

Service Recovery Paradox: Influence of Service Encounter and Context

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Abstract:- The “service recovery paradox” is a remarkable concept and phenomenon in the vital domain of customer service, whereby customer satisfaction loyalty towards the service provider increases after an incidence of a problem faced by the customer. With this phenomenon in the backdrop, this research paper pertains to a threefold purpose- to analyze situations and prevailing contexts which may cause formation and further strengthening of a service recovery paradox, secondly to identify factors which are required for the formation of the not-so-apparent service recovery paradox, and thirdly to propose a theoretical model of factors and their inter relationship. The study draws considerably from relevant available pieces of literature and from case-based experiences. Independent variables have been identified through a qualitative analysis of the literature. The service recovery paradox is the dependent variable. From a practical perspective, the service recovery paradox is an under rated phenomena which may be taken up by industry for strategic advantage. The study provides a starting point from where academicians may provide a theoretical understanding of the concept.

Keywords:- Service Recovery, Recovery Paradox, Recovery Scenarios, Service Recovery Strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Services have been defined and comprehended as deeds, acts, processes, experiences and performances. Non availability of the final outcome in a tangible form is the single most important characteristic of services. Pure, intangible services are almost nonexistent today very few such instances available. It may safely be said that even pure goods are a thing of the past. In fact, both goods and services cannot survive without support from each- other in today’s competitive world where consumerism is on a constant rise. Thus, in terms of a continuum of goods and services, there is no ‘absolute’ product or ‘absolute’ service, indicating that the dividing line between the two is fast disappearing.

Bhandari and Sharma (2009) have confirmed that the growth in the services sector has not been a sudden phenomena, but has been a gradual process. This process has been propelled by changes on various fronts such as demography, society, economy, technology, politics etc.

They add that as the private and public consumption of services increases, countries move towards more value added outputs and a commensurate growth in economic indicators such as the GDP. It is as a result of this growth that the services sector has consistently contributed more than 70% to the national income in the last decade. The availability and usage of a wide range of services is commonplace in contemporary times. This includes services such as electricity, transportation, e-commerce, healthcare- to name a few. These services are characterized by intangibility, inseparability of production from consumption, heterogeneity, and perishability). In order to deal with these characteristics, services need to be managed differently so as to ensure value deliver to the consumers.

As services are primarily experiences, a pivotal role is played by customers. A customer approaches a service with a certain set of expectations, and forms a perception after consuming the service. The service process itself includes the interaction of a number of elements, only a few of which may be visible to the customer. This illustrates the importance of back-office operations and support mechanisms for services. Managing the interaction between frontline employees and customers and forming a positive impression on the customer are of paramount importance (Cheng et al, 2015).

The above-mentioned characteristics of services render service management as a challenging area. This is further strengthened by the following:

- Customers are involved in different roles and in varying magnitudes during the service.
- Physical evidence or tangible cues for services are sought by customers.
- The interactions between customers and service employees hold the potential to create a moment of truth, as the core service is delivered during this interaction.

A. Service Failure

Service failure is an almost certain incident in service delivery. Involvement of and dependence on the human factor in services makes the service industry function on a twin- edged sword (Michel & Meuter, 2009). While delivery of quality service is the endeavour of the service principal, there may be instances when this aim may not be achieved.

This is the case of service failure and customer dissatisfaction. In other words, service failures confirm that there has been a gap between expected service and perceived/delivered service. In most cases, service failures may be attributed to: -

- Services not being available when required (time delay/ overruns or cancellation)
- Services not being available as required (or a deviation in specification)
- Services may not yielding the desired result/ output (service process not being effective)
- Inappropriate behavior exhibited by service employees (not displaying responsiveness or empathy)
- Inadequate role played by customers (especially when customers are co-producers of the service)

B. Service Recovery

Obsession with service delivery may not be a foolproof mechanism to prevent service failure (Migacz, Zou, & Petrick, 2018). Even in the face of uncontrollable circumstances, organizations must strive to make all efforts to mitigate the loss from failures and to salvage dissatisfied customers. Such efforts which are made by organizations as a response to service failure are broadly known as Service Recovery. Failures in service are critical incidents which definitely elicit a negative response from consumers. If left unchecked, failures may lead to situations where dissatisfied customers may switch to another provider. Apart from a loss in revenue, loss in goodwill may occur as disgruntled customers tend to spread unhealthy, damaging word of mouth. Some may even become activists by complaining to media, third parties, regulatory bodies etc. Quick resolution of customer complaints is essential in order to avoid potentially negative consequences for the organization. The service recovery paradox is one such path towards effective service recovery.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Considering the nature of services and the inherent challenges in delivering service offerings, the present study seeks to find out:

- The role of service recovery paradox in service delivery, service recovery and customer satisfaction.
- Factors necessary to strengthen the incidence and success of a service recovery paradox.
- A model to confirm the application and strategic scope of the recovery paradox.

III. METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY

The ensuing piece of work is an exploratory study in the broad area of services operations and management. The concepts of service recovery and recovery paradox are analysed through analysis of available theoretical and empirical content. A qualitative study of literature has been conducted through thematic analysis. It is through these analyses that a model for service recovery paradox has been proposed.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. A Case for the Service Recovery Paradox (SRP)

Performing in a scripted manner in the first attempt is the ideal way to make a service fail proof. However, research suggests that even when a service fails, an initially dissatisfied customer may be won over with good service recovery, leading to a higher level of satisfaction and enhanced loyalty. This phenomenon has been given the nomenclature of the *service recovery paradox* (Magnini, Ford, Markowski, & Honeycutt Jr, 2007). In this context, recovery encounters present an opportunity for service providers to augment customer retention rates by enhancing customer satisfaction levels (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2015). The service recovery paradox basically presents a win-win situation for both the service provider and the customer. Through the paradox, dissatisfied customers are more likely to exhibit repurchase behavior towards an organization. However, there is tremendous onus on the service recovery encounter and actions taken therein. The service recovery effort is actually an opportunity for the service provider to salvage pride even after an initial failure. The idea of bringing in customer delight through recovery is the basic ingredient of making the customer better off than a scenario when satisfaction would have occurred in the first cut of the service performance.

B. Is Service Recovery Paradox (SRP) possible in all Service Failures?

If disappointing customers in the first place may lead to a more satisfied customer, then should companies pursue the strategy of creating service failure and seeking a paradoxical situation? (assuming that companies shall be able to recover positively and shall establish even greater loyalty). Literature lends limited support to the existence of the service recovery paradox. Magini et.al.(2007) elucidates that “Service recovery paradox is most likely to occur when the failure is not considered by the customer to be severe, the customer has had no prior failure with the firm, the cause of the failure was viewed as unstable by the customer, and the customer perceived that the company had little control over the cause of the failure”.

Success of the SRP is highly contingent upon the context and situation in which it is built. Although a customer may find it easy to overlook failure meted out by an organization, another customer may not appreciate the recovery efforts. Post-recovery satisfaction may depend on a number of factors, including the magnitude of the service failure, the importance of the service to the customer, and whether the service provider or the customer is the first to note the service failure (Fatma & Rahman, 2016).

It is evident from the above discussion that the service recovery paradox may not exist in all situations. It is imperative to identify the instances holding maximum likelihood of paradoxical recovery. Further, mere identification of such instances may not be sufficient to reap the benefits of SRP. A careful analysis of creating and controlling such situations needs to be undertaken by service organizations. The following may be considered for due diligence:

- What are the situations in which SRP may be expected to manifest itself?
- How should organizations identify such situations?
- Can service organizations create such situations which may lead to formation of service recovery paradox?

C. The Recovery Scenario

An excellent, concerted service recovery effort has a direct impact on how consumers trust the firm (Kau and Loh, 2006). In this sense SRP may be viewed as a strategy to win over customers whom the company seems to have lost due to service failure. Situations/ instances of service failure would always arise, but if a company tracks these scenarios in such a way that the chances of paradoxical service recovery may be possible, it may lead to a win-win situation for both the customer and the organization.

Circumstances which act as propellants of the SRP phenomenon are together known as *Recovery Scenarios*. Lastner, Folse, Mangus & Fennell (2016) in their study examined the effects of different levels of service recovery on SRP. They found that moderate to high service recovery efforts significantly increase post-failure levels of satisfaction, positive word of mouth and purchase intent. Therefore a good service recovery effort leads to SRP.

For a customer approaching a service experience, there are two different sets of circumstances which may have an influence on the service delivery process and the outcome of the process. One set of circumstances are those which are subjective to the individual customer. They may be called *Self-enduring scenarios* (as given in Figure 1). The other set of circumstances is created by the company/ the service provider. These may be labeled as *Company-generated scenarios* (as given in Figure2). Since the latter are company-oriented, they are general and objective in nature. They stand

for the organization and not for each customer. The above-cited scenarios have to be ingrained into the company's strategies across all levels (corporate, business and functional) so as to create chances of 'Paradoxical service-recovery'.

➤ *Self – Enduring or Customer- Oriented Scenarios for Service Recovery (SE)*

• *SE₁: Individual Philosophy of Service*

All customers hold a general attitude regarding meaning of service, service expectations and proper conduct. If customers have strong philosophies of service process, their expectations of service experience will be accordingly be intensified, especially in case of customers who are themselves related to service industry in past or if they are purchasing the service on behalf of another consumer (Magini et.al., 2007). Such a stern set of expectations leaves very little scope for service companies to revisit a failure and improve upon it. However, customers with weak service philosophies give more opportunities to the service provider, thus making recovery easier.

• *SE₂: Importance of a Particular Service*

A service which is of paramount importance to the customer (temporarily or enduring) has an innate edge, when compared to other services which may not hold comparable importance (Kumar, Bhagwat & Zhang, 2015). Examples include situations where a customer requires immediate medical care, or where working parents seek a safe and secure environment for their children in their absence. Such situations pose as advantages for the service provider, as the services are rendered indispensable. Unavailability of such services may cause inconvenience and discomfort to customers. Hence, such customers have a propensity to provide a chance to the service provider to recover from a failed service.

• *SE₃: Situational Factors*

The conditions prevalent during services delivery are important determinants of service recovery scenarios (Ozuem, Patel, Howell & Lancaster, 2017). Customers often realize that situational and circumstantial factors are not failure on part of the company, although such factors may give rise to service failure. For example, catastrophes and natural calamities increase emergencies at healthcare organizations, and regular patients may not be attended to in the manner which is usual. However, in the face of conditions which are out of the organization's control, even customers are empathetic and do not complain. This creates an opportunity to recover service. Therefore, adverse service situations as outlined above, are in fact a blessing in disguise for the service principal, as these situations become recovery scenarios.



Fig 1:- Self Enduring/ Customer-Oriented Scenarios (Source: Developed by the authors)

• **SE4: Past Experience**

The past experience of a customer with a particular organization can also generate a recovery scenario. If customers had had a wonderful experience in the past with the services of same organization then they do provide a scope of service recovery. In such cases Customers do a comparison of present not so good experience with the memorable past experience with the same organization, what was their general experience of the performance in all the earlier purchases of the same brand?. (Kumar, Bhagwat & Zhang, 2015). The comparison can lead to two situations. One, If the earlier experience has been bad then an bid to carry out service recovery would surprise and at the same time charm the customer and give rise to possibility of SRP. The second situation can be if the past earlier have been good in such a situation customer expects a great service recovery based on their innate expectations from the company. In case a customer has already experienced service recovery paradox once in past, it becomes an ideal situation. In all three cases the past experience can play an important role leading to SRP

• **SE5: Degree of Customer Involvement in Service Delivery**

Customers are closely involved in the process of delivery of services. They infact play an important role in overall delivery of services, though their level of involvement may vary as per situation. For example in case of services such as beauty services, gymming, health care, medicine and other such personal experiences they have to be physically present hence in such services customers are much more deeply involved in comparison to services such as car repair or courier or cargo services where they themselves do not need to be present for the consumption of service. They

role was just limited upto providing information or the belonging for repair. Thus in such cases they are less involved. Services which require close participation and active involvement of customers are the ones that can lead to creation of a recovery scenario (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2015). In such cases which require a customer to participate or play a specific role in the overall service delivery and the customer has not played his predetermined role in the service then the responsibility of service failure falls on the customer too. Thus a service failure is a result of action of both organization and customers. Hence this closer customer involvement creates a recovery scenario where both customer and organization are eager and often leads to a situation where organization seems to have performed even better than past experience and customer too end up being more satisfied then earlier.

• **SE6: Customer Perception of Service Value vs. Service Price**

Customers buy products or services based on perceived value of a product. Value as such is a personal concept for most of the people. Overall it consists of expected benefits, components and attributes of a service as well the price they have pay for the same off. So it's a in a way a value or utility is a tradeoff between what they have to "give" what they are to "get" from a service. Sometimes customers are very sensitive to benefits as well other then the low pricing. Hence in such situations where customers want additional benefits or opportunity of getting an additional or added advantage (Gohary, Hamzeli, & Pourazizi, 2016). Therefore for such customers even service recovery becomes process of achieving maximum service value or utility and a source for service recovery paradox.

- **SE₇: Zone of Tolerance of a Customer**

Services by nature are heterogeneous. Each service encounter is different. No two service experience can be exactly and perfectly same even in case of same service providers or same service employees. Customers do understand this and are accepting to variation in services in each encounter but only to a limited extent. “The extent, to which customers recognize and are willing to accept variation, is every individual customer’s unique zone of tolerance. The zone of tolerance is nothing but a range in which service performance is acceptable to the customer” (Ozuem, Patel, Howell, & Lancaster, 2017). A number of factors affect this individual zone of tolerance of a customer. It can also change and may expand or contract with experiences. A customer having a broad zone of tolerance, maybe more understanding and may overlook failures in service. This creates an opportunity for company for a service recovery where they get a chance to re-serve the customer and make him happy. A wonderful past experience or a pleasurable recovery experience expands the zone of tolerance of a customer and further strengthens the possibility of recovery scenario.

➤ **Company- Generated/ Market- Oriented Scenarios for Service Recovery (CG)**

- **CG₁: Customer Relationship**

The holy gospel of marketing states “Customer is the king” has changed a little over the time. “Knowing”, “Servicing” and “Maintaining” your customer is of paramount importance in the present day internet age. “The ‘first act’ of attracting customers is important, but attention should also be paid to the ‘second act’ of maintaining these customers” (Dabas & Dhaliwal, 2018). Instead of acquiring new customers the focus is on maintaining closer relationships with the current customers. On the other hand customers too dislike switching and rather seek a stable ongoing relationship with one company or organization. “Today, organizations go through a process and journey of acquiring customers as strangers, satisfying customers as acquaintances, knowing them as friends and listening to them as partners” (Mostafa, Lages, Shabbir, & Thwaites, 2015). As the companies serve customers time and again, the level of cooperation increases and the personal equation between the customer and the company moves from just being acquaintances in the initial stages to partnership based later stage. Therefore with closer loyalty-based relationships with the customer, incase of a service failure the company is not under undue pressure for service recovery. The loyal customers give ample scope to company for service recovery. Therefore strategic customer friendly CRM activities play an important role in creating service recovery scenarios & further SRP.

- **CG₂: Presence of Service Guarantees**

In the present day, understanding the heterogeneity and variability of services majority of companies service guarantees to customers today. These guarantees act as a prior re- assurance to the customer. Service failures do happen and it is often difficult to prevent all but in such cases presence of service guarantees helps and complements service recovery strategy. “It is clear that a service guarantee is much more than just a marketing tool- it is a service recovery scenario in itself” (Chou, 2015). Presence of a service guarantee satisfies a customer that incase of service failure situation, the company will take some steps and make up for it. And a better chance for creating a service recovery paradox.

- **CG₃: Customer Education**

Customers are closely involved in the service process as they play an important role in the delivery of services. Since customers are ingrained the delivery process therefore companies must undertake customer education regarding their role in the process (Magini et.al, 2007). They should prepare, teach and communicate with customers especially in case of unique or new service about which customers have less prior knowledge or should have additional knowledge. The informed customer leads to lower possibility of service failure and even if failure happens, such customers give a fair chance for service recovery since they have better understanding of failure. Therefore customer education leads to service recovery.

- **CG₄: Equity among Customers**

In majority of service encounters, there is a high probability of customers coming across, observing or meeting other customers who are going through a similar service process of consumption or delivery. In all such situation, customers keep a watchful eye on their co customers and their treatment and expect same good service experience from the company. But ensuring the same justice and fairness to all customers company can create service recovery situations. As per Micheal (2002), “ distributive justice (i.e. fair solution) and procedural justice (i.e satisfaction with speed) are mandatory for successful recovery”. For example, if there is a flight delay then in this case a large number of customers end up facing similar service failure. In such a situation, it is easy for an organization to offer a service recovery and that too a similar service recovery effort. This allows the company to have a bit of upper hand as the individual customer feels under pressure to accept the recovery on a positive note as it is same as being offered to and accepted by the other co customers. “Equitable behaviour with all customers in such a situation is in itself a factor that exert pressure on an individual customer, so that he accepts recovery positively” (Hazarika & Dhaliwal, 2018). The opposite to this situation is that the moment a customer detects an inequitable behavior, it leads to dissatisfaction and further to switching to competitors.

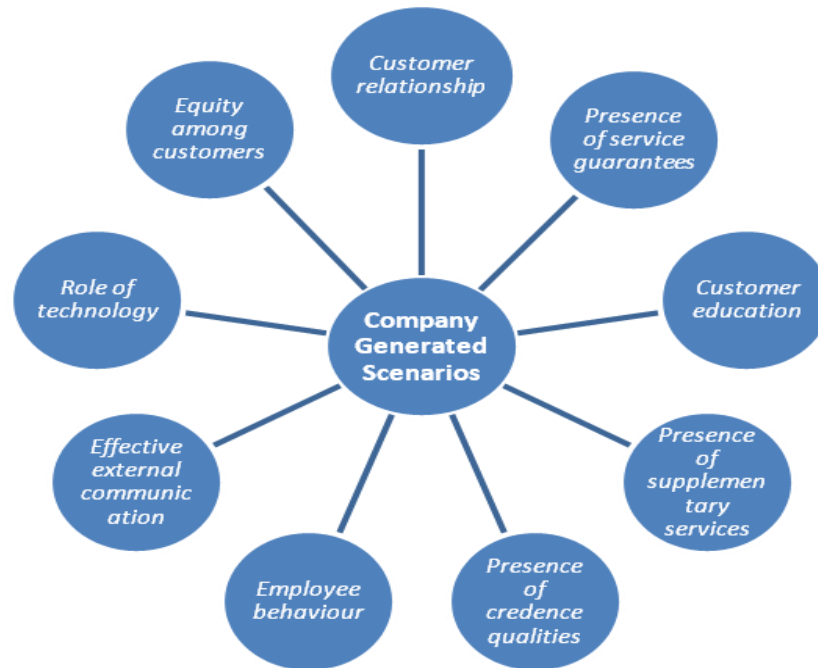


Fig 2:- Company Generated/ Market- Oriented Scenarios (Source: Developed by the authors)

• **CG₅: Presence of Supplementary Services**

A service offering consists of two parts -the core service being offered and the supplementary services which is additional to the core. This supplementary service other than core offering, too plays an important role as well. “The provision of such ancillary services makes service consumption convenient and hassle- free for the customer” (Hur & Jang, 2016).Ancillary service of having a play area for children in shopping mall or having free lockers in the gym or even shopping malls makes the shopping or the gymming experience easier and enjoyable for the customer. Thus is such a situation the service recovery in case of the failure of core service which is backed by ancillary service is compensated by the presence of supplementary service. The reason being that presence of supplementary service ensures that customer is more in psychologically calm and relaxed state & the cost of going through recovery is low. Therefore the existence of supplementary service leads to easier recovery scenario.

• **CG₆: Employee Behavior**

Employees are the flag bearers of their organizations. In case of service organizations the employees personify the brand, the service and the organization. Employees must put on and display flawless behavior in there dealings with the customers while providing service. ”Customer- oriented behaviours of service employees especially in customer facing roles, give them an opportunity to strike the right chord with customers” (Gohary, Hamzelu, & Pourazizi, 2016). Therefore a good employee role and behavior leads to recovery scenario as customer appreciates the behavior of the employee thus enters the recovery effort on basis of his

employee interaction he have had. Thus the porper employee behavior acts as a precursor to the recovery scenario. It is in this way that the ‘people’ element of services may be steered towards a recovery scenario (Hazarika & Dhaliwal,2018).

• **CG₇: Presence of Credence Qualities**

A different set of attributes are present in all market offerings. Some attributes are easily distinguishable and can be easily determined even before purchase for example search qualities, some are determined at least during consumption such as experience qualities.and the last category is the kind of attributes which are not even kown evn after consumption such as credence qualities. The presence of credence qualities is most often found in services.. It has been seen that most often the customer either does not have sufficient knowledge or is not aware about to properly evaluate the service. Thus in such a case of failure of service possessing high credence value the customer being ill-informed themselves keeps on awaiting the better performance as they are not sure of the desired level of outcome. This therefore creates a service recovery scenario.

• **CG₈: Effective External Communication**

In the present day of technology the information needs of consumers have skyrocketed. They themselves can gather collect lot of knowledge at the same time their expectations off the company to provide information too have increased. With the cheapening of technology, they expect from companies to provide information to them through various sources & mediums. Thus for companies it is important not only to provide information but also to ensure that all the communication & messages to consumers are integrated and

unified. “Service oriented companies often create aspirational value for their services utilizing story- based, narrative approaches towards advertising. They create the imagery in mind of customers regarding the present and the post consumption of service situation of the customer”(Moliner-Velázquez, Ruiz-Molina & Fayos-Gardó, 2015). Therefore if the communication is effective and clearer it leads to better visualization of the service by the customer and how the good service would lead to positive outcome. Thus in such a case the service failure and the subsequent recovery effort is hence seen as a step and a chance towards a excellent experience. Thus it leads to service recovery.

• *CG9: Role of Technology*

Today, we all are living in the Technological-convenience age. Instead of having to deal with service representatives for a stipulated time customers rather prefer

the self service options offered through IVR, Kiosks, Touch screens , through internet that are available 24/7 365 days. The technological advances have made it easier not only for customers but also from the perspective of service providers as such services are easier to produce and monitor as well. But even these technology based services do not have 100% uptime and face service failure at times. But their case repeating steps of service process or undoing a particular act is much easier and simpler for both customer and the service provider. “The technology based consumption of service or a repeat of it again is less complex as it involves lesser time and effort” (Moliner-Velázquez, Ruiz-Molina, & Fayos-Gardó, 2015). Therefore in such situations service recovery is much easier. Therefore it is advantageous for firms to provide some of the services must be technology based so to avail the benefit of easier recovery scenario.

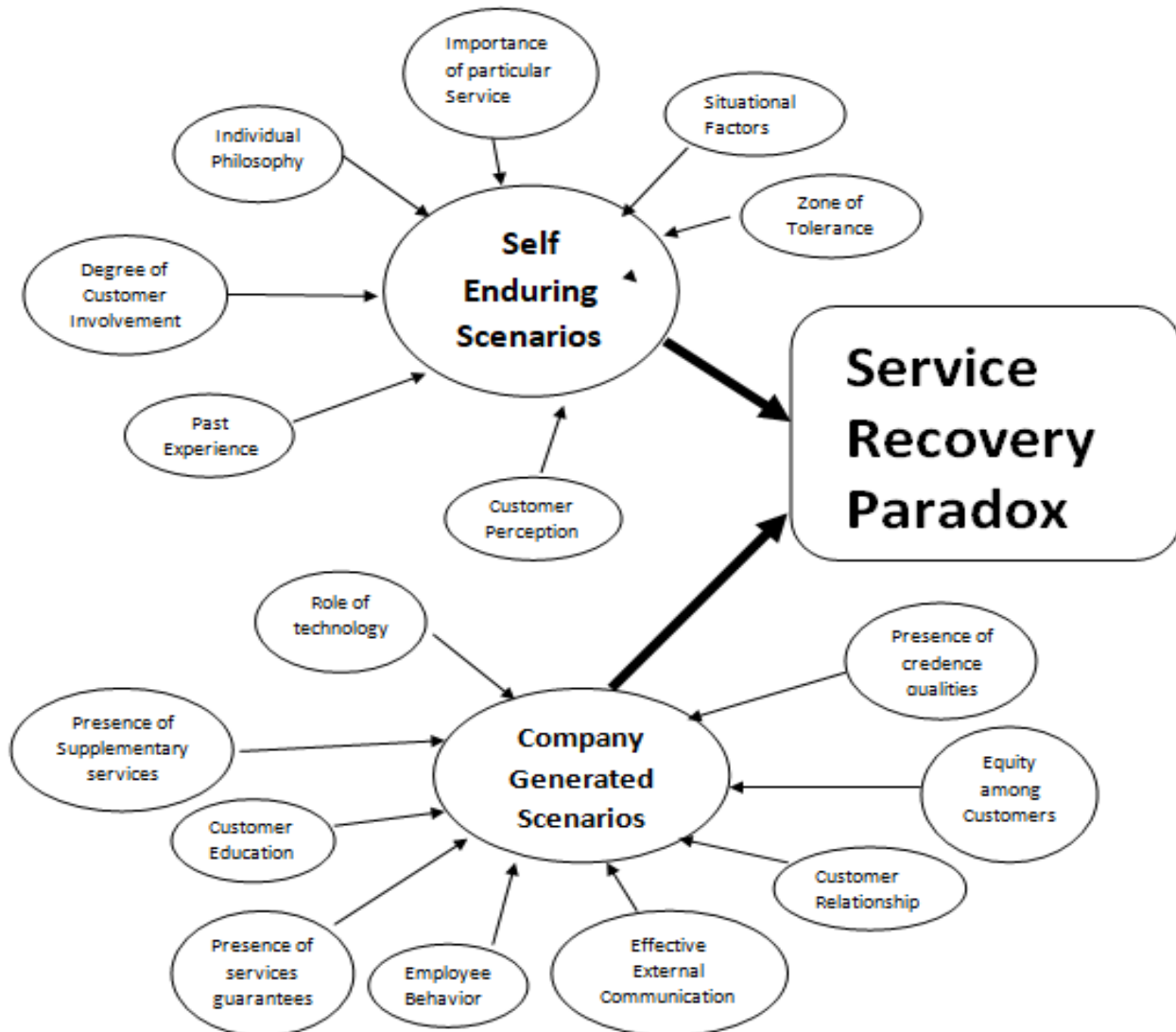


Fig 3:- Proposed Model for Factors Influencing Service Recovery Paradox (Source: Developed by the Authors)

V. CONCLUSION

Service failure is a part and parcel of the service process. As long as a service is being provided there are always chances of a service failure. But how the service failure is handled and what are the recovery efforts and how is it done make the whole difference and can decide whether it would create satisfaction and service recovery paradox or just leave the customer plainly dissatisfied. Number of the factors play mediating role in such a scenario which includes nature of service failure, the level of customer involvement, customers own zone of tolerance, employee behavior in the situation, relationship and past experience with the organization etc. which would ultimately decide the outcome of recovery scenario leading to satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the customer and further the service recovery paradox.

In the present times of tough competition where the organization fight to maintain each and every of their customers happy and satisfied in the first instance itself. It may seem that the SRP phenomenon may not have much presence or importance. But the fact cannot be denied that even in this technological advanced state there always are some variables in case of intangible services which are still uncontrollable hence not fail proof. Even with all the efforts and control systems in place, service failures still do happen and the organization cannot lose their customers because of instances of service failure. Instead companies look for means and methods to compensate for the failure and make strategic recovery efforts so as to win back the dissatisfied customers and their confidence in the brand and the organization.

A silver lining to this dark cloud of failure is the service recovery paradox, which claims that a dissatisfied customer can be made convinced and happier even more than he would have been in the first original service encounter. The goal of best of recovery efforts is to lessen the post- failure customer experience and the associated customer dissatisfaction. But in certain situations even the best of recovery efforts sometimes to do give the expected results. Thinking of SRP in such a situation becomes even more farfetched. It is in such situations that we need to understand the other underlying factors and variables that can enhance the probability of a paradoxical service recovery. These mediating circumstances can be of origin of customer generated or the company generated. The aim of any service oriented companies should be, to be able to recognize these situational factors and develop appropriate strategy for each of them.

The service recovery paradox is not easy to achieve phenomenon. It would require companies to develop “Paradox Strategy” consisting of innovative approaches to recognize such supporting situational factors and smart recovery efforts so to not only win back the customers but win them back so big that they forget their earlier

disappointment or prior held perceptions of the service experience..

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As per the above study, a set of factors have been identified, which qualify the service recovery paradox as a tool for strategic service orientation. Empirical testing of these factors in service scenarios provides an area for research. Such studies may be conducted across various industries, or may be focused on a few industries at a time. A comparison between public and private service enterprises may also be undertaken. Such a study shall confirm and validate the proposed model.

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