Group service recovery strategies effectiveness: The moderating effects of group size and relational distance

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ABSTRACT

The extant service recovery literature focuses on consumers’ responses to individual failures. However, group service failures are in fact common, but they have received insufficient research attention. This study contributes to theory and practice by applying social impact theory to explain the social nature of group failures. Findings from two studies show that group size and relational distance substantially affect consumers’ response to group service recovery strategies. Specifically, private economic recovery creates less consumer satisfaction as group size increases, whereas consumers with a distant social relationship are more satisfied with public recovery for both economic recovery and social recovery. However, consumers with close relationships are more satisfied with public economic recovery and private social recovery. Apart from offering practical insights, this study expands the theoretical understanding of service failures, suggesting that they occur in a complex social ecology instead of relatively simple dyadic interactions between service providers and consumers.

Introduction

Group service failures are common in the marketplace, but they receive scant attention in the service literature. Continuous cost reduction pressures and technological advancements (including information and automation technologies) have encouraged firms to standardize their service offerings for a mass group of customers. However, when a service component fails, a large group of consumers suffers. Flight delays are a common example. What can a firm do to recover if its service failure affects a group of consumers? The extant literature mainly focuses on resolutions for failures that involve just a single customer (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). The literature includes limited discussion of the social nature of group failures. Social presences, regardless of whether they are interactive (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005), influence how consumers react to recovery offers. Zhou, Huang, Tsang, and Zhou (2013) identified individual and group service recovery strategies. However, what they proposed are only general approaches; the complex social ecology of a group further influences the effectiveness of recovery strategies. Building on social impact theory (SIT; Latané, 1981), this paper contributes by identifying two situational factors, group size and relational distance, that moderate consumer response to marketers’ recovery efforts.

This research empirically tested hypotheses via two studies. Study 1 tests the effect of group size on consumers’ satisfaction with group service recovery strategies. Results show that private economic recovery creates significantly less consumer satisfaction as group size increases. Study 2 verifies the impact of relational distance and confirmed that consumers who share a distant relationship are more satisfied with a public recovery strategy for both economic recovery and social recovery, while consumers sharing a close relationship are more satisfied with public economic recovery and private social recovery.

This paper contributes to the service recovery literature by highlighting the social nature of group failures. The study increases understanding of the complex social ecology of group failures. Because group service failures are increasingly common in today’s marketplace, our findings should be highly relevant for academic researchers as well as practitioners.

Theoretical background and research framework

Individual and group service recovery strategies

The highly personal and interactive nature of service makes it vulnerable to failures (Chebat & Slusarzycz, 2005; Hess et al., 2003;...
Magnini & Karande, 2009). Service failures cause economic, physical, and/or psychological losses for consumers and lead to numerous adversarial consumer responses, including complaining, brand switching, negative word-of-mouth, and retaliation (Bittner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Grégoire et al., 2009; Zhou, Tsang, Huang, & Zhou, 2014). How to make an effective recovery is a topic of great interest to marketing executives.

The extant studies focus on individual service recovery strategies and suggested that remedies can be provided through two major recovery dimensions: economic recovery and social recovery (Bittner et al., 1990). Examples of economic recovery include monetary compensation, partial refunds, and discounts for future purchases. Regardless of whether the failures cause economic loss or psychological suffering, economic recovery offers direct and quantifiable compensation and, thus, is commonly viewed as a basic recovery strategy (Boshoff, 1997; Smith et al., 1999). Social recovery includes explanation and apology that can comfort customers and compensate for their psychological distress (Hart, James, & Sasser, 1990; Michel, 2001); both economic recovery and social recovery positively contribute to recovery effectiveness.

In the extant literature, whether to offer economic and/or social recovery depends mainly on individual factors. For example, a consumer’s encounter with failures of different natures (Hess et al., 2003; Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993; Smith & Bolton, 1998; Smith et al., 1999), how an individual consumer attributes a service failure (Hess et al., 2003; Swanson & Kelley, 2001), his/her preference on public economic recovery and private economic recovery (Zhou et al., 2013). However, a group exists in a complex ecology; does this general understanding apply to groups with specific characteristics, including various group sizes and participants with differing intimacy in the social relationship? Our research sheds light on this issue.

**Social impact theory**

Latané offers a general theory of social influence through social impact theory (SIT). Social impact, in Latané’s conceptualization, means “changes in physiological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, and values and behavior, that occur in an individual, human or animal, as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of other individuals.” (Latané, 1981, p. 343). Simply speaking, SIT explains how a source influences a target, but more importantly, as Latané argued, SIT is capable of integrating two historically separate research streams: social influence from the majority (e.g., group pressure, social validation) and social influence from the minority (e.g., opinion leadership) into one general theory (Latané & Wolf, 1981). Latané explained the application of SIT in various social-influence contexts, including conformity, diffusion of responsibility, and embarrassment. Other scholars (e.g., Argo et al., 2005) have applied SIT in consumer research, arguing that a non-interactive social presence is sufficient to create social impact.

SIT argues that social impacts are determined by three multiplicative social forces: (1) Strength of the source. Strength refers to “salience, power, importance, or intensity of a given source to the target” (Latané, 1981, p. 344). Latané used a relatively loose definition of this concept. Strength can be sourced from age, knowledge, power, authority, and socioeconomic status and its influence is well documented in the literature related to conformity, celebrity endorsement, obedience, and opinion leadership, among others. (2) Immediacy. Immediacy refers to “closeness in space or time and absence of intervening barriers or filters” (Latané, 1981, p. 344). (3) Number of people present. “Number” simply means “how many people are there” (Latané, 1981, p. 344).

**Social impact theory in group service recovery: group size and relational distance**

We applied SIT and identified two social forces that differentiate individual recovery from group recovery: group size and relational distance. When Latané proposed his social forces in SIT, they were presented in a relatively abstract form. We refined his definition for a group recovery context: “Group size” refers to the number of affected consumers in a group service failure; “relational distance” is the level of intimacy among affected consumers in a service failure.

Group size may represent a major antecedent condition that enables or prevents successful outcomes of specific customer recovery strategies. Prior research has demonstrated that the greater the number of people present, the more significant the social influence on outcomes is (Griffitt & Veitch, 1971; Jackson & Latané, 1981; Langer & Saegert, 1977; Latané & Harkins, 1976). Research related to group service recovery has shown that consumers are more satisfied with public economic recovery and private social recovery (Zhou et al., 2013). Hence, we hypothesized that:

**H1.** Group size positively affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Specifically, (a) public (private) economic recovery creates more (less) customer satisfaction as group size increases and (b) public (private) social recovery creates less (more) consumer satisfaction as group size increases.

With respect to relational distance, consumers sharing distant relationships form a specific group due to incidental factors (i.e., group failure). Members in such groups have no intrinsic links. This kind of relationship is loose, resulting in instability in the group structure. Affected consumers sharing a close relationship have been more intrinsically linked. Compared to the loose structure, the intimate group structure exerts more significant social influence (Latané, 1981). For example, the more intimate one party is with another person, the less psychologically distant that person typically seems, and vice versa. Usually, people perceive psychologically distant events in terms of relatively abstract features. In contrast, psychologically close events are perceived in terms of detailed features (Tropce, Liberman, & Waksal, 2007).

According to relational distance theory, affected consumers sharing a distant relationship may pay more attention to the big picture of the recovery offer (what a firm offers) and assess whether or not the content can recover their loss. Customers in a failure group sharing a close relationship will, in addition to what is offered, pay attention to how they are recovered (recovery modes). Thus,

**H2.** Increases in relational distance positively affect consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Specifically, only for affected consumers sharing a close relationship in a service failure group, (a) public (private) economic recovery creates more (less) consumer satisfaction and (b) public (private) social recovery creates less (more) consumer satisfaction.

**Study 1: group size and recovery effectiveness**

**Design and participants**

The objective of study 1 was to test H1, which hypothesized that group size positively affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Study 1 was a 2 (group size: small group, big group) x 2
(recovery modes: public recovery, private recovery) × 2 (recovery dimensions: economic recovery, social recovery) between-subjects design in the context of group tours. Two hundred and forty-eight undergraduate students from a mainland Chinese university (60% female, average age 22) participated in the study. They received extra course credit for their participation.

Materials

The scenario included two parts. The first part let the participants imagine that they were performing an academic investigation of city G with their classmates. Before leaving their home city, they booked a hotel via a well-known travel agency. However, when they arrived at their accommodations, they found that the hotel was not as good as the agency promised. They had to walk almost 20 min to the bus stop every day. Thus, upon returning to their home city, all the participants complained to the agency together. We manipulated 5 persons as a small failure group and 50 as a big one.

The second part of the scenario described the travel agency’s recovery for this group failure. We manipulated refund (10% of accommodation payment) as economic recovery and apology as social recovery. We designed recovery modes with the travel agency sending e-mails that differed in perceived scope. In the public recovery version, the participants were able to see the e-mail address of the other members when reading the e-mail from the travel agency that contained information about its recovery strategy. In the private recovery version, the recipient was only able to see his or her own e-mail address, and not the other e-mail addresses.

Procedures and variables

The participants were assigned randomly to one of the eight scenarios. The participants projected themselves into the role of a customer who experienced the group service failure in which group size was manipulated. Participants then read the firm’s resolution in which recovery modes and dimensions were manipulated.

After that, they indicated the extent of their satisfaction with the travel agency’s resolution of the service failure through three items (be satisfied with/accord with my expectation/be pleased with, α = 0.83), which are revised from Chan, Wan, and Sin (2009). Lastly, participants conducted the manipulation check, answered questions including their perceptions of (1) recovery dimensions (apologize in the e-mail/make compensation in the e-mail), (2) recovery modes, which are revised from Chan et al. (2009) and Jing and Xie (2011) (respond privately, respond individually; α = 0.87), and (3) group size (this event involved a large number of consumers). All ratings used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Findings

We checked the effectiveness of the manipulation in study 1. The ANOVA identified significant interaction effects among group size, recovery dimensions, and recovery modes in experiment 1 (F(1,240) = 4.78, p < 0.05). Further analyses revealed (Fig. 1) that in the small group condition, the interaction between recovery mode and recovery dimension is significant for satisfaction (F(1, 240) = 16.40, p < 0.001). For social recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered in a public way than in a public way (M_private = 5.26, SD = 1.12; M_public = 5.84, SD = 1.70; F(1, 240) = 20.72, p < 0.0001). However, for economic recovery, there are no significant differences between public recovery and private recovery (M_private = 5.50, SD = 1.19; M_public = 5.86, SD = 0.51; F(1, 240) = 1.61, p = 0.21).

In the big group condition, the interaction between recovery mode and recovery dimension is significant for satisfaction (F(1, 240) = 50.99, p < 0.001). For social recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered in a private way than in a public way (M_private = 5.55, SD = 0.93; M_public = 4.10, SD = 1.60; F(1, 240) = 21.67, p < 0.05). In contrast, for economic recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered in a private way than in a private way (M_private = 3.97, SD = 1.38; M_public = 5.67, SD = 0.93; F(1, 216) = 29.62, p < 0.001). Another pair of interaction contrasts was examined. The interaction between group size and recovery mode is significant when economic recovery is provided (F(1, 240) = 9.10, p < 0.01) but not when social recovery is provided (F(1, 240) = 0.01, p = 0.97). These results reveal that for social recovery, group size has no significant impact on recovery mode choice (public recovery: M_small = 3.84, SD = 1.70; M_big = 4.10, SD = 1.60; F(1, 240) = 0.68, p = 0.41; private recovery: M_small = 5.26, SD = 1.12; M_big = 5.55, SD = 0.93; F(1, 240) = 0.87, p = 0.35). However, for economic recovery, group size has a significant effect on recovery mode choice (public recovery: M_small = 5.86, SD = 0.51; M_big = 5.67, SD = 0.93; F(1, 240) = 0.40, p = 0.53; private recovery: M_small = 5.50, SD = 1.19; M_big = 3.97, SD = 1.38; F(1, 240) = 24.89, p < 0.001).

The three-way ANOVA identified significant interaction effects among group size, recovery dimensions, and recovery modes in experiment 1 (F(1,240) = 4.78, p < 0.05). Further analyses revealed (Fig. 1) that in the small group condition, the interaction between recovery mode and recovery dimension is significant for satisfaction (F(1, 240) = 16.40, p < 0.001). For social recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered in a public way than in a public way (M_private = 5.26, SD = 1.12; M_public = 5.84, SD = 1.70; F(1, 240) = 20.72, p < 0.0001). However, for economic recovery, there are no significant differences between public recovery and private recovery (M_private = 5.50, SD = 1.19; M_public = 5.86, SD = 0.51; F(1, 240) = 1.61, p = 0.21).

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Fig. 1. Group size and recovery effectiveness.
Discussion

Results of study 1 partially support H1. Group size partially affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes positively. Specifically, in a small failure group, there is no significant difference in consumers’ responses to recovery modes for economic recovery. For social recovery, group size has no significant impact on consumers’ responses to recovery modes. One possible reason is that public recovery is best for economic recovery to reduce consumers’ negative conjecture (i.e., unfairness). However, private recovery is better for social recovery to enhance consumers’ positive feelings (i.e., sincerity; Zhou et al., 2013). According to prospect theory, variables avoid negative factors that exert more influence and enhance positive factors (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

Study 2: relational distance and recovery effectiveness

Design and participants

The objective of study 2 was to verify that relational distance positively affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Study 2 was a 2 (relational distance: distant, close) × 2 (recovery modes: public recovery, private recovery) × 2 (recovery dimensions: economic recovery, social recovery) between-subjects design in the context of group tours. Two hundred and twenty-four undergraduate students in mainland China (64% female, average age 22) participated in study 2. The students received extra course credit for their participation.

Materials and procedures

The scenario in study 2 included two parts. The first part described participants as a group of persons deciding to travel to city B. The following description was the same as that used in study 1. We manipulated the relational difference in this part. The distant relationship group did not know each other and came together as a tour group through a website. The close relationship group was made up of friends who had known each other for many years. They always organized group activities. The second part described the travel agency’s solution for this group complaint. This part was the same as in experiment 1. Procedures of experiment 2 were also the same as those for study 1. The difference involved the relational distance manipulation check (members in this group have known each other for many years/members in this group share a close relationship; a = 0.92). Other variables for recovery modes (α = 0.88) and satisfaction (α = 0.85) were the same as in study 1.

Findings

We checked the effectiveness of the manipulation in study 2. The ANOVA identified significant interaction effects among relational distance, recovery dimensions, and recovery modes in experiment 2 (F(1, 216) = 6.535, p < 0.05). Further analyses (Fig. 2) revealed that in the distant relationship condition, the interaction between recovery mode and recovery dimension is not significant for satisfaction (F(1, 216) = 1.72, p = 0.19). Participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered in a public way than in a private way regardless of social recovery (M_private = 3.29, SD = 1.34; M_public = 4.21, SD = 1.21; F(1, 216) = 9.86, p < 0.05) or economic recovery (M_private = 3.93, SD = 1.10; M_public = 5.40, SD = 0.82; F(1, 216) = 24.92, p < 0.001).

In the close relationship condition, the interaction between recovery mode and recovery dimension is significant for satisfaction (F(1, 216) = 24.26, p < 0.001). For social recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered privately than publicly (M_private = 4.10, SD = 1.02; M_private = 4.33, SD = 0.99; F(1, 216) = 5.08, p < 0.05). In contrast, for economic recovery, participants are more satisfied when recovery is delivered publicly than privately (M_private = 4.11, SD = 1.37; M_public = 5.50, SD = 0.87; F(1, 216) = 22.19, p < 0.05).

Discussion

The findings of study 2 support H2. Increases in relational distance positively affect consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Specifically, only for affected consumers sharing a close relationship in a service failure group, public (private) economic recovery creates significantly more (less) consumer satisfaction and public (private) social recovery creates significantly less (more) consumer satisfaction.

This pattern is not significant for affected consumers sharing a distant relationship. Consumers sharing a distant relationship in a
failure group are more satisfied with a public recovery strategy for both economic recovery and social recovery. One possible reason is that in loose conditions, consumers need reference points to reduce their negative feelings (i.e., uncertainty; Hui, Zhao, Fan, & Au, 2004). Following this logic, consumers sharing a distant relationship need a public recovery mode to know clearly what other people receive, regardless of whether for social recovery or economic recovery.

**General discussion**

This investigation is based on social impact theory and demonstrates the effects of group size and relational distance on consumers’ responses to recovery modes. First, to some extent, group size positively affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Specifically, no significant difference exists in consumers’ responses to recovery modes for economic recovery in a small failure group. For social recovery, group size has no significant impact on consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Private economic recovery creates significantly less consumer satisfaction as group size increases.

Second, relational distance positively affects consumers’ responses to recovery modes. Specifically, only for affected consumers sharing a distant relationship in a service failure group, public (private) economic recovery creates significantly more (less) consumer satisfaction and public (private) social recovery creates significantly less (more) consumer satisfaction. Consumers sharing a distant relationship in a failure group are more satisfied with a public recovery strategy for both economic recovery and social recovery.

This research enriches the theory in service recovery literature. Prior studies explored how to devise an effective individual service recovery strategy (Grégoire et al., 2009; Hess & et al., 2003; Ringberg et al., 2007; Smith et al., 1999). However, group service failures are in fact common, but they have received insufficient research attention. The present study contributes to the service marketing literature by putting forward the social nature of failure groups.

This study further enriches social impact theory by investigating the moderating effects of the social forces in the theory. We operationalized these forces into applicable concepts for group service recovery to provide further evidence supporting the validity and practicality of social impact theory. The study also contributes to social impact theory by examining the moderating effects, instead of the main effects, of social forces. Increasing cost pressures is making more firms to offer standardized services to a large group of customers. Standardization saves money, but when a failure occurs, a large number of customers suffer. Our research provides suggestions for service firms to manage group service recovery. The more consumers in a failure group, the more private economic recovery is avoided. For failure groups in which affected consumers share a distant relationship, it is better to deliver recovery in a public way, regardless of whether for economic recovery or social recovery.

Future research is recommended to extend the scope of this research and resolve some of its limitations. Our experiments of group failure were conducted in the context of travel. Group failures occur in many industries, including medicine, online retailing, and finance, among others. Future research must capture the nature of different industries to generalize research findings. Also, this research tested hypotheses using a scenario-based approach. Future research is necessary that relies on real-life settings. Another valuable direction for future research is the role of culture in moderating consumer response to recovery efforts. While Chinese and Western cultures are differentiated in their collectivism versus individualism, do customers from these cultures react differently to group size and relational distance? Our data, which were collected in China, have provided valuable evidence for a facet of the group failure recovery phenomenon; generalizability can be further enhanced if samples cover consumers from various cultural groups.

**Appendix A. Scenarios for group service failure in study 1**

Imagine you are Yu Li who experiences the following story.

Five persons (fifty persons), including Yu Li, will be undertaking an important academic investigation in City G. They would like to book a hotel in advance and thus consult ABC Agency, which is famous in their community of City W for providing this kind of service. They choose a four-star hotel with convenient transportation, well-equipped accommodations, and free Wi-Fi upon ABC Agency’s recommendation.

Arriving in City G, they find that they must walk almost 20 min from the hotel to the nearest bus stop. Since they have a tight schedule, they have to stay.

“The inconvenient transportation is troublesome for us after every day’s busy investigation” says Chai, one member of the investigation group.

Another member, Zhou, also says “The ABC Agency says that the hotel is convenient. It is not the case. We should complain to it.”

They all agree and complain to the ABC Agency after their return. The company promises to follow up on their case.

**Appendix B. Scenarios for group recovery in study 1**

Then Li receives the following e-mail from ABC Agency.

From: ABC Agency
Sent: Wednesday, August 25, 2010, 10:26 p.m.
To: Yu Li (Small group: Hongmin Bai, Haiyan Chai, Yu Li, Lexin Zhou, Xinchen Zhu)

(Big Group: Hongmin Bai, Zili Bi, Haiyan Chai, Ceng Chen, Chen Chen, Libin Chen, Shaoqian Chen, Ting Chen, Yinmin Chen, Ling Deng, Shanshan Dong, Wenyu Fan, Guoqiu Guo, Ru Guo, Hao He, Shenchun Hong, Jinhua Huang, Li Huang, Xia Huang, Huifen Jin, Fei Kang, Dan Li, Hairong Li, Hong Li, Ming Li, Yu Li, Guoqing Liu, Hongyang Liu, Qianqian Liu, Binxin Lu, Hua Lu, Min Qian, Zixuan Shao, Xianyong Tang, Lei Wang, Xinjian Wang, Feng Wei, Xiao Xiao, Jing Xu, Na Yu, Yufan Yu, Yifan Zeng, JianQing Zhang, Jing Zhang, Peng Zhang, Xiaoling Zhang, Lexin Zhou, Lin Zhou, Ning Zhu, Xincheng Zhu)

Subject: hotel issues in City G

Dear Yu Li (Dear Customers),

Our company is deeply concerned about your case. After investigation, we have learned that the local road is being repaired; thus, the buses had to be rerouted during your stay in City G. We apologize for our inadequate communication with the hotel (Economic recovery: We have decided to refund 10% of your paid fee as compensation. We will send a check to you).

We promise we will improve our services and hope you will repatronize ABC Agency. We will surely provide you with the best services.

Yours sincerely,

Mingli Guo
Customer Service Manager of ABC Agency

**Appendix C. Scenarios for group service failure in study 2**

Imagine you are Yu Li who experiences the following story.

Yu Li and other persons organize a tour group to City B. They are close friends and have known each other for many years. They always plan activities together. This time they have an interest in traveling to City B (They are in the same city, but have not met each other before). They organized together from the tourism website due to the same interest in traveling to City B). They would like to book a hotel in advance and thus consult ABC Agency, which is famous in their community of City W for providing this kind of service. They choose a four-star hotel with convenient transportation, well-equipped accommodation, and free Wi-Fi upon ABC Agency’s recommendation.
Arriving in City B, they find that they must walk almost 20 min from the hotel to the nearest bus stop. Since they have a tight schedule, they have to stay. However, the inconvenient transportation is troublesome for them.

They complaint to the ABC Agency after their return. The company promises to follow up on their case.

References


