The Moderating Effect of Customer Skepticism, Group Empowerment, Face Losing and Emotional Contagion on Customers’ Aggressive Behaviors

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This paper empirically addresses the moderating effects for customers’ aggressive behaviors. It contributes to attribution theory by introducing consumer skepticism as a moderator in attribution-negative emotion relationship. This research also yields valuable insights by examining group empowerment, face-losing and emotional contagion as moderators in strengthening negative emotions to aggressive behaviors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When a service fails, people tend to engage in blame attribution to assess what caused the poor service. Once customers blame the failure upon the service company, this attribution accounts for negative emotions and thus, these emotions will have consequential impacts on their aggressive behaviors. Moreover, attribution theory is limited to situations in which customers make causal inferences based on the information presented. However, the route of attribution would be altered when customers are skeptical towards the information. Customers’ acquired disbelief towards the company claims aggravates blaming the service failure to the company, resulting in higher level of negative emotions. Therefore, this research attempts to propose the moderating effect of customer skepticism on blame attribution and negative emotions.

Furthermore, even if consumers have strong negative emotions after blaming the service company, not all consumers will engage in aggressive behaviors. Thus, this study contributes to the literature by introducing three moderating effects – group empowerment, face losing and emotional contagion. Specifically, people tend to perceive that they have more powers when they are in groups and their behaviors are more legitimized when it is collective actions (Du et al., 2014). Therefore, consumers who believe that they have been empowered with a group will have an increased degree of negative emotions toward aggression. In addition, as losing face is of great significance in Chinese society, when consumers feel that their face has been threatened by the others, e.g. service employees, face losing will also elevate their negative emotions towards aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, since people are easily influenced by the social transmitted emotion, therefore, the level of consumers’ negative emotions can be elevated when other consumers also express the similar types of emotions. Thus, emotional contagion could strengthen consumers’ negative emotional level, leading to a higher possibilities of aggressive behaviors. To sum up, the third contribution of the current study is to introduce moderating effects: group empowerment, face losing and emotional contagion in customers’ negative emotions and aggressive behaviors. Thus, we hypothesize as:

Hypothesis 1: (H1a, H1b) Negative emotions mediate the relationship between attribution of blame and customers’ aggressive behaviors.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between attribution of blame and customers’ negative emotions is stronger when consumers’ are more skeptical than less skeptical towards company claims.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between customers’ negative emotions and aggressive behaviors is stronger when customers feel empowered within groups than without groups.

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between customers’ negative emotions and aggressive behaviors is stronger when customers lose their face than not.

Hypothesis 5: The relationship between customers’ negative emotions and aggressive behaviors is stronger when customers are influenced by the contagious emotion by other consumers.

We distributed online questionnaires via major travel websites, and 200 questionnaires were used for data analysis. All measurements were adopted from previous research using a 7-point Likert scale. We followed Devills’s (2003) scale development process to develop a new construct – group empowerment. Partial Least Squares Path Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) method was adopted for data analysis. The results suggested no common method bias issues by using Harmon’s one-factor test and marker variable technique. We also examined the convergent validity and discriminant validity. We examined the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) for the convergent validity. All of our constructs meet the criteria—AVE >0.50 and CR >0.70 (Hair et al., 2014). The discriminant validity was assessed through indicators’ cross loadings and the comparison of the square root of the constructs’ AVE. Our data suggested that when companies should be blamed for the service failure, negative emotion mediates the relationship between blame attribution and customers’ aggressive behaviors (H1 accepted). Furthermore, our results suggested the blame attribution and negative emotion relationship, and negative emotion – aggression level could be strengthened by consumer skepticism, group empowerment, face losing and emotional contagion respectively (H2-H5 accepted). Our model indicated 52.28 % explanatory power for the dependent variable.

This research focuses on how customers’ attributions of blame affect their emotional and behavioral responses to a company’s service failure. Once consumers blame the failure on the service company, this attribution elicits negative emotions and thus, these emotions will have consequential impacts on their aggressive behaviors. The results extend the literature in two ways. First, this research attempts to investigate the moderating effect of customer skepticism in the service context. Our result revealed that customer skepticism strengthened the relationship between customers’ blame attribution and negative emotion. Second, this research extends the literature by introducing group empowerment, face-losing and emotional contagion as moderators in strengthening the negative emotion and aggressive behaviors.

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