WHEN CUSTOMERS COLLIDE ONLINE:

The Hidden Power of Approval In Digital Service Failures

ROSEN RESEARCH REVIEW

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The research by Wei, Zhang, Rathjens, and McGinley reveals a surprising twist in how restaurant customers respond to online interactions after a service failure. When fellow customers chime in—either with support or mockery—their comments can dramatically shape how the original complainant feels, engages, and judges fairness. But the real game-changer? Whether the customer craves approval. Those with low need for approval react strongly to the tone of others' comments, while high-approval seekers remain emotionally steady. This study uncovers the psychological undercurrents of electronic customer-to-customer interaction (eCCI), offering fresh insights into empathy, justice, and digital engagement in hospitality.

A single comment can reshape a customer's perception of fairness and empathy after a service failure.

THE DIGITAL DINER'S DILEMMA

In the wake of the pandemic, hospitality businesses have faced not only economic recovery but a new frontier of customer behavior—online interactions between guests. These electronic customer-to-customer interactions, or eCCIs, are reshaping how service failures play out. Picture this: a frustrated diner posts a complaint on Yelp. Before the restaurant can respond, another customer jumps in—either to console or criticize. That moment, once invisible to managers, now ripples through the digital landscape, influencing perceptions, emotions, and future engagement.

The stakes are high. As social media becomes a primary outlet for customer expression, the tone of peer responses can either soothe or inflame dissatisfaction. And while firms scramble to craft the perfect apology, they may be missing a crucial variable: how customers react to each other.

This study dives into that overlooked space, asking not just what customers say, but how their psychological need for approval shapes their reactions. Do they seek validation from others? Or do they rely on their own judgment? The answers reveal a complex interplay between personality and digital discourse, with implications that stretch far beyond the restaurant table.

Hospitality firms must now consider not only their own voice but the chorus of customer voices that surround every complaint. As Wei and colleagues show, understanding the emotional dynamics of eCCI is no longer optional—it is essential to navigating the modern service landscape.

BEFORE THE COMMENT SECTION BLEW UP

For years, hospitality research focused on the direct relationship between customers and service providers. But as digital platforms grew, a new player entered the scene: other customers. These interactions, once confined to physical spaces like lobbies or lounges, now unfold in comment sections and review threads. And they are not always kind.

Negative eCCI—think sarcasm, mockery, or outright bullying—has surged, especially in post-pandemic environments where tensions run high. Airline unions have reported thousands of cases of unruly passengers, and hospitality staff face increasing incivility not just in person but online. The ripple effect is real: one rude comment can spiral into widespread dissatisfaction.

They asked: How does the need for approval shape a customer's response to eCCI after a service failure? Would a supportive comment from another customer boost empathy and engagement? Would a mocking reply deepen dissatisfaction?

To answer these questions, the researchers turned to the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory, which explains how external stimuli (like a fellow customer's comment) and internal traits (like need for approval) interact to shape behavior. The result is a nuanced framework that moves beyond simple cause and effect, revealing the emotional choreography behind every online exchange.

This study does not just add a chapter to the CCI literature—it

Hospitality firms must track not only reviews but the tone of customer-to-customer interactions.

restaurant called ABC. Participants were shown a realistic service failure scenario posted on Yelp, followed by two responses: one from another customer named Alex, and one from the restaurant itself. Alex's comment was either supportive or mocking, depending on the condition.

Participants were randomly assigned to experience either positive or negative eCCI. Their psychological need for approval was measured using validated scales. Then, researchers assessed how participants felt about the interaction—specifically their intention to engage on social media, their sense of fairness (interactional justice), and their perception of empathy.

A second experiment tested whether the restaurant's response style—generic or specific—changed outcomes. Across both studies, the researchers gathered rich data on how personality and peer interaction shape digital service recovery.

REAL PEOPLE, REAL REACTIONS

The study drew on responses from over 400 restaurant consumers recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were screened to ensure they had recent experience with takeout orders and online reviews. The final sample included 201 valid responses in the first experiment and 204 in the second. Most were between 26 and 40 years old, with diverse backgrounds and active social media habits. These were not hypothetical consumers—they were real people navigating real digital spaces, making the findings both credible and relatable.

> " **WE DISCOVERED THAT THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF PEER COMMENTS AFTER A SERVICE FAILURE DEPENDS NOT JUST ON WHAT IS SAID, BUT ON HOW MUCH THE CUSTOMER SEEKS APPROVAL FROM OTHERS.**"

Yet not all customers react the same way. Some brush off negativity, others internalize it. The missing link? The psychological need for approval. This trait, rooted in social psychology, determines how much individuals seek validation from others. Those with high need for approval tend to conform, suppress negative emotions, and avoid conflict. Those with low need for approval are more independent, more expressive, and more reactive. Wei and colleagues saw an opportunity to connect these dots.

rewrites the script. By blending personality psychology with digital hospitality dynamics, it opens a new lens on how customers experience, interpret, and respond to service failures in the age of social media.

INSIDE THE EXPERIMENTAL DINING ROOM

To explore these dynamics, the researchers designed a clever quasi-experiment using a fictional

The modern dining experience includes digital conversations that shape satisfaction and loyalty.

THE APPROVAL SPLIT

The results were striking. Customers with a low need for approval responded much more positively to supportive comments from fellow customers. They showed higher engagement on social media, felt more fairly treated, and perceived greater empathy. But when the comment was mocking, their reactions turned sharply negative. In contrast, customers with a high need for approval remained emotionally steady. Whether the comment was kind or cruel, their responses did not change significantly. They seemed to buffer themselves from the emotional highs and lows of peer feedback.

This split reveals a hidden layer in digital service recovery: personality traits can dramatically shape how customers interpret and respond to eCCI. For managers, this means that not all complaints—or commenters— are created equal.

THE EMOTIONAL ECHO OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS

According to Wei and colleagues, the emotional impact of eCCI is not just about what is said—it is about who is listening. Customers with low need for approval are more emotionally transparent. They react authentically, whether that means anger, gratitude, or withdrawal. When they receive a mocking comment, they feel attacked. When they receive support, they feel understood.

This authenticity makes them more vulnerable to online incivility but also more responsive to empathy. They

are the emotional barometers of the digital service landscape.

Meanwhile, high-approval seekers operate differently. They suppress negative emotions, avoid conflict, and even reject positive feedback if it feels too risky. Their reactions are muted, not because they do not care, but because they are managing impressions. They want harmony, not drama.
This dynamic challenges assumptions

Second, understand that customers differ. Some crave approval, others don't. While diagnosing every guest's personality is impossible, firms can design communication strategies that embrace emotional diversity. Personalized responses, empathy-driven messaging, and proactive outreach help.

Third, don't underestimate peer support. Encouraging positive eCCI— via community guidelines, featured reviews, or loyalty programs—creates a more supportive digital space. When customers feel backed by others, satisfaction rises.

Finally, be ready to re-engage. If a customer receives a mocking comment, follow up privately.

Apologize, offer support, and reaffirm the brand's commitment to respectful dialogue. These gestures rebuild trust and prevent emotional fallout.

> ❝ HOSPITALITY FIRMS MUST MONITOR PEER INTERACTIONS, WHICH POWERFULLY INFLUENCE SATISFACTION, ENGAGEMENT, AND FAIRNESS PERCEPTIONS IN TODAY'S EMOTIONALLY CHARGED, DIGITALLY CONNECTED SERVICE ENVIRONMENT.

about digital engagement. It is not just about platforms or algorithms—it is about psychology. The study shows that eCCI is a social experience shaped by deep emotional needs. It is a reminder that behind every comment is a person, and behind every person is a story.

FROM COMMENT TO CONNECTION

For hospitality managers, this research offers a roadmap for navigating the messy world of online customer interactions. First, recognize that eCCI matters. Peer comments shape perceptions as much as official responses. Monitoring these interactions is not just smart—it's essential.

In short, eCCI is not noise—it's a signal. With the right tools, hospitality firms can turn that signal into strategy.

THE NEXT FRONTIER OF DIGITAL EMPATHY

This study opens new questions. How do platforms like Instagram or TripAdvisor shape eCCI? What happens when multiple customers chime in? Can AI detect emotional tone and respond?

Future research might explore eCCI's impact on staff morale or test how environments influence need for approval. The story of eCCI is just beginning.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

Dr. Wei's research agenda is driven by her strong desire to advance the understanding of human psychology and behaviors within the evolving landscapes of hospitality and tourism. Her primary research tackles some of the most urgent issues in the field, such as customer-to-customer incivility and interactions, influencer marketing, and the effects of emerging technological innovations on consumer behaviors and experiences.

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

How did you decide to focus on the need for approval as a key variable in this study?

We were intrigued by the emotional variability we observed in online reviews. Some customers seemed deeply affected by peer comments, while others brushed them off. The psychological need for approval offered a compelling lens to explain this difference. It is a trait that influences how people interpret social feedback, and we suspected it might play a role in digital interactions. By integrating this variable, we were able to uncover a nuanced emotional landscape that had not been explored in hospitality research. It helped us move beyond surface-level analysis and into the realm of personality-driven response patterns.

What surprised you most about the findings?

Honestly, we expected high-approval seekers to be more reactive to peer comments. But the opposite was true. Those with low need for approval showed stronger emotional responses, both positive and negative. It was a reminder that independence does not mean indifference. These customers were more authentic in their reactions, which made them more vulnerable to online incivility but also more appreciative of empathy. That insight shifted how we think about digital engagement—it is not just about visibility, but about emotional resonance.

Positive and negative peer responses create emotional ripple effects in digital hospitality spaces.