

Navigating service variability: A managerial perspective on brand trust in internship-based service SMEs

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Abstract: Service-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) rely heavily on human interaction, making brand trust particularly vulnerable to service variability. This challenge becomes more pronounced when SMEs involve internship-based personnel in service delivery. Although internships are commonly used to support operational flexibility, limited attention has been given to how such practices shape brand trust from a managerial perspective. This study explores how service SMEs manage brand trust under an internship-based service experience. Using a qualitative interpretative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving SME owners, employees, customers, interns, and supporting stakeholders. The findings indicate that brand trust is not automatically weakened by internship involvement. Instead, trust is gradually constructed through managerial supervision, informal service standardization, interpersonal interaction, and stakeholder coordination. Internship-based service experience functions as a trust-sensitive context in which managerial practices determine whether trust is reinforced or undermined. This study contributes to service marketing literature by shifting attention from trust outcomes to managerial processes in resource-constrained SMEs. The findings provide actionable insights for managing internship-based service delivery to sustain brand trust and enhance competitive sustainability.

Keywords: Brand trust, Internship-based service experience, Qualitative research, Relationship marketing, Service SMEs, Service variability.

1. Introduction

Service-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in local economies by delivering customer-oriented services that rely heavily on human interaction. Unlike product-based firms, service SMEs face inherent challenges related to service variability, as service quality is closely tied to the performance, behavior, and interaction styles of frontline personnel. In such contexts, brand trust becomes a critical asset for sustaining customer relationships and reducing perceived service risk. This condition reflects the inherent characteristics of services, such as intangibility and heterogeneity, which increase customers' perceived risk and reliance on trust when evaluating service providers [1, 2]. Recent empirical evidence further confirms that service quality and brand trust jointly influence customer satisfaction and relational continuity in SME contexts, reinforcing the strategic importance of trust under conditions of service variability [3, 4].

Beyond trust formation, effective management of internship-based service experience can enhance the competitive sustainability of service SMEs by stabilizing customer relationships under conditions of service variability. From an economic perspective, such managerial practices contribute to long-term business sustainability by enhancing customer equity and reducing costs associated with service failure and customer churn in people-intensive service environments. Recent studies in SME management contexts also highlight that managerial capability and leadership orientation significantly influence

organizational performance and service consistency under resource constraints. From a services marketing perspective, managing customer perceptions in these contexts requires consistent interaction quality and managerial control, as service performance is closely associated with frontline personnel behavior [5, 6].

Brand trust is widely recognized as a key determinant of customer loyalty and long-term relationship continuity [7]. Prior studies indicate that trust functions as a relational governance mechanism reducing uncertainty and supporting long-term exchange relationships, especially in service settings [8, 9]. In service environments, trust enables customers to cope with uncertainty arising from intangible and heterogeneous service processes [10]. For SMEs, brand trust is especially critical because limited resources often constrain formal branding and standardization efforts, making trust formation highly dependent on direct service encounters and interpersonal interactions [11]. In owner-driven SMEs, trust is therefore frequently developed through close personal interaction rather than formalized branding systems [12].

To address operational constraints, many service SMEs rely on flexible human resource arrangements, including the involvement of internship-based personnel in service delivery. Interns are frequently engaged in customer-facing activities, operational support, and creative tasks to enhance efficiency and manage labor limitations. While such practices may support operational flexibility, they also introduce service variability due to differences in experience, skills, and professional maturity among service providers. From a service marketing perspective, this variability may influence customer perceptions of reliability and competence, thereby affecting brand trust [13]. Prior research suggests that frontline employee variability plays a critical role in shaping customer evaluations of service quality and trust, particularly in people-intensive service organizations [14].

Existing research on brand trust and service experience has largely focused on stable organizational contexts with relatively homogeneous frontline employees. Although studies demonstrate that positive service experiences foster trust and loyalty by shaping customers' emotional and relational responses to brands [15, 16], they often overlook service environments characterized by temporary or inexperienced service personnel, which are common in SMEs. Consequently, limited insight is available regarding how brand trust is managed when service encounters involve internship-based personnel, particularly from a managerial and process-oriented perspective.

In parallel, research on internships has predominantly examined educational outcomes, skill development, or organizational efficiency implications. These perspectives provide a limited understanding of internships as part of service delivery systems that directly shape customer experience and trust. In service SMEs, where brand meaning is frequently constructed through personal interaction rather than formal communication, the presence of interns may significantly influence customer interpretations of the brand and its trustworthiness.

Qualitative research offers an appropriate approach to address this gap by capturing how SME actors interpret and manage trust within everyday service practices. Qualitative inquiry enables the exploration of contextual meanings, relational dynamics, and managerial practices that are difficult to capture through quantitative surveys alone [17]. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how service SMEs manage brand trust under an internship-based service experience. Rather than evaluating internships from an educational standpoint, the study positions internship involvement as a contextual feature of service delivery that shapes customer experience and trust formation. Using a qualitative interpretative approach, this research examines managerial practices, service interactions, and stakeholder coordination that contribute to brand trust management in service SMEs, providing applied insights for firms operating under resource constraints and high service variability.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Trust in Service SMEs

Brand trust is widely acknowledged as a central element in service marketing, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and high customer involvement. Trust enables customers to

reduce perceived risk and maintain long-term relationships with service providers [7]. In service-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), brand trust plays an even more critical role because branding activities are often informal and closely tied to direct interactions between customers and service personnel [11]. Empirical research also shows that brand trust serves as a mediating mechanism between service quality perceptions and customer loyalty in relational exchanges [18]. More recent empirical evidence further confirms that service quality and brand trust jointly influence customer satisfaction and relational continuity, particularly in SME and service-intensive contexts [3, 4].

Prior studies suggest that brand trust in SMEs is not solely derived from brand reputation or communication but is strongly influenced by interpersonal encounters and managerial behavior [10]. Customers tend to associate the behavior of frontline employees and owners directly with the brand itself, making trust highly sensitive to service delivery practices. As a result, brand trust in service SMEs is relational in nature and continuously shaped through repeated service experiences rather than one-time evaluations [13].

Despite its importance, much of the existing brand trust literature focuses on large organizations or stable service systems. This emphasis limits understanding of how brand trust is managed in SMEs operating under resource constraints and service variability, particularly from a managerial process perspective.

2.2. Service Experience and Trust Formation

Service experience refers to customers' holistic perceptions formed through interactions with service providers across multiple touchpoints [15]. In service-dominant contexts, experience encompasses not only functional outcomes but also emotional, relational, and social dimensions. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that positive service experiences contribute to higher levels of brand trust, satisfaction, and loyalty [16]. Consistent service experiences across multiple encounters have been shown to strengthen customer confidence and reduce uncertainty in service relationships [19].

In SMEs, service experience is often co-created through close and personal interactions between customers and service personnel. Because service delivery relies heavily on human involvement, variations in communication style, responsiveness, and service attitude can significantly influence customer trust [17]. Customers often interpret service encounters as signals of organizational credibility, especially in small firms where individual behavior closely relates to the brand [20]. Recent studies also indicate that trust formation in service settings is increasingly seen as an experiential and relational construct shaped by interaction quality rather than solely by outcome performance [4].

However, existing research tends to assume relatively homogeneous and experienced frontline employees. Less attention has been given to service contexts characterized by heterogeneous service providers, such as temporary or inexperienced personnel, which are common in SMEs.

2.3. Internship-Based Service Experience as a Managerial Context

Internship-based service delivery represents a specific form of human resource heterogeneity in service SMEs. Interns are commonly involved in customer-facing roles, operational support, and creative activities as part of flexible staffing strategies. While this practice can improve operational efficiency, it may also introduce service variability due to differences in experience and professional maturity [13]. Consistent with service quality literature, the involvement of heterogeneous service personnel increases perceived service variability, which may elevate customer-perceived risk and heighten the importance of trust in service evaluation.

From a service marketing perspective, internship-based service experience can influence customer trust in two opposing ways. On one hand, limited experience may raise concerns about service reliability and competence. On the other hand, when managed effectively, internship involvement can be interpreted positively by customers as a sign of transparency, learning orientation, or organizational responsibility [11]. From a service management perspective, customers may tolerate performance

variability when it is accompanied by clear communication and perceived organizational accountability [21].

Most prior studies on internships focus on educational outcomes or organizational efficiency, offering limited insight into how internships function as part of service delivery systems that shape customer experience and brand trust. Consequently, the role of internship-based service experience in brand trust management remains underexplored. Within this context, interns are not merely operational support but active agents in service encounters who participate in relationship-building processes that shape customer trust.

2.4. Relationship Marketing and Trust Management in SMEs

In resource-constrained SMEs, relationship marketing operates primarily through informal practices and owner-led interactions rather than formal systems. Trust is therefore built via relational cues, such as empathy, responsiveness, and visible commitment, that help buffer service variability and foster customer tolerance toward minor service imperfections [20, 22]. Trust functions as a core dimension of relationship quality that strengthens long-term customer relationships, particularly in service contexts characterized by close interpersonal interaction [23].

Service SMEs frequently rely on informal relationship-building practices to maintain customer trust. These practices can buffer the negative effects of service variability by fostering emotional attachment and tolerance toward minor service failures [17]. In contexts where interns are involved in service delivery, relationship marketing becomes particularly important, as customers may extend trust to interns when they perceive strong relational support from the organization.

Despite this relevance, existing studies rarely integrate relationship marketing perspectives with internship-based service delivery. This gap limits understanding of how relational mechanisms operate in service environments characterized by temporary or inexperienced service personnel.

2.5. Research Gap and Study Positioning

The reviewed literature highlights several gaps. First, brand trust research in service contexts has largely emphasized outcomes rather than managerial processes, particularly in SMEs [7]. Second, studies on service experience seldom address how service variability arising from internship-based service delivery affects trust formation [15]. Third, prior research predominantly adopts quantitative approaches, providing limited insight into how SME actors interpret and manage trust in everyday service encounters. Recent empirical developments further indicate the need for context-sensitive investigations that examine trust as a dynamic and relational process within service interactions rather than as a static outcome variable [3, 4].

To address these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how service SMEs manage brand trust under an internship-based service experience. Rather than treating internships as educational programs, the study positions internship involvement as a contextual feature of service delivery that shapes customer experience and trust. By focusing on managerial meanings and practices, this research contributes applied insights into brand trust management in service SMEs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretative research design to explore how service-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) manage brand trust under internship-based service experience. A qualitative approach is appropriate because brand trust in service SMEs is embedded in everyday service interactions, managerial practices, and contextual meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone.

Rather than testing hypotheses or seeking statistical generalization, this study aims to generate context-sensitive insights into how brand trust is interpreted and managed within service SMEs. The research focuses on understanding managerial processes, service practices, and stakeholder interactions

that shape brand trust under conditions of service variability, which are central concerns in applied business and management research.

3.2. *Research Context*

The research was conducted in service SMEs operating in customer-intensive service sectors, where service delivery relies heavily on human interaction. These SMEs routinely involve internship-based personnel in operational and customer-facing activities due to limited human and financial resources.

In this context, internship-based service experience is treated as an operational and managerial practice rather than as an educational program. The focus of the study is on how SMEs integrate interns into service delivery processes and how such practices influence customer perceptions of brand trust.

3.3. *Participants and Sampling Strategy*

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring all informants had direct experience with internship-based service delivery and brand-related interactions. This sampling strategy aligns with qualitative research principles emphasizing information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness.

To capture multiple perspectives on brand trust management, the study involved several stakeholder groups:

- SME owners or managers responsible for service and branding decisions
- Permanent employees involved in service delivery
- Internship-based personnel participating in service activities
- Customers who had direct service interactions involving interns
- Supporting stakeholders involved in service operations

The inclusion of diverse informants enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how brand trust is interpreted and managed across different roles within service SMEs.

3.4. *Data Collection Methods*

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to enhance the credibility of the findings. The primary data collection method was in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and managerial practices related to brand trust and service delivery.

Interview questions focused on:

- Service interactions involving interns
- Managerial supervision and control mechanisms
- Customer responses to internship-based services
- Perceived impacts on brand trust

In addition to interviews, non-participant observations were conducted to capture real-time service interactions and supervisory practices. Document analysis was also used to examine service guidelines, internal records, and operational documents relevant to internship-based service delivery.

Data collection was conducted iteratively, enabling emerging insights to inform subsequent interviews and observations until thematic saturation was achieved.

3.5. *Data Analysis Procedure*

Data analysis followed an interpretative thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were analyzed through a systematic coding process. Initial codes

were developed inductively from the data and subsequently grouped into broader themes reflecting patterns related to brand trust management.

The analysis emphasized participants' interpretations of internship-based service experiences, managerial responses to service variability, and trust-related meanings embedded in service encounters. Throughout, constant comparison was applied across data sources and participant groups to ensure consistency, depth of interpretation, and analytical rigor.

3.6. Research Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of the qualitative findings, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by integrating interviews, observations, and documents collected from multiple stakeholder groups, allowing for cross-verification of insights across sources. Peer reflection and member clarification were used to validate interpretations and enhance the credibility of the findings. In addition, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness throughout the research process to minimize interpretative bias.

These procedures support the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study and are consistent with established standards for rigorous qualitative research in business and management studies.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all informants. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants.

3.8. Institutional Review Board Statement

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research in social sciences. All procedures performed in this study were reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee at the authors' affiliated institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

3.9. Funding Statement

This research received no external funding. The study was conducted independently by the authors without financial support from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency.

4. Findings

The analysis of interview transcripts, observational notes, and internal documents revealed six interconnected themes that explain how service SMEs manage brand trust under internship-based service experience. Overall, the findings demonstrate that brand trust is not formed instantaneously but is gradually constructed through structured managerial practices, relational service interactions, and coordinated stakeholder involvement.

4.1. Internship-Based Service Experience as a Trust-Sensitive Context

Participants consistently perceived internship-based service delivery as a trust-sensitive context. SME owners and employees acknowledged that involving interns in service encounters introduced uncertainty, especially during early customer interactions. Customers often associated interns with limited experience, which initially affected perceptions of service reliability.

However, this uncertainty did not automatically lead to distrust. Instead, participants emphasized that customer reactions depended largely on how internship-based services were framed and managed. When interns were introduced transparently and positioned as part of the service process, customers tended to respond with understanding rather than skepticism. This finding suggests that internship-

based service experiences function as a critical moment of trust negotiation rather than a direct threat to brand trust.

4.2. Managerial Supervision as a Foundation of Brand Trust

Managerial supervision emerged as a central mechanism for maintaining brand trust. SME owners described close monitoring of service interactions involving interns, particularly during customer-facing activities. Supervision extended beyond technical oversight and included guidance on communication style, service attitude, and responsiveness.

Employees and interns reported that visible managerial presence during service encounters reassured customers and reduced perceived service risk. Customers interpreted supervision as a signal of responsibility and accountability, reinforcing trust in the firm even when service was delivered by interns. In this sense, supervision functioned as a trust assurance mechanism, compensating for interns' limited experience.

4.3. Service Consistency Through Informal Standardization

Despite the absence of formalized service manuals, service SMEs relied on informal standardization practices to maintain service consistency. Participants described shared service norms, routine briefings, and verbal guidelines that shaped intern behavior during service delivery.

These informal practices helped align intern performance with the firm's service expectations. Customers reported greater trust when service interactions felt consistent across different encounters, regardless of whether services were delivered by permanent staff or interns. This finding indicates that brand trust in service SMEs is supported by process consistency, even in the absence of highly formalized systems.

4.4. Interpersonal Interaction and Relational Trust Building

Interpersonal interaction played a significant role in trust formation. Customers frequently evaluated brand trust based on friendliness, empathy, and communication clarity rather than technical expertise alone. Interns who demonstrated polite behavior and willingness to learn were often perceived positively, especially when supported by employees or managers.

Participants noted that relational warmth helped offset minor service imperfections. Customers were more tolerant of small service errors when interactions were perceived as sincere and respectful. This finding highlights that brand trust in service SMEs is deeply relational and socially constructed through ongoing human interaction.

4.5. Stakeholder Coordination in Managing Trust

Brand trust management extended beyond direct service encounters to involve coordination among multiple stakeholders. SME owners emphasized collaboration among employees, interns, and external partners to ensure coherent service delivery. Interns were not treated as isolated actors but as integral components of a broader service system.

Customers expressed higher trust when service interactions appeared coordinated and orderly. Conversely, a lack of coordination, such as unclear role distribution between interns and employees, led to confusion and reduced confidence. This finding underscores that brand trust is collectively constructed and dependent on alignment among internal and external actors. From an economic perspective, coordinated stakeholder involvement reduces rework, service recovery costs, and customer churn risk, thereby enhancing service efficiency without substantial additional financial investment.

4.6. Gradual Construction of Brand Trust

Across all participant groups, brand trust was described as a gradual and cumulative process. Initial service encounters involving interns were often met with cautious expectations, but trust strengthened

over time through repeated interactions, consistent service practices, and visible managerial involvement.

This process indicates that internship-based service experience does not inherently weaken brand trust. Instead, it creates a context in which trust can be reinforced or undermined depending on how managerial practices are enacted during service encounters. Brand trust, therefore, emerges as a dynamic outcome shaped by ongoing service experiences rather than a static perception.

Figure 1 visually illustrates the sequential managerial mechanisms identified in the findings, demonstrating how managerial supervision, informal standardization, interpersonal interaction, and stakeholder coordination collectively contribute to brand trust outcomes and ultimately support competitive sustainability for SMEs. Table 1 further summarizes each managerial mechanism, corresponding practices, trust-related outcomes, and broader business implications identified in the empirical analysis.

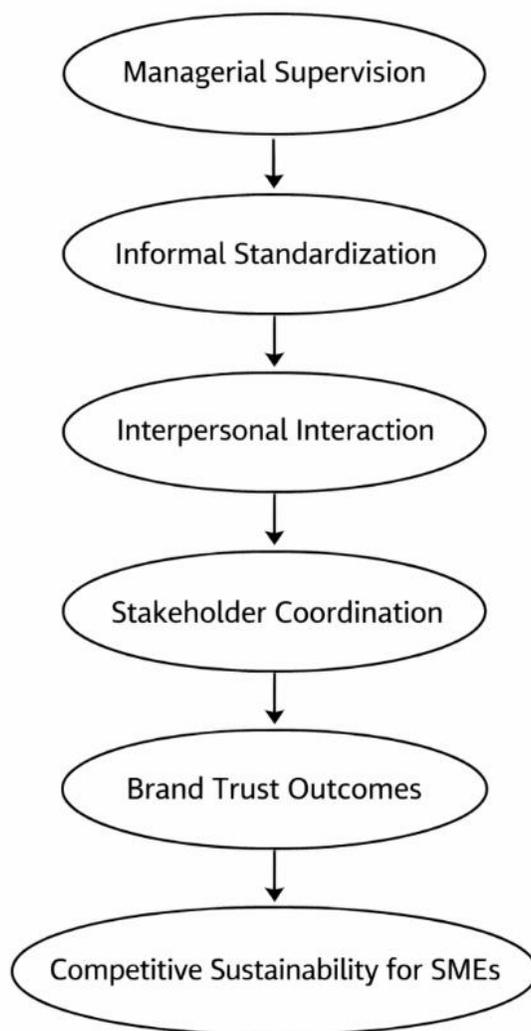


Figure 1.
Managerial Mechanisms and the Gradual Construction of Brand Trust.

Table 1.
Gradual Construction of Brand Trust in Internship-Based Service SMEs.

Managerial Mechanism	Key Practices	Trust-Related Outcomes	Business Implications
Managerial Supervision	Visible oversight, real-time guidance	Reduced perceived service risk	Lower complaint rates and improved service reliability
Informal Standardization	Routine briefings, shared service norms	Consistent service experience	Operational efficiency with minimal formalization costs
Interpersonal Interaction	Empathy, clear communication, and respectful behavior	Relational trust and customer tolerance	Stronger customer retention and relationship continuity
Stakeholder Coordination	Clear role allocation, internal collaboration	Service coherence and accountability	Reduced rework, lower service recovery costs, and improved efficiency

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

5.1. Discussion

This study set out to explore how service SMEs manage brand trust under an internship-based service experience. The findings indicate that brand trust in service SMEs is not a static attribute but a dynamic and relational process shaped by managerial practices, service interactions, and stakeholder coordination. This insight extends existing brand trust literature, which has often emphasized outcomes such as loyalty and satisfaction, by highlighting how trust is actively managed in everyday service contexts characterized by service variability and resource constraints. Recent empirical research similarly emphasizes that trust in service environments emerges from interaction quality and managerial responsiveness rather than solely from outcome performance [3, 4].

First, the identification of internship-based service experience as a trust-sensitive context reinforces the view that service variability plays a critical role in trust formation in service firms. Consistent with service-dominant logic, customers evaluate trust not solely based on service outcomes but also on how service encounters are organized, supervised, and communicated. In this study, transparency in positioning interns as part of the service process helped mitigate perceived risk, supporting the argument that trust is influenced by customers' interpretations of organizational responsibility and intent rather than technical competence alone [7].

Second, managerial supervision emerged as a central mechanism in brand trust management. The findings show that visible and active supervision function as a trust assurance signal, particularly when less-experienced personnel are involved in service delivery. This aligns with relationship marketing perspectives that emphasize managerial responsibility and commitment as foundations of trust [10]. In service SMEs, where formal control systems are often limited, supervision substitutes for standardized procedures and reassures customers of service reliability while helping firms manage service variability efficiently. This interpretation aligns with recent evidence showing that managerial capability and knowledge management capacity significantly influence SME performance and innovation outcomes. Furthermore, leadership characteristics and strategic orientation contribute to enhanced SME performance, reinforcing the importance of managerial influence in shaping organizational trust and sustainability.

Third, the role of informal standardization highlights how service SMEs maintain consistency without relying on formalized service manuals. Shared norms, verbal guidelines, and routine briefings enable interns to align their behavior with expected service standards. This finding complements prior studies on service experience, which suggest that consistency across service encounters strengthens customer trust and reduces uncertainty [15]. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that such consistency can be achieved through low-cost, informal mechanisms that are particularly suited to resource-constrained SMEs.

Fourth, the findings emphasize the importance of interpersonal interaction in trust formation. Customers often prioritized relational qualities, such as friendliness, empathy, and willingness to learn, over technical perfection. This supports the notion that brand trust in service SMEs is deeply relational

and socially constructed, resonating with earlier work on service encounters and customer–employee interactions [17]. When supported by employees and managers, interns were able to contribute positively to trust-building processes despite their limited experience.

Finally, brand trust was found to be collectively constructed through stakeholder coordination. Trust outcomes depended not only on individual service encounters but also on the alignment among owners, employees, interns, and supporting actors. Coordinated service practices reduced confusion, enhanced service coherence, and supported customer confidence. From an economic perspective, such coordination improves operational efficiency by minimizing rework, lowering service recovery costs, and reducing customer churn risk. This finding aligns with recent research highlighting the importance of organizational coordination and maturity in improving service effectiveness and communication quality in service-oriented projects. Together, these insights demonstrate that brand trust in service SMEs is sustained not merely through interpersonal interaction but through coordinated managerial systems embedded in everyday service practices.

5.2. Managerial Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for SME owners and managers operating in service contexts.

First, internship-based service involvement should be managed as a strategic service decision rather than merely as an operational necessity. Managers should recognize that interns directly influence customer perceptions of brand trust and therefore require deliberate supervision and role clarity.

Second, visible managerial supervision is critical in trust-sensitive service encounters. Managers should ensure their presence, particularly during early customer interactions involving interns, to signal accountability and reduce perceived service risk.

Third, service SMEs should develop simple and informal service standards that guide intern behavior. Regular briefings, shared norms, and clear verbal expectations can help maintain service consistency without imposing rigid formal systems.

Fourth, managers should emphasize interpersonal skills in intern integration. Encouraging polite communication, empathy, and responsiveness can compensate for limited technical expertise and strengthen relational trust with customers.

Finally, effective stakeholder coordination is essential. Clear role division and communication among owners, employees, and interns help create coherent service experiences, reinforcing customer confidence in the brand. Strengthening managerial capability, leadership orientation, and internal coordination mechanisms can further enhance SME performance and long-term sustainability in service-intensive environments.

5.3. Summary of Contributions

By examining brand trust management under internship-based service experience, this study contributes to service marketing literature by shifting attention from trust outcomes to managerial processes in SMEs. The findings demonstrate that brand trust can be sustained, even under service variability, through supervision, informal standardization, relational interaction, and coordinated service practices. In doing so, the study provides context-sensitive insights into how resource-constrained service SMEs strategically manage trust as an embedded managerial process rather than as a passive relational outcome.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how service-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) manage brand trust under internship-based service experience. The findings demonstrate that brand trust in service SMEs is not automatically weakened by the involvement of interns. Instead, trust emerges as a dynamic and manageable outcome shaped by managerial supervision, service consistency, interpersonal interaction, and stakeholder coordination.

The study shows that internship-based service experience constitutes a trust-sensitive service context. Customers initially perceive higher uncertainty when service encounters involve less experienced personnel. However, this uncertainty can be effectively mitigated when SMEs actively frame internships as part of the service process and provide visible managerial oversight. Brand trust, therefore, develops gradually through repeated service encounters rather than through instant evaluations.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to service marketing literature by emphasizing managerial processes rather than trust outcomes. It extends existing discussions on brand trust by illustrating how trust is constructed in everyday service practices within resource-constrained SMEs. The findings highlight the importance of informal managerial mechanisms, such as supervision, shared service norms, and coordinated interaction, in sustaining trust where formalized systems are limited.

From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that internship involvement should be treated as a strategic managerial decision rather than merely an operational necessity. Clear supervision, simple service guidelines, relational communication, and coordinated stakeholder roles are essential for maintaining brand trust under service variability. These practices enable service SMEs to balance operational flexibility with trust preservation while managing limited resources effectively.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study is context-specific and focuses on service SMEs operating within particular local settings. As a qualitative study, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization but offer analytical insights transferable to similar service contexts. Future research may extend this work by examining different service sectors, comparing SME and large firm practices, or integrating quantitative approaches to test the relationships identified in this study.

In conclusion, internship-based service experience does not inherently pose a threat to brand trust in service SMEs. When managed deliberately, it can be integrated into service delivery in ways that sustain, and potentially strengthen, customer trust. Overall, the findings demonstrate that service SMEs can compete with larger firms not through scale or branding budgets but by leveraging relational trust and managerial control embedded in everyday service practices, thereby enhancing economic efficiency and long-term competitive sustainability.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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