Dynamics of user-generated content and service failure recovery: evidence from millennials

Abstract

Purpose

There is considerable interest in the value of user-generated content (UGC) and its antecedents. Despite its growing importance, existing studies have largely ignored the effects of UGC on customers' responses to recovery efforts in the fashion industry. The aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which UGC influences customers' responses to providers' service failure and recovery efforts, particularly how millennials' interactions impact recovery efforts.

Design/methodology/approach

The study uses a phenomenological hermeneutics and adopts theoretical sampling to collect empirical data from three European countries (France, Italy and the UK). We interviewed 60 millennials who had online service failure experiences in online fashion. It has designed this methodological framework to illustrate the close relationships between subject and object as well as identify that data analysis and collection are undertaken in relation to consistent iterative interpretations in an evolving process of study. Drawing on multi-theoretical lenses, utilising actor–network and social influence theories, this study advances understanding through the development of a new conceptual model relating to individual characteristics.

Findings

Utilising actor–network theory and social influence theory, this study developed a conceptual model of four customer groups' responses to service failure based on the severity of service failure and the level of customers' online response following service failure.

Originality/value

We suggest some pragmatic implications of our conceptual model and explain how awareness of different customer groups can lead to effective decision making for marketers. This study provides a set of practical insights that brand managers can employ to recover service failures.

Keywords: user-generated content, service failure recovery, millennials, phenomenological hermeneutics methodology, qualitative approach

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, research into the marketing and technology interface has significantly advanced our understanding of how user-generated content (UGC) affects firms' decision making (Mukherjee, 2014). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2007) described UGC as content created outside professional routines and practices, which is made publicly available over the Internet and reflects a certain amount of creative effort. This definition recognises that UGC relates to both technology-enabled platforms and co-creation activities by users for users. Several researchers have studied the significance of technology-enabled platforms that enable UGC or allow customers to use content provided by the firm (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2019a). One stream of studies has looked at the psychological basis of consumers' UGC activity (Sugathan *et al.*, 2017; Chen *et al.*, 2018). Others considered sales and viewership, and they illuminated the benefits of traditional online marketing information, such as product reviews that influence consumers' search and product choice (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). Another stream of research noted that the influence of UGC is based not only on the context of the content, but also on the various interactions that can influence the perceived authenticity of the content (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Weiss *et al*., 2008). For example, a survey by eMarketer found that consumers are less trusting of mainstream media and slick corporate marketing than UGC, and consumers turn to UGC to find their own truth about service failure recovery (Kats, 2021).

Research has acknowledged the role of social networks and their ability to lower the perceived magnitude of service failures (Fan and Niu, 2016; Hartline *et al*., 2000; Liu *et al*., 2019; Mattila and Patterson, 2004). However, these studies focused on the speed of recovery to depict a rather broad range of recovery phases and they sometimes produced conflicting and inconclusive results. We agree that the speed of recovery efforts may lead to a service recovery paradox: a situation in which customer satisfaction after a service failure is greater than it was prior to the service failure when the customer receives high recovery performance (McCollough and Bharadwaj, 1992). This provides a critical impetus for recovery strategies that are based on service processes that focus exclusively on social media and the speed of recovery. Although research has begun to examine the value of UGC contributions to service failure and recovery (SFR), most studies have assumed that UGC within a demographic cohort is organically linear, and a customer's continued engagement exhibits consistent intentions and commitments during a SFR process (Béal *et al*., 2022; Su *et al*., 2019). What these studies have in common is that they consider millennials' responses to be unidimensional; failure to examine the variance within this demographic cohort complicates and challenges marketers' recovery processes.

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of UGC, including collaborative behaviours between customers, on millennial customers' evaluations of a provider's SFR efforts. There is also a paucity of insights into variance in UGC engagement and interactions with SFR processes (Crisafulli and Singh, 2017). Recently, Azemi *et al*. (2020) argued that customers' complex perceptions and attitudes towards SFR are aligned with various contextual antecedents, including pace of recovery, relationship with provider and familiarity with the channel. Despite considerable advances in developing conceptual clarity and theoretical explanations that help to explain and address this complex and often misunderstood phenomenon, challenges remain, particularly in relation to the variance in UGC and SFR practices. Our research objective is to understand how and to what extent UGC influences customers' responses to providers' service recovery efforts. Specifically, we have set out to examine how customer-to-customer interactions, millennials' interactions in particular, impact recovery efforts. Our notion of UGC is related to, but distinct from, the idea of unidimensional and varied interpretations of millennials' perceptions in the SFR literature (Albrecht *et al*., 2019; Ozuem *et al*., 2021).

In the present study, we situate and integrate two somewhat contrasting but still functionally compatible theories (social influence theory and actor–network theory) to provide insights into the mechanisms of UGC and its influence on customers' responses to service recovery efforts. The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss the construct and antecedents of UGC, we review SFR and consumers' responses from a broad perspective and then we discuss the theoretical lenses used to examine the relationship between UGC and SFR. In Section 3, the methodological tapestry of the study is presented, including the philosophical paradigm and data collection methods. In Section 4 we discuss how empirical data were analysed, adopting an inductive analytical approach. Our conceptual framework is provided in Section 5 to help brand managers seeking to improve their SFR practices, and to increase our collective understanding of UGC in SFR practices. We discuss theoretical implications in Section 6 and managerial implications in Section 7. In Section 8 we identify some limitations to our study and areas in which further research is needed, and we suggest specific directions aimed at providing further insights.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 UGC: construct and antecedents

Research suggests several perspectives are relevant to the critical role of social networks in improving service recovery outcomes. Understanding the motivations of customers to create UGC and their influence on recovery efforts is important for service providers. UGC can reflect aesthetic features and emotional expressions that elicit cognitive and emotional engagement from consumers (Wang *et al*., 2023) and increase consumers' intentions to create UGC. Cuomo *et al*. (2020) highlighted the importance of UGC as a cooperative channel between consumers and providers that facilitates more effective information sharing. They also argued that consumers, providers and other parties have a responsibility to share information during high-risk situations or uncertain situations to help participants manage any negative emotions that might arise. Researchers have reported that some consumers develop social trust in online communities because of their relevancy and because they can draw on experts' brand-related knowledge expressed in UGC (Ozuem *et al*., 2021; Naeem and Ozuem, 2022).

Brand sentiment is a common measurement for evaluating the success of social media activity (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). Online customers who have negative sentiments towards providers can be influenced if they observe a high frequency of replies from a company to customer UGC. Such replies emphasise the firm's willingness to help customers (Ibrahim *et al*., 2017). An overview of literature related to characteristics, motivations, impact and credibility of UGC is given in Table I.

The influence of negative information can be greater than positive information (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). Presi *et al.* (2014) identified five motivations that may drive customers to participate in UGC following service failure: altruism, the desire to help others who have a negative experience; vengeance, which sees customers find solutions by causing harm to the firm; venting, where customers express emotions as a means to be heard or to release frustrations; economic, where customers create UGC to gain compensation; and self-enhancement, which involves customers who seek interactions and social recognition for reporting an incident. Customers may seek to obtain benefits through UGC, such as receiving compensation following service failure, and other rewards for providing UGC. Poch and Martin (2015) suggested that offering extrinsic rewards for individuals' content creation had a positive effect on the likelihood of UGC creation. This, in turn, determines a number of economic incentives that have more impact on UGC creation than social benefits.

Table I: Overview of literature related to characteristics, motivations, impact and credibility of user-generated content

Focus	Salient findings	Representative studies and the characteristics they emphasise
Advancement of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) messages	Traditional elements associated with word-of-mouth messages, including positive and negative statements and information related to a product, service or brand, are captured through user-generated content (UGC) and published by potential, actual or former customers. Customers have the opportunity to signal positive or negative brand-related sentiments using various digital formats and tools to display these sentiments through UGC	**Expressed brand sentiment** Ibrahim *et al*. (2017) Hoffman and Fodor (2010) Vermeer *et al*. (2019) **New media characteristics** Berger and Milkman (2012) Klostermann *et al*. (2018) Ramirez *et al*. (2018) **Consumers as content creators** Naeem and Ozuem (2022) Krishnamurthy and Dou (2008) Netzer *et al*. (2012)
Motivations to participate in UGC	Motivations behind consumers' contributions to UGC range from altruistic and social to materialistic benefits. Satisfied or dissatisfied customers may share positive or negative perspectives and experiences through UGC to socially express themselves, achieve intrinsic and extrinsic goals, or to overcome obstacles. UGC becomes a source of support for customers seeking answers or actions from customer services	**Extrinsic and intrinsic goals** Castro and Marquez (2017) Hennig-Thurau *et al*. (2004) Poch and Martin (2015) Yang and Lai (2010) **Satisfaction and dissatisfaction** Demangeot and Broderick (2006) Presi *et al*. (2014) Septianto *et al*. (2020) **Interpersonal support** Buechel and Berger (2018) Naeem (2020)
Impact on marketing and sales	UGC can be utilised as a communication tool to spread and enhance brand-related awareness among online consumers through direct text conversations or indirectly through visual content. UGC stimulates the branding of companies and their offerings. Digital platforms can use UGC as an instrument for customer acquisition and customer retention. UGC can generate consumer reviews that can influence other consumers' decision-making processes. Displays of positive and negative e-WOM can have a direct impact on product and services sales	**Brand-related awareness** Colicev *et al*. (2019) Klostermann *et al*. (2018) Liu *et al*. (2017) Nanne *et al*. (2021) **Consumer acquisition, retention and decision-making processes** De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) Lamrhari *et al*. (2021) Wang *et al*. (2019b) You and Joshi (2020)

		Consumer reviews and sales Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) Godes and Mayzlin (2004) Langan *et al*. (2017) Mukherjee (2014) Moon and Kamakura (2017)
Credibility	Content created and shared by consumers, close friends, family and other related peers is considered more trustworthy than firm-created content. Peer-to-peer interactions can impact behavioural purchasing intentions and community membership. Consumers can perceive UGC to be fabricated reviews or to have a positive or negative bias. Consumers may suspect commercial intent behind company-sponsored UGC and disclosure	**Customer and peer trustworthiness** Dost *et al*. (2019) Ransbotham *et al*. (2012) Weiss *et al*. (2008) White and Dahl (2006) **Authenticity doubt and bias** Gerrath and Usrey (2021) Hwang and Jeong (2016) Moon *et al*. (2021) Jiménez-Barreto *et al*. (2020)

2.2 Determinants and dynamics of service failure

Service failure occurs when customers' expectations are not met, whereas recovery strategies are actions that providers deliver to overcome the event (Azemi *et al*., 2019). Extant literature identifies two key characteristics of SFR strategies: (1) service failures are always expected to occur (Wang *et al*., 2011) and (2) the most minor failures can have the highest severity if not resolved appropriately (Azemi *et al*., 2019; Barwise and Meehan, 2010). Scholars have noted the need to understand online SFR strategy experiences and their influence on consumers' perceptions and behavioural intentions (Azemi *et al*., 2019; Crisafulli and Singh, 2017).

Service failures can occur for various reasons, including unavailable service, slow service response and poor responses to any bespoke customer requirements (Bitner *et al*., 1990). Furthermore, most online service failure is a result of poor design, such as website design problems and a lack of user-friendliness. Further variables in this sense include process failure, when technical issues delay online purchase processes, and delivery problems, where products are not delivered or not received on time (Meuter *et al*., 2000). Holloway and Beatty (2003) identified a six-fold typology of online service failure: (1) delivery, (2) website design, (3) payment, (4) security, (5) product quality and (6) customer service problems. Holloway and Beatty (2003) extended observations of customer behaviour beyond online service failure and investigated issues related to both online and offline encounters. Similarly, Choi and Mattila (2008) examined service failure occurrences, recovery evaluation and post-recovery behaviour, and identified that marketers, customers and other actors can cause service failure.

2.3 Recovery strategies and customer behaviour

Service recovery requires some consideration of how customers perceive the outcomes of recovery strategies. Drawing on justice theory, Smith *et al*. (1999) identified three components of recovery strategies: distributive justice (recovery outcome), procedural justice (procedures utilised for recovery strategy) and interactional justice (treatment of customer throughout the process). A recent study by You *et al*. (2020) warned companies to look beyond apology strategies as a means to restore customer satisfaction after service failure, because appreciation strategies, such as saying “thank you” to increase the self-esteem of customers, are often more effective than apology strategies. Service satisfaction is a critical factor; however, satisfaction may not be sufficient to retain customer loyalty to providers (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) due to the varying behaviours and attitudes of customers and their relationships with online providers.

Contradictions occur across the literature regarding what consumers perceive to be a satisfying recovery process, which illustrates the heterogeneous nature of customers in the service failure process (Lassar *et al.*, 1999; Azemi *et al.*, 2019). For example, Azemi *et al.* (2019) identified three main types of customers whose perceptions of service failure, expectations and evaluations of service recovery, and post-recovery behaviours differed: exigent customers, solutionist customers and impulsive customers. Each of these customer types plays different roles in the failure recovery process.

A specific activity involved in service recovery is co-creation, where both the customer and provider solve the incident. Quach and Thaichon (2017) found that co-creation as a recovery strategy leads to customer satisfaction; however, Roggeveen *et al*. (2012) suggested that customers perceive co-creation negatively as they are unwilling to partake in the recovery process. These contrasting views of recovery efforts reflect the differing behavioural characteristics customers have in response to recovery strategies. Drawing on fairness theory, Wei *et al.* (2019) suggested that the willingness of consumers to participate in co-created recovery strategies can go either way. They concluded that if customers perceive co-creation tasks to be intense or beyond their capability, then they will have doubts about the firm's competence and ethical behaviour towards its customers; this reduces the willingness of customers to co-create in the future. However, the perceived control customers have in co-created recovery efforts can generate favourable perceptions regarding the firm's competence and ethical behaviour; this motivates customers to co-create. Arsenovic *et al.* (2019) discussed service recovery encounters in which multiple actors collaborate. A social environment shaped by different actors within social communities (White and Dahl, 2006) can influence customers' experiences (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Understanding consumers' perceptions of SFR is not limited to either their experience or loyalty to the firm. A summary of service recovery elements (e.g., speed of recovery) is shown in Table II; types of recovery strategies (e.g., compensation) are summarised in Table III; and Table IV defines the three components of justice theory (e.g., the perceived fairness or unfairness of the recovery outcome) and the SFR strategies recommended to address perceived injustices.

Table II: Summary of service recovery elements and consumer processes

Service recovery elements	Salient findings	Supporting studies	Emphasis on…		
			Affective customer process	**Relationship strength**	**Real-time communication initiative**
Speed of recovery	When a service failure occurs, timing of recovery directly influences customer satisfaction and recovery evaluation	Crisafulli and Singh (2017) Hogreve *et al*. (2017) Smith *et al*. (1999) Wirtz and Mattila (2004)	Yes Yes Yes Yes	No Yes No No	Yes Yes No Yes
Providers' efforts	Behaviours of "front-line" providers critically impact customer evaluations; perceived efforts increase customer satisfaction regardless of the success of the complaint outcome	Bitner *et al*. (1994) Folkes (1984) Hartline *et al*. (2000) Liu *et al*. (2019) Mattila and Patterson (2004)	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes	No No Yes No No	Yes Yes Yes Yes No
Combining recovery speed and providers' efforts	Different service scenarios change customers' perceptions of speed of recovery, and speed alone is insufficient to maintain customer satisfaction. Providers' efforts must also be customer-centric, delivering related service recovery attributes and regular communications with customers across various phases of pre- and post-recovery	Fan and Niu (2016) Odoom *et al*. (2020) Ozuem *et al*. (2021)	Yes Yes Yes	No No Yes	Yes Yes Yes

Table III: Summary of service recovery strategies and implementation processes

Recovery strategy	**Definition**	**Emphasis on…** **1) Recovery actions** **2) Critical service failure** **3) Affective nature**	**Supporting studies**
Compensation	A monetary-focused strategy (e.g., refunds, discounts, upgrade services, exchanges and free products or services) for inconvenient experiences and for failures that cannot be resolved is perceived as the most favourable to customers	1) Covers the costs incurred – resolving the actual failure less likely 2) Applied to low-critical failures 3) Brief and quick response with minimum affective response	Albrecht *et al.* (2019) Hoffman *et al.* (1995) Goodwin and Ross (1992)
Direct and indirect assistance	Action-based strategy to replace or correct failures and assist customers when needed. Assistance can increase customers' tolerance of service failure. Assistance approaches and delivery can impact evaluation of recovery. Assistance can be provided through human personnel or digital systems	1) Support and assistance offered through direct assistance (e.g., call centres, email and social media messages) or indirect assistance (e.g., online customer support webpages, consumers' user-generated content) 2) Applied to moderate and high-critical failures 3) Real-time informational or emotional support is expected	Gelbrich *et al.* (2021) Hartline *et al.* (2000) Liu *et al.* (2019) Odoom *et al.* (2020) Ozuem *et al.* (2021)
Apology	A psychological-focused strategy. An apology is offered by the firm for the service failure, and involves communicating emotions towards consumers. It can mitigate the negative effects of customer dissatisfaction and increase the likelihood of customers forgiving service failures, compared to monetary recovery strategy. May be used if recovery solution was not or could not be delivered	1) Expressed apology through private or public communication channels. Can involve minimum actions 2) Applied to various levels of critical failures 3) Highly personalised communication offering emotional support and appreciation	Bitner *et al.* (1994) Ringberg *et al.* (2007) Sinha and Lu (2016) You *et al.* (2020)
Co-creation	A customer-centric strategy. This increases customers' active role within the recovery	1) Consumer uses self-service technology or resources provided by	Dong *et al.* (2008) Roggeveen *et al.* (2012) Meuter *et al.* (2000) Sugathan *et al.* (2017)

	phases. Customers may integrate their own resources with the resources provided by the firm to maximise value. A customer may collaborate with the firm or other social networks to co-create solutions. Consumers may be directly invited by the firm to co-create or take the initiative to choose recovery procedure	firm and consumers to recover 2) Applies to various levels of critical failures 3) Consumers feel more satisfied with recovery process and have less negative word-of-mouth intentions. Some may feel pressured or unsure whether to conduct co-creation or self-recover	Van Vaerenbergh *et al*. (2018)

Table IV: Types of perceived injustice and service recovery strategies

Perceived injustice	Definition	Studied by	Emphasised recovery strategy
Distributive injustice	Focuses on the perceived fairness of the recovery outcome of the process	Azemi *et al*. (2019) Kwak *et al*. (2017) Liu *et al*. (2019) Smith *et al*. (1999) Wang *et al*. (2011) Wei *et al*. (2019)	Compensation strategy
Procedural injustice	Focuses on the perceived fairness of the actual process that led to recovery outcome		Direct and indirect assistance strategy and co-creation strategy
Interactional injustice	Focuses on how individuals were treated throughout the process and outcome		Apology strategy

2.4 Social influence theory and actor–network theory

Social networks can influence individuals to imitate community behaviours (Venkatesh and Brown, 2001). Kelman (1958) identified three broad varieties of social influence: compliance, identification and internalisation. Compliance involves adapting behaviour to gain rewards or avoid negative consequences. Identification happens when individuals accept sources of influence to maintain a desired relationship (Kelman, 1958), whereas internalisation reflects an individual's adoption and acceptance of behaviours and values within a community (Kelman, 1958). At the internalisation stage, the individual's integration of community norms into their own norms strengthens their connection with the community.

Menon and Ranaweera (2018) found that the sharing of information post-service occurs when customers have close social ties and strong exchange ties that contain an explicit expectation of reciprocal relationships. The role of social influence emphasises that adoption behaviours are affected by "…exposure to other actors' knowledge, attitude or behaviours" (Van den Bulte and Lilien, 2001, p. 1410). This is evident from studies that have investigated online consumers' word-of-mouth (WOM) messages, a form of UGC, and their effect on various activities, such as generating awareness of (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008) and attitudes towards products and brands (Hansen *et al.*, 2018). It is evident that a potential customer's evaluation of a service provider can be tempered by their observation of the impact that a service failure has on another customer (Wan *et al.*, 2011). Haenlein (2013) found that customers who are socially connected to customers who have previously defected from a service provider are themselves likely to defect. However, a study by Wan and Wyer (2019) found that observers' reactions to service failures can depend on the characteristics of the customers involved in the service failure.

Social influence theory explores how people affect other people, whereas actor–network theory explores the influential links between human and non-human actors (Bencherki, 2017). Early studies found that technology and failures of service processes remained largely observed in a "technocentric" manner (Sarker and Lee, 2002); this overlooks the sociotechnical nature of service failures (Sarker *et al.*, 2006). Actor–network theory assumes that non-social phenomena can be considered social as a result of a collection of human and non-human actors (Bencherki, 2017); thus, actor–network theory does not make a distinction between human and non-human agents. Human traits, emotions and intentions have been examined and explored in reference to non-human entities, such as brands (Kwak *et al.*, 2017), products and services

(Kim and McGill, 2018). Siles and Boczkowski (2012) suggested that an actor–network approach can explain shifting networks of relationships between technology and individuals, and individuals' interactions and exchanges of information within social networks. Other scholars have recognised that without UGC, firms could not track online customers' sentiments towards brands, products or services (Vermeer *et al.*, 2019). Thus, from an actor–network perspective, UGC plays a role in how others proceed to act in regard to online SFR.

3. Methodology and data collection

3.1 Grounded assumptions and paradigm of inquiry

"Phenomenology explains … that … human subjectivity is the foundation of all scientific knowledge" (Guillen, 2019, p. 218). Phenomenology argues that "all acts of consciousness are experienced by the subject" in relation to an object; "something is understood, perceived or judged" (Howell, 2013, p. 57). Indeed, phenomenology provides research with interpretations relating to distinctions between internal and external worlds as well as relationships between objectivity and subjectivity. In general, phenomenology identifies relationships between mind (subject) and world (object). In this paper we use hermeneutical phenomenology and develop a methodological approach that recognises the researcher and researched as not only being-in-the-world but becoming in relation to the investigation and research process. We use this understanding through an inductive approach which allows us to comprehend historical circumstance and the participatory nature of understanding and discourse. Our existence is historical, so it is not possible to view ourselves or history from an objective position. We do not attempt to free ourselves from historical circumstance but actively reflect on how culture and history affect meaning and interpretation. Understanding is practical experience that is mutually negotiated and constructed rather than something that is discovered.

Phenomenology is an attempt to provide a description of the intentionality of experience. Intentionality involves that which is aimed at or focused on one's goals in the same way as archers aim at a target. Consequently, this involves the direction or extension of the mind towards things.

> Perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act itself apart from the end to which it is directed. Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality … Any contention that perception is indubitable, whereas the thing perceived is not, must be ruled out. If I see an ashtray, in the full sense of the word see, there must be an ashtray there … To see red, is to see red actively in existence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1999, p. 374)

Hermeneutics accentuates relationships between "conscious description and social structures and that the meaning of a text is continually interpreted with reference to context" (Howell, 2013, p. 157). Hermeneutics allows the interpretation of data through contextual situations within which engagement occurs through the activity of interpretation; "understanding is based on life experience and activity" (*ibid*., p. 158). "Human lives, experiences and the world as lived (human lifeworld and its phenomena) are understood within their particular temporal, situated frame through an interpretivist epistemology, that draws upon intentionality, intersubjectivity and hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation" (Suddick *et al*., 2020, p. 2). Each of the researchers involved in this study approached the processes of data collection and analysis through this lens with a recognition that each had perceptual pre-comprehensions that served to delineate interpretive procedures and further data collection.

To facilitate this philosophical perspective and methodological approach, we employed a grounded theory sampling technique which enhanced the idea of "givenness" and how this emerges through the research process. Because of the notion of becoming identified through phenomenology and the relationship with hermeneutical historical process, theoretical sampling was employed to enable an organic (becoming) dimension to the research process. Theoretical sampling allows for transformations in the research process through evolutionary or dialectical change. Theoretical sampling allows a certain autonomy and liberation in the data collection process. Coyne (1997) "argues for researchers to be adaptable and creative in designing sampling strategies that are aimed at being responsive to real-world conditions and that meet the information needs of the study" (p. 630). Theoretical sampling for this study acknowledged the close relationship between theory and development; it provided a process which guided the data collection procedures in relation to the evolutionary or dialectical nature of the approach (Breckenridge and Jones, 2009). The sample size allowed for saturation of the area; the participant list was developed in relation to answers given by earlier participants to previous interview questions and the directions the research then pursued. Indeed, as noted, the study undertook an inductive approach to ensure that the research emanated from an experiential phenomenological perspective, but it recognised the difficulties in terms of pre-understanding in relation to existing theoretical perspectives.

Data that are theoretically relevant encourage theory generation through comparison controls. The application of "theoretical control over choice of comparison groups is more difficult than simply collecting data from a preplanned set of groups, since choice requires continuous thought, analysis and search" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 52). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that to sample theoretically, one progresses in an evolutionary fashion.

Flexibility and consistency are necessary when undertaking theoretical sampling (the researcher is in the world and must react to changing circumstances but exercise control when developing ideas and categories). Consistency in this sense refers to comparisons being systematically related to emerging categories to ensure full development. Flexibility refers to "serendipity while out in the field" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 203). Theoretical sampling allows each sample to build on previous data and analysis. During the research process, theoretical sampling becomes specific, as the theory emerges and evolves. In addition, theoretical coding is closely linked to theoretical sampling and encompasses the essential relationship between data and theory through conceptual codes. Codes are conceptualised as underlying patterns in the data. Through the development and continuation of pre-understanding and being-in-the-world, theoretical sampling incorporates past, present and future perspectives as the research and researchers develop theory and practice through interacting and analysing data (Merlo *et al*., 2020).

3.2 Data collection methods

We adopted an exploratory, multiple and holistic case study design. The case study design allows researchers to examine a phenomenon situated in a specific context (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017), which means that it is possible to develop an in-depth understanding of a specific case. A case study explores situations; it allows researchers to consider different outcomes (Yin, 2014) and to explore a phenomenon using a variety of data sources to draw out multiple sides of the phenomenon (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The study is limited to a single case but explores multiple groups of individuals. A multiple holistic case study design was therefore applied to understand online service failure in the fashion industry from the perspectives of millennials from three different countries: the United Kingdom (UK), France and Italy. A study by Forbes revealed that the global digital fashion market has a US$4.8 billion value prediction for 2031 (Kumar, 2023), and 81% of consumers integrate digital channels into their fashion consumption experiences (Mintel, 2022). These countries were selected for their status of being among the five European countries with the highest online fashion market revenues in 2023, with a value of US$30.3 billion (France), US$20.1 billion (Italy), and US$56.9 billion (UK) (Statista, 2023). Based on a holistic approach, the study provides results that are generalised, thus limiting the number of variables. However, it reflects the perspectives of service failure in the online fashion industry of several units (millennials) from three countries.

A total of 100 individuals were invited to participate in the study from three countries (France, Italy and the UK). Of these, 60 individuals accepted invitations and participated in the study (participants' demographic information is summarised in Table V). Breckenridge and Jones (2009) argued that theoretical sampling size is determined by researchers' judgement that "no new properties emerge and the same properties continually emerge" (Glaser, 1978, p. 53) as opposed to a number-specific criterion. However, between 12 and 60 is the recommended sample size to reach a data saturation point in qualitative research (Azemi *et al*., 2019). Coyne (1997) implied that stages of theoretical sampling begin with selecting groups in which a phenomenon is most present. At the beginning of the sampling stage, we chose participants based on professional contacts to identify cases that met our sampling requirements (i.e., millennials between 18 and 39 years of age who had online service failure experiences in online fashion). As the data collection progressed, we engaged in a sampling strategy that built on emerging theoretical constructs in accordance with theoretical sampling (Breckenridge and Jones, 2009). Interviews consisted of 27 questions: 4 obtained information about participants' demographics, while the remaining 23 extracted SFR-related experiences (interview questions are given in Appendix 1); the latter questions were reordered or rephrased depending on the development of the theoretical constructs that emerged during the interviews.

The interviews were conducted through virtual platforms (Zoom, Adobe, Meet, Teams, Skype) and each interview lasted about 45 minutes. The holistic, qualitative nature of the study required methods that allowed the researchers to modify questions during the interview so as to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' unique experiences; such is the case for semi-structured interviews (Howell, 2013). This also ensured the responses remained within the topic of service failure and UGC. Pre-determined questions were applied to guide the researchers, but, as the discussions progressed, the questions evolved to obtain a precise understanding of the participants' experiences.

Table V: Participants' demographic information

Country	Gender	Occupation	Age range
United Kingdom	Male	University economics student	24–26
	Male	University business student	21–23
	Male	Administrator	27–29
	Female	Administrator	30–32
	Male	Personal trainer	30–32
	Female	University finance student	24–26
	Female	University economics student	24–26
	Female	Teaching assistant	24–26
	Female	Accountant	30–32
	Male	Engineer	30–32
	Male	Graphic designer	21–23
	Male	Business owner	30–32
	Female	Teaching assistant	24–26
	Male	Teaching assistant	24–26
	Male	Sales coordinator	27–29
	Female	University marketing student	18–20
	Male	University marketing student	18–20
	Male	University management student	18–20
	Male	University finance student	18–20
	Male	Marketing coordinator	27–29
Italy	Female	University graduate	24–26
	Female	Content developer	27–29
	Female	University master's student	27–29
	Male	University economics student	21–23
	Female	Cashier and waitress	21–23
	Male	University finance student	18–20
	Male	University master's student	24–26
	Male	University master's student	30–32
	Female	University finance student	18–20
	Female	Administration assistant	21–23

	Female	English and French translator	30–32
	Male	Purchasing and research assistant	27–29
	Female	University marketing student	18–20
	Female	Content manager	33–35
	Female	Fabric cutter	24–26
	Male	University marketing student	18–20
	Male	University marketing student	21–23
	Male	Administrator	33–35
	Male	University economics student	18–20
	Female	University finance student	18–20
	Male	Sales manager	33–35
	Female	Digital marketing executive	33–35
France	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion management	24–26
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion	21–23
	Male	Restaurant waiter	18–20
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion management	21–23
	Male	Data analyst	30–32
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion	24–26
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion	27–29
	Male	Procurement officer	27–29
	Male	Project manager	30–32
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion	24–26
	Male	University marketing student	18–20
	Male	Data protection consultant	33–35
	Female	University marketing student	18–20
	Female	Social media assistant	21–23
	Female	Assistant librarian	24–26
	Female	MSc Global luxury and fashion management	24–26
	Male	Sound designer	27–29
	Male	University finance student	18–20

3.3 Research context

This study took place in three countries: France, Italy and the UK. Millennials were generally sought across universities in these countries. Millennials are characterised by their multiplicity of perspectives, goals and skills (Azemi *et al.*, 2020; Helal *et al.*, 2018); they are tech-savvy, heavily dependent on social media and are the main creators and sharers of UGC. Loeb (2020) reported that 57% of millennials identify fashion trends through social media and out of all age groups they are the most likely to make online purchases; millennials' familiarity with digital media has played a significant role in shaping online shopping. A recent study indicated that consumers from the millennial generation follow brands through social media to obtain the latest product information, to provide feedback and to access customer services more than consumers from Generation X and Generation Z (Sabanoglu, 2020). Millennials are identified as influencers of other consumers, including non-millennial consumers, when it comes to product and service purchases (Torres, 2015); this is attributed to their mass involvement in sharing information and experiences online.

4. Analytical approach

Our study adopted an inductive data analytical approach that adhered closely to the qualitative approach proposed by Gioia *et al.* (2013). Inductive analysis is a procedure that derives theoretical concepts from emerging collected data (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022). We sought to understand participants' perspectives from their explicit statements and from the implicit connections between their statements and theoretical constructs (Ozuem *et al*., 2021). Gioia *et al.* (2013) proposed guidelines that provide a systematic approach to organising and presenting codes and themes, and bring transparency to conducting inductive research (Corley and Gioia, 2011). Following the transcription of recorded interviews, consisting of 242 pages, the original data were synthesised using three trajectories of analysis (first, second and third orders). The first-order analysis revealed a rich narrative of events and several terms, codes and categories about UGC and recovery efforts. As the analysis progressed, the codes from the first-order analysis were connected to the emergent second-order themes and were narrowed down based on their relevance to the generated themes. The third-order analysis, called aggregate dimensions, constructed the data into major themes based on explicit and implicit ideas. Comments as well as the words expressed by participants and the understanding of the researchers were all crucial to this process.

The data structure allowed the researchers to arrange data into a visual aid to demonstrate how the analysis exceeded the empirical context of the data to obtain a broader theoretical understanding through themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). This is a key element in demonstrating consistency in qualitative research (Pratt, 2008). Such an approach moves beyond the simple counting of repetitive words or phrases expressed by participants to provide explicit ideas that support the formation of themes. This means it was possible to consider the implicit messages that emerged from the participants' comments. Figure 1 maps the evolution of the emergent data structure. The empirical data were categorised into four major themes (aggregate dimensions) based on both the explicit words of participants and the implicit ideas the researchers developed following a review of comments. This allowed both the participants' and the researchers' voices to be reported in the analysis. In this sense, it was possible to maintain rigorous qualitative standards and high-level perspectives that prompted the critical interpretations needed to develop theoretical themes (Van Maanen, 1979). The four major aggregate dimensions are each discussed in detail in Subsections 4.1 to 4.4.

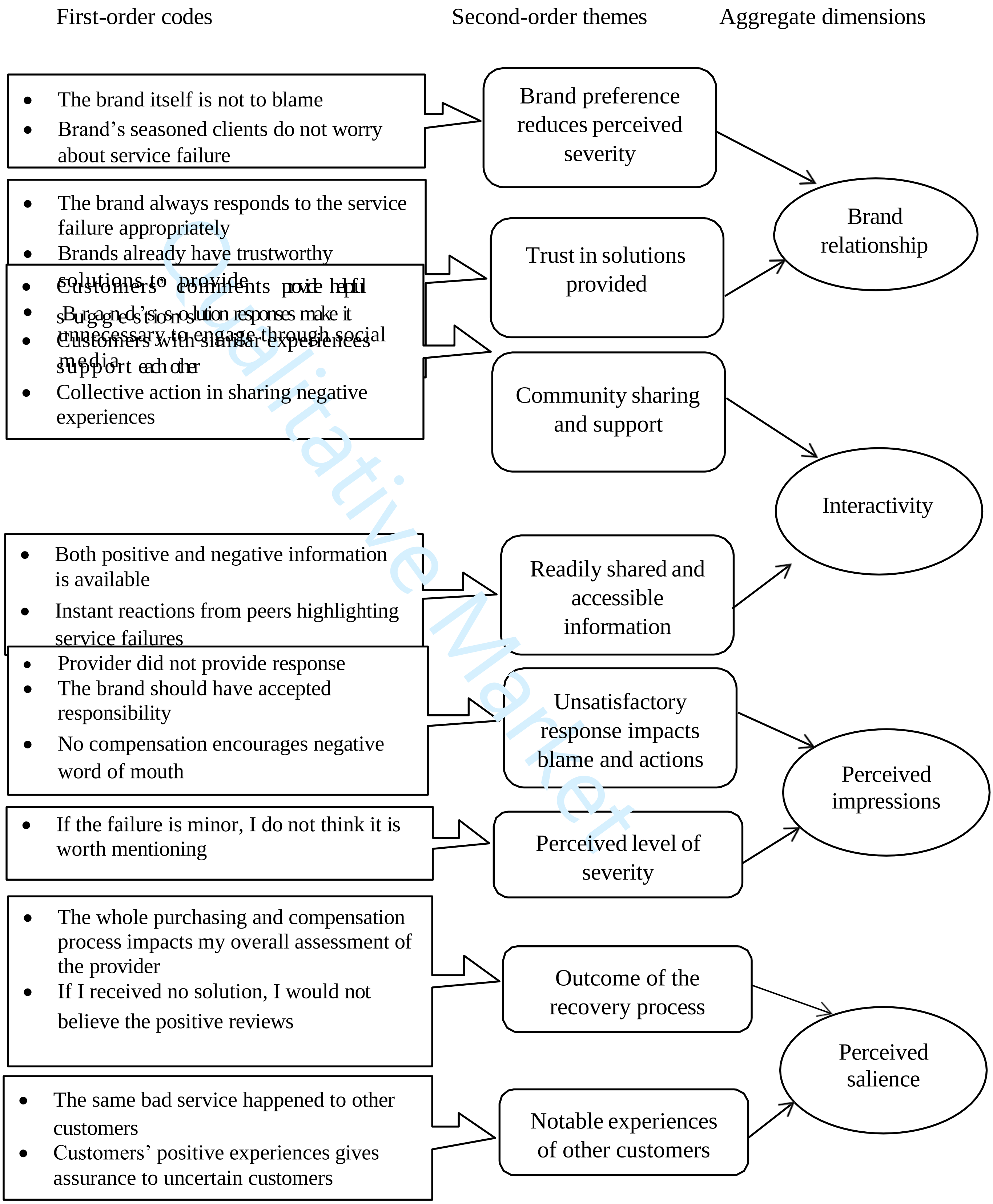

Figure 1: Data structure

4.1 Brand relationship

Brand relationship refers to the emotions customers develop over time that connect them to a specific brand (Malär *et al.*, 2011). Brand relationships can be strongly linked to descriptions of attitudinal loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994) which represents customers long-term brand commitment. Customers who feel they have a strong connection with a brand may feel they are able to engage in positive WOM related to the brand, as indicated by this French, 26-year-old female MSc Global luxury and fashion management student:

> I like to share on social media something new from the brand or something that they did to surprise me in good way. Sometimes I express my gratitude when the brand solved an issue I had with an order.

Intriguingly, this participant highlights how a positive brand relationship can motivate customers to positively express their feelings about a brand even when service failure occurs. When customers develop a strong emotional connection with brands that extends beyond the monetary benefits they receive, they are more likely to engage in conversations that refer the brand to other potential customers (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). However, depending on the impact of brand attachment and emotional loyalty, loyal customers are less likely to leave a brand even if a service failure complaint was not fully resolved, as suggested by this French, 22-year-old female MSc Global luxury and fashion student:

> The company responded politely and were very apologetic for my order not showing up. I lost trust in that online order being sorted, but not in the brand because they responded to the situation.

Another participant, a 25-year-old female French MSc Global luxury and fashion student noted:

> I communicate with the company directly, often it is just for minor issues in delivery or clothing size, but even with major issues the company has solved it in my experience, so I see no need to address it publicly on social media.

The positive emotional strength of customers' relationships with brands may discourage them from participating in sharing information that could negatively impact the brand. Such a brand relationship may even motivate customers to defend the brand against others who do share negative information related to the brand.

4.2 Interactivity

Interactivity can be related to the complex development of the implementation of effective engagement within human–computer environments (Sims, 1997). Interactivity can be derived from various types of UGC that contain information related to brands, including product reviews (Moon and Kamakura, 2017), consumer messages from forums (Netzer *et al.*, 2012), and tweets and visual brand-related UGC (Klostermann *et al*., 2018). A 26-year-old female Italian university graduate stated:

> I read the reviews first. Especially on Zalando, like "this dress is short", or, "time for me to buy a size up...". You find advice from those who comment...I mostly observe, I do not comment.

Online customer WOM can generate greater credibility and relevant information, and evokes greater interest and empathy towards product-related information than firm-generated content. A 23-year-old male British university business student stated:

> My post on my experience received a lot of engagement because others were able to relate to the experience, and it made me feel as though I wasn't alone in this feeling.

Similarly, a 28-year-old male British administrator participant noted:

> Discussing both negative and positive experiences through social media is great, because you can receive instant reactions from peers from exhibiting the deficiencies in service and how companies handle service failure.

Intriguingly, the above participants identified that the option to talk with others following a negative experience can help customers reduce the negative emotional impact the experience has on them in contrast to dealing with it on their own. Millennials are able to use online communication channels with great convenience and ease when they want to reach out to others for support (Buechel and Berger, 2018). A 28-year-old female Italian university master's student noted:

> Other customers and I said: "Well, Sephora's not answering us, even if we put comments on their profile, they're still not answering us, let's start writing about it in our story line", so, we used Socials to get an answer.

The involvement of other customers and their negative responses to service failure using a collective approach could speed up recovery efforts. A large number of social ties strengthens a social network and can impact the speed at which information is spread about products and services (Mukherjee, 2014).

4.3 Perceived impressions

Customer impressions are very important in terms of influencing the recognition of brands during consumer purchase experiences. Each purchasing experience enhances an association with specific providers in terms of mental impressions (Tjandra *et al*., 2020). Service recovery strategies are critical to restoring customer satisfaction but can also worsen the situation and can deter purchasing intentions (Smith *et al*., 1999). A 24-year-old female French assistant librarian indicated:

> I wrote to the provider and I didn't receive any response.…bad, very bad, isn't it?

This participant's specific experience identifies the impact of the provider's response (or lack of) to a service failure. A 27-year-old male Italian purchasing and research assistant asserted:

> Even when I used their service they said that it was not their direct responsibility as it was the mistake of the distributor…How can a provider say to the client that it is not their responsibility?

The emotional connection customers have with brands is a key factor in shaping how loyal customers respond to online service failures. This distinguishes their responses from other customers' behaviours, attitudes and responses. A 26-year-old male university economics student from the UK noted:

> If I received no compensation, I would have taken my complaint to social media platforms to spread the word about my negative experience or to goad the company's attention on social media in order to be rightly compensated.

Customers who encounter a service failure may develop negative emotions, such as anger, concern or distress, and may feel a need to reach out to others (Rimé, 2009) and obtain sympathy for the injustice of a service recovery solution.

4.4 Perceived salience

One of the themes that emerged from the study broadly focused on the attributes of salience. Taylor and Thompson (1982, p. 175) referred to salience as "the phenomenon that when one's attention is differentially directed to one portion of the environment rather than others, the information contained in that portion will receive disproportionate weighting in subsequent judgments”. This was indicated by a 24-year-old male Italian university master’s student:

> I noticed that many customers commented on the same bad service that happened to me. That’s how I found out about what the provider was known for doing bad at.

Customers who share negative information can consequently influence other customers’ behaviour with implications for brand loyalty. A large volume of negative information and experiences can also potentially lead customers to perceive that such information reflects actual service failures that generally occur with the brand.

A 24-year-old female Italian fabric cutter stated:

> I purchased shoes online from Foot Locker, I hardly buy shoes online because more problems occur compared to offline shopping. As I suspected, nothing went well, from the online ordering to the compensation process.

Customers’ experiences may influence their judgement regarding future brand encounters. This means that customers may think that the experiences they encountered could occur again, causing them to believe that service failure is a typical and regular occurrence for that brand (Vanhouche and Alba, 2009). The tendency of customers to generalise their experiences may reduce the salience of positive information shared on social media. A 22-year-old male Italian university economics student stated:

> I recognise the competence of those in the company that solved the problem…however, if the issue had not been solved, I would have been unconvinced by the positive comments on social media.

This participant highlights the scepticism customers have for online positive WOM, especially when they encounter service failure. Customers who seek to reduce service failure risks may observe online information that supports the brand with caution.

5. Emergent findings: service failure severity and customers' response matrix

Our explanatory framework was developed through three stages. First, two authors developed four emergent themes (each author developed two themes) while the other two authors read through the data to gain deeper insight and to develop an independent perspective. Second, we subsequently converged to discuss and resolve our differences based on the original data. Last, iterating between emergent theory, data and the theoretical constructs, we then developed logical arguments to provide further theoretical insights into the phenomenon of interest (Ozuem *et al*., 2021). This led to the distinct categorisation of four customer groups regarding the severity of service failures and the level of customers' online response following service failure. Service failure severity refers to the perceived negative impact of service failure; customers' online response refers to the action customers take that may reflect their attitude towards the failure, including reporting the failure directly to the provider or through social media, which can potentially negatively affect the provider (Fan and Niu, 2016; Vermeer *et al*., 2019; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004).

Customers who encounter service failure will judge the severity of the failure to be low or high, at varying levels, and their response to the service failure online depends on the diverse characteristics that impact their perception of the service failure (Azemi *et al*., 2019; Mattila and Patterson 2004; Sugathan *et al*., 2017). When service failure is perceived as low, it is possible that customers will not respond negatively in comparison to their response to a failure considered to be very severe. Minor responses indicate that customers will take little negative action against the provider; minor actions may include minimising negative WOM, partaking mostly in positive WOM through social media or generally limiting participation in online WOM (Ozuem *et al*., 2021). However, even when the failure is perceived as very severe, some customers will still deliver a minor online response (Wan *et al*., 2011). This is linked to the brand relationship, which is the relationship customers feel they have with the brand. This relationship has an impact on the impression customers form of service failure and diverts their interactive participation and the salience of the failure away from negative WOM (Cheng *et al*., 2012; Haenlein, 2013; Sinha and Lu, 2016).

In contrast, some customers deliver a major response to service failure that is perceived to be of high severity (Kwak *et al*., 2017; Liu *et al*., 2019; Smith *et al*., 1999). Major responses refer to the active reporting of service failures through social media and significant participation in negative online WOM (Azemi *et al*., 2019). Customers who are highly active in their response have a strong sense of independence from the provider which causes them to react negatively to the service failure (Odoom *et al*., 2020; Roggeveen *et al*., 2012); this often culminates in the spread of negative information (Hansen *et al*., 2018; Azemi *et al*., 2020). The severity of the service failure creates a negative impression for these customers causing them to maintain their attention on their negative experience (Wang *et al*., 2011; Vanhouche and Alba, 2009). This can often lead to negative WOM. Other customers may deliver a major response but might perceive the service failure severity to be low; this is linked to customers who have limited experience in handling a service failure so their impression may be emotionally neutral.

However, because millennials frequently interact on social media, the impression of an inexperienced customer may change in response to impartial customers' judgements on the severity of a failure or the information they encounter and exchange with customers who have experienced service failure (Albrecht *et al*., 2019; Septianto *et al*., 2020). From the four themes of brand relationship, interactivity, perceived impressions and perceived salience (BIPP) and the severity of service failure and customers' online responses, the following four categories of customers emerged based on their distinct attitudes and actions delivered online following service failures: forgivers, avengers, mass-crowders and disregarders. Customers were categorised based on their behaviour during SFR processes: the level of UGC in which they engaged and how they perceived the severity of the failure (see Figure 2). The four categories of customers are described in Sections 5.1 to 5.4.

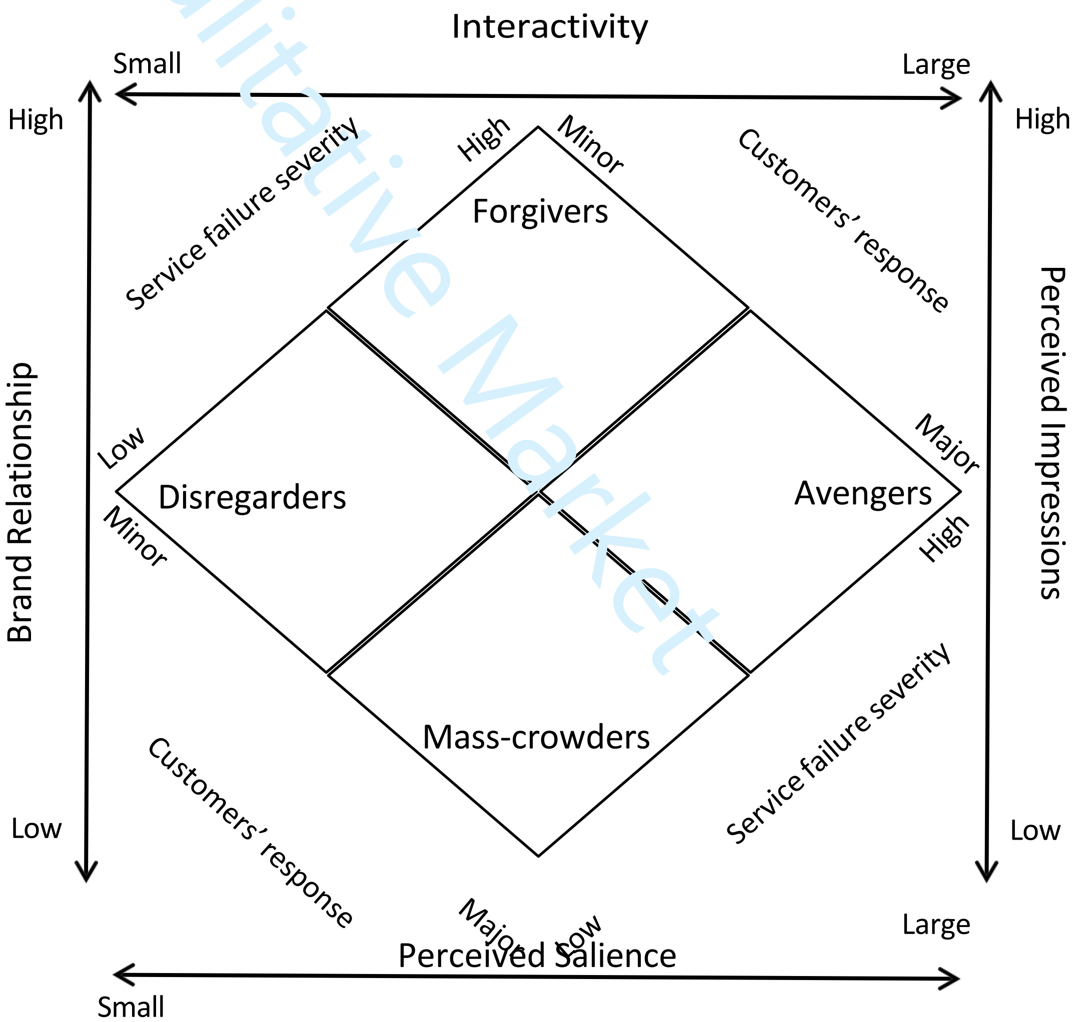

Figure 2: Conceptual framework: brand relationship, interactivity, perceived impression and perceived salience (BIPP) diamond model

5.1 Forgivers

Forgivers are customers with an emotional attachment to a specific brand that motivates them to continue purchasing from that specific brand. Brand relationships have an impact on how forgivers perceive brands during and following service failure. Forgivers' interactivity is dependent on their emotional attachment to the brand, which means that they will mostly engage in positive WOM related to the brand. However, when service failure occurs, forgivers are less likely to interact online because they do not want to tarnish the brand's image and may instead interact with the brand privately. A strong brand relationship motivates forgivers to remain committed to the brand, even if it was directly responsible for service failures (Sinha and Lu, 2016). Forgivers, like any other customer, will have a negative impression of a service failure and will expect solutions to be provided if the failure is severe. However, their relationship with the brand will not be affected. Forgivers are less likely to be socially compliant with other online networks or to internalise the social influence of online networks that could change their impression of the provider. Their relationship with the brand causes them to feel less pressured to align with other customers (Langan *et al.*, 2017).

5.2 Avengers

Avengers are customers who believe brands have the capability to control or prevent service failures. They are less forgiving than forgivers when service failures occurs (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, avengers' strong sense of injustice influences their decision to engage in negative WOM that holds the brand directly responsible. When providers do not provide a solution or take responsibility for failures, customers experience further negative emotions, including anger, and will assess whether they feel they were negatively treated by the provider (Septianto *et al.*, 2020). The experience of the service failure and the provider's response can leave avengers with a negative impression that will have an impact on any further usage of the brand (Azemi *et al*., 2019). Avengers contribute to the majority of negative information shared online which impacts other customers' confidence in providers (Van Laer and De Ruyter, 2010). Avengers act as influencers rather than being influenced, as they hold a strong mental position regarding service failures; their perception of service failure is more salient to them than other customers' positive experiences. As influencers, avengers can be assigned as actors within the social influence categories of identification and internalisation (Kelman, 1958); in relation to other customers, avengers may have characteristics that are relatable or useful to other customers.

5.3 Mass-crowders

Mass-crowders may not have a strong relationship with a brand due to their limited experience. Therefore, they are more likely to rely on the information provided by consumers' UGC. Customers' online WOM that describes perceived service risks associated with a brand (Hudson *et al.*, 2016) would probably be salient to mass-crowders. When considering social influence categories, mass-crowders can arguably be aligned with compliance and internalisation. At first, mass-crowders may be aligned with the compliance category as they have limited experience to support their decisions and they tend to try to avoid negative consequences (Kelman, 1958). However, over time they may align with the internalisation category when they begin to accept information because they agree with it (Kelman, 1958) and it influences their pre-existing perceptions regarding how service failures should be handled. These perceptions can vary between customers (Azemi *et al*., 2019). Mass-crowders may seek to confirm if their current impression is agreeable to the majority of other customers, as shared outlooks and values within a community can socially influence individuals to identify with the community (Lim and Schumann, 2019). However, online comments may reflect a different sentiment to mass-crowders' pre-existing impressions, so they may adjust their perceptions depending on the volume of negative and positive information.

5.4 Disregarders

Disregarders are customers with varying levels of purchasing experience with brands; their responses to service failures and interactivity opportunities will differ depending on their individual characteristics. Customers' different beliefs and expectations will lead them to have perceptions that are dissimilar from each other as regards the same entity (Kottwitz *et al.*, 2022). Disregarders have different perceptions that impact on their perceived impressions. However, their actions reflect a less active stance regarding service failures and recovery solutions. Disregarders have a brand relationship that aligns mostly with behavioural loyalty, which is based on past purchasing experiences. Some customers do not expect to build interpersonal relationships with brands (Hudson *et al.*, 2016) or with social networks, so they will have low expectations of interactivity, which probably reduces the social influence effect of interacting customers on disregarders. However, it is possible they will still observe UGC, which may impact their impression of a service failure and enable the internalisation category of social influence to have an effect on their impression and on the salience of the service failure, but they will not take further action against the provider. Disregarders have minimal emotional attachment to brands; therefore, they have low expectations (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). However, if a provider responds to service failures beyond their expectation, the outcome of the provider's actions may alter the salience of the failure to disregarders.

6. Theoretical implications

This study further develops the conceptualisation of customer responses to service failures and provides a set of practical insights that brand managers can employ to recover service failures. The study characterises customers based on the level of severity they perceive in relation to service failure and based on the level of UGC activity they will willingly engage in through social media. From these groupings, the study identifies four key customer types: forgivers, avengers, mass-crowders and disregarders. It is important that brand managers do not standardise their failure recovery strategies but adapt them in line with the described behaviours of each customer group, as illustrated in Figure 3. Companies should also take advantage of loyal customers who can act as social influencers to other customers. Social influence involves identifying “seed agents” who can endorse brands and provide other customers with an assurance of quality (Naeem, 2021).

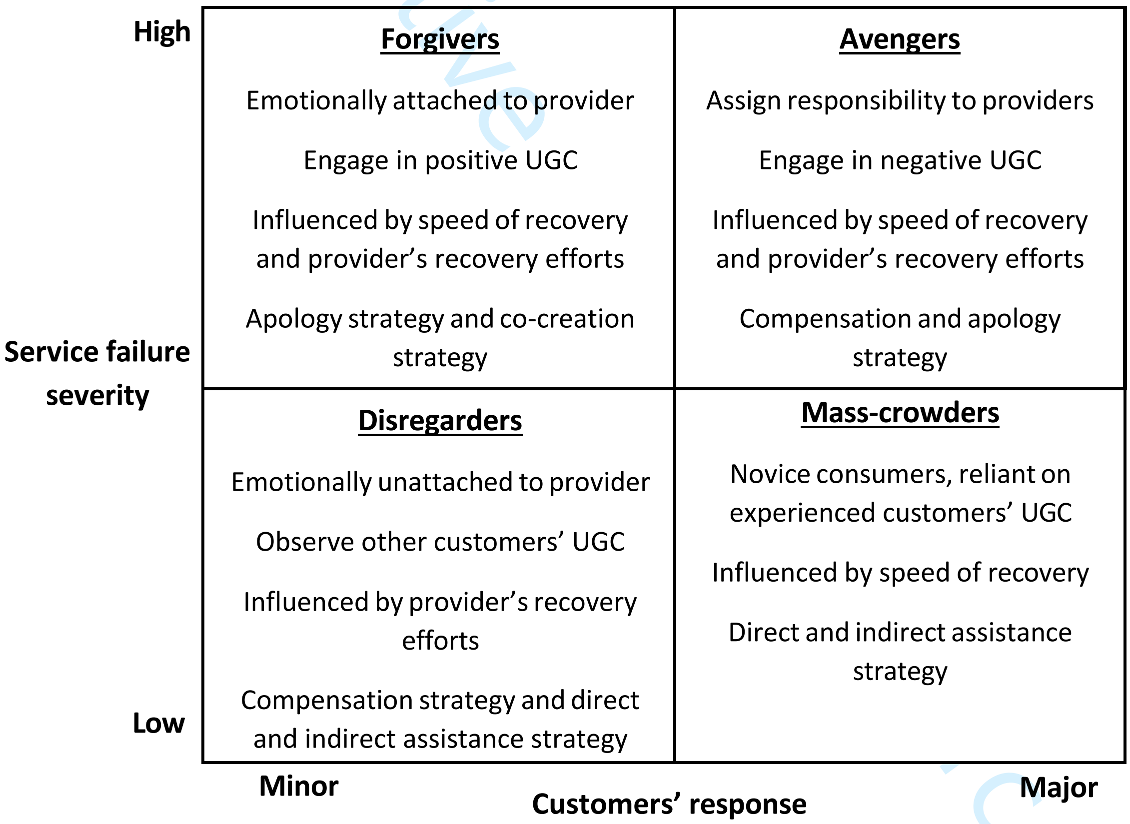

Figure 3: Customer categories and recovery recommendations. UGC, user-generated content

Forgivers have a strong emotional attachment to the brand that causes them to focus on positive outcomes. This reduces their motivation to engage with negative UGC. The current paper recommends that practitioners deliver apology and co-creation strategies in relation to forgivers. Forgivers' long-term relationship with brands is mediated by their emotional attachment to brands, so strategies that influence emotional recovery should take priority over material recovery. Forgivers expect brands to have qualities that are similar to those of their close social networks, such as reliability, authenticity and understanding. Thus, offering an apology to a forgiver will maintain that interpersonal connection between a brand and a forgiver, even in circumstances when a brand was unable to deliver a satisfactory recovery. The results highlight that firms, when appropriate, can also take opportunities to facilitate co-created strategies, involving forgivers in their own and other consumers' recovery process. This may emotionally stimulate forgivers who may feel they are being empowered by a brand they admire to recover themselves and to assist others when required.

7. Managerial implications

The results of our study have several practical implications. The results suggest that in order to reduce the potential severity of UGC, companies must react swiftly and directly to avengers' reports of service failures and emphasise the consequences that affect avengers. The recovery strategy should include a combination of compensation and apology (Chen *et al*., 2018). Avengers require material and emotional recovery, and they assess not only the outcome of a recovery process but the treatment they received prior to and following a recovery outcome. An apology strategy assures the avengers that the firm has accepted responsibility and aims to resolve the service failure. Avengers assign the majority of SFR responsibility to companies; thus, firms must ensure that avengers are expected to conduct minimal efforts towards a recovery process, to reduce their perception that they are investing more than they did prior to the service recovery process. If recovery processes require effort from avengers, then this should be followed by the provider's appreciation of the customer's contribution (You *et al.*, 2020). Avenger customers will then positively assess the provider's actions leading up to the post-recovery stage. Avengers can indirectly influence a disregarder's perception of the brand regarding service failures.

As shown in Figure 3, disregarders focus on providers' efforts, but consider the failure circumstance and its impact on the recovery process. Some disregarders may forgive service failures, but others may choose to disregard taking further action against the provider based on their perception that the provider cannot or will not provide solutions to a service failure; in this situation, their relationship with the brand will be based primarily on the monetary benefits they receive. However, like avengers, disregarders' attention is focused on the actions delivered by the provider itself and they look at the interactions generated by electronic-WOM. A compensation strategy is recommended for disregarders to ensure the monetary benefits offered by firms are maintained. However, before compensation strategies may be expected to occur, firms could facilitate direct and indirect assistance strategies to disregarders. Direct assistance strategies could be applied in recovery processes that require providers to initiate the recovery process when disregarders cannot, and indirect strategies should be applied when providers aim to inform disregarders of their recovery efforts. Providers must consider how disregarders will perceive their online responses and actions, as they impact disregarders' confidence in the provider and their willingness to forgive the service failure.

Mass-crowders as novice customers have limited experience with a brand, which makes them unaware of the actual efforts the brand may deliver in the recovery process; thus, the speed of recovery will be the main indicator of a successful recovery process and outcomes. It is recommended that providers conduct direct assistance strategies so mass-crowders can gain an actual and positive recovery-related experience from the provider, which demonstrates the provider's swift response to a report of a service failure. However, mass-crowders may encounter forgivers' and avengers' UGC, which may inform them of how they feel about a brand's efforts. Mass-crowders' inexperience makes them more reliant on other customers.

Thus, providers should also consider indirect assistance, utilising their forgivers as key indicators of the provider's efforts, to maintain the mass-crowders' confidence. Forgivers can endorse the ability of brands to manage service failures, which may influence mass-crowders' perspectives of the brand; this might motivate mass-crowders to become loyal customers in the long term and become forgivers when they next encounter service failure.

8. Limitations and future research directions

A potential limitation of the BIPP model is that it does not focus on specific types of service failures and how customers would respond to those specific failures. It does, however, encourage brand managers to consider how customers will respond to service failures and the characteristics that influence customers' responses. Different customers will respond differently to the same service failure, so it is important to evaluate customer attitudes and responses towards failure as well as the severity of the failure itself. Additionally, the current study focuses on one single industry, so it is recommended that the BIPP model be tested further in other industries, as different industries may have distinct service characteristics that may impact customer expectations.

This study follows a qualitative approach. The weaknesses of qualitative studies are widely recognised specifically in terms of the issue of generalisability. The findings of this paper are not generalisable due to the limited number of participants involved. Further research could examine the effect of UGC on service failures and the characteristics of the identified customers using a larger sample size. Future studies could also examine the responses of customers from other countries. The conceptualised customer groups developed from these findings are based on a sample of individuals who live in the UK, France and Italy. These three countries are categorised as having a high level of individualism. Consumers from countries with a collectivist culture may respond differently to service failure and engage differently through UGC compared to customers from individualistic cultures. Future research could examine more countries and potentially compare customers' responses to service failures based on different cultural backgrounds. It would also be interesting to study how the service failure recovery process varies between individuals who live in the UK and those who live in France and in Italy.

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Appendix 1: Guided interview questions

Pre-phase demographic details

1) Please tick your age range:

Age	
18–20 years	
21–23 years	
24–26 years	
27–29 years	
30–32 years	
33–35 years	
36–39 years	
40 years and above	

2) How old will you be on your next birthday?

____

3) Please state your gender:

a) Female

b) Male

c) Other

4) Please state your occupation:

____

Questions for individual topics:

a) Online service failure

1. Which type of online service failure did you experience? (technical, communication, delivery, others).

2. When (on what occasion) did you experience it? (normal shopping, after a specific client request, after a specific event, etc…).

3. Why did you decide to use that online service of the provider? Was it the first time that you decided to use that online service of that provider? (If no, then what other online services did you use and why?).

4. Did you have a relationship with that provider? (for how long, for what, collect details on the relationship).

5. What do you think about the provider? (try to understand the perception of the provider)

6. Do you know other competitive providers? In what ways do they differ? Which of their online services did you experience and why?

b) The context of sharing – UGC

7. Where did you communicate the online service failure? (social networks, which social networks were used, what are their names and characteristics, other online media used; offline media used and relative description)

8. Why did you decide to communicate through these means of communication? (fast, effective, accessible, causality; try to understand the reasons for their use with respect to other means of communication)

9. Have you adopted these means of communications before? (on what other occasions were they used, why and for how long have they been used)

10. Where do you usually share information with your friends? (social networks and which, how often do you use them in comparison to other means of communication)

c) The content shared

11. Did you write on social networks first and then contact the company or did you contact the company before you wrote on social networks? Did you implement other kinds of behaviour?

12. What did you write about your online service failure to the company?

13. What did you write about your online service failure in social network?

14. Who answered your communication? (more than one person, how many, how long was the time between your communication and their response, etc…)

15. What was the content of the answer to your communication? (try to remember expressions)

16. What is your impression about the persons who answered? (they knew the provider, they were an expert on the issue as they had had an experience similar to yours, they answered by accident, etc..)

17. Did you know them? (if yes, indicate if you have good/bad relationship, you had many occasions to speak with them, etc..)

18. What was the prevailing view at the end of the sharing and why? (your ideas prevailed and why, the ideas of others prevailed – who and why, indicate why you accepted them)

d) Recovery strategy

19. Did you get an answer from the provider? How did the provider answer? (in case of a dominant collective-based view, try to understand the approach that the provider used, did the provider answer you or give a collective answer)

20. Were you engaged in the provider's recovery strategy? (how were you engaged, explain if you had the competences to be able to give your contribution, explain what the role of the firm was in the recovery strategy)

21. Did the provider engage other actors to answer you? (who were these actors, how were they involved, what contributions did they make).

22. Were you satisfied with the answer received and why? (try to understand on what the perception of satisfaction is based)

23. Did you have other expectations in terms of recovery strategy? What kind of expectations?

Dear Dr Spotswood

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to you for reviewing our manuscript titled "**Dynamics of user-generated content and service failure recovery: evidence from millennials"**. We greatly appreciate your valuable recommendations. The attached appendix includes an explanation of the responses we have provided.

We hope that our manuscript now meets the quality required for publication.

Sincerely,

Authors of the paper "**Dynamics of user-generated content and service failure recovery: evidence from millennials**" Manuscript ID **QMR-08-2022-0124.**

NOTE: The appendix does not include the authors' full response provided in the manuscript. Instead, it gives a brief explanation of our response and the location of the full response in the manuscript.

REVIEWER 1:

Reviewer's comment: 1) **Dear authors,**

Thank you for revising your manuscript titled "Dynamic of User-Generated Content and Service Failure Recover: Evidence from the Millennials."

Although you put time and effort into editing your paper, more work is needed.

The purpose of the paper in the Abstract should be re-written: at this time it does not clearly answer the question why you conducted this study. Lines 15-21 should be edited. Design/Methodology/Approach (lines 24-31) should not have the explanation of the method but rather statement of what was used.

Authors' response: Thank you for bringing our attention to the Abstract. We have rewritten every section of the Abstract and specified the aim of the paper and the methods we employed in data collection and analysis.

The study uses a phenomenological hermeneutics and adopts theoretical sampling to collect empirical data from three European countries (France, Italy and the UK). It has designed this methodological framework to illustrate the close relationships between subject and object and identify that data analysis and collection are undertaken in relation to consistent iterative interpretations in an evolving process of study.

Location of the response: Abstract

Reviewer's comment: 2) **My previous comment was:**

"A research question is not clearly presented. Your description of the purpose of the study could be improved by being a bit more specific (p.3, lines 41-52). The last sentence in that section requires further development. "Ensembled

interpretations of millennials" might refer to the characteristics of millennials as a generation or to the millennials' perceptions of an event. What are you referring to?"

Authors' response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We have reworded the highlighted sentence, which referred to millennials, for clarity.

Location of the response: page 3

Reviewer's comment: 3) **Although you responded saying that revisions were provided in the second paragraph, the changes were not significant. The Introduction section does not explain the motivation behind this study – why and how the topics of the user-generated content and the companies' service failures came together?**

Authors' response: We have attempted to explain the motivation for the study.

Location of the response: page 3 paragraph 2

Reviewer's comment: 4) **To further improve the Literature Review section, you might want to focus on clarity of arguments for presenting the following:**

- The concept of the user-generated content

- The importance of the service failure recovery and the reason for selecting service failure recovery as a type of the company's decision

- The impact of the user generated content on the company's method of recovery based on the selected theories.

You found some good studies, but you need to explain how different pieces are put together for creating a response diamond.

Authors' response: Thank you for your comments. We have added a paragraph explaining the impact of UGC on consumers and service providers.

Location of the response: pages 4-5

Reviewer's comment: 5) **Design of the tables should be improved. For example, it appears that Table II on pages 10-12 has three parts – why are they placed together? Why not to break it into three tables that would be easier to understand? Table II starts on page 10 and has a title "Comparison of service recovery elements, strategies and consumer processes" but there is nothing about strategies. The last section of the table lists three types of perceived justice – what is it for?**

Authors' response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We have removed 'strategies' from the title of Table II and have separated Table II into three tables. The perceived injustice table builds on the paragraph on Page 7 that addresses customers' processing of perceived injustices they experienced during service failure and recovery situations, and it suggests recovery strategies that can be practiced to respond to customers who evaluate service recovery efforts as unjust.

Location of the response: pages 9-12

Reviewer's comment: 6) **Clarity of the writing style remains a weak point – you corrected grammar but the flow of the narration is not very smooth. It appears that you inserted main points here and there to enhance your discussion, but, in some instances, it is out of order. Page 16 and page 17 talk about theoretical sampling in two different places – why not to combine your explanation of the sample selection in one place?**

Authors' response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention. The issue raised has been addressed which explains our rationale for the utilisation of theoretical sampling before we discuss the data collection procedures (please see below).

To facilitate this philosophical perspective and methodological approach, we employed a grounded theory sampling technique which enhanced the idea of "givenness" and how this emerges through the research process. Because of the notion of becoming identified through phenomenology and the relationship with hermeneutical historical process, theoretical sampling was employed to enable an organic (becoming) dimension to the research process. Theoretical sampling allows for transformations in the research process through evolutionary or dialectical change. Theoretical sampling allows a certain autonomy and liberation in the data collection process. Coyne (1997) "argues for researchers to be adaptable and creative in designing sampling strategies that are aimed at being responsive to real-world conditions and that meet the information needs of the study" (p. 630). Theoretical sampling for this study acknowledged the close relationship between theory and development; it provided a process which guided the data collection procedures in relation to the evolutionary or dialectical nature of the approach (Breckenridge and Jones, 2009). The sample size allowed for saturation of the area; the participant list developed in relation to answers given by earlier participants to previous interview questions and directions the research then pursued. Indeed, as noted, the study undertook an inductive approach to ensure that the research emanated from an experiential phenomenological perspective, but it recognised the difficulties in terms of pre-understanding in relation to existing theoretical perspectives.

Data that are theoretically relevant encourage theory generation through comparison controls. The application of "theoretical control over choice of comparison groups is more difficult than simply collecting data from a preplanned set of groups, since choice requires continuous thought, analysis and search" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 52). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that to sample theoretically, one progresses in an evolutionary fashion.

Flexibility and consistency are necessary when undertaking theoretical sampling (the researcher is in the world and must react to changing circumstances but exercise control when developing ideas and categories). Consistency in this sense refers to comparisons being systematically related to emerging categories to ensure full development. Flexibility refers to "serendipity while out in the field" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 203). Theoretical sampling allows each sample to build on previous data and analysis. During the research process, theoretical sampling becomes specific, as the theory emerges and evolves. In addition, theoretical coding is closely linked to theoretical sampling and encompasses the essential relationship between data and theory through conceptual codes. Codes are conceptualised as underlying patterns in the data. Through the development and continuation of pre-understanding and being-in-the-world, theoretical sampling incorporates past, present and future perspectives as the research and researchers develop theory and practice through interacting and analysing data (Merlo *et al*., 2020).

Location of the response: pages 16-17

Reviewer's comment: 7) **Please review the quality of figures – some areas are overlapping and difficult to read – you might add more space between the elements.**

Authors' response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We have edited the figures to enhance their readability.

Location of the response: Page 31

Reviewer's comment: 8) **Overall:**

Unfortunately, at this time, this manuscript still requires strengthening your theoretical background and framework as well as the improving the writing style. Please continue working on revising this paper.

Additional Questions:

1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: Yes, author(s) developed a BIPP model that is novel and practical

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: Relevant literature is used in preparation of the manuscript

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: The research method is appropriate for the purpose of the study

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: Results are appropriately analyzed

5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: Empirical and practical implications are presented

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: More attention should be paid to clarity and logical flow of arguments.

Authors' response:

Thank you for taking the time to review and provide recommendations to improve the quality of the work. The above issues have been addressed in the proceeding sections. Please see certificate for copyediting from Dr Linda Free.

Location of the response: N/A

REVIEWER 2:

Reviewer's comment: 1)

Comments:

Thank you for your detailed answers to the reviewers' comments. The revised paper is much more improved.

Additional Questions:

1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: Yes.

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: Yes.

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: Yes.

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: Yes.

5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: Yes.

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: Yes.

Authors' response: Thank you for recommending our manuscript for publication.

Location of the response: N/A

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To the editors,

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The paper "Dynamics of user-generated content and service failure recovery: evidence from millennials" was proofread by Dr L. Free, Professional Member of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (www.ciep.uk), from 19 April to 20 April 2023.

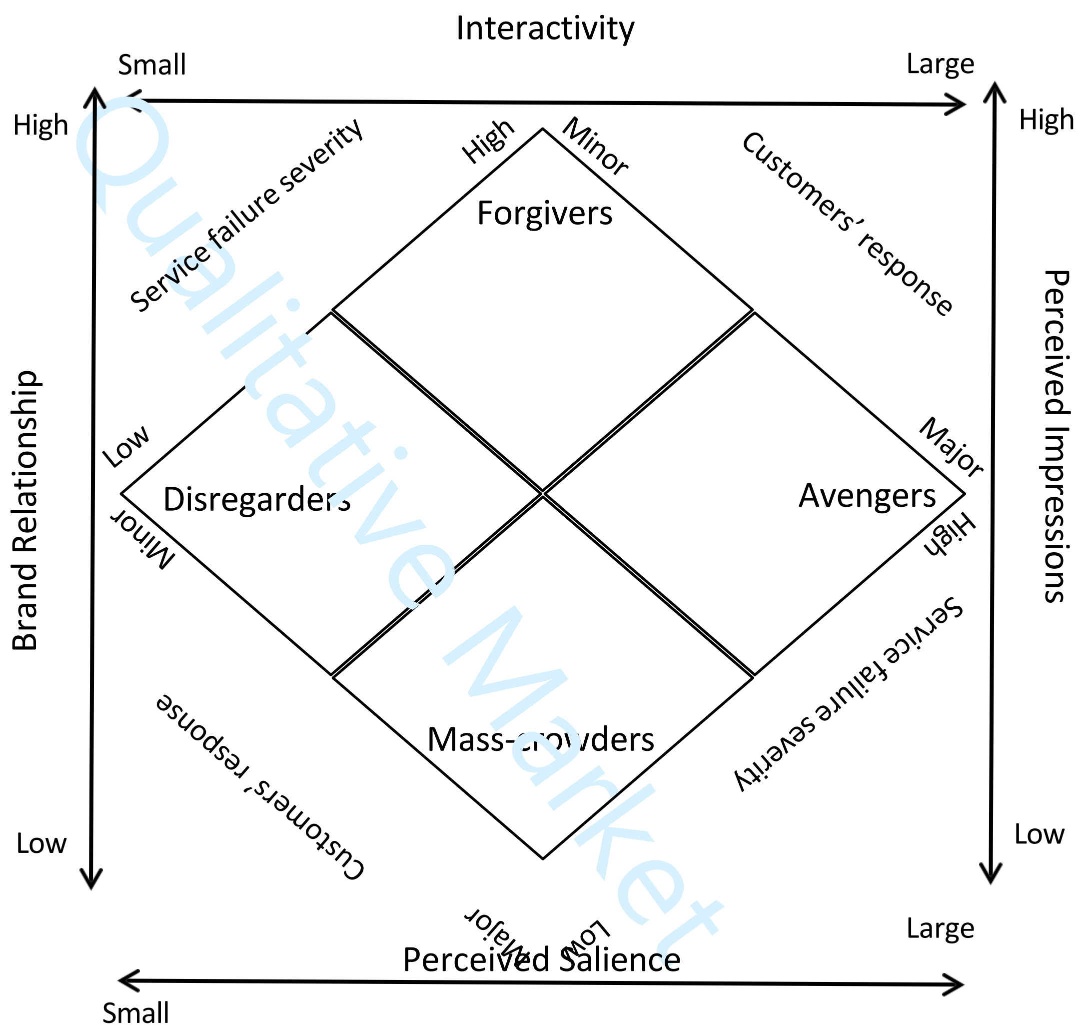

Figure 2: Conceptual framework: BIPP diamond model

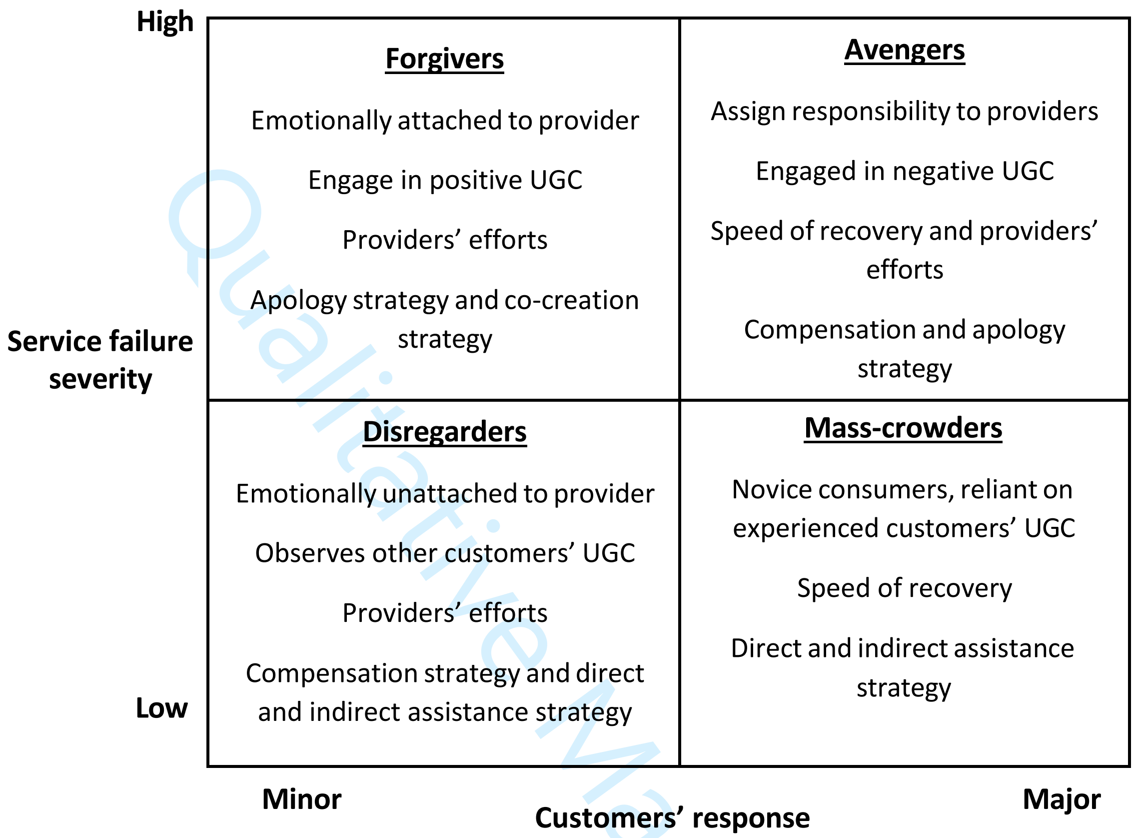

Figure 3: Customer categories and recovery recommendations