



Speaking up against service unfairness: The role of negative meta-perceptions



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ABSTRACT

Taking into account customers' rapport with a service staff and levels of service unfairness, this paper aims to examine the role of negative meta-perceptions in predicting customers' intention to directly speak up to the service staff following an unfair service treatment. The results show that negative meta-perceptions mediate the indirect effect of levels of rapport and service unfairness on speaking up directly to the service staff. The study offers a new explanation on why customers are hesitant to confront the service staff directly owing to negative meta-perceptions that they develop during service encounters.

1. Introduction

Customers generally have a high tolerance for service variability as they understand that it is highly challenging for service staff to deliver an equal level of service to all customers (Moeller, 2010). Customers may not even pay too much attention to service variability until they directly experience different levels of service provided by the same service staff to other customers (hereinafter referred to as 'service unfairness'). In these situations, they may start wondering about how they should react: either speaking up or remaining silent.

In the limited number of studies regarding service unfairness, service researchers have largely focused on the context of service failure and subsequent recovery. Robbins and Miller (2004), for example, found that customers' perception of procedural and distributive fairness in recovery has stronger influences on customers' repatronage intentions only for those with higher levels of loyalty prior to the service failure. Taking into account cultural values of individual customers, Patterson et al. (2006) demonstrated that such values interact with service providers' recovery strategies to influence customers' perception of fairness which then impact on their evaluation of service recovery satisfaction. Clark et al. (2009) further established a positive impact of perceived service fairness on customers' post-recovery satisfaction and relationship quality between customers and service providers. A general conclusion that can be derived from these studies is that higher levels of perceived fairness will lead to more

positive evaluations on most behavioral variables. However, to the best of our knowledge, current research has not investigated one critical behavioral intention variable, that is, customers' intention to speak up against such unfair treatment. The importance of voicing in the context of service failure has been widely acknowledged as voicing allows service providers to redeem themselves from negative impacts of service failures (Chebat et al., 2005; Evanschitzky et al., 2011). Drawing upon this analogy, this paper aims to investigate the factors that trigger customers' intention to speak up against service unfairness in the context of service failure and subsequent recovery.

In this paper, adapting from Seiders and Berry (1998), we define service unfairness as customers' perceptions of the degree of unfairness in a service firm's recovery effort. Drawing on impression management and social comparison theories, this study argues that customers' intention to speak up against service unfairness is influenced by the level of (1) rapport established between customers and the service staff and (2) service unfairness of service recovery effort perceived by customers, mediated by customers' negative meta-perceptions – the negative thoughts customers believe service staff will have of them if they speak up (Laing et al., 1966). These two factors were selected because they capture two important aspects of the interactions between customers and service staff in a service environment critical in the formation of meta-perceptions. We conducted two studies to investigate the influencing role of rapport and perceived level of service unfairness and mediating role of negative meta-perceptions on custo-

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mers' intention to speak up directly to service staff.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Meta-perceptions and impression management

The concept of meta-perceptions essentially has to do with the formation of a perception in individuals' minds about how others feel about them or their behavior (Albright et al., 2001). This concept has increasingly gained attention from marketing researchers as such perceptions demonstrably influence customers' behavioral intentions. For instance, Brumbaugh and Rosa (2009) revealed that there is a strong relationship between customers' meta-perceptions and the number of coupons redeemed. Specifically, their study demonstrated that customers are less likely to redeem coupons as their negative meta-perceptions increase; that is, they believe the cashier would view them as thrifty, poor, money conscious or penny pinching for redeeming coupons. Wirtz et al. (2013) examined how customers' meta-perceptions affect their likelihood of making a purchase recommendation. Their findings revealed that the higher customers' positive meta-perceptions of purchase recommendation given, that is, the higher they perceive that recommendation receivers would think of their recommendation as dependable, credible, and trustworthy, the higher the likelihood of making that recommendation. Finally, Tojib and Khajehzadeh (2014) showed that when customers experience higher negative meta-perceptions, that is, they believe the service staff would view the complaining customer as a trouble maker or hard to please, the likelihood of engaging in direct complaining behavior decreases.

From these findings, it can be inferred that the concept of meta-perception is essentially two sides of the same coin, with each side leading to a different behavior depending on how customers believe others would perceive them. Specifically, one side has to do with inferred positive meta-perceptions, whereby customers believe that others would perceive their behavior in a positive way, while the other side has to do with inferred negative meta-perceptions, whereby customers believe that others would perceive them in a negative way. Given this study focuses on speaking up behavior which generally has a less positive connotation, we focus on negative meta-perceptions when theorizing our predicted relationships.

Individuals' formation of meta-perceptions is related to their impression management concerns and self-presentations (Vohs et al., 2005). Impression management theory asserts that individuals tend to have an urge to be viewed in a socially positive light, and to achieve this, they often alter their self-presentations and control the impression others form of them by adjusting their behaviors (Leary and Kowalsky, 1990; Vohs et al., 2005). In other words, individuals are more likely to experience lower negative meta-perceptions when they are not engaging in impression management, whereas, individuals are more likely to experience lower positive meta-perceptions when they are managing their impressions. Hence, if they would like to be perceived in a less negative way, they should engage in a behavior that can elevate their positive impressions.

2.2. Service unfairness and negative meta-perceptions

Customers perceive a service encounter to be unfair when their service experience conflicts with their fairness standards (Seiders and Berry, 1998). Hence, the perceived unfairness tends to be subjective and its level generally varies from low to high, allowing them to make comparison between their and others' experiences. According to the social comparison theory, individuals make comparisons to a particular standard, which could be a ranking, threshold, or some cut-off value on a scale (Garcia et al., 2006). This theory argues that when individuals maintain their assessments of themselves to others after a comparison, a phenomenon termed 'assimilation' occurs (Festinger, 1954). This suggests that their initial opinions of themselves are successfully

validated. Consequently, individuals may not be tempted to change their behaviors due to the stability of their comparison process. On the other hand, when individuals find discrepancies in their assessments of themselves to others following a comparison, they would be motivated to reduce such discrepancy to at least move their position closer to others in the comparison group (Festinger, 1954).

In the context of our study, customers are assumed to compare their service experience with others'. When customers realize that their service experience is different from others', the standard is said to be inconsistent and discrepancy occurs (Corcoran et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954). In this high unfairness situation, they will be less concerned with managing their impressions as their motivation to reduce the discrepancy would be perceived as justifiable by the service staff. On the other hand, when customers compare their service experience with others and later realize that their service experience is indeed similar to others', the standard is said to be consistent and assimilation occurs. In this low unfairness situation, customers will be more concerned with managing their impressions, as they literally have less compelling reasons to speak up. Consequently, when customers are considering speaking up to the service staff, those who perceive service unfairness as low would demonstrate higher negative meta-perceptions compared to those who perceive service unfairness as high.

2.3. Rapport and negative meta-perceptions

Following Gremler and Gwinner (2000), we define rapport as one's perceptions of having an enjoyable interaction with others, characterized by a personal connection between two parties. The enjoyable interaction is described as a feeling of friendliness developed through various interpersonal interactions such as eye contact, language, or other non-verbal gestures, whereas the personal connection is about the strength of relationship between the two parties determined by close identification and mutual caring. One way to establish this personal connection is through exchanging information on a personal and relational level. Given the level of enjoyable interaction may vary, researchers further postulate that rapport can be classified into strong vs. weak rapport. As our context of study involves an interaction between customers and service staff, a strong rapport is characterized by a high level of trust, emotional and social attachment between customers and service staff (Coulter and Ligas, 2004; Wang and Groth, 2014). A weak rapport is then seen through a professional relationship between customers and service staff which highly focuses on instrumental exchange (Coulter and Ligas, 2004).

As indicated earlier, individuals often adjust their behaviors to portray certain images they would like others to view them. Tice et al. (1995) further asserted that which impression individuals would like to portray is influenced by the type of relationship between the two parties. More specifically, they found that when individuals interact with strangers, they are more likely to say positive things about themselves compared to when they interact with friends. The rationale behind their finding is that, the lack of knowledge that the strangers have on the individuals require the individuals to explicitly show their important qualities if they want to be perceived as positive. It is further acknowledged that first impressions count, and therefore, the need to create a positive first impressions is high when dealing with strangers. On the other hand, friends presumably have some knowledge of the individuals. As such friends already have developed particular impressions of these individuals. Re-affirming their important qualities in front of their friends may be perceived as redundant that could even lead these individuals to be perceived as conceited (Baumeister and Jones, 1978). Hence, disclosing their important qualities to friends may have minimal impact.

From these findings, assuming that customers generally would like to be perceived positively by the service staff, we can infer that when customers have a strong rapport with the service staff, they are less likely to adjust their behaviors to be perceived as less negative (i.e. less

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