

Gaining Customer Compassion During Service Failure through Explanation — An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract: Delivering error free internet service is one of the utmost important challenges for internet service providers. Despite being natural phenomenon, disruption in internet service has catastrophic outcome for the organizations. One of the main consequences of this unwanted event is customers' dissatisfaction, which eventually lead brand switching behavior. Generally, organizations provide explanation to their customers during this critical situation. Effectiveness of explanation, however, greatly depends on different methods. Therefore, this study tries to unveil the most effective dimension of explanation, which mitigate customer dissatisfaction in such unwanted situation. Applying simple random sampling from four main internet service providers' database in Malaysia, this study managed to get 322 respondents, who gave complain about their service disruption during August to October 2014. Factor and regression analysis techniques had been applied to understand the most effective dimension of explanation. Results revealed that excuse has significant negative effect on gaining customer compassion. In contrast, apology become the most effective way of explanation followed by reference and justification during service failure. Indeed, this study is one of the limited literatures that provides deeper understanding of explanation in gaining customer compassion and eventually helps service industry to rethink their customer service strategies in gaining customer compassion, which ultimately keep their customer forever with them.

Key words: service failure; explanation; excuse; apology; internet service

JEL codes: M

1. Introduction

Enjoying consistent internet service is the utmost important expectation from the internet users in recent days as internet transformed almost every individual's life. In contrast, delivering flawless internet service is just next to impossible for the service provides. Disruption in internet service can occurs by many reasons ranging from hardware problem to software problem. In fact, occasionally disruption likely be happed due to consumers themselves. But whoever the cause of such disruption, this situation definitely leads to catastrophic consequences for the organizations by creating dissatisfaction to the users. In such situation, however, users certainly contact with services provider, and organization should utilize this opportunity to appease customers' dissatisfaction.

Due to the growing dependency on the internet, providing seamless internet service become the greatest

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challenge for the service providers. In relation with customer complain, Hardeep and Pinkey's (2013) identified that customer's complaint has been growing tremendously since last two decades. These complains mainly emphasis on the internet speed, poor coverage, network fluctuation and so on. In fact, internet service providers (ISP) also agreed that in some occasions service failure is unavoidable. However, developing a right set of strategies during that particular occasion become an important responsibility for any ISP suggested by many prior studies. They also added that ISPs should offer tangible or intangible or both. In relation with offering compensation, it is difficult for service provider to offer tangible benefits but they can offer intangible benefits such as explanation. By giving proper explanation. ISPs can effectively handle consumers' emotion and indeed save organizations from many drastic negative outcomes including brand switching, customer dissatisfaction etc.

Wang and Mattila (2011) suggested that if explanation is justified then customers will understand the situation and will remain their subscriber. Similarly, Daniel et al. (2012) mentioned that consumers' understanding is the key concern for the organization in the occasion of service failure. Despite having numerous prior studies in the domain of customer satisfaction during service failure, there are little empirical investigation regarding gaining customers' compassion in that particular situation (Wang & Mattila, 2011). Moreover, Ana et al. (2011) suggested that organizations can easily gain trust from customer if they can gain subscribers compassion during failure, which eventually helps to enhance customer satisfaction. Therefore, every organization has recovery strategies which aim to mitigate customers' tempo. According to Suveera (2014), recovery efforts play a crucial role in how customers feel about an encountered failure. Many prior studies identified that explanation can effectively mitigate service failures (Koushiki, 2013). Bies (1987) illustrates and defines "explanation" using four dimensions including justification, reference, excuse, and apology. Though, Bies's concept had been underlined in many prior studies, but Daniel et al. (2012) mentioned that this concept has yet to be thoroughly studied, especially in internet service industry.

By considering this, this study endeavour to examine the important dimension (s) of explanation in service failure occasions. More specifically, this study tries to unveil the important dimension of explanation for gaining customers' compassion in such unenviable situation. The unique contributions of this study compare to prior studies are two fold; (a) there are very little number of studies try to focus on gaining customer compassion; (b) most of the prior studies consider "explanation" as a single factor. Therefore, this study definitely will fill this significant lacuna by giving empirical evidence on how different components of explanation can help organizations to gain customers' compassion in service failure occasions and save from catastrophic outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Service Failure and Recovery System

Service failure has been defined by several scholars from different aspects. For example, Duffy et al. (2006) stated service failure as real or perceived breakdown of service in light of either process or outcomes. Similarly, Chahal and Devi (2015) defined service failure as incongruity between service performance and consumer expectation. This definition has clearly founded by the definition provided by prior studies (Lewis & Spyropoulos, 2001; Gye-Soo, 2007) and they mentioned that service failure occur only when performance of service is able to meet customer expectation. Many prior studies utterly suggested that service failure must be recovered before bring fatal consequences. Hence, many scholars have been finding most effective service recovery strategies since many decades.

In relation with service recovery, Gronroos (1988) defined that service recovery is series of process in response to a service failure provided by organizations. In prior studies, services recovery strategies mainly emphasis on four main area including classification of service recovery system (Bitner et al., 1990; Kelly et al., 1993); relationship between types of service failure and recovery strategies (Craighead et al., 2004; Tax et al., 1998); service recovery strategies based on offering financial benefits (Hays & Hill, 1999; Rust et al., 1995) and outcomes of service failure from customers perspective. However, recently almost every service organization implemented customers care unit for handling customers' issues. In fact, listening customers and giving proper explanation become a norm for every organization. They have been investing significant amount for both technology and training to develop an effective customer care unit. Mattila (2006) mentioned that there is significant lacuna in exploring the effect of explanation in mitigating customers' dissatisfaction. Additionally she also identified three important reasons for examining the importance of explanation as an effective recovery strategy in service failure including (a) explanation can mediate individual's cognitive appraisal of injustice; (b) consumer may have elusive inferences about the fairness; and (c) explanation can be the most cost effective recovery tools for maintaining customer relationship. Hence, the focal point of this study is to understand the effect of explanation on consumers' understanding in that particular undesirable occasion.

2.2 Explanation and Service Recovery System

It is well accepted by many prior studies that explanation has power to yield positive consumer perception. In this regard, Mattila (2006) mentioned that consumers would have positive feeling when organization explain them about the cause of the failure. Similarly, Komunda and Osarenkhoe (2012) organization should explain to their dissatisfied consumers which eventually mitigate organization's accountability. They also mentioned that explanation has power to transform negative perception to positive. Additionally, many prior studies identified three important factors greatly influence of consumers perception of fairness with service recovery including outcomes, procedural fairness and interactional treatment (Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Tax et al., 1998). In relation with interactional justice, Colquitt (2001) and Colquitt et al. (2001) suggested two important dimensions namely interpersonal treatment and informational fairness. In both cases explanation has significant effect. In one study, Shaw et al. (2003) suggested that explanation exert favorable image on people's fairness perception. Hence, it is clear that explanation is important and initial service recovery strategy for organization which has capability to transform consumers' perception. However, there are different dimensions of explanation identified by prior studies. They also added that these dimensions affect consumers' perception differently. Hence, next section explain in details about the dimensions of explanation and its effect on consumer perception which eventually help to develop hypothesis for this study.

2.3 Dimensions of Explanation

The concept of explanation has studied in both marketing and organizational domain. One of the most popular research in this area is Bies (1987), who has identified four dimensions of explanation that as different effect on consumer perception. These are

- **Excuse:** It is a process of evading responsibility for what has happened. In many cases, organization use to give blame to the external environment for service failure which consider as excuse.
- **Justification:** It is also consider as excuse, however in justification organization admit their responsibility and also willing to fix it. Additionally, in this case organization must justify the reason(s) of that particular failure.

- **Reference:** It is the process of comparing customers' current situation with other who have experienced worse failure. Indeed, it has capability to appease customers' anger or dissatisfaction if that particular comparison is truthful.
- **Apology:** This could one of the most effective dimensions of explanation and can be defined as expression of regret. It is the process of admitting what has happened and take full responsibility for the failure.

Prior studies identified that western consumers generally expect efficient explanation from their service provider (Wang & Mattila 2011). Similarly, Mattila and Patterson (2004) identified that eastern consumers use to find the solution internally for any failure, which eventually ensure the efficiency of explanation and an effective service recovery strategy. In addition, Tammo et al. (2014) suggested that providing comprehensive explanation can mitigate consumers' dissatisfaction. In fact, these are few empirical studies which strongly support that explanation has great capability to appease consumers' perception about service failure and eventually helps organization from the catastrophic outcomes. Despite having many empirical supports for explanation as an effective recovery strategies, but these results are inconsistent. For example, Bradley and Sparks (2012) identified that giving excuse can escalate consumers' dissatisfaction immediately. In support of this, Thomas and Tracy (2014) also found excuse has negative effect on consumers' perception. Hence, it is a knotty phenomenon which need to solve. Additionally, Sparks and Fredline (2007) suggested that the efficacy of the four components of explanation (excuse, justification, reference, and apology) in service failure episodes are unclear. Hence, this study tries to provide an empirical evidence of the effect of explanation on consumer perception.

2.4 Hypotheses Development

Excuse: Bradley and Sparks (2012) identified that unlike other dimensions of explanation, excuse has robust negative effect on consumers' perception especially in service failure. However, in some cases excuse showed positive effect as consumers consider failure is beyond organizational control (Conlon & Murray, 1996). In fact, Wang and Matilla (2011) found that excuse and justification has similar effect on consumer psychology. Despite having some positive effect of excuse on consumers' psychology, most of prior studies utterly mentioned that excuse does not yield positive result for organization (Lee & Park, 2010). Hence, we proposed the following hypothesis

H1: There is significant negative effect of excuse on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention in the process of service recovery.

Justification: unlike excuse, justification yield more favourable results as a recovery system. Conlon and Murray (1996) suggested that consumers provide better evaluation to those organization who has implemented justification strategy. However, in one meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Park (2010) showed that excuse are more potential than justification. In support of this view, Shaw et al. (2003) found that excuse is more potent to gain consumers' sympathy. In contrast, Wang et al. (2014) identified that admitting full responsibility likely produce better result than avoiding responsibility. Generally, the logical explanation is supportive of such a claim. Hence we proposed the following hypothesis

H2: There is significant positive effect of justification on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention in the process of service recovery.

Reference: Based on prior studies, reference considered as one of the most desirable service recovery strategy, especially among westerners (Wang & Matilla, 2011). Generally, reference appease consumers' anger by realising then that there are others who also experienced same failure. Logically, reference yield more favourable

outcomes for the organizations as affected consumers understand that that particular failure would be beyond organizational control. This results also be found in many prior studies (Bies, 1987). Hence we proposed the following hypothesis.

H3: There is significant positive effect of reference on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention in the process of service recovery

Apology: Offering apology showed strong relationship of getting better results than other forms of explanation. It has capability to reduce anxiety of customers and also maintain organizational goodwill (Boshoff & Leong, 1998). In some recent studies, it has been found that apology provides greater satisfaction to the affected customers. In fact, it likely create negative word of mouth in long run. Additionally, Johnston and Fren (1999) suggested that in both serious and less severe failure apology would be the best strategy to keep calm affected customers. In contrast, some studies identified that apology may not be an effective strategy to retail customers for lifetime. But generally, most of the researchers strongly agreed that apology has relatively more favourable outcomes for both customers and organizations. Hence, we proposed the following hypothesis

H4: There is significant positive effect of apology on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention in the process of service recovery.

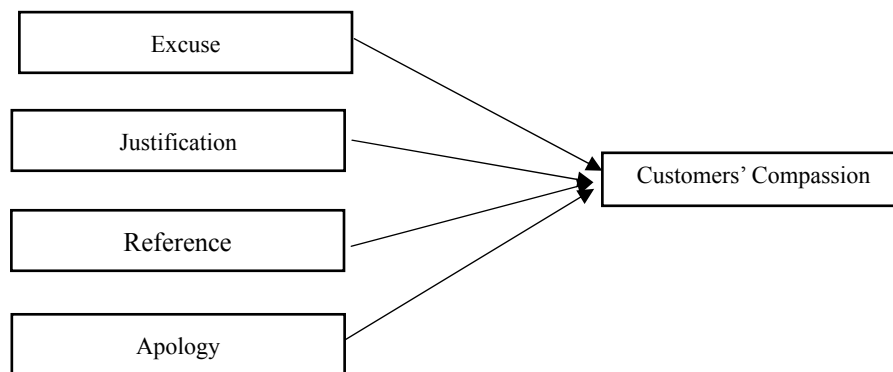


Figure 1 Proposed Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Based on the objectives, three steps of research designed was employed for this study. at the first step, this study employed extensive literature review in order to gain in-depth knowledge related with service failure, recovery strategy and consumer behaviour which consider as exploratory study. In the second stage, descriptive study was used to understand respondents' characteristic for this study. However, descriptive research is not able to establish any causal relationship as it is required for this study to test the proposed model (Sekaran and Bougie 2013). Hence, this study applied hypothesis setting to test proposed hypothesis.

This study, mainly, focuses on primary data collected from respondents through questionnaire. Moreover, in order to conduct exploratory study, this study also collected article related with the research are.

3.2 Sampling, Data Collection Process and Instrument

The population in this study was included only those who write complain about their internet service in Malaysia. We only focused on four major internet service providers namely Maxis, TM Net, Digi and Celcom. There were 2894 complained were recorded during August 2014 to December 2014. An e-mail were send to all

these users and it was the most appropriate data collection method for this study due to minimizing cost and time. With four reminders, 322 valid responds were generated by 2 months and considered adequate to multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2009)

A questionnaire was developed to collect data from respondents. Different steps were used to test validity of the measure and reliability of scales. Construct, face and content validity was examined by getting advice from experts and pilot study. In addition, all items in the questionnaire were adopted from prior studies. In relation with reliability, this study used Cronbach Alpha test and the cut point was 0.70 (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Two types of scale, nominal and interval, were used for the questionnaire.

3.3 Respondents' Profile

Table 1 presents respondents' characteristics. Results indicated that there were adequate number of respondents from both gender type who reported complain about their internet service disruption. In relation with complain, 82 percent of respondents complained about their internet speed followed by billing (66.45%) and hardware problem. Results revealed that most of the complainers' age range was between 20 to 39, which indicated that in Malaysia most of the internet users are young. More specifically, almost 50 percent complain were reported by young Malaysian. Though 70 percent respondents agreed that internet service providers solve issue within 1 to 3 days, but 17 percent respondents also indicated that service providers sometime take almost 1 week to resolve issues. In fact, 2 percent respondents agreed that some issues remain unsolved.

Table 1 Descriptive Summary of Demographic Profile

Gender	N	%	Race	N	%
Male	176	54.7	Malay	168	52.2
Female	146	45.3	Chinese	90	28.0
			Indian	40	12.4
			Other Ethnicity	24	7.5
Total	322	100	Total	322	100
Age (years)			Education level		
20 – 29	160	49.7	Secondary	20	6.2
30 – 39	116	36.0	Diploma	44	13.7
40 – 49	36	11.2	Degree	140	43.5
50 and Above	10	3.1	Master	98	30.4
			PhD	20	6.2
Total	322	100	Total	322	100
Common Complain			Time to Fix		
Speed	265	82.29	Within 24 Hours	32	9.93
No Internet service	56	17.39	24 to 48 Hours	104	32.29
Billing	214	66.45	48 to 72 Hours	123	38.19
Delaying Reconnection	34	10.55	Within 1 Week	56	17.39
Hardware Problem	178	55.27	No solution	7	2.17

3.4 Reliability and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Table 2 presents results of reliability and EFA test. This study applied EFA due to two main reasons including (a) to test discriminant validity; and (b) to identify underline association between observed variables. Results of reliability test revealed that every variable's alpha value was above threshold which is 0.70. Moreover, EFA test also presents satisfactory results. Firstly, KMO scores 0.883 which indicated good level of adequacy in sampling. Secondly, eigenvalues identified five factors which scored more than 1 and explained 87.56 of variance. EFA

revealed that among all excuse scored the highest eigenvalues (6.12) with four constructs followed by reference, justification, and apology. Customers' compassion scored eigenvalues of 2.96 with four constructs which considered only one dependent variable in this study. Indeed, reliability and EFA results provide satisfactory result which eventually allow to conduct hypothesis testing.

3.5 Hypothesis Testing

Regression analysis was used to clarify and understand significant effect of four dimensions of explanation on consumer compassion. In relation with model fit, R^2 scored 0.823. In other words, 82 percent of consumer compassion can be explained by these four dimensions (Table 3). Results revealed that all these four dimensions plays important role in order to gain consumers' compassion at failure. Apology explained almost 73 percent of customers' compassion which is the highest among all and followed by reference and justification. In contrast, excuse also explained 71 percent of customers' compassion, however in a negative manner. Therefore, it can be concluded from regression results that all four dimensions plays important positive role on gaining customers compassion except excuse.

Table 2 Results of Reliability and Factor Analysis

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	0.883				
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	0.000				
Factor Items	Factor Loading	Composite Mean	Cronbach's Alpha	Initial Eigenvalues	% of variance
Excuse		4.12	0.852	6.12	26.24
EX 1	.864				
EX 2	.973				
EX 3	.912				
EX 4	.887				
Reference					
RF 1	.835	5.89	0.829	4.56	18.21
RF 2	.869				
RF 3	.848				
Justification					
JU 1	.875	5.98	0.894	3.75	15.32
JU 2	.946				
JU 3	.879				
JU 4	.887				
Apology					
AP 1	.956	6.102	0.911	3.43	14.56
AP 2	.948				
AP 3	.981				
Consumer Compassion					
CC 1	.902	5.13	0.876	2.96	13.23
CC 2	.931				
CC 3	.875				
CC 4	.816				

Table 3 Regression Results

Predictor Variables	Beta	t-value	Sig value	Tolerance	VIF
Excuse	-0.713	11.85	.000	.852	1.26
Reference	0.569	10.54	.000	.892	1.13
Justification	0.313	6.89	.000	.771	1.42
Apology	0.726	12.987	.000	.742	1.39
Dependent Variable: Customer Compassion; $R^2 = .823$; F value = 96.120; Sig value = .000					

4. Discussion, Limitation, and Further Study

Regression results revealed that all the dimensions of explanation plays important role to gain consumers compassion which also help to appease consumer anxiety and anxious as well in service failure occasion. Among four, apology plays the most important role to gain consumers' compassion. Same results also been yield in many other prior studies (Boshoff & Leong, 1998; Mattila, 2006). In their study, they identified that apology has positive robust effect on consumers understanding process. It always helps to create positive brand image even in worst scenario. In fact, they also mentioned that by showing apology organizations can enhance their brand equity. Similarly, reference and justification also have significant positive effect on gaining consumers' compassion. These findings also in line with many previous studies related with service recovery strategies (Lee & Park, 2010; Wang et al., 2014). Despite having similar results, this study found some interesting changes in these particular variable in Malaysian scenario. Most of prior studies identified that justification is relatively more important than reference. But our results indicated that Malaysian internet users mainly emphasis on reference along with justification. This is probably because reference can assure consumers that they are not alone who face that undesirable consequences. In fact, Malaysian cultural value are underlined by collectivism value which might robust reference effect on consumers' mind. In contrast, results indicated significant negative effect of excuse on gaining consumers' compassion. Though, few studies found its positive effect on consumers' satisfaction. However, many studies utterly suggested that repeatedly giving excuse may ruin organizations' goodwill. Our study also confirmed this and ensure that excuse has significant negative effect on gaining consumers' compassion. Hence, we can conclude that apology and reference can be the best explanation strategy during service failure and organization should not use any excuse to avoid their responsibility.

Despite following scientific aspects in each step, this study has few limitations. Firstly, multivariate results often depend on sample size. Though sample size for this study was adequate, however it would better for generalizing conclusion if the sample size is huge in this particular research area. Secondly, this study focused only four internet service providers in Malaysia, however to gain in-depth knowledge in this regard, further study can compare with other service industry, such as banking, multimedia broadcasting etc. Moreover, further study can be conducted in the context of examining cross cultural issues in service failure domain.

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