Typology of Service Failures: Age and Gender Perspectives

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Although service providers do attempt in earnest to deliver excellent service, service failures inevitably occur in service encounters between the provider and customers, as service delivery may not always satisfy all customers’ expectations. It is of value to the service providers to acknowledge that service failures can and do occur, as this acknowledgement presents them with opportunities to recover from the failures (Smith et al., 1999). Although service failures are assumed to negatively affect customers’ satisfaction and consequent behaviors, service providers’ efforts to resolve the failures can prompt frustrated customers to become loyal customers (Mattila, 2001). With regard to the knowledge developed for customer behavior associated with fitness center industry, sport marketing scholars have focused primarily on service quality as the antecedents of customers’ satisfaction (e.g., Afthinos et al., 2005; Howat & Assaker, 2016; Theodorakis et al., 2014), while the service failures have yet to be fully understood. Thus, it is important to identify the potential service failures that can occur within the fitness center context, as they can vary considerably according to customer demographics such as gender (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2003) and age (i.e., Zen Y vs. baby boomer; Kumar & Lim, 2008). These variables are particularly important as the number of female and mature customers have significantly increased in fitness industry (IHRSA, 2018).

To enhance our understanding of these segment with regard to service failures, the current study was designed to identify and classify service failures in the fitness center by age and gender. We collected data from 100 incumbent customers by asking the following questions: “What specific event led to dissatisfying service encounters from the customer’s point of view?” and “What did the contact employee do that caused your previous experience to be remembered with distaste? Using content analysis, we found multiple types of service failures occurred. Out of total service failures, neglecting to offer assistance (28%), rudeness (23%), ignorance (15%), confrontation (11%), and putting a shame (7%) frequently occurred. “Neglecting to offer assistance”, “rudeness”, and “putting a shame” occurred among all ages and genders. A logistic regression revealed that “ignorance” occurred more in older customers (age > 50) than younger customers (odds ratio: 4.22, χ² = 5.48, p = 0.027). In the gender difference, “confrontation” occurred more among male customers than female customers (odds ratio: 4.11, χ² = 4.46, p = 0.047).

The findings of the current study contribute to extant research in service failure. Specifically, the current study extended the literature by identifying gender and age differences in perception of service failures. In addition, the research provided a strong theoretical understanding of how and why such perceptual differences occur by age and gender, which can be added to the body of knowledge. Practically, recognizing possible service failures associated with target customers (e.g., older female, young male) may allow service providers to achieve increased customer satisfaction.