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The Fiduciary Digital Encounter: Developing a Grounded Theory of Institutional Trust Work and Service Quality in Nigeria's SME Banking Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a grounded theory of digital banking service quality by examining how Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria evaluate digital banking services under conditions of institutional uncertainty. Using a Straussian grounded theory approach, data were collected through 54 in-depth episodic narrative interviews with SME owner-managers and digital banking professionals across three major commercial centres in Nigeria. Iterative open, axial, and selective coding, supported by constant comparison and abductive reasoning, identified the Fiduciary Digital Encounter as the core category. The findings show that SMEs evaluate digital banking service quality not through efficiency and functional performance alone, but through the capacity of banking systems to establish, reinforce, and restore institutional trust during digitally mediated service encounters. Five interrelated dimensions of Institutional Trust Work emerged: Algorithmic Assurance, Restorative Responsiveness, Community-Based Conflict Resolution, Proactive Risk Protection, and Transparent Digital Communication. Together, these dimensions explain how institutional trust is actively produced, maintained, and repaired when SMEs encounter uncertainty, service disruptions, transaction risks, and digitally mediated interactions. The findings further indicate that perceived service quality is shaped by how effectively digital banking providers anticipate vulnerabilities, respond to failures, communicate transparently, and mobilize trusted social mechanisms to resolve conflicts. The study contributes to service quality and digital banking literature by conceptualizing Institutional

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Trust Work as a central mechanism through which digital service quality is experienced, interpreted, and sustained in institutionally uncertain environments. The resulting Fiduciary Digital Encounter framework extends conventional service quality perspectives by foregrounding trust production and restoration as fundamental processes in SME digital banking relationships.

Keywords: Digital Banking; Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM); Emerging Economies; Fiduciary Digital Encounter; Grounded Theory; Institutional Trust Work; SMEs; Service Quality

1. Introduction: Digital Banking Service Encounters as Processes of Institutional Trust Building

Digital technologies have transformed financial service delivery across both developed and emerging economies. Much of the literature on digital financial inclusion assumes a relatively straightforward relationship in which wider access to digital banking improves service quality, strengthens customer satisfaction, and ultimately promotes trust and economic participation[1,2]. This assumption has shaped both academic research and policy initiatives aimed at expanding digital financial services. Yet it offers only a partial explanation of how digital banking is experienced by small businesses operating in environments where institutional conditions remain fragile.

Nigeria provides a particularly important context for examining this issue. Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) contribute almost half of the country's gross domestic product and account for the majority of employment[3]. At the same time, these firms conduct business within an environment marked by unreliable digital infrastructure, regulatory inconsistency, cybersecurity risks, and weak institutional protections[4,5]. Although digital banking has become an essential component of business operations, SME owner-managers often judge these services by more than their speed or convenience. Their primary concern is whether the bank can reliably protect financial resources, support business continuity, and respond effectively when unexpected problems occur.

This context exposes an important limitation in prevailing service quality theories. Influential models, including SERVQUAL[6], E-S-QUAL[7], and more recent customer experience frameworks[8], largely draw on the expectation–disconfirmation tradition. They assume that customers compare perceived performance with prior expectations and that favourable evaluations generate satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. Within these models, trust is generally treated as an outcome of service quality.

The experiences of SMEs in digitally mediated financial environments suggest a different sequence. Where uncertainty is persistent and institutional safeguards cannot be taken for granted, trust appears to precede rather than follow evaluations of service quality. Before assessing whether a digital banking service is efficient or satisfactory, customers first consider whether the institution can be relied upon to protect their financial interests. Service quality is therefore interpreted through the lens of institutional confidence rather than simply through technical performance.

This study describes such settings as conditions of systemic fiduciary precarity, where everyday financial transactions are shaped by persistent perceptions of institutional vulnerability. Under these conditions, digital banking is not evaluated solely on its operational effectiveness. Instead, SMEs assess whether banks demonstrate the competence, transparency, and accountability expected of trusted financial intermediaries. Digital service encounters consequently become moments in which trust is actively constructed, reinforced, or weakened through ongoing interactions between customers and financial institutions.

Building on this perspective, the present study develops a grounded theory of digital banking service quality from the lived experiences of Nigerian SMEs. Rather than assuming predefined dimensions of service quality, it investigates how SME owner-managers themselves interpret positive and negative digital banking experiences and how these interpretations shape their understanding of quality.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

How do Nigerian SMEs construct and evaluate service quality during digital banking encounters, and what forms of institutional trust-building are required of banks operating

in environments characterised by institutional uncertainty?

To answer this question, the study pursues three objectives:

1. To reconceptualise digital banking service encounters as processes of institutional trust-building rather than service delivery alone.
2. To develop an empirically grounded theory explaining how SMEs evaluate digital banking service quality under conditions of institutional uncertainty.
3. To extend service quality theory by proposing an alternative framework better suited to high-risk and institutionally fragile contexts.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Points of Departure

This study draws on insights from service quality research, institutional theory, and relationship marketing while questioning several assumptions that underpin these traditions. Rather than viewing service quality as a stable assessment of organisational performance, it examines how quality is socially constructed within digital banking environments where institutional uncertainty shapes customers' interpretations of everyday service encounters.

2.1. From Service Quality to Institutional Trust Building

Research on service quality has long been dominated by models that explain customer evaluations through comparisons between expected and perceived performance [6,9]. As services increasingly moved into digital environments, scholars extended these ideas through frameworks such as E-S-QUAL and electronic customer experience models [7,10]. More recently, service scholarship has shifted towards broader concepts, including service ecosystems, value co-creation, customer vulnerability, service resilience, and transformative service research [11–13]. These developments recognise that value emerges through interactions among multiple actors rather than through service delivery alone.

Despite these advances, much of the literature assumes that service encounters occur within relatively stable institutional environments. Core dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and security are generally treated as characteristics of service systems or provider performance. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how customers evaluate service quality when institutions themselves are perceived as uncertain or insufficiently protective.

For Nigerian SMEs, digital banking extends beyond executing transactions efficiently. Reliability is understood not only as system availability or transaction accuracy but also as confidence that the bank can safeguard business operations when technological failures, fraud, or institutional disruptions occur. Likewise, security encompasses more than protecting personal information. It reflects the perceived ability of financial institutions to preserve business continuity, minimise risk, and respond effectively when customers become vulnerable [14].

These observations suggest that digital banking performs an institutional role that extends beyond service provision. Through technological infrastructures, communication practices, risk management systems, and mechanisms for resolving disputes, banks continuously shape customers' confidence in the financial system. Service quality, therefore, emerges not simply from functional performance but from the institution's ongoing capacity to establish, maintain, and restore trust. Understanding digital banking service quality in institutionally uncertain environments requires a framework that places this trust-building process at the centre of analysis rather than treating it as a secondary outcome of service performance.

2.2. Beyond the Trust–Satisfaction Relationship: Trust as an Operant Resource

Relationship marketing has consistently identified trust as a cornerstone of enduring customer relationships. Classical models propose that favourable service experiences enhance customer satisfaction, satisfaction strengthens trust, and trust subsequently promotes commitment, loyalty, and long-term relationship continuity [15,16]. Within digital service settings, trust has similarly been viewed as a mechanism that reduces perceived risk, alleviates privacy concerns, and encourages technology adoption [17,18]. More recent work on swift trust in virtual environments [19] and technology-enabled trust mechanisms such as blockchain [20] continues to treat trust primarily as a facilitator of successful exchange.

Although these perspectives have significantly enriched understanding of digital customer relationships, they

largely assume that trust develops after customers' experience of satisfactory service. Findings from the present study suggest a different pattern. For SMEs operating in institutionally uncertain environments, trust is not simply an outcome of service performance but a condition through which service performance is interpreted.

This study, therefore, reconceptualizes trust as an operant resource, drawing on Service-Dominant Logic [11]. Operant resources are intangible capabilities that generate value by influencing and transforming exchange processes rather than being consumed during them. In digital banking, trust performs precisely this function. It shapes how customers interpret system reliability, evaluate service failures, and decide whether to continue engaging with financial institutions despite persistent uncertainty.

From this perspective, SME owner-managers approach digital banking with an ongoing assessment of whether their bank possesses the capability and willingness to safeguard financial resources when unexpected disruptions occur. Evaluations of service quality, therefore, extend beyond transaction speed, platform usability, or technical performance. They also reflect confidence that the institution can protect business interests, manage risk, and respond effectively when normal service conditions are disrupted.

Viewing trust as an operant resource shifts the focus of service quality from the evaluation of isolated service encounters to the institutional capabilities that sustain confidence over time. Trust is continually strengthened, challenged, repaired, and renewed through interactions between customers and financial institutions. It therefore functions not only as a prerequisite for exchange but also as a resource that enables continued participation in digital financial ecosystems. In doing so, this study extends Service-Dominant Logic by highlighting the institutional character of trust as a resource that is collectively produced through organisational practices, customer experiences, and broader socio-economic conditions.

2.3. Institutional Voids and Institutional Trust Work

The concept of institutional voids explains how organisations operate in environments where formal market-supporting institutions are weak, fragmented, or unreliable [21,22]. Under such conditions, firms often perform functions that would otherwise be undertaken by legal, regulatory, or governance institutions. Recent research has shown that digital platforms increasingly assume these responsibilities by establishing rules, coordinating market activities, and creating private governance mechanisms that compensate for institutional deficiencies [23,24].

This study extends that perspective by integrating institutional work theory. Institutional work refers to the deliberate actions through which individuals and organisations create, maintain, and transform institutional arrangements [25,26]. While the concept has been widely applied to organisational and field-level change, its relevance to everyday service interactions has received comparatively little attention.

Our findings suggest that digital banking encounters can be understood as sites of institutional trust work. Rather than functioning solely as transactional exchanges, these interactions become opportunities through which banks actively reinforce customers' confidence in the stability and integrity of the financial system. Technological infrastructures, communication practices, customer support, fraud prevention mechanisms, and dispute-resolution processes collectively perform institutional functions that help customers navigate uncertainty and reduce perceived vulnerability.

For example, resolving failed transactions promptly does more than restore operational efficiency; it reinforces confidence that the institution remains dependable when problems arise. Similarly, proactive fraud alerts, transparent communication during service disruptions, and effective dispute resolution contribute to customers' perceptions that the bank is capable of protecting their financial interests. Such practices strengthen trust in the broader exchange system rather than merely improving satisfaction with individual service encounters.

Building on these insights, this study introduces Institutional Trust Work as a theoretical construct that explains how service quality is produced through institutional practices that create, maintain, and restore trust. From this perspective, customers evaluate digital banking not only by its functional performance but also by the extent to which banks successfully reduce uncertainty, safeguard economic interests, and sustain confidence in ongoing exchange relationships.

This conceptualisation provides the theoretical foundation for the substantive theory developed in this study. It positions digital service quality as the outcome of continuous

institutional trust-building rather than simply the successful delivery of expected service performance.

The conceptual hierarchy is shown in **Figure 1**. The three concepts operate at different analytical levels and should not be treated as interchangeable. Institutional voids refer to the macro-structural condition in which formal market-supporting institutions are weak, fragmented, or unreliable[21,22]. Systemic Fiduciary Precarity refers to the condition as experienced by SME actors: a persistent perception that financial transactions and business continuity remain vulnerable because institutional protection cannot be taken for granted. Institutional Trust Work refers to the organisational response to that condition—the concrete practices through which banks create, maintain, repair, and renew confidence. The Fiduciary Digital Encounter is the interactional mechanism through which this trust work becomes visible to SMEs and through which service quality is interpreted. Thus, the hierarchy is: Institutional Voids → Systemic Fiduciary Precarity → Institutional Trust Work → Fiduciary Digital Encounter → DBF-SQ evaluation. This distinction prevents the concepts from becoming overlapping labels and clarifies their analytical ordering.

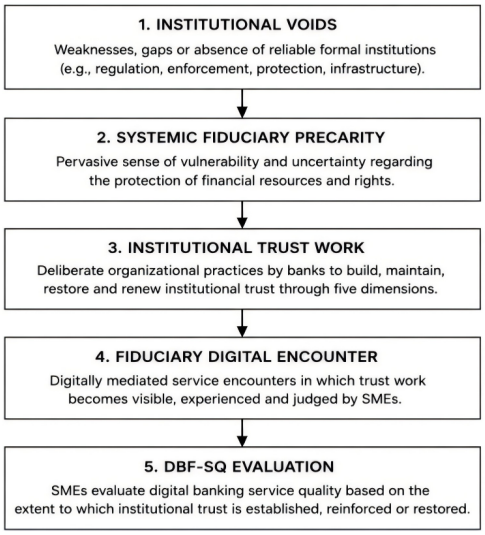


Figure 1. Conceptual hierarchy linking institutional conditions, trust work and service quality.
Source: Author's own work.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a Straussian grounded theory methodology[27,28] to develop a substantive explanation of how SMEs construct and evaluate service quality in digital banking under conditions of institutional uncertainty. Grounded theory was selected because existing service quality frameworks offer limited insight into how trust is formed and sustained in digitally mediated financial environments characterised by weak institutional safeguards. Rather than testing predetermined constructs, the study sought to generate theory inductively from participants' experiences.

To strengthen conceptual development, the analysis incorporated principles of situational analysis[29] and abductive reasoning[30]. Situational analysis encouraged attention to the broader institutional conditions shaping digital banking encounters, while abductive reasoning supported an iterative dialogue between emerging empirical patterns and existing theoretical perspectives. This combination facilitated the development of a contextually grounded theory that remained closely connected to participants' accounts while contributing to wider debates in service quality, relationship marketing, and institutional theory.

Consistent with grounded theory, data collection, coding, theoretical sampling, and theory development proceeded concurrently. Insights generated during analysis informed subsequent sampling decisions, interview questions, and conceptual refinement until theoretical saturation was achieved.

3.2. Research Context

Nigeria provides an appropriate setting for examining digital banking service quality because rapid digital financial innovation has occurred alongside persistent institutional and infrastructural challenges. Although commercial banks and financial technology firms have significantly expanded digital banking services, users continue to encounter unstable network infrastructure, cybersecurity threats, evolving regulatory frameworks, and periodic service disruptions[4,5].

These challenges are particularly consequential for SMEs whose daily operations depend heavily on reliable digital payment systems. Transaction delays, failed transfers, fraud incidents, and temporary account restrictions can disrupt business activities and create substantial financial uncertainty. Under these conditions, digital banking is evaluated not only by its functional performance but also by the extent to which financial institutions can maintain confidence, manage risk, and protect customers' commercial interests. This environment, therefore, provides a rich em-

pirical setting for exploring how trust is constructed through everyday digital service encounters.

3.3. Theoretical Sampling and Participants

Participant recruitment followed the principle of theoretical sampling, whereby sampling decisions evolved in response to emerging concepts rather than being determined in advance. As analysis progressed, participants were selected to elaborate, refine, and challenge developing categories until additional interviews no longer generated conceptually meaningful insights.

The final sample comprised 54 participants drawn from two complementary groups.

The first group included 38 SME owner-managers operating in Lagos, Onitsha, and Kano. These commercial centres were selected to capture variation in regional business environments, industry activities, and patterns of digital banking use. All participants relied on digital banking as their primary channel for business transactions. As theoretical categories developed, subsequent sampling focused on SMEs with experiences relevant to emerging concepts, including transaction failures, fraud, account restrictions, and high-volume digital transactions.

The second group consisted of 16 digital banking professionals, including product managers, digital operations managers, compliance officers, customer experience specialists, and technology personnel involved in the design and management of digital banking services. Their perspectives provided insight into the organisational practices and decision-making processes underlying the service experiences described by SME participants. Including both customer and institutional perspectives strengthened theoretical development by enabling comparison across multiple viewpoints.

3.4. Participant Profile and Sample Diversity

To improve reporting transparency, **Table 1** summarises the participant characteristics explicitly recorded in the study materials. The dataset documents participant group, role, location and digital-banking dependence for the SME owner-manager sample, but it does not contain a systematic profile matrix for age, industry sector, business-size band, length of existence, or geographic reach. These variables are therefore not reconstructed or inferred retrospectively. Reporting them as unavailable is preferable to introducing unsupported classifications and makes the boundary of the evidence explicit.

Table 1. Participant characteristics and sample diversity.

Profile Characteristic	SME Owner-Managers (n = 38)	Digital Banking Professionals (n = 16)
Participant role	SME owner-managers	Product managers, digital operations managers, compliance officers, customer-experience specialists and technology personnel
Geographic location	Lagos, Onitsha and Kano	Not systematically specified in the manuscript
Digital-banking dependence	All relied on digital banking as the primary channel for business transactions	Professional experience in the design/management of digital banking services
Age	Not systematically recorded/reported	Not systematically recorded/reported
Industry sector	Not systematically recorded/reported	Not systematically classified by sector
Business size	SME status established; size bands not systematically recorded/reported	Not applicable
Length of business existence	Not systematically recorded/reported	Not applicable
Geographic reach of business	Not systematically recorded/reported	Not applicable

This reporting limitation has an important implication for SME heterogeneity. Although theoretical sampling deliberately sought variation in commercial centres and relevant digital-banking experiences, the present dataset does not support defensible subgroup comparisons by industry, business size, firm age, geographic reach, or participant age. Accordingly, the study does not claim that service-quality evaluations are identical across SME subgroups. Instead, the findings are presented as a cross-case grounded explanation of recurring trust-related processes. Future studies should collect these profiling variables systematically and examine whether sectoral exposure, digital dependence, firm maturity, or geographic reach conditions the salience of the five DBF-SQ dimensions.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the Straussian grounded theory procedures of open, axial, and selective coding [27], complemented by abductive reasoning [30] and situational analysis [29]. Analysis was iterative throughout the study, with constant comparison guiding movement between emerging concepts, subsequent interviews, and relevant theoretical perspectives. Rather than treating coding as a linear sequence, conceptual categories were progressively refined as new data challenged or strengthened earlier interpretations.

Coding Framework and Category Development

To make the analytic transformation more transparent, **Figure 2** provides a coding tree that links representative initial codes to focused patterns, axial categories, the five dimensions of Institutional Trust Work, and the core category of the Fiduciary Digital Encounter. The tree is a condensed audit representation rather than a frequency count. Initial codes were retained for their closeness to participants' accounts; related codes were compared across interviews and progressively integrated during axial coding. Selective coding then connected the five dimensions through the higher-order process of Institutional Trust Work and identified the Fiduciary Digital Encounter as the core category because it best explained how the dimensions converged during digital banking encounters.

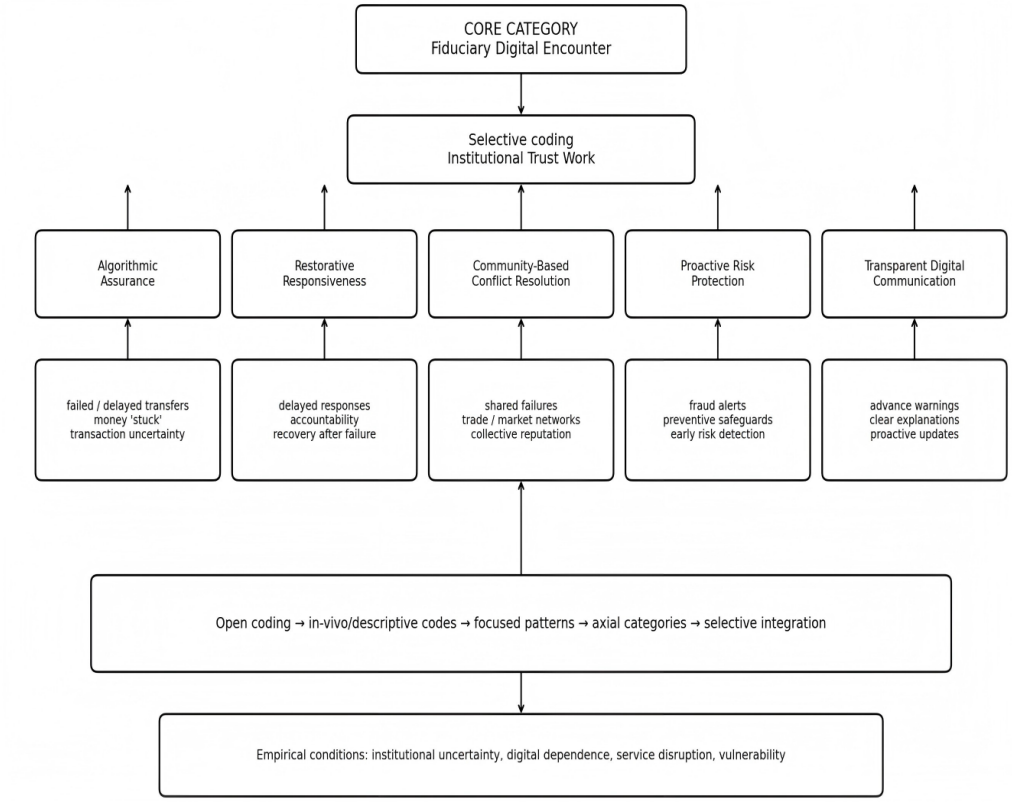


Figure 2. Coding tree: From initial codes to the DBF-SQ core category.

Source: Author's own work.

(1) Open Coding

Analysis began with line-by-line coding of interview transcripts to remain close to participants' experiences and avoid imposing predetermined theoretical categories. Initial coding generated a large number of descriptive and *in vivo* codes that reflected how SME owner-managers understood digital banking in their everyday business activities. Expressions such as *"money stuck in limbo," "the system failed without explanation," "there is nobody to hold accountable,"* and *"I just need to know my money is safe"* captured recurring concerns that extended beyond transaction efficiency. As coding progressed, it became evident that participants rarely discussed service quality solely in terms of speed or convenience. Instead, their accounts centred on uncertainty, vulnerability, institutional reliability, and confidence in the bank's ability to respond when problems occurred. Situational maps were developed alongside coding to examine how these experiences were shaped by interactions among customers, banking technologies, organisational practices, regulatory arrangements, and the wider institutional environment.

(2) Axial Coding

The second stage focused on relating categories using the coding paradigm proposed by Strauss and Corbin[27]. Categories were examined in terms of their causal conditions, contextual influences, intervening factors, interactional strategies, and consequences, allowing fragmented observations to be integrated into broader conceptual explanations.

A consistent pattern emerged across interviews. System failures, delayed responses, limited communication, and opaque decision-making intensified perceptions of institutional vulnerability, whereas timely recovery, transparent communication, and visible protective actions strengthened confidence in the bank. These recurring relationships suggested that participants evaluated digital banking primarily through the institution's capacity to manage uncertainty rather than through technical performance alone.

Abductive reasoning proved particularly valuable during this stage. Several recurring themes, especially participants' expectation that banks should act as protectors rather than simply service providers, were not adequately explained by existing service quality or customer satisfaction models. This prompted iterative engagement with institutional theory, relationship marketing, and Service-Dominant Logic, enabling empirical observations and theoretical interpretation to inform one another throughout the analysis.

(3) Selective Coding and Theory Development

The final stage integrated all major categories around a single explanatory concept. Through ongoing comparison and theoretical refinement, the Fiduciary Digital Encounter emerged as the core category because it provided the most coherent explanation of participants' experiences across the dataset.

Rather than viewing digital banking as a sequence of service transactions, the emerging theory conceptualises each encounter as a process through which banks demonstrate their capacity to protect customers' economic interests under conditions of institutional uncertainty. Alternative explanations based primarily on satisfaction, efficiency, or transaction performance were progressively set aside because they did not adequately account for participants' consistent emphasis on trust restoration, institutional accountability, and perceived protection during service disruptions.

The resulting substantive theory proposes that digital banking service quality is evaluated less by functional performance than by the effectiveness with which financial institutions perform Institutional Trust Work. From this perspective, service quality reflects customers' confidence that banks can maintain, restore, and sustain trust when uncertainty becomes an unavoidable feature of digital financial exchange.

3.6. Research Quality and Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba[31], with attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability throughout the research process.

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants across three major commercial centres in Nigeria and through the iterative relationship between data collection and analysis. Emerging interpretations were continually refined as additional interviews either reinforced or challenged developing conceptual categories.

Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting interview procedures, coding decisions, analytical memos, theoretical sampling decisions, and category development. This record provides a transparent account of how the analysis progressed from raw empirical data to an integrated substantive theory.

To enhance interpretive validity, preliminary findings were presented during four member-validation workshops involving SME owner-managers and digital banking professionals. Participants reviewed the emerging conceptual framework, clarified areas of ambiguity, and confirmed that the developing interpretations reflected their experiences. Their feedback informed subsequent analytical refinement while preserving the inductive nature of theory development.

Transferability was addressed through rich contextual descriptions of the research setting, participant experiences, and the institutional characteristics of Nigeria's digital banking environment. Although grounded theory does not seek statistical generalisation, these descriptions enable readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other digitally mediated service contexts characterised by institutional uncertainty.

Taken together, these procedures ensured that the emerging theory remained firmly grounded in participants' experiences while achieving the conceptual abstraction expected of substantive grounded theory.

4. Findings: The Fiduciary Digital Encounter

Analysis produced a substantive theory explaining how Nigerian SMEs evaluate service quality in digital banking. Contrary to conventional service quality models, participants did not primarily judge digital banking by the extent to which services met prior expectations or delivered efficient transactions. Instead, they assessed whether banks consistently demonstrated the capability to protect financial interests, reduce uncertainty, and sustain confidence during routine operations and service disruptions.

The core category, the Fiduciary Digital Encounter, captures this process. It describes digital service encounters as institutional spaces in which banks actively construct, maintain, and restore trust through their technological systems, communication practices, and organisational responses. Within this framework, digital banking service quality is understood as the perceived effectiveness of Institutional Trust Work rather than as a simple evaluation of functional performance.

Analysis identified five interrelated dimensions of Institutional Trust Work that together constitute the Digital Banking Fiduciary–Service Quality (DBF-SQ) Model. Although analytically distinct, these dimensions operate as an integrated system through which SMEs interpret and evaluate the quality of digital banking services under conditions of institutional uncertainty.

4.1. The Core Category: The Fiduciary Digital Encounter

Analysis identified the Fiduciary Digital Encounter as the core category explaining how SMEs evaluate digital banking service quality. Rather than viewing digital interactions as isolated service transactions, participants described them as moments in which financial institutions temporarily assume responsibility for protecting customers' commercial interests under conditions of uncertainty.

Within these encounters, service quality was rarely judged by efficiency alone. Instead, participants focused on how banks responded when routine transactions became uncertain or failed altogether. Their evaluations reflected an ongoing assessment of whether the institution could be trusted to preserve business continuity, resolve problems, and safeguard financial resources. In this sense, trust emerged not as a consequence of successful service delivery but as the central lens through which service quality itself was interpreted.

One SME owner in Onitsha explained:

> *"The app is just packaging. The real issue is what happens when something goes wrong. Does the bank behave like a government that does nothing, or like someone who stands with my business?"*

This quotation captures the underlying logic of the Fiduciary Digital Encounter. What participants ultimately evaluated was not the digital interface itself, but the institution behind it. Service quality depended on whether the bank could move beyond routine service provision and fulfil a

broader fiduciary role during periods of uncertainty.

Five interconnected dimensions of Institutional Trust Work explain how this fiduciary role is enacted.

4.2. Algorithmic Assurance

The first dimension, Algorithmic Assurance, reflects participants' expectations that digital banking systems should provide dependable transaction execution and protect the integrity of financial exchanges. Although reliability has long been recognised as a component of service quality, participants interpreted it differently. Their primary concern was not whether transactions were processed quickly but whether the system consistently protected funds when unexpected failures occurred.

A recurring issue involved transfers that remained unresolved for extended periods. Participants rarely described these incidents as technical malfunctions; instead, they viewed them as institutional failures because they undermined confidence in the bank's ability to safeguard business resources.

As one logistics business owner in Lagos observed:

> *"If a transaction fails, the money must return immediately. If it hangs for days, that is not a technical issue; it is a failure of trust."*

For participants, reliable algorithms represented more than technological competence. They symbolised the institution's commitment to ensuring transactional certainty in an environment where financial disruptions could directly threaten business operations.

4.3. Restorative Responsiveness

Participants recognised that service failures were inevitable within digital banking systems. What distinguished high-quality service was therefore not the absence of problems but the institution's ability to restore confidence once failures occurred.

Restorative Responsiveness describes the organisational practices through which banks acknowledge customer vulnerability, assume responsibility, and resolve problems in ways that rebuild trust. Participants consistently emphasised that effective recovery involved more than procedural efficiency. They valued responsiveness that recognised the commercial consequences of service failures and demonstrated genuine institutional accountability.

A senior digital banking manager explained this distinction:

> *"We don't call it customer service internally. It is a trust restoration function. The goal is not speed, but the recovery of confidence after a critical failure."*

These accounts suggest that service recovery functions simultaneously as an operational and relational process. Successful resolution restores not only transactions but also customers' confidence in the institution.

4.4. Community-Based Conflict Resolution

A third dimension emerged from participants' descriptions of how trust was shaped within business communities. Many SMEs evaluated banks not only through their own experiences but also through the collective experiences of trade associations, market networks, and professional groups.

Within these communities, service failures rapidly became shared knowledge, and banks were often judged according to how they responded to issues affecting individual members. Consequently, trust extended beyond the individual customer–bank relationship and became embedded within wider social networks.

A trader in Kano explained:

> *"If the system affects one of us, it affects all of us. The bank knows it answers to the entire group, not just one person."*

These findings indicate that digital banking service quality is socially constructed. Institutional legitimacy depends not only on individual satisfaction but also on maintaining credibility within broader business communities that collectively influence perceptions of trustworthiness.

4.5. Proactive Risk Protection

Participants consistently expected banks to anticipate and reduce potential risks rather than merely respond after financial losses had occurred.

Proactive Risk Protection refers to the institution's ability to identify emerging threats, prevent avoidable losses,

and support business continuity through anticipatory action. Fraud detection systems, suspicious transaction alerts, behavioural monitoring, and preventive account safeguards were frequently described as indicators of high-quality service.

As one SME owner remarked:

> *"A good bank is one that sees danger before I do—not only from fraudsters, but also from its own system mistakes."*

Rather than viewing security as a passive technological feature, participants regarded it as an active institutional responsibility. Banks were expected to intervene before uncertainty translated into financial harm.

4.6. Transparent Digital Communication

Communication emerged as another critical mechanism through which banks sustained institutional trust. Participants consistently distinguished between institutions that communicated openly during service disruptions and those that remained silent until customers initiated complaints.

Transparent Digital Communication refers to timely, accurate, and proactive information that enables customers to understand system conditions and make informed business decisions during periods of uncertainty.

One entrepreneur explained:

> *"When the bank tells me in advance that transfers may be delayed, I don't panic. I adjust. That honesty makes me trust them more, not less."*

Transparency, therefore, functioned not simply as information sharing but as a means of reducing uncertainty and preserving customers' sense of control.

4.7. Institutional Trust as a Dynamic Process

The findings indicate that these five dimensions do not operate independently. Instead, they interact to form a dynamic process through which institutional trust is continually established, tested, repaired, and reinforced.

For many participants, trust initially developed through recommendations from business networks and previous interactions with financial institutions. Subsequent digital encounters either strengthened or weakened that trust depending on the consistency of algorithmic performance, the effectiveness of service recovery, the visibility of risk protection, and the quality of institutional communication. Positive experiences accumulated over time, reinforcing confidence in the bank, whereas unresolved failures rapidly undermined institutional credibility.

This process suggests that digital banking service quality is not a single post-service evaluation. Rather, it is an ongoing judgment about whether financial institutions consistently demonstrate the competence and commitment required to support commercial activity under conditions of institutional uncertainty.

Figure 3 summarises this process by illustrating how the five dimensions of Institutional Trust Work interact within the Fiduciary Digital Encounter to produce sustained institutional trust.

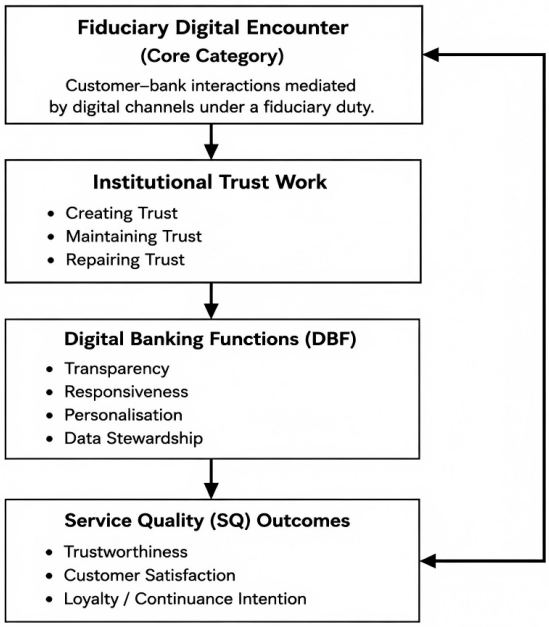


Figure 3. The DBF-SQ model: A cyclical framework of institutional trust work in a fiduciary digital encounter.
Note: Service quality outcomes reinforce and shape future fiduciary digital encounters, creating a continuous cycle of institutional trust work.
Source: Author's own work.

Trust deterioration, recovery, and accumulated development. The temporal pattern is important to the model. Trust was not treated as a fixed state acquired once and then retained automatically. Repeated positive encounters could accumulate into a reservoir of confidence, while unresolved failures could deplete that confidence. Effective recovery could partially or substantially restore trust, depending on the

visibility of accountability, communication, and protective action. This process explains why a single technically successful transaction may be less consequential than a repeated pattern of institutional behaviour. The DBF-SQ model, therefore, treats trust as cumulative and reversible: it can be built through consistent protection, deteriorate through repeated or poorly managed failures, and recover when subsequent encounters demonstrate credible institutional responsibility.

4.8. Competition, Multiple Banks, and Comparative Trust Judgments

Negative Cases and Alternative Interpretations

The analysis also considered whether participants continued to rely on conventional functional measures of digital service quality, including speed, convenience, usability, and ease of completing transactions. The evidence does not support a complete rejection of these criteria. Rather, participants generally treated functional performance as necessary but insufficient: a fast, convenient or easy-to-use platform could be viewed positively during routine transactions, but these qualities did not fully determine service-quality judgments when money was delayed, fraud was suspected, or a transaction failed. This distinction is important because it prevents the DBF-SQ model from being interpreted as claiming that efficiency and usability are irrelevant. Instead, the grounded explanation suggests that conventional functional criteria become embedded within a broader fiduciary evaluation when institutional uncertainty is salient.

No statistically meaningful subgroup difference is claimed because the grounded-theory design was not intended to estimate between-group effects and the available participant-profile information does not support such testing. The strongest alternative interpretation—that SMEs simply value conventional efficiency but become more vocal when failures occur—was examined during analysis. It does not fully account for the recurring emphasis on protection, accountability, transparent communication, and recovery across the dataset. The resulting interpretation is therefore not that conventional service quality disappears, but that its meaning is reframed through institutional trust when the consequences of service failure are commercially consequential.

Competition and multi-banking require a cautious interpretation because the study did not systematically record the number of banks used by each SME, switching behaviour, or formal comparisons among competing banks. The data, therefore, cannot establish that participants' trust evaluations were caused by direct comparison between multiple banks. Nevertheless, participants' references to previous interactions with financial institutions and recommendations within business networks indicate that trust judgments could be informed by accumulated relational experience rather than by a single encounter. In a competitive banking environment, the availability of alternative providers may also raise the practical importance of recovery and accountability: an SME that can move transactions to another bank may evaluate a failure partly in terms of whether the focal bank gives sufficient reason to remain. This is a theoretical implication rather than an empirically tested subgroup effect in the present study. Future research should explicitly examine multi-banking, bank-switching intentions, perceived competitive alternatives, and comparative service-quality judgments.

5. Discussion: Theoretical Contributions and the Dismantling of Dominant Service Logic

This study set out to advance a trust-based theory of service quality in digitally mediated, institutionally fragile environments. The resulting DBF-SQ model and its central construct, the "Fiduciary Digital Encounter," generate three interrelated theoretical contributions that collectively challenge and extend dominant assumptions in service science, institutional theory, and digital CRM research. Rather than offering an incremental refinement of existing models, the study proposes a paradigmatic shift in how service quality is conceptualised, evaluated, and theorised under conditions of systemic uncertainty.

5.1. Institutional Trust Work as a New Perspective on Service Quality

The primary contribution of this study is the development of Institutional Trust Work as a theoretical lens for understanding digital banking service quality in institutionally uncertain environments. Existing service quality research has largely conceptualised quality as customers' evaluations of service performance relative to prior expectations [6,7]. Our

findings suggest that this explanation is incomplete in contexts where institutional protections cannot be assumed.

The clarified conceptual hierarchy is central to this contribution. Institutional Voids describe the structural environment; Systemic Fiduciary Precarity captures how that environment is experienced as persistent vulnerability; and Institutional Trust Work identifies the organisational practices used to manage that vulnerability. The Fiduciary Digital Encounter is the micro-level setting in which those practices become observable and consequential for service-quality evaluation. This hierarchy distinguishes antecedent condition, experienced mechanism, organisational response, and interactional site, thereby avoiding conceptual overlap.

For Nigerian SMEs, digital banking service quality was evaluated less by the efficiency of individual transactions than by the institution's ability to create, maintain, and restore trust during moments of uncertainty. Banks were expected to provide reassurance, respond effectively to service failures, protect customers from financial risk, and communicate transparently throughout the service encounter. These practices collectively constitute what we conceptualise as Institutional Trust Work.

This perspective extends institutional work theory [25,26] by showing that institutional work is not confined to organisational fields or large-scale institutional change. It is also enacted through everyday service interactions, where organisations reinforce institutional confidence through routine digital practices. In digitally mediated financial services, seemingly ordinary activities such as reversing failed transactions, preventing fraud, or communicating during system disruptions perform important institutional functions because they shape customers' confidence in the reliability of economic exchange.

Consequently, service quality is understood not simply as a psychological evaluation of performance but as an institutional accomplishment emerging from repeated interactions between customers, technological systems, and financial institutions.

5.2. Repositioning Trust within Service Quality Theory

A second contribution concerns the role of trust within service quality research. Relationship marketing and digital service studies have generally treated trust as an outcome of positive service experiences that subsequently strengthens commitment and loyalty [15–17]. The findings presented here indicate a different process.

Participants evaluated digital banking through an ongoing assessment of whether financial institutions could be relied upon to protect their commercial interests when uncertainty arose. Trust, therefore, functioned less as a consequence of satisfactory service and more as the interpretive mechanism through which service quality itself was judged.

Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic [11], this study conceptualises trust as an operant resource that shapes rather than follows service encounters. Trust is continually reinforced, weakened, repaired, and renewed through interactions between customers and banks. This dynamic perspective departs from linear models that position service quality, satisfaction, and trust within a fixed causal sequence. Instead, it suggests that service quality and trust evolve together through recurring episodes of institutional interaction.

These findings also indicate that customer satisfaction alone provides only a partial explanation of digital banking behaviour in high-risk environments. Participants were often willing to tolerate temporary inconvenience provided the institution demonstrated accountability, transparency, and a clear commitment to protecting their financial interests. Under conditions of institutional uncertainty, confidence in the institution appeared to be more influential than short-term satisfaction with individual service encounters.

The dynamic formulation also accommodates deterioration and recovery. Accumulated positive encounters can create confidence that functions as a relational resource, whereas repeated unresolved failures can erode that resource. Recovery practices are therefore theoretically significant because they can interrupt a downward trust trajectory. Competition and access to alternative banks may amplify these dynamics, but the present study did not collect sufficient multi-banking data to test this proposition. The appropriate conclusion is therefore conceptual: competitive alternatives may shape the threshold at which SMEs tolerate failures or remain committed to a bank, and this should be tested empirically in future research.

5.3. The DBF-SQ Model as a Contextually Grounded Service Quality Framework

The third contribution is the development of the Digital Banking Fiduciary Service Quality (DBF-SQ) Model, a

substantive theory grounded in the experiences of Nigerian SMEs.

Unlike adaptations of SERVQUAL or generic digital service quality frameworks, the DBF-SQ model emerged inductively from participants' accounts of digital banking within an environment characterised by institutional uncertainty. The five dimensions—Algorithmic Assurance, Restorative Responsiveness, Community-Based Conflict Resolution, Proactive Risk Protection, and Transparent Digital Communication—capture the institutional practices through which customers interpret and evaluate service quality.

Although developed within the Nigerian banking sector, the model has relevance beyond this empirical setting. Many digitally mediated services now operate in environments where users face uncertainty arising from weak institutions, technological risks, or limited regulatory protection. The conceptual logic underlying Institutional Trust Work may therefore provide a useful framework for understanding service quality in other contexts, including digital financial platforms, platform-based labour markets, digital health services, humanitarian technologies, and other high-risk digital ecosystems. Future research should examine the extent to which these dimensions are transferable across institutional settings and service industries.

Rather than proposing a universal replacement for existing service quality models, the DBF-SQ framework complements them by highlighting institutional trust-building as an additional explanatory mechanism in contexts where formal institutions provide limited certainty.

6. Practical Implications

The findings also have important implications for the design and management of digital banking services. If service quality is experienced as Institutional Trust Work, banks need to move beyond strategies that prioritise operational efficiency alone and instead strengthen the institutional practices that sustain customer confidence.

6.1. Implications for Digital Banking Strategy and Operations

First, banks should recognise trust-building as a strategic organisational capability rather than a by-product of customer service. Responsibility for trust should extend across digital operations, customer experience, compliance, cybersecurity, and risk management so that customers experience consistent institutional support throughout their interactions with the bank.

Second, performance indicators should move beyond traditional measures such as system availability or transaction speed. The findings suggest that customers place greater value on how effectively institutions recover from failures than on whether failures occur at all. Rapid reversal of failed transactions, transparent handling of disputes, and effective communication during service disruptions all contribute directly to customers' evaluations of service quality.

Third, customer support should be designed as a mechanism for restoring institutional confidence rather than simply resolving technical problems. Service recovery processes that acknowledge customers' financial vulnerability, communicate clearly, and resolve issues promptly are more likely to preserve trust and encourage continued engagement.

Fourth, banks operating in environments where business communities strongly influence purchasing decisions should engage more actively with trade associations, market groups, and other collective networks. Because trust often develops through shared experiences, strengthening relationships with these communities can reinforce institutional legitimacy beyond individual customer interactions.

Finally, communication strategies should extend beyond promoting convenience and digital innovation. Participants consistently valued timely, transparent communication about service disruptions, fraud prevention, and system risks because such information enabled them to make informed business decisions. In this sense, communication functions not simply as information sharing but as an important component of institutional trust-building.

6.2. Implications for Policy and Financial Regulation

The findings also have implications for financial regulation, particularly in emerging economies where digital banking increasingly supports commercial activity but institutional uncertainty remains high. If service quality is experienced through Institutional Trust Work, regulatory approaches should extend beyond technical compliance and consumer protection to consider how regulatory frameworks

contribute to maintaining confidence in digital financial systems.

First, regulators should encourage mechanisms that reduce uncertainty following digital transaction failures. Prompt reversal of unsuccessful transactions, clearly defined resolution timeframes, and transparent escalation procedures can minimise periods during which customers lose access to business funds. From the perspective developed in this study, prolonged uncertainty represents more than an operational inconvenience; it undermines confidence in the institutional reliability of digital financial services.

Second, the findings suggest value in strengthening collaborative approaches to dispute resolution. Business associations, market organisations, and recognised trade groups often play an important role in shaping trust among SMEs. Incorporating these organisations into structured complaint resolution and consumer engagement processes could strengthen institutional accountability while improving communication between regulators, financial institutions, and business communities.

Third, existing regulatory standards could be broadened to place greater emphasis on proactive customer protection. Beyond compliance with cybersecurity and data privacy requirements, supervisory frameworks might also evaluate how effectively financial institutions anticipate operational risks, communicate emerging threats, and protect customers from avoidable financial losses. Such measures would reinforce the role of regulation in supporting institutional confidence as well as operational resilience.

Taken together, these implications suggest that effective regulation of digital banking should not focus solely on market efficiency or technological performance. It should also strengthen the institutional conditions that enable trust to develop and endure within increasingly digital financial ecosystems.

7. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how SMEs evaluate digital banking service quality within an environment characterised by institutional uncertainty. Drawing on a Straussian grounded theory approach, the analysis demonstrates that participants interpreted service quality primarily through the extent to which banks established, maintained, and restored institutional trust during digital service encounters.

The resulting Digital Banking Fiduciary–Service Quality (DBF-SQ) Model introduces the concept of the Fiduciary Digital Encounter, in which digital banking interactions are understood as institutional moments rather than purely transactional exchanges. Within these encounters, service quality is shaped by the effectiveness of Institutional Trust Work, reflected in five interrelated dimensions: Algorithmic Assurance, Restorative Responsiveness, Community-Based Conflict Resolution, Proactive Risk Protection, and Transparent Digital Communication.

These findings contribute to service quality research by extending existing performance-based explanations of digital service evaluation. Rather than positioning trust primarily as an outcome of satisfactory service, the study suggests that trust functions as the interpretive foundation through which service quality is experienced in institutionally uncertain environments. In doing so, it provides a contextually grounded framework that complements established service quality models while offering new insights into digitally mediated financial services in emerging economies.

As with all grounded theory research, the findings should be interpreted within the empirical context from which they emerged. The substantive theory developed here reflects the experiences of Nigerian SMEs and is intended to explain service quality within that setting rather than to provide universal generalisations. Nevertheless, the conceptual relationships identified in this study offer a basis for future theoretical development and empirical investigation.

The study also has specific reporting and boundary limitations. The available participant records do not permit systematic comparison by age, industry sector, business-size band, firm age, geographic reach, or number of banking relationships. Consequently, the study cannot determine whether particular SME subgroups place greater weight on specific DBF-SQ dimensions. Similarly, competition and multi-banking are theoretically relevant but were not measured sufficiently to support causal or comparative claims. These limitations delimit the scope of the substantive theory and should be addressed in subsequent empirical validation.

Several opportunities for future research emerge from these findings. Quantitative studies could operationalise and validate the dimensions of the DBF-SQ model across different banking populations and institutional settings. Compar-

ative research involving other emerging economies would help determine the extent to which Institutional Trust Work is shaped by differences in regulatory environments, digital infrastructure, and cultural expectations. Longitudinal research could also examine how institutional trust develops, weakens, and recovers over time following repeated digital service encounters, while experimental designs could explore how specific institutional practices influence customers' responses to service failures.

Future studies should therefore combine grounded qualitative inquiry with systematic participant profiling and, where appropriate, comparative designs. In particular, researchers should examine whether sector, firm size, business age, geographic reach, digital dependence, and the number of banking relationships alter the salience of Algorithmic Assurance, Restorative Responsiveness, Community-Based Conflict Resolution, Proactive Risk Protection, and Transparent Digital Communication. Longitudinal studies should track accumulated trust, trust deterioration following repeated failures, and the extent to which successful recovery restores confidence. Comparative multi-bank studies should also test whether SMEs explicitly benchmark competing banks and whether the availability of alternatives changes tolerance for service failures.

More broadly, this study highlights the importance of viewing digital banking as both a technological and an institutional phenomenon. As financial services become increasingly digital, understanding how organisations cultivate trust under conditions of uncertainty will become increasingly important for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. By placing Institutional Trust Work at the centre of digital service quality, the study provides a foundation for future research into service relationships where technological capability alone is insufficient to sustain customer confidence.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because, at the time the research was conducted, formal institutional ethical approval was not required for non-invasive interview-based research involving adult participants. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study prior to participation. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving information regarding the objectives of the research, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research participants.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and institutional regulations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used AI solely for language refinement and editorial assistance. No AI tools were used for data collection, coding, analysis, interpretation of findings, theory development, or the generation of scientific conclusions. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and substantially revised by the author. The author accepts full responsibility

for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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