

They May Play Up but it's Your Fault: The Attributions Toward other Customers.

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Abstract

Imagine you are in a restaurant and someone at another table becomes disruptive. This paper examines the customers' reactions and responses to situations such as this. It is widely acknowledged that the behaviour of other customers may cause service failures (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg, 2003; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003) or enhance the service experience (Arnould and Price, 1993). Yet, it is surprising that little has been done to discover if this influence is a direct result of the individual customer's affective reaction to the environment or whether it is a reaction that follows some form of cognition relating to the causal attributions. This paper therefore, seeks to fill this important gap by using Attribution Theory to investigate and explain the social influence of customers on other customers within the servicescape. We apply Attribution Theory to explain how customers allocate blame for having their experience within a service environment disturbed and what this blame does to service evaluations and repurchase intentions. For instance, if a customer attributes blame for the disruptive behaviour of other customers to the firm then the firm's reputation is likely to be damaged. If on the other hand the attribution is toward the individual customer then the firm is unharmed. Using the three causal dimensions of attribution (locus of causality, controllability and stability) found in Wiener's (1980) Attribution Theory this paper specifically investigates: 1) the blame attributed by customers for the negative or disruptive behaviour of other customers sharing a service environment, 2) the impact these attributions have on the perceptions and attitudes of the customers, and 3) the likely impact these perceptions and attitudes have on the customer's continued patronage of the organisation.

We report on a qualitative study of regular restaurant patrons. The findings revealed that the organisation or at least the staff are often held accountable by customers for the behaviour of others within their premises. This may be due to customers considering that other customers often help create the atmosphere of the service environment (Grayson and McNiell, 2009; Yoshida and James, 2010) and are therefore part of the experience provided by the organisation. We found that the locus of causality shifted from the perpetrator, to the management and staff to the individual customers depending on the situation. The more important the situation is to the customer the more likely the blame will shift to the organization and then to the customer - "I made the wrong choice." The customers' attribution of blame for disruptive situations also appears to be determined by their perceptions of personal control and the perceived stability of the situation and the occasion for which they purchased the service. Our research shows that the attribution of blame for a disrupted service experience will shift from the perpetrators, to the organisation and its staff, to the affected customer depending on such factors as controllability, and perceived stability. These factors may be more stable and better predictors of customers' reactions to disruption than the apparently shifting locus of causality. Organisations need to consider the potential harmful effects of the disruptive behaviour of other customers. While disruptive behaviour is not a common occurrence it does have a major impact on the attributions customers make to the firm and its staff. More importantly one seemingly isolated occurrence may prevent customers from repurchasing in the future.