Customers’ Emotions in Service Failure and Recovery: a Meta-Analysis

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This service failure/recovery emotions’ synthesis showed: 1) Conceptual models of emotions affect the relationship between emotions and their correlates; 2) Perceived fairness is most important in triggering negative/positive emotions; 3) Recovery satisfaction and loyalty are stronger related to positive emotions; 4) Methodological characteristics explain systematic variation in the effect sizes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

For customers, service failure and service recovery situations can be powerful triggers of strong emotional reactions. Consider the following titles of reviews taken from TripAdvisor as an example: “Disgusted, disappointed, DON’T GO,” “Unexpected joy!” Since companies often need to deal with customer displays of emotions, understanding what role do emotions play and what firms should do to manage emotions successfully represents important issues. The last fifteen years of complaint handling research have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of studies that have included customers’ emotional responses following service failure and recovery. The evidence accumulated in these years suggests that emotions are related to cognitive reactions of customers to service recovery efforts (i.e., perceived justice dimensions), and to relevant outcome variables such as loyalty, satisfaction, return intent, word of mouth, and complaint intentions (i.e., Lazarus 1966; Smith and Bolton 2002). Despite the significant number of empirical work, insights from this stream of research have not always been cumulative. Overall, these findings indicate that the impact of emotions may vary depending on the theoretical and methodological choices of the studies, the way emotions are measured (Richins 1997), and the cultural orientation. This suggests the need for a meta-analysis to integrate the evidence of accumulated empirical research. More specifically, through meta-analysis we aim to: 1) reflect on the theoretical conceptualization of emotions in service recovery domain, 2) map the constructs that have been examined in relation to emotions, 3) identify which of these constructs are more strongly related to emotions, and 4) assess the role of moderating variables in shaping the magnitude of the relationships.

In the current research we present a meta-analysis of 331 pairwise relationships coming from 69 independent studies of the correlates of emotions in service failure and recovery. Our results show that for negative emotions, half of the studies relies on a discrete model (50.6%), and the remaining half (49.4%) on a dimensional model (Barret 1998). Within the discrete model, anger is the emotion that is most frequently taken into consideration (52%), followed by frustration, regret, and helplessness. Interestingly, for positive emotions, most studies are anchored to a dimensional view model (92.7%). Moreover, we found that discrete and dimensional constructs are measured differently. Discrete models tend to measure emotions using multi-item scales where each item represents different nuances of the same category of emotions. Dimensional models use multi-item scales where each item represents a specific type of emotion from a different emotion category.

Additionally, negative emotion scales show a wide dispersion of items expressing different types of emotions across studies, whereas this variation is less pronounced for positive emotion scales. For example, we found 25 different negative emotions mentions in the studies vs. only 13 positive ones. Anger is by far the emotion most frequently included (18.7%) in dimensional models, followed by disappointment and annoyance (both 7.8%, respectively). The most common positive emotions are happiness (20.6%), followed by joy (12.7%) and pleasure (11.8%).

We also analyzed the pairwise relationships and the average effect sizes of emotions’ correlates and the results of the homogeneity analysis to test whether the observed variation in effect size values is greater than the one expected from sampling error alone. First, among the three dimensions of justice, procedural justice is the dimension most strongly related to both negative (r_{adj} = - 0.36) and positive emotions (r_{adj} = 0.48). Procedural justice has a stronger relationship with emotions than distributive justice. On average, all justice dimensions have higher effect sizes for positive emotions than for negative emotions, in absolute terms. This is also true for overall justice that has the strongest relationship with both negative and positive emotions, although the magnitude is higher for positive emotions. Positive emotions have a stronger impact on satisfaction after recovery (r_{adj} = 0.56) than negative emotions (r_{adj} = - 0.40), although negative emotions have a strong negative impact on cumulative satisfaction (r_{adj} = - 0.58).

With respect to the relationship between emotions and outcome variables, positive emotions are more strongly related to loyalty (r_{adj} = 0.48), than negative emotions (r_{adj} = - 0.26). By contrast, negative emotions are more powerful in shaping WOM (r_{adj} = - 0.30) than positive emotions (r_{adj} = 0.23). Finally, both positive and negative emotions are strongly related to trust (r_{adj} = 0.49 and r_{adj} = - 0.44, respectively), although we retrieved few effect sizes for this relationship.

Regarding homogeneity analysis results are mixed. Although only five chi-square tests are significant, all credibility intervals are sufficiently wide (exceeding .11) or include zero (Sagie and Koizlowsky 1993). These results suggest the presence of possible moderator variables.

The results of the moderator analyses show that, on average, dimensional models have higher effects sizes between emotions and their correlates. Scenarios produce on average higher effects size between emotions and their correlates, whereas a large number of items generates on average lower effect sizes than a smaller number. The type of participant (students vs. non-students) does not seem to affect the size of the correlations involving emotions and the other constructs. Among the cultural values, only uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation significantly moderate the relationships with emotion correlates.

Thus, we draw four main conclusions: first, our results show that the relationships between emotions and their correlates are higher when researchers use dimensional models rather than discrete models of emotions.

Second, the analysis of pairwise relationships highlights that the perceived fairness of procedures is more powerful than tangible compensation and interpersonal treatment in triggering both negative and positive emotions. Third, satisfaction after recovery and loyalty are more strongly related to positive than to negative emotions. Finally, the findings of the moderator analysis indicate that scenarios might inflate the relationships between emotional reactions and their correlates and that multi vs. single item scale lower on average the correlations. Researchers should also note that uncertainty avoiding cultures generate higher effect sizes in the relationship between emotions and their correlates, and suggests, for these cultures, an important role of the contact personnel and the company’s policies in handling the emotional reactions of customers.

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