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The Effect of Service Failure Severity on Brand Forgiveness: The Moderating Role of Interpersonal Attachment Styles and Thinking Styles

Abstract

Purpose: The objective of this study was to examine the effect of service failure severity on brand forgiveness and to investigate the moderating effects of interpersonal attachment styles and thinking styles on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship.

Design/methodology/approach: We used retrospective experience sampling to collect the data, and structural equation modeling (AMOS 24) to analyze 570 responses collected via an online survey.

Findings: The current study shows that the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship is not always negative since different conditions may amplify or weaken it. Specifically, a secure attachment style and holistic thinking weaken the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness, whereas an anxious attachment style and analytic thinking negatively amplify the relationship. An avoidance attachment style did not appear to play a role.

Implications: Our research should help hotels fine-tune their segmentation, targeting, and positioning efforts, and may also help in implementing more focused recovery strategies

Originality/value: This study provides insights into the role of psychological traits in amplifying/reducing the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness, thus showing the importance of developing the psychological profiles of customers beyond demographic profiling. The emotional and cognitive typologies of consumers are key to understanding the dependence of forgiveness on service failure severity.

Keywords: interpersonal attachment styles, thinking styles, hospitality, service, brand forgiveness, service failure

Introduction

Service failures have always been endemic to the hotel industry (Akarsu et al., 2022), partly due to the frequent customer–employee interaction hospitality involves (Koc, 2019), which makes service failures inevitable and unavoidable (Wang et al., 2021), leading to tangible losses (e.g., declining revenues) and severe damage to hotels’ intangible assets (e.g., reputation; Akarsu et al., 2022). Prior research has shown that service failure severity, which reflects the perceived significance of the failure and its triggered aggravation, is a critical factor in customers’ perceptions of service failure (El-Manstrly et al., 2021). Although the damaging effect of service failure severity for firms and consumers is well documented (Koc, 2019), two significant research gaps remain unaddressed.

First, many of the current studies have focused on examining service failure severity in terms of customer complaints (e.g., Lee et al., 2021), service recovery strategies (e.g., Huang et al. 2020), and customer satisfaction and emotions (e.g., Harrison-Walker, 2019). However, research investigating service failure severity in the context of general branding (Sarkar et al., 2021), and brand forgiveness in particular (Hur & Jang, 2019), is very limited. Brand relationships, like interpersonal relationships, are changeable and fragile, and nearly all service failures diminish the value of a hotel brand (Xie & Heung, 2012). In such instances, the brand depends on customers forgiving failures and transgressions, which reflects palliative and supportive behavior (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). This aligns with the interpersonal relationship literature suggesting that forgiveness is a psychological mechanism people tend to use to regulate negative emotions and cope with hurt and resentment following interpersonal transgressions (Wade et al., 2018). Despite this, the effect of service failure severity on brand forgiveness has rarely been investigated.

Second, previous studies have been instrumental in enhancing our understanding of *how* brand forgiveness is elicited (e.g., Hur & Jang, 2019; Yuan et al., 2020), but little attention has been paid to the question of *when* brand forgiveness occurs (i.e., why some consumers are more forgiving than others). This issue is critical because the concept of brand forgiveness has been borrowed from the psychology domain (Christodoulides et al., 2021), where it has been shown to vary considerably among individuals due to personal characteristics (Hong et al., 2020; Wade et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the extant literature on brand forgiveness has overlooked the role of consumer-related factors in consumers' forgiveness of a brand following severe service failures.

In this regard, psychology research has shown that emotional factors are central in explaining why some individuals are more (or less) forgiving of offensive situations (e.g., Lawler-Row et al., 2006), but recent research has emphasized the importance of cognitive factors (e.g., Hong et al., 2020). These two views indicate that gaining a comprehensive understanding of why consumers are more (or less) forgiving of severe service failures necessitates considering both emotional and cognitive consumer-related factors.

Researchers adopting the emotional perspective have pointed out that conflict situations involve emotionally charged social encounters, and the ability to forgive in such encounters depends largely on emotional factors known as interpersonal attachment styles (e.g., Wade et al., 2018). These styles, which are shaped by social experiences with caregivers in early childhood, persist in influencing adult emotional behaviors in social interactions, helping to explain the differences between individuals in dealing with stressful relationships according to their previous attachment experiences (e.g., Verbeke et al., 2020). Specifically, the interpersonal relationship literature has shown that people with a *secure attachment style* generally deal with interpersonal transgressions in constructive ways. However, those with an *anxious* or *avoidant attachment style*

are less forgiving of past betrayals and tend to adopt destructive conflict-resolution strategies (Bonache et al., 2019). Extending this logic to the current study, we assumed that, when encountering similar service failures, secure customers would collaborate with hotels to constructively resolve conflict, thus facilitating forgiveness of the brand, whereas anxious or avoidant consumers would employ destructive coping mechanisms, thus impeding forgiveness of the brand.

Researchers taking a cognitive perspective have shown that conflict situations require intellectual engagement with transgressions over time, meaning that the ability to forgive offenders depends on the cognitive (holistic vs. analytic) thinking styles that victims employ (e.g., Hong et al., 2020). Specifically, holistic thinkers rely less on internal object-based explanations and more on external context-based explanations (Monga & John, 2008). In contrast, analytic thinkers tend to ignore external contextual factors and consider the object/person as the cause of an event (Choi et al., 2007). Thus, for the same service failure, consumers differ in their perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of its impact due to their different thinking styles, which in turn influence their levels of forgiveness. Nonetheless, the role of interpersonal attachment and thinking styles in affecting the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship remains anecdotal due to the absence of empirical supporting evidence.

Therefore, the twofold purpose of this study was to examine the direct impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness, and to investigate the potential moderating role of interpersonal attachment styles and thinking styles in the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship. This investigation contributes to the literature in several ways. First, our findings provide additional evidence of the significantly negative effect of service failure severity on brand forgiveness (Hur & Jang, 2019; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012), which is an underresearched topic.

Second, by examining the moderating role of *cognitive* (i.e., thinking styles), and *emotional* factors (i.e., interpersonal attachment styles) on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship, our research provides some answers to the question of *when* brand forgiveness is achieved, thus expanding the very limited studies that have examined consumers’ sociodemographic (Hur & Jang, 2019) or psychological factors (Babin et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2020). Third, prior branding research has shown variations in consumers’ responses to different positive/negative brand-related outcomes (e.g., anti-brand actions) due to their attachment styles (e.g., Kordrostami & Kordrostami, 2019) and thinking styles (e.g., Hur et al., 2020). However, brand forgiveness, as an outcome, has been ignored, despite its central role in influencing brand betrayal, avoidance, retaliation (Rasouli et al., 2022), repurchase intentions (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015), and private and public complaining (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). From a practical perspective, our research should help hotels fine-tune their segmentation, targeting, and positioning efforts, and may also help in implementing more focused recovery strategies.

Brand Forgiveness

The interpersonal relationship literature suggests that forgiveness is a complex process that involves conquering negative feelings, thoughts, and behavior and acting with goodwill toward the offender (Fincham & Beach, 2013). It reflects an individual choice, an intentional conscious effort (Hall & Fincham, 2005), and has three facets: cognition, affect, and behavior (Wade et al., 2008). Forgiveness is a process that entails (1) reducing negative feelings (e.g., anger), thoughts (e.g., thoughts of revenge), and behaviors (e.g., avoiding places that prompt memories) about the offender, and (2) increasing positive feelings (e.g., compassion toward the offender), thoughts (e.g., perspective taking), and behaviors (e.g., discussing the offense with the offender).

Parallel to forgiving, consumers exhibiting brand forgiveness decrease retaliation, increase goodwill toward the focal brand, and forgo sanctions or revenge in response to technical or moral brand failures (Hassey, 2019). Nonetheless, the majority of researchers have conceptualized brand forgiveness as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Hur & Jang, 2019; Ma et al., 2020) without capturing these three elements. A recent study by Christodoulides et al. (2021, p. 5) defined *brand forgiveness* as “the consumer’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral response to a brand’s perceived wrongdoing, with the aim of maintaining a constructive relationship with the brand.” Accordingly, the authors conceptualized brand forgiveness as a multidimensional construct that consists of three elements: the cognitive, entailing “consumer evaluations and thoughts following negative experiences with a brand”; the affective, reflecting “feelings of betrayal, disappointment, and loss of faith in the brand”; and the behavioral, encompassing consumers’ behavioral intentions, suggesting that unforgiveness is associated with switching behavior (Christodoulides et al., 2021, p.5). This conceptualization, which we adopted in the current research, mirrors that of interpersonal forgiveness by including three facets of forgiveness.

Interpersonal Attachment Styles

We based the current study on the work of Hazan and Shaver (1987), which conceptualized interpersonal attachment styles as secure, anxious, or avoidant. A *secure attachment style*, which reflects a positive model of the self and others, is defined as a person’s ability to become emotionally close to others and to be comfortable relying on them and supporting them (Paquette et al., 2020). Secure individuals who consider others trustworthy, helpful, and dependable are able to reduce distress and remove obstacles by turning to others, thus ensuring high levels of attachment, relationship quality, and commitment (Dijkstra et al., 2017). They are also likely to

downplay others' temporary lack of availability or responsiveness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018), since they adopt constructive conflict resolution strategies (Bonache et al., 2019).

An *anxious attachment style*, which reflects a negative model of the self and a positive model of others, involves “a fear of rejection or abandonment, an excessive need for approval from others, and distress when one’s partner is unavailable or unresponsive” (Paquette et al., 2020, p.623). Anxious individuals tend to intensify distress and vulnerability (Mikulincer et al., 2011) and escalate conflict in relationships (Ricco & Sierra, 2017). However, an *avoidant attachment style*, which reflects a positive model of the self and a negative model of others, involves a fear of reliance and interpersonal closeness, an excessive need for self-dependence, and a reluctance to self-disclose (Paquette et al., 2020). Avoidant individuals distrust others’ goodwill, striving to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance, which leads them to minimize distress and avoid seeking support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018). Unlike secure individuals, avoidant and anxious individuals tend to adopt destructive conflict-resolution strategies (Bonache et al., 2019).

Thinking Styles: Holistic versus Analytic Thinking

Holistic thinking is “an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships,” whereas *analytic thinking* refers to “detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object’s behavior” (Nisbett et al., 2001, p. 293). Holistic thinkers pay more attention to the relationship between the object and its context (i.e., seeing the whole picture), assign causality of an event to the interactions between the focal object and external contextual conditions, and feel comfortable with contradictions (i.e., hold non-extreme attitudes and pursue compromise; Choi et al., 2007; Hur et

al., 2020). In contrast, analytic thinkers consider the object detached from its context (i.e., emphasizing individual attributes of the object), ignore external contextual factors, consider the object to be the cause of an event (i.e., making personal dispositional attributions), and are less tolerant of contradictions (Allman et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2007).

Hypotheses Development and Suggested Model

Service Failure Severity → Brand Forgiveness

The highly intangible nature of hotel services makes it hard to “try before you buy” since many elements of the service cannot be evaluated before check-in (Sparks & Browning, 2010, p. 802). Additionally, intense human involvement in service processes and delivery leads to variations in performance (Guchait et al., 2019), which customers view as inequity (Hwang & Mattila, 2020), creating negative experiences that prompt negative customer emotions (Akarsu et al., 2022). From an appraisal theory perspective, the cognitive assessment of service failure severity may activate various negative emotions, such as rage (Wang & Zhang, 2018), annoyance, irritation (Baker & Kim, 2018), and feelings of betrayal (Tsai et al., 2014). Hence, when customers have extreme levels of negative emotions, they experience rage (i.e., extreme anger and frustration), prompting their overt action (Wang & Zhang, 2018). Since service failure severity reduces customers’ positive emotions of joy and happiness, fueling sentimental evaluations of service quality (Wen & Chi, 2013), we proposed that:

Hypothesis (H) 1: *Service failure severity has a negative effect on brand forgiveness.*

Moderating Effects of Interpersonal Attachment Styles

Secure Interpersonal Attachment

Secure people employ cooperative forms of conflict resolution, such as collaboration and compromise (LaValley & Guerrero, 2012), demonstrate greater ability to constructively resolve conflicts (Dijkstra et al., 2017), have high concern for the self and others, and make efforts to maximize both parties' outcomes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018). Hence, when offended, they control their anger, do not express intense hostility, and manage conflicts constructively (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Drawing on interpersonal relationship literature, we assumed that when secure customers encounter severe service failures, they will collaborate with hotels to constructively resolve conflict, given that they understand and control their anger without expressing intense hostility. For example, when secure customers are allocated to a lower class of room than they expect, rather than escalating the situation, they may approach the manager to ask why the problem occurred, what factors caused it, and how it can be solved, given that they recognize others' perspectives and have more trust in and commitment to the brand than insecure customers (Verbeke et al., 2020).

This constructive way of managing conflicts, which facilitates a willingness to continue the relationship (e.g., Lawler-Row et al., 2006), tends to enhance customers' transformational forgiveness process (i.e., preventing destructive interpersonal responses and promoting positive ones). Evidence from the hospitality literature suggests that consumers' engagement with a service provider lessens the adverse outcomes of service failures (So et al., 2021). Furthermore, the branding literature has shown that secure consumers are less likely to seek revenge against the brand (Kordrostami & Kordrostami, 2019), since they believe that the firm has good intentions

and therefore do not blame the brand (Whelan & Dawar, 2016). Hence, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: A secure interpersonal attachment style weakens the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.

Anxious Interpersonal Attachment

Anxious individuals have difficulty dealing with conflict and exhibit destructive communication patterns (Bonache et al., 2019) because they view conflicts in threatening terms, are less affectionate during conflicts, do not actively seek compromise, and intensify the negative consequences of conflicts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018). They tend to display whining, nagging, aggressive, and hostile behavior during conflicts because they have heightened access to negative memories (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007) and longer recovery periods compared to secure individuals (Lawler-Row et al., 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that an anxious style does not correlate with forgiving to preserve a relationship (Belicki et al., 2020; Hirst et al., 2019).

Given the characteristics of anxious individuals, we assumed that when encountering a severe service failure, such as being allocated a lower class of room than they expected, anxious customers, instead of approaching the hotel manager for an explanation, would approach the manager with aggression, hostility, and complaint, thus escalating the problem without resolving the conflict. As noted by Kimmes and Durtschi (2016), when anxious individuals engage in a conflict, the situation worsens because they tend to have a negatively biased view of others' behaviors and, instead of seeking alternatives to their beliefs, seek confirmation. Given that they have difficulties regulating their emotions, they may ruminate excessively and exaggerate the potential negative consequences of not, for example, having the room they expect (e.g., Burnette et al., 2009). This, in turn, may increase negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the hotel

and reduce positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, thus impeding the forgiveness process. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: *An anxious interpersonal attachment style strengthens the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.*

Avoidant Interpersonal Attachment

The avoidant style is rooted in an individual's distrust of others' goodwill; hence, the individual keeps their behavioral and emotional distance to reduce the possibility of attachment injury (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). In conflict situations, avoidant individuals tend to use attachment-system deactivation, which entails distancing themselves from hurtful events, handling distress alone, and suppressing stressful related thoughts and emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018), thus hindering the forgiveness process (Burnette et al., 2009). Additionally, avoidant individuals have higher expectations of relationship failure and less commitment to relationships (Tran & Simpson, 2009), which further results in reduced forgiveness (Hirst et al., 2019).

Extending these characteristics to the current research, we assumed that when avoidant customers experience a service failure, such as rude employee behavior, they may neither seek an explanation from the hotel manager nor engage in aggressive, hostile behavior but may try to minimize the stress of the situation by avoiding interaction with the hotel manager, given their severe lack of trust in and commitment to the brand (Verbeke et al., 2020). Such destructive strategies, driven by low levels of empathy toward the hotel, may act as barriers to the forgiveness process. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: *An avoidant interpersonal attachment style strengthens the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.*

The Moderating Effects of Thinking Styles

Analytic thinkers view an individual behavior, event, or object as trait caused, whereas holistic thinkers view it as a combination of trait caused (by a person) and situation caused (Norenzayan et al., 1999). Additionally, holistic thinkers, more often than analytic thinkers, attribute known outcomes to fate (Norenzayan & Lee, 2010). In business contexts, Chang (2018) found that analytic thinkers relied more on personality trait information when evaluating athlete endorsers and endorsed brands. In contrast, holistic thinkers considered the connectedness between objects (i.e., the tarnished athlete endorser) and background (i.e., prior attitudes toward the endorsed brand) and attempted to reconcile contradictory information about the object (i.e., tarnished athlete endorser) and the background (i.e., good brand quality) in a dialectic way to reach a compromise. Similarly, Monga and John (2008) found that, when exposed to brand-related adverse events, analytic thinkers were likely to revise their brand evaluations negatively, unlike holistic thinkers, who diverted blame from the focal brand based on external context-based factors.

Following this logic, we assumed that when encountering the same service failure, holistic thinkers would not attribute it solely to the hotel but to other situational factors, whereas analytic thinkers would attribute it solely to the hotel brand. For example, a delayed check-in might be attributed by holistic thinkers to other customers not leaving their rooms on time. Alternatively, analytic thinkers would attribute it solely to careless and lazy hotel staff not doing their jobs properly (e.g., cleaning the room and making it available on time). Additionally, holistic thinkers expect changes and inconsistencies in their environment and are less surprised by others' behavior, whereas analytic thinkers expect phenomena to remain stable (Nisbett et al., 2001). Therefore, unlike analytic thinkers, holistic thinkers tend to be more tolerant of inconsistent service delivery because they expect it, thus reducing the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness:

H5: *A holistic thinking style weakens the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.*

H5: *An analytic thinking style strengthens the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.*

Research Methodology

The current research adopted retrospective experience sampling to collect the data. This method has been successfully applied in service failure situations in the service industry (e.g., Harrison-Walker, 2019) and, in particular, in the hospitality industry (e.g., Rasouli et al., 2022). The method involves asking participants to describe in detail service failures that they have personally experienced with hotels. Thinking and writing in detail about a service failure in the past generally takes 5–10 minutes of reflection; hence, participants' thoughts, emotions, and attitudes regarding incidents will influence their answers to the questionnaire (Harrison-Walker, 2019). Retrospective experience elicits participants' responses to real-life situations and relies less on the participants' role-playing and imagination, which tend to be quite artificial (Chatterjee, 2018).

Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

A marketing research firm was hired to collect the data from its UK online panel using Qualtrics. The company's database has a population of 93702 panellists, who were then filtered by the research firm based on whether they travelled in the past 12 months. The filtering process was possible because the research firm has an updated profile of its panellists. Those who travelled in the past 12 months, which consisted of 11381 (12% of the total panellists) became the sampling frame of the current research. The marketing research firm started the sampling by sending an email invitation to 1000 panellists out of 11381 qualified panellists. These panellists were chosen

randomly by the system. The system sent an automatic reminder to the panellists after 24 hours. Based on the panellists' complete responses to both the email invitation and the reminder, the firm then calculated how many invitations it should send again to newly and randomly chosen panellists. This process was repeated and the final number of sent invitations was 1936, and the number of those who accepted the invitation was 1449, which is a response rate of 75%.

The survey started with the following definition of service failure:

Service failure refers to customer dissatisfaction with the delivered service because its performance is below his/her expectations, such as rude employee behavior, unavailable hotel rooms, poor room quality, cleanliness issues, waiting too long at check-in, noise distractions, poor-quality food, additional charges, and unavailable services during the stay.

The definition was then followed by a filter question: "Did you experience any such failures with a hotel you visited during the past three months?"

We selected a period of three months to avoid memory-related bias (Chatterjee, 2018). We asked those who answered "Yes" to recall their thoughts and feelings at that time by answering the following question: "Please describe the incident in detail below so that any reader can understand the pain you experienced because of the hotel's behavior."

Next, we asked participants to assess their levels of agreement with a set of statements related to the study's key variables. Of the 1,449 participants, 677 stated that they experienced service failures. We deleted 107 responses due to biases (i.e., a short time to complete the survey or similar answers to all the items), leading to 570 usable responses. Of the total respondents, 42% were male and 58% were female. Regarding income, 24.8% earned less than £25,000, 31.4% earned £25,000–35,000, 21.4% earned £35,001–45,000, 11% earned £45,001–55,000, and 12.4% earned more than £55,000.

Measures

We used a four-item scale to assess service failure severity (Roschk & Kaiser, 2013), and a nine-item scale developed by Christodoulides et al. (2021) to assess brand forgiveness. We measured attachment style using items borrowed from Simpson (1990): secure (5 items), avoidant (4 items), and anxious (4 items). We measured thinking styles with 10 items adopted from Choi et al. (2003).

To provide a robust assessment of the hypotheses, we controlled for recovery satisfaction (Ma et al., 2020) and self-brand connection (Christodoulides et al., 2021), since both have been shown to play a central role in forgiveness. Thus, we used a three-item scale to measure recovery satisfaction (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2003), and a six-item scale to measure self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). All items were measured using a five-point scale.

The survey instrument was pre-tested by three experts in service failure and brand forgiveness. Since the scales were validated by previous research, only minor comments were made.

Measurement and Model Validation

We established the reliability and validity of the measures using IBM® SPSS® AMOS™ 24. Appendix shows that the loading of all items exceeded the threshold of 0.70. The composite reliabilities (CRs) for each variable were above 0.70, and the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010). We used the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion to establish discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE was larger than the correlation between all pairs of variables (see Table 1).

We then validated the research model with seven first-order variables (service failure severity, thinking style—secure style, anxious style, avoidant style—self-brand connection, and recovery satisfaction), and one second-order construct (brand forgiveness). The fit indices for this

model were within the conventional range: CMIN/DF (2.51), IFI (.924), TLI (.915), CFI (.923), and RMSEA (.051).

Insert Appendix

Insert Table 1

Common Method Bias

To control for common method variance, we employed the following procedures: First, we used different scale options, such as “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (for brand forgiveness), “not at all” to “extremely well” (for self-brand connection), “no extent” to “huge extent” (for service failure severity), and “not at all like me” to “very much like me” (for attachment styles). Second, we used a common latent factor (CLF) approach to compare the standardized regression weights of two measurement models: with CLF and without CLF (Archimi et al., 2018). The maximum difference in standardized regression weights was below the cut-off value of 0.25 (Bryan, 2010).

Model Testing

We used AMOS™ 24 to simultaneously examine the direct effect of service failure severity on brand forgiveness (H1), and the moderating effect of interpersonal attachment styles (H2–4), while controlling for self-brand connection and recovery satisfaction. Notably, we used the single-indicator method (Ping, 1995) to model the interactions. Moreover, we excluded thinking styles from this model because they were measured as continuum variables and thus required different statistical treatment (Nyffenegger et al., 2015).

The results reported in Table 2 show that severity had a significant negative impact on brand forgiveness ($\beta = -.18$; $p < .001$), thus confirming H1.

The table also shows that the interaction between secure style and service failure severity was positively significant ($\beta=.09$; $p<.05$), thus supporting H2.

For H3, the interaction between service failure severity and anxious style was significantly negative ($\beta=-.23$, $p<.01$), thus confirming H3.

For H4, the interaction between avoidant style and service failure severity was insignificantly negative ($\beta=-.04$; $p<.05$), thus negating H4.

Insert Table 2

To further substantiate the results, we conducted a simple slope test on the relationships that had significant interactions (Aiken & West, 1991) to gain insights into their nature. This involved splitting the moderators into a high group (one standard deviation higher than the mean) and a low group (one standard deviation below the mean) and reassessing the relationships between the independent and dependent variables (Xu et al., 2018).

For H2, the test revealed a positive link between service failure severity and brand forgiveness when the secure style was high (simple slope: $\beta=.13$, $p<.001$), and the relationship became significantly negative (simple slope: $\beta=-.29$, $p<.01$) when it was low (see Figure 2.A).

For H3, the test showed a negative link between severity and brand forgiveness when the anxious style was high (simple slope: $\beta=-.33$, $p<.001$), but the relationship became insignificantly positive (simple slope: $\beta=.05$, $p<.05$) when it was low (see Figure 2.B).

To test the moderating effect of thinking styles on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship (H5 and H6), we followed the work of Monga and John (2008). Iacobucci et al. (2015) pointed out that when independent variables are uncorrelated, it is acceptable to use median split analyses. In our model, we had only one independent variable, which ruled out the correlation issue. Accordingly, we averaged the scale for thinking styles and used a median split

(median= 3.28) to identify analytic and holistic thinkers. Those with values above 3.28 were identified as holistic thinkers and were assigned 1, while those with values below 3.28 were identified as analytic thinkers and were assigned 2. We followed this with a multigroup moderation test (experiential thinkers vs. analytic thinkers) using AMOS™ 24. The results showed that the effect of severity on brand forgiveness for holistic thinkers was $\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$, whereas that for analytic thinkers was $\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$. We then used chi-squared difference tests to verify whether the difference in the effect of severity on brand forgiveness was statistically different across both subsamples (i.e., holistic vs. analytic thinking; Nyffenegger et al., 2015). The results of the chi-squared difference tests showed that the difference was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.15 > 3.85$), indicating that thinking styles play a critical role in moderating the impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.

Discussion and Conclusions

In line with prior research showing that severe service failures encourage consumers to switch to other service brands (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012) and engage in vindictive WOM (El-Manstrly et al., 2021), the current study revealed that service failure severity prevents consumers from forgiving the wrongdoings of hotel brands. Nevertheless, this relationship is not always negative, as different conditions may amplify or weaken it. These conditions include interpersonal attachment styles, which tend to have varied moderation effects on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship. For example, we expected that a secure attachment style would reduce the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness. However, the result was, to some extent, surprising, since a secure attachment style not only reduced the negative impact of the severity, but also changed the direction of the relationship in a positive direction. A possible explanation is that a secure attachment style reflects a positive model of the self and

others, leading to cooperative forms of conflict resolution and a greater ability to resolve conflicts constructively. Secure people express more positive emotions in distressing situations, make greater efforts to restore relationships, and express higher levels of forgiveness (Lawler-Row et al., 2006). These qualities could explain why the impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness was positive.

Similarly, the moderating effect of an avoidant attachment style on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship was unexpected. Specifically, we expected that an avoidant style would significantly increase the negative impact of service failure severity on forgiveness. However, the results showed that the relationship became insignificantly negative when consumers had an avoidant attachment style. A possible explanation is that such a style is associated with avoiding conflict (investing little effort in resolving the conflict) because anger entails emotional involvement and investment, which is incongruent with the preference of avoidant individuals for interpersonal distance, leading them to suppress awareness of anger because such emotional states can reactivate their attachment needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Taken together, this could explain the insignificant negative effect of severity on brand forgiveness for avoidant consumers who tend to adopt deactivation strategies, which suppress any signs of vulnerability to keep the attachment system deactivated (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005). However, the significantly negative impact of an anxious attachment style on the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship aligned with our initial expectations. This finding is not surprising, given the characteristics of anxious individuals, as explained previously.

Moreover, our findings showed that the negative direct impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness was reduced by holistic thinking and increased by analytic thinking. Thus, it appears that holistic thinkers do not attribute service failure severity to the behavior of the hotel

brand alone but to other situational factors, as explained previously. In contrast, analytic thinkers appear to attribute service failure solely to the behavior of the hotel brand. Unlike analytic thinkers, holistic thinkers are possibly more tolerant of inconsistencies and contradictions in their environments and consider them a result of the changing nature of the world (Nisbett et al., 2001). Thus, it appears that holistic thinkers are more tolerant of inconsistent service delivery as they may already expect these inconsistencies.

Conclusion

This study helps to advance the understanding of the effect of service failure severity on brand forgiveness and the circumstances under which consumers are more or less forgiving of a brand. The study showed that emotions and cognition are key components of the hospitality consumer failure–forgiveness model. These factors redefine the service failure severity–brand forgiveness relationship, which is often deemed inversely strong, by showing that certain conditions can actually strengthen or weaken the relationship. For consumers who exhibit a secure attachment style and holistic thinking, the effect of service failure severity and forgiveness is weaker than for their anxious and analytical counterparts. These findings provide compelling justification for the integration of consumer characteristics, such as psychographics, into the service failure severity–forgiveness model.

Theoretical Implications

As a highly experience-oriented industry, customers’ experiences with hotel brands are a critical factor in customer–brand relationship building (Guan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, service delivery in the hotel industry frequently fails due to coproduction (Wang et al., 2021) and human

involvement issues (Kim & Jang, 2022). Such issues not only lead to increased customer mistreatment (i.e., low-quality treatment of customers; Huang & Kwok, 2021), but can also have a severe effect on customer experiences and eventually damage brand reputations (Akarsu et al., 2022). Thus, to reduce the negative consequences of service failures for both hotels and customers, it is necessary for the former to understand customers' emotional and cognitive characteristics since such understanding would facilitate and accelerate the brand forgiveness process. Our research specifically addressed this issue by examining how different types of customer emotions (i.e., interpersonal attachment styles) and cognitions (i.e., thinking styles) affect the service failure–brand forgiveness relationship, thus contributing to the hospitality literature in several ways. First, this research responds to recent calls to examine the effect of service failure severity in the context of branding (Hur & Jang, 2019; Sarkar et al., 2021) by providing evidence of the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness. Second, the extant literature has examined the role of brand-related mechanisms (e.g., brand personality and brand love) in improving brand forgiveness, thus significantly enhancing our understanding of how brand forgiveness is achieved (e.g., Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019; Yuan et al., 2020). However, few attempts have been made to investigate the question of *when*, rather than *how*, brand forgiveness is achieved. These attempts have shown that consumer-related factors, including sociodemographic (Hur & Jang, 2019) and psychological factors (Babin et al., 2021; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012; Wei et al., 2020), are central in understanding why some consumers are more (or less) forgiving. Our research expands these studies by identifying emotional (i.e., interpersonal attachment style) and cognitive (i.e., thinking style) consumer-related factors as key factors in this regard. Third, prior research has shown that interpersonal styles manifest themselves in *non-personal interactions*, such as consumer preferences for products shown in advertisements (David,

2016), romantic journeys (Mende et al., 2019), and consumer retaliation (Thomson et al., 2012). Our research further expands these studies by showing that these attachments, which are formed in early childhood, manifest themselves in consumers' willingness and ability to forgive service failures. That is, secure and anxious attachment styles weaken and strengthen the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness, whereas an avoidant attachment style plays no significant role. Fourth, prior branding research has shown that thinking styles are valid concepts for understanding the elicitation of salient brand emotions (Jakubanecs et al., 2019), consumers' reactions to brand extensions (Allman et al., 2019), and brand placement (Hur et al., 2020). Our study also adds to this by showing that holistic and analytic thinking are also valid concepts in service failure contexts: the former weakens, and the latter strengthens, the negative impact of service failure severity on brand forgiveness.

Practical Implications

Our findings have significant implications for the hotel industry regarding segmentation efforts and recovery strategies. This is critical because when a service fails to meet customers' expectations (i.e., a single failure), they experience brand dissatisfaction, hate, and retaliation (Sarkar et al., 2021), and they also experience negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and irritation (Baker & Kim, 2018). However, if hotels' recovery strategies fail to address service failure incidents (i.e., double deviation), consumers may feel violated twice over and consider the hotel careless (Sembada et al., 2016). This, in turn, may make it more difficult for them to forgive, leading to significantly intensified distrust (Basso & Pizzutti, 2016) and switching behavior (Haj-Salem & Chebat, 2013).

Thus, our findings offer hotels new insights to help them avoid single failures and the severely negative impact of double deviations. First, at the aggregate level, hotels can include measures/items related to interpersonal attachment and thinking styles, along with sociodemographic factors, when surveying their customer base. This, in turn, would help them correlate the styles with certain sociodemographic variables, since prior research has shown that sociodemographic characteristics are associated with specific attachment styles (Mickelson et al., 1997). Second, hotels can use signs during the complaint process to identify consumers' individual attachment styles. For example, hotels can train their service employees to assess customers' tones, the intensity of their negative behavior, and how they try to resolve the conflict. These may provide tell-tale signs of the consumers' attachment styles. Those who exhibit hostile and aggressive behavior when they experience a service failure or try to resolve it may be anxious consumers, whereas those who seek an explanation calmly or try to understand why such a failure occurred are likely to be secure consumers.

Another application of the study is that it can enable managers to segment and meet the needs of target customers based on their psychographic characteristics. Psychographic factors, such as personality, values, lifestyle, and needs, are well-known influencers of consumer choice (Kerin et al., 2017). They not only influence pre-purchase decisions, but also post-purchase behaviors. Through the understanding of thinking and attachment styles provided by this study, managers can hone their skills in psychographic segmentation. Indeed, thinking and attachment styles define individuals' personalities and values and how they respond to experiences in the marketplace. Equipped with such understanding, managers can determine the degree to which different customer groups are likely to respond to service failures and recovery strategies, make informed decisions on the most effective recovery strategy, and communicate through direct or

peripheral routes (Chowdhury & Biswas, 2011) that will appeal to their customers based on their personalities and values.

Once a consumer's attachment style is identified, a hotel can develop an informed recovery strategy that matches that attachment style, thus avoiding double deviation. For example, when handling a conflict, a secure individual tends to use an integrative approach involving collaboration and problem-solving to promote a positive environment, which may make recovery strategies such as *apologizing*, *offering explanations*, *problem-solving*, and *facilitation* more effective. However, an avoidant individual tends to have limited empathy and keeps their emotional distance, which makes emotional recovery strategies (e.g., apology) less relevant and economic recovery strategies (e.g., financial compensation) more relevant in reducing retaliation (Japutra et al., 2018). Alternatively, *apology* and *empathy*, coupled with other recovery strategies, such as *speed of response* and *follow-up*, may be significantly important for anxious customers who tend to display aggressive or nagging behaviors and require frequent reassurance and passion.

Alongside interpersonal attachment styles, hotels can use signs to identify consumers' thinking styles, one of which is the consumer's culture. Research in this regard has shown that individuals from Western cultures tend to have an analytic thinking style, whereas those from Eastern cultures or multicultural backgrounds (e.g., Hispanic-Americans) tend to have a holistic thinking style (e.g., Allman et al., 2019). Hotels can benefit from nationality-based segmentation in this regard. Since holistic thinkers tend to consider the contextual factors surrounding service failure incidents, they may benefit from emotional recovery strategies, such as *sincere apologies* and *explanations*. Conversely, analytic thinkers tend to blame hotel brands alone when they experience service failures, so they may benefit less from *emotional recovery strategies* and more from *economic recovery strategies*, such as compensation.

Limitations and Future Research

The current research has some limitations. First, our research model was tested for brand forgiveness. It would be interesting to see if the results hold true for other concepts, such as brand hate. In particular, it would be interesting to determine whether the relationship between service failure severity and brand hate would be strengthened by an anxious/avoidant attachment style and weakened by a secure attachment style. Second, to provide detailed psychological profiling of customers, it would be worth examining the extent to which each attachment style is associated with specific conflict resolution strategies and how that may affect the service failure severity–forgiveness relationship. For example, prior research has shown that avoidant individuals exhibit avoiding and dominating conflict styles, whereas secure individuals exhibit collaborating and compromising conflict styles (LaValley & Guerrero, 2012). Thus, further research would verify whether such relationships hold true in the context of service failure severity and brand forgiveness. Third, further research should empirically verify our suggestions for recovery strategies based on consumers’ interpersonal attachment styles. For example, we suggested that a secure attachment style would require recovery strategies such as problem-solving and explanation, whereas an avoidant attachment style would require economic recovery strategies and an anxious attachment style would require empathy and speed of response.

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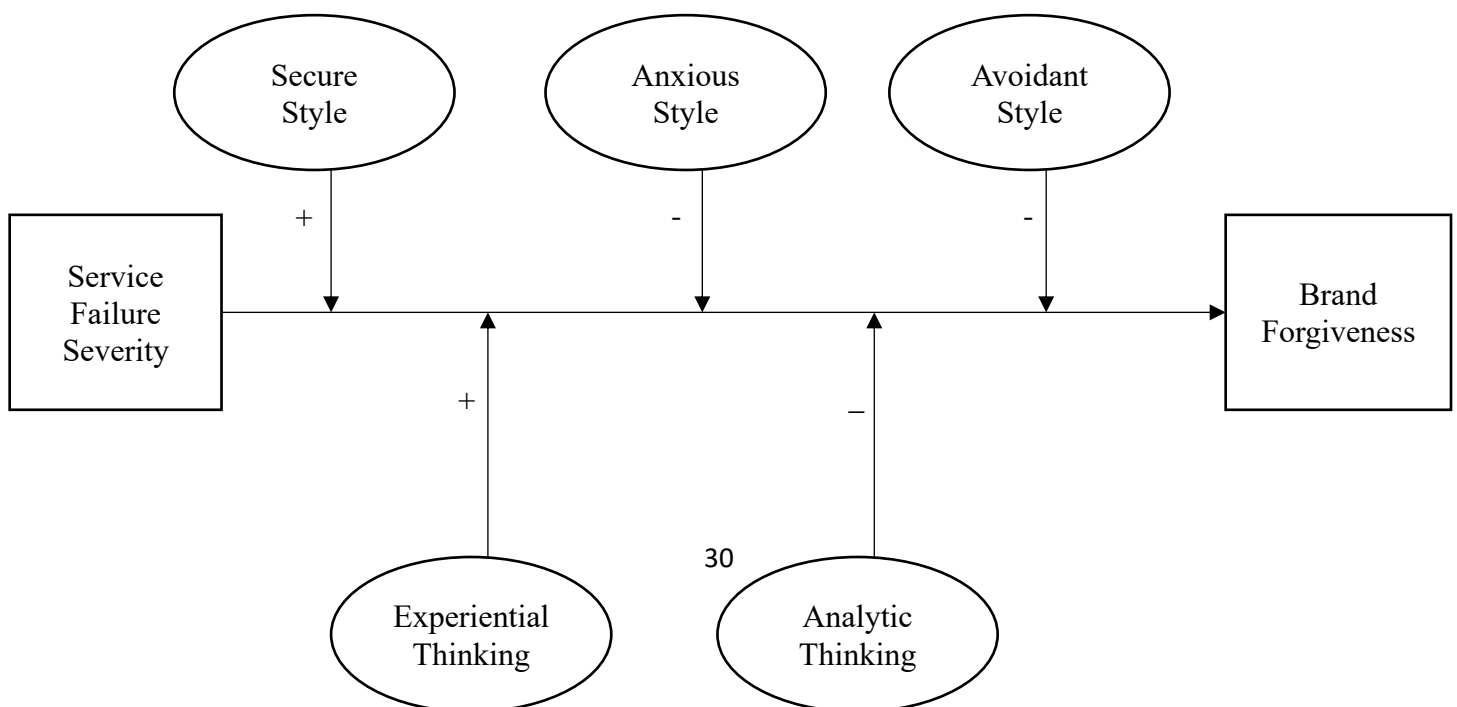
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Figure 1: The Study Model



Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Thinking style	0.77							
2. Service Failure Severity	-0.146	0.82						
3. Recovery Satisfaction	0.118	-0.141	0.90					
4. Avoidant Style	0.140	0.001	0.169	0.77				
5. Anxious Style	0.208	0.024	0.075	0.520	0.82			
6. Self-Brand Connection	0.127	0.015	0.411	0.151	0.280	0.82		
7. Secure Style	0.269	0.135	0.219	-0.068	-0.375	0.321	0.77	
8. Brand Forgiveness	0.224	-0.247	0.350	0.093	-0.148	0.353	0.246	0.92

Models	Regression weight	Significance level	R²	Model fit
			.33	IFI (.91) TLI (.90) CFI (.91) RMSEA (.06)
Recovery satisfaction	.20	P<.001		
Self-brand connection	.16	P<.01		
Service failure severity	-.18	P<.001		
Secure style	.15	P<.05		
Avoidant style	.01	P>.05		
Anxious style	-.07	P>.05		
Service failure severity x secure style	.09	P<.05		
Service failure severity x avoidant style	-.04	P>.05		
Service failure severity x anxious style	-.23	P<.001		

Figure 2.A: The Moderating Effect of Secure Style

Figure 2.B: The Moderating Effect of Anxious Style

