

Service Failure and Its Impact on the Likelihood of Customers? Dysfunctional Behavior

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Resumo

We acknowledge dishonesty in a daily basis, in consumption settings deviant consumer behavior has received considerable attention, since the number of cases reported have increased significantly. The present study aimed to verify if service failure influences the likelihood of customer? dysfunctional behavior. An experiment using a single-factor between subjects design, was applied. Failure was manipulated (with and without failure) and presented in two hunting words (A and B), through random assignment. Results suggest that in failure situations, when people feel morally licensed, the likelihood to act in a dysfunctional manner is higher, showing a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. The contribution of the study is to extend the knowledge about the reason why customers may cross the ethical boundaries; after a service failure they might feel moral licensed to engage in a dysfunctional behavior as soon as the opportunity appears.

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Abstract

We acknowledge dishonesty in a daily basis, in consumption settings deviant consumer behavior has received considerable attention, since the number of cases reported have increased significantly. The present study aimed to verify if service failure influences the likelihood of customer' dysfunctional behavior. An experiment using a single-factor between subjects design, was applied. Failure was manipulated (with and without failure) and presented in two hunting words (A and B), through random assignment. Results suggest that in failure situations, when people feel morally licensed, the likelihood to act in a dysfunctional manner is higher, showing a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. The contribution of the study is to extend the knowledge about the reason why customers may cross the ethical boundaries; after a service failure they might feel moral licensed to engage in a dysfunctional behavior as soon as the opportunity appears.

Keywords: Service failure; Customers' dysfunctional behavior; Moral licensing; Ethical malleability.

1 Introduction

In an ideal marketplace setting company and customer engage in an equitable evenhanded relationship, but in reality, companies do not always act in an appropriate or fair way towards their customers, neither do customers act in a proper manner towards the companies, behaving eventually in a dysfunctional way (Komarova Loureiro, Haws, & Bearden, 2015). When a company fail to fulfill customers' expectation even situations such as the duration of the waiting time can be a motive for customers to feel violated, and depending on their mindset they can get frustrated, angry or merely dissatisfied (Fullerton & Taylor, 2015). As a response to a service failure customer can temporarily alter their own moral compass, this moral licensing after a company wrongdoing might be a potential factor affecting people's choice concerning the dilemma between behaving morally or in a deviant manner (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2015; Huang, Zuo, Wang, Cai, & Wang, 2017).

In this way, after a service failure the customers can do nothing (Tax & Brown, 1998) or decide to strike back to the company (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009). The literature have advanced to study conditions where after a service failure the customer decide to strike back to the company after a service failure (Komarova Loureiro, Haws, & Bearden, 2016). However, it is scarce the investigation about another path, when the customer does nothing after a service failure. Based on this, the article presents an initial effort in this direction evaluating the passive customer dysfunctional behavior triggered by service failure.

There is no consensus regarding the term to be used to refer to customer' deliberate behavior that violates the norms of consumption, an interchangeable variety of terms have been used, such as deviant, dysfunctional or aberrant consumer behavior and consumer misbehavior (Fisk *et al.*, 2010). Some studies sought to classify dysfunctional customer behavior by the types of action, triggers, causes, inhibitors and consequences (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Fisk *et al.*, 2010). Although there is a growing body of research exploring what constitute customer dysfunctional behavior, there is a scarce research inquiring why people may cross these ethical boundaries in consumption settings (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Daunt & Harris, 2012); one of the possibilities is that customers response to companies wrongdoing is behaving in a deviant way. One path that can explain why customer presents passive dysfunctional behavior after a service failure is the moral self-licensing.

The process of moral self-licensing happens when a person believes he or she has the right to further behave in a unethical or immoral way because of prior good deed (Blanken, Van

De Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015). These moral credits earned with a previous good action reduce the discomfort of performing bad deeds afterwards, ensuring a balanced moral account (Clot, Grolleau, & Ibanez, 2014).

Following a call for future studies using moral licensing and emphasizing on aspects of immoral behavior (Blanken *et al.*, 2015), this study explore the effect of the service failure on the occurrence of passive dysfunctional behavior.

2 Dysfunctional Customer Behavior

Dysfunctional customer behavior can be defined as the deliberate activity that violates social rules, organizational policy or well accepted norms of conduct; this behavior can cause problems to the company, its employees and other customers (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Lovelock, 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Fisk *et al.*, 2010). Even though there is no consensus regarding the term to be used to refer to customer' deliberate behavior that violates the norms of consumption, several expressions have been used to describe the same phenomenon (Fisk *et al.*, 2010). For example deviant consumer behavior (Moschis & Cox, 1989; Dootson, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2016); problem customers (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994); aberrant consumer behavior (Fullerton & Punj, 1993); consumer misbehavior (Tonglet, 2002), jaycustomer (Lovelock, 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2004) and dysfunctional customer behavior (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Daunt & Harris, 2012). For clarity reasons the current paper adopts the term dysfunctional customer behavior to refer to these objectionable customer acts.

Certain detrimental consequences of dysfunctional customer behavior can affect the company, and their consequences can cause material or psychological damage, there are two main categories of dysfunctional customer behavior, economically or non-economically motivated (Fisk *et al.*, 2010). Some examples of the economically motivated category are shoplifting, fraud, wardrobing (purchasing an item, using it, and then returning it to the store for a refund) and change price tags (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), all of them can clearly have an economic impact to the company's profitability, wardrobing alone, in the USA, costs retailers over \$10 billion per year (Ayal & Gino, 2011). The non-economically motivated category can be exemplified by vandalism, harassment, verbal or physical abuse, it might affects employees' psychological, emotional and attitudinal status (Charris & Daunt, 2013; Jerger & Wirtz, 2017).

Consistently customers physical or verbal aggression against employees represent one of the biggest management challenges in retail settings, employees respond to these forms of abuse with increased absenteeism, counterproductive behavior work, retaliation, sabotage about customers, increasing conflicts with co-workers and increased job and life dissatisfaction (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Li & Zhou, 2013; Daunt & Harris, 2014), suggesting a direct connection between customer dysfunctional behavior and employee's undesirable outcome. Even though customers who misbehave are hardly distinct from the general consumer, as the dysfunctional behavior does not depend on any noticeable feature or profile, socioeconomic or behavioral factors, the literature has identified some triggers, causes and inhibitors of dysfunctional behavior (Fisk *et al.*, 2010).

Consumers' personality traits and characteristics are well studied as antecedents of dysfunctional behavior, such as cynicism and the pursue of emotion (Reynolds & Harris, 2009); from the personality perspective consumers with low level of morality are more keen on cheating (Wirtz & Kum, 2004); when social norms are not aligned with the law, causing a lack of consensus on the subjective perceptions of wrong behavior, meaning that people look to others behavior to guide their own (Dootson, Lings, Beatson & Johnston, 2017).

Physical and social servicescape, environmental stimuli (e.g., atmospherics and exterior environments), layout, design of buildings and contextual factors have a strong influence on the likelihood of different forms of dysfunctional customer behavior (Daunt & Harris, 2012). Also the perceived opportunity (Daunt & Greer, 2015), customers can utilize anonymity and lack of

clear sanctions to justify the acceptability of their dysfunctional behavior, although individuals have a strong desire to be moral, their moral behavior appears to be dynamic and flexible, the estimate of the minor likelihood of being caught can also be one relevant point to be considered as a dysfunctional behavior motivator (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Daunt & Greer, 2015). Other situational factors such as company's failure to deliver a service or product as expected, can be a trigger to customer's dysfunctional behavior (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2015).

Customers are aware of their role and its power, and often take advantage of their position to threaten or abuse employees displaying their disappointment as a way of getting what they expect (Walker, Van Jaarsveld & Skarlicki, 2014). Highly satisfied consumers have a lower propensity to take advantage of a guarantee, suggesting that satisfaction might be an inhibitor of dysfunctional behavior (Wirtz & Kum, 2004); while companies' service or product failure can act as a situational factor causing dissatisfaction because of the non-fulfillment of the customers' expectations, these encounters can impact negatively on employees, customers and the organization (Walker *et al.*, 2014).

3 Service Failure

Service failure corresponds to poor performance in implementation when compared to customer expectations (Bateson & Hoffman, 2002). Now a days one of the major challenges faced by companies, concerning to customer service, is how to manage service failure (Basso & Pizzutti, 2016). Certain customer behaviors can be considered tolerable, or as part of the consumer experience, enabling the client to misbehave, and even be seen as a victim (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

When a service or product failure happens it can serve as a moral licensing to the customer dysfunctional behavior, the individual can do an internal assessment of their moral attitudes and considers himself entitled to such behavior (Fullerton & Taylor, 2015). When people found that they have been wronged, or even reminded of a time when they were wronged they feel entitled to behave selfishly (Zitek, Jordan, Monin & Leach, 2010), and temporarily reinterpret their ethical behavior feeling licensed to engage in dysfunctional outcomes (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2015).

Consistent with this idea when companies fail to meet customers' expectations the reaction can be a nondeviant behavior, but it is suggesting that mistreated customers exhibit one of three typical behaviors to seek revenge: 1) complain about the failure to the service provider, 2) terminate the relationship by exchanging service provider, 3) spread negative word of mouth (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2016). Specially in the present days with social media when customers decide to get even with the wrongdoer results can be extremely dangerous to the company's image (Grégoire, Tripp & Legoux, 2009).

Service failure can act as a key driver to dysfunctional behavior, it may serve as a trigger for customers negative emotional response once customers' interpretation about the service failure can result in episodes of rage (Surachartkumtonkun, Patterson & Mccoll-Kennedy, 2013); vandalism (Fullerton & Punj, 2004) violence (Harris & Reynolds, 2003) retaliation (Funches, Markley & Davis, 2009; Aron, 2016) and illegitimate or exaggerated complaining, even been named Pinocchio customer (Harris, Fisk, & Sysalova, 2016). When customers feel injustice by the service encounter they experience emotions such as frustration, and this negative affect could generate dysfunctional behavior (Yi & Gong, 2008).

In a digital world this can gain a bigger dimension, where customers have a plethora of communication channels at hand, ready to share complains about a service or product failure (Dahl & Peltier, 2015). Companies must learn from past customer dysfunctional behavior experiences, paying more attention to the service failures, and responding quickly and effectively in order to prevent customers from experiencing rage and associated expressions and behaviors, avoiding potentially disastrous consequences (Walker *et al.*, 2014).

4 Moral License

Typically, people solve an ethical dilemma adapting their perception of morality in order to suit the moral self-view with the moral or immoral action to be taken (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Jordan, Leliveld & Tenbrunsel, 2015). Ethical implicit believes, the internalization of norms and values, serves as an internal benchmark versus which a person compares his or her behavior. According to the Self-Concept Maintenance Theory a person's internal standard, or a manner that each one perceives himself impact on moral decision making (Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008). To maintain a positive self-concept people constantly adapt, weighting the outcome of their unethical actions according to the benefit from behaving dishonestly but still considering himself a moral person (Jordan *et al.*, 2015). The positive self-concept may stem from customers' loyalty to the company or a long history of consistent service, seeing like earning moral credits that entitled him to misbehave after a situation where he feels wronged by the company or the employee (Clot *et al.*, 2014).

Through moral licensing individual's perception about an unethical behavior may be distorted by the person performing the action, in order to self-justify an action that would be unacceptable otherwise (Mazar *et al.*, 2008; Dootson *et al.*, 2016). Moral license refers to the idea that prior good deed provides a permission that grants people to perform morally questionable behavior afterwards (Blanken *et al.*, 2015). Even hypothetical past good deeds can license cheating; not just the moral license effect might decrease the likelihood to act morally but equally enhance the likelihood to act immorally later on (Clot *et al.*, 2014).

When people feel moral licensed they are able to justify their action, wherefore are more likely to subsequently choose hedonic goods, indulging themselves (Witt Huberts, Evers & De Ridder, 2012); express prejudice with little concern of appearing prejudiced (Effron, Cameron & Monin, 2009); cheat more in order to get a higher payoff (Clot *et al.*, 2014); offer less money and also stole more money from another participant, in an ultimatum game (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). In this context previous good deeds make people feel licensed to do what they know is bad, but they feel that their past good deed has earned them moral credits, which justify their later on unethical behavior, while still maintaining their positive moral self-concept (Blanken *et al.*, 2015).

This moral plasticity caused by individual's convenience is called ethical malleability, it is a dissonance between what it is known to be wright and what is actually done, using a psychological mechanism of moral self-regulation called moral self-licensing a person tries to maintain their positive self-concept, when an unethical decision is made (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). External facts of company's behavior, such as treating a customer unfairly or immorally, can activate customer's moral regulation system and lead customer to a dysfunctional response (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2015). Company's wrongdoing empowers customer, who feels authorized to act badly as a way of retaliation or even personal revenge, customers sense of dissatisfaction or betrayal after a service failure can justify their further dysfunctional actions (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Jordan *et al.*, 2011; Tripp & Grégoire, 2011; Blanken *et al.*, 2015).

In line with that when feeling wronged people can have the sense of entitlement, which frees them from typical social life requirements, in other words being wronged make people feel licensed to behave selfishly with no regrets (Zitek *et al.*, 2010), boycotting and spreading negative word of mouth on the internet, which extent can go viral and, in a short period of time, reach millions of people all around the world, causing major damage to the company's image (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011).

After a company wrongdoing customers may temporarily shift their own moral standards and engage in an immoral behavior aiming to a morality matching as a response, and the more immoral the company's action is perceived the greater the customer's moral angry and the likelihood to engage in immoral behavior (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2015). In addition

to that, research suggests that casual and loyal customers act differently after a service failure, while casual customers typically care only about financial repayment, having the size of the repayment as the most important point; loyal customers care about sincere recovery and want to feel special to the company, they feel more betrayed what makes them more revengeful than casual customers; in an online setting, company's best customers are the most likely to become its worst enemies (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011).

Typically people value honesty and believe in their own morality, whilst cheating, fraud, racketeering and other forms of dishonesty are among the biggest personal and societal contemporary challenges; the preponderance of cheating is not committed by "few bad apples" but many "good apples" that decided to behave dishonestly just a little bit (Ayal & Gino, 2011). However, it remains empirically unclear if after some service failure customers that feel moral licensed are more likely to behave in a dysfunctional way. The focal objective of this research is to better understand why costumers engage in dysfunctional behavior, more specifically if a service failure might serve as a trigger to moral licensing, what could increase the likelihood of CDC. Based on this, we present the following hypotheses:

H1: Customer will present a passive dysfunctional behavior after a service failure.

5 Method

An experiment using a single-factor between subjects design, was applied. Failure was manipulated on two different levels (with and without failure) presented in two hunting words (A and B), through random assignment. A total of 71 people participated in this study (42 female). The average age of participants was 33,03 years old. Data was collected in January, 2018.

A link was created on Qualtrics and sent by the authors to their contacts. Participants were randomly assigned to just one of the two experimental conditions. They were instructed to respond as honestly as possible, to observe two hunting words (A and B) and after, one of the time, write down the number of words they had found in each of the hunting words, there were no need to specify which words were found.

To manipulate the failure, after the answer for the hunting words A, in the no failure condition the system registered the correct number of words the participant had written down; in the failure condition the system registered the incorrect number of words (half the number of words the participant had written down).

After, the participants were exposed to the hunting words B. We prepare this hunting word to present only a word (while the hunting word A have 10 words). They must to write the number of words founded in the hunting words B. This is our dependent measure. It is important to note that, given the sensitive nature of self-reporting dysfunctional behavior, and in order to simulate a real failure, the study avoided projection technique, applied in most of the dysfunctional customer's behavior studies. According to Fisk *et al.* (2010), it is one of the major limitations of deviance research, once actual episodes of failure may act differently on people than simulated scenario-based methods.

6 Results

Experimental manipulation was checked asking participants if they considered the number of words registered in the hunting words (A) correct (yes=1; no=2); 97,3% of the control group, without failure, considered that the number of words were correctly registered, while 88,2% of the manipulation group, with failure, considered that the number of words were incorrectly registered. Checks indicated participants' perception about the failure.

The key dependent variable was the number of word registered after hunting words (B), the failure was represented by the hunting words misregistration; we argued that the experimental group (hunting words misregistration) would have a higher probability to

misbehave on the second hunting words registration. To explore whether there was a significant difference across the conditions we compared the main value between the groups. Specifically, subjects exposed to the failure indicate a higher number of words in the hunting words B ($M=2.09$, $SD=1.35$) than subjects exposed to the condition without failure ($M=1.51$, $SD=.87$; $F(1, 69) = 4.590$; $p < .05$). This finding supports H1.

7 Final Remarks

The participants exposed to the failure condition indicated a higher number of words in the game, what represents that they cheated more, when compared to the no failure condition.

People will feel comfortable behaving in a questionable manner as long as they can point to past action that license such attitude, like a company wrongdoing; dysfunctional behavior sometimes fluctuates between a metaphoric line of subjective right and wrong perception; this acceptability deviance threshold serves as a self-justification for an action classified as wrong (Dootson *et al.*, 2017).

Competition is increasing constantly, business need to adapt and learn how to manage customer dysfunctional behavior, training employees but also reinforcing societal norms and educating customers in order to reduce its impact. Moral license can happens because people behave immorally, and are aware of it, but convince themselves that they have the moral right to do so; people self-justify the unethical behavior in order to still perceive himself as an ethic person, due to their history, social context or previous facts; there is a scarce research inquiring why people may cross these ethical boundaries in consumption settings one of the possibilities is that customers response to companies wrongdoing is behaving in a deviant way.

Usually people value honesty and believe in their own morality, whilst cheating, fraud, racketeering and other forms of dishonesty are among the biggest personal and societal contemporary challenges, these moral credits earned reduce the discomfort of performing bad deeds afterwards, ensuring a balanced moral account. In line with this, after a company failure, when a customer feels licensed it can liberate he or she to express morally problematic attitudes or behave in a dysfunctional way, without necessarily seeking retaliation or reparation for the damage caused by the failure.

Keeping ahead of the market goes beyond overcome competitors in order to engage customers and retain them, companies should focus on the treatment provided, meeting and exceeding their expectations without forgetting those who represent the company to the client: employees. The management of customers' expectations may bring lasting and healthy relationships for both parties, providing appropriate training and empowering employees to deal with failure can improve service recovery, avoid dysfunctional customers and lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The present study encourages further discussions about the ethical malleability and the reason why customers could self-justify their dysfunctional behavior, and based in this psychological pre violation justification alter their ethical behavior towards the guilty or even when interacting with a guiltless company by association. For the sequence of this project of research, we will verify if the ethical malleability is the underlying mechanism that explain the relationship between the service failure and customer passive dysfunctional behavior.

Furthermore, we will try to verify if different points in time (immediately after a service failure versus later on) affect the severity and probability of the dysfunctional behavior; also if the failure's gravity perception (severe versus mild) alter the likelihood of dysfunctional behavior.

Note

1. We use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably.

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