

J Bus Psychol (2010) 25:151–161
DOI 10.1007/s10869-009-9137-x

Attributions and Outcomes of Customer Misbehavior

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Published online: 25 September 2009
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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of this study is to determine which attribution dimensions concerning dysfunctional other-customer misbehavior most influence customer dissatisfaction toward a service firm.

Design/methodology/approach Our research hypotheses were tested using a 2 (Controllability: controllable versus uncontrollable) × 2 (Stability: unstable versus stable) × 2 (Globality: specific versus global) experimental design in a hypothetical restaurant context.

Findings Our empirical results demonstrate that when customers feel that the other-customer's misbehavior can be controlled by the firm (i.e., controllability attributions) or is likely to recur (i.e., stability attributions), they render unfavorable service evaluations toward that firm. However, these harmful effects may be mitigated if the customer believes that the same type of dysfunctional customer behavior also occurs during service encounters in other firms (i.e., globality attributions).

Implications With a view to diminishing the unsatisfactory experience of other-customer failure, the service organizations need to: (1) act as “police officers” to ensure that their customers behave appropriately; (2) have policies and procedures in place to manage their guests' behavior so as to reduce the recurrence of other-customer failure; and (3) consider communications intended to enhance attributions of globality following an other-customer failure, that will help to buffer the negative impact of controllability and stability attributions on satisfaction and behavioral reactions with the firm.

Originality/value This is the first time that controllability, stability, and globality attributions are clearly shown to be part of the process by which customers transfer their negative response to other-customer misbehavior to the organization.

Keywords Customer misbehavior · Other-customer failure · Controllability · Stability · Globality · Satisfaction

Received and reviewed by former editor, George Neuman.

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Introduction

In many service environments, dissatisfying encounters are influenced—directly or indirectly—by the misbehavior of other customers (Grove and Fisk 1997; Martin 1996; Martin and Pranter 1989; Moore et al. 2005). This misbehavior can take the form of smoking in the non-smoking area of a restaurant, talking in an overly loud voice late at night in a hotel hallway, talking on cell phones during a movie, cutting into the check-out line ahead of others, and yelling in order to obtain quicker service.

A number of terms have been used in studies exploring and describing customers' detrimental mannerisms. For

example, Bitner et al. (1994) used the term “problem customers,” Lovelock (1994) used the word “jaycustomers,” Fullerton and Punj (1997) used the label “consumer misbehavior,” and Harris and Reynolds (2003) used the phrase “dysfunctional customer behavior.” In this study we prefer to use the more descriptive term *other-customer failure*, which refers to actions by another customer, whether intentional or unintentional, that disrupts one’s own service experience (Huang 2008).

Several studies have shown that other-customer failures reflect negatively on a patron’s global evaluation of the service firm (Bitner et al. 1990; Grove and Fisk 1997; Grove et al. 1998; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004; Martin and Pranter 1989; Moore et al. 2005). For example, based upon a national survey of 554 customers in restaurants and bowling alleys, Martin (1996) found that the negative other-customer public behavior (such as noisy children or public drunkenness) diminished customer satisfaction with the firm. Harris and Reynolds (2003) reported that dysfunctional other-customer behavior lessened the extent of one’s loyalty and satisfaction toward the service organization. Similar findings were found by Wu (2007) in his survey of the tourism service industry.

An interesting unanswered research question regarding other-customer failure remains: Under what conditions does the other-customer’s misbehavior lead to more negative customer reactions toward the service organization? The purpose of this study is to determine which attribution dimensions concerning other-customer failure most influence customer’s negative service evaluations. This research will not only assist managers in identifying what sort of causal attribution may contribute to the evaluation process underlying customer dissatisfaction, but it will also extend the existing knowledge on the study of negative interpersonal encounters in the service literature.

Attribution Theory

When faced with unexpected and negative events, we search for meaningful explanations of their causes (Anderson 1983; Levy et al. 1998). Attribution theory is a collection of several theories concerned with the assignment of causal inferences and how these interpretations influence subsequent evaluations and future actions (Folkes 1984; Hunt et al. 1995; Swanson and Kelley 2001; Wirtz and Mattila 2004). We can use attribution theory to predict the factors that determine when a customer will react negatively to other-customer failure. Weiner (1980) identified three common dimensions of causal attributions: locus of causality, controllability, and stability.

The locus of causality is the customer’s perception of where or with whom the responsibility for the failure rests

(Heider 1958; Weiner 1985). For example, who is responsible for someone (customer B) who misbehaves in a restaurant, thereby disturbing other patrons (customer A) who share the same service setting? The cause is either external (e.g., the misbehaving customer B and/or the service provider), or internal (e.g., the fellow customer A). In this study, we focus only on external attributions as the aim of this study is to investigate under what conditions customer B’s misbehavior will lead to more negative reactions of customer A toward the service organization.

In a customer service context, controllability refers to the degree to which the cause is perceived to be under the service firm’s control. This consists of the customer’s belief as to whether the organization or its personnel could have influenced or prevented the failure from occurring (Hess et al. 2003; Weiner 2000). Studies by Folkes and Weiner have shown that when the failure is perceived as being under the control of the service firm, negative emotional and behavioral reactions such as negative word-of-mouth (WOM) and voiced complaints (Folkes 1984; Folkes et al. 1987; Weiner 1985) are triggered. Bitner (1990) indicated that the greater a firm’s perceived control over the cause of failure, the more unfavorable is the customer evaluation of the firm. Thus, in cases of other-customer failure (e.g., loud voices in a peaceful restaurant) that are perceived to be within the control of the firm (e.g., personnel could ask the other customers to keep their voices down), the victim will feel less satisfied, less willing to patronize that establishment in future, and more likely to engage in negative WOM than when they believe the firm has no control.

H1 Customers are (a) less satisfied, (b) more likely to engage in negative WOM, and (c) less willing to repurchase when they consider the cause of other-customer failure to be controllable by the firm.

Stability concerns the issue of whether the failure is relatively temporary or fairly permanent. Failures with stable causes recur more frequently than failures with unstable causes. The perception that a cause is stable will lead the customer to expect a similar outcome in the future (Folkes 1984). Prior research has demonstrated that when customers perceive the cause of a failure to be stable, they report higher levels of dissatisfaction and negative behavioral responses than when they believe the failure is a rare event (Bitner 1990; Folkes et al. 1987; Wirtz and Mattila 2004). Thus, when customers attribute other-customer failure (e.g., cutting in line) to stable causes, they tend to expect similar failures to recur even if the organization puts policies or procedures in place to manage their guests’ behavior (e.g., take-a-number system) and thereby, will report higher levels of dissatisfaction, negative WOM, and unfavorable future purchase intentions toward the firm.

H2 Customers are (a) less satisfied, (b) more likely to engage in negative WOM, and (c) less willing to repurchase when they attribute the cause of other-customer failure in a service setting to stable causes.

Huang (2008) suggested that when customers perceive the firm to have control over other-customer failure (controllability), but fail to exercise that control, or perceive that this failure is likely to recur (stability), they blame the service firm rather than the specific dysfunctional customer. The results of that study confirm the relationship between controllability attributions and the firm's assumed responsibility for other-customer failure. However, the relationship between stability attributions and a firm's responsibility were not supported. Huang concluded that the unsupported findings might be due to the moderating effect of globality attributions—the extent to which respondents considered the cause of other-customer failure to be widespread among different service organizations rather than specific to one firm. Nevertheless, the results of that research survey show that there is ambiguity regarding relationships between stability, globality, and firm responsibility. Huang (2008) thus noted a need to learn more about how people make causal attributions when other-customer failure occurs. We hope to begin to fill this gap in the present study. We utilize an experimental design in which we manipulate attribution dimensions, which allows us to have more control over the independent variables of interest. Based on Huang's (2008) suggestions, our model contains three attribution concepts, controllability, stability, and globality that seem most relevant when customers suffer from other-customer failure. Previous studies have reported that these attribution dimensions are typically highly related to one another (Anderson 1983; Hess et al. 2007; Weiner 1980).

Moderating Role of Globality Attributions

Attributions of globality reflect the extent to which the cause of an event is believed to occur in multiple settings, as opposed to just the focal one (Abramson et al. 1978). This concept has already been studied extensively in psychology (cf. Bradbury and Fincham 1990). Oliver (1997) suggested exploring this concept as an avenue for future research on customer dissatisfaction. However, empirical findings regarding the relationships between globality attributions and customer dissatisfaction have only been obtained recently. Hess et al. (2007) investigated customer responses to interactional failures, such as a frontline employee who is inattentive or rude, or unfriendly. They examined interactional failures within pseudorelationships, which exist when a customer interacts repeatedly with different frontline employees across encounters with a

service organization. Empirical results demonstrated that dissatisfaction with the organization was critically dependent on the customer's attribution of globality—that is how widespread the customer felt the interactional failure (rudeness of employees during the interaction) to be throughout the organization. Customers who attributed interactional failure to be a global (rather than a specific) problem were more dissatisfied with the service organization (Hess et al. 2007).

In this study, a global attribution is defined as when the same type of other-customer failure also occurs in different organizations, whereas a specific attribution is defined as when other-customer failure occurs in only one organization. Customers who make global attributions tend to believe that similar failures likely occur in different settings. It is important to note the conceptual distinction between stability and globality attributions. A stability attribution is an inference regarding the recurrence of a failure within the same firm; a globality attribution is the extent to which respondents consider the cause of a failure to be widespread (affecting different service organizations) rather than specific to one firm. Research has confirmed that the two are conceptually distinct (Anderson 1983). In Huang's (2008) study, for instance, one respondent stated that he was bothered by someone who smoked in the non-smoking area of a café, and that it was, in fact, not the first time he had suffered from the same problem in the same shop (high in stability), but this unpleasant experience never happened in other cafés (low in globality). In another instance, one respondent described being disturbed by individuals who talked in overly loud voices in a fast-food restaurant (high in stability) but this kind of unpleasant experience also happened in other fast-food restaurants (high in globality).

Attributions of globality are critical to the perception of other-customer failure, and a customer's perceptions whether the cause of a failure is global or specific are expected to influence where he/she attributes responsibility, which ultimately affects service evaluations. In cases where the customer perceives the misbehavior of other-customers (such as cutting in line) to be a global phenomenon (it happens in banks A, B, as well as C), they are less likely to question the firm's ability and commitment to control the problem, or to expect them to establish adequate and effective service systems and processes to decrease its recurrence (e.g., the use of a take-a-number system). Such beliefs are less likely to result in unfavorable evaluations of the service firm. In contrast, other-customer failure perceived to be specific to the setting (it happens only in bank A) is likely to be interpreted as arising from organizational incompetence and their inability to manage customer behavior, and therefore would have a more negative impact on customer satisfaction and subsequent

behavioral intentions. This logic is consistent with Heit's (1998) hypothesis that incongruence results in more elaborative processing (because the perceiver must expend greater effort to generate an explanation for the incongruent service provider's performance) and greater elaboration leads the individual to blame the provider (Matta and Folkes 2005). In short, in this study we argue that globality attributions play an important role in moderating the effects of controllability and stability attributions on customer satisfaction and behavioral reactions to the firm in cases of other-customer failure.

H3 In cases of other-customer failure, there is a significant interaction between controllability and globality attributions on a customer's service evaluation. When the cause of other-customer failure is believed to be situation-specific and controllable, participants will: (a) express lower satisfaction, (b) engage in more negative WOM, and (c) have lower repurchase intentions.

H4 In cases of other-customer failure, there is a significant interaction between globality and stability attributions in customer service evaluations, such that, when other-customer failure is believed to be situation-specific and stable, participants will report: (a) lower levels of satisfaction, (b) higher negative WOM, and (c) lower levels of repurchase intention.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Our predictions were tested with a 2 (controllability: controllable versus uncontrollable) \times 2 (stability: unstable versus stable) \times 2 (globality: specific versus global) between-subjects experimental design.

Consumers at a large shopping center in Taiwan were recruited as participants. Advertisements were posted on bulletin boards near each entrance. Volunteers were offered a small gift (about US\$5 in value) for participating. The surveys were run on a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, so that both weekday and weekend consumers could be polled. Each respondent was given a survey kit consisting of a questionnaire and a randomly chosen scenario. The instructions asked participants to imagine themselves as the consumer in the scenario. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to complete some demographic information.

A total of 224 consumers took part. Of these, 18 were eliminated from the analysis because of incomplete data or because of accurately guessing the purpose of the experiment. The 206 remaining participants were randomly assigned to one of eight groups, ranging in size from 25 to

26. The average age was 35.8 (SD = 10.3) years. Eighty-four (40.8%) of the respondents were male. Of these participants, 54.4% had a college degree or higher. As these demographic variables had no significant effects on the dependent measures, they were excluded from further analyses.

Participants were asked to read a written scenario describing an incidence of other-customer failure in a restaurant. The scenario method was used because it allows for greater control over the independent variables of interest, removes unmanageable variables that can be a problem in field studies, and saves time by summarizing events that might otherwise unfold over days or weeks (Bitner 1990). It is also not subject to memory lapses or rationalization limitations of retrospective accounts of personal experiences with other-customer failure (Smith et al. 1999). For these reasons, we believe that the scenario approach is an appropriate methodology for this study. The scenarios took place in a restaurant. This context was chosen because other-customer failure is common in this industry (Harris and Reynolds 2003).

Experimental Scenarios

Participants were told that "We are interested in understanding how consumers think about restaurant services. Please read the following scenario carefully and imagine that the incident happened to you during a visit to a restaurant, and then answer the questions. The key to the success of this research depends on whether you are really able to imagine yourself in these situations." After this introduction, they read one of eight hypothetical scenarios. In the controllable condition scenario, the noisy other-customers were three young men, whereas in the uncontrollable condition scenario, the participant was bothered by a crying infant. In the unstable condition scenario, the customer/participant informed their dinner partner (by the name of Peggy) that this was the first time he/she suffered from the loud noise in restaurant "A", whereas in the stable condition scenario, the customer/participant said that he/she had suffered from the same problem several times before in restaurant "A". Finally, in the firm-specific condition scenario, the customer/participant was told that the incident occurred only in restaurant "A", whereas in the global condition scenario, the incident was said to have occurred not only in restaurant "A" but also in restaurants "B", "C", and "D". To eliminate any possible order effect, the order of the presentation of the stability and globality attribution scenarios was counterbalanced. A sample scenario is provided below (controllable/unstable/global):

You and your friend Peggy, have decided to go out for a relaxing dinner on a Friday evening in restaurant

“A”. After entering the restaurant, a hostess seats you near the window. You find the atmosphere in restaurant “A” to be a pleasant blend of comfort and tranquility. After a short period, your meal is served. While you are enjoying the delicious food and chatting with each other about your jobs and daily life, it gradually comes to your notice that your voices are being drowned out by loud noise from an adjacent table. There are three rowdy and boisterous young persons seated there, who do not seem to mind that you and some other patrons are glaring at them. You tell Peggy that although your family has dined in this restaurant several times during the last few months, this is the first time you have been subjected to such a loud noise from other patrons. It seems that your wonderful night is ruined. At the same time, you recall that, in fact, this kind of unpleasant incident has also occurred in other similar restaurants, such as “B”, “C”, as well as “D.” In other words, the incident—loud noise caused by other patrons—occurs in different service settings.

Manipulation Checks

The *controllability attribution* manipulation was tested using the following two items (Wirtz and Mattila 2004): “The cause of the failure was controllable by restaurant A” and “The cause of the failure was preventable by restaurant A” ($r = .66$). The *stability attribution* was tested using the following items (Wirtz and Mattila 2004): “The cause of the failure was something permanent” and “The cause of the failure was something unchangeable” ($r = .65$). The *globality attributions* were tested using the scales developed by Kendzierski and Sheffield (2000): “The causes of the failure happened only in restaurant A” and “The causes of the failure also happened in restaurants B, C, and D” ($r = .63$).

Several additional measures were included to ascertain whether the experimental procedures worked as intended. These included how realistic the scenario was, how easy it was for respondents to imagine themselves in the role of the customer, and what they thought the purpose of the survey was. Analyses showed that participants found the scenario realistic and the role-playing easy. The mean rating for scenario realism was 5.62 (SD = 0.78) on the seven-point scale (with 7 indicating “extremely realistic”). When asked to rate how easy it was to imagine themselves as the customer (with 7 indicating “extremely easy”), the mean rating was 5.87 (SD = 0.82). There was no significant difference ($p > .05$) in terms of the realism or easiness among the different treatment groups.

Measures

Satisfaction with the service firm was measured using the scale adopted from Hess et al. (2007) and included the following items: “I am pleased with restaurant A;” “I am unhappy with restaurant A” (reverse scored), and “I am satisfied with restaurant A” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$). The *negative WOM intentions* measure included the following three items (Bougie et al. 2003): “I will say negative things about restaurant A to other people;” “I will recommend restaurant A to someone who seeks my advice” (reverse scored), and “I will discourage friends and relatives from doing business with restaurant A” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$). The *repurchase intentions* measure included the following three items (Wirtz and Mattila 2004): “Because of what happened, I will never go to restaurant A again” (reverse scored), “If this situation had happened to me, I would never go to restaurant A again” (reverse scored), and “Given what happened, I would visit restaurant A again” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$). A 7-point Likert-type response scale, ranging from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very strongly agree* was used to rate all items.

Confirmatory factor analysis, using LISREL 8.50 with maximum-likelihood estimation, was then performed on all six constructs (controllability, stability, globality, satisfaction, negative WOM, and repurchase intentions). The goodness of fit indices suggest the data fit the model well ($\chi^2 = 133.05$, $df = 75$, $p = .001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.77$, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .92, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .061, normed fit index (NFI) = .92, comparative-fit index (CFI) = .96) (Bentler and Chou 1987). Convergent validity was assessed by considering the magnitude of the factor loading of each manifest indicator on its proposed latent construct (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). All loadings were high (from 0.71 to 0.96) and significant, indicating convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using Anderson’s (1987) criterion which states that the correlation between two latent constructs plus or minus two standard errors does not include one. This criterion was satisfied for all construct pairs.

Results

Manipulation Checks

The manipulation checks provided strong evidence that the participants did not have any problem perceiving the conditions as intended. The mean score differences between the various conditions were as follows: perceiving the cause of other-customer failure as a controllable or an

uncontrollable incident (4.97 vs. 4.08; $t = 4.35, p = .000$); perceiving the cause of other-customer failure as an unstable or a stable incident (3.36 vs. 4.69; $t = -7.53, p = .000$); and believing the cause of the other-customer failure to be specific or global (4.89 vs. 5.50, $t = -3.52, p = .001$).

Hypothesis Testing

The cell means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics, inter-correlations, and internal consistency reliabilities of the study variables are summarized in Table 2. Because the three dependent variables, satisfaction, negative WOM, and repurchase

intentions are correlated (see Table 2), the use of one MANOVA is more appropriate than the use of separate ANOVAs for each dependent variable (Tabachnik and Fidell 1996). In this case, the MANOVA controls the experimental error rate. However, separate ANOVAs must still be conducted if the omnibus test is significant to determine which dependent variables are significant.

Main Effects of Controllability and Stability

The $2 \times 2 \times 2$ MANOVA revealed significant main effects for the controllability (Wilks’s lambda = .91, $F = 6.21, p = .000$) and stability (Wilks’s lambda = .92, $F = 5.70, p = .001$), but not globality attributions

Table 1 Cell means for satisfaction, negative WOM, and repurchase intention

Controllability	Stability	Globality	Satisfaction	Negative WOM	Repurchase intention
Controllable	Unstable	Specific	3.26 (1.17)	4.06 (1.46)	4.40 (1.08)
		Global	3.26 (1.20)	3.96 (1.52)	4.53 (1.07)
	Stable	Specific	2.47 (1.28)	5.08 (1.15)	3.73 (1.43)
		Global	3.19 (1.55)	3.83 (1.18)	4.00 (1.37)
Uncontrollable	Unstable	Specific	3.73 (1.39)	2.89 (1.00)	5.13 (0.97)
		Global	3.10 (1.26)	3.23 (1.28)	4.60 (1.07)
	Stable	Specific	3.05 (1.20)	3.91 (1.41)	4.63 (0.97)
		Global	2.60 (1.17)	3.76 (1.57)	4.15 (1.45)

Standard deviations are given in parentheses

Table 2 Means, standard deviations (SD), and inter-correlations for the study variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Controllability	4.53	1.54	(.80)					
2. Stability	4.03	1.43	.24**	(.79)				
3. Globality	5.19	1.26	-.09	-.30**	(.80)			
4. Satisfaction	3.08	1.32	-.14*	-.29**	.08	(.92)		
5. Negative WOM	3.85	1.44	.29**	.46**	-.37**	-.24**	(.89)	
6. Repurchase intention	4.39	1.24	-.21**	-.42**	.37**	.42**	-.54**	(.82)

Cronbach’s alphas are given in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3 MANOVA and ANOVA results for the dependent variables

Source	MANOVA		Univariate <i>F</i>			
	Wilks’ lambda	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Satisfaction	Negative WOM	Repurchase intentions
Controllability (C)	.91	6.21**	1	.18	17.84**	7.83**
Stability (S)	.92	5.70**	1	8.04**	10.68**	10.53**
Globality (G)	.97	2.10	1	.26	2.43	.86
C × S	.99	.69	1	.22	.79	.12
C × G	.96	3.08*	1	6.31*	4.25*	4.51*
S × G	.96	2.42†	1	1.57	4.79*	.08
C × S × G	.99	.49	1	.57	.77	.02

† $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

(Wilks’s lambda = .97, $F = 2.10$, $p = .102$; see Table 3). The controllability attribution had an insignificant effect on satisfaction ($F = .18$, $p = .668$), but significant main effects on negative WOM ($F = 17.84$, $p = .000$) and repurchase intentions ($F = 7.83$, $p = .006$). In other words, when respondents perceived the cause of other-customer failure to be more controllable than uncontrollable by the firm, they were more likely to engage in negative WOM and less willing to repurchase, supporting H1b and H1c but not H1a.

As hypothesized, the stability attribution had significant effects on satisfaction ($F = .804$, $p = .005$), negative WOM ($F = 10.68$, $p = .001$), and repurchase intentions ($F = 10.53$, $p = .001$). These findings confirm that when consumers perceived the cause of other-customer failure to be stable, they rated their level of satisfaction and repurchase intentions lower and reported more negative WOM intentions. These results support H2a, H2b, and H2c.

Interaction Between Controllability and Globality

It was postulated in Hypothesis 3 that globality attributions should moderate the effect of controllability attributions on the customer’s service evaluation. In Table 3, the results of MANOVA testing show the predicted interaction effect for controllability and globality attributions (Wilks’s lambda = .96, $F = 3.08$, $p = .029$). At the univariate level, this interaction was significant for all three dependent variables (satisfaction, negative WOM, and repurchase intentions). The means corresponding to the two-way interaction effects are plotted in Figs. 1, 2, and 3.

As depicted in these figures, when the cause of other-customer failure was believed to be a global problem, participant ratings (for both controllable and uncontrollable conditions), were not significantly different for satisfaction ($M = 3.22$ vs. 2.85 ; $t = 1.43$, $p = .156$; see Fig. 1), negative WOM ($M = 3.90$ vs. 3.50 ; $t = 1.48$, $p = .141$; see Fig. 2), and repurchase intentions ($M = 4.26$ vs. 4.38 ; $t = -.47$, $p = .641$; see Fig. 3). In contrast, when the cause of other-customer failure was believed to be specific to the firm, participants in the controllable conditions reported lower levels of satisfaction ($M = 2.87$ vs. 3.39 ; $t = -2.03$, $p = .046$, see Fig. 1), higher likelihood of unfavorable WOM ($M = 4.57$ vs. 3.40 ; $t = 4.32$, $p = .000$, see Fig. 2), and lower repurchase intentions ($M = 4.06$ vs. 4.88 ; $t = -3.56$, $p = .001$, see Fig. 3) than those in the uncontrollable conditions, supporting H3a, H3b, and H3c.

Interaction Between Stability and Globality

Hypothesis 4 predicts that the effects of stability attributions on customer service evaluations should be moderated

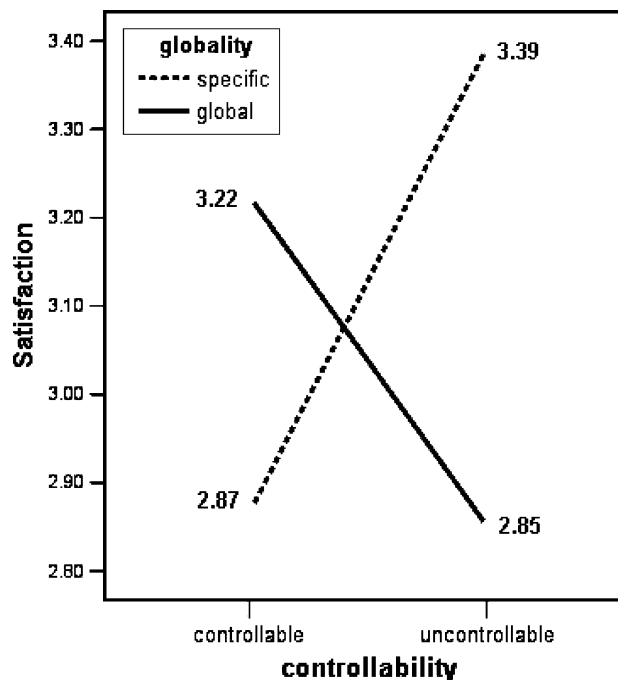


Fig. 1 Interactive effects of controllability and globality attributions on satisfaction

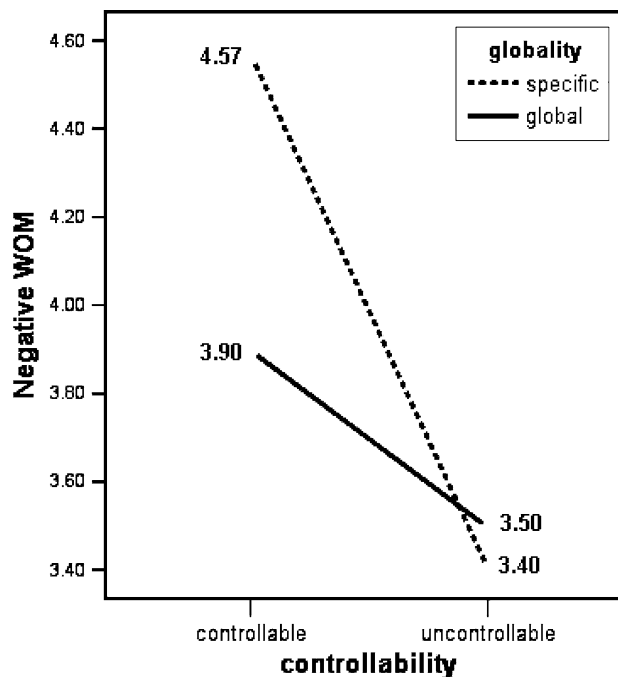


Fig. 2 Interactive effects of controllability and globality attributions on negative WOM

by globality attributions. Thus, we investigated the moderating role of globality attributions with respect to the interaction effects between stability and globality attributions. The MANOVA results in Table 3 show a marginally significant interactive effect between stability and globality

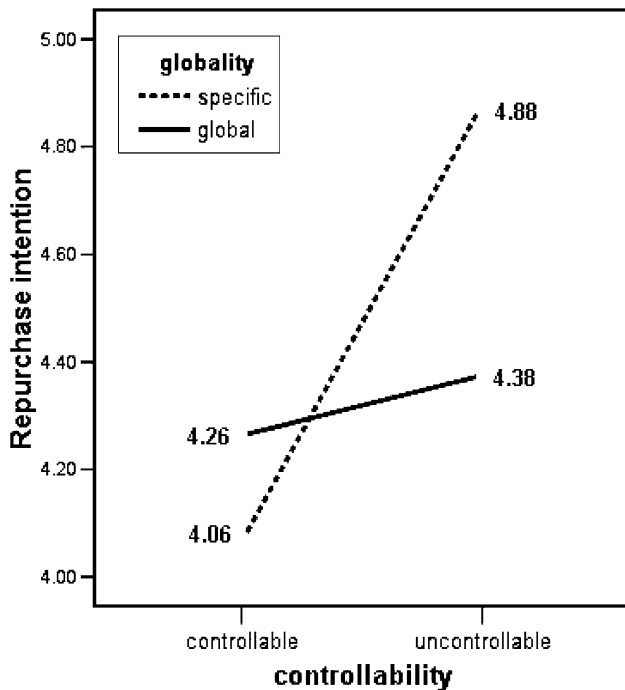


Fig. 3 Interactive effects of controllability and globality attributions on repurchase intention

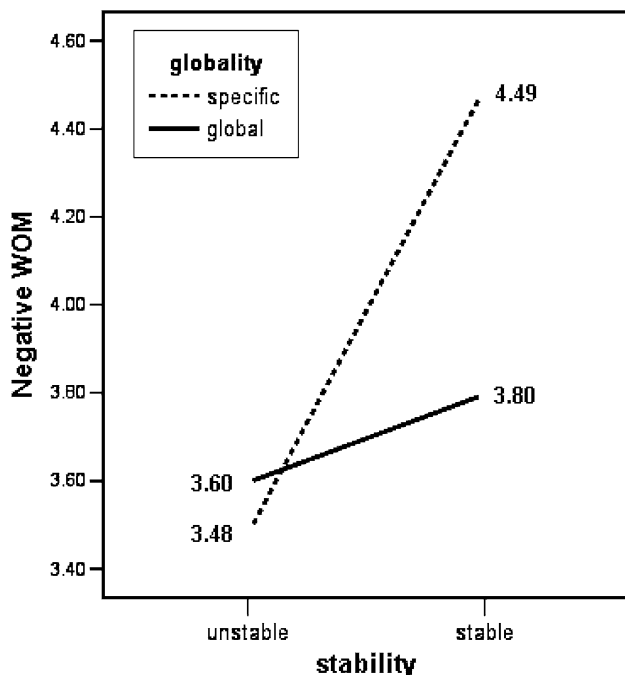


Fig. 4 Interactive effects of stability and globality attributions on negative WOM

(Wilks's lambda = .96, $F = 2.42$, $p = .067$). At the univariate level, the interaction between stability and globality was significant for negative WOM intentions ($F = 4.79$, $p = .030$) but not for satisfaction ($F = 1.57$, $p = .212$) and repurchase intentions ($F = 0.08$, $p = .775$).

As shown in Fig. 4, when the cause of other-customer failure was believed to be global, participants (in both stable and unstable conditions), gave insignificantly different ratings for negative WOM ($M = 3.60$ vs. 3.80 ; $t = -.73$, $p = .469$). In contrast, when the cause of other-customer failure was believed to be specific to the firm and stable, participants tended to engage in more negative WOM ($M = 4.49$ vs. 3.48 ; $t = -3.66$, $p = .001$) than those in the unstable conditions. These results clearly support H4b. The findings reveal that globality attributions appear to moderate the effect of stability attributions on negative WOM.

Discussion

In this study, we investigate under what conditions other-customer misbehavior has an impact upon a customer's service evaluation of a firm. Several important findings and contributions related to marketing theory and real-world practices can be drawn.

To begin with, the results establish that controllability and stability attributions are important determinants of customer dissatisfaction and negative behavior responses to the service organization in cases of other-customer failure. Specifically, customers who attribute other-customer misbehavior to a controllable problem feel less willing to repurchase and have a stronger desire to say negative things about this organization to friends and acquaintances. In addition, when customers attribute other-customer misbehavior to a stable problem, they are less satisfied, more likely to indulge in negative WOM, and less willing to repurchase. These results are consistent with those found in prior studies showing that controllability and stability attributions influence consumer perceptions of failure incidents (e.g., Folkes 1984; Wirtz and Mattila 2004).

Moreover, this study uncovers the fact that the negative impact of controllability and stability attributions on customer satisfaction and behavioral responses can be mitigated when customers believe that the other-customer misbehavior is a global problem. That is, regardless of how controllable the cause of the behavior is perceived to be, when it is perceived that the other-customer failure also occurs in other organizations, ratings of satisfaction, negative WOM, and repatronage intentions are not affected. Similar findings were found in the stable and unstable conditions for negative WOM. In other words, globality attributions moderate the effects of controllability and stability on the customer's service evaluations in cases of other-customer failure. Moreover, globality attributions appear to moderate controllability attributions to a greater extent than stability attributions, as it only moderated the stability attributions for negative WOM. This conclusion is

important and has not been found in previous studies, because in much of that work, the focus has been on service or product failures within a specific organization (e.g., Bitner 1990; Folkes 1984; Folkes et al. 1987; Hess et al. 2007; Weiner 2000; Wirtz and Mattila 2004).

In short, this is the first time that controllability, stability, and globality attributions are clearly shown to be part of the process by which customers transfer their negative response to other-customer misbehavior to the organization. This is an important addition to the service literature dealing with negative customer-to-customer encounters and should thus have a substantial influence on helping service providers to understand and minimize negative customer response in cases of other-customer failure.

Managerial Implications

Within countless service environments, customer dissatisfaction—with the experience and therefore with the service firm itself—is derived, at least partially, from the other customers. Although service organizations may view the negative behavior of other-customers as uncontrollable, our findings indicate that in situations where these failures are perceived by the customer as being controllable by the firm or likely to recur, customers show a lower level of service evaluations toward that organization. Thus, managers must acknowledge that the customer is not always right, nor will she/he always behave in acceptable ways. In other words, to make more customers happy, service firms may sometimes need to act as “police officers” to ensure that their customers behave appropriately (Lovelock 2004). For example, when someone is cutting into the check-out line where people are waiting to pay their bill, the employee needs to end this misbehavior by saying: “Please do not break into the line, sir. We will handle your bill as quickly as possible.” This suggestion also implies that providing employees with suitable coping and problem-solving skills for working with misbehaving customers should be a managerial priority. In addition, letting the customer know that the firm has taken actions to prevent a failure is important. This can be done with signage, commercial advertisements, or even verbal instructions from service organization personnel. When customers are not aware of prevention efforts, they are likely to infer that the firm had control over other-customer failure but did not take necessary measures (Choi and Mattila 2008; Wu 2007).

The service provider should have policies and procedures in place to manage their guests’ behavior, with a view toward diminishing the recurrence of other-customer failure so that customers do not become victim to other-customer misbehavior. This can be done by: (1) trying to convey a clear and unambiguous image in the marketplace

and to avoid attracting and gathering incompatible customers together; (2) blacklisting customers who routinely misbehave; (3) identify the root causes of negative customer-to-customer interaction; and (4) putting in place preventive measures. For example, a restaurant can seat families with young children in a separate area, so that other customers will not be disturbed by the noise of the children (Huang 2008; Martin and Pranter 1989; Tax et al. 2006).

Attributions of globality are especially important in cases of other-customer failure. The negative impact of controllability and stability attributions on satisfaction and behavioral reactions with the firm are buffered by the customer’s belief that the failure is a global problem that occurs in different service settings. Thus, managers might consider communications intended to enhance attributions of globality following a failure, for example, by issuing statements regarding the common and uncontrollable nature of the failure (such as, “We are sorry if another customer’s misbehavior has disturbed you. Although we try hard to prevent it, misbehavior is still likely to occur in our firm, as well as in other firms.”). Such efforts might accomplish this objective and reduce negative responses to the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

There are numerous opportunities for future research in this area, some of which are made evident by the limitations of this study. For example, to maximize internal validity, hypothetical scenarios, rather than an actual experience, were used as stimuli, and the setting involved only one single service industry. Sample sizes for each condition were small (about 26 for each scenario). Future research with other service industries, personal accounts, and larger sample sizes are needed. Second, in our study it is implied that locus of causality represents that mechanism through which attributions of controllability, stability, and globality will have their effects. In other words, locus of causality attribution is an unmeasured mediator in our theoretical model. Future research may include this dimension into the model to further examine why customers who are upset by other customers, blame the service firm rather than the specific misbehaving individuals, and to what extent a customer’s negative response to the misbehavior of other-customers is generalized to the organization. Third, our data were collected in Taiwan, which raises the question of the generalizability of our findings to other cultural regions. Recent evidence has showed that Asians have different patterns of causal attribution. Mattila and Patterson (2004), for example, reported that the differential sensitivity of East Asian and American consumers to situational

constraints influence their attributions for service failures. Thus, the role of culture in other-consumers failure attributions could be examined with respondents drawn from both individualistic and collectivist cultures. Finally, another useful direction for future study would be to explore how a service organization's recovery efforts for other-customer failure influence the customer's level of satisfaction, negative WOM, and repurchase intentions. This will not only assist managers to build better recovery strategies when other-customer failure occurs, but also make a broader contribution to the service literature, by providing insight into interpersonal relationships in customer-to-employee encounters in response to other-customer failure.

Acknowledgment This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Council (NSC97-2410-H-005-029-MY2), Taiwan, awarded to the first author.

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