
Balancing acts: the role of employee emotional and professional competencies in personal fashion advice services

Journal of Fashion
Marketing and
Management: An
International
Journal

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Received 31 July 2025
Revised 4 March 2026
27 May 2026
Accepted 9 June 2026

Abstract

Purpose – In personal advice services (PAS), consumers rely heavily on employee competencies when making purchase decisions. Drawing on job characteristics theory, the role-behavior framework, and affect-as-information theory, this study examines how employees' emotional and professional competencies shape the effectiveness of PAS in fashion retail across offline and online service contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – Two qualitative studies explored changes in consumers' fashion shopping behavior and evolving expectations regarding employee competencies in digitally transformed retail environments. Three experimental studies were conducted to test the effects of employee emotional and professional competencies on customer responses across PAS settings.

Findings – The findings demonstrate that emotional competence represents a key driver of favorable customer responses in both offline and online service encounters. Moreover, when employee emotional competence is high, the influence of professional competence on customer responses is reduced in online PAS settings.

Originality/value – Whereas previous studies have predominantly investigated emotional and professional competence in isolation and primarily within offline settings, the present research extends prior literature by examining the interplay between these competencies across offline and online PAS. The findings suggest that emotional competence represents a critical capability in digital mediated service interactions, where it can partially compensate for lower professional competence. Further, the results demonstrate that retailers should invest not only in employees' task-related experience, but also in the development of emotional competencies to enhance customer experience across channels.

Keywords Employee emotional competence, Employee professional competence, Offline versus online service encounters, Customer emotional state, Personal advice services, Customer responses

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The increasing digitalization of businesses has fundamentally transformed how consumers engage with retailers and how personal advice services (PAS) are delivered across channels. In

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Journal of Fashion Marketing and
Management: An International Journal
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-7433
p-ISSN: 1361-2026
DOI 10.1108/JFMM-07-2025-0406

contemporary fashion retail, consumers may seek shopping advice either in physical stores or through digitally mediated formats, such as live chats or video consultations (Meng *et al.*, 2025; Nobile and Cantoni, 2022). Across both contexts, employees' professional and emotional competencies play a significant role in shaping customers' service experiences, emotional responses, and, ultimately, purchase-related decisions (e.g. Delcourt *et al.*, 2017; Meng *et al.*, 2025).

The growing relevance of PAS in fashion retail has been accelerated by broader developments associated with retail digitalization. Consumers' increasing demand for more convenient shopping has prompted retailers to invest in digital touchpoints and new service formats, such as individualized online consultations, thereby creating new retail business models (Meng *et al.*, 2025; Nobile and Cantoni, 2022; Xie *et al.*, 2025). For example, companies such as Saks Fifth Avenue now offer personalized fashion consultations via digital channels (Saks Fifth Avenue, 2026). Against this background, an important research question emerges: how do employee emotional and professional competencies influence customer responses and consequently service success across offline and online PAS contexts in fashion retail?

Beyond conceptual overviews of employee competencies (see Salman *et al.*, 2020; Nickson *et al.*, 2017 for notable examples), existing research has focused primarily on empirical studies conducted in offline contexts (e.g. Fernandes *et al.*, 2018; Lucia-Palacios *et al.*, 2020; Saleem *et al.*, 2025; Sun *et al.*, 2026; Umar and Saleem, 2022; White, 2005; Wu *et al.*, 2015). Surprisingly, research on these competencies in online contexts as well as direct comparisons between online and offline settings remains limited (not only in fashion but also in other retail and service categories). Among the few, Yao *et al.* (2025) conceptually acknowledge today's omnichannel retail idea ("online-merge-offline"); however, their empirical study focused exclusively on the offline context, as participants were surveyed about their offline service experience. Yet, for today's fashion retail, online and offline channels have become equally relevant (Guercini *et al.*, 2026).

Simultaneously, new business models, the increasing digitalization in retail and services, the changing ways customers and employees interact (Meng *et al.*, 2025; Nobile and Cantoni, 2022), as well as the need for and relevance of specific employee competencies have also evolved (Fuentes *et al.*, 2017; Röding *et al.*, 2024; Yao *et al.*, 2025). Thus, the first objective of this research is to examine how consumers' shopping behavior and expectations regarding employee competencies have evolved in response to increasing retail digitalization and hybrid service experiences.

The pivotal role of employees in shaping successful service encounters is based on their professional and emotional competencies (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017; Meng *et al.*, 2025; Rao *et al.*, 2024; Röding *et al.*, 2024; Sebald and Jacob, 2018). Professional competence refers to the knowledge and technical expertise (Wu *et al.*, 2015), while emotional competence reflects the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate customers' emotions during the service encounter (Delcourt *et al.*, 2016). In traditional (i.e. offline) retail, emotional competence is known to increase customer satisfaction, trust, word-of-mouth, and repurchase intention (Fernandes *et al.*, 2018; Matute *et al.*, 2018) as well as attachment (Saleem *et al.*, 2025). However, digital contexts with reduced personal interaction have introduced new challenges (Meng *et al.*, 2025; Nobile and Cantoni, 2022), making it harder to read emotional signals (Cartwright and Pappas, 2008) and thus pointing to the relevance of employee professional competence for customer decisions (Röding *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, research in offline contexts suggests that emotional competence may influence how professional competence is perceived and evaluated (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017). Given that the boundary between traditional and online retail is still blurry (Landmark and Sjøbakk, 2017) and that digital advice settings are becoming more prevalent and increasingly expected to deliver personal, trust-based experiences, the relevance of both competencies may also change. The second objective is thus to investigate the role of

employee emotional competence in online PAS in fashion retail, both as an independent driver of customer responses and in interaction with professional competence.

Importantly, emotional competence may not only directly impact service outcomes but also indirectly influence the customer's emotional state. Based on the affect-as-information theory (Forgas, 1995), emotions shape how customers think, feel, and act in service encounters. Research confirms that emotionally competent employees can induce positive emotional states (Fernandes *et al.*, 2018), which then drive satisfaction, advice taking, and loyalty (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2011). However, online formats offer fewer interpersonal cues, and emotional state regulation becomes more difficult (Bolton *et al.*, 2022; Froehle and Roth, 2004). Investigating how customer emotional state mediates the effect of employee emotional competence, and how this differs between online and offline settings, offers critical insights for service interactions. The third objective is therefore to examine customer emotional state as a mediating mechanism, linking employee emotional competence to customer responses across both offline and online PAS in fashion retail.

Theoretical framework

Understanding how employee competencies shape customer responses and consequently service success in PAS within fashion retail requires a clear conceptual differentiation between the central competency dimensions discussed in the service literature. Existing research primarily differentiates between professional and emotional competence (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017), both of which represent critical resources in service interactions.

Professional competence refers to employees' "required knowledge, technical skills and expertise to handle customer needs" (Wu *et al.*, 2015, p. 225). The literature also discusses this construct under related labels such as expertise (Hofmann *et al.*, 2021), technical competence (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017), cognitive competence (Supramaniam *et al.*, 2024), or simply competence (Sun *et al.*, 2026). Across these conceptualizations, the construct consistently captures employees' task-related abilities and their capacity to provide accurate and reliable service-related information. Emotional competence, by contrast, describes the "employee demonstrated ability to perceive, understand, and regulate customer emotions in a service encounter to create and maintain an appropriate climate for service" (Delcourt *et al.*, 2016, p. 77). It is closely related to emotion management skill (Härtel *et al.*, 2008) and emotional intelligence (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). While emotional competence and emotional intelligence are often used interchangeably, they differ in an important aspect: emotional competence reflects actual, observable behavior enacted during service interactions, whereas emotional intelligence refers to latent individual capabilities. Likewise, related constructs, such as employee empathy (Lajante and Remisch, 2023), employee warmth (Fiske *et al.*, 2007; Luna-Cortés, 2025), or employee emotional labor (e.g. Kim and Lee, 2020, examining fashion store employees) overlap conceptually with emotional competence but remain theoretically distinct. Emotional labor refers to organizational expectations regarding employees' emotional displays (Wong and Law, 2002), which is conceptually different from emotional competence (Table 1, Panel A).

Beyond their conceptual distinction, professional and emotional competence also differ in their functional role within service interactions. Drawing on Katz's (1964) in-role and extra-role behavior framework, professional competence can be understood as an in-role behavior reflecting how well employees fulfill their formal responsibilities (Schepers and Van der Borgh, 2020). In contrast, emotional competence is viewed as extra-role behavior that enables employees to "go above and beyond" by responding more flexibly and sensitively in addressing customer needs (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017). This perspective is further supported by emotion theories, suggesting that emotions shape behavioral responses by cognitively and physiologically activating individuals (Lin *et al.*, 2008; Russell, 2003).

Table 1. Employee emotional competence: related constructs and selected empirical studies

Construct name	Construct definition		Representative literature					
<i>Panel A: Employee emotional competence and related constructs in prior literature</i>								
Employee emotional competence	The ability to accurately perceive, understand, and regulate customer emotions in a service encounter to create and maintain an appropriate climate for service. Unlike emotional intelligence, which refers to potential abilities, emotional competence focuses on actual, observable behavior		Delcourt <i>et al.</i> (2016)					
Employee professional competence	The application of relevant knowledge and technical abilities to solve customer issues reliably and efficiently, thereby conveying trustworthiness and accuracy		Wu <i>et al.</i> (2015)					
Employee emotional intelligence	The ability to monitor and distinguish one's own and other's feelings and emotions, and to [potentially] use this awareness to guide customers' decisions and actions		Mayer and Salovey (1997)					
Employee empathy	The caring and individual attention the employee provides its customers		Parasuraman <i>et al.</i> (1988)					
Employee warmth	The employee's friendly, helpful, trustworthy, sincere, and moral appearance		Fiske <i>et al.</i> (2007)					
Employee emotional labor	The extent to which employees are required to display appropriate emotions as part of their role, contributing to an efficient and effective job performance		Wong and Law (2002)					
Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
<i>Panel B: Selected empirical studies on employee competencies</i>								
White (2005), <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i>	Benevolence-based and expertise-based trust	Influence of perceived benevolence vs. expertise on consumer advice acceptance under varying emotional decision difficulty	Financial advice services	Offline	Quantitative study (experiment, scenario-based), <i>N</i> = 307 students Manipulation of employee competencies through descriptions of the advisor's behavior, reflecting their expertise and benevolence (non-verbal)	- Advice acceptance - Confidence in advice	USA	- When perceived emotional difficulty is low, expert advice is dominant - When perceived emotional difficulty is high, advice from benevolent advisors is dominant - Stress-buffering effect of benevolence on confidence

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Kidwell et al. (2007) , <i>Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management</i>	Ability to perceive customer emotions	Role of perceiving emotion ability on the relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance and between customer-oriented selling and sales performance	Various products and services	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, multiple regression analyses) <i>N</i> = 135 (matched set of salespeople and supervisors)	Sales performance - Perceived performance - Supervisor rating of performance	Not specified	- At high levels of perceived emotion ability, adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling have a positive impact on sales performance
Nguyen and Leclerc (2011) , <i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	Competence (interpreted as professional according to our understanding)	Role of benevolence in the relationship between perceived employee competence and perceived service firm image	Financial services	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall-based, hierarchical multiple regression) <i>N</i> = 445 customers	- Firm image	Canada	- Benevolence enhances the impact of employee competence on firm image
Delcourt et al. (2013) , <i>Journal of Service Management</i>	Emotional competence	Effect of employee emotional competence on customer satisfaction and loyalty	Hair-styling service	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, PLS-SEM) <i>N</i> = 247 students	- Customer satisfaction - Customer loyalty - Rapport	Not specified	- Emotional competence positively impacts on satisfaction and loyalty - Rapport serves as a partial mediator of these effects
Wu et al. (2015) , <i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	Interpersonal competence, professional competence	Impact of FLE service competencies (scale development) on perceived service quality	Various services (insurance, bank, financial planning, real estate, car dealership)	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall-based, PLS-SEM) <i>N</i> = 252 customers	- Reliability - Responsive-ness - Assurance - Empathy	Not specified	- Interpersonal competence significantly predicts all four service quality dimensions - Professional competence predicts reliability and assurance

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Delcourt et al. (2017) , <i>Journal of Service Research</i>	Technical competence, emotional competence	Effect of employee emotional and technical competencies on negative customer emotions and satisfaction in emotionally charged service encounters	Transportation (Airline check-in)	Offline	Quantitative study (experiment, video-based), $N = 223$ students Manipulation of employee competencies: Technical competence (verbal and non-verbal); emotional competence (verbal and nonverbal)	- Negative customer emotions - Customer satisfaction with the employee response	Europe, country not specified	- Both competencies should be displayed by employees - When emotional competence is low, technical competence has no effect on negative emotions and satisfaction - When emotional competence is high, technical competence decreases negative emotions and increases satisfaction
Fernandes et al. (2018) , <i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	Emotional competence	Impact of employee emotional competence on post-recovery satisfaction, trust, WOM and repurchase intention depending on various service types (level of employee-customer contact)	Various services	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall-based; PLS-SEM) $N = 355$ customers who experienced a service failure that was followed by a recovery	Post-recovery outcomes - Satisfaction with service recovery - Trust in service provider - WOM - Repurchase intention	Not specified	- Significant effect of employee emotional competence on satisfaction, trust, WOM and repurchase intention - Satisfaction partially (fully) mediates the relationship between emotional competence and trust (WOM, repurchase intention) - For high-contact (as opposed to medium- and low-contact) services, the effect of emotional competence on satisfaction is stronger

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Matute et al. (2018), <i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	Emotional competence	Effect of employee emotional competence on clients' responses in high-contact personalized services	Fitness personal training service	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall-based; PLS-SEM) N = 296 fitness club clients	- Rapport - Trust - Loyalty to the employee - Loyalty to the company	Spain	- Emotional competence positively influences loyalty to the service employee, as well as trust and rapport - Emotional competence does not significantly affect loyalty toward the company
Lucia-Palacios et al. (2020), <i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	Task competence (interpreted as professional competence according to our understanding), interaction competence	Influence of FLE task and interaction competencies on customer satisfaction with the store under various situational circumstances (query type with consultation vs. assistance, store crowding)	Fashion	Offline	Qualitative study (in-depth interviews) N = 41 consumers Quantitative study (survey at shopping mall, OLS-SEM) N = 575 customers	- Customer satisfaction with the store	Spain	- Effect of FLE task competence on customer satisfaction is stronger when the store is crowded - Effect of interaction competence is stronger in consultation queries
Schneider and Zielke (2021), <i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	Service quality/competence (with being friendly and knowledgeable)	<i>Relevant only Study B:</i> Influence of employee availability and service quality on purchase intentions	Sports shoe retail	Offline	Study B: quantitative study (experiment, scenario-based), N = 324 consumers (convenience sample) Manipulation of service quality through descriptions of the employee's behavior	Purchase intentions - Showrooming behavior (i.e. browsing in a physical store and subsequently purchasing online) - Offline purchase	Not specified	- Service quality/competence reduces showrooming behavior

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Umar and Saleem (2022) <i>British Food Journal</i>	Emotional competence	Influence of perceived employee emotional competence on recovery satisfaction directly and via consumer forgiveness indirectly; moderating role of failure type	Restaurant service	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall of most recent service failure, PLS-SEM) N = 204 customers	- Recovery satisfaction - Consumer forgiveness	Pakistan	- Emotional competence impacts recovery satisfaction directly and indirectly via consumer forgiveness - The relationship between emotional competence and recovery satisfaction is weaker for process failures (than for outcome failures)
Rao et al. (2024) <i>The TQM Journal</i>	Employee competence (with technical competence, emotional competence, interpersonal competence)	Effect of perceived employee competence on customer loyalty through justice perception and affection; moderating roles of gender and service failure	Banking services	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, PLS-SEM) N = 535 customers	- Attitudinal loyalty - Behavioral loyalty	India	- Employee competence boosts attitudinal and behavioral loyalty - Loyalty is partly mediated by justice perception and customer affection - Attitudinal loyalty drives behavioral loyalty - Effects are generally stronger for females and for low service failures

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Röding <i>et al.</i> (2024), <i>The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research</i>	Service competence (interpreted as professional according to our understanding)	Influence of different types of technology-infused frontline service encounters on customers' perceptions of frontline employee service competence and, subsequently, trust and willingness to pay	Outdoor retail	Offline	Quantitative study (experiment, video-based scenarios) N = 944 customers	- Trust towards the frontline employee - Willingness to pay	Not specified	- Technology infusion significantly influences customers' perceived service competence - Technology-free encounters yield the highest perceived competence and trust - Technology-facilitated encounters generate the highest willingness to pay - Perceived service competence mediates the effects of service encounter type on trust and willingness to pay - Technology infusion can reduce perceived employee competence
Supramaniam <i>et al.</i> (2024), <i>FIIB Business Review</i>	Competence (interpreted as professional according to our understanding)	Influence of interactions with salespeople on customers' emotions directly as well as indirectly on relational outcomes and overall satisfaction	Fashion	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, PLS-SEM) N = 301 customers	- Customer emotions - Customer value - Customer satisfaction - Customer competence	Malaysia	- Salespersons' competence influences customer emotions positively that in turn drive customer satisfaction, value and competence - Affective empathic interactions drive salesperson competence

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Luna-Cortés (2025), <i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	Competence (interpreted as professional according to our understanding)	Importance of employee warmth and competence on customers' expected service quality of the hotel and their willingness to stay depending on the (non-) luxury context	Hotel services	Offline	Quantitative study (experiment, (non-) luxury hotel pictures shown, (non) luxury hotel written descriptions, <i>T</i> -tests) <i>N</i> = 100 UK-participants <i>N</i> = 100 US-participants Quantitative study (survey, <i>T</i> -tests) <i>N</i> = 63 luxury hotel guests <i>N</i> = 106 non-luxury hotel guests Quantitative study (experiment, scenario-based <i>N</i> = 160 Manipulation of employee competence and warmth through description of employees' characteristics	- Willingness to stay - Expected service quality	UK, USA, Monaco, France and Italy	- Consumers evaluate competence and warmth as more important for luxury hotels - When focusing on only one characteristic, employee competence is more important for luxury hotels - For luxury hotels, employee competence leads to a higher expected service quality and higher willingness to stay of customers

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Saleem <i>et al.</i> (2025), <i>British Food Journal</i>	Emotional competence	Influence of perceived employee emotional competence on customer emotional attachment via service recovery satisfaction; moderation of service failure severity	Restau-rant service	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, recall of most recent service failure, PLS-SEM) N = 195 customers	- Recovery satisfaction - Customer emotional attachment	USA	- Emotional competence impacts emotional attachment directly and indirectly via recovery satisfaction - Consumers feel more emotionally connected to the restaurant when they are satisfied with the service recovery - The relationship between emotional competence and recovery satisfaction becomes stronger as the failure gets more severe

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
<i>Yao et al. (2025), Foods</i>	Service competence (with product expertise, communication and interaction competence, empathic understanding, digital service competence)	Effect of perceived service competence on repurchase intention via customer satisfaction and via trust; moderating role of online-merge-offline setting	Restau-rant services	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, PLS-SEM), N = 326 Gen Z customers	- Repurchase intention - Customer satisfaction - Brand trust	China	- Service competence positively influences repurchase intentions and customer satisfaction - Service competence does not influence brand trust - Customer satisfaction is a mediator of the relationship between service competence and repurchase intention - Online-merge-offline setting has no moderating effect on the relationship of service competence and customer satisfaction as well as service competence and brand trust
<i>Sun et al. (2026) Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management</i>	Competence (interpreted as professional according to our understanding)	Impact of coaching leadership and psychological mechanisms (intrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence, relatedness) on employee creativity; moderation of perceived ease of use of focal in-store automation technology	Fashion	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, PLS-SEM) N = 311 employees	- Employee creativity	USA	- Intrinsic motivation to adopt in-store automation technology positively affects employee competence - Employee competence has no effect on their creativity - Perceived ease of use of technology negatively moderates the relationship between competence and creativity

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Kumar and Kaur (2026), <i>Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication</i>	Social competence, emotional competence, professional competence	Influence of self-perceived social, emotional, and professional competences via internal marketing on service recovery performance; moderation of service sector is explored	Hotel services, automobile service centers, shopping malls	Offline	Quantitative study (survey, Hayes' Process model) N = 210 dyad sets of employees and their managers	- Service recovery performance	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All competency types have a positive effect on service recovery performance - The relationship between the competency types and service recovery performance is mediated by internal marketing - Industry differences exist

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Focal employee competence(s)	Main objective	Product/service category	Context	Method	Outcome variables	Country	Main findings
Our study	Emotional competence, professional competence	Change of consumers' expectations regarding employee competencies due to retail digitalization; effect of employee emotional competence on customer responses directly and indirectly via customer emotional state; interaction with employee professional competence; change in effects of online vs. offline contexts	Fashion	Offline and online	Qualitative study (semi-structured interviews), <i>N</i> = 18 consumers Qualitative study (survey with open questions), <i>N</i> = 54 fashion retailers Quantitative studies (experiments, scenario-based), <i>N</i> = 126, <i>N</i> = 187, <i>N</i> = 115 consumers Manipulation of employee competencies: Emotional competence (verbal); Professional competence (verbal)	- Advice taking - Satisfaction - WOM (company) - Customer emotional state	Germany and Austria	- Despite the online shift, customers still value personal contact and expect both professional and emotional competence - Retailers see the value in online advice but struggle to meet new competence demands - Emotional competence positively drives customer responses in the online context - When emotional competence is high, the influence of professional competence on advice taking and satisfaction is weaker in the online context - Customer emotional state mediates the relationship between emotional competence and customer responses - The effect of emotional competence on customer emotional state is weaker in the online compared to the offline context

Source(s): Table by the authors

In addition to role-theoretical perspectives, research on job design emphasizes the structural conditions that foster employee performance. Job characteristics theory (JCT; Hackman and Oldham, 1976) proposes that employee motivation and performance are influenced by five core job dimensions, including skill variety, which is directly related to the range of competencies employees possess and can apply. Accordingly, employees who are capable of combining technical expertise with emotional responsiveness may be better positioned to create positive customer experiences and favorable service outcomes.

To contextualize the present research, Table 1 (Panel B) provides an overview of key empirical studies examining employee emotional and/or professional competencies, summarizing their research focus, methodological approaches, and main findings. Existing empirical research has predominantly focused on employee competencies in offline settings across a variety of service categories. Within fashion retail, for example, Lucia-Palacios *et al.* (2020) demonstrate that task competence strengthens customer satisfaction, while Supramaniam *et al.* (2024) show that professional competence has a positive effect on customer emotions which subsequently drive customer satisfaction outcomes. More recently, Sun *et al.* (2026) examined employee motivation to adopt in-store technologies as a driver of professional competence.

Despite the increasing digitalization of retail and the growing relevance of omnichannel service encounters, empirical research (independent of the service category) focusing on the competencies in online settings and/or on the differences between online and offline service encounters remains limited. This omission is particularly noteworthy, given that multichannel or omnichannel strategies nowadays shape contemporary fashion retail experiences (Guercini *et al.*, 2018, 2026). Although Yao *et al.* (2025; in the restaurant context) conceptually account for omnichannel retail (“online-merge-offline”) when examining different dimensions of service employee competencies, their empirical study focused exclusively on customers’ experiences with the perceived competencies in the offline context. For fashion retail, the investigation of employee emotional and professional competencies and their interplay has remained relatively underexplored, particularly across the service online versus offline contexts.

Addressing this gap, the present research examines how employee emotional and professional competencies for PAS in fashion jointly influence the success of offline and online service encounters and thereby strengthen the idea of multichannel or omnichannel strategies in fashion retail. In doing so, the study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of employee competencies within increasingly digital and hybrid service environments.

The empirical research

This research comprises five studies examining changes in fashion shopping behavior and the role of employee competencies in the context of PAS in the fashion industry. Studies 1a (18 consumers) and 1b (54 fashion retailers) use qualitative methods to explore the effects of digitalization on shopping habits and expectations regarding employee competencies in both online and offline settings. Studies 2 to 4 employ experimental designs with consumer samples ($N = 126$, $N = 187$, and $N = 115$) to test how employee emotional and professional competence — individually, in combination, and across online versus offline contexts — influence customer responses, including the mediating role of customer emotions. Table 2 provides a concise overview of the conducted studies.

Study 1a

Method

Study 1a involved qualitative semi-structured interviews with consumers, following a case-by-case approach, as individual opinions and beliefs were the primary focus (Mayring, 2014). Five narrative questions on personal expectations and desires regarding offline and online PAS (e.g. “What is particularly important to you regarding the employee providing online shopping

Table 2. Overview of studies

Characteristics	Study 1a	Study 1b	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Research approach	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews	Qualitative: survey with open questions	Quantitative: experimental	Quantitative: experimental	Quantitative: experimental
Sample	$N = 18$ (consumers)	$N = 54$ (retailers)	$N = 126$ (consumers)	$N = 187$ (consumers)	$N = 115$ (consumers)
Context	Fashion, offline, online	Fashion, offline, online	Fashion, online	Fashion, online	Fashion, offline vs. online
Objectives	Exploring changes in shopping behavior for fashion due to increasing digitalization from the <i>consumer perspective</i> Identifying consumers' expectations regarding employee competencies in fashion retail	Exploring changes in shopping behavior for fashion due to increasing digitalization from the <i>retailer perspective</i> Verifying consumers' expectations regarding employee competencies in fashion retail	Impact of employee emotional competence on customer responses	Interaction of employee emotional and professional competencies on customer responses	Impact of employee emotional competence in offline vs. online contexts on customer responses Underlying mechanism of customer emotions

Source(s): Table by the authors

advice?") as well as several follow-up questions (e.g. "How would you describe your relationship with the advisor?") were formulated. Supportive questions were also used, as they can help to guide the interviewees and motivate them to give more profound answers (Flick, 2022; e.g. "Could you explain this in more detail?"). In addition, interviewees were asked some general questions about their fashion shopping behavior (e.g. "How often do you seek advice in this regard?").

The sampling process aimed for a representative age distribution, equal gender balance, and participants with an interest in fashion shopping. All studies adhered to ethical research standards. While formal ethical approval was not required, informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, debriefing was provided, and only anonymous, aggregated data were used. Data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved (Guest *et al.*, 2006), after which they were transcribed and analyzed. A qualitative content analysis with a deductive approach was undertaken. The systematic rule-based process followed an *a priori* defined category system (i.e. expectations and desires regarding offline PAS, expectations and desires regarding online PAS, and main differences between the two contexts) according to the interview guideline, and transcripts were divided into units of analysis (Mayring, 2014). The analysis was led by the following quality criteria: procedure documentation, communicative validation, and rule-led approach (Mayring, 2014). The sample consists of 18 recorded interviews with nine female and nine male consumers ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.39$, $SD = 13.40$). Five interviewees are from Germany, six from Austria, and seven from South Tyrol. They come from various professions, and some are students.

Results

By paraphrasing relevant sections of the interviews based on the three *a priori* defined categories and then summarizing the answers of the interviewees, the most frequently used

words (“keywords”) in each category were extracted. Quantifiability was enabled by counting the summarized answers or keywords given by the interviewees (Mayring, 2014). Table 3 contains the complete deductive categorization system, including keywords mentioned more than three times and anchor examples (direct quotes) of the interviewees.

Regarding category #1 “expectations and desires regarding offline PAS”, the analysis reveals that all frequently mentioned keywords relate directly to the employee. Importantly, interviewees emphasize not only job-relevant knowledge and professional expertise but also personal and relational characteristics. For example, respondents highlight the importance of employees’ ability to empathize and respond sensitively to their individual situations. One interviewee emphasized that the sales assistant “(…) was able to put herself completely in my position and immediately understood what was important after I had just had a baby” (I #3), describing the interaction as “very supportive”. At the same time, professional competence is considered essential as consumers expect advisors to provide accurate and relevant information, such as “that I get the information I expect, that I am presented with the right products and that the salesperson is competent” (I #13). Taken together, these findings suggest that offline PAS is perceived as a combination of professional and emotional competence rather than being driven by either dimension alone.

Category #2 “expectations and desires regarding online PAS” demonstrates that expectations toward the employee remain largely similar despite the change in context. Interviewees continue to stress the relevance of understanding individual needs, emphasizing “that my personal wishes are also addressed” (I #14). Notably, personal contact is still perceived as highly important even in digital settings, as one participant stated: “That the personal contact with the advisor is there. I would say that has always been the most important thing for me” (I #2). In addition to employee-related competencies, respondents also point to service-related aspects such as speed and efficiency, indicating that online advice should be “(…) smooth and uncomplicated (…)” (I #14). Together these quotes illustrate that emotional and professional employee competencies remain central, while being complemented by process-related expectations specific to digital environments.

Category #3 “main differences between the two contexts” highlights distinct advantages associated with offline versus online PAS. Offline advice is perceived as faster and more flexible, allowing immediate reactions to customer feedback, as illustrated by one interviewee: “In the shop, I’m standing in front of the advisor, and he can respond immediately. (..) It’s quick and uncomplicated” (I #1). In contrast, online PAS is valued for structural advantages, such as a larger assortment and a calmer environment. As one participant explained, “Online, of course, you simply have a much larger product assortment than in the shop” (I #7), while another appreciated that “(…) online, the focus is then only on one customer” (I #15). These statements indicate that offline and online PAS fulfill complementary roles, with each context offering distinct value propositions to consumers.

In summary, the interviews reveal that advice seeking/giving behaviors have evolved with increasing digitalization; however, the desire for personal contact persists, even in online settings. Participants consistently emphasize the crucial role of the employee in both offline and online fashion contexts. Interviewees express the critical role of employee professional competence, as there is commonly only one chance to meet customers’ expectations. Interestingly, the personal connection is also highly valued and for some even the decisive reason for repurchasing behavior. Even though other aspects such as product assortment or process efficiency are relevant, employee competencies clearly emerge as the central focus across both service contexts. Overall, these findings highlight that digitalization does not replace interpersonal service elements but rather reshapes how professional and emotional competencies are expected to be delivered across channels.

Study 1b

Method

To validate the findings gained in Study 1a from a fashion retailer perspective, we conducted an online survey with mostly open-ended questions. As in Study 1a, the survey adhered to

Table 3. Categorization and result summary of Study 1a

No.	Category	Keyword	Keyword counts	Anchor example
#1	Expectations and desires regarding offline personal fashion advice services	Friendliness/sympathy	10	"Above all, politeness and friendliness, that you are greeted when you enter the shop (I #12)."
		Professional expertise/competence	9	"That I get the information I expect, that I am presented with the right products and that the salesperson is competent (I #13)."
		Understanding of customer needs	8	"For me, good advice is when the salesperson is able to understand what I want (I #5)."
		Honesty	8	"A sales advisor who will also simply tell you that an outfit doesn't look good (I #18)."
		Stylistic confidence	7	"An advisor who makes sure everything looks good and fits together (I #15)."
		Unobtrusiveness	7	"It's important to me that they let me look at all the stuff first. I like it when everything is explained to me, but not in a pushy way (I #11)."
		Product knowledge	6	"A good understanding of the products is important to me (I #2)."
		Personal contact/time for customer	6	"That you definitely have this personal contact (I #4)."
#2	Expectations and desires regarding online personal fashion advice services	Understanding of customer needs	13	"That my personal wishes are also addressed (I #14)."
		Personal contact	9	"That the personal contact with the advisor is there. I would say that has always been the most important thing for me (I #2)."
		Professional expertise/competence	8	"He must be extremely well trained, plus brutally fast at checking. He has to understand immediately in which direction the consultation should go (I #11)."
		Quick responses	6	"Above all, that they give quick feedback, that they are available if I need anything (I #12)."
		Quick and seamless processing	6	"(. . .) a smooth and uncomplicated handling (I #14)."
		Stylistic confidence	5	"That she can already see from the picture how you dress and that she can adapt to that (I #12)."
		Friendliness	4	"Friendliness is particularly important to me (I #16)."
		Video-consultation service	4	"I think that, for example, a video chat would not be bad (I #13)."

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

No.	Category	Keyword	Keyword counts	Anchor example
#3	Main differences between the two contexts <i>Offline</i>	Flexibility/speed of response	4	“In the shop, I’m standing in front of the advisor, and he can respond immediately. If I say, that I don’t like it, he brings the next options right away. It’s quick and uncomplicated. Sending things back and forth online takes more time, so I usually don’t bother (I #1).”
		Personal contact	4	“And you don’t have any personal contact online. And that’s definitely a different feeling (I #4).”
	<i>Online</i>	Large assortment	4	“Online, of course, you simply have a much larger product assortment than in the shop (I #7).”
		Quiet (no other customers) – more time for customers	4	“In the shop, there are all the external factors, e.g. customers bursting into a consultation. Online, the focus is then only on one customer (I #15).”

Note(s): As the interviews were conducted in German, the quotes have been translated and selectively shortened for the sake of clarity and coherence. I = interviewee

Source(s): Table by the authors

established ethical guidelines. The following job positions were eligible to participate in the survey: owner, manager, division or branch manager, or comparable positions. The sample consists of 54 German fashion retailers with 53.20% female and 46.80% male participants with a mean age of 39.26 years ($SD = 11.97$). In total, the questionnaire consisted of four open questions (e.g. “In your opinion, how has the fashion shopping behavior of consumers generally changed?”), and socio-demographics.

As in Study 1a, the analysis initially followed a deductive evaluation system as the answers were assigned to four *a priori* formulated categories (i.e. change of customers’ fashion shopping behavior, change of customer advice seeking behavior, promising channels for PAS in the future, online alternatives to PAS in physical fashion retail), which are based on conceptual reasoning and the results of Study 1a. This step was followed by a summary content analysis using an inductive approach to provide more details. Sub-categories were formulated by summarizing and structuring data (Mayring, 2014). In the final step, the number of answers per sub-category was calculated and, thereby, quantified. Ambiguous answers were not included.

Results

Regarding category #1 “change of customers’ fashion shopping behavior”, almost half of the retailers explicitly mention that their customers shop more online, and some also claim that shopping in brick-and-mortar stores therefore has decreased. Findings related to category #2 “change of customer advice seeking behavior” show that only 25.93% of retailers reported no noticeable changes. The majority (74.07%) observed shifts in customer fashion shopping behavior, with some reporting an increase in online consultations (18.52%) and others noting a

decrease in in-store advisory interactions (14.81%). These developments may overlap. Additional changes included greater physical distance in customer interactions (14.81%) and others, such as challenges due to restrictions, more independent customers or a heightened appreciation for personal advice (25.93%). Concerning these changes, two contrasting patterns emerge. The first group believes that customers have become more independent and as such require less advice, for example:

Customers are more self-reliant now (I #36). They enjoy looking around without assistance (I #24).

The second group perceives advice to be valued more, for example:

The appreciation of personal advice is increasing (I #4). Those who seek consultation are thankful that I am still available (I #3).

This divergence suggests that digitalization does not uniformly reduce the demand for advice but instead shows a polarization of customer needs, with some customers becoming more autonomous while others place greater value on personalized support.

Category #3 “promising channels for PAS in the future” demonstrates that the majority of the retailers highly value online consultation channels as future options. The final category “online alternatives to PAS in physical fashion retail” reveals that 68.52% of the retailers already offer their customers some kind of online alternative, such as a classic online shop, telephone or video consultation, or support via chat. This indicates that many retailers are already actively adapting their service offerings to hybrid or digitally supported formats.

In summary, these results underpin those of Study 1a by demonstrating that not only customers but also retailers recognize the need and benefits of PAS in online service encounters. At the same time, the findings highlight that adapting to digital channels requires retailers to respond to increasingly heterogeneous customer expectations. Retailers acknowledge that customers have varying needs, implying that employees must possess not only professional but also emotional competence. These insights extend earlier findings in prior empirical offline research (see [Table 1](#), Panel B) and reveal the need to examine employee professional and emotional competencies in both offline and online service encounters. In particular, the results indicate that the effectiveness of these competencies may depend on the service context (offline versus online) and the evolving expectations of digitally engaged customers. This is important since nowadays fashion is offered and sold via offline and online channels with personal advice by employees.

Hypotheses development

By effectively perceiving, understanding, and regulating customer emotions in offline settings, emotionally competent employees can enhance customer experiences ([Fernandes et al., 2018](#)). Accurate identification and regulation of customer emotions have been shown to increase the probability of advice taking in offline settings ([Gino and Schweitzer, 2008](#)), improve the level of satisfaction ([Fernandes et al., 2018](#); [Saleem et al., 2025](#); [Umar and Saleem, 2022](#)), foster positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication ([Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002](#)) and loyalty ([Saleem et al., 2025](#)). Thus, emotional competence enables employees to deliver superior PAS ([Delcourt et al., 2013](#)) and can be understood as an extra-role behavior that enhances their ability to meet customer needs more effectively ([Schepers and Van der Borgh, 2020](#)). This perspective aligns with emotion theories ([Russell, 2003](#)) suggesting that emotions have the power to mentally and physically activate individuals, thereby shaping their responses ([Lin et al., 2008](#)). Furthermore, the possession of emotional alongside professional competence enriches skill variety – a key element in JCT known to drive employee motivation and performance – ultimately influencing customer responses and service success ([Hackman and Oldham, 1976](#); [Maxham III et al., 2008](#)). Importantly, research indicates that customers also value emotional qualities in online PAS ([Bolton et al., 2022](#)), despite the absence of personal face-to-face interactions. Finally, in an era of increasing digitalization, personal

relationships appear to hold even greater significance for customers (Bolton *et al.*, 2022; Cartwright and Pappas, 2008). Based on these insights, we hypothesize:

- H1. Employee high (vs. low) emotional competence leads to higher (vs. lower) a) advice taking, b) satisfaction, and c) WOM in online PAS.

From the offline world we know that emotional competence in PAS reinforces the impact of professional competence on customer satisfaction (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017; Supramaniam *et al.*, 2024). In addition, employees with higher emotional competence tend to be more successful as they can build a favorable affective atmosphere, which enables seamless interactions with the customer, making a positive influence on customer responses more likely (Delcourt *et al.*, 2013). When assessing service encounters in online PAS, research provides mixed insights. On the one hand, customers rely primarily on professional competence due to the lack of face-to-face interaction (Cartwright and Pappas, 2008). Moreover, customers are often well-informed and possess substantial product knowledge (Klaiber *et al.*, 2015), thereby increasing expectations regarding employees' professional competence. On the other hand, the rising use of the internet and digital services and, with it, the grown use of impersonal settings with perceived distance (Fuentes *et al.*, 2017; Rödning *et al.*, 2024), make personal relationships increasingly important for customers (McKinsey and Company, 2025; Sebald and Jacob, 2018; Xie *et al.*, 2025) and consequently service success (Delcourt *et al.*, 2013). Nowadays, employees are expected to permanently interact with customers while competently using modern technologies during the PAS (Rödning *et al.*, 2024). However, customers also expect individualized attention in digital service interactions, seeking a personalized, exceptional fashion shopping experience within a trustworthy atmosphere (Ben Saad and Choura, 2023). Following this notion, it can be assumed that the influence of professional competence on customer responses is attenuated when an employee is emotionally competent as service encounters become increasingly impersonal while the desire for personal connection remains (McKinsey and Company, 2025; Xie *et al.*, 2025; see also findings of Study 1a). Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H2. An interaction exists between employee emotional and professional competence, such that for high employee emotional competence, the effect of employee professional competence on a) advice taking, b) satisfaction, and c) WOM is weaker compared to low employee emotional competence in online PAS.

Affect-as-information theory indicates that the affective state shapes attitudinal and behavioral responses (Forgas, 1995). Applied to PAS, existing literature shows that employee emotional competence can evoke positive emotions in customers in both offline (Hofmann *et al.*, 2021; Meyer *et al.*, 2017) and online settings (Ruan and Mezei, 2022), thereby fostering favorable customer responses. Thus, emotional competence not only influences customer responses directly but also shapes their emotional state (Lee *et al.*, 2011). Research evidence further shows that emotionally competent employees can actively regulate customer emotions (Delcourt *et al.*, 2016). While customers experience positive emotions, such as pleasantness and happiness when the employee is emotionally competent, negative emotions are experienced with emotionally incompetent employees (Meyer *et al.*, 2017). In addition, customer emotional state cannot solely be viewed as a reaction to employee competencies, but also as a driver of advice taking, satisfaction with the employee, and WOM because customer emotions determine attitudinal and behavioral responses (Lin *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, employee emotional competence is not only important for the success of PAS but also influences customer emotional state which further drives customer responses (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017; Marinova *et al.*, 2018). We hypothesize:

- H3. The effect of employee emotional competence on a) advice taking, b) satisfaction, and c) WOM is mediated by customer emotional state.

Digital retail solutions are becoming increasingly important requiring retailers to expand their online sales activities (Klaiber *et al.*, 2015; Landmark and Sjøbakk, 2017). This shift also transforms

how customers are addressed and engaged (Fuentes *et al.*, 2017; Röding *et al.*, 2024), and consequently alters the competencies expected of employees (Fuentes *et al.*, 2017; Yao *et al.*, 2025), such as emotional competence. Research indicates that affective information is harder to perceive without face-to-face contact (Cartwright and Pappas, 2008). Technology-mediated communication in online PAS offers a limited degree of customer contact compared to the direct contact in physical stores (Froehle and Roth, 2004) by restricting sensory stimulation (e.g. audition, touch) and human connection between employees and customers (Beltagui *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the direct impact of employee emotional competence on customer responses may be diminished in the online context. In line with this, literature also shows that customers place less emphasis on emotional qualities in digital settings compared to physical stores (Bolton *et al.*, 2022). Employee emotional competence is based on proximity and is associated with low affective distance (Septianto and Pratiwi, 2016). Online services are more spatially distant than physical stores (Bolton *et al.*, 2022); thus, the effect of employee emotional competence on customer emotional state may be reduced. Based on this reasoning, we propose that employee emotional competence has a weaker effect on customer emotional state in an online compared to an offline context and hypothesize:

- H4. The effects hypothesized in H3 are moderated by context, such that the effect of employee emotional competence on customer emotional state is weaker in online (vs. offline) PAS.

Figure 1 summarizes the research model.

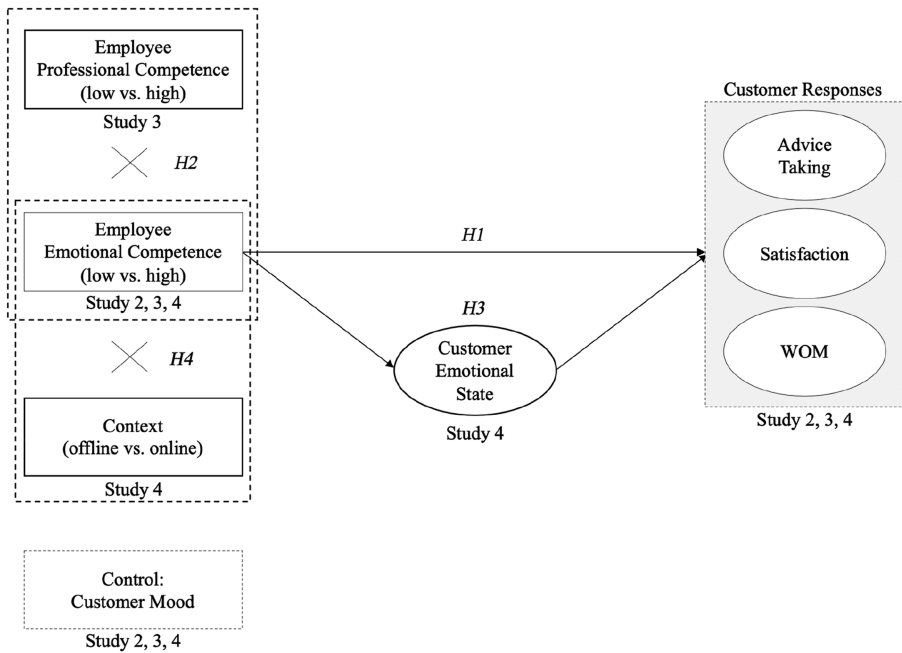


Figure 1. Research model with hypotheses. Source: Figure by the authors

Study 2

Method

To test the relationship established in H1, an experimental study using a one-factorial between-subjects design was conducted. Employee professional competence (PC) was kept constant, while employee emotional competence (EC) was manipulated (low vs. high). Participants

were given a short scenario asking them to imagine being a customer at a fictional online fashion retailer (DressMe) offering shopping advice and were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (see [Appendix](#)). In the high EC condition, the employee is described as being able to control their emotions, willing to share them with customers, and able to understand customers' feelings. In contrast, these abilities are described as rather poor in the low EC condition (based on [Schutte et al., 1998](#)). The subsequent online questionnaire followed common ethical guidelines and measured participants' intention to take advice, satisfaction, WOM, and customer mood. The sample consists of 126 (29.40% male, 70.60% female) participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.84$, $SD = 10.26$).

Measures

All construct items, derived from the literature, were measured using seven-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). The manipulation of employee emotional competence was tested with five adapted items from [Schutte et al. \(1998\)](#); e.g. "My fashion advisor can tell how I am feeling by listening to the tone of my voice."). Advice taking was measured with three items from [White \(2005\)](#) and [See et al. \(2011\)](#); e.g. "I will factor in the opinion of the fashion advisor into my decision-making process."). Satisfaction with the employee was assessed with three items from [Hennig-Thurau et al. \(2002\)](#); e.g. "My choice to use the service of the fashion advisor was a wise one.") and three items were chosen to measure WOM ([Zeithaml et al., 1996](#); e.g. "I will recommend DressMe to someone who seeks my advice."). Customer mood (control variable) was measured with one item from [Peterson and Sauber \(1983\)](#); e.g. "Currently I am in a good mood.)."

Results

All constructs show satisfactory reliability and validity. Manipulation checks are successful as the mean value of employee emotional competence was higher in the high condition and lower in the low condition ($M_{\text{EC_low}} = 2.59$; $SD = 1.14$ vs. $M_{\text{EC_high}} = 4.81$; $SD = 0.93$; $p < 0.01$). To test [H1](#), several ANCOVAs with employee emotional competence as independent variable and customer mood as a covariate were run. The findings reveal a significant difference between low and high emotional competence for customer advice taking ($F(1, 123) = 20.84$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$), satisfaction ($F(1,123) = 35.35$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$), and WOM ($F(1,123) = 43.32$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.26$). Mood did not have a significant influence. Customer advice taking is higher when employee emotional competence is high ($M_{\text{EC_low}} = 4.50$, $SD = 1.17$ vs. $M_{\text{EC_high}} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.00$). The same applies to satisfaction ($M_{\text{EC_low}} = 4.11$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M_{\text{EC_high}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.06$) and WOM ($M_{\text{EC_low}} = 3.88$, $SD = 1.48$ vs. $M_{\text{EC_high}} = 5.41$, $SD = 1.10$). Thus, [H1](#) is confirmed.

Study 3

Method

To test [H2](#), an experimental study using a 2 (employee emotional competence: low vs. high) x 2 (employee professional competence: low vs. high) between-subjects factorial design was conducted. Participants were provided with a scenario and questionnaire similar to Study 2 and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. As in Study 2, the employee was first characterized by either low or high emotional competence. In this study, the manipulation of professional competence was added and described as being either low or high. This second dimension refers to the employee's task-related competencies, expertise, and skills ([White, 2005](#)). Referring to our scenario, this means that the employee is either highly knowledgeable when it comes to the assortment, sizes, and fashion in general or rather uninformed. The final sample consists of 187 (42.20% female, 57.30% male, 0.50% diverse) participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.96$, $SD = 12.38$).

Measures

The manipulation of employee emotional competence was adapted and tested with four items. One item was from [Schutte et al. \(1998\)](#) and three items were from [Wong and Law \(2002\)](#); e.g. “The fashion advisor has good understanding of people around him.”). Likewise, four items were used to test the manipulation of employee professional competence; three items were from [Germain and Tejada \(2012\)](#); e.g. “The fashion advisor shows that he has the education necessary to be an expert in his field.”) and one from [Wang et al. \(2010\)](#). The dependent variables were measured in the same way as in Study 2. For the control variable, a second item was added in Study 3 to enhance measurement reliability.

Results

Construct measures show satisfactory reliability and validity, and manipulation checks are successful. Participants who were assigned to the high emotional competence group ($n = 91$) rate employee emotional competence as high ($M_{EC_high} = 5.92$, $SD = 1.07$), whereas the other group ($n = 96$) rates emotional competence as low ($M_{EC_low} = 2.41$, $SD = 1.12$, $t(185) = -21.82$, $p < 0.001$). Further, there is a significant difference between the high ($n = 92$) and the low ($n = 95$) professional competence group. Those in the high condition perceive employee professional competence as high ($M_{PC_high} = 6.19$, $SD = 0.74$), whereas the other group perceives it as low ($M_{PC_low} = 3.17$, $SD = 1.20$, $t(185) = -20.61$, $p < 0.001$). To test [H2](#), Process Model 1 ([Hayes, 2018](#); bootstrap = 5,000) was run. The results confirm the hypothesized relationship in [H2a](#) and [H2b](#) and show that when employee emotional competence is high, the effects of employee professional competence on advice taking ($B = -0.77$, $p < 0.05$, $CI_{95}[-1.37 \dots -0.18]$, $R^2 = 0.46$) and satisfaction ($B = -0.56$, $p < 0.10$, $CI_{95}[-1.15 \dots 0.03]$, $R^2 = 0.58$) are weaker compared to when employee emotional competence is low, while no significant effect was found for WOM. Thus, [H2](#) is confirmed for [H2a](#) and [H2b](#), but not for [H2c](#).

Study 4

Method

To further expand the research model by comparing the online with the offline context and, finally, to test the relationships proposed in [H3](#) and [H4](#), another experimental study was conducted using a 2 (employee emotional competence: low vs. high) \times 2 (context: offline vs. online) between-subjects design. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the online condition with the fashion retailer “DressMe” and were asked to imagine that their personal advisor is contacting them by video call, while the other half was asked to imagine visiting the physical “DressMe” store and being approached by an advisor. Then, participants were provided with a short dialog between a customer and the employee, including the manipulation of emotional competence, which was either low or high; professional competence was kept constant (high) as in Study 2 (see [Appendix](#)). The sample consists of 115 (79.10% female, 20.00% male, 0.90% diverse) participants ($M_{age} = 23.92$, $SD = 5.01$).

Measures

The manipulation of employee emotional competence was tested with four items from [Delcourt et al. \(2016\)](#); e.g. “The fashion advisor was altogether capable of perceiving how I was feeling at the beginning of the conversation.”) and the correct perception of the context was checked with two items (e.g. “I should imagine taking advantage of the following fashion advice: online . . . offline in a store”). The dependent measures and the assessment of customer mood remained mostly unchanged, except that one additional item was added to the advice taking measure. Customer emotional state was introduced as an additional construct and assessed with three items ([Howard and Gengler, 2001](#); e.g. “After the fashion consultation, I feel happy.”).

Results

The results show satisfactory reliability and validity (Table 4) and the manipulation checks are successful. Means, standard deviations and correlations of all three studies are shown in Table 5.

Participants correctly perceived the context, which was measured on a semantic differential from 1 (=online) to 7 (=offline): $M_{\text{offline}} = 5.59$, $SD = 1.89$ vs. $M_{\text{online}} = 2.37$, $SD = 2.15$ with $t(113) = 8.45$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the high emotional competence group rates employee emotional competence as high ($M_{\text{EC_high}} = 5.01$, $SD = 1.18$), whereas the other group rates it as low ($M_{\text{EC_low}} = 3.44$, $SD = 1.30$, $t(113) = -6.80$, $p < 0.001$). To test H3, Process Model 7 (Hayes, 2018; bootstrap = 5,000) was run. In this model, the independent variable was participants' perception of employee emotional competence (low vs. high). The dependent variables were advice taking, satisfaction, and WOM. Customer emotional state served as the mediator, while the context (offline vs. online) functioned as a moderator on the path between emotional competence and customer emotional state. Customer mood was included as a covariate. The results show that employee emotional competence has a positive impact on customer emotional state ($B = 0.98$, $p < 0.05$, $CI_{95}[0.16 \dots 1.80]$, $R^2 = 0.10$), which further drives customer advice taking ($B = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$, $CI_{95}[0.49 \dots 0.78]$,

Table 4. Reliability and validity of measurement items

Constructs with items	Study 4	
	FL	ITTC
<i>Manipulation check items for emotional competence ($\alpha = 0.845$; AVE = 0.686)</i>		
The fashion advisor was capable of recognizing that I am looking forward to the consultation	0.834	0.690
The fashion advisor was altogether capable of perceiving how I was feeling at the beginning of the conversation	0.771	0.603
The fashion advisor was able to understand why I don't like online shopping	0.827	0.686
The fashion advisor perfectly understood the reason for my feelings	0.878	0.766
<i>Manipulation check items for context ($\alpha = 0.948$; AVE = 0.951)</i>		
I should imagine using the following fashion consultation: online . . . offline in a store	0.975	0.901
I should imagine shopping in the following context: online . . . offline in a store	0.975	0.901
<i>Advice taking ($\alpha = 0.937$; AVE = 0.842)</i>		
It is very likely that I follow the fashion advisor's recommendation	0.939	0.887
I will factor in the opinion of the fashion advisor into my decision-making process	0.893	0.812
I am open to make a decision based on the input of the fashion advisor	0.931	0.873
I will consider the advice of the fashion advisor when making my decision	0.906	0.832
<i>Satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.931$; AVE = 0.880)</i>		
Overall, I am satisfied with my fashion advisor	0.927	0.837
My choice to use the service of the fashion advisor was a wise one	0.937	0.859
I think I did the right thing when I decided to use the fashion advisor's service	0.950	0.884
<i>WOM ($\alpha = 0.932$; AVE = 0.880)</i>		
I will say positive things about DressMe to other people	0.943	0.870
I will recommend DressMe to someone who seeks my advice	0.941	0.866
I will encourage friends and relatives to use the service of DressMe	0.930	0.844
<i>Customer emotional state ($\alpha = 0.936$; AVE = 0.890)</i>		
After the fashion consultation, I feel happy	0.953	0.888
After the fashion consultation, I feel joyful	0.956	0.894
After the fashion consultation, I feel pleased	0.921	0.828
<i>Customer mood ($\alpha = 0.8260$; AVE = 0.878)</i>		
Currently I'm in a good mood	0.937	0.755
As I answer these questions, I feel cheerful	0.937	0.755

Note(s): FL = factor loading, ITTC = item to total correlation, α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = average variance extracted, WOM = word of mouth communication

Source(s): Table by the authors

Table 5. Correlations

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Study 2</i>							
1 Advice taking	4.94	1.17	1				
2 Satisfaction	4.74	1.32	0.840**	1			
3 WOM	4.65	1.51	0.715**	0.814**	1		
4 Customer mood	4.97	1.24	0.045	-0.101	0.005	1	
<i>Study 3</i>							
1 Advice taking	4.59	1.37	1				
2 Satisfaction	4.32	1.56	0.869**	1			
3 WOM	4.13	1.67	0.811**	0.899**	1		
4 Customer mood	5.36	1.07	0.097	0.152*	0.132	1	
<i>Study 4</i>							
1 Advice taking	4.77	1.48	1				
2 Satisfaction	4.60	1.59	0.862**	1			
3 WOM	4.25	1.64	0.784**	0.878**	1		
4 Customer emotional state	4.48	1.54	0.625**	0.760**	0.733*	1	
5 Customer mood	5.18	1.41	0.043	0.090	0.135	0.240**	1

Note(s): M = mean, SD = standard deviation, WOM = word of mouth communication, the theoretical scale range is 1 (low) to 7 (high) for all variables. For more details on the measures, see Table 4. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Source(s): Table by the authors

$R^2 = 0.40$), satisfaction ($B = 0.81, p < 0.01, CI_{95}[0.68 \dots 0.94], R^2 = 0.59$), and WOM ($B = 0.78, p < 0.01, CI_{95}[0.64 \dots 0.92], R^2 = 0.54$). Also, a positive effect of mood on customer emotional state ($B = 0.29, p < 0.01, CI_{95}[0.09 \dots 0.49], R^2 = 0.10$) can be found. Since there is no significant direct effect of employee emotional competence on the dependent variables ($p > 0.10$), customer emotional state fully mediates the proposed effects. H3 can be confirmed. H4 posits that the effect hypothesized in H3 is moderated by context, such that the effect of employee emotional competence on customer emotional state is weaker in the online (vs. offline) context. This moderation effect is marginally significant ($B = -0.96, p < 0.10, CI_{95}[-2.07 \dots 0.16], R^2 = 0.10$). A conditional effects analysis reveals that the effect of emotional competence on customer emotional state is significant in the offline condition ($B = 0.98, p < 0.05, CI_{95}[0.16 \dots 1.80], R^2 = 0.10$), but not in the online condition ($B = 0.02, p = n.s., CI_{95}[-0.72 \dots 0.77], R^2 = 0.10$). This pattern provides partial support for H4, indicating that the impact of employee emotional competence is attenuated in online customer interactions.

Discussion

Summary

This research addresses the evolving role of employee competencies in personal advice service (PAS) within increasingly digitalized fashion retail environments. First, it explores how consumers' shopping behavior and expectations regarding employee competencies have shifted with growing digitalization. Findings from Study 1a demonstrate that, despite the expansion of online shopping and digitally mediated service encounters, the value of personal interactions remains high with consumers. Study 1b supports these findings by showing that fashion retailers also acknowledge the importance and growing potential of online advice. At the same time, digitalization appears to alter how these competencies are enacted and evaluated within service encounters. Employees must deliver added value by showcasing exceptional, task-specific expertise to win over customers. At the same time, it is crucial to grasp customers' emotions and respond appropriately. These insights align with research on

the importance of employee professional and emotional competence for service encounters (e.g. [Delcourt et al., 2017](#); [White, 2005](#)). This result extends existing literature by suggesting that emotional and professional competencies do not merely operate as complementary resources; rather, their relative importance appears to be contingent upon the service context.

Second, the experimental studies reveal that employee emotional competence exerts a substantial influence on central customer responses, including advice taking, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth intentions (WOM). More importantly, the findings demonstrate that emotional competence attenuates the influence of professional competence in online PAS settings. This finding adds a more nuanced perspective to existing literature by suggesting that professional competence remains a central requirement for credible and useful advice ([White, 2005](#)), while emotional competence appears to partially compensate for lower professional competence in digital advisory settings. Thus, the relationship between emotional and professional competence is not merely complementary, but context dependent. In online PAS, where personal cues are reduced and service encounters may feel more distant, emotional competence can become a particularly salient resource eliciting favorable customer responses.

Furthermore, the findings identify customer emotional state as an important underlying mechanism explaining how employee emotional competence shapes customer responses. Consistent with affect-as-information theory, which states that customer emotions are an important mechanism through which employee competence affects customer responses, emotionally competent employees elicit more positive customer emotions, which subsequently enhance advice acceptance, satisfaction, and WOM intentions ([Forgas, 1995](#); [Lee et al., 2011](#)). However, the mediation effect is stronger in offline settings, suggesting that the emotional transmission and interpretation of affective cues is constrained in online PAS. This indicates an important boundary condition: although emotional competence matters online, its ability to shape customers' emotional state is reduced when interpersonal cues are limited. Taken together, the findings highlight that employee competencies in PAS should be understood as context-sensitive resources whose effectiveness depends on the characteristics of the service environment.

Theoretical contributions

This research offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on service interactions, employee competencies, and digitally mediated retail environments: first, the study contributes to emerging research on the role of retail digitalization for consumer shopping behavior ([Guercini et al., 2026](#)) by examining employee competencies across offline and online PAS contexts from both the consumer and retailer perspective.

Second, the findings contribute to existing literature on employee competencies by examining professional and emotional competencies across contexts. In doing so, the study extends research on service interactions and employee competencies ([Delcourt et al., 2016](#); [White, 2005](#)) by demonstrating that emotional competence is not only relevant in offline contexts ([Delcourt et al., 2013](#)) but also plays a critical role in online PAS. Importantly, the findings go beyond confirming its relevance by showing that emotional competence attenuates the effect of professional competence in online settings, suggesting a substitution-like mechanism. This refines prior assumptions of a purely complementary relationship between both competencies and highlights that their interplay is contingent on the service context. The distinction between professional and emotional competencies is in line with the in-role and extra-role behavior framework ([Katz, 1964](#)), where professional competence represents in-role behavior and emotional competence reflects extra-role behavior. The present findings refine this perspective by indicating that the relative importance of these behaviors shifts depending on whether the interaction takes place offline or online. This suggests a context-contingent and partially substitutive relationship between both competencies, thereby challenging assumptions of a uniformly complementary interaction.

Third, this study contributes to the job characteristics theory (JCT; [Hackman and Oldham, 1976](#)) by extending the notion of skill variety into digitally mediated service environments. Possessing both professional and emotional competencies reflects a broader repertoire of employee skills, which may enhance motivation, service performance, and ultimately customer evaluations of the service encounter. However, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of this skill variety depends on contextual characteristics of the service environment. In online PAS, where interpersonal cues are limited, emotional competence assumes greater relevance in shaping customer responses. This adds a more context-sensitive perspective to JCT by indicating that the value of specific skill combinations depends on the structural characteristics of the service environment.

Fourth, the study contributes to the advice taking literature (e.g. [Gino and Schweitzer, 2008](#); [See et al., 2011](#)) by identifying that emotionally competent employees can increase customers' tendency to take advice. While prior research has primarily focused on informational and expertise-based drivers of advice acceptance, the present findings highlight the importance of emotional and relational factors, particularly in digitally mediated contexts where trust and interpersonal connection may be more difficult to establish.

Fifth, this work contributes to the affect-as-information theory ([Forgas, 1995](#)) by empirically demonstrating customer emotional state as a mediating mechanism linking employee emotional competence to customer responses in PAS, which in turn drives positive customer responses such as advice taking, satisfaction, and WOM ([Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006](#); [Lee et al., 2011](#)). At the same time, the findings reveal an important boundary condition: the emotional mechanism underlying customer responses is attenuated in online service contexts. This suggests that technology-mediated interactions constrain emotional processing by limiting the availability of interpersonal and affective cues. Consequently, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of emotional mechanisms in contemporary service encounters.

Finally, by linking these theoretical insights to the design of personal advice services, this research contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice. It highlights how context-dependent competency effects can inform the design and management of PAS in omnichannel retail environments, where both professional expertise and emotional engagement must be strategically aligned with the service context.

Managerial implications

The findings of this research provide several important implications for fashion retailers operating in increasingly digital and omnichannel service environments. Although advice-seeking and advice-giving behaviors have evolved with retail digitalization, customers continue to value interpersonal interaction. Thus, they expect service experiences delivered by professionally and emotionally competent employees across both offline and online channels. Subsequently, fashion retailers operating in omnichannel environments should avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and instead train employees to adapt their competencies to the specific service setting.

The findings indicate that professional competence constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for effective PAS across channels, as customers continue to expect accurate product knowledge and reliable recommendations ([Delcourt et al., 2017](#); [Marinova et al., 2018](#)). However, the findings also demonstrate that emotional competence emerges as a critical driver of customer responses, particularly within digitally mediated service encounters. In offline PAS, emotional competence significantly shapes customers' emotional state, which in turn drives important customer responses ([Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006](#); [Lin et al., 2008](#)). In online PAS, emotional competence remains highly relevant but operates differently: its indirect effect via customer emotional state is attenuated, while simultaneously reducing the relative importance of professional competence. This suggests that emotional competence can partially compensate for lower professional competence in digital advisory interactions.

Managers should therefore treat emotional competence as a strategically relevant capability, particularly in online PAS, where it can buffer against limitations in employees' expertise.

These findings have direct implications for recruitment, employee development, and service training. Beyond task-specific expertise (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017; Marinova *et al.*, 2018), retailers should place greater emphasis on identifying and developing employees' emotional competence (Delcourt *et al.*, 2013, 2017; Wong and Law, 2002). Recruitment processes may benefit from incorporating assessments of emotional skills and responsiveness alongside traditional competency evaluations. Likewise, training programs should include structured interventions such as role plays, coaching, and customer interaction simulations designed to strengthen employees' ability to recognize, interpret, and appropriately respond to customer emotions (Lastner *et al.*, 2024). As customers' emotional state is a key driver of customer responses (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006; Lin *et al.*, 2008), employees must understand how their interpersonal behavior influences customers' affective reactions and subsequent service evaluations.

The findings additionally highlight the importance of designing digital service environments that support socio-emotional interaction. Since recognizing and conveying emotions is more difficult online, retailers should implement tools that enhance socio-emotional presence without replacing human interaction. For example, video consultations, personalized communication (e.g. addressing customers by name), and advisor-customer matching may help reduce perceived distance and foster relational trust. In addition, digital interfaces such as advisor-linked avatars or personalized video interfaces may strengthen perceived social presence and facilitate emotional communication (Hu *et al.*, 2026). Finally, designing online shopping as a more social experience – through features such as virtual shopping rooms or community-based interactions – may help replicate the relational benefits traditionally associated with offline retail environments and strengthen long-term customer engagement across channels.

Limitations and further research

While the present research advances understanding of employee competencies within offline and online personal advice services (PAS) in fashion retail, several limitations provide opportunities for future research. First, the empirical studies primarily rely on experimental designs and scenario-based evaluations. It would be therefore beneficial to collaborate with fashion retailers to examine employee competencies and collect corresponding customer data within real-world retail environments. Such an approach would strengthen the external validity of the findings and may reveal more complex interaction patterns between emotional and professional competence than can be fully captured in controlled experimental settings. Following this idea, dyadic data sets of advisors and customers could be obtained to observe reciprocal perceptions and interactions more accurately.

Second, additional contextual and individual-level boundary conditions warrant further investigation. The present findings suggest that the effectiveness of employee competencies depends on characteristics of the service environment; however, other relevant moderators remain underexplored. Future research could therefore investigate whether and how factors such as consumer-brand trust, technology affinity of both consumers and employees, and cultural norms moderate the influence of emotional and professional competence in hybrid service settings. In this context, digital competence, defined as the "ability to facilitate online-offline integration" (Yao *et al.*, 2025, p. 3), could be considered alongside emotional and professional competence, particularly in online or hybrid service interactions (Yao *et al.*, 2025; Liu and Liu, 2025; Sun *et al.*, 2026). Incorporating this additional competence may help clarify how frontline employees effectively transfer emotional understanding across channels. Furthermore, insights from technology acceptance research (Shin and Yang, 2025) may help explain how customers evaluate digitally mediated advisory interactions and how technological interfaces shape perceptions of employee competence.

Third, the present research relies on cross-sectional designs. Longitudinal studies could provide additional insights into how perceptions of employee competence and customer responses evolve over time, particularly with repeated interactions or relationship-building efforts in digital contexts. Similarly, the long-term effectiveness of the aforementioned training interventions could be assessed to examine how competence development influences customer outcomes in the long term.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

We thank Heike Hebborn for her support during the data collection and for her valuable feedback on previous versions of this manuscript.

Appendix

Table A1. Stimuli example

Online context	Offline context
<p>You have registered with the online fashion retailer DressMe and would like to take advantage of a free online style consultation. After submitting your measurements, current style, and personal preferences through a questionnaire, the advisor shown below has contacted you via video call as requested</p>	<p>You are a customer at the brick-and-mortar fashion retailer DressMe and would like to take advantage of a style consultation. After you have had a quick look around the store, the advisor shown below approaches you</p>
<p>Imagine that you are now receiving the call and try to put yourself in the situation of the customer</p>	<p>Imagine that you are now being approached by the advisor and try to put yourself in the situation of the customer</p>



Source(s): Stimuli created by the authors

Exemplary dialog: (online context – high emotional competence)

Advisor: Hello, Lea Mueller from DressMe here. I'm calling regarding our consultation appointment to put together your outfits. I would like to go through everything with you again and see if you have any remaining questions.

Customer: Yes, hello. Thank you for your call. Certainly!

Advisor: I have the feeling that you are looking forward to the new experience.

Customer: Yes, traditional online fashion shopping somehow isn't right for me.

Advisor: I completely understand why you don't enjoy traditional online shopping and I know exactly how to get you excited about this new form of consultation.

Customer: I'm curious.

Advisor: Let's get started then. I've gone through your information. You mentioned slim fit jeans. What about the wash first?

Customer: In general, I'm looking for a lighter wash.

Advisor: Okay. I know we offer this model in five different colors. Let me pick something for you.

Customer: Yes, please. Do you think the fit will suit me?

Advisor: I just reviewed your personal details. From experience, I can tell you that the fit of these pants will definitely flatter your figure.

Customer: I just have some concerns because I am very thin at the waist.

Advisor: If the pants really don't fit, we can easily adjust them with two small tucks at the waist.

Customer: Okay, good.

Advisor: Great, I've noted everything. I'll now put together your outfits and send them to you. Any questions from your side?

Customer: I'm excited and have no more questions.

Advisor: You'll only pay for the items you actually want to keep and return the rest. Then I wish you a wonderful day.

Customer: Thank you, I also wish you a good day.

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