



Situational influences on the evaluation of other-customer failure[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This article examines how customers evaluate their dissatisfaction with the service provider at times of other customer misbehavior when they are accompanied by a number of social companions with specific consumption goals in a restaurant context. The empirical data demonstrate that participants note higher levels of dissatisfaction when they are in the company of social companions than when they are alone. Moreover, the presence of strong ties would have an inhibitory effect on the expression of dissatisfaction relative to the presence of weak ties, whereas the effects of weak ties would depend on the group size and consumption goals. With hedonic consumption goals, the weak tie customer expresses higher dissatisfaction when the group size is small rather than when it is large. In contrast, with utilitarian consumption goals, the weak tie customers' dissatisfaction is higher when the group size is larger than when it is small. Theoretical and managerial implications for these findings are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Increasing evidence has emerged that customer-to-customer interactions can damage a customer's consumption experience and service evaluation in the hospitality industry. Martin (1996), for example, surveyed 554 customers in restaurants and bowling alleys and found that other-customer misbehavior (e.g., drunkenness and verbal abuse) could lessen the focal customers' satisfaction ratings. Huang (2008), in a study across 11 service contexts (e.g., restaurants, movie theaters, hotels and so on), found that other problem customers (e.g., shouting loudly) could have a detrimental effect on customers' satisfaction with the service provider. As the negative interactions with other customers often times lead to a failure to meet customers' expectations, Huang (2008) termed this phenomenon "other-customer failure" which refers to actions by another customer, whether intentional or unintentional, that disrupts one's service experience.

Strictly speaking, interaction occurring between customers in a service environment can be divided into intergroup and intragroup interactions (Pearce, 2005). The former refers to interactions between unacquainted customers and the latter concerns interactions between social companions such as friends or colleagues who consume services together (Huang and Hsu, 2010). Both types of

interactions can occur simultaneously. There has been previous research that examines the effect of intergroup interactions and explores how negative encounters with other unacquainted customers may affect an individual's service evaluation (Bitner et al., 1990; Grove and Fisk, 1997; Huang et al., 2010a,b; Martin and Pranter, 1989; Miao et al., 2011; Raajpoot and Sharma, 2006; Wu, 2007; Zhang et al., 2010). However, the contemporaneous effect of intragroup interactions has been largely neglected. Whether an individual's service evaluation varies when accompanied by social companions at the time of other-customer failure needs further investigation.

In the hospitality services, the presence of social companions is an indispensable part of the consumption experience (Wei et al., 2012). Restaurants, theme parks, and movie theaters are typically experienced in social contexts along with companions. When multiple companions are involved in the service production and delivery process, they co-operate to create the service experience (He et al., 2008; Martin, 1996). Moreover, it has been found that these companions determine how customers react to a service deficiency. Wei et al. (2012), for example, demonstrated that the "co-consumption others" (e.g., friends) who are present at a service failure affect a focal customer's complaining behavior. However, it is still unclear whether and how social companions influence an individual's dissatisfaction with the service provider when other-customer failure occurs.

To further our understanding, companion variables such as the number of companions present and the relationship with these companions are, therefore, incorporated into the present study to account for the intragroup interaction effects in response to the misbehavior of other customers. Specifically, we address four research questions: (1) Do customers react less negatively when

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companions are present than when they are alone? (2) Does group size matter? (3) What happens to a customer's dissatisfaction evaluation if he/she is accompanied by strong tie (e.g., friends) versus weak tie (e.g., colleagues) individuals who endure the same negative incidents of other-customer failure? In addition, there are differences in customer goals when buying products or services, whether utilitarian or hedonic. In Study 2 we will further display (4) how dissatisfaction with a service firm at the time of other-customer failure may be moderated by the customer's consumption goals. Briefly, we investigate how group size and tie strength, as well as the initial consumption goal, may influence customer A's dissatisfaction evaluation toward a service firm after suffering from customer B's dysfunctional behavior.

We believe our work makes a significant contribution to the literature, specifically adding to the limited knowledge that exists regarding situationally driven differences in evaluations of other-customer failure. We consider the roles of group size, tie strength, and consumption goals as situational contexts (Belk, 1975) that might be used to interpret the different dissatisfaction evaluations in response to other-customer failure. Hospitality researchers have found that consumer experience is better understood when situational influences are taken into consideration (Ryu and Han, 2011; Walls et al., 2011). In addition, our findings will help facilitate a service firm to devise meaningful programs for customer compatibility management (Martin and Pranter, 1989).

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Negative customer-to-customer interaction (NCCI) research

Negative interactions between customers in the hospitality industry are an important aspect of the service encounter (Martin, 1996). Following Fisk et al.'s (2010) and Nicholls's (2010) categorization, extant hospitality research on negative customer-to-customer interaction (NCCI) can be grouped into six major categories (the individual study details are presented in Table 1). The first category includes the triggers and causes of NCCI (Daunt and Harris, 2012; Griffiths and Gilly, 2012; Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds and Harris, 2009). The second category is associated with the classifications of NCCI (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Wu, 2007, 2008; Zhang et al., 2010). The third category focuses on the consequence of NCCI (Bitner et al., 1990; Grove et al., 1998; Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Martin, 1996). The fourth category comprises the psychological processes underlying the relationship between NCCI and service evaluations (Huang, 2008; Huang et al., 2010a,b). The fifth category pertains to managerial guidelines that encourage firms to take specific courses of action to prevent (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Pranter and Martin, 1991) and even recover from NCCI (Huang, 2010). The sixth category of research, and indeed, the focus of the current paper, is the investigation of NCCI sensitivity (Baker and Wakefield, 2012; Hui and Bateson, 1991; Martin, 1996; Miao et al., 2011; Raajpoot and Sharma, 2006).

Sensitivity to NCCI is a matter of the exact circumstances surrounding NCCI. Under certain conditions, the NCCI is likely to be viewed more negatively (Nicholls, 2010). Nicholls (2005) referred to such circumstances as situational factors. Belk (1975) has identified five objective situational factors, including the physical surroundings (e.g., dinner at a restaurant), social surroundings (e.g., dinner with friends or colleagues), temporal perspective (e.g., time available for dinner), task definition (e.g., dinner for a special occasion) and antecedent states (dinner when tired). Based on Belk's framework, existing NCCI studies on situational influences can be framed as physical settings (Hui and Bateson, 1991; Martin, 1996), task definition (Baker and Wakefield, 2012; Moon and Mattila, 2009), and antecedent states (Miao et al., 2011; Raajpoot and

Sharma, 2006). As mentioned previously, these studies do not consider, however, what happens to an individual's satisfaction evaluation with the service provider if accompanied by someone with specific consumption goals at the time of the NCCI (i.e., the intragroup interaction effect). Thus, using a restaurant dining environment as our context, the impact of two of Belk's five factors, social surroundings and task definition (i.e., consumption goals), on customer dissatisfaction evaluation are investigated.

Restaurants are chosen as the target service category for several reasons. First, real-life dysfunctional customer behavior is common in this setting (see Huang, 2008, p. 527 and Zhang et al., 2010, p. 394). Second, restaurant dining is a social activity. People usually eat in the company of social companions for either utilitarian or hedonic reasons. Although some researchers have identified the patronizing of a restaurant as hedonic consumption (e.g., Wirtz and Lee, 2003), Strombeck and Wakefield (2008) claimed that the utilitarian/hedonic nature of the consumption experience is not dependent upon the service alone, but upon the individual's consumption motive. For instance, one individual may have primarily utilitarian intentions when entering a restaurant, such as to consume food to stave off hunger, while another's intentions may be hedonic, such as to enjoy a pleasant meal with friends or colleagues (Noone and Mattila, 2009). These arguments reflect that the restaurant setting is appropriate for our study. We begin to describe our conceptual development by discussing the importance of social companions relative to consumer dissatisfaction evaluation toward a service provider in cases of other-customer failure.

2.2. Social companion

A number of studies have shown that people who are part of a group act and respond differently than they would as individuals (Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010). Jakobs et al. (1996), for example, investigated the relationship between the social context and emotional experience. Participants were asked to imagine being in a situation in which they had broken some glasses after a birthday party. The results indicated that their response was less angry when in the company of a friend than when alone. Jakobs et al. (2001) examined the generalizability of social context effects in relation to facial expressions made in response to negative emotional stimuli (sad film clips) and found that the displays of sadness occurred much less often in the company of a friend than when alone. Similarly, Buck et al. (1992) showed that the expression of negative emotion was inhibited when with a friend rather than alone. In Jackson and Latané's (1981) study of stage fright, participants reported less nervousness and tension when performing in groups than when alone. Recently, He et al. (2008) evaluated the impact of social presence during positive and negative service encounters and revealed that in comparison with conditions with no social presence, social presence (friends) significantly reduced the negative effect of a disappointing other-attributed service encounter.

In summary, these studies showed that the presence of social companions can help to diminish the negative emotions or dissatisfying incidents. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that when customers suffer from other customer's dysfunctional behavior (e.g., talking loudly), those who are accompanied by social companions will report a lower level of dissatisfaction with the service firm than if they are alone.

H1. In cases of other-customer failure, services experienced with companions will show a lower level of dissatisfaction toward the service provider compared to services experienced alone.

Although a group differs from an individual, not all groups act the same. Finsterwalder and Tuzovic (2010) highlighted that in the service context, an individual in a smaller group may perceive

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