



# A scenario-based experiment and a field study: A comparative examination for service failure and recovery



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## ABSTRACT

Scenario-based experiments are an important method in service marketing, especially in the field of service failures and service recoveries. Field studies on these topical areas are rare because of the expense and ethical issues in a real setting. However, this raises a question: Can the results obtained from experiments accurately predict real-world field behavior? In order to obtain more accurate information regarding service failures and recoveries, this study compares the results from a scenario-based experiment with those from a field study. The findings provided mixed support for the concordance between the scenario-based experimental results and those obtained in a field setting. Negative emotions, such as anger and discontent toward service failures, were consistent in both cases. However, positive emotions (i.e., contentment with recovery efforts and overall satisfaction) and switching behavioral intentions significantly differed depending on the data source (i.e., scenario or field). Specifically, the scenario experiments tended to overstate positive feelings and understate negative behavioral intentions resulting from service failures. An analysis of these differences suggests practical implications to enhance the design of future scenario-based experiments.

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## 1. Introduction

Many critics of experimental methods claim that people's behavior in the laboratory, as well as their behavior in hypothetical scenarios, is unconnected to their behavior in the field (Falk and Heckman, 2009). Common criticisms are that the artificial conditions of the experiment produce unrealistic data (Bardsley, 2005). Bardsley (2005) noted that experimental studies lack the rich, real-life context that may be important for behavior in the field. Moreover, experimental studies may be subject to an experimenter demand effect (Orne, 1962). Researchers have noted that participants in experimental studies may alter their actions to conform to the behavior that they believe the experimenter desires (e.g., Levitt and List, 2007; Orne, 1962). However, researchers who use hypothetical elicited methods, such as scenario-based experiments, argue that they provide a high degree of internal validity by manipulating and controlling variables. Further, they avoid the expense and ethical issues involved in real settings, such as actual service failures in a restaurant (Bitner, 1990). This controllability

allows experimenters to test precise predictions derived from theories and/or models while holding all else constant (Calder et al., 1981).

As discussed above, there is lively debate in the social sciences about field studies versus laboratory experiments. A number of hospitality and service marketing researchers favor the latter methodology for advancing causal knowledge (Falk and Heckman, 2009). A critical assumption underlying the interpretation of data from scenario experiments is that the results gained from this method can be extrapolated to a real-world setting. However, an important criticism by field researchers is that the external validity of the results of scenario experiments are questionable, especially in settings involving monetary loss (e.g., service failures) and those where customers' emotions are more important than cognition (e.g., recovery situations). In an experimental condition, participants are not part of the service setting and therefore they do not need to worry about delays, financial loss, and waiting time (Michel, 2001). Previous empirical findings have bolstered criticisms of hypothetical elicited methods. For example, willingness-to-pay elicited from hypothetical decision tasks almost always exceeds willingness-to-pay elicited from non-hypothetical decision tasks (Little and Berrens, 2004; List and Gallet, 2001; Murphy et al., 2005).

As a consequence, for scenario-based experiments to achieve their full potential as an invaluable empirical tool in service

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marketing, we need to examine whether we can reliably generalize the results of these experiments to real-world settings of interest to marketing researchers. With this issue in mind, this study investigates the potential correspondence, as well as incongruence, between scenario-based research methods (hypothetical experiment) and field study methods (non-hypothetical setting) regarding customers' responses to service failures and service recoveries in restaurants. In particular, this study examines the ability of the scenario experiment to predict customers' emotions (both positive and negative) and behavioral intentions in the real world. To that end, the following research questions are presented and tested in this study: (1) Can the results of scenario-based experiments be generalized to actual environments?; (2) If not, under what circumstances might the results correspond to those from the field?; and (3) If they do not correspond to results obtained in the field, how can the results (e.g., attitude and behavior) identified in scenario-based experiments be interpreted and the conclusions applied to natural settings?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Scenario-based experiments and field studies

Conducting service failure and recovery research in the field is rare due to a number of challenges, including the expense and time involved (as the incidence of service failure is rare), ethical issues, and managerial unwillingness to intentionally impose service failures on customers (Bitner et al., 1990). For these reasons, previous empirical studies have used critical incident technology (CIT), which asks respondents to recall their actual critical failure incidents (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990) and written complaints (e.g., Tax et al., 1998).

However, researchers have often criticized these methods due to various limitations. For example, Singh and Wilkes (1996) noted that the CIT method may produce flaws because of respondents' recall bias (i.e., recalling the most significant service failures). Moreover, the time lag between the occurrence of the service failure and its subsequent description by the respondents may lead to reinterpretation of the incident (Johnston, 1995). Regarding the use of complaint letters, Day et al. (1981) stated that only a minority of dissatisfied customers write complaint letters, and therefore the complainers are not representative of all dissatisfied customers. The experimentally generated scenario method, which may overcome the limitations of other methods, has been widely used for studying service failures and recovery. It generally improves internal validity because it allows for tight control of the study environment. This control allows precise predictions derived from a theory or a model to be tested. Schendel and Hofer (1979) supported the use of experimental studies for several reasons. For example, experimental studies are ideal for dealing with questions that cannot be addressed through field research owing to access problems and expense. Moreover, the control inherent in experimental studies increases the ability to evaluate causal hypotheses. In the same vein, experimental research may provide an effective method for testing a nomological network.

However, "realism" is the key drawback of this method. Respondents read a hypothetical scenario and are then asked to express how they feel (e.g., anger and satisfaction) about the described situation. Since the respondents are not part of the described service setting, they may not be sufficiently simulated to have a strong emotional response to the scenario. To overcome this issue with lack of realism, some researchers have focused on recent events, describing a service failure and recovery effort by a business a customer has recently patronized (e.g., Smith and Bolton, 1998).

Others have utilized the sequence-oriented problem identification (SOPI) research method, which blueprints a specific service transaction sequentially in a service encounter (Botschen et al., 1996).

All these efforts are commendable and eliminate the skepticism surrounding the use of scenario methods. However, considering that researchers make inferences about real life when conducting scenario-based experiments, one of the most important questions is whether the responses generated from the method accurately predict real-world field behavior. Recently, some researchers have assessed whether results obtained in a lab are echoed in the field and vice versa (e.g., Aaker et al., 2008; Barsky, 2011; Levitt and List, 2007; Lusk and Norwood, 2009). The following section discusses previous studies that have compared results from laboratory experiments with those from field studies.

### 2.2. Review of previous lab-field comparisons

Two prominent articles have examined the correspondence between laboratory experiments and field studies and came to different conclusions (Camerer, 2011; Levitt and List, 2007). Levitt and List (2007) expressed skepticism about generalizing the findings of laboratory experiments to the field. They contended that human behavior may be sensitive to a number of factors that systematically vary between the laboratory and real-world settings. Particularly, in experimental economics there are five ways in which a laboratory experiment influences human behavior: moral and ethical considerations, scrutiny of one's actions by others, decision context, self-selection of the experimental subjects, and the stakes. On the other hand, Camerer (2011) highlighted evidence showing agreement across the two research methods by discussing six comparisons of laboratory and field studies. The criteria by which Camerer (2011) evaluated correspondence are based on whether the results from the two different types of studies arrived at the same effect sign, similar coefficients, and displayed correlations across contexts. After assessing the level of agreement between laboratory and field studies, Camerer concluded that "there is no replicated evidence that experimental economics lab data fail to generalize to central empirical features of field data" (p. 35).

With these controversial claims in mind, we expanded our review of the literature comparing results across laboratory and field studies in parallel conditions. Table 1 summarizes this stream of research and its findings. As shown in Table 1, results for the correspondence between the two types of studies are mixed. Based on these results, it can be seen that not all laboratory experiments can be generalized to a field setting but that the results correspond to those in the field under some conditions. For example, assessments of emotional responses showed a relatively higher correspondence level between laboratory and field studies than assessments of behavioral responses. In particular, when a behavior was related to a sensitive issue (e.g., race or dignity) there were discrepancies between the two methods. This supports Levitt and List's (2007) notion that scrutiny of subjects' actions in an experimental setting causes individuals to respond and/or react differently in scenarios compared to real settings. To the best of our knowledge, no study in the service marketing literature has compared the results from experimental studies with those in the field. Therefore, much less is known about the correspondence between scenarios and real-world studies in this field. Thus, this study set out to examine the correspondence between the results of a scenario-based experiment, which is one of the most commonly used research methods in service marketing, and those of a field study.

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