

## **THE EFFECTS OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND DURATION ON NEGATIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH AFTER A LOW-CONTACT SERVICE FAILURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the effects of relationship quality (RQ) and relationship duration (RD) on negative word-of-mouth (WoM) after a low-contact service failure. Partial least square structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data collected through a scenario-based online survey (n=153). First, unlike the inconsistent findings in high-contact service research, the results showed that RQ led to decreased negative WoM in low-context service failures, namely telecommunication. Second, this research contributes to the literature by revealing the negative effect of RD on customers' tendency to spread negative WoM. In addition, RD did not moderate the relationship between RQ and negative WoM.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Growing scholarly interest has focused on examining consumer complaining behaviors, including word of mouth (WoM; Novak et al., 2023a). Previous studies offer preliminary insights into the link between relationship length and quality and WoM (e.g., Migacz, 2018; Ranaweera & Menon, 2013; Seo, 2012). However, additional work is needed to understand whether a strong relationship leads to higher customer tolerance to service or product failures or worsens customer dissatisfaction and provokes complaining behaviors (Arora et al., 2021).

Relationship quality (RQ) is a significant factor in creating, managing, and sustaining successful customer relations (Hennig-Thurau, 2000), specifically after a service failure (Novak et al., 2023a). RQ reflects the nature and strength of relationships between business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) parties (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Jiang et al., 2016; Smith, 1998). Many studies have examined different aspects of RQ in various fields, such as marketing (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Dorai et al., 2021), financial services (Fernandes & Pinto, 2019), and supply chain (Qian et al., 2021). Research on RQ in the B2B setting has increased during the past few decades (Lasrado et al., 2023). However, recent purchasing patterns, such as increasing online shopping preferences on B2C electronic commerce platforms and the positive effects of e-customer satisfaction and e-trust on repurchase intention (Miao et al., 2022), highlight the need for more research on RQ in the B2C context.

Previous studies have examined the relationships between RQ and WoM (e.g., Al-Alak, 2014; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Ng et al., 2011), electronic WoM (e.g., Kousheshi et al., 2019; Oraedu et al., 2021; Purnasari & Yulianto, 2015; Sarmiento Guede et al., 2018; Tsao & Hesieh, 2012; Verma et al., 2016), and mobile WoM (e.g., Velicia-Martin et al., 2023). Furthermore, relatively little research attention has been devoted to the relationship between RQ and negative WoM, and the issue has been examined in high-contact services, particularly hospitality (e.g., Migacz, 2018; Seo, 2012). However, service failure experience and consumer complaining behavior are context-dependent concepts (Jin et al., 2023; Khamitov et al., 2023; Novak et al., 2023a, 2023b; Xu et al., 2014), and low-contact context perspectives remain unexplored. Services differ according to the extent (high versus low) of contact between customers and service systems

(Mersha, 1990). For instance, hospitality can be classified as a high-contact service that requires a high level of customer involvement and interaction with service providers. On the other hand, telecommunication services represent low contact, routine, and less interactive and customized services. Given that the levels of customer contact may affect customer evaluations of service encounters (Ganesan-Lim et al., 2008) and behavioral intentions, including positive WoM (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016), differences may exist in consumer complaining behaviors in high- (e.g., hospitality) and low-contact (e.g., telecommunication) services. Therefore, the current research aims to extend the consumer complaining behavior literature by examining the effects of RQ on customers' tendency to spread negative WoM after service failures in a low-context service, namely telecommunication.

The literature has demonstrated the positive effects of RD in B2B (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Gounaris & Venetis, 2002; Palmatier et al., 2007) and B2C settings (e.g., Dorai et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the effect of RD on negative WoM has not been studied. In addition, the theory of transformation relational events (TRE) suggests that relationship length leads to different effects on relational exchanges, which may be reversed (Harmeling et al., 2015). Only a few studies have examined the moderating effect of RD on the relationship between RQ and self-brand connect (Dorai et al., 2021) and offered explanations for preannouncement and negative WoM (Béal et al., 2019). This study also examines the direct and moderating effects of RD on negative WoM following low-contact service failures.

### *Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development*

Consensus is lacking on the conceptualization and operationalization of the RQ construct (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Jiang et al., 2016; Smith, 1998). RQ refers to an overall evaluation of the strength of a relationship (Smith, 1998; Storbacka et al., 1994). RQ can be considered a higher-order, multidimensional construct composed of three key variables: satisfaction, trust, and commitment components (De Wulf et al., 2001; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Jiang et al., 2016). Relationship satisfaction refers to a consumer's affective evaluations of their overall relationship with a company (De Wulf et al., 2001). Trust, another core dimension, reflects consumer perceptions of a seller's reliability and integrity (De Wulf et al., 2001; Doney & Cannon, 1997). Relationship commitment, on the other hand, can be defined as a consumer's desire and willingness to continue a relationship with a firm (De Wulf et al., 2001; Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A stronger customer-firm relationship, such as a positive commitment towards the service provider, is negatively associated with negative WoM in response to a service failure (Ashley & Varki, 2009).

RQ is an important factor in increasing customers' intention to sustain a relationship with a company (Olavarría-Jaraba et al., 2018). Moreover, it decreases the desire of consumers to retaliate after a service failure (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006). When service delivery performance falls below customer expectations, this incident is defined as a service failure (Hess et al., 2003; Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). Intentionally choosing longer taxi routes is an example of a service encounter failure that results in negative online reviews (Xu et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that service failure leads to several negative customer outcomes (Sands et al., 2022) and the severity, magnitude, and causes of service failure influence customers' positive or negative emotions (Xu et al., 2019). When the customer perceives the service provider to be more responsible and in control of a service failure, their satisfaction with the service provider is likely to decrease. This decrease is also reflected in their overall satisfaction with the service, due to causal attribution (Frechette & Wingate, 2022). Service failure severity negatively affects

satisfaction with the service recovery, trust, and commitment, while having a positive influence on negative WoM (Weun et al., 2004). When the controllability of a firm over a service failure is low, high-RQ customers do not intend to retaliate as much as low-RQ customers do (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006). Hospitality research has demonstrated that customers with higher RQ generate fewer negative emotions following a service failure (Xie & Heung, 2012). In addition, Hu (2018) argued that, after a service failure, the perceived greed and incompetence of the service provider positively affect customers' negative WoM intentions. Seo (2012) studied the effect of RQ on negative WoM intention in the context of food safety communication on social media. Two levels of RQ were compared: (a) high-level, referring to a commenter who is a close friend to the reader, and (b) low-level, referring to a comment made by an anonymous person. The results indicated that consumers' tendency to spread negative information did not differ by RQ level in a hospitality context. Migacz (2018) investigated negative WoM as an outcome of service recovery in hospitality-oriented services. The results demonstrated that both post-recovery satisfaction and satisfaction with the firm predicted negative WoM significantly. In addition, trust did not have a significant moderating effect between negative WoM and either post-recovery satisfaction or satisfaction with the firm. Service failure recovery is context-specific (Xu et al., 2014). Following a service failure, consumers experience negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and regret, that drive behavioral outcomes, such as negative WoM (Harrison-Walker, 2019). Investigating the nature (product versus process) and severity (high versus low) of the failure and the industry type has also been suggested. Therefore, additional research is needed to better understand the relationship between RQ and negative WoM in low-contact service contexts, such as telecommunication. The following hypothesis was thus developed.

**H1:** *In low-contact service failures, RQ leads to decreased negative WoM.*

RD refers to the length of a relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006), such as the time elapsed since customers began using the product or service (Béal et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2001). The relationship length is a critical factor in creating the bond between customers and service providers (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002; Itani et al., 2020; Palmatier et al., 2007). Time strengthens the relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Verma et al., 2016) and enhances perceived partnership quality (Chang et al., 2015) but has conflicting effects on positive WoM intentions (Ranaweera & Menon, 2013; Sakiyama et al., 2023). Although RD and interaction frequency were not found to be antecedents of RQ in an online retail context (Verma et al., 2015), previous studies have highlighted positive effects of RD (Chang et al., 2015; Dorai et al., 2021; Palmatier et al., 2007). For a better understanding of customer-service company relationships, time dynamics must be considered (Arora et al., 2021; Donthu et al., 2021; Itani et al., 2020). Recent systematic literature reviews on electronic WoM (Donthu et al., 2021) and service failure (Fouroudi et al., 2020) did not mention any study examining RD factors. The following hypotheses were thus developed.

**H2:** *In low-contact service failures, RD leads to decreased negative WoM.*

Limited studies have examined the moderating effect of RD in RQ (Dorai et al., 2021) and service recovery research (Béal et al., 2019). For instance, RD positively moderated the effect of RQ on self-brand connection with an e-tailer (Dorai et al., 2021). In the retail banking sector, when customers encounter a dissatisfying service recovery, RD creates a buffering effect (Béal et al., 2019). In the context of service contract termination, RD increases the positive effects on negative WoM of offering an explanation while not moderating the effects of offering a preannouncement.

The TRE argues that relational expectations change over the relationship and thus lead to different interpretations of exchange events (Harmeling et al., 2015). Based on the TRE, after a severe service failure, RD strengthens the effects of RQ on negative WoM.

**H3:** *In low-contact service failures, RD moderates the relationship between RQ and negative WoM.*

## METHODOLOGY

An online survey link was shared via social media and instant messaging platforms and emails between November 2022 and March 2022. The total 153 respondents comprised 79 men (n= 52%) and 74 women (n= 48%). The majority were aged 35 years or older (n= 115), had a bachelor’s degree (n= 91), and earned 29,000 TL or more (n= 56). Table 1 presents a summary of the demographics of the respondents. The mean RD was 49.1 months (SD = 45.26).

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Sample

		n	%
Gender	Male	79	52
	Female	74	48
Education level	High school or less	11	7.19
	Bachelor’s degree	91	59.48
	Graduate degree	51	33.33
Age	18-25	10	6.54
	26-34	28	18.30
	35-44	46	30.07
	45-54	29	18.95
	55 or more	40	26.14
Net Income Level	Below 8.500 TL	16	10.458
	8.500 TL -13.999 TL	27	17.647
	14.000 TL -18.999 TL	32	20.915
	19.000 TL -23.999 TL	16	10.458
	24.000 TL -28.999 TL	6	3.921
	29.000 TL and more	56	36.601

### Procedure

Participants were first asked to answer the RD and RQ questions about their current internet service provider company. The following question was asked to measure RD: “About how long have you been receiving service from this provider? (number of months)” (Dagger et al., 2009; Doney & Cannon, 1997). RQ was assessed on a nine-item scale adopted from De Wulf et al. (2001). Notably, the first item of the commitment dimension was adapted from Sun (2010) to better reflect the characteristics of the service industry. Participants were then asked to read a hypothetical service failure scenario. The scenario-based role-playing experiment is a well-established data collection method that leads participants to perceive the appropriate and desired levels of the research constructs (Rungtusanatham et al., 2011). Negative WoM was measured on a three-item

scale adopted from Wetzel et al. (2022). Seven-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree were used. Finally, demographic information was collected.

The scenario presented a service failure where the internet service provider is unable to meet customer expectations of connection speed. It described a severe service failure and a poor-quality recovery performance. Service failure severity presents the magnitude of loss that customers experience due to a service problem (Migacz, 2018). The greater the severity of a service failure, the greater the perceived loss (Weun et al., 2004). Quality of recovery performance refers to the level of reparation offered by a service provider following a service failure (Hess Jr. et al., 2003). Table 2 provides the expressions used to represent related constructs. Three experts independently evaluated the scenario in terms of plausibility, clarity, and simplicity and agreed that it accurately represents the related constructs. Therefore, the case scenario was validated (Rungtusanatham et al., 2011; Wason et al., 2002).

**Table 2:** Expressions used to represent related constructs

Construct	Scenario
<b>Service failure:</b> connection speed	You are invited to an online engagement ceremony of your close relative living in another country. The video conferencing program requires a fast and large amount of streaming sound and video data. You believe that your internet package can handle this situation. In the past, you have used this program for other meetings without any problems. But when you start the video conferencing program to attend the event, the sound becomes distorted, and images download lately.
<b>Level of quality of recovery performance:</b> Poor	To solve the problem, you call customer service support. In response to your complaint, the representative apologizes for the problem and asks you to wait on the phone. 20 minutes have passed, but nothing has been done to solve the problem.
<b>Level of service failure severity:</b> Severe	The online ceremony is almost over, and you feel frustrated. You think that your relatives may feel you don't care about them.

## RESULTS

Partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for hypothesis testing. Since RQ and negative WoM were reflective latent variables, the recommended two-step process was used; after assessing the measurement (outer) model, the structural (inner) model was evaluated (Hair et al., 2017).

### *Outer (Measurement) Model Assessment*

Table 3 demonstrates that the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability of the items whose outer factors loadings were between 0.40 and 0.70 were above the critical values of 0.5 and 0.7, respectively (Hair et al., 2017; Guenther et al., 2023). Hence, internal consistency reliability and convergent validity were ensured.

**Table 3:** Items, factor loading and convergent validity measures

Items		Factor Loading	C. Alpha	C.R. (rho_a)	AVE
<b>RQ</b>			0.922	0.934	0.624
Satisfaction	As a regular customer, I have a high-quality relationship with this service provider.	0.690			
	I am happy with the efforts this service provider is making toward customers.	0.806			
	I am satisfied with the relationship I have with this service provider.	0.856			
Trust	This service provider gives me a feeling of trust.	0.890			
	I have trust in this service provider.	0.898			
	This service provider gives me a trustworthy impression.	0.898			
Commitment	I am willing to make efforts to remain a customer of this service provider.	0.746			
	I feel loyal toward this service provider.	0.709			
	Even if this service provider would be more difficult to reach, I would still keep buying there.	0.538			
<b>Negative WoM</b>			0.871	0.938	0.790
I will spread negative word-of-mouth about this service provider.		0.814			
I will tell others about my experience to denigrate this service provider to others.		0.925			
I will share my experience with others to warn others not to buy the products or services from this service provider.		0.923			

As shown in Table 4, all the indicators’ outer loadings on the associated construct were greater than any of their cross-loadings (Hair et al., 2017).

As shown in Table 5, the analysis of the Fornell–Larcker criterion showed that the square root of the AVE values for all constructs exceeded the latent variable correlations (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 6 demonstrates that the HTMT criterion was below 0.85 for two distinct reflective constructs and below 0.90 for two close constructs (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, discriminant validity was ensured.

**Table 4.** Cross Loadings of the Indicators

	RQ	NWOM
Commitment-Item 1	0.746	-0.095
Commitment-Item 2	0.707	-0.131
Commitment-Item 3	0.536	-0.166
NWOM-Item 1	-0.104	0.816
NWOM2-Item 2	-0.190	0.940
NWOM3-Item 3	-0.174	0.908
Satisfaction-Item 1	0.692	-0.021
Satisfaction-Item 2	0.808	-0.121
Satisfaction-Item 3	0.857	-0.144
Trust-Item 1	0.891	-0.191
Trust-Item 2	0.899	-0.165
Trust-Item 3	0.898	-0.119

**Table 5:** Fornell-Larcker Criterion Values

	RD	NWOM	RQ
RD	Single-item construct		
NWOM	-0.191	0.889	
RQ	0.005	-0.182	0.790

**Table 6.** Discriminant Validity Results (HTMT Matrix)

	RD	NWOM	RQ	RD * RQ
RD				
NWOM	0.193			
RQ	0.045	0.175		
RD * RQ	0.192	0.050	0.059	

*Inner (Structural) Model Assessment*

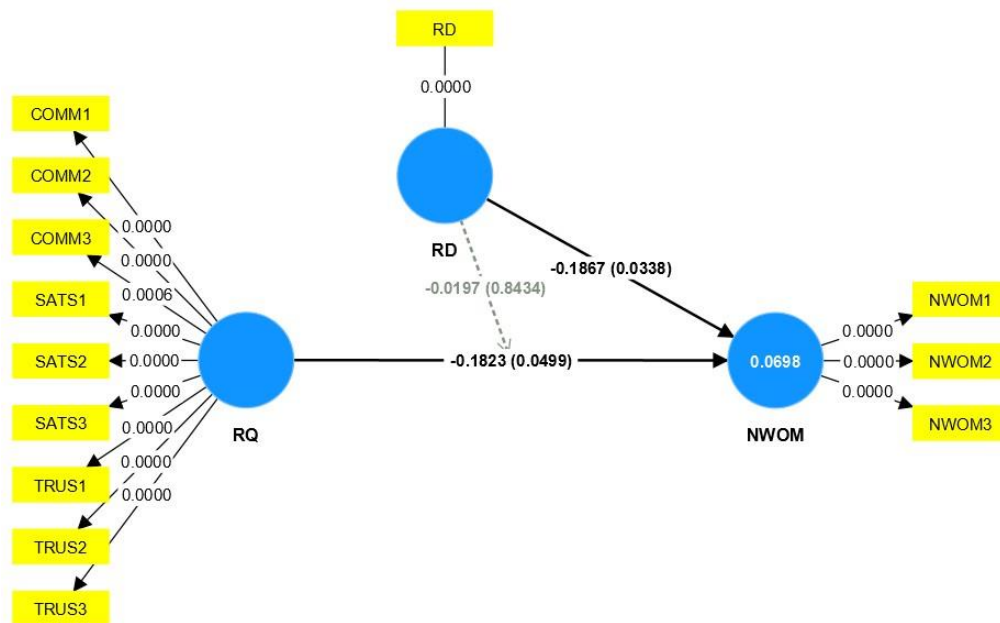
The association between the proposed constructs was investigated using a path model, and the significance of the route models was assessed using a bootstrap resample process. Initially, to assess the structural model for collinearity, inner variance inflation factor (VIF) coefficients were checked. According to Hair et al. (2017), in a reflective model, inner VIF values should be under 5; for better results, they should be under 3. All inner VIF coefficients were between 1.002 and 1.040. The R<sup>2</sup> and f<sup>2</sup> of the endogenous latent variable of negative WoM were 7.0% and 3.6%, respectively. Hence, because the effect size was greater than 2%, the researchers accepted some effect of the latent variable of RQ on negative WoM (Cohen, 1988; Sarstedt et al., 2017).

After the bootstrap resampling procedure, all paths within the model were found significant using 5,000 subsamples. For testing hypotheses, a complete bootstrapping procedure was then applied. As shown in Table 7 and Figure 1, RQ ( $\beta = -0.1823$ ,  $t = 1.9612$ ,  $p = 0.0499$ ) and RD ( $\beta = -0.1867$ ,  $t = 2.1231$ ,  $p = 0.0338$ ) had a negative effect on negative WoM, whereas a moderating effect of RD was not found ( $p = 0.843$ ). Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported, but H3 was not.

**Table 7: Results of the Hypothesis Testing**

Variables	Beta Value	Standard Deviation	t value	P value	Support for Hypothesis (p < 0.05)
RQ -> NWOM	-0.1823	0.0929	1.9612	0.0499	Yes
RD x RQ -> NWOM	-0.0197	0.0995	0.1975	0.8434	No
RD -> NWOM	-0.1867	0.0879	2.1231	0.0338	Yes

**Figure 1. Final PLS-SEM Model**





## **DISCUSSION**

Researchers have long realized the importance of WoM on consumer evaluations and decisions (e.g., Gilly et al., 1998; Litvin et al., 2008; Paisri et al., 2022). In particular, the effects of RQ on WoM have been well-documented (Kim & Cha, 2002; Al-Alak, 2014; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Ng et al., 2011; Sultan, 2018). Similarly, insights from previous research in the service failure literature suggest that failure severity (Weun et al., 2004), consumer desire for retaliation (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006), and post-recovery satisfaction and satisfaction with the firm (Migacz, 2018) influence negative WoM. Negative WoM has also been argued to not differ by RQ level (Seo, 2012). However, the findings of the current research demonstrate that RQ led to decreased negative WoM in the context of low-contact service failures. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by addressing the contextual nature of service failures (Xu et al., 2014) and the relational antecedents of negative WoM (Arora et al., 2021) or complaining responses in general (Dahl and Peltier, 2015).

This research also contributes to the literature by investigating the direct and moderating roles after a service failure of the length of the relationship. Building on the TRE (Harmeling et al. 2015), the results lead to the conclusion that the longer customers are in a relationship, the less likely they intend to spread negative WoM following a low-contact service failure. Regarding the ongoing debate in the research (Dorai et al., 2021; Béal et al., 2019), RD was found to have no moderating effect.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

A customer's satisfaction, trust, and commitment levels towards the service provider will decrease if they encounter service failures. Because these are inevitable, service managers should make more efforts to build relationships and differentiate their offers to decrease the likelihood of customers exiting and diffusing negative WoM (Forrester and Maute, 2001). To prevent the negative effects of service failure, managers should compensate customers to maintain consistent RQ, regardless of successful recovery (Xu et al., 2018). Therefore, managers must prioritize customer retention considering the impact of RD on negative WoM (Gounaris, 2005).

Managers should pay attention to RQ during failures to manage unfavorable customer reactions through social media or online brand communities that consumers increasingly use to produce negative electronic WoM (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Yuan et al., 2020).

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Despite having several distinctive results, this research also has limitations. Although the sample size requirement for PLS-SEM was met (Hair et al., 2022), future research with a larger sample size may demonstrate a moderation effect of RD (Memon et al., 2019). Further, factors with a significant role in service failure (e.g., controllability of service failure; Grégoire & Fisher, 2006) and service recovery (e.g., criticality and failure type; Migacz, 2018) were not examined. Failure duration is a recent relationship variable affecting customer–firm relationships by moderating the relationship between attributions, service failure severity, empathy, and consumer forgiveness. It is the period elapsed between the commencement of a failure and the discovery of a recovery (Lee et al., 2020); therefore, future research should consider this new moderator. Past studies show that age moderates the relationship between digital banking service satisfaction and WoM (Bapat & Kannadahasn, 2022). In addition, the presence or absence of other customers, known or unknown to the potential complainer, can significantly affect the decision to complain or not in a service context (Wright & Larsen, 2023). Another fruitful research avenue will be to

understand the nature and effectiveness of complaint management and response strategies (Novak et al., 2023a). For instance, high-RQ customers tend to have stronger and negative attitudinal and behavioral reactions to failed service recovery efforts (Holloway et al., 2009). The congruency between the levels of service failure and compensation is another crucial factor affecting behavioral intentions (Zinko et al., 2023). Previous research provides inconclusive results regarding the comparative effects of situational and cultural factors in service recovery (Blodgett et al., 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Nowadays, individuals typically express their contentment or dissatisfaction publicly through online platforms (Stevens, 2023). Thus, negative electronic WoM, which is a more complex (Naylor, 2016) and emerging (Zinko et al., 2023) domain, must be further explored in terms of value exchanges and relationships between online sharing platforms, service providers, and customers (Nowak et al., 2023a). Finally, since cultural differences impact consumer complaint behaviors (Badghish et al., 2018), future research conducted in a cross-cultural context may validate the findings of this study and provide new insights.

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