

Article

## Service Failure Dynamics in the Hospitality Industry

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### Abstract

*This study examines the vulnerabilities of the hospitality industry, particularly focusing on service failures and recovery strategies within hotels in Nsukka town, Enugu State, Nigeria. Recognizing that service failures can significantly impact customer relationships, the research aims to identify common failures, their underlying causes, and effective recovery methods. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with hotel staff and management and analyzed using a thematic approach. Key service failures identified include inconsistent power supply, impolite staff behavior, reservation errors, malfunctioning facilities, failure to change towels, unclean swimming pool water, and inadequate daily cleaning. The research highlights several causes for these failures, including poor funding, understaffing, outdated facilities, erratic power supply, conflicting supervisor instructions, and unprofessional staff attitudes. In terms of recovery strategies, the study identifies several approaches employed by hotels, such as acknowledging failures, promising quick resolutions, offering sincere apologies, providing compensation (including freebies), and issuing refunds or discounts. However, the paper emphasizes that while these reactive strategies can mitigate customer dissatisfaction, proactive measures – such as raising awareness, identifying root causes, assessing impacts, and implementing appropriate management actions – are essential for effectively addressing service failures and enhancing overall customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.*

**Keywords:** Service failure, hospitality industry, relational marketing, Nsukka, operational challenges

### Introduction

Service failure is unavoidable in different human endeavours, especially in service-oriented industries such as the hospitality sector, where it remains part of service processes. Since service failure is inevitable, service enterprises are expected to devise means of recovering from failed services, as this is the only way of compensating dissatisfied customers. This statement is true because responding appropriately to service failures (same for effective service recovery) may enhance customer satisfaction, re-visit intention, and ultimately increase organizational profit. Today, service failure and the attendant recovery have continued to attract attention in the hospitality and tourism industries, of which the hotel aspect is a key player, attracting a surge of research interest among hospitality and tourism researchers (Lai et al., 2018). The hotel sub-sector, which is one of the most significant contributors to the advancement of the tourism industry (Cheng et al., 2019), is a quintessence of the service industry. It is marked by extensive interactions between service providers (hotel staff) and customers; thus, there are chances for service failures to occur along the various lines of service delivery at one point or another. Such can be gleaned from the Nigerian case.

Okpoko (2015) observed that the condition of Nigeria's hospitality industry, as perceived by hotel users, seems not to meet expectations primarily due to substandard customer service. Failure in service delivery can create significant challenges for hospitality service providers, potentially leading to precarious



situations and even business closure if they are not promptly addressed (Letsa and Asimah, 2018). Therefore, successfully dealing with service failures requires effective service recovery strategies in hotels. Over the past few years, there has been a proliferation of hotels in the urban area of Nsukka town in Enugu State. This suggests a concurrent increase in the number of visitors, including tourists, to the area. The hotel industry, as a provider of accommodation, is one of the most substantial factors in the growth of tourism. Therefore, for the hotels in Nsukka to contribute meaningfully to tourism development, a good service recovery plan is adjudged very necessary, since it affects the overall experience of guests (including tourists). Anunobi et al. (2021) highlighted that a strategic approach to hotel service delivery will revitalize the industry and bring a profitable change. More so, it influences re-visit intention, customer loyalty, as well as competitive advantage. Given the hospitality and tourism industry's vulnerability to service failure (Kim and So, 2023), it becomes imperative to study service recovery in hotels, which is a key component of the hospitality and tourism industry.

This paper discusses service failures and recovery strategies in five hotels within Nsukka town with a view to proffering ways for them to reposition their service recovery strategies. The topic is necessary because it is not usually the initial failure to deliver the expected service that causes dissatisfaction, but rather, the employees' lack of appropriate response to that failure (Pranic and Roehl, 2013). It suffices to say that whilst customers can ignore certain service failures due to human imperfection, they may find it difficult to pardon establishments that fail to respond appropriately to service failures. This study will be beneficial to hotel managers and proprietors, policy-makers, students, academics, researchers, NGOs and other stakeholders interested in hospitality management. The study fills a gap in the literature by concentrating on selected hotels in Nsukka town of Enugu State and offering invaluable insight into the service failures experienced by the hotels and their recovery strategies. The objectives of the research are as follows:

- a. Identify service failures occurring within the hotel context;
- b. Evaluate causes of service failure; and
- c. Ascertain service recovery strategies used to redress the identified service failures.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research on service recovery is related to service failures (Lewis-McCann, 2004; Michel et al., 2009). It is instructive to begin this section by defining the two concepts. Zeithaml et al. (2018) defined service as all of the actions and procedures undertaken to improve client happiness, comfort, and convenience. It consists of components such as responsiveness, dependability, empathy, and assurance offered by service providers to meet or even go beyond clients' expectations. Lovelock and Wright (1999, p. 141) further defined service recovery as "a systematic effort by a firm after a service failure to correct a problem and retain a customer's goodwill". Miller et al., (2000) perceived service recovery as "those actions designed to resolve problems, alter negative attitudes of dissatisfied customers and ultimately retain these customers". Again, service recovery is defined as the organizational steps taken to address and resolve service delivery failures (Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016). These definitions present service recovery as only reactionary, in that they emphasize

rectifying what went wrong. However, service recovery goes beyond these definitions.

What appears to be a more comprehensive definition was given by Michel et al., (2009) when they defined the concept as the integrative actions a company takes to re-establish customer satisfaction and loyalty after a service failure, to ensure that failure incidents encourage learning and process improvement (process recovery) and to train and reward employees for this purpose (employee recovery). This definition brings new elements to a comprehensive understanding of service recovery, with the core of the definition being that to advance knowledge on effective service recovery, an integrated approach (customer, process and employee aspects of recovery) is needed (Skaalsvik, 2012). From these definitions, it becomes clear that effective service recovery constitutes an important part of total service quality management (Grönroos, 2006). Michel and Meuter (2008), and Maxham (2001) defined service failure as a real or perceived setback or problem that occurs during customer-company interaction. From the perspective of customers, service failure refers to a condition where something goes amiss, irrespective of responsibility, such as unavailable service, unreasonably slow service, and other core service problems (Bitner et al., 1990; Palmer et al., 2000).

Agarwal et al., (2016) defined service failure, or service breakdown as a service that does not meet customer expectations. Yim et al., (2003) were of the view that to cushion the effects of service failure and prevent customers from switching allegiance, firms need to have a good understanding of customers' expectations when there is service failure, and then, apply effectual service recovery tactics. As observed in service management literature, service failures are a threat, but also an opportunity to enhance the quality of the service product (Skaalsvik, 2012). Some researchers on customer service have identified the benefits of an adequate service recovery plan. For instance, Bamford and Xystouri (2005) opined that efficient service recovery is very fundamental in building and sustaining customer loyalty. Supporting this, Robbins and Miller (2004) wrote that customer loyalty has been an often suggested and supported consequence of effective service recovery management. Tsai and Su (2009) and Varela et al., (2009) remarked that good quality service recovery programs reduce the probability of customers switching to alternative service providers. There are some claims that service failures present opportunities to transform consumers with low relationship levels into those with high relationship levels (Soyeon & Soocheong, 2011).

In terms of the strategies for redeeming failed services, available literature shows that the most commonly used recovery strategies are apology, compensation, urgent reinstatement, empathy, symbolic atonement, acknowledgement, explanation, discount, correction, management/employee intervention and refund (Zemke & Bell, 1990; Smith et al., 1999). Lewis and McCann (2004); McDougall and Levesque (1999) and De Run and Kusyarnadi (2008) noted that apology is needed in most service recovery circumstances which is seen as the minimum recovery offered by a service provider. However, it should be noted that post-recovery satisfaction is influenced by the severity of service failure. As noted by McCollough (2009), the greater the severity of the service failure, the lower the post-recovery satisfaction. Likewise, the greater the severity of the service failure, the greater the customer's dissatisfaction (Magnini et al., 2007; McCollough et al., 2000; Weun et al., 2004). McCollough (2009)

points to situations in which no matter what the recovery performance might be, it is impossible to satisfy the customer because of the damage or harm caused by the original failure. However, as acknowledged by Mattila (1999) in McCollough (2009), recovery efforts can at least mitigate the damage done by the failure and may be able to convert modest customer dissatisfaction into satisfaction.

Empirical studies on the subject matter abound. For instance, Budi and Galang (2010) conducted a study on service recovery strategies and customer satisfaction among hotels in the Yogyakarta area of Indonesia. The findings indicated that compensation, speed of recovery and apology are all influencing factors in customer satisfaction carried out either wholly or partially. The study captured apology as the most effective service recovery strategy with the biggest impact on customer service satisfaction compared to other service recovery strategies. More so, Cheng et al., (2018) studied service recovery, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in Malaysia's hotel industry. The study found that service recovery dimensions are significantly similar to customer satisfaction, which adds positive impacts on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Again, using selected hotels in Iran, Shams et al. (2021) explored hospitality-based service recovery, positive results, satisfaction with service recovery and consequent customer loyalty. The results showed a favourable correlation between service recovery and positive results. Additionally, the results showed that desirable outcome has a beneficial impact on satisfaction service recovery and loyalty.

Nwokorie (2016) researched customer loyalty and service recovery strategies using selected hotels in Lagos State, Nigeria. The focus of this study was on significant service recovery strategies and how they affect customer loyalty in the hotel sector. The study showed that efficient recovery efforts have a significant impact; identifying compensation as among the top recovery strategies used by most of the studied hotels. Mensah-Kufuor, et al., (2015) studied service failures in three 5-star hotels in Accra, Ghana. The results showed that most times, housekeeping departments were responsible for service system issues that resulted in unavailable/irregular service and damaged goods. The study makes recommendations to revise some policies to reduce some service failures and improve service delivery in light of the probable service failures experienced by guests and their impact on visitors. More so, Ekong (2021) studied the recovery strategies and customer repurchase intentions in hotels and showed that when service providers make efforts to resolve service failures, there is an increase in customer repurchase intentions. Anunobi et al., (2021) also found that hotels were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the loss of revenue, downsizing, job loss, and numerous changes in hotel operations and services, suggesting that strategic approaches to hotel service delivery will revitalize the industry and bring a profitable change.

The review highlights the importance of well-timed and effective responses to service recovery initiatives. It also implies that these strategies are critical to fostering customer loyalty and repeat business in the hospitality industry. For hotel managers and other professionals looking to improve customer satisfaction and retention through proactive service recovery strategies, these findings are relevant. Akbar, et al., (2010) found that improving hotel service quality had a favourable impact on customer loyalty. Perceived value and patron satisfaction were two important factors that acted as mediators between hotel service quality and customer loyalty. While service failure

and recovery literature were found for certain parts of the globe, none, at least within the search of literature for this study, was found for the study area, highlighting the contribution of this study.

This study was anchored on Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT). RMT was propounded because traditional marketing approaches had emphasized transactional exchanges, with companies aiming to sell goods and services to customers without much consideration for building lasting relationships. Berry (1983) introduced the term "relationship marketing" and emphasized the importance of cultivating strong customer relationships between key stakeholders in any sector. The Nordic School of Relationship Marketing, led by researchers such as Gronroos and Gummesson, contributed significantly to the development of RMT. These scholars underlined the relevance of symbiosis in terms of trust-building, communication, as well as shared value creation between companies and their customers. RMT focuses on building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers over time. It recognizes the importance of customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in establishing a strong customer base in any business or organization. Durmaz et al., (2020) remarked that relationship marketing helps to increase the level of customer satisfaction to higher levels, reaching profitable customers, and providing a competitive advantage with word-of-mouth advertising on the business and customer side.

When it comes to the hospitality industry, particularly the hotel sub-sector, RMT plays a crucial role in understanding how service failure and service recovery strategies can impact customer relationships both in the short and long term. In the context of hotel operations, RMT suggests that effective service recovery can strengthen customer relationships and enhance loyalty. Hotels that respond to service failures in a fast, empathetic, and satisfactory manner show that they value their customers and are prepared to address any problems that might arise. As a result, the hotel and its visitors may develop a stronger emotional bond, increase trust, and create favourable opinions both in the present and future.

## **Research Methods**

Data collection took place at five selected hotels in the urban area of Nsukka town. The hotels that were selected are CEC Guest House within the University of Nigeria, Nsukka campus, Ehekofell Hotels and Suites, Golden Valley Hotel and Suites, Ikenga Hotel, Nsukka and Jerry Marriot Hotel. These hotels were selected because they are strategically positioned in the hub of Nsukka town. They also offer affordable rates and feature well-equipped rooms with modern amenities. Many guests, including tourists, choose to lodge in these hotels and make use of their modern facilities. The qualitative research design was utilized in data collection and analysis, with the understanding that participants would respond to questions based on their lived experiences, the world view and the happenings or observations around them (this is consistent with the constructivism paradigm that works with the design). The rationale for selecting a case study strategy was to get as much data as possible about the subject matter under study (Ugwu & Eze, 2023).

This study focused on how hotel management, managers and staff working in three-star rating standard hotels in Nsukka urban, Nigeria, effectively manage and lessen the impact of service failure on guests' satisfaction and loyalty. Specifically, it targeted

individuals responsible for the daily operations of their respective hotels and those who maintain direct interaction with customers. This is helpful and gives necessary explanations for a clearer understanding of the development of best practices for service recovery strategies within the hotel industry. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct interviews with the participants in the study. Using a purposive sampling method, which according to Bryman (2012), is a non-probability method of selection in which the researcher does not look for sample study participants by accident. Face-to-face interviews covering hotel service issues were conducted with five hotel management and fifteen staff of the establishments to better understand their ideas and experiences about the topic.

The participants were selected based on their experience with customers when providing and receiving hotel services. This method helped the researchers to have one-on-one conversations with participants in which questions were directly asked to better understand their ideas and experiences about how they handle service failure and recovery in their respective hotels. Data collection from the participants in the five study hotels took place between June and August 2023. Thematic analysis was used in which themes were generated to analyze the data.

## **Findings**

### **Forms of Service Failures**

The in-depth interview with hotel management and staff on forms of service failure in the selected hotels in Nsukka urban, Enugu State, Nigeria, revealed the effect of service failure on customer value and experience. The thematic categories that emerged from the field data include; negative emotions and emotional labor. There was a clear emphasis on negative emotions, particularly frustration, regarding poor power supply from the national grid. The frustration arose from the ongoing challenges and interruptions caused by unreliable electricity supply. A receptionist in the hotel identified inconsistency in the power supply as a main service failure. Like the Ikenga Hotel, there is a standby generator, but this cannot guarantee a steady power supply because of the high cost of fuel in Nigeria. This is also made worse since the hotel's generator cannot be used all the time because of the high cost of fuel. Other identified negative emotions reported by informants are frustrations as a result of improper functioning of facilities (for example, when taps in some bathrooms do not function properly). Another has to do with the water in the swimming pool, which sometimes is described as dirty by some guests, as reported by the participants. A participant hinted that sometimes, complaints come from customers regarding daily cleaning routines. Customers express displeasure due to oversight by housekeepers, in terms of cleaning dust particles that have settled in rooms, especially during the dry season. However, this appears to be an objective issue, since some customers are very demanding that they expect no atom of dirt in their rooms. Another identified service failure includes the inability to change towels after room cleaning.

Emotional labour was evident in the impolite actions of some staff toward customers. It was gathered that some staff show their frustration over unpaid wages through their impoliteness toward guests. This, as was gathered, may lead to customers complaining about how impolite and slow some of the workers are in attending to their needs. Again, emotional labour was identified to manifest in mistakes

concerning reservations. There have also been cases of mistakes when booking reservations, like giving out a room which a guest did not request. For example, a customer might specifically request a standard room, yet ends up getting an executive room instead. This situation illustrates how employees while attempting to manage and regulate their emotions to meet customer expectations unknowingly make mistakes in the process of accommodating those requests.

### **Causes of Service Failures**

The data gathered from the interview showed that resource constraints, technical problems, inadequate training and poor communication between the supervisors, employees and customers are the main causes of service failure. The informants unanimously agreed that resource constraints emerging from a lack of funds are the major cause of service failure in the hotels. This is followed by technical problems. As noted by one of the participants, the hotel is ancient, and some facilities are not working properly. The participant added that whilst some renovations have been made, some facilities still need to be replaced. However, there are not enough funds to update the facilities and carry out the renovations thoroughly. At one of the study hotels, the interviewees agreed that the main causes of service failure can be attributed to inadequate training and lack of staff. Poor communication was identified as one of the participants noted the issue of multiple instructions, stating that there are many managers and supervisors to take orders from. There are situations where one supervisor may tell you to do one thing and then another supervisor will tell you to do otherwise.

### **Service Recovery Strategies**

The in-depth interview revealed that apology and acknowledgement, compensation and problem resolution, process improvement and employee training and development are the major strategies used to recover service failure in the hotels. In the study hotels, it was gathered that the first service recovery strategy used is 'apology' and acknowledgement of service failure since 'customers are always right'. Rendering an apology and making assurances that the issue will be rectified as quickly as possible are problem-solving strategies adopted in the hotels. Moreover, the compensation strategy identified is 'refund' to customers if the need arises. The participants also stated that for some of the old customers, the strategy of compensation may be applied by slashing some percentage of money to be paid whenever such guests come around. The participants went on to state that when a customer complains about the food served, and it is established that the food has a problem, the hotel can offer a discount or even offer a different meal as part of service recovery efforts. Another strategy was 'refund', especially after all other options had been exhausted. Freebies, such as using the swimming pool, can also be considered as part of service recovery strategies.

### **Discussion**

From the data collected, service failures in the form of negative emotions and emotional labour manifest through frustrations from inconsistent power supply, impolite actions of some staff towards customers, mistakes over room reservations, improper functioning of certain facilities such as taps in some bathrooms, oversight by housekeepers while cleaning dust in rooms, failure to change towel after room

cleaning, unclean water in swimming pool and complaints regarding daily cleaning routines. These failures can be categorized under outcome and process-related failures (Berkes & Davidson, 2007). The failure to execute a core function or meet a basic need by an organization is an example of outcome failure, whereas the failure to deliver a core function properly is an example of process failure.

Much of the causes of these service failures are traceable to resource constraints, technical problems, inadequate training, poor communication between supervisors, employees and customers, outdated facilities (which are blamed on poor management), insufficient staff and lack of funds. At one of the hotels, for instance, it was discovered that while the management of the hotel was under the government, it was mismanaged due to inadequate allocation of funds for maintenance and replacement of equipment and payment of workers. This resulted in the dilapidation of the facilities and a lack of dedication to duties by the workers. The study by Opoku (2020) affirmed that poor management is one of the significant factors that trigger service failures in Nigerian hotels. It is instructive to note, as already stated, that service failure must occur. Thus, the management of hotels should have effective ways of recovering failed services. The service recovery strategies employed by the selected hotels include a calm approach to the issue, apology, compensation and in tougher cases, refund. The findings aligned with those of Nwokorie (2016) on customer loyalty and service recovery strategies using selected hotels in Lagos State. The study equally identified compensation and apology as among the recovery strategies used by most of the hotels studied.

In the case of apology as a service recovery strategy, the front desk unit should be adequately equipped and trained since this is where many customers' complaints will be reported. The front desk unit is therefore a key unit to recovering service failure and promoting good relationships between the hotel and its customers through polite and diplomatic approaches to calming down guests where service failures occur. Ekong (2021) has rightly pointed out that when service providers, especially those in the hospitality industry, make genuine efforts to resolve service failures, there is bound to be an increase in customer repurchase intentions. This supports the argument made by Anunobi et al., (2021) that a strategic approach to service delivery in hotels will revitalize the sector and promote profitability.

Resolving service failures effectively is one of the ways to apply RMT, which is the theoretical anchor for the study. Building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers, as posited in this theory, can be achieved through appropriate service recovery strategies, which reassure guests that their satisfaction is of paramount importance to hotel management. Applying RMT enables hotel management to understand how proper service recovery strategies can positively impact customer relationships by building trust and loyalty, which culminate in re-visit behaviour. Applying this theory entails that hotel management must have appropriate response plans to service failures. This may include adherence to global best practices in recovering failed services, re-deployment of staff, re-training of staff or in-service training, including hiring of consultants to train staff towards effectiveness in service delivery and service recovery strategies.

One final point to make is that these approaches to recovering failed services discussed earlier, which can be described as reactionary measures, should be



complemented by proactive measures to deal with service failures. In line with this, Hu et al., (2013) argued that a service establishment should apply four basic steps which include awareness of service failures, identification of the causes of such failures, assessment of their impact, and application of the appropriate management activities to resolve these failures.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary tourism and hospitality industry, particularly within hotels, the implementation of both proactive and responsive service recovery strategies is essential for sustained success. This study investigated the patterns of service failures and the corresponding recovery strategies employed in selected hotels in Nsukka town, Enugu State, addressing a notable gap in existing literature. By focusing on the identification and documentation of service failures alongside recovery efforts, the research aimed to offer insights that could help hotels enhance their service recovery frameworks. The findings emphasize the importance of effective service recovery in maintaining customer satisfaction and influencing future patronage intentions.

Ultimately, this study deepens our understanding of the complexities involved in service failures and recovery strategies in the 21st-century hospitality industry. It serves as a valuable resource not only for students and academics but also for hotel owners and hospitality professionals seeking to navigate the challenges associated with service failures. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to explore customer perceptions of service failure and recovery in future research, as understanding these perspectives could lead to more tailored and effective recovery strategies in the hospitality sector.

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