The effects of perceived justice in service recovery on firm reputation and repurchase intention in airline industry

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The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of perceived justice on repurchase intention and to examine the moderating role of firm reputation in the relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention. Data were gathered by means of survey from airline passengers who experienced a service failure and subsequently a service recovery within past one year. The results show the effect of distributive justice on repurchase intention was stronger than procedural and interactional justice. Additionally, hierarchical regression analyses suggested that firm reputation plays a moderating role between perceived justice and repurchase intention in the distributive and interactional justice dimensions. Although, prior research has developed an understanding of the role of firm reputation on behavioral intentions, however, this study additionally examined the role of firm reputation as the moderator in this relationship. Managerial implications of these findings are briefly discussed.

Key words: Service failure, service recovery, perceived justice, firm reputation, repurchase intention

INTRODUCTION

It does not matter how excellent the service a company delivers, every company still often makes mistake in meeting the expectations of today’s customers, who tend to be more demanding and less loyal than ever before. Bitner (1993) argues that due to the unique nature of services it is impossible to ensure 100% error-free service. Even the most customer-oriented organization with the strongest quality program is unlikely to be able to eliminate all service failures (del Río-Lanza, 2009). Due to service failures, customers may exit silently, spread a negative word-of-mouth, voice their complaints to the operator, or continue to patronage the same service provider despite their dissatisfaction (Kim et al., 2009). Therefore, service recovery is critical for service organizations for strengthening its relationships with customers (Blodgett et al., 1997; Smith and Bolton, 1998).

Service recovery refers to the actions an organization takes in order to respond to a service failure (Gronroos, 1988). In order to more fundamentally comprehend effective service recovery, researchers have utilized justice theory as the main framework for examining service recovery procedures (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). A justice theory framework has gained popularity in explaining how customers evaluate service providers' reactions to service failure/recovery. In this theory, perceived justice is a multi-dimensional concept comprising three dimensions: Distributive, procedural, and interactional justice.

A growing number of researchers have identified service recovery as a rather neglected aspect of service marketing and one which warrants much greater research attention (Andreassen, 1999; Tax et al., 1998; Lewis and McCann, 2004). Kim et al. (2009) states although the recent advances concerning the effects of perceived justice on post-recovery behavior, there is still room to learn how a service provider’s recovery efforts affect subsequent customer relationships with the company. There is still a need for solid empirical research...
regarding the impact of organizational responses to a customer complaint (Davidow, 2000, 2003). Moreover, according to Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), there is a paucity of empirical research regarding the effects of complainants’ perceptions of justice on intentions.

Based on previous literature, firm reputation has been investigated in previous studies in marketing; however, to date; very little, if any, research has examined the impact of firm reputation within a failure/complaint handling context (Hess, 2008). May be Hess’s (2008) is the only study which investigates firm reputation in the service failure and recovery context. In addition, based on Bailey and Bonifield (2010) exploring how subsequent handling of a nonfulfillment influences consumers’ attitudes and behavioral intentions would be interesting, particularly with respect to how the service recovery interacts with firm reputation. There was no investigation of how a company’s communication about a nonfulfillment might impact how consumers respond to the company. This, obviously, would have managerial implications. They further recommend that it may be interesting to draw from equity theory, in particular the literature on interactional justice, procedural, and distributive justice, to explore such an issue. The current study was conducted in the airline industry. The reason why this study is conducted in the airline industry is that: First, it is a service industry fulfilling the main criteria of inseparability, heterogeneity, intangibility and perish ability, and “in the airline industry, the product is the complete air travel experience” (Street, 1994: 13). Second, the contact between customer and service provider is very high; service processes offer various opportunities for service failure to occur (Grönroos, 1984).

The third reason is that, service is one of the most competitive elements in the airline industry, as the competitiveness of airline industry has been increased due to the increasing deregulation and a lot of new and low-cost airlines are entering the market (Economist, 1999). Moreover, although service failure and recovery has been studied in wide range of service industries, it has not been well studied in the hospitality services. According to Becker (2000) and Collie et al. (2000), the application of service recovery and justice theory in tourism and hospitality services is in its infancy stage. In addition, while in recent years, there are a number of studies on service recovery focusing in the hospitality industry, but they have mostly focused on hotels and restaurants (DeWitt et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009; Sparks and Fredline, 2007; Yuksel et al., 2006; Karatepe, 2006), thus, there is a lack of research on service recovery in the airline industry.

In this regard, the purpose of this study is to bridge these gaps in the literature by examining dimensions of perceived justice on repurchase intention and to analyze whether firm reputation moderates the relationship between perceived justice with service recovery and repurchase intentions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Perceived justice with service recovery

Customers and service providers cannot prevent the incidents that occur during exchange processes. Therefore, they expect fair behavior from each other and they do their evaluation based on perceived justice. Past research on service failure and recovery has presented considerable evidence of the suitability of the concept of justice as a basis for understanding the process of service recovery and its outcomes (Blodgett et al., 1997; Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998).

Distributive justice

Distributive justice refers to the assignment of tangible resources by the firm to rectify and compensate for a service failure (del Río-Lanza, 2009). In a service failure/recovery context, it refers to the perceived fairness of the service failure/recovery outcome (Holloway et al., 2009). When an individual perceives that benefits have not been allocated equitably, he/she experiences distress (Walster et al., 1973), which in turn motivates him/her to restore the distributive justice. Studies have provided empirical evidence that perceived fairness of tangible outcomes have a positive effect on recovery evaluation (Boshoff, 1997; Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Hoffman et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1999). Previous literature in service recovery have measured distributive justice by the “justice,” “fairness,” “need,” “value” and “reward” of outcomes (Chebat and Slusarczyk, 2005; Smith et al., 1999; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004).

Procedural justice

Procedural justice refers to the methods the firm uses to deal with the problems arising during service delivery in aspects such as accessibility, timing/speed, process control, delay and flexibility to adapt to the consumer’s recovery needs (del Río-Lanza et al., 2009). Procedural justice also includes policies, procedures, and tools that companies use to support communication with customers and specifically, the time taken to process complaints and to arrive at a decision (Davidow, 2003). In service recovery context, procedural justice means the customer’s perception of justice for the several stages of procedures and processes needed to recover the failed service (Mattila, 2001). Procedural justice focuses on the way that the outcome is reached. Based on previous literature, there are six sub-dimensions for procedural justice, namely, flexibility, accessibility, process control, decision control, response speed and acceptance of
Firm reputation

Firm reputation is defined as customers’ perceptions of how well a firm takes care of customers and genuinely is concerned about their welfare (Doney and Cannon, 1997). A firm’s reputation for service quality can be shaped in many ways. Customers’ perceptions of a firm can occur directly through exposure to its products and services (Campbell, 1999). However, many firms develop reputations, good and bad, without such direct contact. Important insights about many products and services can occur through comments from friends, family members, and colleagues (Richens, 1983; Brown et al., 2005). Firm reputation has received some attention from marketing researchers. This research has shown that reputation affects customers’ product choice (Traynor, 1983), overall attitudes about products and services (Brown, 1995), trust (Johnson and Grayson, 2005), and purchase intentions (Yoon et al., 1993). Research has also demonstrated within a sales context that firm reputation affects managers’ intentions to integrate vertically and switch to alternative manufacturer’s representatives (Weiss et al., 1999). Despite these results, firm reputation has not, to our knowledge, been examined within a customer complaint/failure context.

Repurchase intention

Repurchase intention refers to the customer’s aim to maintain a relationship with a particular service provider and make his or her next purchase in the category for this service provider (Jones and Taylor, 2007). Continued purchasing by current customers is an important concern because the cost of obtaining a new customer usually greatly exceeds the cost of retaining a customer (Spreng et al., 1995). Repurchase intention as a consequence of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is a critical factor affecting customers’ future relationship with an organization, its profitability, and therefore its business success (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Weun, 1997).

Perceived justice and repurchase intention

Although a service failure has the potential to destroy customers’ loyalty, the successful implementation of service recovery strategies may prevent the defection of customers who experience a service failure (Lewis and Spyrokopoulos, 2001). When a service breakdown occurs, the effective reactions of the service providers can help create even stronger bonds, whereas the poor responses may prompt customers to switch. Thus, an effective effort for service recovery after experiencing faulty service must be carefully planned and carried out in order to establish a long-term relationship with the customers (Kim et al., 2009), because inappropriate responses significantly increase the companies’ defection rate.

Perceived justice dimensions also have a great effect on repurchase intention. Blodgett et al. (1997) examined the effects of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice on customers’ repatronage intention and negative word of mouth intention. In their study, they checked different levels (low-medium-high) of recovery scenarios based on the three justice dimensions to test how each recovery effort, with varying degrees of recovery, influences customer repatronage intention and word of mouth. The study suggested that the effects of perceived justice on customer repatronage intention and word of mouth vary across the different dimensions of justice and change with the degree of service recovery efforts as well. In addition Ha and Jang (2009) found that all dimensions of justice affect repatronage intention in the restaurant setting. They found that service recovery efforts, such as discounts for food items, promptness of recovery, and a sincere apology for the service failure could leave customers satisfied, consequently encouraging them to revisit the restaurant.

H1: There is a positive relationship between distributive justice and repurchase intention.

H2: There is a positive relationship between procedural justice and repurchase intention.

H3: There is a positive relationship between interactional justice and repurchase intention.

The moderating role of firm reputation

Evidence shows that perceived justice with service recovery leads to greater intention (Ha and Jang, 2009). Thus, the direct relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention is well founded. Within this
study, however, we propose that this direct relationship will be moderated by firm reputation. We propose that the relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention vary as a function of the firm reputation. Customers' perceptions of firm reputation arise from beliefs that the firm is dependable (Brown, 1995), produces quality service or products (Campbell, 1999; Rindova et al., 2005), cares about its customers (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Johnson and Grayson, 2005) and is trustworthy (Ganesan, 1994). Thus, a good reputation is critical for companies as an excellent firm reputation (compared to average) leads to greater repurchase intentions (Hess, 2008).

Hess (2008) stated that customers are expected to be somewhat forgiving of a failure, especially if it is caused by a firm with an excellent compared to average reputation for service quality. They are aware that firms with excellent reputations have made considerable investments in employee training, control mechanisms, and service delivery systems to minimize the occurrence of failures. When the occasional failure does occur, customers are expected to consider these efforts and be more lenient and forgiving of firms with good reputations. Moreover, Choi and Mattila (2008) mention that when a firm has a good reputation for high service quality, a single failure incident is easily discounted, thus having a minimal impact on overall impression of the firm. Conversely, such a buffering effect should not be observable for providers known to deliver low quality services. Hence, failures are even more detrimental for less-than-stellar performers.

Therefore, the effect of perceived justice due to recovery efforts might have a stronger impact on repurchase intention of firms who have a good reputation. Despite the potential importance of these findings, to our best knowledge, no previous studies have investigated the moderating role of firm reputation in relation to perceived justice in service recovery. Thus, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

\[ H_4: \text{Firm reputation moderates the relationship between distributive justice and repurchase intention.} \]

\[ H_5: \text{Firm reputation moderates the relationship between procedural justice and repurchase intention.} \]

\[ H_6: \text{Firm reputation moderates the relationship between interactional justice and repurchase intention.} \]

**Conceptual framework of the study**

In line with literature review and the purpose of study described in the beginning of the paper, the conceptual framework of this study was configured as illustrated in Figure 1. Distributive procedural and interactional justices will affect repurchase intention (\( H_1, H_2, H_3 \)). Besides, firm reputation moderates the relationship between distributive, procedural, and interactional justices and repurchases intention (\( H_4, H_5, H_6 \)).

**METHODS**

**Sampling frame and data collection**

Data were collected from airline passengers.

The respondents were approached by interviewers at Emam Khomeini International Airport, Tehran, in June 2010 while they were waiting for their flight. The main advantage of this procedure was the possibility of approaching airline customers without having to obtain customer records in advance. A screening question was asked to see if respondents encountered any service failure with airline during the past one year. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to these customers. The questionnaire was adapted from original English questionnaire items and then translated into Persian. Two linguists who were educated in the U.S. were involved in the translation process. A pilot test was performed by distributing
the questionnaire to 35 airline passengers to refine the instrument by clarifying any ambiguous expressions or misrepresentation of the original meanings. Out of 300 surveys, the response rate was 55%, representing a total of 165 returned questionnaires. Out of the 165 collected, 12 questionnaires were either incomplete or the answers were found to be unreliable, leaving the remaining 153 questionnaires that were retained for further data analysis.

Measures

A self-report questionnaire was used. Except for demographic questions, all of the variables were measured on interval scales. All variables with scales from the literature briefly explained:

Perceived justice

The measures for perceived justice dimensions were borrowed or adapted primarily from previous studies. Overall, thirteen items were used to measure “perceived justice”. For this study, distributive justice was measured by a four-item scale adopted from Blodgett et al. (1997) and Smith et al. (1999). The procedural justice was measured by a four-item scale adapted from Blodgett et al. (1997) and Karatepe (2006). To measure the interactional justice construct, we used a five-item scale adapted from Karatepe (2006), Smith et al. (1999), and Tax et al. (1998).

Repurchase intention

The seven point scale for switching intention was adapted from measures developed by Mattila (2001) and Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). Repurchase intention was captured via five items.

Firm reputation

The seven point scale for switching intention was adapted from measures developed by Walsh et al. (2006). In their study, seven items measuring firm reputation had coefficient alpha of 0.94, which can be considered to be very reliable (Nunnally, 1978).

RESULTS

Respondents' demographic profile

The demographic profile of respondents is as follows. Table 1. The sample consisted of 54.2% male and 45.8% female respondents. The findings also indicate that most of the respondents are aged between 21 to 30 years. Almost 53.6% of the respondents were married, 41.3% single and 4.6% divorced. Over 39.9% of the respondents hold bachelor degree, 30.7% master, 10.5% certificate/diploma, 9.8 PhD/doctorate and only 8.5% hold high school.

Goodness of measures

Factor analysis was used to understand the underlying factor of variables in the proposed framework (Hair et al., 1998). A Varimax rotation method was applied to variables. The selected factors were based on eigenvalues equal to or greater than 1.00. In this research, the chosen cut off point for significance loading is minimum 0.50. Then, the factors and selected items were grouped and renamed accordingly.

Factor analysis was performed on thirteen items in the perceived justice with service recovery. The result is shown in Table 2. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.639 and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant at the 0.00 level. The anti-image correlation matrix ranged from 0.578 to 0.725; so, there were sufficient correlations among the items. Three factors were extracted with 72.64% of the variance. Factor one is labeled as interactional justice justice, factor two was labeled as distributive justice and the third factor was renamed as procedural justice.

Reliability and descriptive analysis

Reliability analysis is established by testing whether the items grouped under a factor are internally consistent and stable. Cronbach’s alpha (α) was used to analyze the reliability of the instruments. Reliability over 0.80 is good; reliability in the range of 0.70 is acceptable; and reliability less than 0.60 is considered poor (Sekaran, 2003). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3. Distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, firm reputation and repurchase intention are accepted based on Cronbach α aforementioned 0.70. Descriptive statistics of all the variables also is shown in Table 2. The mean values (standard deviations) for distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, firm reputation and repurchase intention are presented in Table 2.

Hypotheses testing

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test H1a to H1c and H2a to H2c, the relationship between perceived justice dimensions and repurchase intention and the moderating role of firm reputation in the relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention. The first step of the hierarchical regression analyses indicated that all dimensions of perceived justice including distributive, procedural and interactional justices are positively related to repurchase intention, supporting H1a to H1c. This step also showed that the effect of distributive justice on repurchase intention was stronger than procedural and interactional justices. The second step of the analyses examined the direct effect of firm reputation on repurchase intention. However, an explanation of the results is not provided here because it was not one of the study objectives and, thus, it was not hypothesized.

Step 3 revealed the moderating effect and interaction terms between perceived justice and firm reputation. In the distributive and interactional justice dimensions,
interaction terms were significant, supporting $H_{2a}$ and $H_{2c}$. Meanwhile, in the procedural justice dimension, interaction term was not significant, meaning that firm reputation did not play a moderating role between perceived justice and repurchase intention, rejecting $H_{2b}$. The details of the hierarchical regression are presented in Table 3.

**DISCUSSION**

Repeat customers are an essential asset to any successful business. The most effective way to retain repeat customers is to provide a service that exceeds the customers’ expectations. Unfortunately, however, perfect customer service may be practically impossible, because in airline industry, the contact between customer and service provider is very high, thus, service processes offer various opportunities for service failure to occur (Grönroos, 1984). Thus, an effective effort for service recovery after experiencing faulty service must be carefully planned and carried out in order to establish a long-term relationship with the customers.

The empirical results testing the relationships between perceived justice with service recovery, and repurchase intention demonstrated that all three dimensions of justice namely distributive and interactional justice are positively related to repurchase intention which is consistent with the previous findings of Blodgett et al. (1997), Ok et al. (2005) and Ha and Jang (2009). The impact of distributive justice on repurchase intention appears to be stronger than that of procedural and interactional justices. The significant role of distributive justice in affecting repurchase intention would be supported by fair distributive treatment such as refunds, discounts, and etc that are important in returning back airline passengers to repurchase from the same service provider. Therefore, airlines should implement an effective way of distributive justice. Airlines can do this task by implementing fair distributive treatment such as discounts, refunds, and etc which are important in encouraging customers to repurchase. Interactional justice was another important predictor of repurchase intention. Thus, airlines should also implement an effective way of interactional justice. This task can be done by offering apologies, appearing courteous and respectful and showing empathy and attentiveness. In terms of procedural justice, a training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>No of item remaining</th>
<th>Item dropped</th>
<th>Cronbach alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distributive justice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.881</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural justice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional justice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm reputation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.944</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repurchase intention</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.883</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>0.919</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Result of regression analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive justice</td>
<td>0.515***</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
<td>-0.580***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural justice</td>
<td>0.155*</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>-0.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International justice</td>
<td>0.133**</td>
<td>0.132**</td>
<td>0.138*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm reputation</td>
<td>0.398***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderating variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR×DJ</td>
<td>1.140***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR×PJ</td>
<td>-0.186</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR×IJ</td>
<td>0.433*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F value</td>
<td>36.104***</td>
<td>13.779***</td>
<td>476.416***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.421</td>
<td>0.470</td>
<td>0.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.409</td>
<td>0.456</td>
<td>0.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ change</td>
<td>0.421</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.481</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.00.

In the distributive and interactional justice dimensions, interaction terms were significant, showing that firm reputation plays a moderating role in the relationship between distributive and interactional justices and repurchase intention. These findings indicate that the effects of distributed justice-related service recovery (compensation) and interactional justice-related service recovery efforts (apology and explanation of the problem) on behavioral intentions would significantly vary by reputation of the firm. However, in the procedural justice dimension, interaction term was not significant, meaning that firm reputation did not play a moderating role between perceived justice and repurchase intention. In other words, excellent firm reputation will not affect the effects of procedural justice on repurchase intention, even when they are responded quickly, in a timely manner and the procedure of complaint handling is not complicated.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Several important managerial implications emerge from this study. First, airlines should train employees to understand what aspects of perceived justice, the fair distributive treatment, proper procedures, interpersonal communication is important to the customers. If airlines can improve these aspects of service recovery, the customers will repurchase from the same service provider that benefits the company in future.

Second, in order to enhance distributive justice which had a stronger relationship with repurchase intention, airlines should develop specific monetary compensation guidelines while training both full-time and part-time employees to quickly and properly react to various service failure situations. Depending on different levels of complaints and different situations of customers, airlines needs to train front desk staff to offer proper arrays of compensations with similar values and let their customers select the best compensation (Kim et al., 2009). In addition to distributive treatment training, airlines should also implement a training program, which clearly illustrates the reactions improving the interactional justice practice through teaching how to properly treat angry and frustrated customers, showing empathy and apology.

Third, the study also demonstrated that firm reputation plays a moderating role in the relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention in distributive and interactional justice situations. However, the moderating role of firm reputation was not found in the procedural justice dimension. Therefore, airlines need to make continuous efforts to create and hold an excellent reputation in the mind of customers, even in service failure/recovery situations.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study like all other studies suffers from various limitations, that restrict the generalization of the findings and opens directions for future research. First, since this study only focused on one service sector (airline industry)
and in a specific country, the findings cannot be generalized to other service sectors and different geographical areas. Therefore, future research can replicate this study in other service sectors and different countries.

A second limitation refers to the sample of this study. This study used a convenience sampling method consisting of 153 responses. Future research can overcome this limitation by taking a larger, randomly-selected, sample which may provide a more comprehensive result.

In addition, future research may consider some other moderating variables in the relationship between perceived justice in service recovery and repurchase intention. Among these variables, the authors recommend customers’ personality.

**Conclusion**

Prior service recovery research has developed an understanding of the role of perceived justice on repurchase intention. However, this study additionally examined the role of firm reputations in service recovery situations. The purpose of the study was to examine the dimensions of perceived justice on repurchase intention and to analyze whether firm reputation moderates the relationship between perceived justice with service recovery and repurchase intention. Based on the responses from the 153 respondents, the results indicate that distributive, procedural and interactional justices have a positive relationship with repurchase intention. The results also confirmed the moderating role of repurchase intention in the relationship between perceived justice and repurchase intention.

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