



Are cynical customers satisfied differently? Role of negative inferred motive and customer participation in service recovery

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of consumer cynicism in service recovery, specifically the process through which cynicism influences customer satisfaction. This study also investigates the role of customer participation in the recovery process when alleviating outcomes among cynical customers. Across one pilot study and two experiments, we demonstrate that cynicism negatively moderates the effects of perceived justice on satisfaction. Additionally, we demonstrate the mediating role of negative inferred motive in the relationship between perceived justice and customer satisfaction. Highly cynical customers were found to less favorably evaluate customer satisfaction than less cynical customers, as they infer recovery efforts to be motivated by firms' self-interest rather than customers' interest. We also demonstrate that increasing customer participation in service recovery through joint recovery can overcome adverse outcomes and increase customer satisfaction among highly cynical customers. These findings offer important insights for service managers in designing effective service recovery strategies for cynical customers.

1. Introduction

Service failures are inevitable, so service providers often engage in service recovery to rectify the losses experienced by customers. Service recovery efforts may not lead to the desired level of satisfaction, however, if they fail to meet customer expectations (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, & Tripp, 2013; Nguyen, McColl-Kennedy, & Dagger, 2012). While prior studies have focused largely on what service providers do to elicit favorable responses, this study identifies a personality trait, namely cynicism, which may adversely influence customer satisfaction with service recovery encounters. Paradoxically, the positive effects of perceived justice in service recovery efforts on satisfaction are reduced among customers with high levels of cynicism.

Cynicism refers to a generalized belief that others' actions are deceitful. It is associated with unrealistic expectations, a sense of being let down, feelings of betrayal, and negative affect (Hochwarter, James, Johnson, & Ferris, 2004). Although cynicism has been examined in various organizational behavior contexts (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005; Wu, Neubert, & Yi, 2007), only recently has this concept been studied in the consumer behavior context. An increasing body of research on cynicism indicates that certain consumers may become

aggravated enough to show deviant behaviors, such as demonstrating lower purchase intentions, spreading negative word of mouth, and disparaging a firm's reputation (Chylinski & Chu, 2010; Helm, Moulard, & Richins, 2015; Odou & de Pechpeyrou, 2011). Due to the potentially severe outcomes of cynical consumers, managers must gain a better understanding of how cynicism influences service encounters, from which appropriate intervention strategies to overcome the effects of cynicism can be developed.

Despite its adverse effects, research into the effects of consumer cynicism on service recovery outcomes remains limited. The present study addresses this research gap by empirically examining the role of cynicism in service recovery encounters. Cynical consumers are characterized by suspicion, hostility, and pessimism. They may feel a deep-rooted mistrust of the motives behind the service provider's actions and doubt the ability of the service provider to deliver the stated outcomes (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). This negative view of a service provider may influence cynical consumers to unfavorably evaluate service recovery efforts. Thus, we argue that consumer cynicism may moderate the effect of perceived justice on satisfaction. Further, the role of negative inferred motive may mediate this relationship, as cynical consumers may view the service recovery efforts as motivated by the firm's self-interest

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rather than by consumer interest, which might adversely affect their satisfaction judgments.

Also, this study proposes that customer participation in the service recovery process might help to alleviate the unfavorable evaluation by cynical consumers. Prior studies have indicated that customer participation in service encounters might improve their perceptions of quality. This is because, when consumers engage or participate in a service recovery, they may observe service aspects that are typically not visible to them. This lowers the level of uncertainty associated with the outcomes of service recovery, making such recovery more transparent and trustworthy (Guo, Lotz, Tang, & Gruen, 2015). In addition, customer participation may assist companies in evaluating service recovery efforts by assuaging consumer suspicion of firm motives. Thus, we expect that customer participation can improve service recovery outcomes among cynical consumers.

The present study aims to examine (1) the mediating role of negative inferred motive in the perceived justice and customer satisfaction relationship; (2) the moderating role of cynicism in the effects of perceived justice on negative inferred motive and satisfaction; and (3) the role of customer participation in the effects of cynicism on negative inferred motive and satisfaction. This study makes at least four contributions to the current literature on service failure and recovery. First, this study extends the idea of consumer cynicism to a potential paradox in which high levels of service recovery may lead to less than favorable customer satisfaction. Second, this study demonstrates that consumer cynicism regulates judgments of satisfaction through the inference of negative motives. Third, this study establishes that increasing participation in service recovery may reduce negative outcomes among cynical customers. Finally, this study extends our understanding of value co-creation through customer participation in the service-recovery context (Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patricio, & Voss, 2015).

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding our research efforts. This framework concerns the underlying mechanism by which overall perceived justice affects customer satisfaction through negative inferred motive. We posit that cynicism moderates the effect of overall perceived justice on negative inferred motive and customer satisfaction. In addition, we propose that customer participation in the recovery process may alleviate the effects of cynicism on negative inferred motive and satisfaction.

2.1. Overall perceived justice

Perceived justice refers to the extent to which consumers perceive

they have been treated fairly in a service encounter (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). According to justice theory (Blau, 1964), consumer perceptions of justice in service recovery are based on procedures, outcomes, and interactions. Fair treatment restores the balance between inputs and outputs in a service exchange and enables consumers to react more favorably to a service provider. In other words, satisfaction is determined by the extent to which consumers perceive that they have been treated fairly during the service recovery process (Balaji & Sarkar, 2013; McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). While prior studies have often focused on distinct forms of justice, such as distributive (fairness of outcome), procedural (fairness of procedures), and interpersonal (fairness of interpersonal treatment) justice, this study considers consumer perception of overall justice in a service recovery encounter.

Overall perceived justice is examined in this study because a number of researchers have noted that consumers form holistic impressions when evaluating justice or fairness in service recovery. For example, Törnblom and Vermunt (1999) argued that individual dimensions of justice are meaningful only in relation to the overall justice of the encounter. Following a similar line of thought, Beugre and Baron (2001) proposed that justice dimensions serve as a basis for forming systematic justice, which then relates to a customer's overall perceptions of justice in a service encounter (Zhu & Chen, 2012). DeWitt, Nguyen, and Marshall (2008) stated that “customers use a compensatory model to arrive at an overall perception of justice” (p. 270). More recently, Xu, Marshall, Edvardsson, and Tronvoll (2014) proposed that considering overall justice from a monistic perspective underlies the interdependence between the three justice dimensions. In addition, several empirical studies in services marketing and organization behavior have shown that the three justice dimensions are strongly correlated and often interact to influence a variety of customer and organizational outcomes (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998; Xu et al., 2014). Consistent with those studies, the present study proposes that overall perceived justice allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how consumers form and use justice judgments following service recovery.

2.2. Negative inferred motive

Negative inferred motive is defined as the extent to which a consumer believes that a service provider intends to exploit or take advantage of the customer to maximize the provider's own interests in a service exchange (Joireman et al., 2013). Attribution theory (Weiner, 1992) suggests that attributions made for a service provider's actions during a service failure encounter, as well as the resulting behavioral responses, are influenced by the motives or intentions inferred (Wirtz &

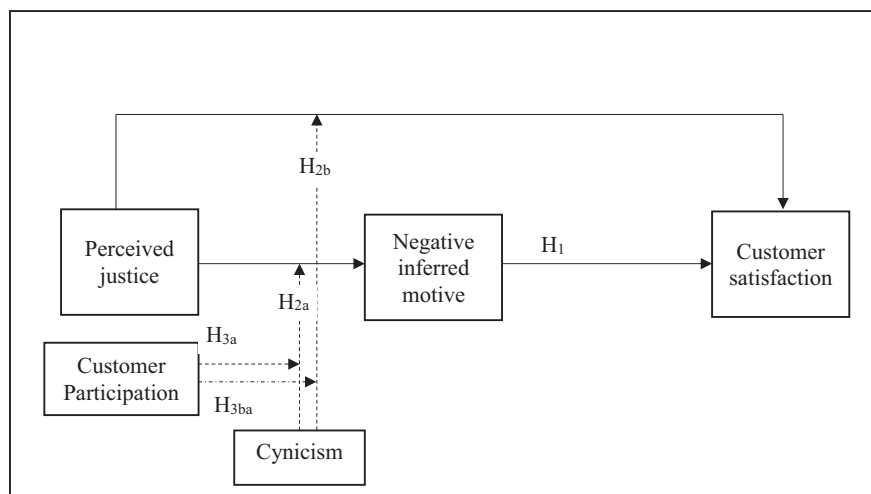


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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