



## The fading affect bias: Examining changes in affect and behavioral intentions in restaurant service failures and recoveries



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### ABSTRACT

The fading affect bias (FAB) refers to the way in which affect associated with a negative event fades more quickly than affect associated with a positive event. The FAB is a healthy coping behavior developed by humans to deal with negative emotions. Drawing on the FAB hypothesis, this study investigated whether customers' negative experiences of service failures faded more quickly from their memories than positive experiences did, such as contentedness with recovery efforts and overall satisfaction. This study also examined the moderating role of the type of service failure and service recovery on changes in the intensity of the FAB. The results suggest that individuals dissipate their anger about negative service experiences and their discontent by reappraising the event in a more positive light and by boosting implicit positive experiences (i.e., the experiences provided in service recovery). However, the amount of affect that faded significantly differed among failure types. The results also demonstrated that service recovery can help individuals evaluate a service more positively and reduce their intentions to engage in negative behaviors over time. The theoretical and managerial implications of this study are discussed in detail.

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### 1. Introduction

Service failures occur often in the restaurant industry, due to the inconsistent nature of hospitality and restaurant services, coupled with the inevitability of human error. Service failure research has reported many negative consequences of service failures, such as customer dissatisfaction (Kelley et al., 1993), negative word-of-mouth (WOM) publicity (Mattila, 2001), unwillingness to return (Brady et al., 2002), and customer defection (Keaveney, 1995). Given that it is difficult to prevent service failures in the restaurant business, researchers and practitioners are interested in effective ways of reacting to these failures. The reaction to a service failure is termed "service recovery," which is defined as the actions that a firm takes in response to the service failure (Grönroos, 1990). Appropriate levels of service recovery result in positive affect toward the recovery efforts, which might balance out negative affect in response to service failures. Therefore, if we separate these two stages—one in which service failures occur and the other in which compensation is provided—it can be understood that

customers experience mixed feelings (both positive and negative) over the course of dining experiences. Considering that recalled experiences significantly affect future behavior (e.g., Kim and Ritchie, 2013), an important question for restaurant management is the manner in which their customers recall failure experiences later (e.g., whether the customers remember the mixed emotions triggered by different incidents or whether they remember one of the emotions).

Memory researchers have suggested that individuals exhibit a positivity bias (e.g., Ritchie and Batteson, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2006, 2009; Walker et al., 2009). In other words, affective fading is greater for negative events than for positive events. This pattern has been termed the fading affect bias (FAB) (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2011; Skowronski et al., 2004; Walker and Skowronski, 2009; Walker et al., 2003). A number of experiments have shown that the emotions prompted by memories of events generally fade in intensity with time. Such information on the FAB can prove valuable for restaurant managers who are under pressure to prevent service failures. When the FAB occurs in a service failure context, the negative feelings that customers associate with a service failure fade more quickly than the positive ones related to a satisfactory service recovery. Therefore, in the long run, customers experience service failures and receive satisfying remedies might have a stronger recollection of the positive feelings than the negative

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feelings. Ultimately, the positive memories may override the negative ones.

Despite the apparent importance and practical implications of the FAB to the service industry, there have been no previous studies regarding the effects of the FAB in a business setting. Validation of the effects of the FAB in the restaurant industry would greatly contribute to the service literature and have significant managerial implications for the industry. For example, if customers do not retain negative feelings following service failures, but instead quickly forget them, managers might not feel as much pressure to deliver error-free service. Rather, managers could concern themselves with developing more effective strategies to provide satisfactory recoveries in order to highlight positive experiences. Moreover, if service recoveries do not significantly moderate the FAB (i.e., the intensity of negative emotions felt by customers following a service recovery does not fade more quickly than the intensity felt by those who did not receive any remedy), managers might not need to make significant recovery efforts. With this issue in mind, the current study examined the changes of emotions over time in restaurant businesses. In addition to replicating previous FAB studies in a restaurant context, the current study extended the scope of previous FAB studies (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2003), which mainly discussed affect changes (i.e., pleasantness) by adding variables of behavioral intentions, such as switching behavior and spreading negative WOM. Affect, including satisfaction, are significant predictors of future behavior (e.g., Baker and Crompton, 2000; Fornell et al., 1996; Lee et al., 2007; McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Oliver, 1997; Yoon et al., 2010). However, to provide practical information to restaurant businesses, other variables potentially associated with the FAB in a restaurant context need to be considered. For example, restaurant managers need to understand not only emotional changes across time, but also changes in customers' behavioral intentions. Changes in customers' affect might not be associated with future behavior in some situations. Some customers might excuse the service failure but not return. In contrast, others might retain negative feelings but be willing to give the business a second chance. Therefore, behavioral intentions were examined together with customers' affects (both positive and negative).

The goal of this study was to identify the FAB while examining different types of service failures. Specifically, it investigated (1) whether the FAB can be generalized to a business environment (i.e., whether the intensities of negative affect and positive affect differ over time); (2) whether the intensity of behavioral intentions changes over time; (3) if the FAB occurs, when does it occur; (4) whether the FAB changes within retention levels and, if so, how; and (5) whether types of service failures and service recoveries moderate the FAB and behavioral intentions during the recollection stage (i.e., when customers recall service failures and recoveries).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Changes of affect over time and the fading affect bias (FAB)

Memory researchers have noted that remembered affect resulting from an autobiographical event is not always the same as the affect prompted by the event itself (e.g., Walker and Skowronski, 2009). The balance of emotions (i.e., negative and positive) sometimes shifts between when an event occurs and when the event is recalled (e.g., the event was initially rated as unpleasant but was later rated as pleasant). The most, common change in emotions accompanying an event memory is that the same feelings are present, but they fade in intensity over time (Ritchie et al., 2009; Walker and Skowronski, 2009). One theory that explains how

emotions change over time is Taylor's (1991) *mobilization–minimization hypothesis*. This hypothesis suggests that two sets of mechanisms are activated when someone experiences a negative event. The first mechanism involves the mobilization of resources. During the mobilization stage, the person draws on biological, psychological, and social resources to regulate the emotions produced by the negative event to help maintain a positive self-concept. In the second mechanism, which involves minimization, the person works to dampen the affect associated with the negative event in order to return to homeostasis. As with mobilization, minimization involves drawing on biological, cognitive, and social resources. These two mechanisms generally occur only in response to negative events to enable the individual to retain a hopeful outlook about the future. Applying this hypothesis to memories, Walker et al. (2003) suggested that as time passes, the extent to which intensity fades is not the same for positive and negative events. The intensity of emotions associated with negative events decreases more rapidly than the intensity of emotions associated with positive events. Previous research comparing the intensity of emotions people feel when events occur and later recollections of these events support this proposition (e.g., Cason, 1932; Gibbons et al., 2011; Walker et al., 1997, 2003, 2009). Those studies reported that the intensity of the emotions felt when someone first retrieves a memory of a negative event tends to diminish more quickly than when the memory of a positive event is retrieved. This differential fading of affect over time is referred to as the FAB (Walker et al., 2003), which researchers have viewed as a healthy coping mechanism (Ritchie et al., 2006; Skowronski et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2009).

The robustness of the effect of the FAB in autobiographical memory has been validated in previous studies using different methods and different populations. Some researchers used a retrospective design, asking their study participants to recall past positive and negative experiences freely (e.g., Suedfeld and Eich, 1995; Walker et al., 2003). These studies compared the affective intensity of an event at the time it occurred and when the event was recalled. They found that the average pleasantness rating of the recalled event increased. One criticism of studies that assess emotion retrospectively is that they can be subject to memory bias in the recall of emotion (Safer et al., 2002; Levine et al., 2006). To address this issue, other researchers have employed the more rigorous diary methodology (e.g., Walker et al., 1997; Gibbons et al., 2011) in their FAB studies. In those studies, the researchers asked their participants to submit diaries in which they described a unique event (likely to occur only once during the recording interval), as well as a pleasantness rating of the event. The length of time for recording in the diaries varied from 3.5 months to 2.5 years. After the participants submitted their diaries, the researchers tested their memories of the recorded events. The researcher read part of the recorded event aloud to the participant as a cue, and then asked the participant to recall the rest of the event. The participants were asked to state when the event occurred (i.e., the date), rate the memory (e.g., recollection and vividness), and rate the pleasantness of the event. The pleasantness of the event was assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from –3 (extremely unpleasant) to +3 (extremely pleasant), with 0 being neutral. The researchers found that the fading affect of the events increased significantly as time passed. They also observed that the fading affect phenomenon was more extreme for unpleasant events than for pleasant events, thereby supporting the FAB. In assessing the memory of an event, Walker and Skowronski (2009) reported that participants remembered both positive and negative events with almost equal clarity. Therefore, they suggested that while the emotions associated with positive and negative events faded differently, the memory of the events themselves did not. Moreover, Ritchie et al. (2009) proved that the FAB is a reliable and valid characteristic of autobiographical recall. They

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