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Customer forgiveness following service failures

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Recent research has focused on the conditions under which customers will forgive firms for their misdeeds. Within this context, it is important to recognize that some service failures represent minor issues that occur within routine customer–firm exchange relationships, while others represent severe issues that occur within well-established customer–firm communal relationships. We propose that the construct of 'customer forgiveness' becomes more relevant when there is a (1) relational norm violation within a strong customer–firm relationship; (2) severe service failure; (3) failed recovery (double deviation); and (4) a belief that the firm was trying to take advantage of the customer (negative inferred firm motives). Building on these ideas, we outline an integrative model of customer forgiveness in the wake of service failures.

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Imagine two customers at an upscale restaurant. A first-time customer orders hot soup. When the food is delivered, the soup is cold. The customer asks the waiter to bring a new bowl of hot soup and the waiter does so promptly. The second customer, a long-time patron, also orders hot soup. When the food is delivered, the soup is cold and the waiter spills some soup on the customer. When the customer asks the waiter to bring a new bowl of soup and a towel, the waiter reluctantly agrees. After 30 min, the waiter returns with a lukewarm bowl of soup and a dirty dishrag and says 'I hope you're happy. This is coming out of my tip jar.'

Which customer is more likely to forgive the restaurant? Intuitively, the answer seems obvious: the first customer, as the service failure was not severe and the restaurant recovered quickly. While the first customer *is* more likely to be *satisfied*, we argue the second customer is more likely to engage in a process that could eventually lead to *forgiveness*. This assertion underscores a central point of this paper: customer forgiveness is a process that is more relevant under certain, well-specified conditions. A first-time customer who receives cold soup may be dissatisfied, but as long as this situation is quickly resolved, a high level of anger and desire for revenge seem unlikely. Here, forgiveness is not especially relevant. In contrast, a long-time customer who receives cold soup, a soup stain on her shirt, and a terrible recovery, is likely to experience extreme anger and a desire for revenge. In this situation, forgiveness *is* relevant; given enough time and under the right conditions, the customer may start forgiving. Restated, service failures do not, *ipso facto*, involve the customer forgiveness process. At a minimum, for customer forgiveness to be relevant, there must exist a strong customer–firm relationship. Customer forgiveness then becomes increasingly relevant as the service failure, recovery, and inferred firm motives become more negative.

To highlight when customer forgiveness is a relevant process following service failures, we distinguish between: a) routine service failures involving simple dissatisfaction and straightforward recoveries, and b) more severe failures involving highly negative cognitions and emotions that make customer forgiveness a *relevant process*. In the former case, customers are likely to have a weak relationship with the firm, view it as more of an exchange relationship, and display a response more akin to 'first impressions.' If those first impressions are unfavorable, a customer may simply migrate to greener pastures (exit). In the latter case, customers are likely to have a strong relationship with the firm, and must weigh the current infraction against the benefits they have received (and may expect to receive) in the relationship, making forgiveness a more relevant process. To make a case for this line of reasoning, we first define forgiveness and consider when forgiveness is a more or less relevant process in customer–firm interactions. We then review foundational service failure models and articulate an integrative model of customer forgiveness in the wake of service failures.

Defining customer forgiveness

Forgiveness has been subject to a range of definitions [1••]. What many definitions have in common are reduced anger and obsession with the offender or offense, a willingness to foreswear revenge, and enhanced compassion and generosity toward the offender [2–4]. Similarly, we define customer forgiveness as *customers' internal act of* *relinquishing anger and the desire to seek revenge against a firm that has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm* [1••].

Unique aspects of customer forgiveness

Given its many interpersonal [4–7] and psychological benefits [8–10], consumer researchers have started to investigate forgiveness following service failures [11–15•]. While customer forgiveness is worthy of study, it is important to recognize differences between the context in which theories of forgiveness have developed and the context characterizing service failures. First, rather than occurring among family members, friends, or coworkers [16], service failures occur between a firm and a customer, who may sometimes have no strong relationship. Second, service failures occur when the service delivery is below a customer's expectations, and many of these situations can be quite minor. This suggests that not all service failures necessitate forgiveness.

When is forgiveness relevant in customer–firm interactions?

As noted, forgiveness involves reduced anger and revenge, and increased thoughts of reconciliation and goodwill. If anger and desire for revenge are initially low, due to a minor service failure, a weak relationship, or a positive recovery, forgiveness is arguably moot. Accordingly, we propose that *forgiveness theories apply to customer-firm interactions when firms have caused significant psychological or physical harm—by showing self-serving motives, for instance—in the context of a valued relationship*. This assertion identifies four conditions that contribute to a high level of anger and desire for revenge and thus determine when forgiveness is relevant (Table 1). As we explain, these conditions operate as a 'cascading process' with contextual variables and aspects of the service failure impacting anger and desire for revenge via the key cognition of perceived negative motives.

Condition 1.
Relational Norm Violation (and Betrayal) within a Strong Relationship.

Service failures are especially problematic when they occur in the context of strong relationships that satisfy important needs (e.g., identity or self-esteem). Indeed, following a service failure, a firm's best customers can become its worst enemies (i.e., the 'love becomes hate effect'; [13•,17,18]). In part, this is because service failures make customers who have closer relationships with firms feel more betrayed [19,20•,21•], and this feeling of betrayal leads them to engage more vividly in anti-corporation actions [22]. In this way, norm violations can be perceived as unfair actions, which motivate revenge and impede forgiveness [23,24]. Customers who have a close relationship with a firm may also be motivated to maintain the relationship [13•], whereas customers approaching the interaction from an exchange perspective may simply move on to another service provider. In this case, customers may remain indifferent to the firm causing the service failure. In sum, the stronger the customer–firm relationship is, the more customers will feel betrayed after a service failure, and the more relevant customer forgiveness becomes [16].

Condition 2.
Severe Service Failure.

A second factor that determines whether forgiveness is relevant is the severity of (i.e., loss associated with) the service failure. Simply stated, the more severe a failure, the more customers will infer that a firm probably had a malicious intent, be angry, and want revenge, believing the firm should have prevented such a situation [25,26••]. Accordingly, severe service failures give rise to the

Table 1

Conditions determining the relevance of foundational and forgiveness theories in explaining customer responses to service failures and double deviations.

Condition (Dimension)	Relevant theoretical framework	
	Foundational service failure theories	Forgiveness theories
Strength of Customer-Firm Relationship (Condition 1)	Weak	Strong
Nature of Customer-Firm Relationship (Condition 1)	Exchange	Communal
Nature of Violation (Condition 1)	Service Expectation	Relational Norm
Severity of Service Failure (Condition 2)	Low	High
Type of Deviation (Condition 3)	Single Deviation	Double Deviation
Inferred Firm Motives (Condition 4)	Mildly Negative	Highly Negative

**Note*: As noted in the text, the dichotomous 'conditions' shown here are more accurately conceived of as anchors along a continuous dimension. For example, the strength of a customer–firm relationship can vary from weak to strong, and as it moves toward a stronger relationship, a forgiveness framework becomes more relevant. At a minimum, for customer forgiveness to be relevant, condition 1 must be met (i.e., there is a relational norm violation in the context of a strong, pre-existing, communal relationship). Customer forgiveness becomes even more relevant as the remaining conditions are met.

cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes that make forgiveness relevant.

Condition 3.
Double Deviation.

Another factor that increases the relevance of customer forgiveness is the presence of a double deviation (i.e., a service failure followed by a failed recovery). For example, one study found that 96% of the cases of online revenge are made after a double deviation [18]. Another study finds that rage is much more likely after the second and even the third service failure episode [26••,27•]. Because double deviations are likely to generate anger and a desire for revenge, forgiveness becomes a more relevant process following double deviations.

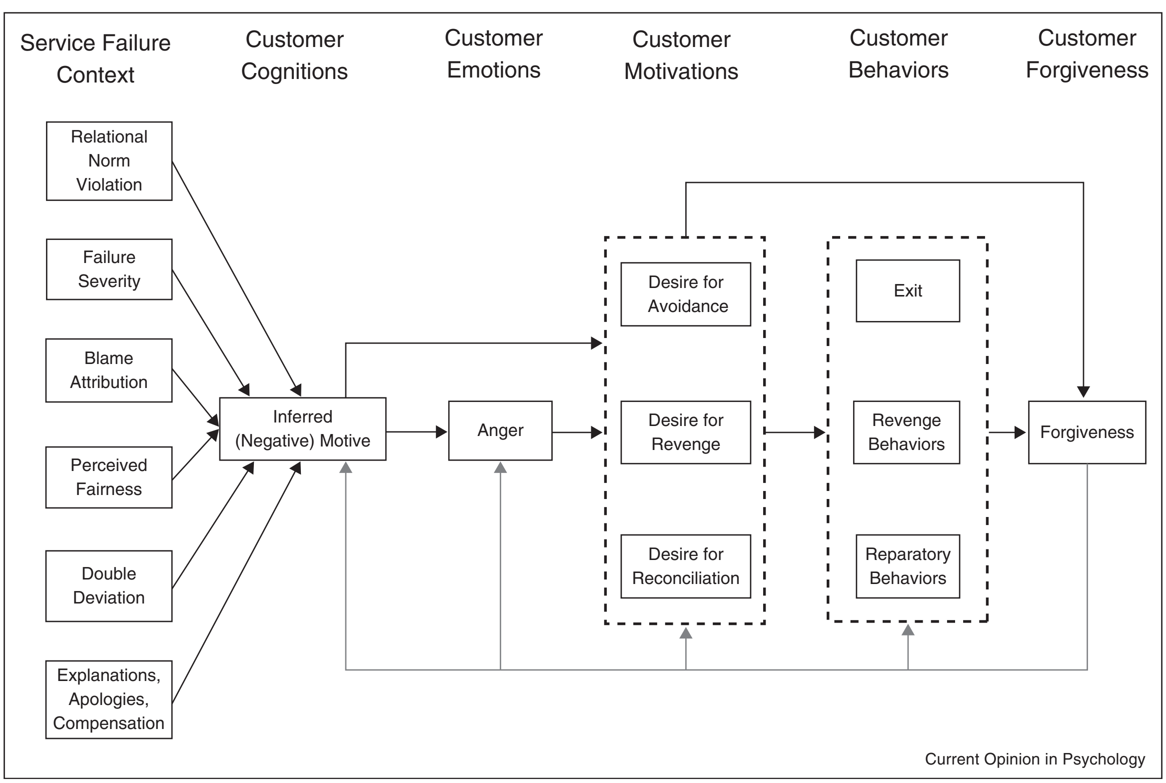
Condition 4.
Inferred Negative Motives.

A final condition that makes forgiveness more relevant is the belief that a firm tried to take advantage of a customer, a construct we call 'inferred negative motives.' For example, the waiter who claims that the compensation is coming out of his tip jar is communicating highly self-interested motives that might lead the customer to believe the firm has negative motives and experience anger as a result. Indeed, inferred negative motives represent a key mediator of failure severity, and the most proximal cognition leading to anger and a desire for revenge [25,26••]. In sum, an inference of negative motives makes it more likely that anger and revenge will be triggered, making forgiveness a relevant process.

Foundational theories

Before outlining our model of customer forgiveness, it is useful to consider foundational service failure theories which can explain how customers respond to less severe failures (characterized by low levels of the four conditions just noted). Indeed, when a service falls below customers' expectations, customers often engage in several actions that have no bearing on forgiveness. For example, customers may simply find another service provider (exit), ask for a resolution and reparation (voice), or remain 'silent' (loyal to a firm) [28,29]. As consumers experience a service failure, they also assess the causes of the failure (attribution) and how fairly they were treated (justice) [30,31•]. This basic recovery process is the dominant paradigm in the literature [32,33], and should be the first path researchers consider before referring to 'newer' forgiveness theories. This framework also serves as a foundation for our integrative model of customer forgiveness, as we explain next.

Figure 1



Customer forgiveness model.

Integrative customer forgiveness model

Expanding on our recent work in this area [25,26••], Figure 1 provides a comprehensive model of customer forgiveness following service failures (see also Table 2 for definitions and references for measurements). The model assumes that relational norm violations, severe failures, blame, (un)fair treatment, double deviations, and a lack of explanations, apologies, and compensation encourage customers to infer the firm has negative motives. Inferring negative motives, in turn, increases anger, which in turn influences three forgiveness-relevant motivations [2–4,6], including desires for avoidance, revenge, and reconciliation. Beyond this indirect 'hot/emotional' route through anger, inferred negative motives have a direct 'cool/rational' route to the desires. These desires subsequently influence the likelihood of three forgiveness-relevant behaviors, which in turn impact the overall level of forgiveness. Finally, forgiveness at a given point in time feeds back into subsequent cognitions, emotions, motivations, and behaviors [18]. These feedback loops emphasize the importance of time for the forgiveness process to take place.

Portions of this model that have been tested have received convincing support. For example, a recent survey of customers who had complained about a service failure with a Canadian airline supports the following multi-stage sequence: contextual variables (e.g., severity, justice, blame) → inferred motives → anger → desire for revenge → revenge behaviors [26••]. In a subsequent study [26••], participants imagined a failed recovery at an electronics store. Results revealed higher desire for revenge than reconciliation in the absence of an apology or compensation, equal levels of the two desires when either an apology or compensation was offered, and higher desire for reconciliation than revenge when an apology and compensation were combined. Structural equation modeling further supported core aspects of our integrative model of customer forgiveness, though not all constructs in our current model were assessed in the earlier study (Figure 2).

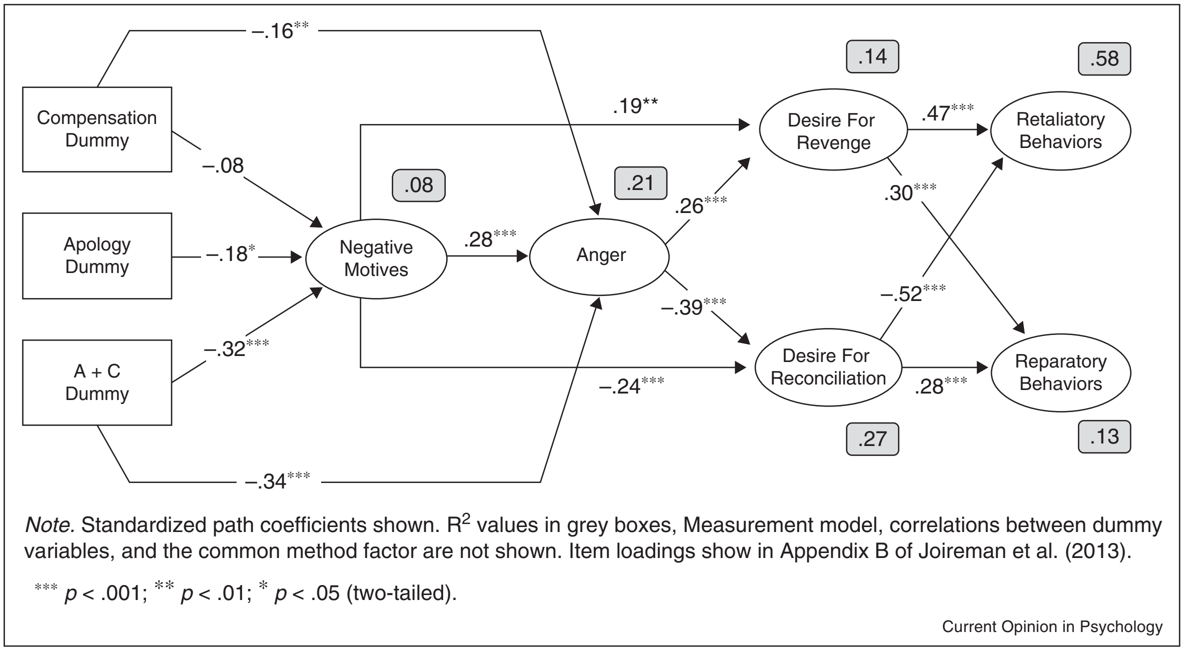
Another important aspect of our model focuses on the connection between a customer's behaviors and their eventual level of forgiveness. For example, a customer's reparation seeking behaviors can lead to forgiveness by reducing the injustice gap [34–39], helping overcome in-group/out-group barriers that sometimes exist among disputing parties [40,41], and ruling out worst-case (sinister) attributions about the other firm's motives [1••,42,43]. In contrast, avoidance behaviors will likely reduce

Table 2

Definitions for the key constructs of the forgiveness process.

Concept	Definition	Measurement
Relational norm violation (betrayal)	A customer's belief that a firm has intentionally violated what is normative in the context of their relationship.	Grégoire *et al*. (2009)
Failure severity	Extent to which an individual believes the service failure caused inconvenience and aggravation.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Blame	Degree to which customers perceive a firm to be accountable for the causation of a failed recovery.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Perceived fairness	A perception composed of three judgments related to the appropriateness of a firm's actions: distributive (outcomes), procedural (procedures and policies) and interactional (interpersonal treatment).	Grégoire *et al*. (2010)
Double deviation	The extent to which a service failure is followed by a failed recovery.	Grégoire *et al*. (2009)
Inferred motives	Extent to which customer believes a firm tried to maximize its own interests and take advantage of the customer.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Anger	A strong emotion that involves an impulse to respond and react toward the source of the anger.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Desire for avoidance	Extent to which a customer wants to withdraw himself or herself from any interactions with the firm.	Grégoire *et al*. (2009)
Desire for revenge	Extent to which a customer wants to punish and cause harm to a firm for the harm it has caused. This desire has been mostly studied after a failed recovery.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Desire for reconciliation	Extent to which a customer is willing to accept a firm's failure and extend acts of goodwill in the hope of maintaining his or her relationship with the firm.	Joireman *et al*. (2013)
Exit	A customer's action to leave a firm for another one.	Grégoire and Fisher (2008)
Revenge behaviors	Negative behaviors that aim to punish and cause inconvenience to a firm for the harm it has caused, such as negative word-of-mouth, private vindictive complaining and third-party complaining for negative publicity.	Grégoire and Fisher (2008)
Reparatory behaviors	Constructive behaviors that aim to seek redress and resolve the problem caused by a firm, such as problem-solving complaining and third-party complaining for dispute resolution.	Grégoire and Fisher (2008)
Forgiveness	A customer's internal act of relinquishing anger and the desire to seek revenge against a firm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm.	Aquino *et al*. (2006)

Figure 2



Structural equation model testing process model of responses to double deviations (Joireman *et al*., 2013; Study 3).
Note. Standardized path coefficients shown. R^2 values in grey boxes. Measurement model, correlations between dummy variables, and the common method factor are not shown. Item loadings shown in Appendix B of Joireman *et al*. (2013).
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

forgiveness, because avoidance precludes the reparatory behaviors that can address the injustice gap and create the empathy that minimizes sinister attributions that sustain anger.

Finally, at least two additional and perhaps less obvious aspects of the model deserve mention. First, although a desire for revenge often leads to revenge behaviors, other factors may moderate that desire, such as having insufficient power to execute retaliation or prevent counter-retaliation [2,3], or if justice has been served before one has the chance to retaliate [18,26••,37]. Second, and less obvious perhaps, is the effect retaliatory behaviors have on customers' forgiveness of the firms that failed them. Indeed, retaliatory behaviors may make forgiveness *more* likely rather than less likely, because retaliation offers the victim an opportunity for customers to get justice [18,44], which in turn can reduce the 'injustice gap' that is known to interfere with forgiveness [37]. In summary, retaliation can (perhaps counterintuitively) lead to a sense of justice, which then leads to forgiveness.

Conclusion

Customer forgiveness is gaining increased attention in the service failure literature. We have argued that customer forgiveness becomes an increasingly relevant construct when customers experience a relational norm violation in the context of a strong customer–firm relationship, a severe service failure, a failed recovery, and infer that the company has nefarious motives. Under these conditions anger and desires for avoidance and revenge are high, desire for reconciliation is low, and forgiveness becomes an especially relevant focus of investigation.

Conflict of interest

Nothing declared.

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Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- • of special interest
- •• of outstanding interest

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