Role of Expertise, Affect, and Attribution in Consumer Created Service Exigency

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Three experiments explore consumer created exigency and contribute to services research by 1) examining the effect of expertise and hope of the service provider, along with the end outcome of consumer success or failure, on consumer satisfaction; 2) suggesting a mechanism based on attribution theory, to influence consumer evaluations in exigencies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Jane has to receive her CEO at the airport, and she is late to start from her office. She persuades the cab driver so that she may reach on time. Despite the service been delivered successfully, i.e., the cab reached the airport within stipulated drive-time, if the consumer is late to arrive, s/he (may) feel dissatisfied with the service provider (SP). In such situations of consumer created exigency, although technically the service might not fail, the consumers might fail to achieve their end goal of availing the service. We term this as consumer failure, and by extension, when the consumer is able to reach on time, i.e., is able to achieve the end goal of availing the service, as consumer success.

During exigency, the SP is exposed to anxiety and job stress (e.g.,(Vroom 1964)) while pacifying a troubled customer. This results in performance pressure, withdrawal symptoms, and even blatantly deny out-of-the-way consumer requests. Customers on the other hand might be either elated with the SP in case they attain their desired goal and succeed, or (may) hand over adverse evaluation to SP in case they fail.

In such exigency situations, it is important to understand the role of emotions, because as a state variable, they can be easily altered in the short-run. Therefore, emotions can act as a key to managerial intervention into the management of overall evaluations of the SP by the consumer (Tsai and Huang 2002). Expertise is the SP’s competence, knowledge, qualifications, or skill (Aharony and Strasser 1993) and it indicates the SP’s ability to adhere to high standards of service. Expertise attains heightened salience in a situation of exigency due to the challenges posed before the consumer in the achievement of the end-goal.

Across three studies we examine the role of SP’s expertise and positive display of emotion (hope) in the overall consumer evaluation. We further investigate the effect of outcome (consumer success versus failure) on the overall consumer evaluation, and provide a mechanism to safeguard the SP from adverse evaluation of the consumer using reorientation of attribution. In this study, we focus on satisfaction with a SP as the dependent variable (henceforth, simply consumer satisfaction), defined as the consumers’ emotional feeling directed towards the SP.

In Study 1A (N=90), we examine the role of expertise and the outcome on the overall consumer evaluation, and then subsequently in Study 1B (N=87) we extend these tests to include the positive emotions using the constructs of SP’s hope and the consumer hopefulness. Study 2 (N=68) was developed using a different scenario. The scenarios manipulated both SP Expertise and SP displayed Hope. The measures of satisfaction and hopefulness were the same as used in study 1. In Study 3 we illustrate how the relationships tested in study 1 and 2 changes once the consumer is primed with one of the four types of attributions (Universality, Unique, Globality, and Internal).

All the studies used online scenario-based experiment. For study 1 and 3, a three-part instrument on exigency at a printing situation was presented sequentially. The first part measured the demographic details and the mood of the respondent. The second part described a scenario that required the participant to use the centralized printing facility at the institute. The facility has plausible points of process breakdown, which is typically resolved with assistance from the IT personnel on duty. Due to heavy rush for printing, the problem escalates further towards the last hours of an impending deadline. We stimulate a situation of exigency by stating - “you have an important assignment due at 6PM, you could not complete the assignment till 5:45PM, and by the time you arrived at the printing facility there was a lot of rush...”. Further, the SP’s expertise during the interaction was manipulated at two levels (low/high). In the third part, the actual outcome (consumer success/failure) was disclosed and satisfaction was measured. The scenario for Study 2 represented a time urgency in a taxi travel to the airport. The process followed was exactly similar to the earlier study but the sample used was different.

Study 1 shows that consumers are likely to commit fundamental attribution error and attribute their failure to the SP, exhibiting low level of satisfaction with the SP. The display of expertise by the SP reduces such effect, indicating that while firms need to proactively make an effort to highlight the expertise of their employees even in the provision of routine services. Furthermore, this study also shows that exigency situations defy the effect of emotional contagion, and SP’s display of hope did not make a distressed consumer feel more hopeful. However, consumer hopefulness influences consumer satisfaction, indicating the need for firm’s to create tenable and credible sources of eliciting consumer hope.

These results were further validated in Study 2 using a new sample and a different scenario. Study 3 uses the priming of different types of attributions and evaluates the efficacy of four important types of attributions, namely, universality attribution, unique attribution, globality attribution, and self-attribution. We found that universality and unique attributions are able to influence the effect of final outcome and consumer hopefulness on satisfaction.

REFERENCES
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