

## ONLINE SERVICE RECOVERY: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF JUSTICE THEORY ON MANAGERIAL RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS

### RECUPERACIÓN DEL SERVICIO EN INTERNET: EXPLORANDO LOS EFECTOS DE LA TEORÍA DE JUSTICIA EN LAS RESPUESTAS GERENCIALES A COMENTARIOS NEGATIVOS EN LÍNEA

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#### Abstract

This conceptual paper intends to a) analyse the effects of distributive, interactional and procedural justice on managerial responses to negative online reviews to new guest hotel choice, b) determine which dimension of justice theory has the largest impact on new guests' hotel choice, and c) suggest the elements that a managerial response to a negative online review needs to contain in order to obtain better effects for new potential guests. This conceptual paper proposes an experimental design with three conditions, in order to shed light on the elements -based on justice theory- that a managerial response should contain, to mitigate the effects of a negative online review. Expected results are likely to support the four propositions suggesting that the three dimensions of justice theory have a positive effect on purchase intention. However, negative online reviews that are addressed by management who offer some kind of physical compensation (distributive justice) are expected to generate greater purchase intentions from new potential guests that are looking for online information to assist them in their decisions regarding a trip. Insights from this research might help managers to design specific answer policies to negative online reviews. It is recommended that hotel managers should fully understand the different justice dimensions, specifically, the distributive component. Hotels can implement better compensation strategies that can be offered by managers when they reply to a negative online review. This conceptual paper addresses the online service recovery efforts and how they affect new potential customers -unrelated to the service failure- indirectly on an online rating website. Specifically, results from the proposed study are expected to build on previous research on service recovery by considering the impacts of justice theory of traditional marketing strategies for complaint handling in an online marketing context.

*Keywords:* Service recovery, negative online reviews, justice theory, distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice.

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## Resumen

El propósito de este artículo conceptual es: a) analizar cómo las respuestas gerenciales a los comentarios negativos en Internet que integran las dimensiones distributiva, interactiva, y de procedimiento de la justicia influyen en las elecciones de los nuevos clientes potenciales, b) determinar cuál de las tres dimensiones de la teoría de justicia genera un mayor impacto en la elección de los nuevos clientes potenciales, y c) identificar los elementos que una respuesta gerencial en Internet debe contener para lograr mitigar los efectos de un comentario negativo en Internet e incrementar la intención de compra de los nuevos clientes potenciales. En esta investigación se propone un diseño experimental con tres condiciones, para entender qué elementos de la teoría de justicia debe integrar una respuesta gerencial, para mitigar los efectos de un comentario negativo en Internet. Se espera que con el estudio propuesto, se logre obtener evidencia que respalde las cuatro proposiciones planteadas en este artículo, las cuales sugieren que las tres dimensiones de la teoría de justicia tienen un efecto positivo en la intención de compra. Adicionalmente, se espera que la intención de compra de los nuevos clientes potenciales que buscan información para su próximo viaje sea mayor si éstos vieron comentarios negativos resueltos por la gerencia ofreciendo algún tipo de compensación física (justicia distributiva). Los hallazgos derivados de esta investigación podrían ayudar a los hoteles a diseñar políticas de respuesta específicas para comentarios negativos en Internet. Particularmente, se recomienda que los gerentes de los hoteles conozcan las diferentes dimensiones de justicia, especialmente, el componente distributivo, permitiendo así implementar mejores estrategias de compensación que se puedan ofrecer cuando se responde a un comentario negativo en Internet. Esta investigación conceptual considera los esfuerzos de recuperación en el servicio en Internet y su impacto en la decisión de nuevos clientes potenciales. Se espera que los resultados del estudio propuesto complementen las investigaciones previas sobre el tema, al considerar el impacto de las dimensiones de la teoría de justicia en el manejo de reclamos en un contexto de Internet, específicamente en personas no involucradas en la falla original.

*Palabras clave:* recuperación en el servicio, comentarios negativos en internet, teoría de justicia, justicia distributiva, justicia de procedimiento, justicia interactiva

## Introduction

When deciding to choose a new product, people often tend to look for information that can assist them in the decision making process. Specifically, in the case of services, the intangibility that characterizes them makes it more difficult for customers to evaluate and make decisions. Online reviews now play a significant role in the decision making process, as customers tend to read comments about others' experiences in order to reduce uncertainty before they decide to make a purchase. For instance, service organizations such as hotels need to take into consideration that negative online reviews may affect future customers and prevent them from making a reservation, because the lack of tangibility has implications on the ease with which customers can evaluate services (Wolack, Kalafatis & Harris, 1998). The service recovery strategy, as well as an effective complaint handling process is essential for reverting the negative effect of a negative online review. For such purposes, there are a significant number of studies that focus on justice theory to explain customer perception of the handling of their complaint (Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993; del Río-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles, & Díaz-Martín, 2009; Ding,

Ho, & Lii, 2016; Mattila, 2001; Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010). Justice theory presents a theoretical framework that will be addressed in the model for the present research, as this theory has been used for service recovery strategies.

Dellarocas (2003) defines online reviews as a new large-scale form of the traditional word-of-mouth strategy. Previous literature has addressed how electronic word of mouth through online reviews can affect and predict the sales of different products, such as books, movies and video games (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, Liu, 2006; Zhang, & Award, 2007; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Other studies have addressed online reviews as determinants of consumer preferences and purchase intention (Grupta & Harris, 2010; Senecal & Nantel, 2004).

There is evidence that suggests that dealing effectively with complaints has a dramatic impact on customers' evaluations (Blodgett & Hill, 1997). However, exactly how such service recovery efforts indirectly affect potential customers on an online rating website is still not clear. Despite the growing interest in explaining consumers' reactions to service failure incidents, research examining the role of explanations in mitigat-

ing the negative effects of service failure is scant. This is surprising because many internet-based organizations such as Tripadvisor.com and Amazon.com allow companies to respond to unfavourable opinions posted on these sites (Treviño & Castaño, 2013).

Furthermore, justice theory explains how customers evaluate organizational service recovery efforts, by analysing three dimensions: distributive, interactional and procedural justice (Folger, 1987, 1993; Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Although there is some research based on this theory to study managerial responses to customers' complaints in a traditional context, it could also help to evaluate the impact of responding to negative online reviews. Therefore, this conceptual paper proposes a methodology to shed light on the following question: Which justice dimension has a greater impact on reverting the effect of a negative online review? Particularly, the specific objectives of the proposed study are: a) to explore the effects of distributive, interactional and procedural justice of managerial responses to negative online reviews for new hotel guest choices, and b) determine which dimension of justice theory has the greatest impact on new guests' hotel choices. Based on previous research on the traditional marketing context, our expected results are that justice theory dimensions do have a positive effect on purchase intention in the online context.

This paper is structured as follows: The first section presents the theoretical framework and literature review that will serve as a starting point for the development of the propositions. The second section addresses the proposed methodology, followed by the expected results and implications. Finally, the last section is dedicated to concluding and shedding light on future research avenues for this topic.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will address existing literature on the topics of online reviews, purchase intention, complaint handling and justice theory. This will serve as a starting point for the propositions. Previous research has focused on service recovery strategies and justice theory in a face-to-face context; however, this paper proposes a study that will expand prior findings by suggesting the online environment as a new and important medium of communication. Specifically, online reviews will be detailed in the following section in order to address how service recovery strategies can also be applied in this context.

### Online Reviews

The Internet can reach many people rapidly, and content on the web can travel around the world with just a

few clicks. Good and bad comments about a service can have major impact once they are shared on the Internet. As such, online reviews provided by consumers that previously purchased products or services have become a major source of information for consumers. Previous research has addressed online reviews as sales predictors. Different products such as movies, books, and video games have been a subject of research. For example, Delarocas, Zhang, & Award (2007) found that a more accurate sales forecasting model can be constructed by adding online movie ratings. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), also studied the impact of online reviews on sales, and concluded that negative product reviews have a greater impact than positive reviews.

Online reviews have been studied as a factor that might shape consumer's preferences and purchase intention. Senecal & Nantel (2004) made an online experiment to test consumer choices. They found evidence to support the hypothesis that people that tend to consult online reviews usually select recommended products twice as often as people who do not. Gupta & Harris (2010) also conducted an experiment that suggested that people usually spent more time considering products that are recommended online.

In the service arena, online reviews can be studied as well, as their effects can differ from online reviews of products, taking into consideration the natural characteristics of services: intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Wolack, et al., 1998). Popular webpages such as Tripadvisor.com, allow people to post reviews of their experiences in restaurants, hotels, and other entertainment services. This website also allows companies to manage their account and to respond to customers' posts. The answer provided by management can be seen as a service recovery effort, and represent an opportunity to conduct research in this context.

Despite great interest in complaint handling in many studies that focus on traditional marketing, little attention has been paid to the online marketing approach. The use of online reviews has been increasing in recent years, and knowledge on how to better approach negative online reviews is becoming crucial. One study that addresses online reviews is Gretzel & Yoo's (2008), which presents a web-based survey to study how trip-planning decisions are influenced by the reviews posted on Tripadvisor.com. Results show that these reviews are used mostly to inform accommodation decisions, and women reported having obtained greater benefits than men from other travellers' reviews. Furthermore, research has suggested that positive comments have the highest impact on consumer demand, and comments about hotel attributes, room quality, Internet provision, and building have

the highest impact on hotel performance (Philips, Barnes, Zigan, & Schegg, 2017). Researchers such as Cho, Im, Hiltz, & Fjermestad, (2001) identified the potential of complaint handling management and recognize it as an important aspect of any online marketing strategy. For example, research has analysed the impact of management responses on consumer reviews, and suggests that both star ratings and reviews volume is higher for responding hotels (Prosperpio & Zervas, 2017). Therefore, the concern of the proposed study is to analyse whether the previous findings of justice theory on traditional marketing strategies for complaint handling apply also to the online context of online reviews.

### Complaint Handling and Justice Theory

Complaint handling, as one of the service recovery strategies, has been explored among academics for many years. Unsatisfied customers are frequent in services organizations, in which it is, in general, very difficult to eliminate service failures because of the inseparability between service delivery and consumption, which are often simultaneous (Wolack, et al., 1998). However, when unhappy customers complain, service marketers have found an opportunity consisting of the implementation of a service recovery strategy to effectively repair the situation and turn the dissatisfied customer into a satisfied one. Previous research has focused on how organizations can handle and manage complains. Justice theory has been predominant in trying to explain how customers evaluate organizational service recovery efforts. Previous findings support the use of justice theory in complaint handling. For example, Folger (1993) proposed that people evaluate certain levels of treatment or rewards based on past events, other people, and implicit and explicit promises. Based on these standards, a person can determine the degree of dissatisfaction with a given outcome. This organizational theory has also been applied to several contexts, and it has proven to be made up of three dimensions of perceived justice: distributive, procedural and interactional (Folger, 1987, 1993; Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010).

#### *Distributive justice*

Distributive justice can be explained in terms of the perceived fairness that results from a dispute or negotiation between two parties (Blodgett & Hill, 1997). Specifically regarding service recovery and complaint handling, distributive justice is found when the customer perceives that the outcome when resolving the problem was fair. This outcome can come in the form of a refund or discount, repairs, exchanges, and other physical incentives.

Particularly, when organizations meet the requirements of this dimension of justice, customers have reported to be satisfied with how the complaint was handled (Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010). Previous research in the face-to-face context has identified that compensation is effective in restoring customers' perceptions (Writz & Mattila, 2004). Considering the above, we propose that in the online context, a similar effect could be found. In cases where negative online reviews are addressed by managers offering a response that contains elements of the distributive justice, customers may perceive that the problem was solved in a fair manner and, therefore, increase the probability to consider the establishment. Therefore, the following proposition is formulated:

P1: Managerial responses to negative online reviews that contain elements of distributive justice, will have a positive effect on new guests' hotel purchase intention.

#### *Procedural justice*

Procedural justice usually refers to how fairly customers evaluate the procedures, policies, and criteria the decision makers use to obtain an outcome in a dispute or negotiation. In the context of service recovery, previous research has identified elements such as accessibility to complaint, time required to complete the process, and speed with which the conflict is resolved (Blodgett & Hill, 1997; Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010). Other authors have found that the speed by which the service failure is corrected, is one of the major determinants that shape consumers' perceptions with respect to procedural justice (Writz & Mattila, 2004). In the context of online reviews, users can consult the date in which reviews were created by other customers. More importantly, the date on which managers offer a response to such reviews, is also visible. Therefore, customers can analyse the speed at which the problem with the unsatisfied customer was addressed in terms of the time lapse between the posting of the negative online review and the company's response to that review. Considering this, we believe that managers that respond in a timely manner to negative online reviews may influence the purchase intention for new guests in a positive manner. In sum, consider the following proposition:

P2: Managerial responses to negative online reviews that contain elements of procedural justice, will have a positive effect on new guests' hotel purchase intention.

#### *Interactional justice*

Interactional justice is perceived when customers sense that the treatment they received when resolving their



problem was good. Elements such as courtesy, respect, truthfulness, provision of an explanation, politeness, sensitivity and interest are all expected for customers when dealing with a company with regards to which they encountered a service failure. Specifically, offering a sincere apology has been identified as an important factor that impacts consumers' post complaint behaviour and satisfaction (Blodgett & Hill, 1997; Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010). Even though in the context of online reviews there is no physical interaction, the way managerial responses are formulated can show potential customers the way in which the establishment treats customers when they encounter a service failure. Particularly, we believe that the offers of an apology, and polite and respectful treatment of a negative online review, can have an effect on how new customers perceive the company. Therefore, we propose that:

P3: Managerial responses to negative online reviews that contain elements of interactional justice will have a positive effect on new guests' hotel purchase intention.

### Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is a very attractive topic for both academics and practitioners. Determining the factors that may support or impede customers from actually buying a product or service bring important benefits for marketing theory and practice. The shopping orientations or purchase intention refers to the general predisposition of consumers toward the act of shopping (Gehrt and Carter, 1992). Previous literature reveals that this predisposition may be manifested in many ways; i.e., in information search patterns, alternative evaluation, and product selection. The purchase intention construct can be operationalized based on variables such as attitudes, interests, and opinions related to the topic of shopping (Brown, Pope & Voges, 2003).

Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, 2010 performed a meta-analysis to understand the effects of justice theory on the traditional marketing context. The authors found evidence to suggest that distributive justice, in the majority of studies was identified as the most strongly related to SATCOM. In this same study, procedural justice in general was reported to be positively correlated with SATCOM; however, the magnitude and significance of the direct effects have varied among many studies. In the context of online reviews, there has been research that tries to understand the elements that constitute a right answer by managers to negative online reviews to increase purchase intention (Treviño & Castaño, 2013). To build on previous findings, this research attempts to shed light on the elements that such right answers could contain to mitigate the effects of a negative review. Particularly, we believe

that if managers address a negative online review with a response that considers elements of distributive justice, such as a discount, or any economic compensation, new potential customers will perceive such company effort to address the service failure and, therefore, increase the probability of purchase intention. Because the company is investing resources -for example, a free night in the hotel- to prove that the problem has been fixed, new potential customers may think positively of such a company. This idea is consistent with previous literature that suggest that a manager that offers a changing response -one that offers a promise to change or improve the situation in future occasions, as well as an incentive to serve the customer again, may increase not only purchase intention, but also the overall perception of the hotel (Treviño & Castaño, 2013). In short, the following proposition is presented:

P4: Managerial responses to negative online reviews that contain elements of distributive justice will have a stronger positive effect on new guests' hotel purchase intention, than managerial responses that contain procedural and interactional justice elements.

To manipulate the three dimensions of justice theory in managerial responses to negative online reviews, this study will consider a physical compensation as the element for distributive dimension, a different response speed as an element of the procedural dimension, and a manager's apology as an element for interactional justice (Writz & Mattila, 2004). This theory has been investigated for traditional service recovery and complaint handling processes in the face-to-face context; however, to date there is no empirical research that addresses this theory in the context of negative online reviews.

### Methodology

In order to test the hypotheses, an experiment is proposed. Subjects can be randomly divided into three separate groups and can be asked to read a negative online review describing a situation in which a guest was unhappy with a New York luxury hotel. For this study, we propose to consider a luxury hotel given that for most customers, this decision can be classified as a high involvement purchase, often requiring a certain level of research before booking. The negative review that participants read, was written by a guest that stayed at the hotel for one night and encountered some hygiene issues in his room that dissatisfied him. The hotel manager responded to this negative review differently, in the different scenarios. As mentioned earlier, given that prior work on service recovery in offline contexts has indicated that a discount or free products offered lead to distributive fairness, a fast response

contributes to increasing procedural justice perceptions, and an apology induces interactional fairness. The managerial responses were manipulated based on these criteria (Writz & Mattila, 2004). The first group read the response in which the dissatisfied guest was offered a free night's stay on his next visit (distributive justice). The second group read the response in which the manager responded to the unhappy guest urgently (i.e., making strong emphasis on time) and on the same day after the negative review was posted online (procedural justice). Finally, the third group read the response of the manager that offers a sincere apology for the inconvenience caused (interactional justice). See Annex I for a more detailed description of the written scenarios. After this process, participants were given a questionnaire so that they could evaluate the situation, and to finally decide whether they were willing to stay in the hotel in order to measure purchase intention.

Multiple item scales are proposed to measure each construct. Previous research (Blodgett & Hill, 1997; Writz & Mattila, 2004) can serve as a basis for creating the questionnaire; however, the items were subject to minor modifications in order to better fit the online and travel industry context of this study. All the items should be measured using a 7-point Likert scale, with "strongly agree/strongly disagree" anchors. Table 1 lists the items that are proposed to measure each dimension. Finally, subjects can be selected based on the following criteria, to ensure familiarity with the trip planning process and online reviews: a) all participants should use Internet on a daily basis; b) they all use online websites for product/services recommendations; c) they travel at least once a year; and d) to ensure that participants are able to pay a similar fee, they will be filtered according to the average price they pay for a night's stay at a luxury hotel, including only those who pay \$200dls or more.

**Table 1. List of Items for Each Construct**

Instrument Items
<b>Distributive Justice</b>
Taking everything into consideration, the outcome the guest received was fair.
In resolving the problem, the hotel gave the customer what he needed.
Given the circumstances, I feel that the hotel offered adequate compensation.
<b>Procedural Justice</b>
The guest's complaint was handled in a very timely manner.
The manager was quick in dealing with the problem and writing a response.
<b>Interactional Justice</b>
The manager was appropriately concerned about the guest's problem.
The manager did not give the guest the courtesy he/she was due.
<b>Purchase Intention</b>
Knowing what I do now, I would stay in this hotel.
Because of what happened to other guests, I would never go to this hotel.
If the situation had happened to me, I would never go to this hotel in the future

## Expected Results and Implications

In general, results are expected to confirm that negative online reviews that are addressed by management who offer some kind of physical compensation (i.e., a free night's stay) are more likely to obtain greater purchase intentions from new potential guests that are looking for online information to assist them in their decision making processes for an upcoming trip. One possible explanation of the effect of distributive justice is that, when the manager offers physical compensation, like a free night's stay, future potential guests are more likely to believe that a possible situation of dissatisfaction will be taken into consideration. If the hotel is investing resources to compensate unsatisfied guests, then it appears to be safer to opt for the hotel that will make sure the situation will not happen again. If the propositions of this research can be supported, interesting implications can be applied in the context of digital marketing, particularly in online reputation management. This finding could indicate that offering compensation for service failure can represent a valid strategy to mitigate the effects of a negative online review. Potential guests that read both, the review and the manager's reply, will be more inclined to choose those hotels that offer physical compensation to their unsatisfied guests, than those hotels that address the issue by offering a timely explanation or sincere apology for the inconvenience. Additionally, if procedural and interactional justice also reported positive effects on purchase intention, this suggests that the quality of the interpersonal treatment and fairness of the procedure are important to the service recovery strategy in the online context. These findings will be consistent with previous research in a traditional physical context. Authors such as Osringer, Valentini & Angelis, (2010), identified that the distributive justice dimension had a greater effect on satisfaction with complaint handling (SATCOM).

The expected results for this research will also have implications for service managers in general and hotel managers in particular, who are interested in implementing an online strategy for service recovery efforts. We call for research that provides insights into the propositions of this paper, as managers can obtain interesting insights that might help them to design specific answer policies to negative online reviews. It is recommended that hotel managers should fully understand the different justice dimensions, specifically, the distributive component. Hotels can consider the compensation strategies that can be offered by managers when they answer a negative online review, as hotels that do not consider this topic in their strategy can suffer an important loss of potential new customers, and sales.

## Conclusions and Future Research

The topic of online reviews is now crucial for many companies, especially in the tourism industry. Future studies can extend this research taking into consideration the use of qualitative methods to obtain important insights of how potential new guests perceive the different responses from management as a service recovery effort in the online context. Because management responses to online reviews are a new phenomenon that is increasing in importance and impact, qualitative insights may be helpful to understand customers' reactions to different answers. Another avenue for future research may be to determine variables that can mediate the relationship between perceived justice and purchase intention in online reviews. For example, perceived usefulness and ease of use, are two popular factors that are considered in the literature on motivations, when studying why people use technology (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989). It may be interesting to analyse whether new customers' perceptions on these variables can affect how they rate the managerial response to a negative online review. Additionally, researchers that are interested in the topic may address the purchase intention effect when dealing with the interaction between the three justice dimensions in the same managerial response. Finally, it can be interesting to analyse the differences in a similar study but considering non-luxury hotels, to determine whether the type of purchase (high involvement vs. low involvement) has an impact on how customers perceive managerial responses to negative online reviews.

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