

**MEETING PLANNERS' EXPERIENCES OF MULTIPLE SERVICE FAILURES:
A DYNAMIC MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE**

Abstract

This article investigates service failures in the meeting industry, with a particular focus on multiple failures. Drawing on an integrative model of organizational justice, this research developed a framework to study meeting planners' responses following multiple service failures. In-depth interviews with meeting planners assessed their experiences with repeated service failures in which a meeting venue was at fault. The study revealed several findings, including distinctive characteristics of multiple service failures, a new escalation evaluation process, and meeting planners' distinctive responses to failures as a result of their intermediary role. Study implications are discussed, and future research directions are offered.

Keywords: multiple service failures, meeting planner, venue, organizational justice

Introduction

The business events industry has been recognized as a significant contributor of economic and non-economic benefits in many destinations around the world (e.g., BECA, 2015; Edwards, Foley & Malone, 2017; EIC, 2018). Meeting planners (also referred to as ‘Professional Conference Organizers’ (PCOs)) form an integral part of the convention industry. They are often influencing or making decisions that bring substantial business to a destination (Jago & Deery, 2003). Yet, potential problems and shortfalls experienced in the service provision by suppliers are not only affecting meeting planners but ultimately, they may have an impact on convention attendees. Thus, it is of interest to better understand how meeting planners perceive service failures caused by suppliers. Of particular interest are venues, given their central role in the convention experience.

This article examines service failure events in the meeting industry context, with a particular focus on one of the key industry players, namely meeting planners. In a significant departure from prior research, it focuses on multiple occurrences of service failures over an extended time period. In doing so, it addresses two gaps in the literature. First, prior literature primarily investigates single service failures by isolating individual service encounters during an entire service delivery process or throughout the course of a customer–firm relationship. This approach has been applied despite customer perceptions and experiences being dynamic and likely to change over time (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Sivakumar, Li & Dong, 2014).

Second, prior literature on service failure has focused on examining end customers in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context, while neglecting potential intermediary customers or customers in a business-to-business (B2B) context. Meeting planners act as an intermediary between meeting venues and the association/attendees, and they buy services from meeting venues

under the B2B context. Considering the distinctive characteristics of different types of customers, generalizing findings from the B2C to the B2B context, or to the meeting industry is problematic.

By considering the dynamic service delivery literature and using an integrative model of organizational justice, the present research developed a framework to study meeting planners' responses following multiple service failures. In doing so it investigated how multiple service failure experiences over an extended time period impact on meeting planners' responses towards a service provider and related entities? In particular, the study aimed to address four research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What are the types of service failure events experienced by meeting planners during their relationships with venues?

RQ 2: What are distinctive responses formed by meeting planners following service failures compared to end customers in a B2C context?

RQ 3: What are the distinctive characteristics of multiple service failures compared to single service failures?

RQ 4: How do meeting planners' responses change over time as they experience multiple service failures?

The convention industry was chosen as a study setting for three reasons: 1) the increasing economic and social significance of the industry; 2) the long duration of the organizing process, especially for large-scale conventions, which is suitable to investigate multiple service failures over an extended period; and 3) meeting planners act as an intermediary customer between host locations/suppliers and meeting attendees, and work with host locations in a B2B context.

Literature Review

Overview of Service Failure and Recovery Research

Service failure and recovery have received considerable research attention in recent decades (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Van Vaerenbergh, Orsingher, Vermeir & Lariviere, 2014). Holloway & Wang (2015) conducted a comprehensive review of the service failure and recovery literature in the past 15 years from selected marketing journals. They noted that early studies primarily focused on service failure characteristics (e.g., Sparks, 2001), service recovery strategies (e.g., de Matos, Henrique & Rossi, 2007), as well as various customer responses following failures and/or recoveries (e.g., Johnston & Michel, 2008). Research attention then shifted to examining the effect of moderators affecting customer responses, including personal, situational and contextual factors (e.g., Hess, Ganesan & Klein, 2007). Service failure in an online context has also been a focus of investigation (Harris, Mohr, & Bernhardt, 2006). One of the most prominent theoretical frameworks to investigate service failure and recovery has been organizational justice theory which will be discussed next.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Organizational justice theory in the service failure and recovery context

Organizational justice theory has been drawn on extensively to explain people's reactions to conflict management, including service failure and recovery (Tax et al., 1998). Customers often need to participate during the service delivery process (Gronroos, 1988) and are therefore recognized as partial employees (Bowen, 1986). When a service failure occurs, customers tend to form injustice and unfairness evaluations toward the service provider (e.g. Clark, Adjei, & Yancey, 2009; Namkung & Jang, 2010). A service provider may implement recovery measures, which can

restore customers' justice evaluations to some degree, depending on the effectiveness of the recovery measures (e.g. , Bradley & Sparks, 2012).

There are four types of justice typically discussed in the service failure and recovery literature, namely distributive, procedural, interactional, and informational justice. *Distributive justice*, originating from equity and social exchange theories, is concerned with the allocation of benefits and costs as well as the perceived outcome of exchange (Smith et al., 1999). When a service failure occurs, customers experience inequality or a loss of benefits compared to their input, both monetary and non-monetary (Roschk & Gelbrich, 2014). In the meeting planner–venue context, meeting planners may encounter situations where services are not delivered as promised, leading to distributive injustice. *Procedural justice* is concerned with the policies, procedures and criteria by which an outcome is achieved (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997). During a service failure, customers obtain clues about the process and use this information to supplement justice judgment formations, especially when an outcome is not available or unsatisfactory. They may assess service providers' response speed as well as customer voice (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Tax et al., 1998). Procedural injustice in a meeting planner-venue context may occur if a planner is not afforded an opportunity for input on how to recover from a service failure. *Interactional justice* focuses on how service personnel perform services (Tax et al., 1998), consisting of various elements such as politeness/friendliness, attentiveness, honesty, trustfulness, empathy, effort, assurance, directness and concern (Blodgett et al., 1997). Being confronted with rude venue staff may result in perceptions of interpersonal injustice by a planner. Finally, *informational justice* refers to the adequacy and trustworthiness of information provided by service personnel (Colquitt, Wesson, Porter, Conlon, & Ng, 2001).

Prior literature suggests justice is a dominant cognitive basis of customer satisfaction and other responses in a service failure context, and the degree of influence of the four dimensions of justice may vary (e.g. Lee & Park, 2010; Mattila & Cranage, 2005). However, the majority of literature uses justice theory to study customer responses following a specific service failure or/and recovery. It lacks a heuristic assessment of customers' overall justice evaluations toward the particular firm, nor does it distinguish justice evaluations of service personnel versus the firm. Studying multiple service failures requires a cumulative evaluation about various service providers and a firm during the entire service delivery process over the course of a firm-customer relationship.

Multiple Service Failures

The vast majority of service failure research has neglected to explore multiple occurrence of service failures experienced by customers during an extended time period. Only two studies examined multiple service failures, identifying several distinct characteristics including failure *frequency*, *timing*, and *proximity* and *similarity* (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Sivakumar et al., 2014). The first three characteristics were proposed in a conceptual study only and lacked empirical evidence, while the latter characteristic was established in a longitudinal study but was reported to have no impact on customer responses. Maxham III & Netemeyer (2002) noted distinct customer responses caused by multiple service failures compared to those reported in relation to a single service failure. First, the service failure “paradox effect” diminishes when more than one service failure occurs. Despite successful recoveries in response to a repeat failure, customers will not restore their satisfaction or behavioral intentions to the pre-failure level. Second, customers believe multiple service failures are indicative of a stable cause for these service failures, and thus, attribute them specifically to the service firm.

Gaps in the Multiple Service Failure Literature

Compared to literature focusing on single service failures, findings from multiple service failure research are rather limited. First, findings from the only two prior studies on multiple service failures are preliminary and cannot be generalized. Sivakumar et al. (2014)'s study is purely conceptual and lacks empirical testing. Maxham III & Netemeyer (2002)'s study investigates situations with only two service failures, which cannot fully reflect real situations where three or more service failures might happen. Second, it is unclear how the various characteristics of multiple service failures affect customer responses at the same time. In a multiple service failure context, time distribution and variability dimensions can exist concurrently. What adds to the complexity of the service process involving multiple service failures is that some characteristics may play a contradictory role in influencing customer responses towards the service personnel and the firm. It is also possible that certain characteristics may exert a stronger influence over others or even lead the overall influence on customer responses. Lastly, cumulative measurements about customer responses are missing in both studies. Maxham III & Netemeyer (2002) only measured responses regarding each failure while neglecting overall responses following the two consecutive failures. Sivakumar et al. (2014)'s study uses perceived service quality as the only measurement, while links to customer satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and other responses remain unexplored.

Service Failure and Recovery in the Meeting Industry Context

Meeting planners and their relationships with meeting venues have received some research attention ((Oh, Kim, & Hong, 2009; Kim & Boo, 2010; Kim & Qu, 2012; Yoo & Weber, 2005). However, this area still offers critical lines of inquiry, due to the changing demands of meeting

planners together with the increasingly competitive landscape for meeting venues (Parrish, 2014). Little research has investigated the impact of service failures in the meeting industry despite the fact that meeting planners are likely to experience them during their various encounters with suppliers. Indeed, Oh (2003) reported that more than one-third of about 50,000 meeting planners from a major hotel chain's database reported service failure experiences. Yet, they rated hotels' recovery measures "only moderately successful" (Oh, 2003). Another study across different hotel chains revealed that among all service failures reported by meeting planners to hotels, only half were resolved, leading to planners' dissatisfaction and diminished loyalty to hotels (J.D. Power and Associates, 2002).

Stages of the Meeting Planning Process and Potential Multiple Service Failures

Meeting planners' interactions with venues normally span over a longer time period compared to end customers, with a typical timeline for site selection and meeting planning being around five years for association meetings (Rogers, 2013). Thus, they experience multiple service encounters, with the potential for multiple service failures. The meeting organizing process is divided into four stages, namely initial (sales), pre-event, event, and post-event stages (Oh et.al., 2009). These stages compose a dynamic service delivery process between meeting planners and venues. Since the entire process is evaluated by the same meeting planner, it is logical to believe that meeting planners' responses in each stage are interrelated, impacting those in later stages. However, only one study to date has examined the dynamic service delivery process and accumulated effects of service evaluations for the entire process. Oh et al. (2009) investigated service encounters during the four event stages, arguing that hotels' service promises and performance at each stage affect those in subsequent stages. As a result, meeting planners' responses in each stage can affect those as well as overall responses. That study also revealed that

the event stage is of critical importance, with event stage satisfaction having the strongest impact on overall satisfaction. It is worth noting that rather than examining service failures, Oh and colleagues' study primarily focused on positive service experiences.

As is apparent, service failure/recovery has received only scant attention in the meeting industry context. In the broader context, multiple service failures experienced over an extended time period as opposed to single service failure events have been neglected by researchers. This article aims to address this research gap.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain insights into the various constructs in the framework, and to investigate meeting planners' responses following multiple service failures. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 meeting planners to investigate their experiences with multiple service failures in which a meeting venue was at fault, either during the process of organizing a meeting or throughout the entire meeting planner-venue relationship. Initial interviewees were sourced via researchers at a local university and a sales office of an international hotel chain. Snowballing was then employed to tap into interviewees' professional networks for further referrals. The sample size was not pre-determined; rather it was an evolving process until reaching saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted via Skype and phone. They ranged from 30 to 70 minutes, with the majority lasting about 40 minutes. Interviewees were asked to share details about their specific multiple service failure experiences, including when, where, and how it happened, as well as what

they thought and how they felt following the failures. Probing questions were asked to gain further insights by prompting interviewees to think about possible reasons for their thoughts and feelings. All interviews were recorded into audio files after obtaining interviewees' consent, and then transcribed within a day. Transcripts were analyzed by eye-balling and the adoption of NVivo, a computer software for qualitative research. First, each recording was listened to and read multiple times to gain familiarity with all service failure events as well as interviewees' thoughts and feelings following each failure. Pertinent comments were highlighted. Then, with the assistance of NVivo, relevant content was coded into different categories. The first round of coding was mainly relating to existing constructs in the multiple service failure framework which was informed by the literature review, followed by another round of coding that focused on exploring new categorizations beyond the established framework. Lastly, all codings were reexamined to confirm existing relationships among them and to uncover new ones.

Analysis of the interview data followed the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness, and adopted a comparative technique, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The first author served as the primary data analyst who conducted the initial content analysis, employing the methods detailed previously. Then, a second researcher content analysed the transcripts, without knowledge of the outcome of the content analysis by the primary data analyst. The researchers then compared their independent analyses, with the coding agreement within the 85-95% range that was deemed acceptable (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). Inter-researcher differences were resolved through discussion and re-assessment of the transcripts, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results and Discussion

Interviewee Profile

Table 1 provides a profile of interviewees' professional background. As is apparent, interviewees were a mix of corporate, association, and independent meeting planners. They were based in Asia (Hong Kong, Mainland China, Singapore), Australia and the United States. Half of the sample dealt with regional and international meetings, while the remainder focused on domestic meetings, with their size ranging from 50 attendees to more than 10,000. The number of meetings organized annually ranged from six to as many as a few hundred. Interviewees had an average of 14 years of industry experience.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Service Failures and Justice Types

Analysis of transcripts revealed a wide range of service failures experienced by meeting planners (Table 2). They were first classified into the four stages of a meeting organizing process (Oh et. al., 2009), namely sales, pre-event, event, and post-event stages. In each stage, failures were further categorized by justice elements – namely outcome, process, interactional, and informational elements. Given meeting planners' intermediary role, interviewees clearly differentiated whether a failure affected themselves exclusively or their end customers, that is, attendees. Service failures were mostly associated with the first three stages of the meeting planning process, namely sales, pre-event, and event stages (39 events). Outcome and process elements were more prevalent (34 events), compared to interactional and informational elements (7 events). Around half of the service failures only affected interviewees, while the remainder were also noticed by and/or affected their attendees.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Meeting Planners' Distinctive Perceptions of and Responses to Service Failures due to their Intermediary Role and operating in the B2B Context

Analysis of transcripts revealed several interesting findings about interviewees' distinctive service failure perceptions and responses due to their intermediary role and operating in a B2B context. Compared to end customers in a B2C context, interviewees disclosed 1) lower pre-failure expectations, and 2) less severe post-failure responses.

Lower pre-failure expectations

Informants' service expectations appeared relatively low due to a) an awareness of the service complexity and b) the long duration of the meeting planning process.

a) Service complexity

Interviewees stressed that services provided by venues during the meeting organizing process were more complex so that they expected service failures to occur for various reasons. First, it often involved coordination among different service staff from different departments. And as one informant noted:

“There are so many things that are out of my control, out of your hands, that may go wrong... You're always going to run into something that's out of your control. Being in the industry, you have to roll with the punches, and you have to realize that not everything is in your hands.” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years' experience)

Second, the meeting organizing process requires meticulous attention to detail, which may be compromised by situational factors, as explained by one informant after experiencing a service failure caused by a newly opened hotel whose service staff had little experience organizing large-scale meetings:

“It [meeting planning] involves a lot of small details such as luggage handling, guestrooms and so on. Some new hotels may not be able to take care of every single detail, as they don’t have the experiences... So I kind of know something would go wrong and it did happen.” (Interviewee No. 1, Corporate, 10 years’ experience)

Third, it is common for convention service managers to take care of multiple meetings, potentially compromising their attention to detail. Several informants expressed low service expectations as they observed service providers being overloaded:

“I found the convention service manager was overwhelmed, meaning he had a lot of other projects with other clients... They were really overworking a lot of their employees, so the service wasn't just at the level.” (Interviewee No. 6, Corporate, 20 years’ experience)

“They are actually quite overloaded. They often have more than one event on hand... It was peak season that time. It was very common that they worked until 12 o’clock [midnight]. They are also humans, so it was natural they missed out something, or forget about something during my event. It was just not possible for them to remember everything and take care of every detail... I knew the response time would be much longer than normal.” (Interviewee No. 8, Corporate, 12 years’ experience)

b) Duration of Planning Process

Interviewees noted the long process duration resulting in increased service encounters, and consequently an increased chance of service failures, as illustrated here:

“It was such a long process, and there were so many things we needed to work with... It was just not possible for nothing to go wrong.” (Interviewee No. 8, Corporate, 12 years’ experience)

Given the long lead time, informants both expected and experienced staff turnover, resulting in potential for miscommunication, as shared by one informant:

“The sales manager was going for maternity leave, so I prepared myself to spend more time to brief her successor, as there would definitely be things missed, especially the special arrangements we’d agreed on.” (Interviewee No. 9, Independent, 9 years’ experience)

Less severe post-failure responses

Interviewees exhibited less severe post-failure responses, compared to those expressed by end customers in a B2C context. For example, when deciding whether to use a venue again following a service failure, informants would consider feedback of their clients and attendees more than their own experiences, and would continue to use it for future meetings if their attendees were satisfied with or wanted to use it, even if they may have been dissatisfied with the service received, as illustrated here:

“There were actually a number reasons [why I still used that hotel after service failures], for example, it had a good location, the venue was suitable for my events, overall service levels, or more often, my clients specifically wanted to use that hotel. Then I would have to use it.” (Interviewee No. 3, Independent, 4 years’ experience)

Yet, these less severe post-failure responses were not always exhibited, with attendees' level of satisfaction being the determining factor. Several respondents noted that they would not use a venue again if attendees were dissatisfied, even if they themselves had a good relationship with venue staff:

“My relationship with the hotel will not be the deciding factor of whether I would use that hotel. It does matter somehow [in my decision whether I will reuse a hotel], but if the hotel cannot deliver the services to the clients on site and upsets them, then it will affect my relationship with the clients too. So I would not reuse that hotel again.”

(Interviewee No. 3, Independent, 4 years' experience)

Characteristics of Multiple Service Failures

Data analysis revealed substantial empirical evidence relating to distinctive characteristics of multiple service failures, namely *frequency, similarity, timing, and proximity*, as well as consequent responses of service failures.

Failure Frequency

Frequency was the most explicitly expressed characteristic of multiple service failures. Respondents clearly identified the number of service failures they had experienced, referring to the *first/second/third/last...problem*”. Failure frequency directly caused respondents to intensify their negative responses following multiple service failures. It is likely that respondents perceived venues not expending sufficient effort, and allowing service failures to happen, which affected their perception of venues' overall service quality. One informant's comment clearly reflects such reasoning:

“I thought I’d give him the benefit of the doubt [after the first failure] but he didn’t improve much... I felt worse the second time than the first. It happened once already and I gave them the chance to correct the problem, but it turned out they didn’t improve much.”
(Interviewee No. 5, Association, 25 years’ experience)

Failure Similarity

Respondents often commented on whether two or more failures were similar or different among the multiple service failures they experienced, using expressions like “after so many *similar* mistakes”, “it *again* came back to her attention of details”, and “that was a *different* problem”. Respondents emphasized when the failures were similar as those were likely to intensify their negative emotions, and also reduced their repurchase intentions:

“I can forgive a few minor blips, but when a venue continues to mess up on the same thing over and over they move themselves further down my radar for future events.”
(Interviewee No. 12, Association, 11 years’ experience)

One possible reason may be that similar failures suggest that these failures are stable as the service provider does not address the underlying procedural shortcomings. One informant’s account clearly points to such reasoning:

“I would have to say two mistakes being the same would make me more annoyed [than two mistakes being different], because you would think after the first mistake, you’ve tried to address the situation. If they’re making that same mistake again, then it’s like they weren’t even listening to you or they just couldn’t change it.” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years’ experience)

Combination - Failure Frequency and Similarity

Reference to failure frequency and similarity often occurred together. If similar failures occurred multiple times, respondents tended to describe them together and specify *how long* the failures last continuously during a given time period, instead of describing failures individually. Such failures severely aggravated respondents' negative responses. One informant shared her experiences of continuously bad service attitudes, which gave rise to her dissatisfaction with the service provider; it eventually resulted in her switching to another service provider, and that not after but during the meeting organization process.

“She was not helpful, not responsive, and absolutely not supportive throughout the three months that I worked with her...I ended up changing to another event manager...It was a process that I gradually could not stand working with her...It was the worst I’ve ever experienced...” (Interviewee No. 9, Independent, 9 years’ experience)

Another informant described a service provider not providing correct billing multiple times, leading to negative emotions and dissatisfaction:

“When we actually got the first draft, she was asking us to confirm all the different charges for each events, but nothing added up correctly...And she couldn’t get it right for many of the bills during these six weeks...for me it was a lot of frustration, because then I would have to continually liaise with her and pull off the mistakes.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

Failure Timing

Respondents also considered multiple service failures by the timing of each individual failure, though to a lesser extent compared to *frequency* and *similarity*. They usually identified the timing of a failure by referencing certain “milestone” events, like “*two weeks* after our first contact”, “*six weeks* ahead of the event”, “until *three days* from my event”, etc. Respondents also related the timing of failures to specific stages of the meeting planning process, for example, “during the *sales stage*”, “right *before our event started*”, “when I *got on site*”, “*after the event*”, etc. However, there was no strong indication that failure timing caused respondents to intensify their responses.

Failure Proximity

Some respondents also described multiple service failures in terms of failure proximity, with commonly used phrases including “it happened *right after* the second problem”, “*about three weeks after* our first bad experience, another problem came up”, etc. However, no specific patterns were observed relating failure proximity to the intensity of responses to the service failure.

As is apparent, findings of the current study are consistent with those of Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) and Sivakumar and colleagues (2014), identifying four distinct characteristics of multiple service failures.

Evaluation of Distinct Entities

Table 3 provides illustrative examples of respondents’ evaluations beyond that of the service failure event itself. As discussed previously, throughout the meeting organizing process

meeting planners need to deal with various venue employees. It is therefore not surprising that when evaluating service failure situations, respondents not only assess a particular employee involved in the failure event but also evaluate their *teams* and *supervisors*. Furthermore, it is common for meeting planners to use chain venues with multiple properties, as associations rotate their convention destinations on an annual basis (Weber, 2000). Thus, a service failure event may also lead to service provider (venue) brand evaluations. Finally, since a destination's service related attributes are important factors during meeting planners' site-selection, some respondents also linked their evaluation of the service failure with a particular employee to an evaluation of the venue destination. In summary, findings of our interviews indicated that meeting planners not only evaluated the service failure event but in addition also evaluated various social entities including the *service provider (venue employee)*, the *service providers' (venue) teams*, *service provider (venue) brands*, and the *destination where the service provider (venue) is located*.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

These findings lend support to Weber's (2005) study that focused on the airline context, and differentiated between event versus global evaluations of service failures of airlines that directly caused a service failure event, and a partner airline. The present study in the meeting planner-venue context confirms such an aggregation process and broadens the scope of entities by identifying three new entities that are evaluated by meeting planners: 1) service providers' teams, 2) a venue brand and 3) a venue destination. Meeting planners may potentially attribute blame, have negative emotions, are dissatisfied, reconsider their repurchase intentions, and engage in negative word-of-mouth about these entities.

Evaluation Escalation Process

Analysis of transcripts did not only identify the evaluation of various entities following multiple service failures but also pointed to an evaluation escalation process. Following a first service failure, respondents' evaluations primarily focused on the failure itself (*event*); when further failures occurred, respondents tended to aggregate their evaluations of individual failure events to evaluations of the various *social entities*, namely *service providers*, *service providers' team/department*, *venues*, and *destinations*. More importantly, it appeared that respondents' evaluations towards these entities were not formed at the same time; instead, respondents evaluated these entities in sequence of an escalation process. The evaluations about *service providers* were often evident following the first failures; and then evidence of evaluations toward other entities gradually emerged in the order of *service providers' teams*, *venues*, and *finally brands* and/or *destinations*.

It was interesting to note that the degree of escalation seemingly varied among different respondents. Not all respondents ultimately escalated their responses to the *brand* or *destination* level. All respondents expressed their responses towards the failure *events* and a specific employee, while only some escalated towards the *service providers' teams*, and fewer towards the *venue*, even fewer towards the *brands* and the *destinations*. For example, one informant having experienced multiple service failures caused by a service provider extended the negative evaluations towards the service provider only and did not respond negatively towards the service provider's team or the venue, mainly because experiences with other service providers during the entire service process were generally positive, as illustrated here:

“There were some black sheep, like the original event manager, but not many. The rest of the staff were all very good... I will surely consider to use it [the venue] again.”

(Interviewee No. 9, Independent, 9 years' experience)

Another informant blamed the service provider as well as the service provider's team after experiencing multiple service failures, but still held positive views towards the venue. The informant drew such a conclusion by comparing alternative venues in the destination:

“I'd blame everyone in the team, including sales and operations...I think it was the entire team's fault... [when asked about whether she would use the hotel again] Yes I will. Actually the venue is generally ok...you know, if you compare it to other venues there”

(Interviewee No. 10, Corporate, 16 years' experience)

More commonly, informants escalated their negative evaluations to the venue level following multiple service failures, but the experiences did not change their responses towards the venue chains. Two main reasons emerged to explain such an escalation process. First, some respondents had positive prior experiences with other venues in the same chain. Therefore, they did not perceive their experiences of multiple service failures caused by one venue representative of the overall brand. One informant's comments are reflective of such a view:

“I have worked with another hotel under the same brand and the services were just excellent. It is a drastic comparison with this hotel [that have caused the service failures]. So I'd say it's rather a personal issue of the service provider, which then may affect the image of the hotel, and also the brand but to a lesser extent... I can say those service problems would not affect my relationships with other hotels under the same brand.” (Interviewee No. 3, Independent, 4 years' experience)

Second, some informants acknowledged the differences in the ways that venues under a same brand operated and therefore would not infer their experiences with one venue to their perceptions of others, as one informant clearly explained:

“I rarely blame a brand. I know that certain brands are franchised, privately owned, or owned by a different management company.” (Interviewee No. 12, Association, 11 years’ experience)

Based on the findings discussed, a framework of meeting planners’ responses following multiple service failures is advanced in Figure 2. Figure 3 illustrates the escalation process of meeting planners’ evaluations towards various social entities.

INSERT FIGURES 2 AND 3 HERE

Conclusion

This paper investigated multiple service failure events experienced by meeting planners during their relationship with venues. It aimed to address four specific research questions. In reference to RQ1, the study established that service failures experienced by informants were mostly associated with the first three stages of the meeting planning process, namely sales, pre-event, and event stages. An equal number of service failures experienced by interviewees affected only them versus being also noticed by attendees. Drawing on organizational justice theory, notably, among the service failures outcome and process elements were more prevalent, compared to interactional and informational elements. Relating to RQ2, meeting planners demonstrated distinctive responses due to their intermediary role. Specifically, they tended to have lower pre-failure expectations and less severe post-failure reactions than has been reported in the B2C literature. Addressing RQ3, four distinctive characteristics of multiple service failures were

confirmed, namely, failure frequency, timing, proximity, and similarity, occurring individually or in combination. Finally, in reference to RQ4, study results confirmed that meeting planners responded more negatively following multiple service failures. An escalation process emerged in which meeting planners tended to evaluate various social entities in the order of venue employee, venue employees' team, venue, venue brand, and venue destination. Based on these findings an extended integrative framework of organizational justice in the meeting industry context has been advanced for subsequent empirical testing.

Implications

The current study presents several key managerial implications, with a specific focus on the meeting industry. First, given that service failures can lead to various unfavorable customer responses, with multiple failures intensifying these responses, it is imperative for venues to take service failure seriously and prevent repeat service failures. During the interview process, meeting planners mentioned several strategies that they thought venues should adopt in order to avoid multiple service failures. These included providing proper training to service staff and avoiding assigning a too heavy work load to each staff. Besides, it is considered important that venues document service failures to prevent a repeat in the future.

Second, meeting planners tend to aggregate their experiences of service failures and escalate their negative responses beyond service providers to venues and even brands, which is damaging to venues' profitability. If a service failure or multiple failures have been experienced by meeting planners, it is important for venues to deliver favorable and delightful services in subsequent service encounters, in order to buffer the aggregation of negative responses and

terminate the escalation process at the less damaging levels, ideally at service provider level only. In that way, venues may still be able to retain meeting planners by assigning a different staff member for a planner's future meetings.

Third, since meeting planners often evaluate failures which have been noticed by or affected their attendees much more severely than failures affecting themselves only, venues should attach high importance to particularly preventing the former. First, although meeting attendees are usually not directly involved during the sales and pre-event stages, certain arrangements made between venues and meeting planners at those times may have implications for attendees. For example, seated services at large banquet often need longer service time and more intensive manpower than buffet style, which may lead to slow service if manpower is not adequate. Experienced salespersons or conference services managers should alert meeting planners of this aspect and work out a mutually agreed solution in order to prevent potential service failures experienced by attendees. Second, venues should aim to deliver perfect service during the event stage, as it is usually the "moment-of-truth" experienced by meeting attendees.

Last but not the least, unlike end customers, planners are often more understanding and willing to take ownership of service failures. Therefore, venues should always uphold a cooperative and problem-solving attitude when service failures occur, in order to minimize planners' negative responses.

Future Research Directions

First, quantitative research is proposed to examine the various relationships in the multiple service failure framework. For example, experiments may examine the effect of various characteristics of multiple service failures on customer responses. Since failure frequency and similarity were mentioned most frequently, future research may manipulate these two factors in particular and measure respective responses. Experiments may also investigate the effect of multiple service failures that impact a meeting planner only versus those that are noticed by or experienced by meeting attendees.

Second, given that multiple occurrences of service failures usually span an extended time period, longitudinal study designs may be considered to gain further insights into the effects of multiple service failures. Such data may provide more real life insights, compared to experiments where responses are measured at one time only within a laboratory setting.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge several limitations of the current study. First, the study sample was confined to meeting planners who had considerable industry experience, thus, results may or may not readily extend to inexperienced meeting planners. Second, potential memory bias of respondents has to be acknowledged, as respondents were asked to recall experiences of service failures within the past two years, and given the interview setting, effectively relied on their memories rather than relevant documentation.

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Table 1. Profiles of Interviewees

Interview Order	Gender	Place of Origin	Type of Meeting Planner ^a	Scope of Career Exposure	Years of Professional Experience	Size of Meetings Organized (no. of attendees)	No. of Annual Meetings
1	Female	China	Corporate	Domestic	10 years	50-2,000 persons	varies
2	Female	China	Corporate	Domestic	20 years	20-10,000 persons	varies
3	Female	Hong Kong	Independent	Domestic	4 years	500 persons	120
4	Female	Australia	Corporate	Regional	15 years	50-20,00 persons	400
5	Female	US	Association	Domestic	25 years	6,000-15,000 persons	6
6	Male	US	Corporate	International	20 years	50-12,000 persons	30
7	Female	Singapore	Association	Domestic	10 years	6,500-7,000 persons	15
8	Female	Hong Kong	Corporate	Regional	12 years	200-300 persons	15
9	Female	Hong Kong	Independent	Domestic	9 years	100-500 persons	10-20
10	Female	Hong Kong	Corporate	International	16 years	100-3,000 persons	10-20
11	Male	Hong Kong	Independent	Regional	10 years	20-500 persons	6
12	Female	US	Association	International	11 years	1000 persons	10

^a – *association meeting planner* - meeting planner who is employed full-time by a professional association; *corporate meeting planner* – meeting planner who is employed full-time by a corporation; *independent meeting planner* – meeting planner who is not affiliated with either an association or a corporation, but instead is contracted for the provision of full or limited meeting planning services

Table 2. Categorization of Service Failures Experienced by Meeting Planners

Justice Elements	Service Failures
Sales Stage	Total 13 events mentioned
<i>Outcome</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrong venue information • Wrong quotation • Cheating in quotations • Selling unsuitable venues • Turnover of salespersons
<i>Process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of responses • Delay in venue confirmation • Difficulty to reach salesperson • Inflexible pricing and payment policies
<i>Interpersonal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of attention • Poor service attitude • Not helpful to suggest solutions
<i>Informational</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate information
Pre-event Stage	Total 10 events mentioned
<i>Outcome</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrong venue setup • Unable to deliver venue on time due to internal reasons • Too many contact points • Unable to hand over venue due to previous clients' over run • Discrepancy in venue expectation due to no site inspection conducted
<i>Process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover of conferencing service persons • Lack of internal communication • Lack of service recovery initiatives / contingency plan
<i>Interpersonal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor service attitude
<i>Informational</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate information
Event Stage	Total 16 events mentioned
<i>Outcome</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not able to deliver services as promised • Wrong service delivery • Permitting labor shortage • Food running out before event ends • Not assigning group guestrooms together • Lack of on-site contacts • Unable to setup audio/visual equipment as required • Taking event photos without prior consent • Power outage • Audio-visual equipment breakdown • Disturbance by other customers on site • Not following environmental friendly practices
<i>Process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow service speed • Delay in service delivery

- Shirking responsibilities after failures occur

<i>Interpersonal</i>	• Poor service attitude
Post-event Stage	Total 2 events mentioned
<i>Outcome</i>	• Wrong billing
<i>Process</i>	• Delay in billing

Note: Bold denotes service failures having affected meeting attendees or been noticed by attendees.

Table 3 - Social Entities Evaluated by Meeting Planners Following Multiple Service Failures

Elements	Illustrative Examples
Event	
Justice	<p>“It [service failure event] could have easily have been avoided if I had received the <u>proper information</u> from my contact...He could have easily <u>provided</u> me <u>this information</u> and I could have accurately planned around <u>it</u>.” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years’ experience)</p> <p>“The hotel should be <u>more transparent with their charges</u>.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)</p> <p>“<u>There was</u> obviously a lot of <u>poor attention to detail</u>.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)</p>
Emotion	<p>“It was very <u>frustrating</u> not being able to get very clear accounting.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)</p> <p>“It [service failure event] was just a very, very <u>disconcerting</u> situation.” (Interviewee No. 6, Corporate, 20 years’ experience)</p>
Satisfaction	<p>“I wasn’t happy after <u>that</u> [service failure event] happened.” (Interviewee No. 6, Corporate, 20 years’ experience)</p>
Social Entity – Service Provider	
Emotion	<p>“I had no hard feelings towards the chain, it was more just <u>towards that one person</u> [service provider].” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years’ experience)</p>
Satisfaction	<p>“I think it <u>comes back to the hotel coordinator</u> [service provider]. She was just sloppy during the whole process. She hadn't managed expectations and she created a lot of frustration and a lot of anxiety...she didn't have the attention to detail.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)</p>
Switching Behavior	<p>“I ended up changing the <u>event manager</u>.” (Interviewee No. 9, Independent, 9 years’ experience)</p>

Repurchase Intention “If he were still there, I would not use him again.” (Interviewee No. 5, Association, 25 years’ experience)

Trust “We just didn't trust her during the last onsite stuff.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

**Social Entity –
Service Provider’s Team**

Justice “I’d blame everyone in the team, including sales and operations. To me, they were a team. No one could say it was none of their business. They represented the hotel and it was their teamwork that delivered the whole event. It just made no sense if I blamed one person only, as nobody could handle one event fully by themselves. So I think it was the entire team’s fault.” (Interviewee No. 10, Corporate, 16 years’ experience)

 “I guess it had nothing to do with the specific people. Maybe their boss pushes them to do it.” (Interviewee No. 8, Corporate, 12 years’ experience)

 I usually blame the managers, not the service staff. Staff just do what they are told.”(Interviewee No. 12, Association, 11 years’ experience)

Repurchase Intention “So would I potentially not use them again? I'd have to really think see. Maybe just going there for a personal vacation, but not for an event.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

**Social Entity –
Venue**

Justice “It [the hotel] wasn't at the level as what it could have been, so in reality they could have really focused on maybe better service all round.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

Emotion “Would I use the hotel again? You know what, I would probably think twice about it [the hotel] as much as I love to. It definitely doesn't leave the best taste in my mouth.” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years’ experience)

Satisfaction “It [the hotel] was very sloppy, not to the detail of a 5-star hotel.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

Repurchase Intention

“If I would go back there [the hotel] again, I would not use it.” (Interviewee No. 5, Association, 25 years’ experience)

“So I think, I definitely would not use it [the hotel] again. Just because it was just not a really fun experience...for this particular hotel, I might have reservations to use again.” (Interviewee No. 7, Association, 10 years’ experience)

“I can forgive a few minor blips, but when a venue continues to mess up on the same thing over and over they move themselves further down my radar for future events.” (Interviewee No. 12, Association, 11 years’ experience)

Word-of-mouth

“If someone asks me to recommend hotels, definitely I won’t recommend it [the hotel] and it wouldn’t be my first choice in any cases, especially if I know it will be the same salesperson or same event coordinator to handle my events...If I need to choose a venue in future, then I will not recommend this hotel to my clients.”(Interviewee No. 3, Independent, 4 years’ experience)

Trust

“I lose trust in a [convention] center if they cannot offer me solutions to my problems before bringing a problem to my attention.” (Interviewee No. 12, Association, 11 years’ experience)

**Social Entity –
Brand of the Venue**

Justice

“I think for that brand and that name of hotel, there definitely could've been a better response.” (Interviewee No. 4, Corporate, 15 years’ experience)

Repurchase Intention

“Unfortunately they [the brand] are big enough so you don’t have a choice but you have to use them...I make sure that when I use that chain again, I let them know that I’ve had bad experiences with the company...So I’m be pretty up front with them on the fact that they hadn’t provided service as expected.” (Interviewee No. 5, Association, 25 years’ experience)

**Social Entity –
Destination of the Venue**

Justice

“I wouldn’t blame the hotel or the chain, as it wasn’t their fault; rather it was the local infrastructure.” (Interviewee No. 10, Corporate, 16 years’ experience)

Expectation

“The overall service standards in Penang are not very high. It’s actually quite common to come across people who are not responsive, not cooperative, shirking responsibilities after problems occur, or have a bad attitude, etc. So I kind of expected these problems to happen.” (Interviewee No. 10, Corporate, 16 years’ experience)

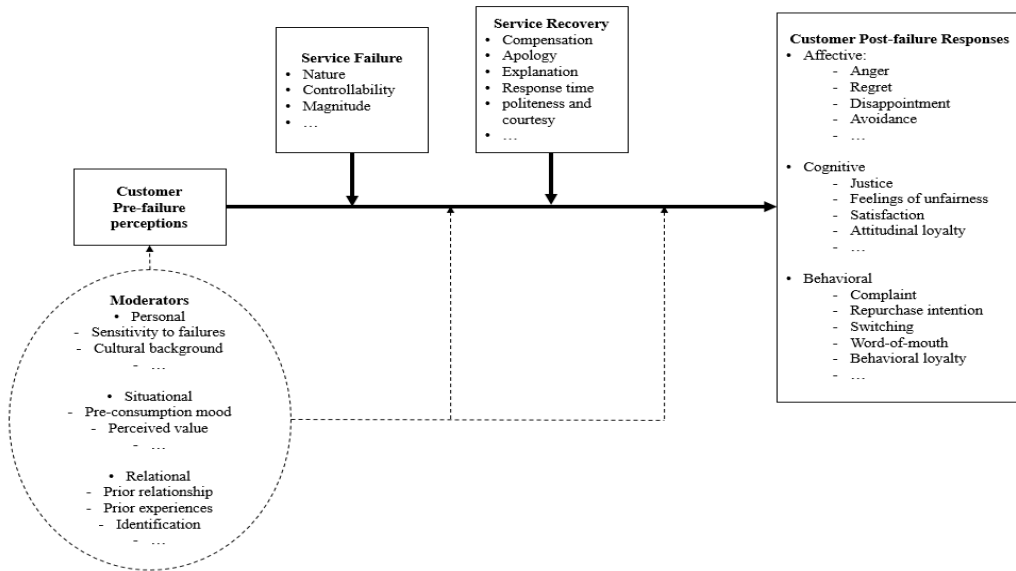


Figure 1 – Relationship among Key Concepts relating to Service Failure and Recovery

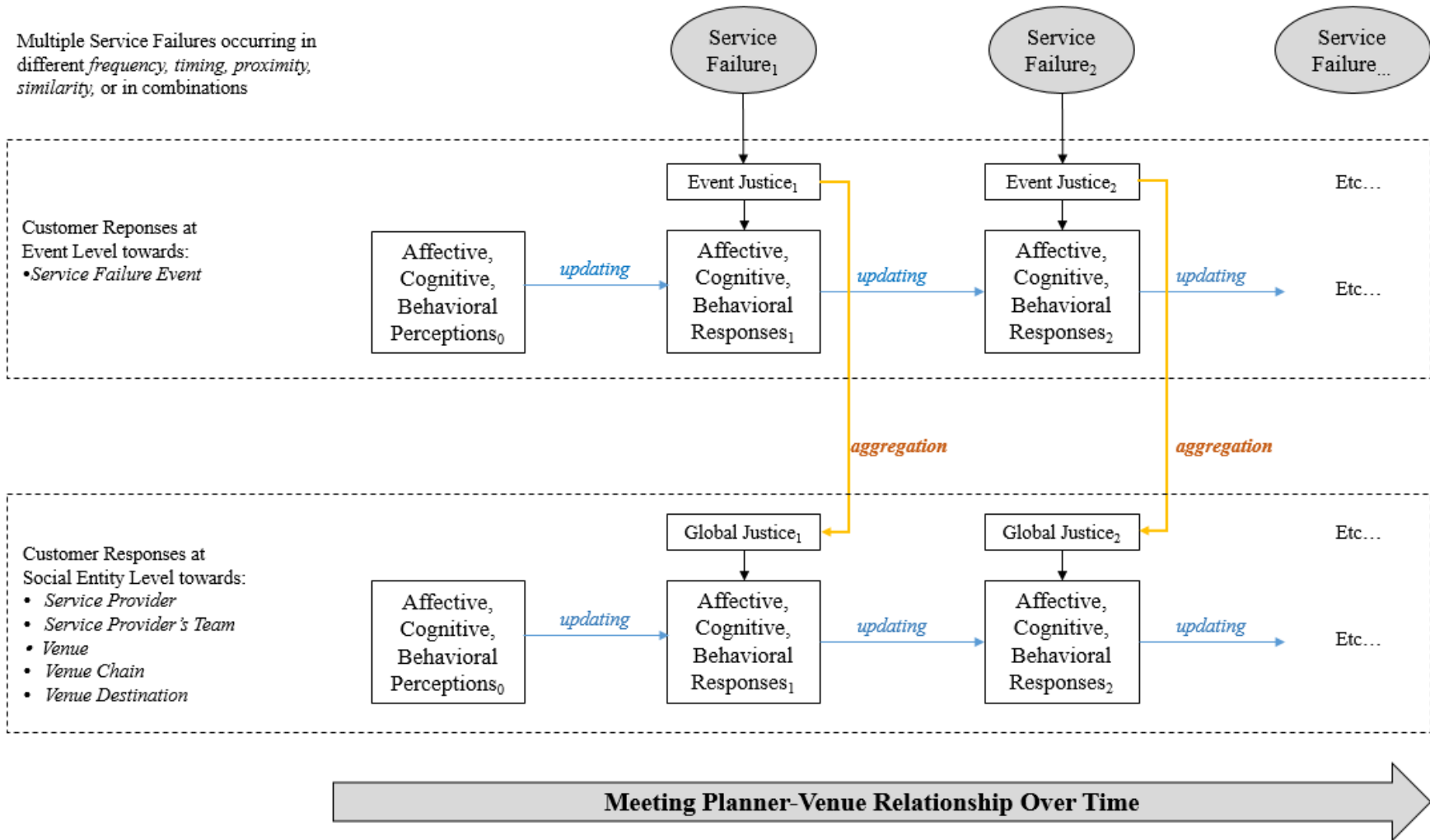


Figure 2. Framework of Meeting Planners' Responses following Multiple Service Failures

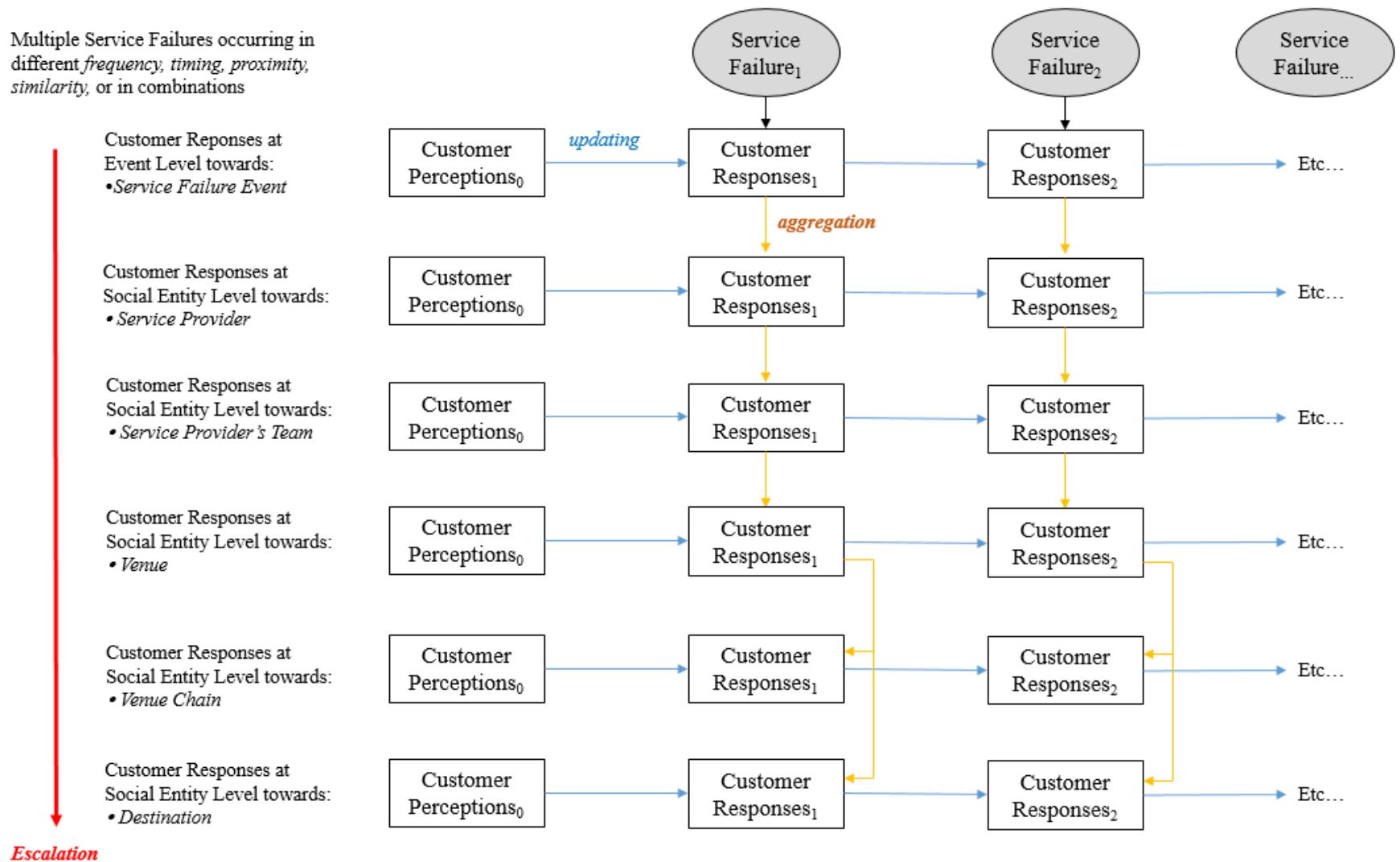


Figure 3. Escalation Process of Meeting Planners' Evaluations towards Social Entities following Multiple Service Failures

Appendix A – Interview Guide for Meeting Planners

1. Thinking about your relationships with any venues you've used for your events in the past, can you recall a specific experience where you have encountered service problems with a same venue not only once but repeatedly over the extended time period of organizing events? Could you share with me what happened?

2. What outcomes did these service problems bring to you, your attendees, and your association?

3. Following these service problems, how did you feel about the service staff, the venue, and other venues of the same brand (if any)?

4. How have these service problems affected your relationship with the venue?