



Whom do customers blame for a service failure? Effects of thought speed on causal locus attribution



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Thought speed
Service failure
Causal attributions

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the impact of customers' thought speeds in a service failure setting. Fast-thinking induces not only heuristic processing, but also positive affect. As both factors predict a different outcome on whom customers blame for the failure, this study examines rival hypotheses. Findings from three experiments show that fast-thinking leads respondents to attribute failures to the service providers (i.e., showing a self-serving bias). In addition, fast-thinking also has more downstream consequences, as it negatively affects repurchase intentions and positively affects intentions to spread negative word of mouth. Therefore, service providers are encouraged to stimulate slow thought during service encounters.

1. Introduction

Thought speed refers to how fast or slow someone thinks. Individuals' thought speeds may be altered by situational factors, such as fast- or slow-moving images in the environment or how fast or slow a conversation develops. Thought speed has been shown to influence a variety of behavioural reactions. Fast thought speed (FTS), for example, leads to more risk taking (Chandler and Pronin, 2012), a higher self-confidence and self-esteem, more creativity and a higher capacity for solving novel problems (Pronin, 2013).

Central to this study's investigation is that thought speed is also related to (1) cognitive processing and (2) affective reactions. Fast cognitive processing involves fast thinking (Pronin, 2013). According to the dual-process framework, individuals use two cognitive processes to think: the more intuitive, heuristic and faster System 1 and the more reflective, analytical and slower System 2 (De Neys, 2006; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002). System 2 monitors System 1, helping the latter when things get difficult (Kahneman, 2011). Although System 1 may be useful in situations requiring fast reactions, its reliance on simplifying heuristics may lead to errors and biases when System 2 fails to correct these (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974).

Based on the thought speed and dual-process framework literature, stimulating FTS among customers may prompt the adoption of simplifying heuristics, such as “the customer is always right”, as well as inhibit System 2 from correcting it. This process should lead to a self-serving bias after a service failure, that is, a tendency to attribute the failure to external causes, such as the service provider (Mezulis et al.,

1985).

However, FTS also induces more positive affect (Pronin et al., 2008; Pronin and Wegner, 2006), and the literature addressing mood as a resource (e.g., Raghunathan and Trope, 2002; Trope et al., 2001) would predict the exact opposite effect. Indeed, according to the mood as a resource literature, positive mood is a resource that helps people to process negative self-relevant information. When individuals lack positive mood, they may avoid such information. This avoidance may lead to a greater self-serving bias. Based on the findings of Pronin et al. (2008) and Pronin and Wegner (2006), individuals with FTS have more positive mood and, consequently, could be less likely to report self-serving bias. These rival predictions (i.e., that FTS could lead to either more or less self-serving bias) are examined and include an investigation into more downstream consequences such as the impact of thought speed on repurchase intentions and the intentions to spread negative word of mouth (NWOM).

To date, no study has been found that investigated the effect of thought speed on causal locus attribution and behavioural responses after a service failure. Understanding whether and how thought speed affects whom customers blame for service failures is important because service providers could use this knowledge to reduce customer self-serving bias. This reduction is beneficial for service providers because it means that customers will share some responsibility for the failures, which should decrease customers' negative affective and behavioural reactions towards the service providers (Hui and Toffoli, 2002). In other words, the reduction of self-serving bias among customers will diminish typical negative reactions, such as anger, avoidance, NWOM

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and intentions to complain and punish the service providers (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000, 2014). In this paper, three experimental studies investigating the effect of thought speed on causal locus attribution, NWOM and repurchase intentions are presented.

2. Thought speed, cognitive processing and affective responses

Previous research shows that individuals' thinking speeds can have pervasive effects on their behavioural, cognitive and affective responses. Some scholars (e.g., Chandler and Pronin, 2012; Yang et al., 2014) argue that FTS leads to different outcomes when compared with both normal (NTS) and slow thought speeds (STS).

For instance, according to Pronin (2013), the occurrence of fast thoughts may serve as a signal to a person's mind and body that he or she may need to prepare for urgent action. The author suggests that the state of preparation for urgent action is responsible for increased energy, self-confidence, self-esteem, willingness to take risks, creativity and capacity for solving novel problems.

As previously stated, the relationships between thought speed and (1) cognitive processing and (2) affective responses are pertinent to this study. Concerning the former, although fast cognitive processing is often associated with easier cognitive processing (i.e., stimuli that are easy to process are quickly processed), the effects of thought speed cannot be explained by ease of cognitive processing (i.e., fluency) because FTS induces positive affect even when the stimuli are more difficult to process (Pronin, 2013). Whereas ease of processing cannot explain the effects of thought speed, different cognitive processes adopted by faster-thinking individuals could have implications for consumer behaviour. To understand cognitive processes that influence human judgement and choice, many authors (e.g., De Neys, 2006; Dhar and Gorlin, 2013; Saini and Thota, 2010) have adopted the dual-process or dual-system framework (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002). As mentioned, the proponents of this dual-process framework argue that our minds use two different cognitive processes, called System 1 and System 2, to make sense of things.

System 1 generates fast and intuitive answers to judgment problems using simplifying heuristics, which may sometimes lead to biases and systematic errors (De Neys, 2006; Kahneman, 2011; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). For instance, when evaluating whether a tidy person with a need for order is more likely to be a librarian or a farmer, an individual applying System 1 may use resemblance as a simplifying heuristic to determine that a person who resembles the stereotype of a librarian is more likely to be a librarian. However, the fact that there are more farmers than librarians implies that this person is more likely to be a farmer (Kahneman, 2011). Although System 1 may lead to incorrect answers due to its reliance on simplifying heuristics, it results in correct answers in many other situations and is the system used in several activities, such as understanding simple sentences, solving simple math equations, driving a car on an empty road and detecting hostility in a voice (Kahneman, 2011). Generally, simplifying heuristics are useful and effective despite the possibility of errors and biases (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974).

In turn, System 2 is used in more complex activities requiring attention and effort, such as solving complicated math equations and filling out tax forms. Thus, thought speed is slower when applying System 2 (Kahneman, 2011). System 2 monitors the answers formulated by System 1 and endorses or corrects them. If this process is not successful, the errors and biases derived from the simplifying heuristics of System 1 are more likely to occur (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002). Analytical responses are expected to require more processing time than heuristic responses require (De Neys, 2006). Therefore, individuals with STS likely rely more on the slower analytical system, whereas individuals with FTS likely depend more on the faster heuristic system.

Thought speed and the dual-process framework could influence customers' reactions in several ways, including their responses to

service failures. Specifically, whether customers think faster and rely more on System 1 or think slower and depend more on System 2 could influence other cognitions, such as causal attributions for a service failure. Because fast-thinking individuals more frequently adopt simplifying heuristics that may lead to biases (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), they may be more likely to engage in cognitive biases, such as the self-serving bias, and make more external attributions for service failures than individuals with STS make.

According to Kahneman (2011), a person can walk and perform simple tasks at the same time, but when he or she is required to engage in effortful thinking to solve a problem, other tasks tend to be ceased so the cognitive resources can be directed to System 2 without hindrance. Based on this rationale, inducing individuals to think faster than usual could inhibit their use of System 2, creating a scenario where the heuristics and biases common to System 1 are no longer monitored and corrected. This idea reinforces the notion that individuals with FTS could engage more in self-serving bias than individuals with STS. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1a. Compared with STS, FTS will lead to more external causal attributions for a service failure.

Concerning affective responses, FTS (versus STS) seems to induce more positive affect (Pronin and Wegner, 2006; Pronin et al., 2008), an outcome that appears to be independent of thought content (elating versus depressing content) and ease of cognitive processing or fluency. FTS, thus, induces positive affect even when the thought content is more depressing and difficult to process (Pronin, 2013). In line with this findings, Yang et al. (2014) provide empirical evidence that the positive affect of individuals with mild to moderate depressive symptoms may be increased by inducing fast thoughts, as is the case for individuals with no depressive symptoms. In addition, studies suggest that FTS has no influence on negative affect (Pronin et al., 2008; Pronin and Wegner, 2006). As a consequence, FTS can be assumed to exert a net positive impact on individual affect or mood.

According to the mood as a resource literature (Raghunathan and Trope, 2002; Trope et al., 2001), positive mood serves as a resource that facilitates the processing of negative self-relevant information and makes it bearable. For instance, Raghunathan and Trope (2002) conducted a study in which individuals with high caffeine consumption read an article describing negative items about caffeine (representing negative self-relevant information). Those in a negative mood recalled fewer items from the article than those in a positive mood, which exemplifies that when individuals lack positive mood, they tend to avoid negative self-relevant information (Raghunathan and Trope, 2002). Because FTS is associated with a more positive mood (Pronin et al., 2008; Pronin and Wegner, 2006), FTS is likely also associated with the processing of negative self-relevant information and, consequently, a lower self-serving bias after a service failure. Thus, drawing from the mood as a resource literature, FTS (versus STS), in contrast to H1a, may induce less external attribution for a service failure. As such, the following *rival* hypothesis is formulated:

H1b. Compared with STS, FTS will lead to less external causal attributions for a service failure.

Besides an impact on causal attributions, FTS likely also has an effect on more downstream variables, such as spreading NWOM and repurchase intentions. This effect is expected to be explained (i.e., mediated) by the causal locus attribution. The literature shows that external locus attribution for a failure leads to more NWOM (Folkes, 1984; Richins, 1983) and avoidance or intention to switch (Richins, 1987; Weiner, 2000). Therefore, thought speed likely will influence external attribution (H1a and H1b), which, in turn, will lead to more NWOM and less repurchase intention.

H2a. Thought speed will have an indirect effect on NWOM intention through the causal locus attribution.

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