer retention	8	3.16	0.74	0.792

Both scales showed acceptable internal consistency in this sample, with Cronbach's alpha values of .796 for happiness-based emotional branding and .792 for customer retention.

4.3 Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis indicated a moderate positive relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention, $r = .517$, $p < .001$, $N = 185$. Respondents who reported stronger positive emotional experiences with their selected establishment also tended to report stronger retention-related intentions. The null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was supported.

Variables	Pearson's r	p	N
Happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention	.517	< .001	185

4.4 Regression analysis

The simple linear regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 183) = 66.683$, $p < .001$. The model's R^2 was .267 (adjusted R^2 = .263), indicating that happiness-based emotional branding accounted for 26.7% of the variance in customer retention scores in this sample. The unstandardized regression coefficient was positive ($B = .557$, $SE = .068$, $t = 8.166$, $p < .001$). The estimated equation was: Customer retention = 1.408 + 0.557 × happiness-based emotional branding.

Statistic	Result
R	.517
R^2	.267
Adjusted R^2	.263
F(1, 183)	66.683
Unstandardized B	.557
Standard error	.068
t	8.166
p	< .001

The regression result indicates statistical prediction within the fitted model, not proof that happiness-based emotional branding causes retention. Approximately 73.3% of the variation in retention scores remained unexplained by this single-predictor model.

V. DISCUSSION

The study found a statistically significant, moderate positive association between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among the participating young consumers. The result is consistent with the broader view that consumer experiences and emotional responses are relevant to brand relationships (Akgün et al., 2013; Brakus et al., 2009; Kim & Sullivan, 2019). It also fits with hospitality research that has examined the role of sensory environments, meal experiences, and restaurant atmospherics in customers' evaluations and behavioral intentions (Alves, 2023; Chen & Lin, 2020; Rathnasiri et al., 2025). These studies address related concepts and contexts, so the comparison should be interpreted as conceptual consistency rather than direct replication.

The descriptive results suggest that comfort, relaxation, and enjoyment were prominent parts of the emotional experience reported by respondents. This is plausible in cafés and casual dining restaurants, where customers encounter not only food and beverages but also the physical environment and service interactions. For managers, the findings support paying attention to the complete experience, including seating comfort, ambience, staff interactions, and the consistency of the environment. However, the present analysis did not test the separate causal contribution of each of these elements.

The customer-retention mean was 3.16, and the revisit and choose-again items received relatively higher scores than the direct loyalty item. This difference matters because an intention to return is not the same as enduring loyalty or actual repeat behavior. Customers may intend to revisit a place they enjoy while still considering alternatives based on price, convenience, food quality, location, or changing needs. Retention strategies should therefore combine emotional experience with reliable service and functional value.

The regression model explained 26.7% of the variance in customer retention scores. This is meaningful evidence of an association in the sample, but it also indicates that most variation was not explained by the single predictor. Future studies should test additional variables, such as perceived value, service quality, satisfaction, food quality, convenience, brand familiarity, and switching costs. They should also examine whether the relationship differs between cafés and casual dining restaurants rather than assuming the two settings are equivalent.

An important qualification concerns measurement. The happiness-based emotional branding measure combines several dimensions of experience, including happiness, comfort, atmosphere, enjoyment, staff interaction, emotional connection, and positive memories. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as showing that happiness alone predicts retention. Instead, they show that a broader composite of positive emotional experience associated with an establishment is related to retention intentions.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Managerial implications

Café and restaurant managers can use the findings as a reason to assess emotional experience alongside conventional service and performance indicators. Practical areas to review include comfort, ambience, staff warmth, ease of service, and whether the brand promise matches the actual visit. Emotional branding should not be limited to advertising: customers need to experience the intended warmth or happiness in the environment and interactions.

6.2 Research implications

The study provides a context-specific test of the relationship between a broad happiness-based emotional experience measure and retention intentions in a combined café and casual dining sample. Future work should distinguish happiness from satisfaction, emotional attachment, brand experience, loyalty, and actual retention. Using validated measures for distinct constructs would help establish whether happiness contributes explanatory value beyond these related concepts.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should guide interpretation. First, convenience sampling limits generalizability beyond the respondents who participated. Second, the cross-

sectional design cannot establish causality or determine whether positive emotional experiences precede retention intentions. Third, the study relies on self-reported perceptions and intentions, which may differ from actual future visits. Fourth, the happiness-based emotional branding measure combines several related experience dimensions rather than isolating happiness as a single construct. Fifth, the regression model included only one predictor and did not control for other possible drivers of retention. Finally, cafés and casual dining restaurants were analyzed together, so possible differences between the two types of establishments remain untested.

Future research could recruit a larger and more diverse sample, compare café and casual dining customers separately, use validated measures of happiness and retention, and include other relevant predictors. Longitudinal designs or consent-based behavioral records could test whether stated intentions translate into repeat visits. Studies could also examine mediating or moderating variables, such as satisfaction, emotional attachment, age group, visit frequency, or the type of establishment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between happiness-based emotional branding and customer retention among young consumers visiting cafés and casual dining restaurants. Among 185 valid responses, the two scales showed acceptable internal consistency. Happiness-based emotional branding was positively associated with customer retention ($r = .517$, $p < .001$) and was a statistically significant predictor in a simple regression model, which explained 26.7% of the variance in retention scores. The findings suggest that stronger positive emotional experiences are associated with stronger intentions to revisit, choose, and recommend an establishment. They do not establish that emotional branding causes retention, nor do they measure actual future repeat visits. The practical implication is to treat emotional experience as one relevant part of customer retention, alongside functional value, service quality, and convenience.

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