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TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. REVISITING DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISONS IN SERVICE RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

Service employees can communicate downward social comparisons (DSCs), namely social comparisons stressing how things turned out worse for other people. These types of communications are used to alleviate negative customer reactions following service failures. In two experiments, the research shows that DSCs activate inferences of manipulative intent, thereby increasing negative consumer responses. Manipulative intent inferences are activated even when the company is not blameworthy, but these are lower when customers are to blame for the failure. We show that DSCs can backfire when perceived as manipulative. Managers should use DSCs with caution, evaluating whether the message is perceived as manipulative.

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that compensation following service failures can restore customer satisfaction (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005; Schoefer and Diamantopoulos 2008). Notwithstanding, compensation is costly. Alternatively, interpersonal information from the service firm can be a cost-effective recovery strategy. For instance, firms can provide information that encourages customers to compare themselves against less fortunate others, in a process known as downward social comparisons (DSCs).

The concept of downward social comparisons stems from social comparison theory (Festinger 1954), which postulates that evaluations of a situation often depend on how an individual compares him/herself with others. When downward, social comparisons boost self-esteem as individuals see themselves in a positive light and feel superior to others (Wills 1981). Downward social comparisons are often spontaneous (i.e. occur without instructions) and effortless (i.e. occur even when individuals are distracted). In service failure encounters, DSCs can be induced by the employee instructing the customer to think of the experience of less fortunate others.

There is emerging evidence supporting the relevance of DSCs at lowering consumer negative outcomes and emotions following service failures (Bonifield and Cole 2008). An intriguing, yet hitherto overlooked aspect of DSCs induced by employees is that these might not be always palpably sincere. When delivered by service personnel, DSCs can activate resistance to persuasion (Campbell 1995). Given that service failures are negative events to be avoided, customers are especially perceptive of the intentions of employees, and thus might judge DSCs as insincere. As active recipients of social comparison information, customers may assess the intentions of the employee. This view is consistent with attribution theory (Heider 1958), which suggests that individuals strive to understand reality and act as naïve researchers attempting to identify the causes of events and of human behavior.

Our argument is that, DSCs rendered by employees can be perceived as manipulative and as indicative of an illegitimate attempt of the employee to shift the responsibility away from the organization. DSCs backfire if customers perceive the social comparison information provided by the employee as manipulative. Furthermore, we expect that attributions of blame affect customer response to DSCs. It is possible that DSCs are especially impactful when the firm is blameworthy and the condition of less unfortunate others, as encapsulated in DSCs, is highly relevant to the focal customer (Alicke 2000). Drawing on the arguments above, this study investigated how DSCs influence customer post-recovery anger, revenge and behavioural intentions when perceptions of manipulative intent are considered. Further, it examined the interaction between DSCs and blame attributions.

METHODS

The study employed two scenario-based experiments. Study 1 included a 2 (DSCs vs No DSCs) X 2 (External cause of the failure mentioned vs No cause mentioned) between-subjects design. Study 2 included a 2 (DSCs vs No DSCs) X 2 (Consumer responsibility in the failure mentioned vs No responsibility mentioned) between-

subjects design. An online self-completion questionnaire containing different service failure scenarios was used as data collection method. The two studies were conducted in two hospitality contexts for generalizability purposes, namely restaurant in Study 1 (n=241) and hotel in Study 2 (n=281).

FINDINGS

The findings from Study 1 show that, consistent with our conceptual model, the use of DSCs in service recovery can potentially have negative (rather than positive) effects for the organization. Specifically, we find that the presence of DSCs increases perceived manipulative intent ($M_{DSC} = 3.99$ vs. $M_{NO\ DSC} = 3.24$, $p < .01$) and has a positive indirect effect on anger ($\beta = .26$, CI: .15 to .39), desire for revenge ($\beta = .16$, CI: .07 to .26) and negative word of mouth ($\beta = .29$, CI: .17 to .45). The hypothesized moderation of company blame, however, is not statistically significant. Results from Study 2 confirm that, in the hotel context, DSCs are perceived as manipulative and lead to negative consequences for the organization. Notably, consumer blame attributions moderate the mediation of manipulative intent. Consequently, the positive influence of DSCs on anger ($\beta_{high\ blame} = .15$, CI: .04 to .27; $\beta_{low\ blame} = .34$, CI: .20 to .51), desire for revenge ($\beta_{high\ blame} = .13$, CI: .05 to .25; $\beta_{low\ blame} = .30$, CI: .18 to .45) and negative word of mouth ($\beta_{high\ blame} = .22$, CI: .06 to .37; $\beta_{low\ blame} = .49$, CI: .26 to .69) depends on the level of customer blame.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study advances service recovery research by providing evidence on the efficacy of DSCs as a recovery strategy. It offers a novel account of how consumers respond to employee explanations including DSCs. Complementing previous research on the potential benefits of DSCs, it shows that, following a service failure, DSCs induced by employees can actually increase consumer anger, desire for revenge and negative word of mouth. The detrimental effect of DSCs is independent of company blame, but it lowers if customers perceive themselves as partly responsible for the failure. The study contributes to extant research by 1) predicting and explaining the potential negative effects of DSCs as an explanation following service failures, and 2) demonstrating the importance for future research to consider perceptions of manipulative intent in relation to employee explanations.

From a managerial perspective, the study suggests that the specific content of employee explanations warrants detailed consideration. Specifically, explanations need to be pretested to avoid inferences of manipulative intentions. DSCs induced by employees can have negative rather than positive effects, as customers perceive social comparison information as manipulative.

KEYWORDS

Downward social comparisons, service failure recovery, experiment, blame, manipulative intent

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