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Dewi Tojib Saman Khajehzadeh

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# The role of meta-perceptions in customer complaining behavior

Dewi Tojib and Saman Khajehzadeh

*Department of Marketing, Monash University, Caulfield East,  
VIC, Australia*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to demonstrate that meta-perceptions play a contributing role in customers' direct complaint intention.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In an exploratory study, we identified different types of meta-perceptions. In a scenario-based experiment, we tested the interaction effect of service failure attribution and the perceived service failure severity on meta-perceptions and direct complaint intention.

**Findings** – After experiencing service failure, customers amplify both positive and negative meta-perceptions. Depending on how customers attribute the service failure and perceive the magnitude of service failure, they evaluate these meta-perceptions differently which then determine their subsequent actions.

**Research limitations/implications** – The use of hypothetical scenarios may not capture the richness of an actual service encounter. The study is limited to two service failure contexts: cable TV connection and restaurant booking.

**Practical implications** – Service managers should design marketing strategies that can elevate customers' positive social image associated with voicing complaints.

**Originality/value** – This study offers a new explanation, in that some customers do not engage in direct complaining behavior owing to meta-perceptions that they develop during service failure.

**Keywords** Complaining behavior, Intention to complain, Meta-perceptions, Service failure attributions, Service failure severity

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Service failures can happen anytime, anywhere, with or without service providers' knowledge, and customers' reactions will vary. Some customers will articulate their dissatisfaction directly to the service provider, whereas others will express their disappointment indirectly by engaging in negative word-of-mouth, switching to competitors or simply remaining silent (Thøgersen *et al.*, 2009). Most service providers appreciate customers who candidly voice their dissatisfaction with service failures, as they can then record the shortcomings of a service delivery process and prevent future service failures (Homburg and Fürst, 2005) or will be able to rectify the problem immediately to maintain a good relationship with the customer (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2011).

Prior studies have investigated different types of service failure recovery strategies including correction, refund, replacement, extra compensation, apology, politeness and empathy (Liao, 2007). Service firms devotedly engage with these recovery strategies hoping that such efforts could reduce the likelihood of customers' engagement in



negative word-of-mouth (Wangenheim, 2005) or switching behavior (Brady *et al.*, 2008) and, consequently, increase customers' repurchase intentions (Liao, 2007) or maintain their customer loyalty (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011). Indeed, being proactive in initiating service recovery effort is a substantive element of effective service recovery systems (Smith and Bolton, 1998; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2011). Regrettably, only a small proportion of customers speak up about their dissatisfaction directly to service providers (Tronvoll, 2012). This situation is certainly not desirable, because service providers will lose not only the opportunity to redress service mishaps but also the lifetime value from customers who decide to switch to competitors (Chebat *et al.*, 2005).

Prior studies have identified various factors that determine customers' decision to voice their complaint to service providers after a service failure. The likelihood of voice success, mediated by ease of voicing the complaint, is a strong predictor of direct complaints (Robertson and Shaw, 2009). The level of complaint barriers has been found to have a direct negative effect on complaint intention (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2011). Research has also shown that customers' likelihood of complaining is positively related to individual characteristics, including attitude toward complaining (Thøgersen *et al.*, 2009; Bodey and Grace, 2007), complaint propensity (Harris and Mowen, 2001) and prior experience with complaining (Velázquez *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, negative emotions such as anger (Bougie *et al.*, 2003; Kalamas *et al.*, 2008), frustration (Gelbrich, 2010), disappointment (Mattila and Ro, 2008) and anxiety (Chebat *et al.*, 2005), have been shown to influence customers' direct complaint intentions (Donoghue and De Klerk, 2009).

Research addressing the role of social and interpersonal factors between customers and service personnel on complaint intention is still very limited. Researchers have found that customers who have developed strong rapport with service personnel are less likely to complain (DeWitt and Brady, 2003) and that customers with a weak tie to service personnel are more likely to complain (Mittal *et al.*, 2008). These studies suggest that customers are empathic toward the conditions under which the service personnel work and they do not want to risk damage to their relationships by complaining. Furthermore, customers may be less likely to voice their dissatisfaction owing to their sensitivity toward social risks (Kowalski, 1996). While these explanations seem compelling, they have not been empirically tested.

The present research offers a new perspective on why some customers are reluctant to voice their dissatisfaction to service providers after a service failure. Specifically, we demonstrate that customers' meta-perceptions – the thoughts and expectations that customers believe service personnel will have of them if they complain (Laing *et al.*, 1966) – form an underlying reason for customers' reluctance to lodge direct complaints. Direct complaints here refer to customers' real-time confronting of the service personnel over service failures (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). We conducted two studies to investigate such an influencing role on customer complaining behavior.

## 2. Study 1

The first study focuses on determining which meta-perceptions are associated with customer complaining behavior and preliminarily demonstrates that meta-perceptions play a role in influencing customer complaining behavior.

### *2.1 Theoretical background and hypotheses*

Impression management theory asserts that people tend to have a pervasive desire to be viewed in a socially positive light (Leary, 1995). Therefore, they might strategically adjust their behaviors so they can project a positive social image. Fulfilling such a desire is important for them because positive social image results in rewarding social interactions (Chen *et al.*, 1996). In addition, effective impression management helps people avoid negative feelings, such as embarrassment, when dealing with others (Dahl *et al.*, 2001). Another theory, closely linked to impression management theory, is that of self-presentation, which asserts that people employ various strategies to influence others' impressions of them (DePaulo, 1992). That is, when people would like to be viewed in particular ways, they may behave in ways that either reflect their actual self-image or are inconsistent with their self-image.

The notions of impression management and self-presentation are inherently associated with the concept of meta-perceptions, which are people's beliefs that others have particular thoughts and expectations of them (Albright *et al.*, 2001; Laing *et al.*, 1966). The impression management and self-presentation theories suggest that if people believe others' thoughts about them are not favorable, they may adjust their behaviors to change how others perceive them (Laing *et al.*, 1966).

Studies of meta-perceptions generally appear in the domain of social psychology, where their focus is largely on exploring their function in interpersonal or intergroup contexts (Frey and Tropp, 2006). The process of meta-perception formation is relatively complex, as it involves making a judgment about another person's judgments about oneself. Therefore, unless individuals receive direct and honest verbal feedback from other parties, the meta-perceptions they form may not be fully accurate (Albright and Malloy, 1999). Consequently, the question of primary interest in studies of meta-perceptions has been how accurately individuals know the way others perceive them. That is, how accurate is the correspondence between meta-perceptions and actual perceptions, a notion commonly referred to as meta-accuracy (Albright and Malloy, 1999; Kenny and DePaulo, 1993). Meta-accuracy is present when an individual's perception of how another person sees him/her matches the other person's actual perception.

While meta-perceptions have been shown to influence individuals' behaviors in their interaction with others, very few studies have examined the concept of meta-perceptions with respect to customers. For example, researchers found two distinct types of meta-perceptions within the coupon redemption context: customers believe salespeople view them either as "cheap shoppers" or "smart shoppers" (Argo and Main, 2002; Ashworth *et al.*, 2005). Another study showed that customers who believe salespeople perceive them as "cheap shoppers" will feel reluctant to redeem coupons, but customers who believe sales personnel perceive them as "smart shoppers" will be more likely to redeem coupons (Brumbaugh and Rosa, 2009).

In line with this reasoning, we propose that meta-perceptions could have an influencing role in customer complaining behavior after a service failure. This effect may occur, particularly, in the context of a service delivery process, which generally involves an exchange relationship between the customer and the service personnel (Smith *et al.*, 2010). When failure occurs and customers consider making a complaint, they engage in a cost-benefit analysis to maximize the resulting benefits and minimize the associated costs (Kowalski, 1996; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). One of the primary

costs that factors into this evaluation relates to the negative social consequences resulting from complaining, as complaining generally is viewed as a negative and unpleasant behavior (Kowalski, 1996). Therefore, because voicing complaint entails an interpersonal interaction between a customer and service personnel, how customers think the service personnel would view them may play a role in their intention to voice their disappointment directly.

Previous literature revealed that people who complain frequently may be labeled as whiners (Kowalski, 1996). Therefore, when customers consider making direct complaints, they may be concerned that they will project the negative image of being a nuisance or troublemaker in the eyes of service personnel (Halstead and Dröge, 1991). These concerns align with the suggestion that complaining may result in negative feelings such as embarrassment (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). On the other hand, the service personnel may be enthusiastic about helping customers who voice their unsatisfactory experience with substandard service. In this case, customers may feel they are doing the right thing to complain, as they may contribute to service improvements by providing feedback (DeWitt and Brady, 2003) and encouraging problem-solving efforts (Folkes *et al.*, 1987). In this case, when customers consider making a direct complaint, they believe that they would make a positive image of being a valued customer whose dissatisfaction is legitimate in the eyes of service personnel (Robertson and Shaw, 2009). We thus propose that:

*H1.* Two types of meta-perceptions may arise in the complaining context, namely, positive and negative meta-perceptions.

Previous research shows that when people experience a social mishap, they feel their image has been tarnished in the eyes of others – although these fears are commonly exaggerated (Savitsky *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, people often overestimate others' judgments of their appearance, accomplishments or performance in either good or bad situations (Gilovich *et al.*, 2002). In line with this reasoning, after experiencing a service failure, which can be classified as an unfavorable social exchange (Kowalski, 1996), customers may overestimate how service personnel would view them if they were to raise a direct complaint. In other words, meta-accuracy does not exist:

*H2.* Compared to service personnel perceptions, customers, in general, have stronger negative meta-perceptions and weaker positive meta-perceptions about how service personnel would view them if they voice direct complaints.

## 2.2 Pre-test

To explore different perceptions associated with complaining behavior, we conducted a pre-test. Our sample ( $n = 50$ ) was recruited by an online research panel of US consumers ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 37$ , 58 per cent males). Employing the critical incident technique (Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2010), we asked participants to write down the most recent service failure incident in which they complained directly to service personnel. We then asked them to explain how they perceived themselves when complaining and also how they thought the service personnel viewed them. Two researchers reviewed the answers separately and selected the perceptions that appeared most frequently and that they deemed to be relevant to the context under investigation. The two researchers then compared their selections and resolved disagreements through discussion, resulting in 19 perceptions associated with complaining behavior, as listed in Table I. These

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I think/the service personnel thought

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1. I was right in lodging the complaint
  2. I was justified in lodging the complaint
  3. I was reasonable in lodging the complaint
  4. It was moral to lodge the complaint
  5. I was a customer who was seeking redress after experiencing a service failure
  6. I was a valued customer, as I offered constructive feedback to them
  7. I was powerful
  8. I had control over the situation
  9. I was a difficult customer
  10. I was a complainer
  11. I was arrogant
  12. I was a nuisance
  13. I was hard to please
  14. I was someone who tends to exaggerate the situation to get more benefits
  15. I was a pushy customer
  16. I was just another customer whining about the services
  17. I was a silly customer
  18. I was a hardly satisfied customer
  19. I was a beggar
- 

**Table I.**  
Customers' perceptions  
associated with  
complaining behavior

perceptions were then validated to identify the types of meta-perceptions that may occur in the complaining context.

### 2.3 Method and procedure

Our sample ( $n = 400$ ) was recruited by an online research panel of US consumers. Participants were asked to read a scenario describing a television cable connection failure. Half of the participants ( $n = 200$ ,  $M_{Age} = 33$  years, 57 per cent males) were asked to imagine themselves as a customer who was experiencing the service failure and was considering whether to contact the company's customer service personnel to make a complaint (hereafter referred to as customer group). The other half ( $n = 200$ ,  $M_{Age} = 33$  years, 69 per cent males) imagined themselves as a customer service representative who was contacted by customers experiencing the service failure (hereafter referred to as personnel group). We distributed the personnel version of the questionnaire only to those who had at least two years of experience working as customer service personnel. This role-playing exercise has been employed in previous research (Savitsky *et al.*, 2001; Argo and Main, 2002).

After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire that included the list of the 19 perceptions determined in the pre-test. The customer group was asked to rate how they believed the service personnel would view them on the identified list. The personnel group were asked to rate how they would view the customers on the identified list. The personnel group's responses represented a measure of actual perception, enabling us to examine meta-accuracy.

### 2.4 Measures

In addition to the 19 meta-perceptions items identified in the pre-test, participants completed measures on private self-consciousness ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ),

public self-consciousness ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ), social anxiety ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) (Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975), self-esteem ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ) (Rosenberg, 1979), attitude toward complaining ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) (Bodey and Grace, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2003) and propensity to complain ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ) (Bodey and Grace, 2007), as they are found to be associated with meta-perceptions and complaint intention (Bodey and Grace, 2007; Argo and Main, 2002). All items were measured using 7-point Likert scales.

### 2.5 Analysis and results

We first performed an exploratory factor analysis on the 19 items measuring how customers believe service personnel view them when deciding to lodge a complaint. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.93. The 19 items were then subjected to principal axis factoring with the Promax oblique rotation (Tinsley and Tinsley, 1987). Items with factor loadings of  $< 0.45$  and those cross-loaded on two or more factors at  $\geq 0.45$  were excluded. An eigenvalue of one was employed as the cut-off value for extraction. The iterative sequence of factor analysis and item deletion resulted in a final scale of 17 items belonging to two distinct factors that explained 66 per cent of the variance. The high loading of all the items on a single factor indicates unidimensionality. No item had multiple cross-loading, thus supporting the discriminant validity of the scale. The reliability coefficients for both factors were  $> 0.80$ . We also performed a similar analysis on the 19 items measuring how service personnel would view customers when complaining and obtained comparable results, as shown in Table II.

As expected, Factor 1 mainly focuses on customers' beliefs that they are viewed negatively by service personnel when lodging direct complaints, such as perceptions of being hard to please, difficult and a nuisance. Factor 2 reflects customers' belief that they are viewed positively by service personnel when lodging direct complaints and includes perceptions of being right, justified and reasonable. Therefore, we labeled Factors 1 and 2 as negative meta-perceptions and positive meta-perceptions, respectively. This finding supports *H1*. The item scores relating to the two constructs were averaged to form two separate meta-perception indices, which we later used for data analyses.

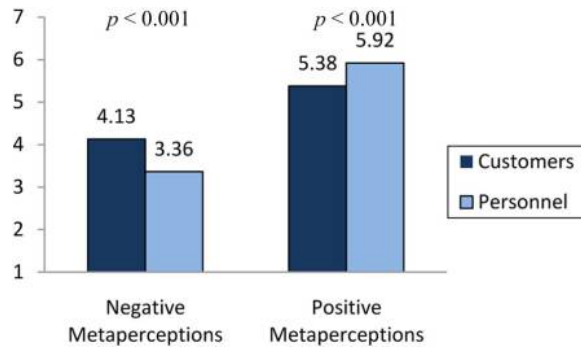
To examine for meta-accuracy, we performed an ANOVA. The variables of public and private self-consciousness, social anxiety, self-esteem, propensity to complain and attitude toward complaining were included in the data analyses as covariates. As indicated in Figure 1, service personnel have significantly lower degrees of negative meta-perceptions toward customers ( $M_{\text{Personnel}} = 3.36$  vs  $M_{\text{Customers}} = 4.13$ ,  $F(1,384) = 22.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and significantly higher degrees of positive meta-perceptions toward customers ( $M_{\text{Personnel}} = 5.92$  vs  $M_{\text{Customers}} = 5.38$ ,  $F(1,384) = 38.79$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Excluding the covariates from the analysis did not result in significant changes in the results. Therefore, *H2* is supported.

### 3. Study 2

The findings from Study 1 lend preliminary support to our earlier prediction that meta-perceptions may have an influencing role in the complaining context. Study 2 thus aims to test our proposition.

|   | Customer group Factor |       | Personnel group Factor |       |
|---|-----------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
|   | 1                     | 2     | 1                      | 2     |
| If I decided to complain, the service personnel would think I am/would think the customer is: |                       |       |                        |       |
| <i>Negative meta-perceptions</i>  |                       |       |                        |       |
| 1. A difficult customer   | 0.85                  |       | 0.78                   |       |
| 2. A complainer   | 0.82                  |       | 0.73                   |       |
| 3. An arrogant customer   | 0.80                  |       | 0.85                   |       |
| 4. A nuisance   | 0.84                  |       | 0.80                   |       |
| 5. Hard to please   | 0.88                  |       | 0.91                   |       |
| 6. Someone who tends to exaggerate the situation to get more benefits                         | 0.72                  |       | 0.73                   |       |
| 7. A pushy customer   | 0.83                  |       | 0.88                   |       |
| 8. Just another customer whining about the services   | 0.73                  |       | 0.77                   |       |
| 9. A silly customer   | 0.67                  |       | 0.80                   |       |
| 10. A hardly satisfied customer   | 0.65                  |       | 0.50                   |       |
| 11. A beggar  | 0.76                  |       | 0.83                   |       |
| <i>Positive meta-perceptions</i>  |                       |       |                        |       |
| 1. Right in lodging the complaint   |                       | 0.90  |                        | 0.91  |
| 2. Justified in lodging the complaint   |                       | 0.87  |                        | 0.92  |
| 3. Reasonable in lodging the complaint  |                       | 0.84  |                        | 0.83  |
| 4. Moral to lodge the complaint   |                       | 0.71  |                        | 0.66  |
| 5. A customer who is seeking a solution after experiencing a service failure                  |                       | 0.77  |                        | 0.73  |
| 6. A valued customer as I offer constructive feedback to them                                 |                       | 0.56  |                        | 0.47  |
| Eigenvalue  | 8.91                  | 2.36  | 9.21                   | 2.09  |
| Cumulative variance explained (per cent)  | 52.40                 | 66.29 | 54.20                  | 66.48 |
| Cronbach's Alpha  | 0.94                  | 0.89  | 0.93                   | 0.87  |

**Table II.** Factor loadings of items representing negative and positive meta-perceptions



**Figure 1.** Meta-perceptions from customers' and service personnel's viewpoint

### 3.1 Theoretical background

Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the process model of complaining behavior suggests that after a dissatisfying marketplace experience, customers will compare their costs and benefits prior to deciding whether to voice a complaint or do nothing, while, at the same time, taking into account their personal,



situational and emotional factors (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Applying this model to our research context, after a service failure, customers will evaluate the failure via the cognitive appraisal process. They may enter the primary appraisal stage, where they first assess the extent to which the failure inhibits achieving their initial goal (Lazarus, 1966, 1991). If they find that the goal inhibition is associated with the service failure, they are likely to appraise the experience as stressful. Customers could also weigh the extent to which the service failure affects their level of ego involvement (Lazarus, 1991). The more customers perceive the failure as destructive to their self-esteem, the more likely they are to appraise the failure as stressful.

This appraisal can also be explained by equity theory (Adams, 1966). When a service failure occurs, the exchange relationship between the customer and service provider becomes inequitable, with the customer experiencing a loss (Smith *et al.*, 1999). This loss can be tangible, such as a monetary loss, or intangible, such as unpleasant social interactions (Hart *et al.*, 1990). The degree of loss then determines the severity of the failure, with the higher the loss the more severe the failure (Smith *et al.*, 1999).

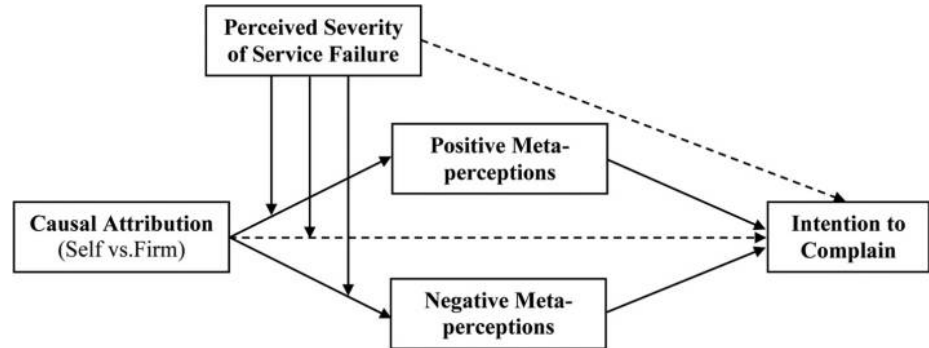
During the cognitive appraisal process, customers may also enter the secondary appraisal stage, in which they assess their ability to cope with the service failure (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Here, customers must first investigate who is responsible for the failure, as without knowing whom to blame, they are less likely to engage in any coping behavior (Lazarus, 1966). Research has identified three dimensions for causal attributions:

- (1) *locus* (who is responsible of the failure – the consumer or the service provider?);
- (2) stability (is the cause relatively temporary or fairly permanent?); and
- (3) controllability (did the responsible party have control over the cause?) (Weiner, 2000).

Once consumers know where the blame lies, they can evaluate the extent to which they can manage the situation and assess whether things are likely to get better or worse should they decide to take action.

The interplay between the primary and secondary appraisals allows customers to determine whether the service failure is stressful or irrelevant (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Only when customers appraise the service failure as stressful will they engage in one of the three coping behaviors aimed at decreasing the stress surrounding the event: problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). As noted earlier, this study examines problem-focused coping, in which customers take direct action to voice their dissatisfactions to the service provider.

As Figure 2 shows, our study focuses on how two service failure conditions – attribution of the cause (Weiner, 2000, Folkes *et al.*, 1987) and severity (Smith *et al.*, 1999) – influence meta-perceptions and direct complaint intentions. They were chosen for two reasons. First, the cognitive–emotive model described earlier states that customers must know whom to blame so that they can progress to the coping behavior. Second, customers' perception of the severity of the service failure determines their appraisal of the encounter as stressful. The high or low level of stress determines the likelihood of customers to engage in a particular coping strategy. Consequently, these two variables are the most critical and relevant factors in our research context.



**Figure 2.**  
Conceptual model

**Note:** The effects depicted by broken arrows are already established in the literature and the effects depicted by continuous lines are this paper's contribution

This study focuses solely on *locus* of attribution for two reasons. First, meta-perceptions are strongly related to impression management. During service encounters, customers tend to maintain their positive social image when interacting with service personnel. Thus, concern for self and others becomes critical and meta-perceptions are likely to be influenced by perceptions of who is responsible for the service failure (Joseph and Douglas, 2004). Second, in today's service encounters, customers often act as the co-producers of the service outcomes, in that their input is crucial to experience maximum service value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Hence, customers may need to assume part of the responsibility for service failure incidents (Bitner *et al.*, 1997).

### 3.2 Hypotheses development

After a service failure and customer's acknowledgement that they are partly responsible for the failure, a feeling of guilt or shame may dominate their cognitive appraisal process (Westbrook, 1987). Such feelings may especially arise from the belief that their lack of ability or effort caused the failure (Zellars *et al.*, 2004) and that the service personnel will view them negatively if he/she knows that they are lodging a complaint even when they partly attribute the failure to themselves. In contrast, when customers believe that the cause of the service failure resides mainly with the service provider, the feeling that the complaint is reasonable and justified may rule their cognitive appraisal process, as they are more likely to demonstrate self-protecting behaviors (Joseph and Douglas, 2004). Such feelings may result from their sense that they will be perceived as valuable customers because of their willingness to give feedback to the service personnel. This view is aligned with impression management theory, which postulates that people generally tend to project themselves in a positive way when interacting with others (Leary, 1995). Therefore, we predict that, when customers attribute the cause of service failure to themselves, they will feel more concerned about the negative social image they would create if they complained directly to the service personnel.

During the cognitive appraisal process, customers also assess the extent to which the service failure harms them before they finally judge the negative incident as stressful and adopt a particular coping strategy. Equity theory holds that any service failure

creates an unbalanced relationship between customer and service provider, as the customer will experience some extent of loss (Adams, 1966). The magnitude of the loss is translated into the perceived severity of the failure, in that a greater amount of loss is considered a more severe failure. As many factors influence the evaluation of costs and benefits during the appraisal process, customers may perceive the severity of the service failure at various levels (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Thus, a reasonable assumption is that the magnitude of the service failure plays a moderating role in the cognitive appraisal process, which can influence the customer's meta-perceptions.

As our earlier discussion showed, customers who attribute the failure partly to themselves might hold stronger negative meta-perceptions and weaker positive meta-perceptions than customers attributing the failure to the service provider. Taking into account the magnitude of service failure, we predict that, in the self-attribution context, negative meta-perceptions will be significantly stronger and positive meta-perceptions will be significantly weaker when service failure is less severe than when it is more severe. The rationale for this prediction is that a less severe failure should not significantly damage equity and, therefore, the need to restore equity is reduced (Roggeveen *et al.*, 2012). If customers decided to complain, the service personnel may see very little reason for making a complaint about such a trifling incident, as compared to a more important problem (Maute and Forrester, 1993). Thus, the feelings of guilt or shame arising from the cognitive appraisal process may be stronger in the case of a less severe failure, especially because individuals are generally keen to maintain their positive social image (Leary, 1995). Consequently, in this particular situation, their negative meta-perceptions will be stronger and positive meta-perceptions will be weaker.

On the other hand, in the firm-attribution context, we predict that no significant difference will exist in the levels of both positive and negative meta-perceptions, regardless of how severe the service failure is. The rationale for this anticipation is that customers' feelings that the complaint is reasonable and justified may greatly influence their appraisal process. Furthermore, as customers' meta-perceptions are related to impression management, customers may be less concerned with maintaining their positive social image because they feel that they have the right to voice their dissatisfaction no matter how trivial or harmful the negative service incident is to them. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H3a.* Customers who attribute the failure partly to themselves will have stronger negative meta-perceptions when failure severity is minor compared to major. However, customers who attribute the failure to the service firm will perceive a similar level of negative meta-perceptions regardless of the magnitude of the failure.
- H3b.* Customers who attribute the failure partly to themselves will have weaker positive meta-perceptions when failure severity is minor compared to major. However, customers who attribute the failure to the service firm will have a similar level of positive meta-perceptions regardless of the magnitude of the failure.

In line with impression management theory, customers who experience service failures are eager to maintain their positive social image in the eyes of the service personnel (Kowalski, 1996). Therefore, customers tend to avoid discomfort resulting from

anticipated negative social image by suspending or adjusting their behaviors (Grace, 2007), as when customers who believe the cashier will see them as cheap shoppers are less likely to redeem a coupon (Brumbaugh and Rosa, 2009). Drawing from these insights, we postulate that when customers believe the service personnel would view their complaining behavior as bothersome, they will be less likely to voice a direct complaint. This reluctance may be due to negative meta-perceptions projected from this situation, requiring them to maintain their positive social image. Relatedly, when customers believe that the service personnel would view their complaining behavior as right and justified, they will be more likely to voice a direct complaint. The positive meta-perceptions arising from this situation may require them to maintain their positive social image:

*H4.* Negative meta-perceptions have a negative relationship with direct complaint intention, whereas positive meta-perceptions have a positive relationship with direct complaint intention.

The cognitive–emotive model explains complaint behavior as a process where customers compare all potential costs and benefits after experiencing service failures prior to engaging in a particular coping behavior (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Drawing on this model, we focus on how customers' assessment of responsibility for the service failure and the severity of service failure affect their meta-perceptions, which later guide them in deciding their direct complaint intention. This model, thus, implicitly assumes that as one of the outcomes of the cognitive appraisal process, meta-perceptions determine customers' direct complaint intention. Therefore, we advance the following hypothesis:

*H5.* Meta-perceptions function as a mediator through which the interaction between customers' causal attributions and their perceived failure severity affects their intentions to voice their complaint.

### *3.3 Method and procedure*

Study 2 employed a scenario-based experiment that involved the manipulation of the attribution of the cause of service failure (self-attribution vs firm attribution). The second independent variable, perception of severity of service failure, was not manipulated, as customers will have different perception levels of service failure (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Therefore, continuous variables more accurately capture customers' perceptions. The sample ( $n = 128$ ) was recruited by the same online research panel as in Study 1. Four cases were excluded from the data set because they failed attention checks, resulting in 124 cases for the main data analysis ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 33$  years, 64 per cent males).

Participants were then presented with a hypothetical scenario in which they were asked to imagine themselves making an online reservation for a friend's birthday dinner. On the day of the dinner, the waiter cannot find their name in the booking system. The waiter asks whether they received a call to confirm their bookings. Participants allocated to the self-attribution condition were asked to imagine that they did not recall any call but remember receiving a message instructing them to call the restaurant directly if they did not receive a confirmation call within the next 24 hours. In contrast, for the firm-attribution condition, participants were asked to imagine that they did not recall any call but remember receiving a message that the restaurant will give

them a call in the next 24 hours to confirm their online booking. A pre-test showed that participants in both contexts found the scenarios to be realistic and easy to imagine ( $M_{\text{Self-attribution Realistic}} = 5.24$ ;  $M_{\text{Self-attribution Imagine}} = 5.94$ ;  $M_{\text{Firm-attribution Realistic}} = 5.54$ ;  $M_{\text{Firm-attribution Imagine}} = 6.00$ ). Participants were then asked to complete questions related to dependent variables, covariates and manipulation checks as described below.

### 3.4 Measures

The dependent variables are direct complaint intention and positive and negative meta-perceptions. Direct complaint intention was measured by three items adopted from Liu and McClure (2001). Using 7-point bipolar scales (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely), participants indicated how likely they would be to discuss the failure with the restaurant manager, ask for a solution to the failure and comment on the failure so that they can improve ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Negative and positive meta-perceptions were measured by the 17 items developed in Study 1. We employed 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) in asking respondents how they thought the restaurant manager would view them if they complained (negative meta-perceptions:  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ; positive meta-perceptions:  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). We measured participants' perception of the severity of service failure with three items adopted from Hess *et al.* (2011). The items asked the respondents to describe the service failure incident on three 7-point bipolar scales: "mild vs severe"; "minor vs major"; and "insignificant vs significant" ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ,  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). To check the manipulation of service failure attribution, we employed two items adopted from Robertson and Shaw (2009) using 7-point Likert scales ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ,  $\alpha = 0.97$ ). Similar to Study 1, we measured participants' personality traits, consisting of private self-consciousness ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ), public self-consciousness ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ), social anxiety ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ), self-esteem ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ), attitude toward complaining ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and propensity to complain ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ). In addition, we measured respondents' negative emotions, including feelings of anger, disappointment, frustration and anxiety after experiencing the service failure (Bougie *et al.*, 2003; Gelbrich, 2010; Mattila and Ro, 2008; Chebat *et al.*, 2005). All of these variables were included as covariates in our data analysis. All items relevant to each construct were averaged to form an index to be used in subsequent data analysis.

### 3.5 Analysis and results

An ANOVA showed that the mean failure attribution index for the self-attribution condition was significantly higher than for the firm attribution condition ( $M_{\text{Self-attribution}} = 4.82$ ,  $M_{\text{Firm-attribution}} = 3.09$ ,  $F(1,122) = 34.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result confirms the manipulation of failure attribution.

In all our data analyses, excluding the covariates did not result in significant changes in the main or interaction effects found. Hence, in the interest of brevity, we do not elaborate on them.

To test *H3a* and *H3b*, we compared whether significant differences existed for participants' negative and positive meta-perceptions for low and high levels of severity across the two attribution conditions. Because severity is a continuous variable, we used simple slope analysis (Aiken and West, 1991, Hayes and Matthes, 2009) at  $-1$  SD and  $+1$  SD from the mean of severity. Specifically, we first performed two regressions. In the

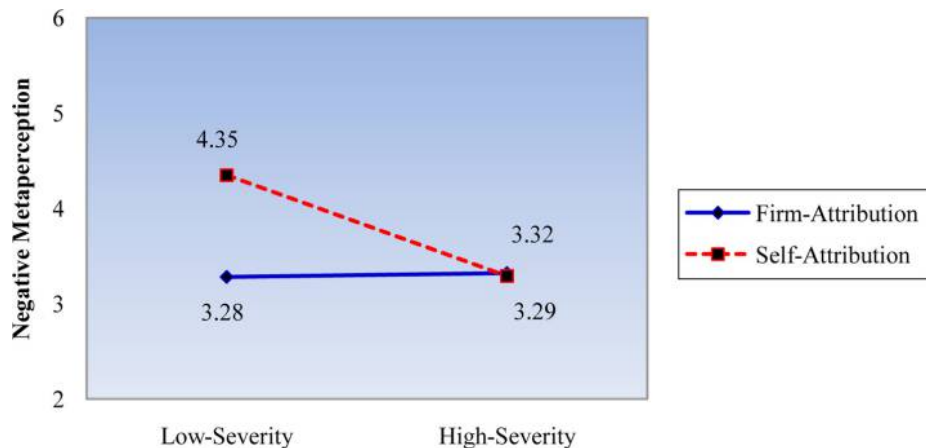
first regression negative meta-perceptions and in the second regression positive meta-perceptions were regressed on service failure attribution (coded as “1” = self-attribution vs “0” = firm attribution), mean-centered scores of perceived severity and the interaction between failure attribution and mean-centered perceived severity.

The results of the first regression showed that the effect of failure attribution on negative meta-perceptions was significant ( $b = 0.52, p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that when participants attributed the cause of service failure partly to themselves, they had greater negative meta-perceptions. Further, the interaction effect of attribution and severity was significant ( $b = -0.55, p < 0.05$ ). This interaction effect is shown in Table III and illustrated in Figure 3. For subjects in the self-attribution condition, a negative and significant relationship exists between perceived severity and negative meta-perceptions ( $b = -0.53, p < 0.001$ ), and the confidence interval for this effect does not include the value of zero. This result indicates that those who perceive severity of service failure as lower experience greater negative meta-perceptions. In contrast, for participants in the firm-attribution condition, no significant relationship exists between perceived severity and negative meta-perceptions ( $b = 0.02, p > 0.10$ ), and the confidence interval for this effect does include zero, indicating that these customers have similar negative meta-perceptions regardless of the level of severity. This finding supports *H3a*.

|                                       | B       | LCI   | UCI   |
|---------------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| <i>DV = Negative meta-perceptions</i> |         |       |       |
| 1: self-attribution                   | -0.53** | -0.83 | -0.23 |
| 0: firm attribution                   | 0.02    | -0.34 | 0.37  |
| <i>DV = positive meta-perceptions</i> |         |       |       |
| 1: self-attribution                   | 0.58**  | 0.35  | 0.82  |
| 0: firm attribution                   | -0.04   | -0.32 | 0.23  |

**Table III.**  
The effect of perceived severity on negative and positive meta-perceptions

**Notes:** DV = Dependent variable; LCI and UCI = Lower and upper 95 per cent confidence intervals for 5000 bootstrap samples; \*\* $p < 0.01$



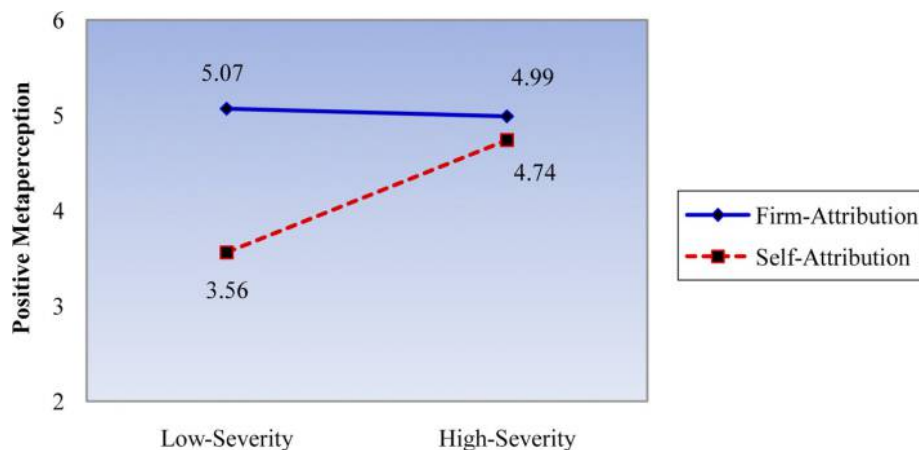
**Figure 3.**  
The effect of perceived severity on negative meta-perceptions

For positive meta-perception as the dependent variable, the effect of failure attribution was significant ( $b = -0.88, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that when participants attributed the cause of the service failure partly to themselves, they had lower positive meta-perceptions. Also, the interaction effect of attribution and severity was significant ( $b = 0.63, p < 0.01$ ). As Table III shows, for subjects in the self-attribution condition, a positive and significant relationship exists between perceived severity and positive meta-perceptions ( $b = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ), and the confidence interval for this effect does not include the value of zero. This finding indicates that those who perceive the severity of the service failure as lower experience lower positive meta-perceptions, as illustrated in Figure 4. Conversely, for respondents in the firm-attribution condition, the relationship between perceived severity and positive meta-perceptions is not significant ( $b = -0.04, p > 0.10$ ) and the confidence interval for this effect includes zero, indicating that these customers have similar positive meta-perceptions regardless of the level of severity, supporting *H3b*.

To test the mediating role of negative and positive meta-perceptions in the effect of the interaction between failure attribution and severity on intention to voice complaint, we used the bootstrapping method (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In our mediation test, negative and positive meta-perceptions were included as our proposed mediators, the interaction term was included as the independent variable, and intention to voice complaint was the dependent variable. Service failure attribution and service failure severity, negative emotions and personality traits were included as covariates.

The results of the mediation tests appear in Table IV. First, the negative effect of negative meta-perceptions on intention to voice ( $b = -0.18, p < 0.05$ ) indicates that stronger negative meta-perceptions lead to lower intention to complain. On the other hand, the positive effect of positive meta-perceptions on intention to voice ( $b = 0.36, p < 0.01$ ) suggests that stronger positive meta-perceptions lead to greater intention to complain. Therefore, *H4* is supported.

As Table IV shows, the negative effect of the interaction term on negative meta-perceptions ( $a = -0.55, p < 0.01$ ) means that in the self-attribution condition, customers who perceive the failure to be less severe have greater negative



**Figure 4.**  
The effect of perceived  
severity on positive  
meta-perceptions

meta-perceptions when thinking of voicing their complaint. The confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction term on intention to voice through negative meta-perceptions ( $a \times b = 0.10, p < 0.05$ ) does not cross zero. Also, the direct effect of the interaction term on intention to voice is significant ( $c' = 0.48, p < 0.05$ ). Hence, negative meta-perceptions partially mediate the effect of interaction between failure attribution and severity on intention to voice complaint. The partial mediation effect is probably attributable to the presence of other mediator variables that explain the effects of attribution and severity on intention to voice complaints, but which have not been included in our model.

For positive meta-perceptions as the mediator variable, as shown in Table IV, the positive effect of the interaction term ( $a = 0.63, p < 0.01$ ) implies that in the self-attribution condition, customers who perceive the failure to be less severe have lower positive meta-perceptions when thinking of making a complaint. The confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction term on intention to voice via positive meta-perceptions ( $a \times b = 0.22, p < 0.01$ ) does not cross zero. Also, the direct effect of the interaction term on intention to voice is not significant ( $c' = 0.35, p > 0.05$ ). Thus, positive meta-perceptions fully mediate the effect of interaction between failure attribution and severity on intention to voice complaint. These results together support H5.

#### 4. Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that customers have positive and negative meta-perceptions after experiencing service failures prior to deciding whether they will lodge direct complaints. Results also showed that meta-accuracy does not exist in the complaining context. This finding lends support to our prediction that meta-perceptions have a contributing role in understanding why customers do not complain directly to service providers post service failures. In particular, we found that customers' perceptions of themselves tend to be more negative than the perceptions service employees actually hold of complaining customers.

Study 2 showed that, in the self-attribution condition, customers will have stronger negative and weaker positive meta-perceptions, and this effect is even greater when they perceive the severity of the service failure as low. In contrast, in the firm-attribution condition, customers will be less concerned about the negative image they might make on the service personnel, regardless of the magnitude of the service failure. As predicted, we also found that the stronger the negative meta-perceptions, the less likely customers are to lodge direct complaints.

| IV                    | Mediator                  | DV                 | A      | B       | c      | C'    | a*b    | LCI  | UCI  |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------|---------|--------|-------|--------|------|------|
| Attribution* severity | Negative meta-perceptions | Intention to voice | -0.55* | -0.18** | 0.58** | 0.48* | 0.10*  | 0.02 | 0.30 |
| Attribution* severity | Positive meta-perceptions | Intention to voice | 0.63** | 0.36**  | 0.58** | 0.35  | 0.22** | 0.09 | 0.47 |

**Notes:** LCI and UCI = lower and upper 95 per cent confidence intervals for 5,000 bootstrap samples; A: effect of IV on mediator; B: effect of mediator on DV; C: total effect; C': direct effect; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table IV.**  
The indirect effect of interaction between attribution and severity on intention to voice through negative and positive meta-perceptions



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Furthermore, our mediation tests revealed that the effects of the interaction between customers' causal attributions and their perceived failure severity on their direct complaint intentions occur through the effects of their meta-perceptions. Therefore, in parallel to the findings of previous research about the mechanisms through which a service failure leads to customers' decision to complain, such as emotions (Bonifield and Cole, 2008; Gelbrich, 2010; Kalamas *et al.*, 2008) or cognitive evaluations (Singh and Wilkes, 1996), our research showed that positive and negative meta-perceptions manifested as two important factors that can provide a supplementary explanation for customers' complaint decisions.

#### *4.1 Theoretical contributions and managerial implications*

In understanding the formation of meta-perceptions, this study synthesizes two theories: impression management and attribution theories. The integration of these two theories appears to make a significant contribution, as it not only addresses one of the key challenges for the development and application of attribution theory but also advances current limited works that aim to link attributions to impression management strategies (Martinko, 2004).

Previous studies have largely focused on investigating the direct effect of attribution dimensions on complaining behavior (Mattila and Ro, 2008). Exceptions found that customers' emotions – in particular anger – mediate the effect between attribution and complaining behavior (Kalamas *et al.*, 2008) and showed that failure attributions affect intention to voice complaint through expectancy value judgments (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). Also, studies investigating the joint effect of attribution and severity on complaining behavior are rare (Chebat *et al.*, 2005). Our study, thus, offers an additional contribution to the current literature on appraisal stages (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998) by showing that meta-perceptions indeed function as a cognitive process that links the interaction effect between attribution and perceived severity of the service failure to customers' complaint intentions.

With respect to our findings in relation to how interaction between attribution and severity of service failures influences meta-perceptions, service managers should first equip their service personnel with appropriate skills to identify who is responsible for service failures. Such skills can be obtained through training that reviews internal reports of previous complaint incidents (Tax *et al.*, 2006). This way, when service failure occurs, personnel can adequately assess the circumstances and better tailor the service recovery to the individual situation.

Customers perceive severity of service failure differently, presenting service personnel with a challenge when examining a service failure. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that both lower and higher degrees of service failure contribute to meta-perceptions to some extent. Therefore, the better approach is for service employees to treat all customers with utmost sincerity so as to quickly reduce or eliminate customers' negative meta-perceptions.

Furthermore, our findings, in general, show that negative meta-perceptions inhibit customers' intention to voice their dissatisfaction. Therefore, service managers should consider marketing strategies that can increase positive meta-perceptions. With the knowledge that attitudes and behaviors of service personnel play an important role in encouraging customers to voice their dissatisfaction (Bove and Robertson, 2005), service managers could revise their service script so that service personnel can respond to

customers' complaints in a more positive way. Service managers could also encourage customer citizenship behavior (Tax *et al.*, 2006). For instance, service managers could reward customers for sharing their positive complaining experiences with others.

#### *4.2 Limitations and directions for future research*

A potential limitation of this study is that the data were collected using hypothetical scenarios. Although this method has been widely applied and the scenarios employed were refined through pre-tests, the scenarios may not capture the richness of an actual service encounter. Future research could use an experience-based sampling method to better depict customers' real experiences in handling service failures. Future research could utilize objective situational indicators, such as videotape of negative service incidents or a third-party observer technique, to reveal more precise distinctions between positive and negative meta-perceptions. Finally, this study was limited to two service failure contexts: cable TV connection and restaurant booking. Replications and extensions to other types of services are needed to generalize our findings.

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#### About the authors

Dewi Tojib is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Marketing at Monash University. She holds a Bachelor of Business Systems (H1) degree and a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) from Monash University. Her main research interests include consumer responses to service failures, multi-channel in retailing and services context, and technology adoption and use in organizational and consumer context. Her research has been published in a number of academic and practitioner journals such as *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Journal of Services Marketing* and *Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organization*. Dewi Tojib is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [Dewi.Tojib@monash.edu](mailto:Dewi.Tojib@monash.edu)

Dr. Saman Khajehzadeh is a research fellow in the department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University. He holds a PhD degree in Marketing from Monash University. His research interests are consumer behavior with focus on consumers' responses to mobile marketing communications, services marketing and management, and health marketing.