

More is not Always Better: Configurational Effects of Competence, Emotional Intelligence, and Personality in High-Contact Service Encounters

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Abstract

High-contact services are experienced through people, yet research often assumes that desirable employee attributes accumulate linearly. This study develops a configurational perspective by examining whether simultaneously high cognitive competence, emotional intelligence, and personality-related expressiveness necessarily produce the most favourable recipient responses. Higher education is treated as a high-contact professional service context in which students evaluate a provider's expertise, emotional responsiveness, and interpersonal presentation. Eight profiles combining high and low perceived intelligence quotient (IQ), emotional quotient (EQ), and personality quotient (PQ) were compared across interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived performance. General Linear Model results based on the observations showed a significant multivariate profile effect, Pillai's Trace = .108, $F(28, 2076) = 2.053$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .027$. Significant profile effects were also found for interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived performance, with partial η^2 ranging from .066 to .081. Notably, the all-high profile did not produce the highest mean on any outcome, challenging the assumption that more favourable attributes are always better. The findings support a capability-calibration perspective in which service outcomes depend on how competence, empathy, and personality are combined, allowing for complementarity, compensation, and possible saturation effects. This extends service encounter theory by emphasizing configurations over isolated traits.

Keywords: High-contact Services, Service Competence, Emotional Intelligence, Personality Expressiveness, Capability Calibration

Introduction

For many services, the employee is not merely a channel through which value is delivered; the employee is a central part of the service experience. Classic service-encounter research shows that customers often interpret the behaviour of contact employees as evidence of service quality itself, particularly when the encounter is interpersonal and difficult to evaluate

independently of the provider (Bitner et al., 1990; Solomon et al., 1985). Contemporary customer-experience research similarly treats value as emerging across multiple touchpoints in which cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social responses are intertwined (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). From a service-dominant perspective, value is not simply embedded in an offering but emerges through interaction and use (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). These perspectives establish the importance of frontline human attributes, but they also raise a more specific question i.e. whether favorable characteristics operate independently or whether their value depends on the configuration in which they occur.

A substantial literature has examined specific provider attributes. Technical competence can signal ability and reduce uncertainty; warmth and empathy can signal benevolent intent and relational orientation; and emotionally competent employees can regulate interpersonal exchanges, build rapport, and shape customer responses (Delcourt et al., 2013; Giardini & Frese, 2008; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Güntürkün et al., 2020; Prentice, 2019). Research on emotional displays also demonstrates that the manner and authenticity with which service employees express emotion influence recipients' evaluations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Taken together, these streams suggest that competence and relational capability matter. However, most of this evidence has examined these capabilities either separately or in limited combinations, rather than testing how competence, emotional intelligence, and personality-related expression operate simultaneously as a complete provider profile.

Indeed, service research provides reasons to question a simple additive assumption. Surprenant and Solomon (1987) showed that greater personalization is not universally associated with greater satisfaction as its value depends on the type of personalization and the nature of the service. More recently, Güntürkün et al. (2020) demonstrated that warmth and competence play asymmetric roles in customer-service provider relationships, in which warmth is particularly influential for relational outcomes, whereas competence is more influential for transactional outcomes. These findings imply contingency. What appears to be desirable in isolation may have a different marginal value once other favorable signals are already present.

Nevertheless, three empirical gaps remain. First, existing service-encounter studies have predominantly examined single provider attributes, additive effects, or two-dimensional combinations such as warmth and competence. They have rarely tested competence, emotional intelligence, and personality-related expression simultaneously within a three-attribute configuration. As a result, current research provides limited evidence on whether the effect of one provider attribute changes when the other two are already high or low. Second, prior research has not sufficiently distinguished between complementarity, compensation, and saturation among provider attributes. Complementarity would imply that the value of one capability increases when other capabilities are strong; compensation would imply that one attribute can offset weakness in another; and saturation would imply that additional intensity in an already strong capability bundle provides little or even negative marginal value. Existing additive models are not designed to identify these alternative patterns.

Third, the service literature has rarely tested whether the "all-high" provider profile is superior to alternative configurations. An additive logic would predict that a provider

simultaneously perceived as highly competent, highly emotionally intelligent, and highly expressive should generate the strongest recipient responses. A configurational perspective does not require this outcome. It allows alternative bundles to perform equally well or better and permits the contribution of one attribute to diminish or reverse depending on the levels of the others. This distinction can only be examined through direct comparison of complete capability profiles

Configuration theory provides a useful framework for this problem. Rather than assuming that predictors operate independently and additively, configurational approaches treat outcomes as consequences of combinations of attributes and explicitly accommodate nonlinearity, causal asymmetry, and equifinality (Doty et al., 1993; Fiss, 2007, 2011; Meyer et al., 1993). Equifinality is especially relevant to service encounters because more than one bundle of provider characteristics may generate a favorable experience. A highly competent and empathetic but relatively restrained provider may be evaluated as positively as a highly engaging provider whose other perceived capabilities are weaker. The theoretical question is therefore not simply whether competence, emotional intelligence, or personality matters, but whether the contribution of each attribute depends on the capability bundle in which it is embedded.

The present study addresses this question using data from a lecturer-student context. Higher education is treated here as a high-contact professional service setting rather than as a proxy for every commercial service. Students repeatedly interact with a knowledge-intensive provider whose perceived expertise, emotional responsiveness, and interpersonal presentation jointly shape the encounter. The original constructs are retained: perceived intelligence quotient (IQ) captures cognitive and technical competence; emotional quotient (EQ) captures empathy, understanding, expression, and emotional regulation; and personality quotient (PQ) captures engagement, encouragement, charisma, enthusiasm, patience, and calmness. Four recipient outcomes are examined i.e. interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived performance. Importantly, these three provider attributes are combined into eight complete high/low profiles, allowing direct comparison of alternative capability configurations rather than treating IQ, EQ and PQ only as independent predictors. The study makes three contributions. First, it shifts the analysis from isolated provider attributes to capability configurations. More specifically, it extends prior warmth-competence and emotional-competence research by simultaneously examining three provider capabilities within a single configurational framework. Second, it tests an implicit maximization assumption by examining whether the high-IQ/ high-EQ/ high-PQ profile is associated with the strongest recipient evaluations. This directly addresses the empirical question of whether “more of every favorable attribute” produces superior service outcomes, or whether alternative combinations generate comparable or stronger responses. Third, it develops capability calibration as a service-management implication i.e. effective human service delivery may depend on matching and balancing attributes rather than maximizing each independently. Capability calibration therefore captures the possibility of complementarity, compensation, and saturation among provider attributes and offers a more contingent explanation of frontline service effectiveness.

Theoretical Background

High-contact service encounters and the human delivery system

Service encounters are dyadic interactions in which the behaviour of the provider becomes a salient cue for evaluating the service (Solomon et al., 1985). Bitner et al. (1990) showed that contact-employee behaviours are central to very satisfactory and very dissatisfactory incidents, reinforcing the proposition that recipients evaluate the encounter through the actions of the person delivering it. Service-quality research likewise emphasises the difficulty of evaluating intangible services and the importance of perceptions formed during delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

This interpersonal component becomes particularly consequential in high-contact and professional services. When recipients cannot fully observe technical production, they rely on behavioral signals to infer provider quality. Rapport is one such signal in which Gremler and Gwinner (2000) found that rapport in high-interaction services is positively related to satisfaction, loyalty intentions, and word of mouth. Bolton et al. (2014) further argue that apparently small details within consumption experiences can become strategically meaningful sources of differentiation. The provider's competence, empathy, and interpersonal manners can therefore be understood as interconnected components of the human delivery system.

Cognitive Competence as an Ability Signal

Competence communicates whether a provider appears capable of delivering the core service. In social judgement, competence and warmth are fundamental dimensions through which people and organizations are evaluated (Fiske et al., 2002; Judd et al., 2005). Within customer-service provider relationships, competence is especially relevant to transactional outcomes because it signals the ability to perform the task effectively (Güntürkün et al., 2020). In professional services, this signal may be particularly important because recipients often lack the technical knowledge required to verify quality directly.

The IQ construct in the present study captured this ability signal through perceived intelligence, explanation of complex content, depth of knowledge, and currency of knowledge. The results show a one-factor structure explaining 72.15% of variance, with loadings between .804 and .893. Thus, the construct is best interpreted in this business paper as perceived cognitive or professional competence rather than psychometric intelligence in the clinical sense.

Emotional Intelligence as Relational Capability

Emotional capability concerns how effectively a provider understands and manages the relational demands of the encounter. Kernbach and Schutte (2005) linked service-provider emotional intelligence to customer satisfaction, while Giardini and Frese (2008) connected employee emotional competence with customer satisfaction at multiple levels. Delcourt et al. (2013) further showed that customer-perceived employee emotional competence contributes to rapport, which in turn supports satisfaction and loyalty. Prentice (2019) demonstrated the relevance of employee emotional intelligence to both employee and customer responses in service encounters. Collectively, this literature established emotional competence as a service resource rather than merely as internal psychological characteristic.

The EQ measure in the present data reflects understanding, empathy, self-expression, and emotional control. These items correspond closely to the relational mechanisms identified in service research. The factor analysis reports loadings from .877 to .902 and approximately 79.48% explained variance. EQ is therefore interpreted as perceived emotional and relational competence in which the recipient's perception that the provider understands others and manages emotional interaction effectively.

Personality-Related Expressiveness and Interpersonal Intensity

The third attribute is PQ. Unlike conventional Big Five personality measurement, the PQ construct used here combines behaviors that are visible during the encounter, i.e. engaging and fascinating others, providing encouragement and motivation, displaying charisma and enthusiasm, and remaining patient and calm. Its factor loadings range from .888 to .933, with 82.94% variance explained. For this reason, PQ is treated as personality-related interpersonal expression rather than as a general personality taxonomy.

Service-research suggests that interpersonal displays matter but that more display is not automatically superior. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) showed that positive emotional displays and their authenticity influence customers' emotions and evaluations. Surprenant and Solomon (1987) similarly demonstrated that greater personalization does not uniformly increase satisfaction. These findings support a calibration perspective where the effectiveness of expressive behavior depends on how it is perceived within the broader encounter rather than solely on its intensity.

A Configurational Perspective: Complementarity, Compensation, and Equifinality

Configurational theory rejects the assumption that an outcome must be explained by a single best predictor or by the independent addition of predictors. Meyer et al. (1993) describe configurations as multidimensional constellations whose elements derive meaning partly from their relationship to one another. Doty et al. (1993) emphasize fit and equifinality, while Fiss (2007, 2011) develops a causal logic in which different combinations can produce the same outcome and the role of a condition can change across configurations. Although the present analysis does not use fsQCA, this theoretical logic is directly relevant to the eight observed IQ-EQ-PQ profiles.

Three mechanisms are particularly relevant. Complementarity occurs when capability strengthens the value of another. Compensation occurs when strength in one capability offsets weakness elsewhere. Saturation or interference occurs when an additional favorable attribute contributes little incremental value, or when its expression alters the coherence of an already strong configuration. The latter mechanism is consistent with the broader service-design insight that more personalization or interpersonal input is not necessarily better in every context (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

Hypothesis Development

Profile Heterogeneity

If recipients evaluate a provider as an integrated human stimulus, then combination of IQ, EQ and PQ should generate different responses even when each constituent attribute is conventionally desirable. Service-encounter theory establishes the importance of employee behavior (Bitner et al., 1990), emotional-competence research establishes the relational value

of EQ (Delcourt et al., 2013; Prentice, 2019), and warmth-competence research demonstrated that different social judgements could dominate for different outcomes (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Configurational theory therefore predicts heterogeneity across the eight profiles.

H1: Recipient outcomes differ significantly across configurations of perceived cognitive competence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and personality quotient (PQ).

H1a: Interest differs significantly across IQ–EQ–PQ configurations.

H1b: Motivation differs significantly across IQ–EQ–PQ configurations.

H1c: Satisfaction differs significantly across IQ–EQ–PQ configurations.

H1d: Perceived performance differs significantly across IQ–EQ–PQ configurations.

Challenging the all-high assumption

An additive competency model implies that the all-high profile should be optimal because each favorable attribute contributes incremental value. A configurational model does not require this order. The importance of warmth and competence changes across relational and transactional outcomes (Güntürkün et al., 2020), and service personalization can exhibit diminishing or context-dependent returns (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Accordingly, a profile containing a lower level of one attribute can plausibly equal or exceed an all-high profile if the resulting bundle is more coherent for the recipient.

H2: The all-high configuration (HIQ×HEQ×HPQ) will not necessarily produce the most favorable recipient outcomes; at least one alternative configuration will equal or exceed it.

Compensatory Configurations

Equifinality implies that favorable outcomes can be reached through more than one causal recipe (Fiss, 2007, 2011). In a service encounter, an engaging and motivational interpersonal presence may partly compensate for a weaker perception of expertise or empathy, while strong expertise and empathy may reduce the marginal need for intense personality expression. Such patterns would indicate functional substitution among perceived provider capabilities rather than a single universally superior profile.

H3: The profile pattern will exhibit compensation, such that a configuration with lower levels of some provider attributes can generate outcomes comparable to a configuration with higher levels of those attributes.

Methodology

Design and Empirical Context

The original study used a scenario-based design in a higher-education context. For the present paper, the setting is conceptualized as a high-contact professional service encounter while retaining the original constructs and outcome measures. The design comprises eight profiles formed from high and low IQ, EQ and PQ i.e. HIQ×HEQ×HPQ, HIQ×HEQ×LPQ, HIQ×LEQ×LPQ, HIQ×LEQ×HPQ, LIQ×LEQ×LPQ, LIQ×LEQ×HPQ, LIQ×HEQ×LPQ, and LIQ×HEQ×HPQ.

The source material describes manipulation screening in which observations that did not reflect the intended high/low profile were removed. The General Linear Model output contains 527 valid profile observations.

Measures

IQ was measured through perceived intelligence, explanatory ability, in-depth knowledge, and currency of knowledge. EQ was measured through understanding, empathy,

interpersonal expression, and emotional control. PQ was measured through engagement, encouragement and motivation, charisma and enthusiasm, and patience and calmness. Overall reliability reported results was $\alpha = .867$ for IQ, $\alpha = .891$ for EQ, and $\alpha = .901$ for PQ. However, scenario-specific reliability was weak for IQ ($\alpha = .417$) and EQ ($\alpha = .548$) in Scenario A, a limitation that is particularly relevant because this scenario represents the all-high profile. Four composite dependent variables were analyzed i.e. interest (IL_COMB), motivation (ML_COMB), satisfaction with teaching and learning (SL_COMB), and perceived academic performance (PP_COMB). In the service framing, these are treated respectively as recipient engagement interest, motivational response, encounter satisfaction, and perceived outcome effectiveness. The original operational meaning is retained to avoid overstating generalization beyond the educational setting.

Analytical Strategy

The SPSS General Linear Model treats the eight IQ-EQ-PQ combinations as an eight-category profile factor and jointly models the four outcomes. Because Box's M is significant and the group sizes are markedly unequal, Pillai's Trace is emphasized for the multivariate inference. Univariate tests are then used to establish whether each outcome differs across profiles. The supplied pairwise comparisons use Least Significant Difference (LSD), which does not adjust for multiple comparisons. Accordingly, pairwise results are used selectively to illuminate the theoretically central profile contracts and are interpreted cautiously.

A methodological distinction is important. This analysis demonstrates differences among eight configurations. It is not equivalent to a factorial model that enters IQ, EQ, and PQ as separate factors and directly estimates all main effects, two-way interactions, and the IQ×EQ×PQ interaction. The paper therefore uses the terms profile effect and configurational effect rather than claiming that this GLM alone proves a conventional three-way interaction.

Results

Profile Means

Table 1

Profile means

Profile	n	Interest	Motivation	Satisfaction	Perceived performance
HIQ×HEQ×HPQ	307	4.312	4.200	4.127	4.143
HIQ×HEQ×LPQ	13	5.260	5.059	5.096	5.212
HIQ×LEQ×LPQ	7	4.609	4.520	4.629	4.504
HIQ×LEQ×HPQ	26	4.617	4.464	4.392	4.440
LIQ×LEQ×LPQ	12	4.409	4.337	4.337	4.378
LIQ×LEQ×HPQ	15	5.244	5.111	5.135	5.143
LIQ×HEQ×LPQ	15	5.079	4.820	4.811	4.918
LIQ×HEQ×HPQ	132	4.337	4.208	4.143	4.177

The descriptive profile pattern is inconsistent with simple simultaneous maximization. HIQ×HEQ×LPQ recorded the highest mean for interest ($M = 5.260$) and perceived performance ($M = 5.212$), whereas LIQ×LEQ×HPQ recorded the highest motivation ($M = 5.111$) and satisfaction ($M = 5.135$). The all-high HIQ×HEQ×HPQ profile produced means of 4.312, 4.200, 4.127, and 4.143 respectively and was not the highest profile on any outcome.

Multivariate and Univariate Profile Effects

Box's M was significant, $M = 183.744$, $F = 2.309$, $p < .001$, indicating heterogeneity of covariance matrices. Pillai's Trace was therefore used as the principal multivariate statistic. The overall profile effect was significant, Pillai's Trace = .108, $F(28, 2076) = 2.053$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .027$. The four outcomes collectively therefore differed across the eight configurations.

Table 2

Multivariate and univariate profile effects

Outcome	F(7, 519)	p	Partial η^2	R ²
Interest	6.178	< .001	.077	.077
Motivation	5.230	< .001	.066	.066
Satisfaction	6.287	< .001	.078	.078
Perceived performance	6.511	< .001	.081	.081

The profile effect was significant for interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived performance, supporting H1 and H1a–H1d. The largest profile-associated variance occurred for perceived performance (partial $\eta^2 = .081$), followed by satisfaction (.078), interest (.077), and motivation (.066).

The all-high profile versus an alternative high-capability configuration

The theoretically central comparison concerns the two profiles in which IQ and EQ are both high. Relative to HIQ×HEQ×HPQ, the HIQ×HEQ×LPQ profile was higher by .948 points for interest ($p < .001$), .858 for motivation ($p < .001$), .969 for satisfaction ($p < .001$), and 1.069 for perceived performance ($p < .001$) in the supplied LSD comparisons. Thus, within the high-IQ/ high-EQ condition, the profile with lower PQ received more favorable evaluations across all four outcomes. The observed pattern supports H2 descriptively and in the supplied focal pairwise comparisons, although the unadjusted LSD procedure and small number (n) for the LPQ cell require caution.

Evidence Consistent with Compensation and Equifinality

The LIQ×LEQ×HPQ profile also generated high means: 5.244 for interest, 5.111 for motivation, 5.135 for satisfaction, and 5.143 for perceived performance. These values were close to those of HIQ×HEQ×LPQ. The supplied pairwise comparisons between the two profiles were nonsignificant for interest ($p = .961$), motivation ($p = .871$), satisfaction ($p = .905$), and perceived performance ($p = .841$). This pattern is consistent with H3 and with configurational equifinality: different bundles of perceived attributes can be associated with similarly favorable outcomes (Fiss, 2007, 2011).

A related pattern appears when HIQ×HEQ×HPQ is compared with LIQ×HEQ×HPQ. Their means are nearly identical across all four outcomes, and the pairwise contrasts are nonsignificant. Within these high-EQ/ high-PQ profiles, higher perceived IQ therefore did not correspond to stronger evaluations. The result further illustrates why the value of a provider attribute should be interpreted conditionally rather than as a universal increment.

Assumption Checks

Levene's tests were significant for interest, $F(7, 519) = 4.986$, $p < .001$; motivation, $F = 3.523$, $p = .001$; satisfaction, $F = 5.027$, $p < .001$; and perceived performance, $F = 3.328$, $p = .002$. The combination of heteroscedasticity, significant Box's M, and unequal cell sizes means that the profile-level means and pairwise tests should not be interpreted as precise rankings of universally optimal configurations. The robust conclusion is narrower where the data show meaningful heterogeneity across configurations and do not support a simple monotonic assumption that the all-high profile is necessarily best.

Discussion

From Attribute Maximization to Capability Calibration

The central finding is that favorable provider attributes do not behave as a simple additive scorecard. The all-high profile was not strongest observed profile for any of the four outcomes. This result is compatible with a broader service literature showing that interpersonal inputs are contingent rather than uniformly beneficial. For example, Surprenant and Solomon (1987) demonstrated that not all forms of greater personalization increase satisfaction. Güntürkün et al. (2020) similarly show that warmth and competence have different consequences depending on whether the outcome is relational or transactional. The present findings extend this logic to a three-attribute configuration involving cognitive competence, emotional intelligence, and personality-related expression.

The proposed concept of capability calibration captures this implication. Calibration does not mean reducing actual professional competence or discouraging empathy. It means recognizing that the behavioral expression of capabilities occurs within a bundle. Once a provider is already perceived as highly competent and emotionally responsive, additional interpersonal intensity may not generate additional value. Conversely, when other positive signals are weak, an engaging and motivational interpersonal style may assume greater importance. Thus, the managerial problem shifts from maximizing isolated scores to developing coherent combinations of capability and expression.

Complementarity and Compensation

The data are consistent with both complementarity and compensation. The high-IQ/high-EQ/high-PQ profile suggests that cognitive and relational capability can form a powerful combination even without the highest level of personality-related expression. At the same time, the low-IQ/low-EQ/low-PQ profile suggests a compensatory pathway in which strong engagement, encouragement, charisma, enthusiasm, patience, and calmness can coexist with favorable recipient responses despite weaker perceptions on other dimensions. This resembles the equifinality logic articulated in configurational theory where multiple recipes can be associated with the same desirable outcome (Doty et al., 1993; Fiss, 2007, 2011).

The compensation finding should not be interpreted as evidence that competence is dispensable. In actual professional practice, minimum technical standards can be non-negotiable. Rather, the finding concerns perceived recipient responses in the experimental setting. It indicated that the route to a positive experience may not be unique and that interpersonal strengths can alter how weaknesses elsewhere are experienced.

Extending Emotional-Competence Research

Prior studies establish that employee emotional competence can build rapport and contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Delcourt et al., 2013; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000), while emotional intelligence can shape both employee and customer responses during service encounters (Prentice, 2019). The present study adds boundary-oriented insights where emotional capability is embedded in a wider configuration. The near-identical outcomes of HIQ×HEQ×HPQ and LIQ×HEQ×HPQ suggest that, within a high-EQ/high-PQ bundle, increasing perceived cognitive competence may not be translated into a stronger recipient evaluation. This does not negate the value of competence as it shows that its marginal perceptual contribution can depend on the surrounding attributes.

Extending Warmth-Competence Logic with Personality-Related Expression

Warmth-competence research provides a powerful account of how recipients infer intentions and ability (Fiske et al., 2002; Güntürkün et al., 2020). However, high-contact encounters also vary in the intensity and style with which those qualities are expressed. PQ adds this expressive layer. A provider can be capable and empathic yet differ markedly in charisma, enthusiasm, encouragement, patience, and engagement. Incorporating this third dimension helps explain why two providers who appear equally competent and relationally responsive may nevertheless generate different recipient experiences.

This extension also created a more precise future research agenda. Rather than treating PQ as a single personality construct, subsequent studies should separate warmth, enthusiasm, assertiveness, charisma, patience, and calmness. The present data establishes that the bundled PQ manipulation is consequential within configurations in which they do not establish which facet is responsible for the observed non-monotonic pattern.

Theoretical Contribution to Configurational Service Research

The paper contributes to configurational theory by applying its core logic at the level of the interpersonal service encounter. Meyer et al. (1993) noted that configurational thinking has potential beyond the organizational level, and Fiss (2007, 2011) emphasized combinations, asymmetry, and equifinality as alternatives to universal net-effect explanations. The present findings illustrate that logic in a human-delivered service where the same attribute does not carry an invariant meaning across profiles, and more than one configuration can be associated with favorable outcomes.

Configurational theory is used to motivate and interpret the profile heterogeneity, while the statistical evidence remains conventional multivariate and univariate comparison. This distinction preserves methodological accuracy and identifies a natural next, which is the replication of using balanced factorial experiments or explicitly configurational methods.

Managerial Implications

For managers of high-contact professional services, the findings challenge additive competency scorecards. Recruitment and development systems often assume that the ideal employee should simultaneously maximize expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, charisma, confidence, and communication. The present results suggest that this assumption is too simple. Managers should distinguish between capability possession from capability

expression and consider whether an employee's behavioral style complements the other signals already present in the encounter.

Training can therefore emphasize adaptive calibration. Technically strong and emotionally responsive providers may benefit from learning when to reduce interpersonal intensity, invite recipient participation and allow greater autonomy. Employees who are still developing confidence in technical or relational dimensions may use greater autonomy. Employees who are still developing confidence in technical or relational dimensions may use encouragement, enthusiasm, patience, and calmness to maintain engagement while substantive capability is strengthened. This is consistent with the broader service principle that experience is shaped by the orchestration of multiple details rather than by one universally dominant element (Bolton et al., 2014).

The findings should not be used to justify deliberately selecting low-competence employees. Nor do they demonstrate that low personality is inherently desirable. The practical message is that service organizations should avoid equating "more" with "better" without considering fit. Capability systems should establish minimum professional standards while developing employees' ability to adjust the intensity and combination of interpersonal behaviors to the encounter.

Limitations and Further Research

The study has several limitations. First, the empirical context is higher education. Although it is a high-contact, knowledge-intensive professional service, students are not interchangeable with commercial customers. Replication is required in settings such as consulting, banking, hospitality, healthcare, legal services, and other professional encounters before broad generalization.

Second, the four outcomes are perceptual and educational i.e. interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived academic performance. They can inform service theory about recipient response, but they are not direct measures of purchase, loyalty, profitability, or objective service performance. Future studies should include behavioral outcomes appropriate to the focal service context.

Third, the profile cells are highly unbalanced, ranging from $n = 7$ to $n = 307$. Box's M and all four Levene tests are significant. The supplied LSD pairwise comparisons also do not control familywise errors. A confirmatory study should use balanced random assignment, preregister focal contrasts, and employ heteroscedasticity-robust or multiplicity-controlled procedures. Fourth, the eight-profile GLM does not directly estimate a conventional $Q \times EQ \times PQ$ factorial interaction. A future reanalysis of the raw data should enter IQ, EQ, and PQ as separate factors, estimate all lower-order and three-way terms, and report estimated marginal means with robust confidence intervals. Where the research question is explicitly configurational, fsQCA or other configurational methods could complement the factorial analysis, consistent with Fiss (2007, 2011).

Fifth, scenario-specific reliability is uneven. In the all-high Scenario A, IQ reliability is $\alpha = .417$ and EQ reliability is $\alpha = .548$, despite good overall scale reliability. This could be crucial because the paper's most provocative comparison involves the all-high profile. Future

experimental work should refine the manipulations, verify measurement invariance across conditions, and ensure that the all-high manipulation does not inadvertently create ambiguity or response compression.

Finally, the psychological mechanism behind the non-monotonic pattern is not directly measured. Future studies could test whether capability calibration operates through perceived authenticity, dominance, cognitive load, psychological safety, trust, recipient autonomy, or perceived provider self-orientation. Emotional-display research suggests that authenticity is one plausible mechanism (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006), but the present data cannot adjudicate among these explanations.

Conclusion

High-contact services are experience through configurations of human qualities. The present study shows significant differences across eight combinations of perceived cognitive competence, emotional intelligence, and personality-related expression on interest, motivation, satisfaction, and perceived performance. The all-high configuration did not produce the highest mean on any outcome. Instead, different bundles were associated with strong responses, including high-IQ/high-EQ/low-PQ and low-IQ/low-EQ/high-PQ profiles.

These results do not imply that competence, empathy, or positive interpersonal behavior is undesirable. They imply that the value of each attribute is contingent on the configuration in which it appears. The theoretical shift is therefore from attribute maximization to capability calibration. For service research, this directs attention toward complementarity, compensation, equifinality, and possible saturation. For managers, it suggests that excellence in human-delivered services may depend less on maximizing every desirable characteristic and more on developing coherent, adaptive combinations of professional and interpersonal capability.

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