Perceived Justice and Customer’S Satisfaction Following a Service Failure and Recovery Encounters. an Approach From Script Theory

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This paper examines perceptions of justice and the consumer’s satisfaction with service failure/recovery encounters from script theory. The results of the first study show main effects of the three experimental variables on three dimensions of perceived justice. The corrective action affects the distributive, procedural and interactional dimensions, the type of script interruption affects the procedural and interactional dimensions, and the action relevance affects the interactional dimension. The results of the second study basically replicate the results of the first study and also show that perceptions of distributive and procedural justice significantly mediate the relationship of script disconfirmation to customer satisfaction.

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The role of service failure and recovery attempts has received considerable attention in the study of satisfaction with service encounters (e.g. Beugre and Viswanathan 2006; Blodgett, Hill & Tax 1997; Maxham III and Netemeyer 2002; McColl-Kennedy and Spark, 2003; McCollough and Berry, Yadav 2000; Smith and Bolton 2002; Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999; Tax, Brown & Chandrashekaran 1998; Wirtz and Mattila 2004). Among the different psychological variables proposed to explain this relationship, consumer perceptions of justice or fairness have received considerable attention. Research in this domain has focused on the impact of the failure/recovery on three dimensions of perceived justice: distributive, procedural and interactive, as well as the impact of these dimensions on satisfaction (e.g. Beugre and Viswanathan 2006; Oliver 1997; Oliver and Swan 1989a; 1989b; Smith and Bolton 2002; Smith, Bolton & Wagner 1999).

Although perceived justice has proved to be as useful a predictor of satisfaction in this kind of encounters, little is known about the kind of comparison standards used by consumers to judge such encounters as fair or unfair. In this study it is assumed that consumers apply service scripts as comparison standards to evaluate fairness service failure and recovery attempts.

Script theory has been used by some researchers in the study of service encounters (Bateson 2002; Bitner, Booms and Mohr 1994; Mhor and Bitner 1991; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel & Gutman 1985). There is evidence that consumers have scripted knowledge about different consumption experiences, such as restaurants, or various shopping activities (Bower, Black & Turner 1979; Bozinoff and Roth 1983; Smith and Houston 1983; Sierra, Falces, Briñol & Horcajo 2002; Stoltman, Tapp & Lapidus 1989).

Scripts are defined as schematic knowledge about the typical action sequence in a consumption setting that guide consumer expectations about the appropriate behaviors and outcomes in that context (Abbott, Black & Smith 1985; Abelson 1981; Schank and Abelson, 1977; Smith and Houston, 1983). Scripts actions have different perceived relevance (Maki, 1990; Mandler 1984). Actions that include consumer-provider interaction are viewed as most relevant (e.g., ordering food)

Due to their dynamic nature, scripted structures must incorporate mechanisms capable of interpreting the presence of mismatching information, such as the interruption of the action sequence that normally leads to script goals (Schank and Abelson 1977; Mandler 1984). Schank and Abelson (1977) distinguish two types of interruptions: obstacles and errors. Obstacles result when an imminent action is missing or when the flow of actions is blocked in some way (e.g., you have a reservation but your table is occupied). Errors are incorrect actions or actions that lead to an inappropriate or unexpected outcome (e.g., you ask for a non smoking table but are assigned a smoking one). In both cases, some kind of corrective action is expected to happen (e.g., to remind the waiter about your reservation) to recover from the failure that has occurred.

Various studies have found that scripts act as standards of comparison in evaluations of provider performance and satisfaction judgments (Bitner et al 1994; Mohr and Bitner 1991; Falces, Sierra, Briñol & Horcajo 2002; Sierra, Falces & Bautista 2006). Falces et al. (2002) found that satisfaction experienced by consumers was affected by the kind of script interruption, the relevance of perceived action and the outcome of corrective action. Based on this evidence we propose that service scripts will act as a comparison standard in evaluations of distributive, procedural and interactive justice.

How do scripts—as standards for comparison– relate to the evaluation of perceived justice dimensions? Because of distributive justice is based on customers’ perception of the exchange outcome, procedural justice involves procedures to solve the problem, and interactional justice is the way the customer is treated during the exchange (Clemmer and Schneider 1999), we formulated the following hypotheses.

Regarding script interruptions, they reflect action values that affect the appropriate advance or sequence to fulfill script goals, so it was expected that this dimension of script would affect procedural justice to a greater extent than distributive and interactive justice.

Action relevance reflects perceptions of the importance of each script action (Maki 1990; Mandler 1984). In service settings, actions that include interaction with the provider are viewed as the most relevant to consumers. Based on this, we hypothesize that action relevance affects mainly interactive justice, and to a lesser extent distributive and procedural justice.

Strong scripts often have prescriptions (e.g. corrective actions) to overcome obstacles or correct errors (Schank and Abelson 1977; Mandler 1984). The corrective actions are related to benefits or lack thereof, if they are finally successful in solving the problem. Therefore the outcome of these corrections influences not only the evaluation of what people achieve, but also the perception of the whole process and the people involved in it. Thus, we hypothesize that the outcome of corrective actions will affect all three dimensions of perceived justice.

Each participant had to read the description of eight failure and recovery encounter scenarios. The description differed in the type of action relevance, type of interruption and result of corrective action. After reading each scenario they evaluated script disconfirmation, perceived justice (distributive, procedural, and interactive) and satisfaction with service encounter.

The first study was conducted with 93 psychology students enrolled in a Spanish University. A 2x2x2 between-subjects factorial design was used. The factors were Script action relevance (high or low), Type of script interruption (obstacle or error), and Corrective action result (positive or negative). In accordance with our expectations, results indicated that outcome of corrective action was the most important determinant of all three dimensions of perceived justice, whereas script interruption predicted changes in procedural and interactive dimensions, and action relevance only had a significant impact on the interactive dimension.

In a second study, conducted in Chile with a sample of 407 participants, results were replicated, showing that script dimensions are precursors of disconfirmation and satisfaction judgments, and that perceptions of distributive and procedural justice partially mediate the effect of script disconfirmation on satisfaction.
Taken as a whole, both studies support the idea of script theory as a robust and useful approach in the prediction of satisfaction, and satisfaction related responses.

References