

Expressing gratitude the right way: how and when does brand gratitude strengthen the consumer–brand relationship?

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the find-remind-and-bind theory, this study aims to investigate the impact of brand gratitude on consumer–brand relationship quality (BRQ). It identifies perceived sincerity as the underlying mechanism, examines brand loyalty and advocacy as downstream consequences and delineates how the effectiveness of brand gratitude is moderated by the service experience stage, interaction channel and latency.

Design/methodology/approach – This research uses a multi-method design comprising one field study and four experiments. Study 1 establish the effect of brand gratitude on behavioural BRQ. Study 2 tests the mediating role of perceived sincerity and consequential outcomes of customer loyalty and advocacy. Studies 3–5 investigate the moderating roles of service stage (beginning vs end), interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital) and latency (immediate vs delayed).

Findings – The results provide robust evidence that brand gratitude enhances BRQ through increased perceptions of sincerity. Furthermore, brand gratitude expressed at the end of the service experience and through face-to-face channels was found to be more effective in increasing BRQ. Additionally, brand gratitude is more effective when expressed immediately via digital channels rather than following a delay.

Research limitations/implications – The study findings offer novel theoretical implications and practical insights. This research extends the find-remind-and-bind framework to the branding and services context, demonstrating how and when brand gratitude fosters relationship quality.

Practical implications – For managers, the findings provide a strategic framework to design effective moments of brand gratitude.

Originality/value – This research shifts the focus from consumer-felt gratitude to brand-expressed gratitude, establishing it as a critical driver of relationship quality. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of brand gratitude is dependent on the service experience stage (beginning vs ending), interaction channel (digital vs face-to-face) and latency (immediate vs delayed). This research offers a comprehensive framework for how brands can leverage gratitude to enhance consumer–brand relationships.

Keywords Brand gratitude, Sincerity, Relationship quality, Service experience, Interaction channel, Latency

Paper type Research paper



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1. Introduction

Brands frequently express gratitude across various service interactions, ranging from a simple “thank you” at checkout to post-purchase appreciation messages. These practices reflect a widespread belief that gratitude strengthens relationships with consumers (Chou *et al.*, 2023). While substantial research has examined gratitude from the consumer perspective, demonstrating that consumer gratitude enhances loyalty, repurchase intentions and willingness to pay (Huggins *et al.*, 2020; Koskie *et al.*, 2024; Palmatier *et al.*, 2009), far less attention has been devoted to the relational impact of brand gratitude (Mattila *et al.*, 2016; Thomas *et al.*, 2023). Brand gratitude represents a critical relational strategy, defined as a brand’s expression of appreciation towards its customers (Bock *et al.*, 2021). While such expressions are intended to strengthen emotional and motivational ties with consumers (Fournier, 1998), research suggests a potential dark side. In certain situations, gratitude expression can backfire, leading to a decline in relationship quality or even retaliatory behaviours (Hoppner *et al.*, 2026; Yu and Chaudhry, 2024). This suggests that the effectiveness of brand gratitude may be contingent on the context of the service encounter. Thus, understanding how and when brand gratitude strengthens brand relationship quality (BRQ) is critical for marketers.

Brand gratitude serves as a relational investment, signalling care and appreciation (Françoise and Andrews, 2015). However, the success of this investment is contingent on consumers’ perception of the brand’s intent (Aaker *et al.*, 2004). Prior studies showed that gratitude from exciting brands may seem less sincere (Bock and Thomas, 2023) and that cool brands may fail to convey gratitude effectively in private consumption settings (Koskie *et al.*, 2024). This introduces a critical tension. While brand gratitude can signal genuine care, it can trigger scepticism if consumers attribute it to a persuasion tactic (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Stephenson, 2025). Thus, the impact of brand gratitude is determined by whether consumers perceive the gesture as sincere. Despite this, limited research has examined the effectiveness of brand gratitude on consumers’ relational outcomes. This study addresses this gap by investigating perceived sincerity as the underlying mechanism through which brand gratitude leads to improved BRQ.

This research proposes that the relational outcomes of brand gratitude depend not only on the expression itself but also on the situational dynamics of the service encounter. These dynamics serve as diagnostic cues that consumers use to evaluate the sincerity of the brand’s gratitude expression (Massi *et al.*, 2023; Yang and Battocchio, 2021). While existing literature suggests that factors such as the service stage, channel and response speed influence how brand signals are processed (Hamilton and Price, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2023; Yu *et al.*, 2025), research examining the role of these factors in determining the effectiveness of brand gratitude remains limited. This study draws on the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012) to investigate how brand gratitude influences BRQ via perceived sincerity. Specifically, it explores how this effect is contingent on key service encounter factors, such as the stage of the service experience (beginning vs ending), the interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital) and the latency of the gratitude expression (immediate vs delayed). These factors represent critical service encounter moments that influence consumers’ appraisal of brand gratitude.

Firstly, the effectiveness of brand gratitude likely varies across service experience stages, as timing shapes sincerity evaluations. The beginning sets expectations while the ending anchors overall evaluation (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). However, early gratitude risks appearing ingratiating, whereas end-stage gratitude risks being dismissed as a routine script (Makri and Turner, 2020; Yu and Chaudhry, 2024). Given that peak and end moments disproportionately shape consumer memory (Holmlund *et al.*, 2020; Zhang and Shao, 2019), this research

examines how timing of brand gratitude influences the relationships between brand gratitude, sincerity and BRQ.

Secondly, the channel of expression shapes how consumers assess brand gratitude. Face-to-face interactions offer rich non-verbal cues that facilitate sincerity inferences (Okdie *et al.*, 2011; Roghanizad and Bohns, 2022), but may also feel intrusive (Esmark Jones *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, digital channels despite their efficiency convey less warmth, leading consumers to attribute messages to automated scripts, thereby undermining sincerity (Xu *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, this research examines how the channel of gratitude expression influences perceived sincerity and BRQ.

Finally, response latency, defined as the time between consumption and the expression of brand gratitude, shapes consumer responses. Prior research presents mixed evidence where delays may signal thoughtful processing but can also reduce satisfaction (Crisafulli and Singh, 2017; Jung *et al.*, 2023), whereas immediacy may signal spontaneity but also raise concerns about automation or manipulation (Sahni *et al.*, 2019; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). Accordingly, this research examines how latency moderates the effect of brand gratitude on perceived sincerity and BRQ.

In summary, this study examines the underlying mechanism and boundary conditions that shape the relationship between brand gratitude and BRQ. Specifically, the research proposes perceived brand sincerity as the key mediator and posits that service experience stage (beginning vs ending), interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital) and latency (immediate vs delayed) moderate the effects of brand gratitude on sincerity and BRQ. Grounded in the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), these relationships are examined through a multi-study approach comprising one field study and six experiments. To ensure generalizability, data were collected across diverse consumption contexts (e.g. hotels, restaurants, home décor and retail) and cultural settings (the USA and India).

The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. Firstly, it extends the gratitude literature beyond the consumer perspective (Huggins *et al.*, 2020; Koskie *et al.*, 2024; Palmatier *et al.*, 2009) to the brand perspective (Bock and Thomas, 2023; Mattila *et al.*, 2016), demonstrating that relational outcomes depend on the sincerity conveyed by the brand when expressing gratitude (Hoeffler and Keller, 2002; Guèvremont and Grohmann, 2013). Secondly, by applying the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012; Leonhardt *et al.*, 2025), this study extends this framework into the marketing domain, specifying the conditions under which brand gratitude successfully binds consumers to brands. Finally, this study contributes to service and communication research by identifying the service experience stage (Blečić and Kuester, 2025; Fuller *et al.*, 2023), interaction channel (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2022) and latency (Li *et al.*, 2021; Sahni *et al.*, 2019) as critical determinants of brand gratitude–BRQ relationship. For practitioners, this research offers actionable guidance on designing effective brand gratitude strategies that are perceived as sincere, thereby fostering stronger, long-term consumer–brand relationships.

2. Literature review

2.1 Brand gratitude

Gratitude is a social emotion experienced when individuals recognize benefits or support received from others (Bock and Thomas, 2023). It comprises three distinct components: a cognitive component of recognizing others' actions in producing a positive outcome, an emotional component of feeling appreciative and a behavioural component of wanting to reciprocate (Huggins *et al.*, 2020). Existing research has predominantly focused on consumer gratitude, where the customer feels thankful towards the brand. This literature consistently demonstrates that consumer gratitude drives satisfaction, trust, price tolerance

and positive word-of-mouth, which in turn enhances revenue and share of wallet (Hasan *et al.*, 2017; Koskie *et al.*, 2024; Palmatier *et al.*, 2009). Researchers have validated these outcomes across diverse contexts, including e-tailing and loyalty programmes (Huggins *et al.*, 2020; Hasan *et al.*, 2014), gift giving (Septianto and Garg, 2021), cause marketing and CSR (Mattila *et al.*, 2016), advertising appeals (Baek and Yoon, 2022) and access-based services and social media use (Chou *et al.*, 2023), establishing gratitude as a key driver of consumer–brand relationship strength.

In contrast, this study examines gratitude from a *brand's perspective*, where appreciation is expressed by the brand to the consumer. In this context, brand gratitude refers to a brand's acknowledgement and appreciation of consumers' choice and patronage (Bock *et al.*, 2021). Gratitude is both an emotional and a communicative act. It involves not only the internal feeling of appreciation but also the external expression of thanks (Fredrickson, 2001; Huggins *et al.*, 2020). This study focuses specifically on the communicative aspect, examining how brands expressing gratitude to consumers influences BRQ.

Conceptually, brand gratitude is distinct from other relational constructs, such as authenticity, warmth and relational investment. Firstly, it is different from authenticity, which involves consumer perceptions of a brand's character or intentions (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, brand gratitude is a specific behavioural action where the brand explicitly acknowledges the consumer. Secondly, while warmth reflects a social judgement regarding a brand's friendliness and benevolence (Aaker *et al.*, 2012), brand gratitude is a relational tool used to drive judgements of brand's warmth. Thirdly, while traditional relationship investment typically refers to broad, ongoing resource efforts (De Wulf and Odekerken-Schröder, 2003), brand gratitude is a distinct form of investment that validates the consumer's support in driving relationship quality.

Common industry manifestations of brand gratitude range from digital platforms thanking new users for subscribing to retailers sending follow-up thank-you emails after purchases. Despite the prevalence of these practices, research on brand gratitude remains limited. Bock and Thomas (2023) showed that the effectiveness of brand gratitude depends on brand personality, with expressing gratitude to third parties leading to positive outcomes for sincere brands. However, when exciting brands expressed gratitude, it was perceived as less genuine, leading to lower purchase intentions.

Similarly, Thomas *et al.* (2023) found that sincere brands benefit more when advertised gratitude is effortful and consumers strongly identify with the brand. In the CSR context, Mattila *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that expressing gratitude increases donation intentions for low-power consumers by enhancing their feelings of self-worth. Conversely, Liu *et al.* (2015) found that pairing gratitude with a smaller-than-expected financial benefit makes consumers feel less appreciated than when no financial benefit is provided. Studies in service recovery have further shown that gratitude outperforms apologies in restoring relationships and leads to higher satisfaction and recommendation intentions (Song *et al.*, 2023; You *et al.*, 2020).

While these studies provide initial insights, the current research extends the literature by offering a more comprehensive understanding of how and when brand gratitude fosters BRQ. Most existing studies examine gratitude in narrow, context-specific settings, such as advertising messages, appreciation over apology communications, or responses to non-transactional consumer efforts (Thomas *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2015; You *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, in many cases, gratitude is directed towards third-party groups or expressed broadly rather than to the focal consumer (Bock and Thomas, 2023). Consequently, it remains unclear how brand gratitude expressed to the focal customer in diverse service encounters improves BRQ.

Furthermore, previous research has primarily focused on brand-level traits, such as brand personality, as a boundary condition for effectiveness (Bock and Thomas, 2023; Thomas *et al.*, 2023). However, brand traits are relatively fixed and difficult to change in the short term. In contrast, this research identifies service encounter factors, such as service stage, interaction channel and latency, as key boundary conditions shaping relational outcomes of brand gratitude (Orth, 2005). These service encounter factors are highly relevant, as they represent the actual dynamics of the interaction as well as specific moments of truth during which consumers evaluate a brand's intention and sincerity (Noone *et al.*, 2009; Verhoef *et al.*, 2004). By identifying these service encounter factors, this study shows that brand gratitude is contingent upon the delivery of the signal rather than merely the brand's personality. Thus, the present study addresses how the timing of the expression (service stage), the interaction channel (face-to-face vs online) and the latency (immediate vs delayed) influence consumers' perceptions and responses to brand gratitude.

2.2 The find-remind-and-bind theory

The find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012) conceptualizes gratitude as a social emotion that evolved to help humans identify high-quality relationship partners. According to this theory, gratitude serves three distinct functions: it helps individuals *find* valuable partners, *reminds* people of the worth and value of their partners and *binds* them closer together by increasing emotional connection. While this theory has been widely applied in organizational behaviour and psychology (Leonhardt *et al.*, 2025; Ma *et al.*, 2017), this study extends the framework to the marketing context to examine how and when brand gratitude shapes consumer-brand relationships. In this context, brands express gratitude as a relational investment. Consumers, acting as beneficiaries of this appreciation, reciprocate by investing further in the relationship. In other words, brand gratitude serves as a strategic relational signal that enables consumers to find and identify trustworthy partners in the marketplace, remind them of the brand's commitment and bind them more closely in a relationship with brands.

The find-remind-and-bind theory differs conceptually from traditional relationship marketing frameworks, particularly social exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). While social exchange theory proposes that individuals emphasize reciprocity in exchange relationships (Abarashi and Edirisingha, 2025), it frames gratitude through a transactional perspective, focusing on the balance of inputs and outputs. In contrast, the find-remind-and-bind framework treats gratitude as a signal of responsiveness and partner quality (Algoe, 2012). This distinction is crucial because brands express gratitude to signal care rather than balance a transactional ledger. Therefore, while social exchange theory explains *why* consumers reciprocate, the find-remind-and-bind theory clarifies *how* gratitude strengthens relationship bonds (Stieler and Germelmann, 2016).

3. Hypothesis development

As shown in Figure 1, this study proposes that brand gratitude enhances BRQ (*H1*) through the underlying mechanism of perceived brand sincerity (*H2*), subsequently driving brand loyalty (*H3a*) and advocacy (*H3b*). This relationship is moderated by service experience stage (*H4*), interaction channel (*H5*) and latency (*H6*).

3.1 The effects of brand gratitude on BRQ

BRQ reflects the depth and intensity of the bond consumers share with brands (Smit *et al.*, 2007; Xie *et al.*, 2017). Previous studies have demonstrated the critical role of BRQ in driving both consumer-related and brand-related outcomes (Nyffenegger *et al.*, 2015; Quaye *et al.*, 2022; Sreejesh, 2024). Although research has comprehensively examined the

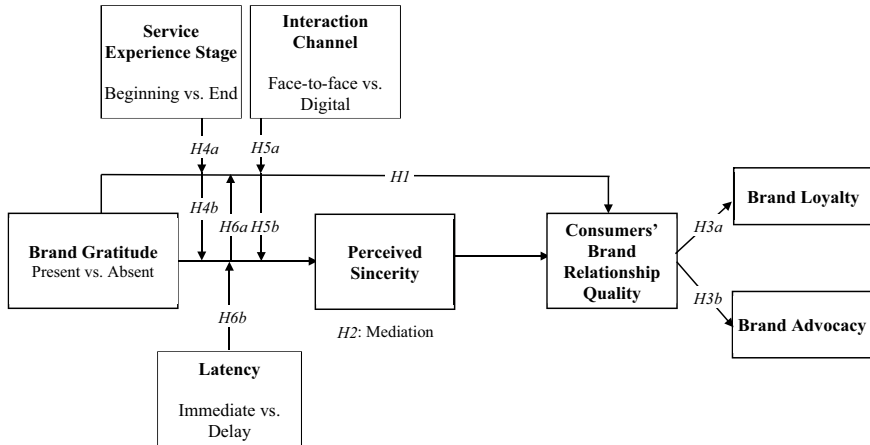


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Source: Authors' own work

definition, dimensions and consequences of BRQ (Adhikari and Panda, 2020), few studies have explored specific strategies that strengthen it. While extant literature has identified CSR activities, social media interactions, brand experience, specific brand personality traits, customer orientation and brand extensions as drivers of BRQ (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Xie *et al.*, 2017), this study extends this stream by examining brand gratitude as a distinct driver.

Empirical evidence supports the role of brand gratitude in shaping positive consumer responses across advertising, CSR and service recovery contexts (Bock and Thomas, 2023; You *et al.*, 2020; Song *et al.*, 2023). However, unlike traditional relationship marketing, which often views gratitude as triggering reciprocal obligation (Raggio *et al.*, 2014), the find-remind-and-bind (Algoe, 2012) theoretical lens used in this research offers a more robust explanation for this gratitude–BRQ link. Specifically, when applied to the brand gratitude context, the find function operates as a diagnostic signal, helping consumers identify the brand as a responsive and trustworthy partner. The remind function reinforces consumers' awareness of the brand's investment in their relationship, while the bind function fosters commitment to future engagement by signalling the brand's intention to maintain the relationship over time (Bock and Thomas, 2023). Consequently, these functions collectively strengthen BRQ. Additionally, gratitude signals that the brand is attentive and responsive. It makes consumers feel valued, increasing their self-efficacy and self-worth, which in turn motivates them to engage in reciprocal behaviours towards brands (Grant and Gino, 2010):

H1. Brand gratitude has a positive effect on consumers' BRQ.

3.2 The mediating role of perceived sincerity

Perceived sincerity refers to the extent to which consumers view a brand's actions as honest, caring and genuine (Hoeffler and Keller, 2002). Gratitude involves an explicit acknowledgement of consumers' actions (e.g. purchase, loyalty) and expresses that their contributions matter, positioning them as valued partners. Crucially, it signals a commitment to maintaining the relationship in the future (You *et al.*, 2020). This mechanism aligns with

the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), where brand gratitude strengthens perceptions of sincerity by signalling a long-term commitment. It reduces scepticism about the brand's self-serving motives while signalling warmth and reinforcing trust in the relationship (Stephenson, 2025). Moreover, brand gratitude conveys authenticity by fulfilling fundamental human needs for acknowledgement, connectedness and belonging (Locklear *et al.*, 2023).

Prior research indicates that perceived brand sincerity fosters favourable attitudes and enduring consumer-brand relationships (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Guèvremont and Grohmann, 2013). This aligns with broader findings in social psychology, which suggest that sincerity outweighs traits like excitement in impression formation (Brambilla *et al.*, 2013) and mirrors the characteristics sought in an ideal partner (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999). Consequently, we argue that by enhancing perceived sincerity, brand gratitude strengthens BRQ:

H2. Perceived brand sincerity mediates the relationship between brand gratitude and BRQ.

3.3 *The consequential outcomes of brand gratitude and BRQ*

Brand loyalty and brand advocacy represent critical downstream consequences in relationship marketing. Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's intention to repurchase and prioritize a specific brand over alternatives, while brand advocacy encompasses the willingness to recommend and speak favourably about the brand to others (Fullerton, 2011; Veloutsou, 2015). Previous research has consistently linked these consequences to the core dimensions of BRQ, such as trust, satisfaction and commitment (Quaye *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, advocacy is strengthened when consumers perceive the brand as trustworthy and relationally invested (Fullerton, 2003; Price and Arnould, 1999).

The find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012) provides a robust theoretical basis for predicting these effects. Notably, the bind function suggests that when consumers perceive a relationship as valuable (i.e. high BRQ), they are intrinsically motivated to engage in actions that maintain and extend that bond. Consequently, loyalty and advocacy serve as the manifestations of this binding process. Complementing this, relationship investment theory (De Wulf and Odekerken-Schröder, 2003) suggests that when consumers perceive that a brand actively invests resources into the relationship, they evaluate the brand more positively and feel compelled to reciprocate (Thomson, 2006). Thus, consumers are expected to respond to high-quality relationships by reciprocally offering their loyalty and positive word of mouth:

H3. Higher perceptions of BRQ will positively affect (a) brand loyalty and (b) brand advocacy.

3.4 *The moderating role of service experience stage*

The consumption experience is typically conceptualized as a process comprising multiple stages (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). Within this continuum, the service experience stage refers to specific moments during consumption when salient consumer-brand interactions occur (Reitsamer and Becker, 2024). Prior work emphasizes that both the beginning (entry) and ending (exit) stages are critical in shaping overall evaluations (Gahler *et al.*, 2023; Hansen and Danaher, 1999). Interactions at the beginning help form initial expectations that anchor subsequent judgements, whereas those at the end serve as reflective moments where consumers integrate the overall experience (Zhang and Shao, 2019). Recent studies highlight

that the peak and end moments in a service encounter leave a lasting impression that often outweighs other stages (Holmlund *et al.*, 2020; Reitsamer and Becker, 2024). However, research remains uncertain regarding whether the beginning or ending stage exerts greater influence on consumers' receptivity to relational signals like gratitude (Blečić and Kuester, 2025; Fuller *et al.*, 2023; Jiang *et al.*, 2018).

This research posits that the specific stage of the service encounter shifts the consumer's attribution of the brand's motive. While expressing gratitude at the beginning of a service experience sets a positive tone, it risks activating consumers' persuasion knowledge. Since the consumer has not yet experienced the core service, beginning-stage gratitude could be construed as a strategic ingratiation tactic to induce agreeableness or mitigate potential complaints. In this context, brand gratitude is perceived as a tactic rather than a sincere expression.

In contrast, gratitude expressed at the ending stage of the service encounter aligns with established norms of reciprocal value exchange. Because consumers attribute this appreciation to a completed service delivery, it is less likely to trigger scepticism and is instead evaluated as sincere (Makri and Turner, 2020; Yu and Chaudhry, 2024). Existing services marketing literature supports this, suggesting that timely appreciation following service delivery reinforces trust and deepens emotional attachment (Raggio *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, given that the ending stage of a service encounter is psychologically salient, relational cues presented at this stage carry disproportionate weight in shaping overall relationship judgements (Ieva and Ziliani, 2018; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the service experience stage moderates the effects of brand gratitude on BRQ and sincerity.

Finally, the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012) suggests that the ending stage offers a more favourable environment for gratitude to function effectively. At the end of the encounter, the expression of gratitude serves to remind consumers of the brand's commitment and bind them more closely to the brand based on the delivered value. Conversely, gratitude offered before value is delivered lacks this reminding capacity and may instead signal a persuasion tactic. Therefore, the ending stage provides the necessary context for gratitude to be perceived as an authentic signal of a communal relationship:

- H4. Service experience stage (beginning vs ending) moderates the effects of brand gratitude on (a) BRQ and (b) sincerity, with gratitude expressed at the end of the service experience leading to higher BRQ and sincerity than gratitude expressed at the beginning.

3.5 The moderating *role* of interaction channel

The interaction channel refers to the medium through which brands communicate gratitude, ranging from high-touch face-to-face encounters to digital formats such as emails (Lesscher *et al.*, 2021). Channel choice shapes how consumers decode relational signals (Ramirez and Zhang, 2007; Wakefield, 2024). Face-to-face interaction offer high media richness, providing real-time feedback and non-verbal cues that foster a strong sense of social presence. Conversely, while digital channels offer efficiency, the absence of non-verbal cues may increase psychological distance and hinder the accurate assessment of a brand's sincerity (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2022).

Research demonstrates that face-to-face interactions are significantly more effective in eliciting compliance and relational trust than digital messages (Roghanizad and Bohns, 2022). Digital communication is frequently associated with lower credibility and a higher potential for deception due to the ease of automation (Toma *et al.*, 2018; Togawa *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, brand gratitude expressed face-to-face is more likely to be evaluated as

authentic. In physical settings, consumers can observe congruency between the employee's expression and non-verbal cues, thereby reducing uncertainty about the brand's sincerity. In this context, brand gratitude is assessed as a genuine attempt to strengthen the relationship with consumers rather than a scripted protocol. Thus, the interaction channel moderates the effects of brand gratitude on BRQ and sincerity.

From the perspective of the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), face-to-face gratitude acts as a more effective relational mechanism. The physical presence and emotional labour inherent in face-to-face interaction function as a genuine signal of commitment. This gives consumers credible evidence of the brand's investment and reminds them of the relationship's value. Thus, interaction channels influence the effectiveness of brand gratitude in determining sincerity and BRQ. On the other hand, digital expressions often lack the personal touch and risk being perceived as impersonal, reducing the effectiveness of brand gratitude on consumers' relational outcomes:

- H5. Interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital) moderates the effects of brand gratitude on (a) BRQ and (b) sincerity, with gratitude expressed face-to-face leading to higher BRQ and sincerity than gratitude expressed digitally.

3.6 The moderating role of latency of gratitude

Latency refers to the time elapsed between the end of the consumption stage and the expression of brand gratitude (Lew *et al.*, 2018). The present research conceptualize latency as a moderator that shapes how consumers interpret a brand's gratitude expression. Prior research on latency in marketing suggests that its effects depend on the purpose of the communication. For functional tasks that require cognitive effort, delay can sometimes be beneficial. For example, Jung *et al.* (2023) show that delayed review requests can increase compliance by activating future-oriented memory, while Li *et al.* (2021) find that retargeting after a short delay can enhance effectiveness in cart abandonment contexts. However, when communication is intended to influence affective responses and relationship perceptions, immediacy appears to be more consequential. For example, the effectiveness of ad retargeting declines as the delay from the focal interaction increases (Sahni *et al.*, 2019), and immediate responses in service contexts are more likely to enhance satisfaction and reduce uncertainty than delayed ones (Roschk and Kaiser, 2013; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004).

While prior research offers mixed evidence, this research proposes that the timing of brand gratitude expression shapes consumer inferences by influencing how readily the consumption episode can be linked to the brand's response. Shorter latency preserves greater temporal proximity between the experience and the gratitude communication, increasing the accessibility of the consumption episode in memory. Consistent with this reasoning, Sederberg *et al.* (2008) show that stimuli encountered in close temporal proximity share greater contextual overlap in memory, strengthening their associative connection.

Relatedly, research on construal level suggests that temporally proximal events are processed more concretely and in closer relation to their immediate context, whereas temporally distant events are construed more abstractly and with less reliance on contextual cues (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Thus, when gratitude is expressed immediately after purchase or consumption, consumers can more easily connect the message to their specific behaviour, reinforcing the perceived contingency between their action and the brand's response and, in turn, supporting sincerity inferences. In contrast, delayed gratitude may weaken this associative and contextual linkage, increasing the likelihood that the message is interpreted as impersonal or strategically motivated rather than as a sincere response to the focal interaction (Patak and Reynolds, 2007). Prior research supporting this argument found

that temporally proximal communications can exert stronger persuasive effects than temporally distant ones. Messages framed around near-term rather than distant consequences are often more compelling (Kim and Kim, 2018), and positive reviews are perceived as more persuasive in temporally proximal rather than distant decision contexts when the recommendation is prominently positioned (Jha *et al.*, 2025). In addition, consumers in temporally proximal contexts are more likely to rely on immediately available cues when forming judgements (Jeong *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Zhao, 2014). Accordingly, latency moderates the effects of brand gratitude on BRQ and perceived sincerity.

Similarly, the find-remind-and-bind perspective (Algoe, 2012) suggests that immediacy is essential for the bind function. The theory posits that gratitude reinforces the bond between partners in response to a benefit. Immediate gratitude signals high responsiveness, a key indicator of relationship quality, showing that the brand values the consumer's action in real time. Unlike review requests that benefit from a cooling-off period, relational signals thrive on proximity, thereby increasing BRQ and perceived sincerity:

- H6.* Latency (immediate vs delayed) moderates the effects of brand gratitude on (a) BRQ and (b) sincerity, with immediate expression of gratitude leading to higher BRQ and sincerity than delayed expression of gratitude.

4. Overview of studies

Across one field study, four experiments reported in the manuscript, and two supplementary studies reported in the supplementary appendix, this research used a multi-study approach to examine the relational outcomes of brand gratitude. Following a sequential logic, Study 1 examined the effect of brand gratitude on behavioural BRQ, while Supplementary studies established the robustness of these findings across different service contexts, outcomes and organizational sources, while controlling for trait gratitude. Study 2 examined perceived sincerity as the mediating mechanism and assessed the downstream consequences of BRQ on loyalty and advocacy. The subsequent studies delineated critical boundary conditions. Study 3 examined the service stage (beginning vs end), Study 4 investigated the interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital) and Study 5 explored the role of temporal latency (immediate vs delayed) in the relationships between brand gratitude, sincerity and BRQ.

5. Study 1: A field study of brand gratitude and its impact on BRQ

Study 1 employed a field experiment to test the causal relationship between brand gratitude and BRQ. By moving beyond self-reported intentions, this study captured real-world behavioural responses to brand gratitude in a naturalistic retail environment. The study used a one-factor (gratitude: present vs absent) between-subjects design.

5.1 Method

Study 1 was conducted in a physical apparel retail store located in a Tier 2 city in India. Data collection took place over eight consecutive days during peak operating hours (12:00 pm to 8:00 pm). Two store employees received in-person training from a research team member in the local language to ensure consistent delivery of the experimental manipulations and accurate recording of observations.

To minimize potential confounds, a systematic assignment rule was applied at the point of sale. Specifically, every second customer who completed a purchase with a participating employee was assigned to either the gratitude-present or gratitude-absent condition.

In the gratitude-present condition, employees were instructed to express explicit brand gratitude immediately after the transaction using a scripted acknowledgement (e.g. “Thank you so much for your purchase; we truly appreciate your support”). Conversely, in the gratitude-absent condition, employees inquired if the shopping experience was enjoyable and offered further assistance, deliberately omitting explicit expressions of gratitude (see Web Appendix 1 for study stimuli).

Immediately following the manipulation, employees invited customers to provide their email addresses to receive updates on new products (see Web Appendix 2 for study measures). Consistent with prior research, this opt-in behaviour was operationalized as a behavioural proxy for (Packard and Wooten, 2013). To capture these outcomes and control for extraneous variables, employees recorded interaction details in a data log immediately after each transaction. Four key variables were documented: gratitude offered (yes vs no), email provision (yes vs no), time of day (afternoon vs evening) and social context (shopping alone vs with a companion).

This process resulted in a final sample of 104 customers who completed a purchase and received the manipulation. Participants were entirely unaware of the experiment, ensuring that observed behaviours reflected authentic consumer responses free from laboratory demand characteristics (Verbeke *et al.*, 2016).

5.2 Results

Testing H1. A binary logistic regression was carried out with email provided (yes = 1, no = 0) as the dependent variable and brand gratitude condition (yes = 1, no = 0) as the predictor. The results showed that brand gratitude significantly predicted the likelihood of email provision ($B = 0.94$, $SE = 0.40$, $Wald = 5.44$, $p = 0.020$). The odds ratio (OR) indicated that participants in the gratitude-present condition were 2.56 times more likely to provide their email address than those in the gratitude-absent condition (OR = 2.56, 95% CI [1.16, 5.65]).

To test for robustness, we estimated a binary logistic regression model including two control variables: time of day (afternoon = 0, evening = 1) and social context (alone = 0, companion = 1). Gratitude remained a significant predictor of the outcome (OR = 2.59, 95% CI [1.16, 5.77], $p = 0.020$). Neither time of day (OR = 1.00, $p = 0.997$) nor whether the customer came alone (OR = 1.86, $p = 0.141$) significantly predicted email provision.

Additionally, a chi-square test was conducted to examine whether gratitude expression influenced customers' willingness to share their email addresses. The test revealed a significant association, $\chi^2(1, n = 104) = 5.54$, $p = 0.019$. In the gratitude-present condition, more customers provided their email than declined (31 vs 21; 59.61% vs 40.39%). The opposite pattern emerged in the gratitude-absent condition, where fewer customers provided their email than declined (19 vs 33; 36.53% vs 63.47%).

5.3 Discussion

The findings from Study 1 demonstrate that brand gratitude significantly enhances BRQ, as evidenced by a higher rate of email provision in the gratitude-present condition compared to the gratitude-absent condition. While this field experiment offers high external validity (Malodia *et al.*, 2023), it is limited by its inability to control for extraneous variables.

To address the limitations and establish robustness, two supplementary studies were conducted (see Web Appendices 3 and 4). These studies extend the findings of Study 1 in three ways. Firstly, they confirm the generalizability of the effectiveness of brand gratitude across diverse cultural and service contexts, replicating the positive impact of brand gratitude in both US dining (Web Appendix 3) and Indian retail (Web Appendix 4) settings. Secondly, they establish construct validity by demonstrating that the effects of brand gratitude on email

provision (a behavioural measure for BRQ) observed in Study 1 correspond with established psychometric measures of BRQ, including both unidimensional (Web Appendix 3) and multidimensional scales (Web Appendix 4). Thirdly, they rule out alternative explanations concerning organizational source (manager vs salesperson) and individual differences (gratitude disposition) (Web Appendix 4). Collectively, these findings offer robust evidence of the brand gratitude–BRQ relationship observed in the field study.

6. Study 2: The mediating role of perceived sincerity and downstream outcomes of BRQ

Study 2 investigates the mediating role of perceived sincerity (*H2*) and the consequential outcomes of BRQ on brand loyalty (*H3a*) and brand advocacy (*H3b*).

6.1 Method

A total of 163 participants (53.37% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.54$ years) were recruited for a one-factor (brand gratitude: absent vs present) between-subjects experiment set in a retail context. Participants imagined visiting Fashion Hut (a fictitious apparel retail store to control familiarity bias), where the manager either sincerely thanked them for their purchase (gratitude-present) or simply asked if they needed assistance (gratitude-absent) (see Web Appendix 1 for study stimuli).

Following the scenario, participants completed measures of BRQ ($\alpha = 0.92$), perceived sincerity ($\alpha = 0.91$), brand loyalty ($\alpha = 0.88$) and brand advocacy ($\alpha = 0.94$). Manipulation ($r = 0.88$) and realism checks ($r = 0.89$), along with demographic information, were also recorded (see Web Appendix 2 for study measures).

6.2 Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation was successful, as participants perceived significantly higher gratitude in the gratitude-present condition ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.06$) compared to the absent condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.13$, $t_{161} = 2.13$, $p = 0.035$, Cohen's $d = 0.333$). The scenarios were also perceived as realistic [$M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.22$, scale midpoint = 4.0, $t(162) = 16.70$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.316$].

Testing H2. A mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples; Hayes, 2018) supported *H2*, revealing a significant indirect effect of brand gratitude and BRQ through perceived sincerity (indirect = 0.39, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.71]). Brand gratitude significantly increased perceived sincerity ($\beta = 0.43$, $p = 0.015$), which in turn enhanced BRQ. The total effect of brand gratitude on BRQ ($\beta = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$) remained significant but decreased when sincerity was controlled for ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation (see Figure 2).

Post hoc analysis revealed that participants perceived the brand as more sincere when gratitude was present ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.11$) compared to the absent condition [$M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.16$, $F(1, 161) = 5.99$, $p = 0.015$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.036$].

Test of H3a. Serial mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2018) confirmed the downstream consequences of BRQ. The path from brand gratitude → sincerity → BRQ → loyalty was significant (indirect = 0.18, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.37]), supporting *H3a* (see Figure 3, Panel A).

Testing H3b. Similarly, the path from brand gratitude → sincerity → BRQ → advocacy was significant (indirect = 0.13, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.29]), supporting *H3b* (see Figure 3, Panel B).

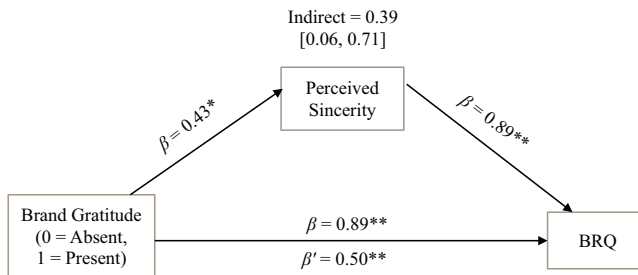


Figure 2. Mediation results (Study 3)

Note: β' is effect of gratitude on BRQ without sincerity

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors' own work

6.3 Discussion

Study 2 validated perceived sincerity as the underlying mechanism driving the effect of brand gratitude on BRQ. Furthermore, it demonstrated that this high BRQ translates into significant downstream outcomes, specifically brand loyalty and advocacy.

7. Study 3: The moderating role of service experience stage

Study 3 examined whether the service experience stage (beginning vs end) moderates the effects of brand gratitude on BRQ (*H4a*) and perceived sincerity (*H4b*).

7.1 Method

A total of 268 participants (57.83% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.23$ years) were recruited for a 2 (brand gratitude: absent vs present) \times 2 (service experience stage: beginning vs end) between-subjects design. The study used a hotel context. Participants imagined interacting with a hotel manager either at check-in (beginning) or check-out (end). In the gratitude-present condition, the manager thanked the guests for choosing the hotel, whereas in the gratitude-absent condition, the manager simply asked if they required further assistance (see Web Appendix 1 for study stimuli).

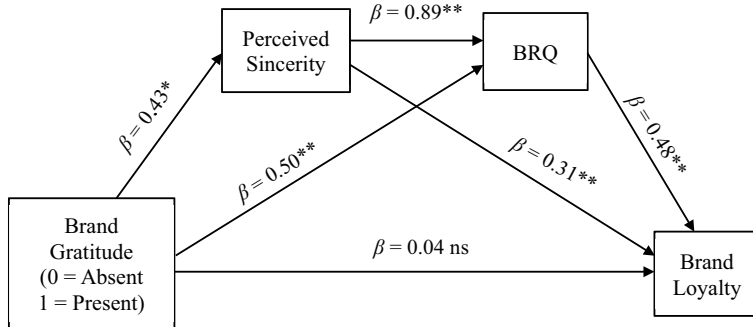
Following the scenario, participants completed measures of BRQ ($\alpha = 0.88$) and sincerity ($\alpha = 0.90$), along with manipulation checks for gratitude ($r = 0.81$) and service experience stage, realism checks ($r = 0.88$) and demographics (see Web Appendix 2 for study measures).

7.2 Results

Manipulation check. The manipulations were effective. Participants in the gratitude-present ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 0.80$) condition reported significantly higher gratitude than those in the absent condition ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.02$, $t_{249.77} = 6.43$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.791$). A chi-square test confirmed that participants correctly identified the service experience stage. In the beginning condition, most of participants [yes = 132 vs no = 3, $\chi^2(1) = 123.26$, $p = 0.000$] identified it correctly, while in the ending condition, the majority (yes = 98 vs no = 35, $\chi^2(1) = 29.84$, $p = 0.000$) identified it correctly. The scenario was perceived as highly realistic [$M = 5.90$, $SD = 0.97$, $t(267) = 31.98$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 1.959$].

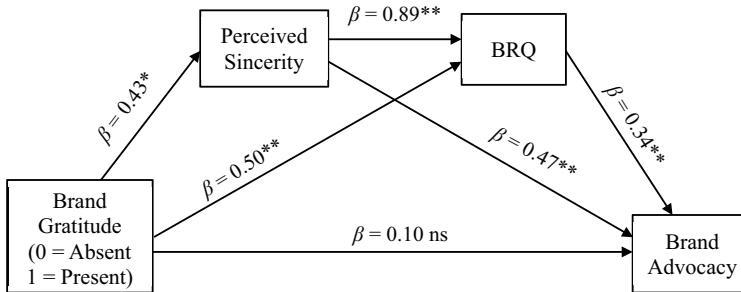
Test of *H4a*: A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of brand gratitude ($F_{264} = 24.83$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.086$), but no main effect of service experience stage ($F_{264} = 0.30$, $p = 0.585$). Importantly, the gratitude \times stage interaction was significant

Panel-A



Gratitude → Sincerity → Loyalty: indirect = 0.13, SE = 0.06, 95%SI = 0.02 to 0.28
 Gratitude → BRQ → Loyalty: indirect = 0.24, SE = 0.07, 95%SI = 0.11 to 0.40
 Gratitude → Sincerity → BRQ → Loyalty: indirect = 0.18, SE = 0.08, 95%SI = 0.03 to 0.37

Panel-B



Gratitude → Sincerity → Advocacy: indirect = 0.20, SE = 0.10, 95%SI = 0.03 to 0.43
 Gratitude → BRQ → Advocacy: indirect = 0.17, SE = 0.06, 95%SI = 0.07 to 0.31
 Gratitude → Sincerity → BRQ → Advocacy: indirect = 0.13, SE = 0.07, 95%SI = 0.02 to 0.29

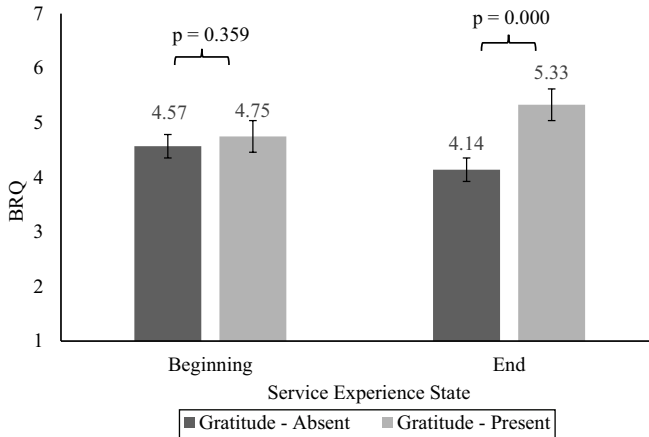
Figure 3. Sequential mediation results (Study 2)

Source: Authors' own work

($F_{264} = 13.60, p = 0.000, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.049$). Simple slope analysis showed that at the ending stage, gratitude-present ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.12$) significantly increased BRQ compared to gratitude-absent ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.18$), $F_{264} = 37.32, p = 0.000, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.124$. However, at the beginning stage, there was no significant difference in BRQ between gratitude-present ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.19$) and gratitude-absent ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.00$) conditions, $F_{264} = 0.84, p = 0.359$) (see Figure 4, Panel A).

Test of H4b: The results for sincerity followed a similar pattern. A two-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect of brand gratitude ($F_{264} = 4.09, p = 0.044, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.015$), no main effect of service stage ($F_{264} = 0.37, p = 0.541, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.001$) and a significant gratitude x stage interaction ($F_{264} = 4.61, p = 0.033, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.017$). Simple slope analysis revealed that at the ending stage, gratitude-present ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.12$) led to

Panel A



Panel B

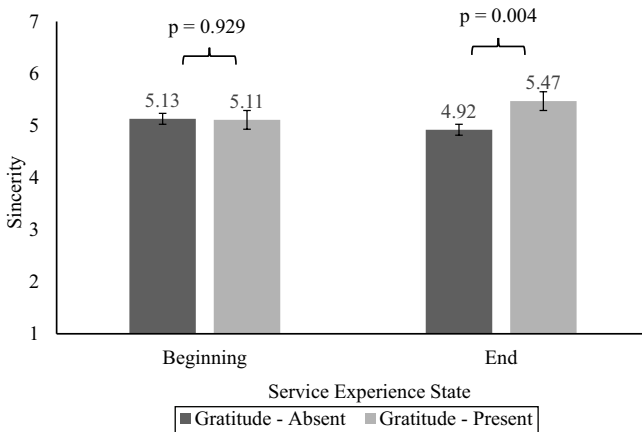


Figure 4. Service Experience stage and gratitude interaction (Study 3)

Source: Authors' own work

significantly higher sincerity than gratitude-absent ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.21$), $F_{264} = 8.63$, $p = 0.004$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.032$. At the beginning stage, no significant differences were found between the conditions (gratitude-present $M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.03$ vs gratitude-absent $M = 5.13$, $SD = 0.92$, $F_{264} = 0.00$, $p = 0.929$) (see Figure 4, Panel B).

Post hoc moderated mediation: A moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples; Hayes, 2018) revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($IMM = 0.45$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.87]). The indirect effect of brand gratitude on BRQ via sincerity was significant at the ending stage (indirect = 0.44, $SE = 0.16$,

95% CI [0.13, 0.75]), but not at the beginning stage (indirect = -0.01, SE = 0.13, 95% CI [-0.29, 0.25]).

7.3 Discussion

The findings of Study 3 demonstrated that the effectiveness of brand gratitude depends on the specific service experience stage at which it is expressed. Expressing brand gratitude at the end of service consumption enhanced both BRQ and sincerity. In contrast, gratitude expressed at the beginning of service consumption did not lead to higher BRQ and sincerity.

8. Study 4: The moderating role of interaction channel

Study 4 examined the interaction channel as the boundary condition, exploring whether brand gratitude expressed face-to-face versus digitally results in differential effects on BRQ (H5a) and sincerity (H5b).

8.1 Method

A total of 273 participants (61.90% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.51\%$ years) were randomly assigned to a 2 (brand gratitude: absent vs present) \times 2 (channel: face-to-face vs digital) between-subjects design. The study was set at the hotel checkout stage, consistent with Study 3's finding that gratitude expressed at the end of the consumption experience is more effective. To ensure consistency across channels, gratitude was manipulated using a thank-you card, a common appreciation tool used across various service contexts such as hotels, boutique retail, spas and salons and e-retailing. In the face-to-face condition, the manager handed the guest a physical bill and card, while in the digital condition, the bill and digital card were sent via email. In the gratitude-absent condition, no card was provided (see Web Appendix 1 for study stimuli).

A pretest ($n = 71$, 54.92% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 45.26$ years) confirmed the validity of the manipulations. Participants in the gratitude-present condition ($M = 6.63$, $SD = 0.71$) reported significantly higher gratitude than those in the gratitude-absent condition ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.95$, $t_{69} = 5.26$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 1.251$). Chi-square tests confirmed that participants correctly identified the interaction channel in both face-to-face [yes = 34 vs no = 2, $\chi^2(1) = 28.44$, $p < 0.001$] and digital conditions (yes = 35 vs no = 0, 100% identification).

After reading the scenario, participants completed measures of BRQ ($\alpha = 0.94$) and sincerity ($\alpha = 0.93$), along with realism ($r = 0.90$), one attention check question assessing service stage, and demographics (see Web Appendix 2 for study measures).

8.2 Results

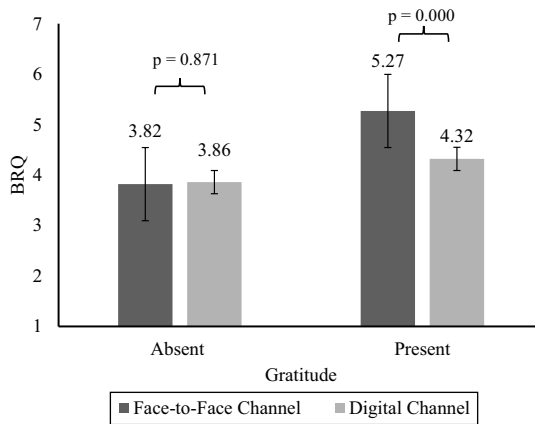
The scenario was perceived as highly realistic across conditions ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.11$, scale mid-point = 4.0, $t(272) = 25.83$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 1.564$). Participants also reported receiving the gratitude (card/email) immediately after checkout [$M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.68$, scale mid-point = 4.0, $t(272) = 14.38$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.874$].

Test of H5a: A two-way ANOVA revealed significant main effects of gratitude ($F_{269} = 30.40$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.102$) and interaction channel ($F_{269} = 6.94$, $p = 0.009$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.025$). Importantly, the gratitude \times channel interaction was significant ($F_{269} = 8.21$, $p = 0.004$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.030$). Simple slope analysis showed that in the gratitude-present condition, BRQ was significantly higher in the face-to-face channel ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.35$) than in the digital channel ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.14$, $F_{269} = 15.51$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.055$). In the gratitude-absent condition, no difference in BRQ was

found between channels (face-to-face: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.59$ vs digital channels: $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.55$), $F_{269} = 0.02$, $p = 0.871$ (see Figure 5, Panel A).

Testing H5b: A similar pattern of results was observed for sincerity. Main effects were observed for gratitude ($F_{269} = 11.78$, $p = 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.042$) and interaction channel ($F_{269} = 4.13$, $p = 0.043$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.015$). The interaction effect between gratitude and channel was also significant ($F_{269} = 5.52$, $p = 0.019$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.020$). Simple slope analysis revealed that in the gratitude-present condition, perceived sincerity was higher in the face-to-face channel ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.10$) compared to the digital channel ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.09$, $F_{269} = 9.86$, $p = 0.002$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.035$). In the gratitude-absent condition, no significant

Panel A



Panel B

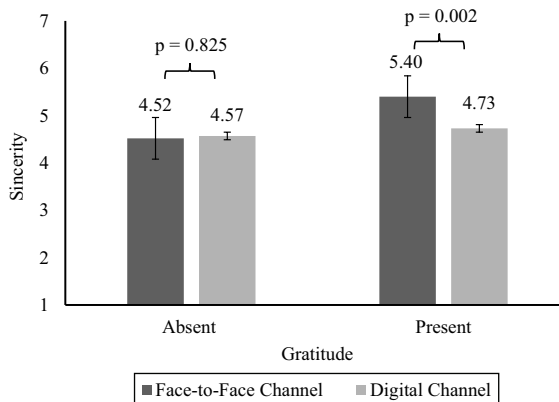


Figure 5. Interaction effects of gratitude and interaction channels (Study 4)

Source: Authors' own work

difference was observed (face-to-face $M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.31$ vs digital $M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.47$, $F_{269} = 0.04$, $p = 0.825$) (see Figure 5, Panel B).

Post hoc moderated mediation: A moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples; Hayes, 2018) revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($IMM = 0.66$, $SE = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.10, 1.24]). The indirect effect of brand gratitude on BRQ via sincerity was significant in the face-to-face condition (indirect = 0.82, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.40, 1.22]), but non-significant in the digital condition (indirect = 0.15, $SE = 0.19$, 95% CI [-0.22, 0.53]).

8.3 Discussion

Study 4 demonstrated that the effectiveness of brand gratitude is channel-dependent. Gratitude expressed face-to-face significantly enhanced both sincerity and BRQ compared to digital expressions.

9. Study 5: The moderating role of latency

Study 5 investigated the moderating role of latency in the relationships between brand gratitude, BRQ (*H6a*) and sincerity (*H6b*). Given that digital channels facilitate post-encounter engagement, this study used email as the interaction channel to examine the role of latency.

9.1 Method

A total of 287 (55.74% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 46.38$ years) were randomly assigned to a 2 (brand gratitude: absent vs present) \times 2 (latency: absent vs present) between-subjects design. The study involved a home décor store context. In the gratitude-present condition, participants received a thank-you email from the manager either immediately upon leaving (latency absent) or one week later (latency present). In the gratitude-absent condition, a follow-up email offering further assistance was sent at the same respective time intervals (see Web Appendix 1 for study measures).

Participants subsequently completed measures of BRQ ($\alpha = 0.92$) and sincerity ($\alpha = 0.94$), along with manipulation checks for gratitude ($r = 0.88$), latency, realism ($r = 0.87$) and demographics (see Web Appendix 2 for study measures).

9.2 Results

Manipulation check. Participants perceived significantly higher gratitude in the gratitude-present condition ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 0.75$) compared to the absent condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.16$, $t_{243.69} = 6.33$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.758$). A chi-square test confirmed that the latency of gratitude expression was correctly identified. Participants in the latency-absent condition recognized that the email was sent immediately after purchase [yes = 131, no = 10, $\chi^2(1) = 103.83$, $p = 0.000$]. Similarly, in the latency present condition, most participants correctly identified receiving the email a week after visiting the home décor store (yes = 137, no = 9, $\chi^2(1) = 112.21$, $p = 0.000$). Realism was high across conditions [$M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.24$, test mid-scale = 4.0, $t(286) = 19.55$, $p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 1.161$].

Test of H6a: A two-way ANOVA on BRQ revealed a significant main effect of brand gratitude ($F_{283} = 23.99$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.078$), but no main effect of latency ($F_{283} = 0.41$, $p = 0.840$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.000$). A significant gratitude \times latency interaction was observed ($F_{283} = 4.34$, $p = 0.038$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.015$).

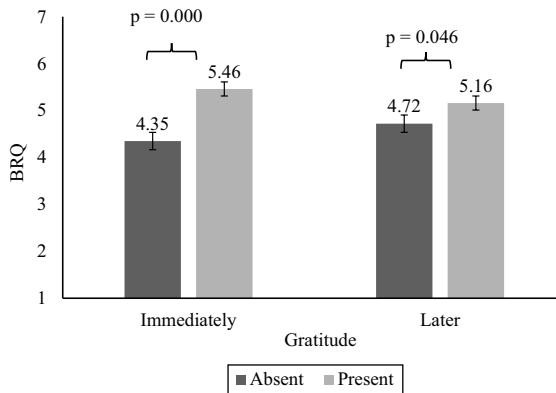
Simple slope effects indicated that in the latency absent condition, BRQ was higher in the gratitude-present condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.07$) compared to the absent condition

($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.55$, $F_{283} = 23.97$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.078$). In the latency present condition, a significant difference in BRQ was observed between the gratitude-present ($M_{\text{present}} = 5.16$, $SD = 1.38$) and the gratitude-absent condition ($M_{\text{absent}} = 4.72$, $SD = 1.30$), $F_{283} = 4.02$, $p = 0.046$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.014$) (see Figure 6, Panel A).

Test of H_{6b} : For sincerity, only the main effect of gratitude ($F_{283} = 30.51$, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.097$) was significant. Neither the main effect of latency ($F_{283} = 0.00$, $p = 0.927$) nor the interaction effect was significant ($F_{283} = 0.28$, $p = 0.597$) (see Figure 6, Panel B).

Post hoc moderated mediation: A moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples, Hayes, 2018) confirmed that latency did not significantly moderate the mediation path ($IMM = -0.13$, $SE = 0.26$, 95% CI [-0.67, 0.38]).

Panel A



Panel B

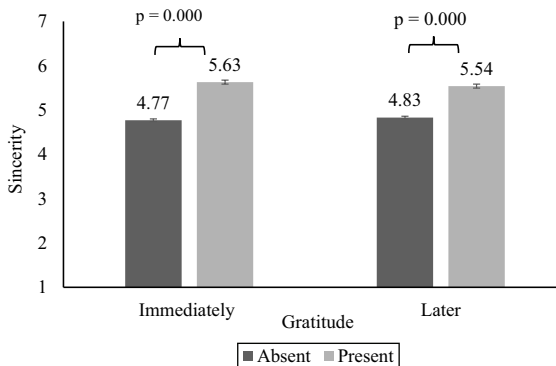


Figure 6. Interaction effects of gratitude and timing (Study 5)

Source: Authors' own work

9.3 Discussion

Study 5 demonstrated that brand gratitude enhances BRQ regardless of timing, though the effect was magnified when expressed immediately without latency ($\Delta M = 1.11$) rather than with a latency of a week ($\Delta M = 0.41$). Interestingly, latency did not moderate perceived sincerity. One possible interpretation is that moral inferences may be shaped more by the presence of gratitude than by its latency. Although relational outcomes such as BRQ may be more sensitive to immediacy, sincerity judgements appear to stabilize once consumers receive reliable information about the brand's intent, regardless of whether the gratitude is expressed immediately or after a delay (Brambilla *et al.*, 2011).

Another possibility is that this pattern may reflect the experimental nature of the study, in which latency was described rather than directly experienced as a temporal duration. Because participants did not actually wait to receive the brand's gratitude, latency may have functioned more as an informational cue than as an affectively experienced delay, which may account for why it appeared to influence BRQ more than perceived sincerity. This aligns with research suggesting that signals processed through a deliberate mindset often yield different relational inferences than those processed automatically (Sundar and Noseworthy, 2016).

10. General discussion

This research extends our understanding of how and when brand gratitude influences BRQ. Through seven studies, we provide a nuanced framework for the relational power of brand gratitude (see Table 1).

Drawing on the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), Study 1 established the main effect in a field setting, demonstrating that expressing brand gratitude directly enhances

Table 1. Summary of study findings

Study	Objective	Context and sample	Key finding
Study 1	Test effect of brand gratitude on behavioural BRQ	Retail; $n = 104$; India (Field Experiment)	Brand gratitude significantly increases behavioural BRQ (email provision odds 2.56x higher)
Study 2	Test mediation (sincerity) and downstream outcomes	Retail; $n = 163$; USA (Prolific)	Sincerity mediates the gratitude-BRQ link, driving brand loyalty and advocacy
Study 3	Test moderation by service experience stage (beginning vs ending)	Hotel; $n = 268$; USA (Prolific)	Gratitude is significantly more effective in increasing BRQ and sincerity when expressed at the ending stage than the beginning
Study 4	Test moderation by interaction channel (face-to-face vs digital)	Hotel; $n = 273$; USA (Prolific)	Face-to-face expressions generate higher sincerity and BRQ than digital ones
Study 5	Test moderation by latency (timing)	Home Décor; $n = 287$; USA (Prolific)	Gratitude enhances BRQ regardless of timing, but the effect is stronger when expressed immediately than delayed by a week. No significant effect of latency on sincerity
Web Appendix 3	Establish generalizability in a Western context	Restaurant; $n = 110$; USA (Prolific)	Brand gratitude significantly enhances BRQ in a US dining setting
Web Appendix 4	Test cultural generalizability, source effects and trait gratitude	Furniture Store; $n = 224$; India (Prolific)	Effect is robust across cultures and organizational sources. Ruled out trait gratitude as an alternative explanation for increased BRQ

behavioural outcomes associated with BRQ (i.e. email provision). Supplementary studies detailed in Web Appendices 3 and 4 confirmed the robustness of this effect using established attitudinal measures of BRQ across diverse cultural contexts (the USA and India). These findings diverge from prior research in advertising contexts, where gratitude is often expressed broadly to customer groups or third parties (Bock and Thomas, 2023; Thomas *et al.*, 2023). In such settings, gratitude is processed primarily as a persuasive message, while this research demonstrates that when gratitude is directed at a focal consumer, it functions as an effective acknowledgement of patronage rather than a persuasive tactic. Web Appendix 4 demonstrated that this effect is driven by brand gratitude itself rather than consumers' dispositional traits and gratitude source.

Study 2 illustrated the psychological mechanism, identifying perceived sincerity as the key mediator linking brand gratitude to BRQ and subsequent outcomes like loyalty and advocacy. This aligns with recent work suggesting that expressions of gratitude can outperform apologies in restoring relationships in the service recovery context (Song *et al.*, 2023; You *et al.*, 2020). However, our findings extend this by showing that brand gratitude need not be associated with a service failure or apology to be effective. Moreover, while Liu *et al.* (2015) found that verbal gratitude can be undermined by financial incentives in non-transactional contexts (e.g. writing reviews), our results show that in standard transactional contexts, brand gratitude drives sincerity and BRQ without the need for financial rewards.

Beyond the main and mediation effects, this research examined the boundary conditions impacting the effectiveness of brand gratitude. Study 3 demonstrated that the stage of the service experience is critical. Brand gratitude expressed at the ending stage of an encounter conveys greater sincerity and builds stronger BRQ than gratitude expressed at the beginning. Our findings align more closely with service encounter research, which suggests that closing interactions have higher relational significance (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Ieva and Ziliani, 2018). While the effectiveness of end-stage brand gratitude could be attributed to recency effects, recent research challenges this explanation. Blečić and Kuester (2025) demonstrated that whereas negative service incidents trigger recency effects, positive incidents do not. Thus, the impact of end-stage gratitude observed in our study is unlikely to be caused by memory, but is rather a reflection of the heightened relational significance of the ending stage of a service encounter.

Study 4 demonstrated the critical role of the interaction channel in shaping the impact of brand gratitude. The results revealed that gratitude expressed face-to-face evokes significantly stronger effects on both BRQ and perceived sincerity compared to gratitude communicated digitally. These findings suggest that consumers place a high value on social presence, which reinforces the bind function of gratitude. While digital channels offer efficiency, our findings suggest that the lack of non-verbal cues and interpersonal intimacy may impact the effectiveness of brand gratitude (Roghanizad and Bohns, 2022; Togawa *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the channel of gratitude expression is important in enhancing consumer–brand relationships.

Finally, Study 5 examined the latency of gratitude within digital channels to understand if the immediacy of delivery increases its effectiveness. We found that immediate expressions (no latency) result in significantly higher BRQ than delayed expressions (one-week latency), highlighting that latency is a key driver of relationship quality. Interestingly, latency did not moderate the effect of brand gratitude on perceived sincerity. This suggests that while relational outcomes (BRQ) are sensitive to immediacy, the perception of sincerity is driven by the presence of the gratitude expression itself (Brambilla *et al.*, 2011). In other words, the findings indicate that while the sincerity of gratitude is established by the expression, its ability to enhance BRQ depends on its service experience stage, interaction channel and latency.

10.1 Theoretical contribution

The present study offers several key theoretical contributions. Firstly, this research advances the literature on BRQ (Quaye *et al.*, 2022; Sreejesh, 2024; Xie *et al.*, 2017), sincerity (Hoeffler and Keller, 2002) and brand gratitude (Huggins *et al.*, 2020; Raggio *et al.*, 2014). While previous research has extensively examined BRQ, relatively few studies have investigated specific brand strategies that enhance it. Furthermore, prior research on gratitude has predominantly adopted a consumer perspective, focusing on how consumers' feelings of gratitude drive outcomes like loyalty and sales performance (Hasan *et al.*, 2017; Septianto and Garg, 2021). Limited studies have explored gratitude from the brand perspective, often linking its effectiveness to specific brand personalities (Bock and Thomas, 2023). We addressed these gaps by demonstrating how brand gratitude acts as a strategic relational tool that strengthens BRQ and sincerity across diverse service contexts, providing a more robust and nuanced understanding of the construct.

Secondly, this study extends the find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), widely applied in organizational behaviour (Leonhardt *et al.*, 2025), to the context of consumer-brand relationships. Previous research suggests that gratitude helps individuals find valuable partners, reminds them of benefits and binds them in long-term relational bonds. Building on this, we demonstrated that brand gratitude serves as a relational cue that enhances consumers' perception of sincerity. Specifically, it helps consumers find value in the brand's motives and reminds them of positive interactions, effectively binding them more closely to the brand by strengthening relationship quality.

Thirdly, existing literature on relational signalling primarily focuses on how consumers form cognitive beliefs about a brand's future intentions, such as authenticity, trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Anderson and Weitz, 1992). We extend this literature by theorizing that brand gratitude serves as a relational signal that acknowledges consumers' support and directly enhances the perception of sincerity. While prior research highlights that gratitude is distinct from satisfaction (Raggio *et al.*, 2014), the present study positions it as a critical antecedent of BRQ. By demonstrating that gratitude determines brand sincerity, which in turn strengthens relationship quality and drives downstream outcomes such as loyalty and advocacy, this study identifies a distinct relational pathway for developing BRQ (Fredrickson, 2001; Palmatier *et al.*, 2009).

Fourthly, this study contributes to research on the service experience stage and its impact on relational outcomes. While prior research has noted that consumption stages (peaks, endings) shape memory and evaluation (Holmlund *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2023), the impact is often context-dependent. This study contributes to this literature by showing that expressing brand gratitude at the end stages of the service experience is significantly more effective in strengthening BRQ and sincerity than when communicated at the beginning. End-stage gratitude helps consumers evaluate the sincerity of the brand's expression by leveraging the psychological power of closure in service encounters (Ieva and Ziliani, 2018; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017).

Fifthly, we contribute to the literature on interaction channels by delineating how the medium of communication shapes the effectiveness of gratitude. While channel choice is known to influence signal interpretation (Wakefield, 2024), little is known about its specific interaction with gratitude. This study demonstrates that face-to-face encounters foster stronger BRQ and perceived sincerity than digital channels. Consumers are more likely to perceive sincerity through non-verbal cues and accurate assessments of intentions in offline settings (Roghanizad and Bohns, 2022). Conversely, despite their efficiency, digital channels convey impersonal communication and perceived potential for deception, thereby reducing the relational impact of brand gratitude.

Sixthly, this study contributes to the nascent literature on response latency. Previous research found mixed effects, with some arguing that delays increase compliance (Jung *et al.*, 2023) and others advocating for immediacy (Sahni *et al.*, 2019). We extend this by showing that while brand gratitude expressed digitally enhances BRQ regardless of latency, its impact is significantly stronger when expressed immediately after the service encounter. A novel finding here is the distinction between sincerity and relationship quality. While perceptions of sincerity remained similar across latency conditions, BRQ increased most with an immediate expression of brand gratitude.

Finally, we extend the literature on source effects. While previous research suggests that outcomes are driven by the organizational position of the actor (e.g. Merlo, 2011), this study reveals that the expression of gratitude is more important than who offers it. We found that gratitude expressed by a human actor, whether a manager or a salesperson, had a similar positive impact on perceptions of sincerity and BRQ. This suggests that for brand gratitude to be effective, the presence of a human representative is more critical than their specific organizational position.

10.2 Managerial implications

This research offers critical insights for managers, shifting the perspective of brand gratitude from a mere social courtesy to a strategic relationship-building tool. By identifying the specific conditions, such as experience stage, channel and intimacy, that drive sincerity and BRQ, this study provides a road map for leveraging brand gratitude to increase loyalty and advocacy.

Firstly, managers must prioritize brand gratitude as a key strategic capability. Our findings suggest that gratitude is not just about being nice to customers; rather, it can be a strategic tool to strengthen consumer–brand relationships. However, its execution is critical, as perceptions of gratitude as insincere may risk backfiring. Training programmes across service contexts (e.g. hospitality, retail, healthcare) should emphasize the delivery of sincere gratitude. For example, acknowledging a specific visit or purchase could strengthen BRQ. While prior research in service failure reveals that bundling gratitude with compensation increases satisfaction, our results demonstrate that sincere gratitude is sufficient to strengthen BRQ.

Secondly, our study reveals that gratitude is significantly more effective when expressed at the ending stage of service consumption rather than its beginning stage. At the ending stage, consumers have a complete service performance against which they can evaluate the sincerity of the brand's gratitude expression. Thus, employees must be trained to identify and capitalize on closing moments, such as hotel checkouts or retail payments. With the rise of self-service technologies (e.g. self-checkouts), the absence of human touchpoints represents a lost opportunity to strengthen consumer–brand relationships. To address this, managers should design hybrid end stages where human employees supplement digital touchpoints to express gratitude, strengthening BRQ. For example, in a supermarket with self-checkouts, a single roaming host could be stationed at the exit specifically to express gratitude to departing customers.

Thirdly, while gratitude expressed in face-to-face encounters was found to generate higher BRQ, it is resource-intensive. Gratitude expressed via digital channels leads to lower BRQ, as it may be perceived as inauthentic and impersonal. Thus, managers could adopt a tiered strategy, where face-to-face gratitude is expressed for high-value customers or critical service moments where the relational impact is critical. Conversely, if a brand chooses to express gratitude digitally (e.g. via app, email or SMS), it must be triggered immediately after the service encounter. Delayed expressions break the link between the service

experience and the gratitude, reducing the positive impact on BRQ. Automated systems should be set to zero latency to simulate the immediacy of a thank you offered by a human employee.

Finally, our results regarding source effects offer a cost-effective insight for workforce management. We found that gratitude expressions were equally effective whether delivered by a manager or a salesperson (see Web Appendix 4). Thus, brands need not rely on senior management to convey appreciation to consumers for it to be effective. Brands should invest in empowering and training frontline staff to act as the primary gratitude officers of the brand. This ensures sincere relational signalling at every touchpoint, including the ending stage of service encounters, without increasing operational costs. To assist managers in implementing these strategies effectively, a decision framework is presented in [Figure 7](#).

10.3 Limitations and future research directions

While the present study offers novel insights into when and how brand gratitude increases consumer-BRQ, it is not without limitations.

Firstly, although the findings remained robust across various service contexts (e.g. hotels, retail, restaurants), this study did not account for specific brand personalities. Given that gratitude's effectiveness can hinge on a brand's perceived character ([Bock and Thomas, 2023](#)), future research should investigate whether these effects differ between sincere versus exciting or sophisticated brands. Additionally, researchers might explore how customer personality, such as bargain-seeking tendencies versus loyal customers, influences the effectiveness of brand gratitude.

Furthermore, while our study demonstrates consistency across service and cultural settings, scholars should examine the linguistic framing, the frequency of expressions and potential differences between B2B and B2C contexts. Thus, future research should investigate whether brand gratitude is more effective when expressed in isolation or when bundled with other strategies, such as financial compensation, loyalty rewards or service recovery efforts. Additionally, while the present study examined brand gratitude in routine service encounters, future research should investigate its effectiveness in negative situations such as service failure or embarrassing service contexts. Examining how gratitude interacts with consumer vulnerability or negative affect in these service encounters would provide a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of brand gratitude.

Secondly, a critical avenue for future inquiry is the role of brand gratitude in technology-mediated interactions. As automated service agents and AI chatbots become ubiquitous, understanding how digital appreciation fulfils relational needs is vital ([Lv et al., 2022](#)). Future studies should examine whether digital gratitude signals genuine benevolence or is dismissed as a programmed script. This extension is essential for contemporary marketing, where human-to-human touchpoints are increasingly replaced by AI-driven interfaces.

Thirdly, while this study found that face-to-face gratitude expressed at the end of an encounter enhances BRQ, the internal psychological mechanisms require further mapping. Future research could use neuromarketing tools (e.g. fMRI or skin conductance) to determine if these peak moments trigger specific neurological rewards or lasting emotional impressions that reinforce relationship quality ([Casado-Aranda et al., 2023](#)).

Fourthly, in Study 5, the use of a scenario-based design required participants to imagine a one-week latency period. This imagined latency may not accurately capture the intensity of experienced latency. This could be a plausible reason for the non-significant results for sincerity. Thus, future research should use field experiments with actual time delays to more accurately capture how latency affects consumer perceptions of brand gratitude, sincerity and BRQ.

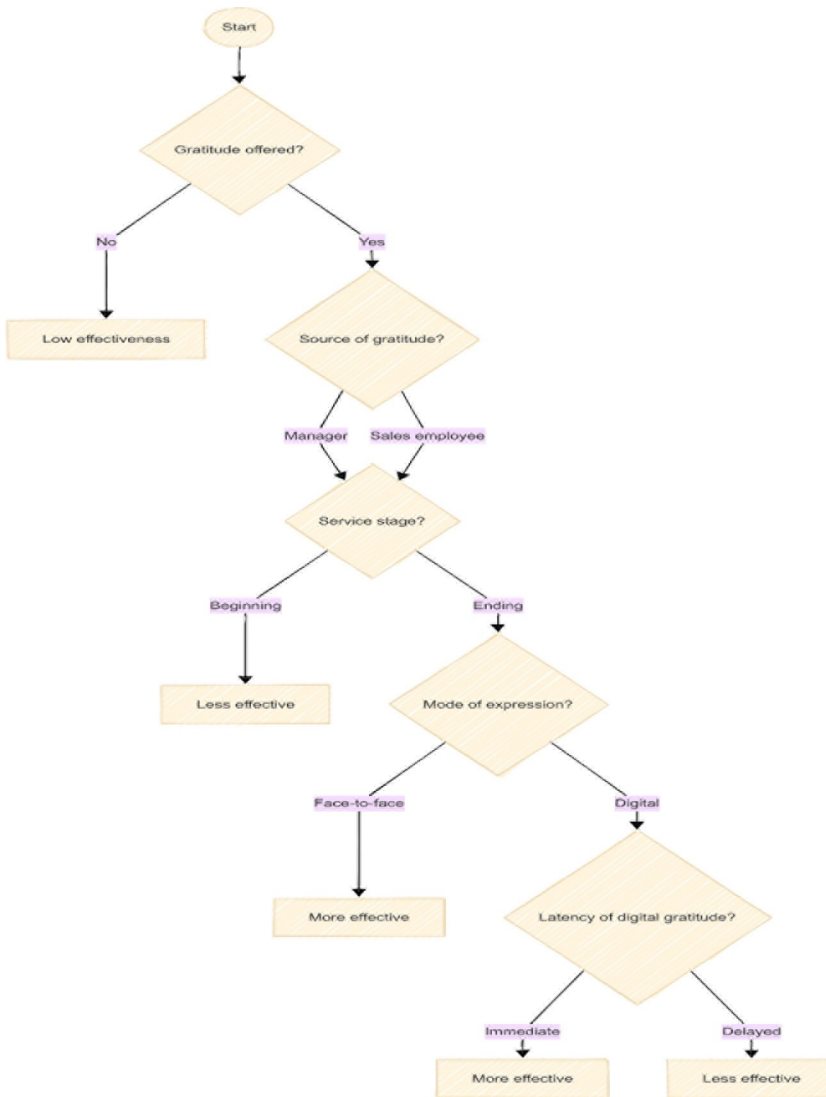


Figure 7. Step by step guide for effective brand gratitude expression

Source: Authors' own work

Fifthly, while this study controlled for consumer demographics, it did not test them as moderators. Future research should investigate whether individual characteristics, such as age or gender, influence the relational outcomes of brand gratitude. Furthermore, scholars could extend this line of inquiry to the dyadic level by examining whether demographic congruence, specifically age and gender similarity between consumers and employees, affects how expressions of gratitude are perceived and evaluated.

Finally, this study focused on three specific boundary conditions: service stage, channel and latency. Future research should broaden this scope to include the social context of the encounter, such as the presence of other customers (social proof) or the consumer's baseline emotional state. Investigating the intensity of the service failure or success preceding the gratitude could also provide a more nuanced understanding of when brand gratitude enhances relationship quality. Furthermore, while our study shows that end-stage brand gratitude is effective, future research should investigate whether recency, the peak–end rule, or the need for psychological closure explains why the ending stage is pivotal for relationship building. While our study found that latency has a significant impact on BRQ, it only examined the role of immediate or delayed expression. Future research should adopt a more nuanced approach to examine the dynamic impact of latency, particularly in digital contexts.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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