

# Impact of Waiting Attribution and Consumer's Mood on Perceived Quality

Jean-Charles Chebat

Pierre Filiatrault

Claire G  linas-Chebat

UNIVERSITY OF QU  BEC, MONTREAL, CANADA

Alexander Vaninsky

TECHNION, HAIFA, ISRAEL

*Waiting involves both emotions and cognition, in particular attribution of the cause for waiting. How do emotions impact on the attribution process? Do emotions and attribution impact on perceived service quality? The present study focuses on these rather new questions through the employment of videos simulating waiting lines in a bank. Subjects' mood was manipulated by two (sad-vs.-happy) television videos before subjects were exposed to the waiting video. Subjects were administered a three part questionnaire: Servqual (to assess perceived service quality in the bank); the Russell's Causal Dimension Scale to assess the three dimensions of Weiner's attribution of waiting time; the Mehrabian-Russell's questionnaire on mood (pleasure-arousal-dominance). A structural equation model was built. Mood affects some dimensions of service quality, those related to the personnel in contact; attribution affects the relational dimensions of service quality (personnel's empathy and assurance); mood does not affect the attribution process. Service quality is assessed not only in terms of what consumers receive at the end of the service delivery process but also in terms of the process itself.*

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While waiting for services, consumers may be in a good or in a bad mood; can the mood impact on the cause to which consumers attribute their waiting? That is either an internal cause (the employee at the desk) or an external cause (the normal process of delivering service). This attribution process is likely to impact on the assessment of service quality: if the employee or the company is perceived as the cause of the delay, rather than something outside their control, this delay is a symptom of low quality (e.g., Berry, 1979). Because consumers have been shown to react emotionally to the cost of time spent in service encounters (e.g., Lovelock, 1990), this study examines the impact of consumers' mood on their assessment of service quality.

Address correspondence to Jean-Charles Chebat, School of Management, University of Qu  bec, Montreal, P.O. Box 6192, Montr  al, H3C 4R2 Canada.

The literature reviewed here focuses on the following three relationships tested in the present study, that is: the mood-attribution, the attribution-perceived quality, and the mood-perceived quality relationships. A study, the hypotheses of which are based on the literature review, is reported here.

## The Mood-Attribution Relationship

Studies (e.g., Kassner, 1990; Sullivan and Conway, 1991) showing that mood influences cognitive processes related to social judgments; focus on the attribution to others-vs.-attribution to self (Forgas and Bower, 1987). However, marketing researchers are more interested in the attribution to others-vs.-environment. In other words, a consumer in a waiting line may attribute the waiting either to the employee (and the organization behind the employee) or to the process through which the employee and the organization have to go normally themselves. No single study reported results on this specific relation, except the study by Forgas, Bower, and Moylan (1990) who tested the two main competing theories: the *motivational theory* (or "self-enhancement theory") by Clark and Isen (1982), reflects common sense, ("people attribute success internally and failure externally," p. 809) and is supported by several studies (Arkin and Maruyama, 1979; Davis and Stephan, 1980); the competing *cognitive theory* predicts that "affect may influence social judgments by influencing the availability of cognitive constructs" (p. 812). The second experiment by Forgas, Bower, and Moylan (1990) clearly supports the cognitive theory: "In a negative mood, attributions are more critical of the self than of others" (p. 816). These results are supported by other studies (e.g., Schwarz and Clore, 1988). As Forgas, Bower, and Moylan clearly summarized: "Negative moods were often found to have *greater impact on judgments about self than others*" (p. 813; our emphasis).

As for the present study, the two theories contradict each other on the effects of *negative mood*. According to the motiva-

tional ("self-enhancement") theory, consumers are highly critical of others, whereas according to the cognitive theory, consumers are more tolerant toward others' behavior.

## The Attribution-Quality Relationship

When waiting, consumers observing the way the line is processed through the organization may ask themselves three types of attributional questions, each of the questions associated with one dimension of Weiner's (1979) attribution model:

1. *Locus of Causality*: "Who is responsible for the waiting time?"; the cause is either internal (e.g., the employee at the bank's teller), or external (e.g., the high number of clients in the bank).
2. *Stability*: "Is it a usual waiting time?"; the cause is either constant over time or variable over time; for instance, the consumer's experience with waiting situations is such that he/she is waiting a time as long as he/she was expecting, or, conversely, significantly shorter or longer.
3. *Controllability*: "Could this waiting time be reduced?"; a controllable cause could be affected by some factor or people; for instance, employee's desire to service clients rapidly may impact on the waiting time.

Marketing studies related to the attribution-quality relationship are reviewed in the next two sections.

### Marketing Studies about the Locus of Causality

Several studies show convergent results: Consumers are more satisfied with the service when the cause is internal (i.e., themselves) than when the cause is external (i.e., the service provider); conversely, consumers are more dissatisfied with the service when the cause is external than when the cause is internal. Such a relation is found by Oliver and Desarbo (1988) in their study about investor-stockbroker relations, by Richins (1993) on their study on the relation between salesmen and customers about a failing product, by Rethans and Albaum (1980) in their study on risks voluntarily accepted by consumers (e.g. alpine skiing).

### Studies on Services Using Several Dimensions of Weiner's Model

Studies by Folkes and Weiner (and their respective colleagues) show that when the failure of the service is perceived as being stable or under the control of the company, it triggers negative emotional or behavioral reactions: negative word-of-mouth between consumers and complaints to companies (Curren and Folkes, 1987); anger (Folkes, 1984); active search for causes (Folkes, 1982; Weiner, 1985; Wong and Weiner, 1981). As pointed out by Folkes (1988), the attributional studies in the field of consumer research were done in a *post-purchase* situation, when all the information was gathered by the consumer. No study has yet explored through which attributional processes the expected quality of a service is assessed *before* being served,

which is precisely the focus and the contribution of the present study.

## The Mood-Evaluation Relationship

Two competing theories may explain the mood-evaluation relationship: the congruence theory and the consistency theory. The congruence theory predicts that "people's feelings cause certain environmental cues to become more salient, to stand out, to evoke deeper processing and better memory" (Bower and Cohen, 1982, p.392). The consistency theory, on the other hand, predicts that a positive mood has a more pronounced effect on judgments and memory than a negative mood; Forgas and Bower (1987) found that "happy subjects made more judgments than did sad subjects about realistic person description containing negative and positive details."

Empirical studies show contradictory results on the mood-evaluation relationship. For Batra and Stayman (1990) positive moods create less cognitive elaboration, more heuristic processing, and reduce the extent to which message evaluation mediates brand attitudes. On the contrary, Moscardo and Pearce's (1986) results reveal that enjoyment of visitors in recreational centers is moderately but *positively* and significantly correlated with visitors' "mindfulness." As found by Kamins, Marks, and Skinner (1991) "a happy commercial viewed in the context of a happy program was evaluated more favorably than in the context of a sad program" and *conversely*. In the same vein, Hornik (1992) found that "positive and negative moods resulted in underestimation and overestimation of duration, respectively" in consumers' temporal judgments. Even more convincingly, Isen et al. (1978) confirmed the effects of good mood on cognitive processes of consumers: one the mood of consumers in a shopping mall is enhanced (by giving them a gift), good mood improves consumers' evaluations of the performance and services records of products they owned. Results by Ikegami (1986) show that positive affect, compared to negative affect, is more likely to facilitate the organization processes by which inferences and connections are drawn from the given information. Similarly Isen and Shalcker (1982) found a positive relation between induced mood and evaluation of positive, negative, or neutral slides: "mild mood inducing events . . . affect evaluation"; these authors stress that the relation is *not* dependent "on directing attention to the stimuli themselves." The two studies by Isen and her colleagues led us to hypothesize that a *positive mood enhances evaluation without necessarily reducing the depth or scope of incoming stimuli processing*.

## Model

### Effects of Mood on Attribution

Our hypotheses are based on the *cognitive model*. Whereas mood has been shown to be a three-dimensional concept (Mehrabian and Russell, 1994, 1978; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986; Russell, Ward and Pratt, 1981), that is pleasure, arousal, and dom-

inance, only *one* dimension is generally taken into account in the studies on the mood-attribution relationship. Even if, to our knowledge, no study has yet investigated the *combined* effects of the three dimensions of mood on attribution or the effects of mood on the three dimensions of attribution, some hypotheses based on the cognitive model can be elaborated:

H1: When in a “bad mood” (i.e., low level of *pleasure*), consumers are more tolerant in their attribution process:

H1.1: The locus of causality is more *outside* the service employee’s will.

H1.2: The cause of the identified problem is less *stable*.

H1.3: The situation is felt as less *controllable* by the employee.

### Effects of Mood on Perceived Quality

The following hypothesis is drawn from Isen’s (and her colleagues) results: the better the mood, the higher the appraisal of services quality cues; good services are more salient under positive mood and negative cues are underestimated or neglected.

H2: The higher the level of pleasure, the higher the level of perceived service quality.

### Effects of Attribution on Quality

Service quality is a complex multidimensional perceptual construct. Parasuraman, Zeithalm, and Berry (1985, 1986, 1988) designed a conceptual model and a scale in which quality is composed of five dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibility, reaction, and empathy). However criticized and improvable (Carman, 1990; Hedvall and Paltschik, 1989), this model and this scale clearly proved that perceived service quality cannot be reduced to a single dimension. So far the existing studies on the attribution-quality relation have overlooked the multidimensionality of the service quality concept. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to elaborate hypotheses on the specific dimensions of service quality affected by the attribution process.

H3: The perceived service quality is negatively affected by internal attribution (as a combination of the three components of attribution).

## Methodology

We used two kinds of videos: one waiting video and two (sad-vs.-happy) mood manipulation videos.

### Video Simulating an Incident during the Waiting Time

The video was filmed in a branch of a real bank by a professional team of film-makers of the first author’s university. Subjects were instructed to identify with the camera: what they saw and heard on the television set was what they would have seen and heard if they had been the next client to be served.

On the screen they could see two interacting characters, the employee and the client, who were professional actors. They exchanged usual greetings and the client gave his instructions to the employee. The bank employee left the counter for one minute, after hearing from another employee that she was wanted on the phone. No indication was given for the causes of the service interruption. The absence of clue was meant to let the subjects’ mood orientate the attribution process. Then the employee came back and finished the transaction. The waiting video lasts four minutes and six seconds.

The ecological validity of such a method is supported by several studies: Carpman, Grant, and Simmons (1985) who simulated a hospital parking deck, Hershberger and Cass (1974) who simulated real housing. Bosselman and Craik (1987) have reported substantial congruence between direct and simulated presentations in the studies they reviewed. Bateson and Hui (1992) who simulated services environmental settings (such as a London train station) through slides and videos showed that these simulations were as realistic as the field experiment (p. 78). The employment of videos allowed us to ensure that all cues were identical for all respondents.

### Subjects

From the first two authors’ school of management, 162 undergraduate students were recruited to participate in the experiment. Their ages ranged from 21 to 49 years; 52% were female students. They were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. Only 155 questionnaires were fully completed and usable.

### Mood Manipulation Video

Before being exposed to the waiting line video, subjects were exposed to either a sad or a happy mood manipulation video: The sad video was a five-minute excerpt from a “World Vision” broadcast showing sick children in Third World hospital ( $N = 74$ ); the happy video was a five-minute excerpt from the popular “America’s Funniest Home Video” series ( $N = 81$ ). Mood was measured right after viewing the mood manipulation video (i.e., before subjects were exposed to the waiting video). The P-A-D (pleasure-arousal-dominance) scale designed and validated by Mehrabian-Russell (1974) was used.

Only one factor, pleasure, was significantly manipulated by the sad-vs.-happy videos ( $F(1,174) = 154; p = .000$ ).

### Questionnaire

In addition to the P-A-D, subjects completed a questionnaire after being exposed to the waiting video.

**PERCEIVED QUALITY.** The *perception* of service quality was assessed by the second part of the “SERVQUAL” questionnaire designed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1986, 1988).

**ATTRIBUTION.** The attribution of the incident was assessed by the “Causal Scale” designed and validated by Russell (1982).

We used the nine 9-point bipolar semantic scales to reflect the fact that:

- the employee was (or not) the cause of the incident (locus of causality)
- the incident was (or not) a repetitive element of the service delivery (stability)
- the incident was (or not) under the control of the employee (controllability).

## Results

### Confirming the Conceptual Structure

A factor analysis was performed on all the variables of the three scales (i.e. P.A.D., SERVQUAL, and Russell's attribution scales). Nine factors explained 91% of the total variance. This factor analysis was a rather good reflection of the concepts: the variables loading high on a given factor did not load high on others; on each factor the variables loading high pertain to the same conceptual construct (i.e., either mood or attribution or service quality). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s were high. The factors are shown in Figure 1. Our factor analysis confirms clearly the three P.A.D. concepts (i.e. pleasure, arousal, and submissiveness). The "causal dimension scale" is somewhat problematic as we failed to reproduce the distinction of two of the three concepts (i.e., causality and controllability), as Russell (1982) did. The SERVQUAL scale shows four of the five expected factors without overlapping. However a number of scales of SERVQUAL are not evidenced in the factor analysis.

### Building the Structural Equations

The following equations (see Table 1 and Table 2) express the structural model. We used the CALIS program of the SAS package to assess the validity of the global model. In the first run most of the coefficients of the manifest variables equations proved to be very low. We obtained a reasonable adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI = 0.91) but the Bentler and Bonnett Normed Index (BBNI) was low. More importantly the root mean square residual (RMR) was high (0.05). In order to improve the model,

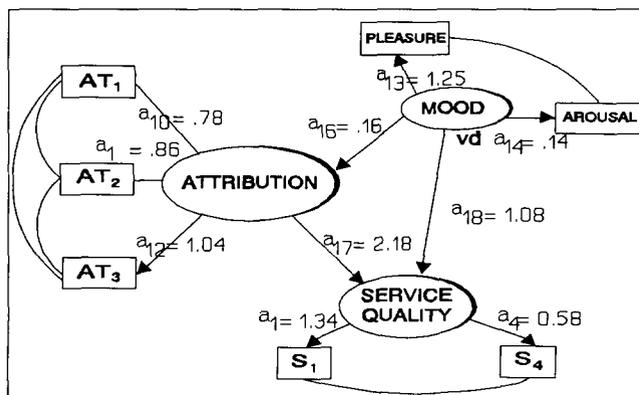


Figure 1. Global model.

Table 1. Manifest Variables

$S_1$	$= A_{1s} \times QUAL + E_1$
$S_2$	$= A_{2s} \times QUAL + E_2$
$S_3$	$= A_{3s} \times QUAL + E_3$
$S_4$	$= A_{4s} \times QUAL + E_4$
$AT_1$	$= a_{1A} \times ATTR + E_5$
$AT_2$	$= a_{2A} \times ATTR + E_6$
$AT_3$	$= a_{3A} \times ATTR + E_7$
PLE	$= a_{1M} \times MOOD + E_8$
ARO	$= a_{2M} \times MOOD + E_9$
DOM	$= a_{3M} \times MOOD + E_{10}$

Table 2. Latent Variables Equations

$ATTR$	$= a_{16} MOOD + D_2$
$QUAL$	$= a_{17} ATTR + a_{18} \times MOOD + D_2$

factors that were related too weakly to the latent variables were dropped. Only two factors related to service quality remain in the analysis: the first and the fourth factors (respectively empathy and assurance). Two mood factors, pleasure and arousal remain: "pleasure" dominates clearly ( $t = 13.02$ ) whereas the  $t$ -value for arousal is low ( $t = -0.31$ ). The three factors of attribution described earlier are maintained in the analysis. Only the residuals of the manifest variables related to the same latent variable were allowed to co-vary.

The CALIS procedure of maximum likelihood estimation leads to the following results (see Table 3), which show a good structural model. Tables 4 and 5 respectively show the results obtained for the manifest variable equations and the latent variable equations.

As the mood-attribution relationship is weak, equation (1) was dropped from the model. The model gets worse: the AGFI drops to 0.86; the Bentler-Bonnett's Normed Index to 0.82; the  $\chi^2$  increases to 9.44 ( $p = .22$ ); so does the RMSR (0.06). The mood-attribution has to remain in the model.

## Discussion

The factor analysis shows no overlapping between the three major concepts. However two problems are met: either the conceptual structure is incomplete (the factor analysis shows four,

Table 3. Main Results of the Maximum Likelihood Estimation Procedure of the CALIS Program

Fit criterion	0.0328
Adjusted goodness of fit	0.9348
Bentler and Bonnett's (1980) normed index	0.9531
Root mean square residual	0.0319
$\chi^2$	2.4296
df	4
Null model $\chi^2$	51.7748

**Table 4.** Manifest Variable Equations

$S_1$	$- 1.3374 \times QUAL$	$+ E_1$
$S_4$	$- 0.5857 \times QUAL$	$+ E_2$
$AT_1$	$- 0.7768 \times ATTR$	$+ E_3$
$AT_2$	$- 0.8601 \times ATTR$	$+ E_4$
$AT_3$	$- 1.0365 \times ATTR$	$+ E_5$
$PLE$	$- 1.2512 \times MOOD$	$+ E_6$
$ARO$	$- 0.1362 \times MOOD$	$+ E_7$

**Table 5.** Latent Variable Equations

$ATTR$	$- 0.1651 \times MOOD - D_1$	(1)
$QUAL$	$- 2.1861 ATTR + 1.0839 MOOD + D_2$	(2)

not five of the SERVQUAL structure) or two dimensions on the same concept are confused (for the attributional scale, the factor analysis reveals that of "controllability" and "causality").

The structural equations show a reasonably good model since the AGFI is high, and the  $\chi^2$  and the RMSR are low.

The results confirm that both the mood and attribution process affect the evaluation of services quality: the higher the consumer's pleasure, the higher his/her assessment of service quality ( $H_2$  is supported); the more external and the less stable the cause of the service interruption, the better the perceived service quality ( $H_3$  is supported). The mood-attribution relation, which is necessary to maintain a sound model, is weak and hard to interpret:  $H_1$  is rejected.

## Conclusions

Isen's results are basically confirmed here; our results show that "pleasure" impacts on two dimensions of service quality, i.e. personnel's empathy and assurance; mood does not affect services' reliability, tangibility, and reaction. Consumers' mood seems to affect the interpersonal aspect of the service encounter.

Attribution also impacts on perceived service quality. Consumers are not passively observing the service delivery process; they search for the causes of incidents (in terms of locus of causality and controllability) and for the stability of those causes. They may be tolerant if the incidents are not under the control or the responsibility of employees and/or if the incidents are not recurrent. These results tend to confirm previous studies by Folkes (1982, 1984, 1988). Our results show that only the "relational" aspects of the service (i.e., personnel's empathy and assurance) are affected by the attribution process. Consumers are basically assuming that the cause of the service "incident" is human because they see mainly human actors, (i.e., the employees); they do not necessarily conceive an abstract cause, such as the "organization" or the "production system." In that sense, consumers in a "bad" mood (i.e., the low pleasure experimental condition) are *not* searching for more abstract causes: that aspect of our results tends to disconfirm Batra and Stayman results (1990) who suggested that low mood

would enhance cognitive elaboration and to support those by Isen and those by Moscardo and Pearce (1986).

The insignificant relation between mood and attribution cancels the possibility of solving here the contradictions between the two opposite theories (i.e. the motivational vs. cognitive theories).

Results show a key strategic element: service quality is not assessed by consumers only in terms of what they receive at the end of the service delivery process; service quality is also evaluated in terms of the process itself. In an open service encounter site, such as that of banks where consumers can observe the service delivery process to other consumers, our results may serve as a warning to services managers: the way services are delivered impacts not only on the consumers who receive the service, but also on other consumers who observe the service delivery process.

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