

SERVICE QUALITY, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND REPURCHASE INTENTION IN ONLINE ESL EDUCATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN YANGON, MYANMAR

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Abstract

This study investigates the behavioral pathway linking service quality to student retention in the highly competitive, high-touch online English as a Second Language (ESL) market in Yangon, Myanmar. Grounded in the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) framework, Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), and Social Capital Theory, the research posits that Student Engagement serves as a critical mediator between perceived service quality and the ultimate dependent construct, Repurchase Intention. Data from 455 students were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

The findings strongly validate the proposed mediating mechanism, demonstrating that student loyalty is an active behavioral consequence rather than a passive outcome of satisfaction. Student Engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of future re-enrollment ($\beta = 0.314$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, the human-centric dimensions of service quality —Empathy ($\beta = 0.062$), Assurance ($\beta = 0.077$), and Reliability ($\beta = 0.044$) — were all found to significantly influence Repurchase Intention through Student Engagement. Conversely, the technical dimension, Tangibles, only exhibited a direct effect on repurchase, while the administrative dimension, responsiveness, was not statistically significant (either directly or indirectly). This research advances service theory by empirically validating a behaviorally grounded mediation model in a high-touch digital context. From a practical perspective, the results provide clear guidance: online ESL providers should prioritize investment in instructor development and soft skills (Empathy and Assurance) to maximize student engagement and promote sustainable student retention, rather than focusing solely on administrative efficiency or platform technology.

Keywords: Service Quality, Student Engagement, Repurchase Intention, SERVQUAL, Online Education, ESL, Yangon, Myanmar

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Introduction

The global language education market has undergone a structural shift toward scalable digital service delivery, with the online language learning market projected to reach USD 21.06 billion in 2025 and grow at a 16.08% CAGR to USD 44.38 billion by 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2025). English proficiency serves as a primary driver of global commerce and professional mobility (Vajirakachorn et al., 2023). Recent technological innovations, such as generative AI tutors and adaptive learning platforms, highlight an industry evolution toward personalized, high-fidelity user experiences (Lin et al., 2025). While this rapid digitalization presents vast opportunities, it also intensifies competition, making the optimization of service quality essential to manage market saturation and address high churn rates (Oliveira et al., 2025).

This study focuses on Yangon, Myanmar, where English is widely recognized as a key vehicle for socio-economic advancement and international integration (Win & Yunyasit, 2021). The local ESL market is highly fragmented and competitive, comprising a diverse range of local and international providers (Gazi et al., 2024). Notably, learners in this context demonstrate unique preferences for high-touch services and assured interaction with live instructors, posing challenges to technology-driven, asynchronous business models that prevail elsewhere (Fabian et al., 2024).

Despite the critical importance of service quality, online ESL providers face persistent, costly student churn after course completion,

necessitating a strategic shift from customer acquisition to sustainable retention (Oanh & Tho, 2024). The core issue is the empirical gap in understanding the behavioral pathway that translates student satisfaction into sustained commitment (Ngo et al., 2025). Stakeholders urgently require validation of the mechanism explaining why superior service quality drives re-enrollment (del Águila & del Sagrado, 2023). This study investigates Repurchase Intention as the ultimate dependent construct, defined as the learner's volitional desire and plan to re-enroll with the same provider. Repurchase Intention is recognized as the most reliable predictor of long-term Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) and market stability in the discrete course environment (Sun et al., 2023). For service firms, maximizing repurchase intention directly translates into stable, recurring revenue and a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate (Hui et al., 2025). The research model is grounded in the five dimensions of the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) framework: Tangibles, Assurance, Reliability, Empathy, and Responsiveness, which serve as exogenous inputs that capture the full spectrum of service performance (Ratasuk et al., 2025). These inputs are hypothesized to influence Student Engagement (Ananda et al., 2023), a key endogenous behavioral construct representing learners' active participation and investment, which is proposed as a direct antecedent to Repurchase intention (Majeed et al., 2022; Owusu et al., 2025). Theoretically, the model integrates Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) to explain the evaluation of

SERVQUAL dimensions and Social Capital Theory, which justifies Student Engagement as a behavioral investment stemming from perceived Service Quality (Zuhairah et al., 2024). This dual-theoretic approach enables the rigorous testing of a behaviorally focused mediation model within the contemporary service-dominant logic framework.

The existing literature largely neglects the synchronous, live instructor-led online education context, failing to capture the essential human-mediated dynamics that foster loyalty (Ngo et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2024). More importantly, prior research often overlooks the active behavioral mediator between service quality and loyalty outcomes (Diwayanti et al., 2025; Mugova et al., 2025). This study addresses a significant gap by empirically testing Student Engagement as the critical mediator explaining why service quality leads to future re-enrollment decisions in this high-touch digital service environment.

This research advances service theory by extending SERVQUAL's applicability to the high-touch digital context of online education. It refines theoretical understanding by empirically validating a behaviorally grounded mediation model and providing granular insight into loyalty formation, where active student engagement is crucial. Practically, the findings provide actionable guidance for providers to prioritize investments, such as instructor development and virtual classroom design, that maximize engagement and drive sustainable growth in competitive emerging markets like Yangon.

Objectives

The primary objectives are to: (1) assess the direct effects of the five SERVQUAL dimensions on Repurchase Intention, and (2) rigorously evaluate the mediating effect of Student Engagement within this relationship, validating its role as the central behavioral link.

Literature Review

The sustainability and competitiveness of any service-based enterprise hinge critically on its ability to foster repeat business. In the burgeoning digital education sector, this necessitates a deep understanding of how service excellence translates into enduring learner commitment. This section establishes the theoretical framework and reviews the empirical evidence supporting the direct and indirect relationships between Service Quality, Student Engagement, and Repurchase Intention.

Theoretical Foundations: SERVQUAL and Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory

The foundational concept for assessing service provision is Service Quality, which, following the seminal work of Zeithaml et al. (1996), is operationalized through the SERVQUAL model. SERVQUAL defines perceived service quality as the difference between customer expectations and perceptions of the actual service delivered, structured across five core dimensions: Tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, appearance), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence), reliability

(ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), empathy (caring, individualized attention provided to customers), and responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service) (Akbaba, 2006; Naing & Ratasuk, 2025; Ngo, et al., 2025a). The theoretical relevance of SERVQUAL is rooted in the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), which posits that post-consumption evaluations, driven by the five SERVQUAL dimensions, directly lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which in turn dictate future behavioral intentions (Swamidass, 2000; Zuhairah et al., 2024). EDT thus provides the initial theoretical justification for linking perceived service input to the final behavioral outcome (Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2023).

Repurchase Intention

The ultimate dependent variable in this research is Repurchase Intention. Defined as an individual's conscious plan or decision to continue purchasing a product or service from the same provider (Ratasuk, 2024a; Tan et al., 2024), it is widely recognized as the most reliable behavioral indicator of future loyalty and a crucial predictor of Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) (Ratasuk & Gajesanand, 2022a, 2022b). In the competitive context of course-based services, the ability to secure a student's intention to re-enroll is directly correlated with revenue stability and lower customer acquisition costs (Del Rio-Rama et al., 2021). Previous studies across diverse sectors, including mobile services (Ho & Chung, 2020) and dental services (Sharka et al., 2024), consistently affirm a strong

positive relationship between perceived service quality and repurchase intentions.

The Mediating Role of Student Engagement

To explain how service quality influences repurchase intention in a learning context, this study introduces Student Engagement as a critical behavioral mediator (Reeve et al., 2025). Engagement, broadly defined as the intensity and quality of students' participation in educational activities, transforms passive consumption into active investment (Singh & Rajendran, 2024). Student engagement is a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Zhoc et al., 2019). Behavioral engagement refers to the effort and persistence students put into learning activities, while emotional engagement involves the students' affective reactions and sense of belonging. Cognitive engagement pertains to the psychological investment in learning and the use of self-regulated strategies. In the context of this study, engagement is operationalized as the active investment of time, effort, and attention in the online learning process.

According to Social Capital Theory, active participation and interaction within a community, in this case, the course, foster investment (Woo et al., 2023). Students who perceive a high-quality service environment (high SERVQUAL) are more motivated to invest effort, attention, and time into their learning (high engagement) (Ngo et al., 2025a). This investment creates psychological commitment, functional dependence, and

cognitive “switching costs,” thereby strengthening the likelihood of future repurchase (Changwen et al., 2025). Empirically, engagement has been shown to mediate between various system quality factors and positive behavioral outcomes in e-learning (Bano et al., 2024).

Hypothesis Development

The hypotheses in this study are framed by integrating the well-established Service Quality (SERVQUAL) framework with core principles from Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and Social Capital Theory to establish a coherent behavioral pathway from service perception to repurchase decision.

Direct Effects of Service Quality

The initial hypotheses (H1-H5) propose a direct relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and Repurchase Intention. This direct relationship is justified by Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), which posits that a customer’s post-consumption evaluation, driven by the five SERVQUAL dimensions, directly dictates future behavioral intentions (Amoako et al., 2021; Juanli et al., 2025; Ratasuk et al., 2025). Based on this, the study hypothesizes that all five SERVQUAL dimensions, Tangibles (H1), Assurance (H2), Reliability (H3), Empathy (H4), and Responsiveness (H5), will positively impact a student’s desire to re-enroll (Apidana & Prasetyo, 2023; Naing & Ratasuk, 2024). Furthermore, Student Engagement is hypothesized to be a direct, positive antecedent of Repurchase Intention (H6) (Hsu, 2023; Owusu et al., 2025). Thereby, the

following hypotheses were proposed.

H1: Tangible positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

H2: Assurance positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

H3: Reliability positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

H4: Empathy positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

H5: Responsiveness positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

H6: Student Engagement positively impacts Repurchase Intention in Yangon’s Online ESL Market.

The Mediating Mechanism

The model’s core innovation lies in identifying Student Engagement as the crucial behavioral mechanism (mediator) through which service quality influences repurchase (Kankhuni et al., 2023; Majeed et al., 2022). This concept is supported by Social Capital Theory, which suggests that actively participating in and investing effort into the service (Engagement) creates psychological commitment and “switching costs,” thereby strengthening loyalty and the decision to repurchase (Naing & Ratasuk, 2025; Ratasuk et al., 2025). The study thus hypothesizes that high service quality is an antecedent of desired student behavior. Specifically, when the course is dependable

(Reliability), and the instructor is competent (Assurance), the student is more likely to participate fully (Engagement) (Ngo et al., 2025a; Surya Bahadur et al., 2024). Therefore, the study hypothesizes that engagement mediates the relationship between each of the five SERVQUAL dimensions and Repurchase Intention (H1a–H5a) (Naing & Ratasuk, 2025). Thereby, the following hypotheses were proposed.

H1a Engagement mediates between Tangible and Repurchase Intention.

H2a Engagement mediates between Assurance and Repurchase Intention.

H3a Engagement mediates between Reliability and Repurchase Intention.

H4a Engagement mediates between Empathy and Repurchase Intention

H5a Engagement mediates between Responsiveness and Repurchase Intention.

Role of Demographic Controls

In line with established consumer behavior research, demographic variables such as gender, age, education level, and income are often included as control variables (Ngo et al., 2025b; Zhu & Ratasuk, 2024). These factors are known to influence consumption behavior, service quality expectations, and economic capacity for repurchase (Ali et al., 2022; Lyu & Ratasuk, 2024; Yang & Ratasuk, 2024). Including

them in the model ensures that underlying sociodemographic differences do not confound the explanatory power attributed to SERVQUAL and Engagement.

Methodology

This study utilized a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to test a model linking service quality, student engagement, and repurchase intention. Analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), chosen for its strength in prediction and variance maximization (R^2) relevant to the study's goal of validating the behavioral mechanism (Ratasuk, 2023b). Data were collected from a sample of $N = 455$ students enrolled in live, instructor-led online ESL courses in Yangon, Myanmar, using a convenience sampling strategy due to the unknown population size. The minimum sample size was determined using G*Power software (version 3.1.9.7). Based on an F-test (Linear multiple regression: Fixed model, R^2 deviation from zero) with an effect size (f^2) of 0.15, a power ($1-\beta$) of 0.95, an error probability (α) of 0.05, and 6 predictors, the required sample size was 146. Thus, the final sample of 455 exceeds the minimum requirement and provides sufficient statistical power.

Table 1 Respondents' Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	Descriptive Analysis	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18-25	342	75
	26-30	41	9
	31-40	44	9.6
	41-50	21	4.6
	51-60	8	1.8
Gender	Male	80	17.6
	Female	375	82.4
Education level	Undergraduate	383	84.4
	Postgraduate	71	15.6
Employment status	Employed full-time	97	21.3
	Employed part-time	11	2.4
	Self-employed	15	3.3
	Unemployed	6	1.3
	Student	326	71.6

Table 1 shows that the sample for this study is heavily concentrated among young, female students. Specifically, the vast majority of respondents are between 18 and 25 years old (75%) and identify as Female (82.4%). Consistent with the age distribution, most participants are at the Undergraduate level (84.4%). Regarding employment status, 71.6% of the sample are full-time students, while only 21.3% are employed full-time. This skewed profile suggests the study primarily reflects the perspective of the young adult, student segment of the online ESL market.

Measurement

The questionnaire included sections for demographics, a screening check, and validated scales adapted from qualified prior related research for all constructs, measured by a 5-point Likert scale, including the five SERVQUAL dimensions (Tangibles, Assurance, Reliability, Empathy, Responsiveness) (Ratasuk et al., 2025), Student Engagement (Zhoc et al., 2019), and Repurchase Intention (Ratasuk, 2024a).

Data Collection

Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed via relevant channels, with screening questions to ensure participants were active or recent students of an online, live-instructor-led ESL program. Specifically, data collection will be conducted on social media, primarily Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram, targeting respondents who have attended ESL courses, programs, or classes. The author selected respondents through a screening process that enforced three criteria: respondents must be 18 or older and must have attended at least one ESL course, program, or class. The respondents were asked to participate voluntarily and had the right to stop at any time during the survey. Before the author distributed the questionnaires to the respondents, they received information that the survey would be anonymous and confidential, that they could stop at any time, and that their information would be used only for this study.

Data Analysis

PLS-SEM assessment included evaluating the Measurement Model via Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and HTMT for discriminant validity (Hair Jr et al., 2020; Ratasuk & Naing, 2025). The Structural Model was assessed to determine significant path coefficients (β) and the overall explanatory power (R^2), and the VIF was used to check for multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2021). Specific mediation effects of Student Engagement were tested using the bootstrapping procedure (Alfons et al., 2021). All ethical considerations, including consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were maintained.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings from the PLS-SEM analysis, which tested the hypothesized relationships among Service Quality, Student Engagement, and Repurchase Intention.

Table 2 Convergent Validity and Reliability

Variables	Scale Items	FL	CR	AVE	CA	VIF
Tangibles	Tangibles 1. The ESL service provider has modern digital tools.	0.750	0.801	0.574	0.627	1.490
	Tangibles 2. The ESL service provider's physical facilities (teaching materials, presentations, or virtual classroom) are visually appealing and easy to understand.	0.805				
	Tangibles 3. Teachers or instructors are well-dressed and appear neat.	0.715				

Table 2 Convergent Validity and Reliability (Cont.)

Variables	Scale Items	FL	CR	AVE	CA	VIF
Reliability	Reliability 1. When the ESL service provider promises to do something by a specific time, they deliver on that promise.	0.750	0.885	0.607	0.837	2.677
	Reliability 2. When a student has a problem, the staff or the teachers show a genuine interest in solving it.	0.700				
	Reliability 3. The staff and teachers provide their services at the agreed time.	0.823				
	Reliability 4. The ESL service provider carries out its activities on time.	0.803				
	Reliability 5. The ESL service provider performs its services smoothly	0.813				
Responsive ness	Responsiveness 1. The ESL service provider informs students when services will be provided.	0.736	0.863	0.612	0.788	2.388
	Responsiveness 2. The ESL service provider gives prompt service to students.	0.800				
	Responsiveness 3. Staff and teachers are always willing to help students.	0.829				
	Responsiveness 4. Staff and teachers are never too busy to respond to students' requests.	0.762				
Assurance	Assurance 1. The behavior of staff and teachers instills confidence in students.	0.812	0.85	0.586	0.764	2.733
	Assurance 2. Students feel safe in their interactions with staff and teachers.	0.774				
	Assurance 3. The staff and the teachers are polite.	0.727				
	Assurance 4. The staff and the teachers know how to answer students' questions.	0.747				
Empathy	Empathy 1. The staff and the teachers give students individual attention.	0.743	0.867	0.568	0.806	3.082
	Empathy 2. Operating hours of the ESL service provider are convenient for all the students	0.614				
	Empathy 3. The ESL service provider has employees and teachers who give students personal service.	0.780				
	Empathy 4. The staff and the teachers have their students' best interests at heart	0.830				
	Empathy 5. The staff and the teachers understand the specific needs of the students	0.782				

Table 2 Convergent Validity and Reliability (Cont.)

Variables	Scale Items	FL	CR	AVE	CA	VIF
Engagement	Engagement 1. I make sure to listen attentively during class.	0.802	0.899	0.641	0.860	2.121
	Engagement 2. I participate in a class discussion.	0.847				
	Engagement 3. I put effort into assignments, revisions, or homework	0.805				
	Engagement 4. I raise questions when I encounter something I don't understand	0.767				
	Engagement 5. I try to apply what I have learned from a class in practical settings	0.782				
Repurchase Intention	RI 1. I intend to study with this ESL service provider again.	0.843	0.935	0.741	0.912	1.908
	RI 2. I have every intention of attending classes from this ESL service provider in the future.	0.900				
	RI 3. I am likely to study with this ESL service provider in the future.	0.894				
	RI 4. I see myself purchasing from this ESL service provider again when I need to.	0.867				
	RI 5. This ESL service provider is my first option when I need to improve my English	0.795				

Note: FL = Factor Loadings, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CA = Cronbach's Alpha, and VIF = Variance Inflation Factor

Table 2 presents the measurement model results, confirming the reliability and validity of all constructs. Internal Consistency Reliability was excellent, with all constructs showing Composite Reliability (CR) values well above the 0.70 threshold, ranging from 0.801 (Tangibles) to 0.935 (Repurchase Intention) (Cheung et al., 2024). Convergent Validity was confirmed, as all constructs achieved an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value greater than the 0.50 cutoff, ranging from 0.568

(Empathy) to 0.741 (Repurchase Intention) (Manley et al., 2021; Ratasuk, 2024b). Individual Factor Loadings generally exceeded 0.70, with one Empathy item retained despite a loading of 0.614, as the collective validity measures remained strong (Cheung et al., 2024; Ratasuk, 2023a). The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all constructs ranged from 1.49 to 3.082, confirming that multicollinearity is not a concern for the structural model.

Table 3 Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratios)

	Replnt	Tangible	Assurance	Empathy	Reliabil	Respons	Engage
Replnt							
Tangible	0.544***						
Assuranc	0.624***	0.736***					
Empathy	0.597***	0.525***	0.737***				
Reliabil	0.572***	0.658***	0.843***	0.717***			
Respons	0.584***	0.593***	0.845***	0.874**	0.812*		
Engage	0.631***	0.435***	0.644***	0.576***	0.577***	0.6***	

Note: *** = $p \leq .001$, ** = $p \leq .01$, and * = $p \leq .05$, Replnt = Repurchase Intention, Tangible = Tangibles, Assuranc = Assurance, Emphy = Empathy, Reliabil = Reliability, Respons = Responsiveness, and Engage = Engagement

Table 3 displays the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio results, which assess the discriminant validity—the degree to which a construct is truly distinct from other constructs

in the model. Discriminant validity is generally supported when HTMT values are below a conservative threshold of 0.85 or a more liberal threshold of 0.90.

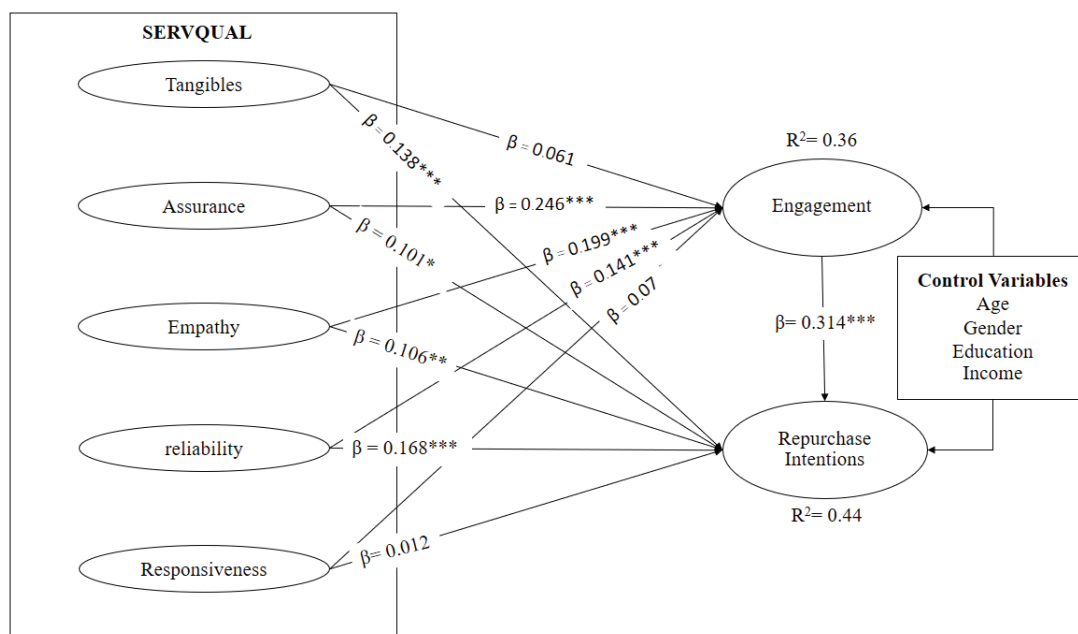


Figure 1 PLS-SEM Results

Direct Effects (H1-H6)

These hypotheses assessed the direct impact of each variable on Repurchase Intention. H1: Tangibles positively impact Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.138, p = 0.001$). Therefore, H1 is supported. H2: Assurance positively impacts Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.101, p = 0.014$). Therefore, H2 is supported. H3: Reliability positively impacts Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.106, p = 0.010$). Therefore, H3 is supported. H4: Empathy positively impacts Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.168, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H4 is supported. H5: Responsiveness does not impact Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.012, p = 0.399$). Therefore, H5 is not supported. H6: Student Engagement positively impacts Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.314, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H6 is strongly supported.

Mediation Effects Tested by Bootstrapping (H1a-H5a)

These hypotheses tested the model's core argument: whether Student Engagement serves as the mechanism (mediator) through which service quality dimensions influence Repurchase Intention. H1a: Student Engagement does not mediate between Tangibles and Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.019, p = 0.188$). Therefore, H1a is not supported. H2a: Student Engagement partially mediates between Assurance and Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.077, p = 0.002$). Therefore, H2a is supported. H3a: Student Engagement partially mediates between Reliability and Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.044, p = 0.047$). Therefore, H3a is supported. H4a: Student Engagement partially mediates between Empathy and Repurchase Intention

($\beta = 0.062, p = 0.012$). Therefore, H4a is supported. H5a: Student Engagement does not mediate between Responsiveness and Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.022, p = 0.187$). Therefore, H5a is not supported.

The control variables demonstrated a minimal impact on the model's key dependent variables. Only income has a significant adverse effect on Student Engagement ($\beta = -0.095, p = 0.019$). This finding indicates that higher-income students reported lower levels of engagement.

Discussion

This study aimed to empirically validate the mechanism through which service quality influences Repurchase Intention in the high-touch, instructor-led online ESL market in Yangon. The central thesis, that Student Engagement acts as the critical behavioral mediator, found strong, albeit nuanced, support. The most critical finding is the validation of Student Engagement as the single strongest predictor of Repurchase Intention ($\beta = 0.314, p < 0.001$), strongly supporting H6. This confirms that loyalty is an active behavioral consequence, aligning with Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) (Amoako et al., 2021; Juanli et al., 2025; Ratasuk et al., 2025) and prior research (Hsu, 2023; Owusu et al., 2025), as well as validating the integration of Social Capital Theory (Naing & Ratasuk, 2025; Ratasuk et al., 2025). The core of the research model was supported by the human-centric dimensions et al., 2024), Assurance, Empathy, and Reliability, which

were significant antecedents of engagement and showed a significant indirect effect on Repurchase Intention through Engagement (H2a, H3a, and H4a supported) (Ngo, Bui, et al., 2025; Surya Bahadur et al., 2024). This highlights that value is realized when service quality inspires active participation. Empathy had the largest total effect ($\beta = 0.230$). In contrast, Tangibles showed a significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.138, p = 0.001$) (H1 supported), but failed to predict Engagement (H1a not supported), suggesting it functions as a “hygiene factor” that encourages direct re-enrollment but doesn’t inspire active participation 14. Crucially, responsiveness was not significant either directly (H5 not supported) or indirectly (H5a not supported). This indicates that administrative efficiency is not a primary driver of loyalty; the in-class, human-to-human experience dictates repurchase decisions. Finally, the one significant control variable finding showed that Employment harmed Student Engagement ($\beta = -0.095, p = 0.019$), suggesting that time-poor employed students struggle with active engagement. Furthermore, it is important to note the high proportion of female respondents (82.4%) in this study. This demographic distribution likely reflects the actual composition of the language learning market in Yangon, rather than sampling bias. As such, the findings accurately represent the behavior of the primary consumer segment in this educational context.

Conclusions

This research provides empirical evidence that student retention in the competitive online ESL market is a function of behavioral investment. The study successfully validates a mediation model in which the “human” dimensions of service quality (Assurance, Empathy, Reliability) foster Student Engagement, which is essential for securing Repurchase Intention.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study makes three key contributions. It extends service-dominant logic into the high-touch digital education space by empirically confirming Student Engagement as a critical behavioral mediator, answering the call for research that moves beyond simple satisfaction-to-loyalty models. It refines the application of the SERVQUAL framework in this context, demonstrating that not all five dimensions are equal. The relational, human-centric dimensions (Empathy, Assurance) are the primary drivers of engagement, while process-oriented dimensions (Responsiveness) can be non-significant, and technical dimensions (Tangibles) may follow a different path to loyalty. It validates the dual-theoretic framework, showing how Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) explains the evaluation of service inputs, while Social Capital Theory explains the behavioral investment (Engagement) that flows from those evaluations.

Practical Implications

The study provides straightforward, actionable guidance for online ESL providers in Yangon and similar emerging markets seeking to improve student retention and sustainable growth. Providers must prioritize instructor development, as Empathy and Assurance were the strongest drivers of retention. This requires managers to shift investment toward rigorous instructor training, focusing on soft skills like providing personalized feedback, fostering a supportive environment, and building student confidence. Furthermore, providers must train for engagement, recognizing that simply hiring a good teacher is insufficient; instructors need training on specific pedagogical techniques, such as effective questioning and managing group discussions, that actively elicit student participation. While it is important to optimize “Tangibles,” don’t rely on them. Providers should view a modern, visually appealing platform as a hygiene factor that directly secures re-enrollment but cannot compensate for a poor, unengaging classroom experience. Crucially, providers should re-evaluate “Responsiveness,” as this administrative factor had no impact on retention, suggesting that resources currently spent on administrative

speed could be better allocated to enhancing the core in-class, human-to-human experience.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample was heavily skewed toward young, female, full-time students, which may limit generalizability to older, professional learners. Second, the discriminant validity of several SERVQUAL constructs, including Empathy and Responsiveness, and Assurance and Reliability, was a concern, as indicated by the high HTMT ratios. This suggests that these concepts overlap significantly in learners’ minds. Future research should develop a more parsimonious scale specifically for online, instructor-led education. Furthermore, future studies should investigate the consistency of the quality of instructors and staff over time, as well as the specific qualities of the online platform and content, such as the effectiveness of interactive and engaging materials. Finally, the cross-sectional design cannot definitively prove causality. A longitudinal study that tracks student engagement and re-enrollment decisions over several terms would provide a more robust test of the proposed model.

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