



Effect of disruptive customer behaviors on others' overall service experience: An appraisal theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the appraisal theory, this study proposes and tests a conceptual model to delineate customers' evaluative process of disruptive customer behaviors in a shared service environment (e.g., theme parks, airplanes, restaurants). Using a scenario-based online experiment, two sets of data were collected from U.S. customers and analyzed by a series of regression analyses. Findings suggest that customers go through a systematic evaluative process of primary appraisal (e.g., congruence and relevance) and secondary appraisal (e.g., cognitions and emotions), which results in the development of coping behaviors (e.g., active and passive coping). Cognitions are found to have direct influences on passive and active coping. Perceived powerlessness, perceived betrayal, and perceived identity threat are identified as critical cognitions. Negative emotions are found to result in active coping. Primary appraisal (e.g., congruence and relevance) either directly affects coping behaviors, or indirectly through cognitions and negative emotions. Theoretical and managerial implications are further elaborated.

1. Introduction

Being a pioneer of the experience economy, the tourism industry has embodied the development and changes in interactive travel events that contribute to an enriched travel experience (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Hwang & Seo, 2016). In the meantime, customers have become much more demanding, especially when it comes to the quality of service experiences (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Möhlmann, 2015). While a number of key factors associated with the product, service, and the service environment are critical to creating satisfactory service experiences, studies suggest that customer-to-customer interaction has become one of the most crucial determinants of service quality (Cheng, 2016; Grove & Fisk, 1997; Martin, 1996). In fact, direct or indirect interaction with other customers is found to be more influential in determining a satisfactory experience than the physical service environment (Huang & Hsu, 2010).

The growing importance of customer-to-customer interaction has stirred up vigorous debates on its influences on customers' service experiences and strategies to manage customer-to-customer interactions (Hua, 2016). While positive interpersonal exchanges with other customers can enhance the overall service experience (Harris, Davies, & Baron, 1997), negative encounters with other customers may have a

detrimental effect on by-standing customers' service evaluation (Zhang, 2005). Disruptive customer behavior on aircrafts (i.e., seat kicker, whining kids), restaurants (i.e., customers with poor personal hygiene), hotels (i.e., take extra toiletries home, excessive noise), and tourism attractions (i.e., pee in the ocean, overzealous tour member) has begun to receive significant attention from both researchers and practitioners (e.g., Grove et al., 2015). Customers' disruptive behavior can compromise the perceived service experience and quality, which is a form of service failure in the eyes of by-standing customers (Grove et al., 2015). Such by-standing customers whose service experience is compromised due to the disruptive customers' behaviors are mentioned as focal customers in this paper.

Service providers can also suffer from such failed service delivery if disruptive customer behavior is not managed strategically (Grove et al., 2015). Research has shown that exposure to others' misbehaviors dissuades focal customers from staying longer and from re-patronizing the establishment (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013). Furthermore, if focal customers believe that the management could have done a better job dealing with the disruptive customers, they end up blaming the organization for their compromised experience (Huang, 2008). In addition to complaining to friends and families, customers are also likely to post negative comments on the review sites if they attribute their wrecked

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experiences to the establishment's incompetence to manage misbehaving customers (Berezina, Bilgihan, Cobanoglu, & Okumus, 2016). Although some customers may particularize the attributes (e.g., others' misconduct) that impair their experience, individuals who view those comments can easily misinterpret the anecdotes as the fault of the service provider (Zhang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2010). In fact, some customers tend to blame the providers for anything occurred in the service environment (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2015). Even though there might be exceptions to this, especially the service providers who are actively engaged in corporate social responsibility activities (Nikbin, Hyun, Iranmanesh, Maghsoudi, & Jeong, 2016), tourism companies still need to carefully manage service experiences to secure business success. Therefore, tourism firms need to understand the influence of customers' disruptive behaviors on by-standing patrons' experiences and develop strategies to minimize the detrimental effects (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013).

Debate on how one should effectively handle this situation remains controversial. Balancing the interests between the “wrongdoers” (i.e., the misbehaving customer) and “watchers” (i.e., the by-standing customer) is a challenging task for service employees since they both are seen as valuable customers (Hibbert, Piacentini, & Hogg, 2012). Some service businesses have taken proactive approaches by adopting rules and etiquette to minimize customer misconduct from taking place (Darcy, 2014). For instance, some dining establishments do not allow families to bring their young children during certain hours or to enter certain parts of a restaurant, as the presence of unruly children may ruin other customers' dining ambiance. Some airplanes blacklist disruptive customers and refuse to serve them due to previous bad manners.

In the existing literature, studies have primarily focused on the recovery strategies after complaints are filed by the by-standing customers (Hibbert et al., 2012). However, such steps following a formal complaint tend to leave the concerns of by-standing customers unattended unless they speak up. Furthermore, past research tends to simplify customers' evaluations of others' misbehavior as exclusively “good” or “bad”, and thus underestimates the aftermath of by-standing customers' appraisal. Similar events may elicit different degrees of emotions and cognitions across individuals based on their beliefs, values, and experiences. Customers' assessment of a service event involves emotions (e.g., Miao, Mattila, & Mount, 2011; Wu, 2007) and cognitions (e.g., Namasivayam & Guchait, 2013), and both can impose critical effects on their attitudes and behavioral intentions. By-standing customers can acquire an active role in interacting with service providers and determining what to do in case of service failures based on their appraisal of an event (Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus, & van Niekerk, 2017). While previous studies (e.g., Gross, 1998) have examined the cognitive and emotional components in the service context, examination of by-standing customers' emotional and cognitive appraisals of and their behavioral responses to a customer-induced service failure in a shared service environment context has not received much attention.

To bridge this gap in the current literature, this study conceptualizes and empirically examines the impacts of customer misbehavior on by-standing customers' service appraisal and behavioral intentions utilizing the appraisal theory. Conceptually, this study investigates by-standing customers' mental appraisal (i.e., emotions and cognitions) and behavioral intentions in the presence of disruptive customers using an integrative model that jointly examines cognitions and emotions to explain the appraisal process. This approach advances the understanding of customers' mental appraisal when forced to be exposed to peers' disruptive behaviors in a service context. Findings of this study provide meaningful insights into customers' coping strategies (e.g., switching intentions, negative word-of-mouth (WOM), direct complaint, etc.) upon facing negative customer-to-customer interactions. Service managers (e.g., airplanes, restaurants, hotels, theme parks) can develop preventive or remedial approaches accordingly.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disruptive customer behaviors

In the tourism context, production and delivery of many services require some form of collaboration between service providers and customers (e.g., Cheng, 2016; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Möhlmann, 2015). Customer involvement in the production, delivery and consumption process, and the quality of interactions among customers and/or service providers play a critical role in customers' evaluation of service experiences (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Other customers have been classified as “Co-consumption others” (Huang & Wang, 2014; Wei, Miao, Cai & Alder, 2012) or “Customer Bs” (Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, & Eigler, 1981; Miao, 2014) in the literature. Customer Bs are conceptualized as strangers who happen to be present in the same service environment with disruptive customers at the same time (Langeard et al., 1981). Previous literature portrays the influence of other customers in service transactions from several perspectives. Other customers present during the service production and delivery can be viewed as co-producers or co-creators of service experience (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). Other customers are a major group of “People” identified in the extended 7Ps framework of service marketing mix (Bitner & Booms, 1981). Other customers are also considered as a vital component of the physical environment (Bitner, 1992), which extends the traditional perceptions of customer-to-customer interactions. In this sense, other customer behaviors, as part of the servicescape, inevitably contribute to the service experiences of the rest of the group (Miao, 2014). While positive customer-to-customer interaction may improve the overall service experience, customer-to-customer interactions can also function as dissatisfying events (Grove & Fisk, 1997). Negative customer-to-customer interactions can lead to perceived injustice and/or dissatisfaction (Fisk et al., 2010).

Other customers' disruptive behavior is probably the most common form of negative customer-to-customer (indirect) interactions in a service context. Customers' disruptive behavior refers to any counter-productive or unproductive behavior of a customer that can negatively influence the operation of a service business and the service experience of focal customers (Gursoy, Cai, & Anaya, 2017; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). In a shared public environment (i.e., tourism attractions, theme parks, restaurants, hotels, and airplanes), customers may affect one another's experiences directly through interpersonal encounters, or indirectly through being part of the environment (Bitner, 1992; Gursoy et al., 2017; Martin, 1996; Miao, 2014). Indirect customer-to-customer interactions are highly relevant because they can influence customers' holistic evaluation of the service provider and customers' future intentions (Martin, 1996). Thus, service providers cannot afford to ignore or passively acknowledge the presence of negative interactions (Martin & Pranter, 1989).

Despite the potential consequences of disruptive customers' presence in a shared service environment, not many studies have examined its negative influence on focal customers. In general, service failure research has concentrated exclusively on the context when service providers are directly responsible for failing to provide a satisfactory service (Hibbert et al., 2012). Prior efforts in disruptive customer behavior mostly focused on its classification or recommended recovery strategies (Gursoy et al., 2017; Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Huang, Chen, Li, & Fu, 2014). For instance, McQuilken, Robertson, and Polonsky (2017) have explored the recovery efforts on customer overstay. Boo, Mattila, and Tan (2013) have identified six groups of deviant customer behaviors and their recovery strategies. Miao et al. (2011) have examined the roles of felt emotions and displayed emotions in both positive and negative customer-to-customer interactions. Yet, existing literature remains unclear concerning how by-standing customers may react to others' misbehavior through an explicit set of cognitions and emotions. Thus, there is a lack of endeavor to delineate how the presence of customer disruptive

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