



The effects of brand relationship quality on responses to service failure of hotel consumers

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the applicability of Fournier's (1998) Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) framework in the hotel industry, and also investigates the effects of BRQ on hotel consumers' behavioral intentions, after service failures in high-class hotels. The empirical results show that BRQ is applicable to the hotel industry and has a moderating effect on consumers' post-failure emotions, particularly in terms of influencing future behavioral intentions. However, this finding is not applicable when the service failures are severe.

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1. Introduction

Hotel performance and competitiveness are significantly dependent on their ability to satisfy customers efficiently and effectively (Olsen and Connolly, 2000; Sin et al., 2006). One of the suggested ways to retain loyalty from customers is through relationship marketing. Loyalty theory is one of the most significant theories concerning relationships between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998). However, Fournier's (1998) study indicated that not all brand relationships are alike, either in strength or in character. Indeed, from a consumer perspective, many brand relationships are perceived as indications of 'loyalty'. Thus, the BRQ model proposes to capture the *strength* and *depth* of the connection between consumers and brands. The model is seen to have advantages of conceptual richness over extant loyalty notions within the domain of process specification compared to traditional perceptions of brand loyalty.

The BRQ model was first proposed in the context of the retail industry. Currently, the suitability of metaphoric transfer to the consumer-brand context for all the brands remains unclear. Although retail is one of the typical service industries, hotels are ideally placed to establish relationships with their customers (Gilbert and Powell-Perry, 2002). However, it is still unclear whether hotel brands are capable of establishing themselves as relationship partners with hotel consumers. Moreover, brand relationships are changeable and fragile, and nearly all service failures could be responsible for diminishing or even destroying brand value. It would be interesting to examine whether BRQ has a certain

influence on consumers who have formed relationships with a particular brand. Therefore, comparing the differences of post-failure responses between high BRQ consumers and low BRQ consumers can help us to understand whether BRQ as a model could moderate or magnify the negative influences of service failures on brand relationship.

The purpose of this study is to examine the applicability of BRQ in the hotel industry, and especially to address the lack of research on the effects of BRQ on consumers through identifying causal attribution as a theoretical base to define service failures and applying it to empirical study. First, the study seeks to validate the applicability of the BRQ concept in a hotel setting through empirical investigation. Second, as empirical work to apply attribution theory in the hospitality and tourism industry remains limited, the findings of this study could provide a reference for hotel organizations in deciding whether BRQ should be a priority. It is also hoped that the findings will help hotel brands to manage service failure through developing an understanding of how affected consumers attribute service failure.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand relationships in the service setting

The brand relationship metaphor, based on the relationship between marketing and the interpersonal theory of social psychology, was regarded to be superior in its ability to provide insights into the roles of brands in consumers' lives and the understanding of consumers' needs (Breivik and Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Fournier, 1998; Monga, 2002). The concept of brand relationship was formally introduced in the writings of Blackston (1992, 1993) and Fournier (1994). Fournier (1994) defines brand relationships as a *voluntary or imposed interdependence between a person and a brand*

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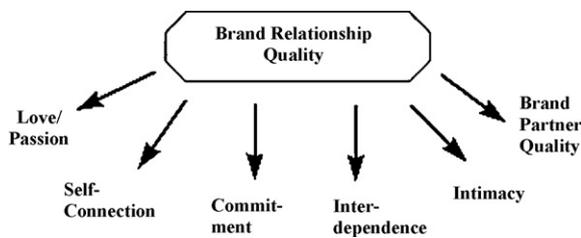


Fig. 1. Facets of BRQ model.

Source: Fournier (1998).

characterized by a unique history of interactions and an anticipation of future occurrences. This implies that the interdependence between the consumers and brands is a key indicator, and that the relationship between them has similar qualities to human relationships. She seeks to qualify brands as a relationship partner through the personification of brands. The brand relationship literature also asserts that some brands are naturally more suited to establishing a relationship than others (Aggarwal, 2002; Dall'Olmo Riley and De-Chernatony, 2000; Smit et al., 2007). Because brands are largely differentiated or identified from the people who have invested their psychic energy into the branded product or service (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 1999). Brands with a distinctive value system, relevant to consumers, indicating the origin of the offering and enabling the building of relationships based on trust are more likely to act as a relationship partner. Specifically, three kinds of brands are generally considered to be indistinguishable from their manufacturers: (1) service brands, such as hotels, airlines and banks; (2) brands composed of a combination of products and services as their core offering, such as many online store brands; and (3) brands in which consumers have a direct interaction with people who work for the company.

Hospitality brands are very likely to be a legitimate active relationship partner. Hospitality services are generally recognized as excellent examples of highly intangible and complex service-offerings. This varies enormously according the context of consumption, delivery, duration and significance to the customer. Hence, there is a need to examine whether hospitality brands are capable of establishing a relation with consumers.

2.2. The BRQ model

Several conceptualization constructs of brand relationship have been suggested to understand the *strength* and *depth* of brand relationship (Blackston, 1992; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Dwyer et al., 1987; Fournier, 1994, 1998). The BRQ model proposed by Fournier (1998) is the most influential framework and significant construct (Smit et al., 2007). Within her conceptualization, relationship thinking has reached its logical conclusion (Bengtsson, 2003). The brand relationship is becoming one of the principal foci of research on consumers and brands (Aaker et al., 2004; Breivik and Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Chang and Chieng, 2006; He, 2006; Huber et al., 2010; Ji, 2002; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 1999; Kates, 2000; Smit et al., 2007).

As shown in Fig. 1, the BRQ model consists of six aspects: *love/passion* and *self-connection*, which refer to emotional connections and denote the affective and socio-emotive attachments between the consumers and the brands; *interdependence* and *commitment*, which capture the behavioral ties between the relationship partners; and *intimacy* and *partner quality*, which are cognitive connections and denote consumers' supportive cognitive beliefs. However, the BRQ model has the advantage of conceptual richness over extant loyalty notions within the domain of process specification compared with traditional brand loyalty perspective (Fournier, 1998). Research in terms of creating a valid

measurement scale and testing the construct empirically remains limited. Only recently has empirical research been conducted (Breivik and Thorbjørnsen, 2008; He, 2006; He and Lu, 2007; Monga, 2002; Thorbjørnsen et al., 2002). Thorbjørnsen et al. (2002) studied the application of personalized websites and customer communities on the BRQ framework of Fournier (1998). Thirty-three indicators of BRQ were initially designed based on Fournier's (1998) original scale. Breivik and Thorbjørnsen (2008) compared two models of consumer-brand relationships: the BRQ model and the relationship investment (RI) model, on the basis of empirical fit and model interpretation.

2.3. Attribution theory to service failures

Generally, consumers respond to service failures in a number of ways, including by attributing blame, appealing to justice, emotional responses, expressing recovery expectations, and through post-failure behavioral intentions (Bonifield and Cole, 2007; Hess et al., 2003; Hetts et al., 2000; Simonson, 1992; Tsiros and Mittal, 2000; Weiner, 2000). Attribution theory is one of the most common theories covering service failures. It argues that consumers commonly search for explanations for the causes of failures (Bitner et al., 1990; Folkes, 1984). A general process developed by Weiner (2000) provides a clear picture about the consequences of causal attribution. These sequences start with thinking (attribution → causal stability → expectancy; or attribution → causal controllability → personal responsibility) and progress to feelings (hope and fear; anger) and on to action (Weiner, 2000).

2.3.1. Causal attribution

Causal attributions represent cognitive explanations as to why particular events occur (Heider, 1958). These have been the predominant psychological accounts of people's behavior explanations, focusing on the various causes that people assign to behavior (Malle, 1999). Weiner's (1985) categorization system is widely accepted. It consists of three primary attributions: locus, controllability, and stability. *Attributions of locus* are customers' determination of whether the cause(s) of failures are located within the customer or the organization. However, this attribution is excluded in many studies because most causes of failure are perceived by customers to originate with service organizations (rather than within customers), making the locus attribution unambiguous and thus less relevant to most situations (Bitner et al., 1990; Folkes et al., 1987; Hess et al., 2003; Weiner, 2000). *Attributions of controllability* are the degree to which the cause is subject to volitional alteration where the outcome "could have been otherwise" (Weiner, 1985, 2000); that is, the degree to which customers believe that the cause(s) of failures could have been prevented by the organization. *Attributions of stability* denote the degree to which customers believe that the cause(s) of failures are temporary or enduring (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 1985). This study also eliminates the locus attribution and focuses exclusively on attributions of controllability and stability, which are most salient in understanding post-consumption reactions (Weiner, 2000).

2.3.2. Emotional response

Emotions are defined as *mental state(s) of readiness that arise from cognitive appraisals of events or of one's own thoughts* (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Consumers may generate different types of negative emotions when they are dissatisfied with the service. Generally, anger, offense, regret and disappointment are widely recognized as consequences of service failure and casual attributions (Bonifield and Cole, 2007; Folkes et al., 1987; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Tsiros and Mittal, 2000; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991).

Lerner and Keltner's (2000) framework explains how different emotions arise from six appraisal patterns: pleasantness,

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