

Emotions in the time of COVID: Who do customers blame for service failures during the pandemic?

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Abstract

With the surge in online grocery during the pandemic of 2020, retailers struggled with fulfilling their grocery service commitment, which increased customer complaints. But do customers blame the retailer or the situation? To address this research question, we performed text analysis of 7,810 customer reviews from four retailers in the US and UK: Walmart US, Tesco, Ocado, and Sainsbury. Using automated text analysis and LIWC (linguistic inquiry and word count) methodologies, we analyzed customer sentiments and attribution-dependent emotions (anger, anxiety/fear, and sadness) in customer reviews before and during the pandemic. Our results show that overall customer sentiment was negative, and that anxiety was significantly higher in customer reviews during the pandemic. Based on our finding, we can conclude that customers attributed the blame for the service failure not to the retailers but rather to uncertain circumstances caused by the pandemic. Our findings add to the service failure literature, which predominantly examined anger, an emotion associated with blaming the service provider. They also have implications for retailers who can make strategic changes to address customer anxiety in their communications.

Keywords: Service Failure, Appraisal- Attribution, Grocery

Track: Retailing and Omni-Channel Management

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic enveloped the world at the beginning of 2020, customer uncertainty towards health, family, and economy increased. The pandemic has impacted people's emotional state (Acosta, 2020) and is "having a transformative effect on services" (Berry et al., 2020). Customers are staying home and shopping for groceries online, leading to a surge in online grocery sales. Kroger, a leading US grocery retailer, reported a 92% increase in online sales for the period ending the first quarter of 2020 compared to last year (Acosta, 2020).

With the surge in online grocery orders, retailers struggled to keep with the delivery demands and fulfilling delivery commitments (Brion, 2020). Service literature has documented this failure to fulfill delivery commitments as 'service failures,' resulting in discrete negative emotions such as anger towards the service provider (Vaerenberg et al., 2014; Kranzbühler et al., 2020; Gelbrich, 2010). This body of literature suggests that customers perceive that blame for the service failures lies with the service provider and therefore, the literature has predominately either analyzed the discrete blame attribution emotion 'anger' or other negatively valenced emotions, which are directed towards the service provider (e.g., Hess et al., 2003; Gelbrich, 2010; Kranzbühler et al., 2020). However, appraisal and attribution theorists (Weiner, 1985; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1991) have also stressed other attribution emotions such as anxiety/fear and sadness, which are caused by the circumstances, which are evidently missing in the existing service failure literature.

We are in a pandemic now, which has caused uncertainty among customers (Brion, 2020). In the wake of this pandemic, examining discrete emotions caused by the circumstances such as anxiety/fear and sadness (Roseman, 1991), is necessary to understand customers' cognitive appraisal of circumstances and provide a deeper understanding of to whom or what customers attribute the blame for negative events such as service failure.

Our analysis of customers' emotions in about 7810 online customer reviews, before and during the pandemic from four grocery retailers: Walmart, Tesco, Ocado, and Sainsbury, indicated the dominance of that 'anxiety' in the online customer complaints during the pandemic. Contrary to findings from extant service failure literature (e.g., Gelbrich, 2010), which indicated anger as dominant emotion post service failure, dominance of anxiety/fear in customer reviews signals that customers are anxious about the uncertainty of the circumstances and subsequently

attributed blame for the service failure to the pandemic to a large extent. Many hold the pandemic and not the retailer responsible for the failure to fulfill delivery commitments.

These findings have significant implications for both service researchers and retailers. Presence of anxiety implies that examination of the emotions directed to service providers alone may not be informative in predicting and explaining customers' behavior post service failure. Examinations of these discrete emotions, therefore, is important when "considered at the level of response to the event's urgency" (Frijda, 1986, p.256). In conditions where situational factors such as the current pandemic have a significant impact on customers, a discrete view of emotions can provide retailers a better understanding of who customers blame and therefore, can be helpful in creating a further understanding of customers' behaviors associated with those emotions.

Conceptual foundations

To address our research questions, "who do customers blame for service failures during the pandemic?", we applied appraisal and attribution theories (Weiner, 1985, Lazarus, 1991) to analyze customers' emotions in their online complaints and subsequently to draw inferences about their blame attributions. As stated in appraisal and attribution literature (e.g., Weiner, 1985; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus and Smith, 1988), after a negative event such as the service failure, customers cognitively appraise the situation or evaluate "whether and how what is happening is personally harmful or beneficial" (Lazarus and Smith, 1988, p.283). This appraisal of situation or circumstances gives rise to appraisal and subsequent attribution-dependent discrete emotions (Kranzbühler et al., 2020), which are "useful in the understanding of agency" or the cause of those discrete emotions (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985, p.835). As posited by Lazarus and Smith (1988), customers' accountability judgment about "who to be blamed" is directly responsible for the "type of emotions generated" (p.288). For example, anger has been linked to other humans (other than self) attribution, blaming another human agency for the negative event, whereas anxiety/fear and sadness are associated with the circumstances "in which people were unsure about what was going to happen" (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985, p.835).

2.1 Service Failure- Emotions

Whenever customers experience service failure, such as delay in delivery or out of stock, they undergo a temporal sequence of event appraisal-attribution-emotion (Weiner, 1985). In the grocery shopping context, customers evaluate service performance in terms of availability and timely delivery of the order, order accuracy, convenience, and customer support (Singh and Rosengren, 2020). However, when faced with service failure, customers look for the cause of the service failure (Gelbrich, 2010; Weiner, 1985) following which they often use online reviews to complain about their experiences and voice the service failure in their reviews (Ordenes et al., 2017). Marketing literature has long focused on the role of the valence of emotions in online reviews as informant for customer service evaluation (Purnawirawan et al., 2015). Kranzbühler et al. (2020), in their meta-analysis of discrete emotions in customers evaluations, pointed out the importance of a "fine-grained approach" rather than examining the valence of emotions, which although can provide meaningful insights on the effect of the situation on customers emotions but "sacrifices specificity and explanatory powers" (p.478).

Customers' appraisal of situations and attribution can affect discrete emotions even if those emotions have the same valence (Kranzbühler et al., 2020). For example, anger, anxiety/fear, and sadness are negative emotions; however, these discrete emotions differ in situational appraisal and blame attribution (Weiner, 1985; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus and Smith, 1988). In line with Kranzbühler et al. (2020) argument that discrete emotions have more 'explanatory power' we will examine three discrete attribution dependent emotions: anger, anxiety/ fear and sadness, to answer our research question: "who do customers blame for the service failure during the pandemic?"

2.2 Appraisal-Attribution

Our approach to examining discrete emotions post service failure to answer our research question leans on appraisal and attribution theories. The essence of appraisal theory is the claim that the "critical determinant of any emotion is the resultant evaluation and interpretation" of the situation leading to that emotional response (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999, p. 185). Cognitive appraisal of the situation, whether circumstances caused or other caused, therefore is the prevailing mechanism in the elicitation of discrete emotions, whereas attribution theory serves as the guiding mechanism for the 'causal analysis' (Weiner, 1985). According to Weiner (1985), negative events (such as the service failure) "gives rise to the search for causation" post

cognitive appraisal of the situation (p.187). For example, in his experimental study to examine valenced emotions following causal ascription of an event, Weiner (1980), proposed that, attributions to an event are "subject to further causal analysis, with the ascriptions placed within particular causal dimensions that describe the basic properties of cause" (p.187). Heider (1958), provided a logical analysis of the casual properties, stating that, "in common-sense psychology (as in scientific psychology) the result of an action is felt to depend on two sets of conditions, namely, factors within the person and factors within the environment" (p. 82).

Discrete emotions, therefore, differ with respect appraisal of *valence*, whether an event was pleasant or unpleasant, *certainty*, whether the situation was certain or uncertain and *agency* whether someone else or circumstances to blame (Roseman, 1991). According to Roseman (1991) "appraisal identifying a causal agent for an outcome affected which emotion was experienced" (p. 162). For example, anger occurs when a person sees another person as the source of event (other caused), whereas anxiety/fear and sadness occur in response to uncertain situations, which Roseman (1991) referred to as, "no human agent" (p.163).

Weiner (1985) described anger as the emotional response, which is "directed outwards" (p.563). In the context of a service failure, anger towards the retailer or the service provider is a dominant-negative emotional reaction attributed to the retailer (Gelbrich, 2010). Thus, customers experience anger when they perceive the cause for the service failure or the negative outcomes to be within the control of the service provider or retailer (Folkes, 1984).

Anxiety or the "fear anticipation" (Izard, 1977, p.376) occurs when people appraise the situation to be uncertain and attribute the cause to be the circumstances (Roseman, 1991). Appraisal theorists (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) categorize fear as something of an "extreme anxiety" — it is anticipatory, negatively valenced, and a strong driver of avoidance/withdrawal. Anxiety/fear, therefore, arises when the negative outcome or service failure is presumed to be caused by uncertain circumstances (Smith and Ellsworth, 1988) such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Sadness, on the other hand, result when people appraise the circumstances to be certain and beyond anyone's control. Appraisal of the event as "irrevocable loss", emphasizing the "inability to restore the loss caused, attributing the cause to the circumstances lead to sadness (Smith and Lazarus, 1993, p. 239; Roseman, 1991)

3. Method

3.1 Sample

In this study, customer reviews of grocery shopping experiences with major retailers based in the US and UK, namely: Walmart USA, Ocado (UK), Sainsbury (UK) and Tesco (UK), were used. The reviews were collected from an independent review site, Trustpilot.com, between February 1, 2020 until May 30, 2020. We also gathered customers reviews from the same retailers a year before the pandemic (between February 1, 2019, till May 30, 2019) (Table 1).

Table 1: Customer responses before and during the pandemic

Retailer	Year	Number of Responses (Reviews)	Word Count
Walmart	2019	123	16,551
	2020	660	82,405
Ocado	2019	262	41,647
	2020	4902	27,1602
Tesco	2019	181	27,140
	2020	928	12,1,198
Sainsbury	2019	186	27,641
	2020	568	16,7,595

3.2 Methodology

We examined discrete negative emotions, namely anger, anxiety/fear and sadness, highlighted in the appraisal and attribution literature as the emotions associate with the unpleasant states post negative events (e.g., Smith and Ellsworth, 1988, Weiner, 1990). To answer our research question, "who did customer blame for service failure during the pandemic?" we used automated text analysis methodology and divided our analysis into two parts. First, we performed sentiment analysis to examine the change in customer sentiments before and during the pandemic.

Thereafter, we examined the change in the discrete emotions. We applied unsupervised differential expression of emotion words in customer reviews using R studio. Using the sentiment analysis package '*Tidy Package*', we created word tokens, which separate texts into single words and then cleaned up those single words to exclude any stop words, numbers, spaces. We then analyzed sentiments (emotions) in the text using AFINN lexicon-based sentiment analysis, which transformed the textual information of the reviews into sentiment values. We

also used the *get_sentiment* package available in the R studio to visually examine change emotions; anger, anxiety/fear and sadness as the percentage of all the emotion words in the text before and during the pandemic. Second, we further analyzed the text using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) text analysis program to examine if there was a statistically significant difference between the emotions anger, anxiety/fear and sadness before and during the pandemic. LIWC, is a widely used language processing tool used in more than 100 studies including marketing research in various leading journals (e.g., Aleti et al., 2019). LIWC counts the words, quantifying language categories such as articles and emotions (Kahn et al., 2007). LIWC for the emotion word processing, counts positive and negative words in the text and creates subsets of negative emotion words corresponding to anger (such as hate, kill, angry), anxiety/fear (such as nervous, afraid, anxious) and sadness (such as disappointed, grief, sad), which are represented as the percentage of total word counts in the text (Kahn et al., 2007).

4. Results

Sentiment and Emotion words analysis- Using R studio

Our analysis of customers average sentiments before and during the pandemic (Table1) indicated an increase in negative sentiments during the pandemic. Further analysis of discrete emotions in customer reviews indicated that discrete emotions anger, anxiety/fear and sadness were expressed more during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic (Figure 1). Our analysis also indicated a lower percentage of anger, the emotion associated with blaming other or blaming the retailer in the word count compared to anxiety/fear and sadness, emotions caused when circumstance or situations to be blamed for an event (Roseman, 1991).

Table 1: Average sentiment value (AFINN sentiment lexicon)

Retailer	Average Sentiment value 2019	Average Sentiment value 2020	% Increase in the Negative Sentiments During Pandemic
Walmart (USA)	-0.514	-1.12	54%
Ocado (UK)	0.194	-0.460	142%
Tesco UK)	-0.681	-0.804	15%
Sainsbury (UK)	-0.879	-1.04	15%

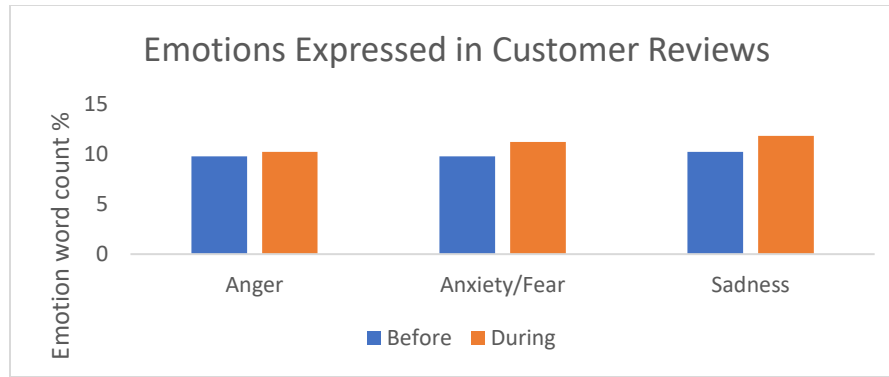


Figure 1: Emotions before and during the pandemic

Linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC)

LIWC captures the words in the text and categorizes them in emotion categories. We further performed t-test to examine whether mean of the word counts of the attribution emotions anger, anxiety/fear and sadness differed before and during the pandemic (which are represented as the percentage of the total emotional words). Results of t-test indicated that there was no difference in the emotions anger and sadness however anxiety/fear was significantly higher in customer reviews during the pandemic (Table 2).

Table 2: Mean comparison of emotions before and during the pandemic

Emotion	Mean of emotional word counts (Before the pandemic)	Mean of emotional word counts (During the pandemic)	t-Value	p-value
Anger	0.38	0.33	0.68	0.52
Anxiety/Fear	0.21	0.52	3.38	0.03
Sadness	0.47	0.48	-0.08	0.93

Discussion and Implications

Our findings that anxiety/fear was significantly higher in customer reviews during the pandemic compared to before COVID-19, whereas anger was not, indicate that customers often held the pandemic responsible service failures. This is contrary to the existing perception that customers always blame retailers for service failures. Our results also indicated that sadness, an emotion association with certainty of the circumstances (Roseman, 1991), was also not higher in

customer reviews during the pandemic. Increased negative sentiments and prevalence of anxiety in the customer reviews during the pandemic, reflect the uncertainty this pandemic has caused. Based on our findings we can plausibly make the interpretation that customers understand that this current pandemic is beyond the control of service providers yet has impacted the fulfillment of delivery commitments. Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic started, numerous articles were dedicated towards the impact of the pandemic on customers' mental health and their wellbeing (e.g., Berry et al., 2020). However, the impact on their appraisal of circumstances and subsequent blame attribution for service failures lacks equal attention. Service failure literature has paid substantial attention to blame attribution, when directed towards service providers, but with this study, we highlighted that customers might not always blame the retailer, and hence that circumstances, which are beyond retailers' control should also be considered when identifying the impact of service failure on customers. Moreover, customers' attribution of blame to the circumstances can also have an impact on retailers' strategies towards addressing service failure. For example, rather than taking the blame for service failure, retailers can devise communication strategies that can help reduce customers' anxiety and the uncertainty affecting customers.

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