

# Boundary-breaking opportunities in service failure and recovery

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The service failure and recovery (SFR) research field has reached its maturity stage and is now at a critical juncture. There are growing calls for fresh perspectives and innovative approaches in SFR research to ensure its continued relevance and growth. The purpose of this paper is to identify boundary-breaking opportunities in SFR research by fundamentally challenging some of the central assumptions of the field.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper employs a unique “review of reviews” methodology to synthesise findings from 19 prior SFR reviews, complemented by an in-depth analysis of 116 primary articles published in the past five years.

**Findings** – This paper makes several contributions. First, it identifies and critically evaluates the central underlying assumptions of SFR, highlighting their inherent limitations in light of emerging conceptual and substantive developments. Second, it offers alternative perspectives that reframe these assumptions and open up new avenues for research. Third, within each alternative perspective, we propose specific research ideas that can benefit from further exploration. To develop the ideas, we build on recent conflicts and negative events in the marketplace. Our review of reviews approach also enables us to track how frequently such ideas have been proposed in prior reviews. Finally, the paper briefly discusses some methodological considerations for conducting more impactful research.

**Originality/value** – This paper leverages insights from prior SFR literature reviews and recent research and steeps into real-world marketing issues to challenge the central assumptions of the field and recommend future research avenues.

**Keywords** Service failure, Service recovery, Transgression, Customer complaints, Foundational assumptions, Breaking boundaries, Review of reviews

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

SFR is a popular topic in academic research and a major area of investigation within the service domain. A service failure refers to a service performance that falls below customer expectations, while a service recovery relates to the actions taken by a firm to redress grievances and losses resulting from such failures (Hess *et al.*, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 1999). Over

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the past three decades, SFR research has flourished in the marketing and service literature (see [Web Appendix A](#) for a detailed performance analysis). Despite this prolific growth, we believe that SFR research is at a critical juncture. The SFR domain has reached the maturity stage with a vast body of literature, multiple meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and a broad consensus among scholars on the field's constructs, theories, and models ([Grégoire and Mattila, 2021](#); [Khamitov et al., 2020](#)). As with any mature field of study, SFR may begin to experience a slowdown in research contributions ([Eisend, 2015](#)). Moreover, scholars have raised concerns that the field's tendency to focus on specific SFR contexts combined with an overreliance on conventional theories and methodologies, could limit the potential for groundbreaking findings ([Grégoire and Mattila, 2021](#); [Khamitov et al., 2020](#); [Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019](#)). This has led to increased calls for more out-of-the-box thinking in SFR research to ensure the field's continued success.

Against this backdrop, the present research offers recommendations to reinvigorate the SFR field so that it can maintain its growth and relevance. Building on [MacInnis et al. \(2020\)](#), we argue that researchers have the opportunity to continue the advancement of SFR literature by *transcending the boundaries of the field*. The SFR field has firmly entrenched beliefs about the nature of customer-firm conflicts along with clear methodological predilections. We believe these implicit boundaries may hinder researchers' ability to pursue novel opportunities and generate new insights. Accordingly, we draw attention to some of the boundaries of SFR, specifically focusing on the field's foundational assumptions on marketplace conflicts and the actors involved. We then challenge these assumptions and default choices adopted in SFR research, highlighting their inherent limitations. We draw on emergent conceptual and substantive developments to advocate for expanding the boundaries of the field.

To develop these recommendations, we rely on a two-pronged approach. First, we critically examine nineteen prior literature reviews on SFR. This *review of reviews* approach allows us to holistically assess the current state of the field and synthesise previous recommendations for more impactful research. Second, we systematically analysed 116 articles on SFR, and other negative marketing events published in eight elite marketing journals and four leading service journals over the past five years [[1](#)]. This analysis allowed us to glean insights from exemplar boundary-breaking articles and develop a nuanced understanding of recent SFR research trends. Furthermore, to imbue our paper with ecological value, we steep ourselves in the real world of marketing, identifying pressing problems needing research attention ([van Heerde et al., 2021](#)). In recent years, the world at large has experienced significant shifts resulting from the global pandemic, economic recession, geopolitical tensions, climate change, and other disruptions ([Ostrom et al., 2021](#)). Further, managers worldwide face unprecedented challenges such as technology-related crises, labour shortages, and consumer activism. By drawing insights from academic literature and complementing them with recent marketplace developments, we identify critical issues that may provide rich opportunities for advancing SFR research.

Our research approach diverges from prior work in that we do not adopt a retrospective perspective to take stock of the extant literature. For instance, recent bibliometric analysis-based reviews (e.g. [Kim and So, 2023](#); [Mir et al., 2023](#); [Sahaf and Fazili, 2024](#)) consolidate decades of SFR research by identifying knowledge clusters and mapping theories, contexts and methods used. In contrast, we offer novel conceptual perspectives on SFR to foster advancements in the field. Drawing from [MacInnis's \(2011\)](#) conceptual goal of *envisioning*, we advocate for a revised perspective in SFR assumptions and present alternative frames of reference. Rethinking and challenging the prevailing assumptions of a field provides opportunities for fresh theoretical development ([Grönroos, 2023](#)). Moreover, unlike previous reviews (e.g. [Baliga et al., 2020](#); [Liu et al., 2023](#)), our analysis is not within the realm of construct-to-construct relationships. Instead, we adopt a macro-level approach, examining SFR through the lens of its core assumptions. By questioning these assumptions and embracing a substantive focus, we believe SFR researchers can break free from incremental research ideas and broaden the impact of their work.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a conceptual overview of SFR and discuss the importance of engaging in boundary-breaking research. Next, we critically evaluate the central assumptions of SFR and recommend alternative perspectives to stimulate further work. In the general discussion, we highlight how scholars can break boundaries in executing SFR research and enhance its relevance among various stakeholders. We end with some concluding remarks and the limitations of our research.

### Service failure and recovery conceptual overview

Service failure and recovery are well-established concepts grounded in decades of research. [Khamitov et al. \(2020, p. 520\)](#) define service failure “as a private service performance that falls below the expectation of one or a few customer(s).” The notion of private performance indicates that the failure occurs during the core service encounter, during which the customer is directly impacted ([Smith et al., 1999](#)). The SFR literature recognises two main types of service failures: outcome and process failure ([Smith et al., 1999](#)). Following a service failure, customers often seek explanations for the event, attributing causality along three dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability ([Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014](#)). Subsequently, customers may respond by voicing dissatisfaction through complaints, engaging in negative word of mouth (WOM), and deciding whether to remain with the provider ([Kim et al., 2010](#)).

Service recovery encompasses all actions firms undertake to rectify and restore losses experienced by customers due to service failures ([Hess et al., 2003](#)). Firm responses may include compensation, favourable employee behaviour, and organisational procedures ([Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011](#)). Customers’ post-recovery satisfaction is shaped by their perception of fairness in the firm’s recovery efforts, which is evaluated through distributive, interactional, and procedural justice ([Smith et al., 1999](#); [Tax et al., 1998](#)). These justice perceptions influence customers’ post-recovery evaluations and behavioural intentions ([Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011](#)). More recently, [Van Vaerenbergh et al. \(2019\)](#) proposed that service recovery unfolds as a journey spanning pre-recovery, recovery, and post-recovery phases, which collectively shape the customer’s overall experience. For an extended conceptual overview of SFR and related negative marketing events, refer to [Web Appendix B](#). While the extant SFR paradigms provide solid foundations for researchers, they can also limit our thinking about marketplace problems. A core premise of this article is that moving beyond these confines opens up boundary-breaking research opportunities.

### Boundary breaking research

[MacInnis et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that researchers can constrain themselves by conforming to the implicit boundaries of their field. These boundaries are the default choices researchers automatically make, such as mainstream assumptions, theories, and methods. While these deeply ingrained tenets and familiar choices provide direction and stability for researchers, they can also act as blinders, suppressing innovative thinking and limiting the exploration of new knowledge pathways ([Moorman et al., 2019](#)). [MacInnis et al. \(2020\)](#), therefore, recommend expanding beyond the field’s boundaries to generate more impactful research. Similarly, [Moorman et al. \(2019\)](#) stress the importance of challenging boundaries given the profound transformations in marketing practices and consumer behaviour. This involves questioning why we conduct research, what we study, and how we execute our work ([MacInnis et al., 2020](#)).

In this article, we focus on some of the central assumptions underpinning SFR, arguing they may act as implicit boundaries. An *assumption* is a statement or idea generally considered true without requiring proof or explicit articulation ([Shugan, 2007](#); [Tsang, 2009](#)). Assumptions simplify the complexity of real-world phenomena, making explanations and predictions more manageable. However, they can steer researchers’ thinking and actions in specific directions, making it challenging to recognise diverse viewpoints or reinvent an entity ([Grönroos, 2023](#)).

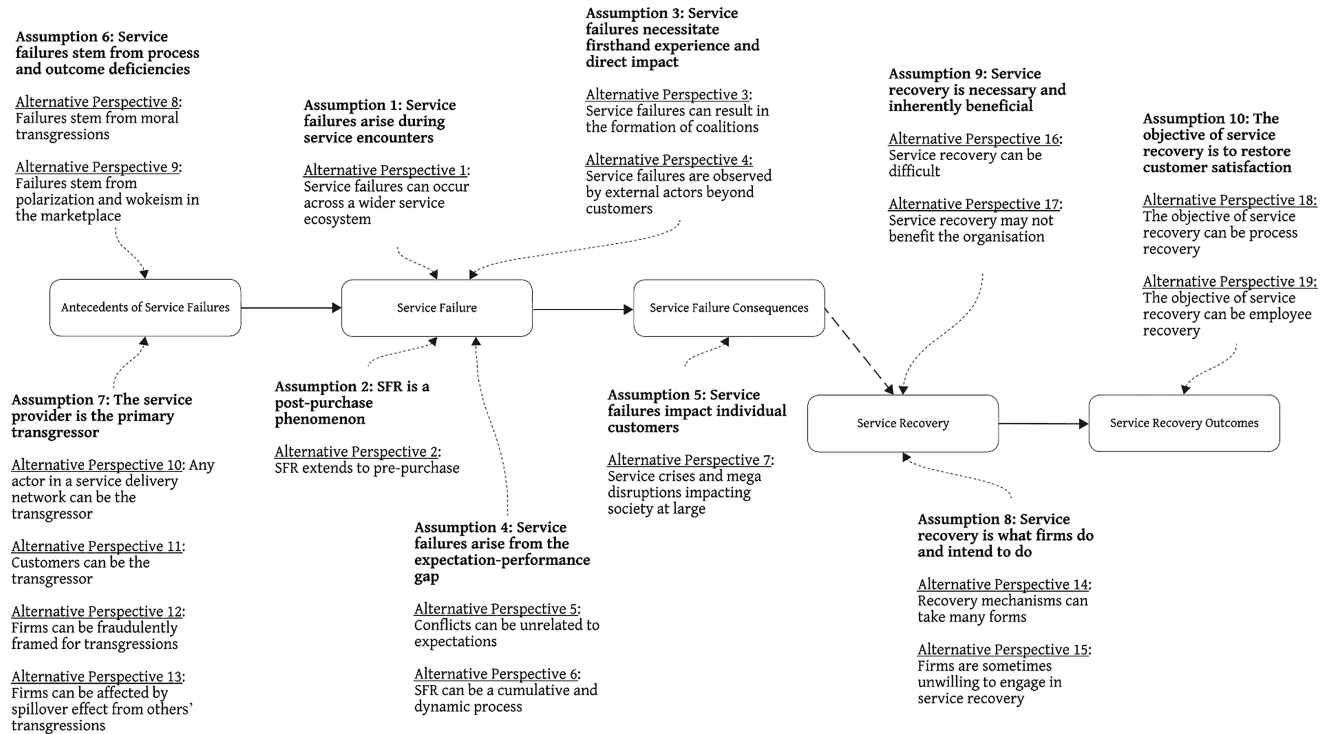
After decades of scholarly work, researchers have formed mental representations of SFR that condition them to interpret these events in particular ways. Yet, dynamic marketplace changes, such as technological advancements and socioeconomic shifts, are spawning new conflicts that may render prevailing views of SFR outdated. Scholars argue that relaxing or altering assumptions can unlock new avenues for theoretical and empirical investigations (Grönroos, 2023; MacInnis, 2011). This may involve developing *alternative perspectives*, which refer to new ways of understanding a phenomenon that departs from conventional views (MacInnis, 2011). Consequently, this paper recommends boundary-breaking SFR research opportunities by challenging the field's assumptions and proposing alternative perspectives (see Figure 1).

We began our research by identifying the fundamental assumptions in the SFR field. Assumptions in a field are rarely explicitly stated, necessitating critical inquiry to uncover the implicit beliefs that influence research and theory. One way to identify these assumptions is by examining the literature to find common ground in the field's conceptualisation of specific subjects (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). To do this, we reviewed the literature to identify commonalities in how SFR is understood and characterised in empirical research. To facilitate our analysis, we leveraged insights from a review of nineteen prior SFR literature reviews published between 2016 and 2023. A "review of reviews" (also known as an overview of reviews, umbrella review, or meta-review) is a research method that systematically retrieves and synthesises findings from multiple reviews addressing the same research problem (Cooper and Koenka, 2012). This approach suited our objectives, as existing reviews synthesised the vast SFR literature, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the field's intellectual foundations. A brief overview of these literature reviews is provided in Table 1. After identifying the relevant literature reviews, we relied on a six-step approach to identify the SFR assumptions and alternative perspectives which we outline in Web Appendixes C.

The review of reviews also enabled us to compile conceptual recommendations from prior SFR reviews. We analysed the future directions proposed in each review and evaluated their alignment with the assumptions and alternative perspectives in this paper. Table 2 presents a conceptual recommendation frequency matrix, tracking how often these reviews offer ideas aligned with our assumptions. Frequent recommendations indicate a consensus among scholars on the need for further research in those areas, while infrequent recommendations highlight unchallenged assumptions, revealing opportunities for novel SFR research. Notably, prior SFR reviews do not necessarily identify or challenge these assumptions. Instead, we contextualise their recommendations within our framework of assumptions and alternative perspectives. Additionally, the review of reviews allowed us to collate prior methodological recommendations for impactful SFR research, summarised in Web Appendix C. We also conducted a systematic review of 116 recently published primary empirical papers to extract insights from forward-thinking articles and understand recent trends. The summary of our findings is provided in Web Appendix D. We now turn our attention to the conceptual boundaries in SFR research.

#### *Assumption 1: Service failures arise during service encounters*

The concept of service encounter is central to the SFR literature, providing the context in which the customer's dissatisfactory experiences occur (Bitner et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1999). A service encounter refers to a customer's direct interaction with a service provider, its personnel, facilities, and other tangible elements, within a specific time frame (Bitner et al., 1990). SFR research has predominantly concentrated on service delivery deficiencies and failures to meet customer expectations during these encounters. However, this narrow focus confines research to specific temporal and spatial contexts and emphasises direct customer-provider interactions. Over the past two decades, extensive work has been done to extend the scope of service (Akaka and Vargo, 2015). These developments create opportunities to expand SFR research by exploring a wider array of actors and their interactions within the service ecosystem. As shown in Table 2, recommendations to extend SFR's scope have received little attention in prior literature reviews.



**Source(s):** The figure was developed by the authors

**Figure 1.** Boundary breaking opportunities in SFR research

**Table 1.** Review of previous SFR literature reviews

Article	Research context	Method	Contributions
<a href="#">Sahaf and Fazili (2024)</a>	Review of SFR research in business, management and accounting	Bibliometric analysis and systematic review (1990–2020, $n = 1,307$ , $n = 245$ )	Summarises SFR literature by identifying knowledge clusters, core theories, contexts, study characteristics and methodologies in prior research; future directions related to theory, context, study characteristics, and methodology
<a href="#">Akarsu et al. (2023)</a>	Review of SF research in hospitality and tourism	Bibliometric analysis (2001–2020, $n = 99$ )	Summarises SR literature by identifying themes and knowledge clusters in prior research; discussion on emergent topics in hospitality and tourism
<a href="#">Kim and So (2023)</a>	Review of SFR research in hospitality and tourism	Bibliometric analysis and systematic review (2001–2021, $n = 278$ )	Summarises SFR literature by identifying knowledge clusters; longitudinal assessment; developed framework with linkages between key constructs in SFR research; future directions- dynamic SFR, SFR as journey, innovative methods
<a href="#">Mir et al. (2023)</a>	Review of SR research across multiple disciplines	Bibliometric analysis (2005–2021, $n = 1,020$ )	Summarises SR literature by identifying knowledge clusters; developed conceptual framework that integrated clusters across micro, meso and macro levels; future directions-expanding methodological horizons and new avenues
<a href="#">Liu et al. (2023)</a>	Review of SFR research from multiple disciplines	Bibliometric analysis (1990–2020, $n = 533$ )	Summarises SFR literature by assessing thematic development in prior research; analysed longitudinal development; generated future opportunities by identifying gaps/disconnections through social network analysis and supplementary analysis
<a href="#">Suresh and Chawla (2022)</a>	Review of double deviation research in marketing	Systematic literature review ( $n = 43$ )	Summarises double deviation literature by identifying research themes pertaining to causes, consequences, moderators and recovery; future directions
<a href="#">Adil et al. (2022)</a>	Review of online SF research across multiple disciplines	Systematic literature review and lexicometric analysis (2003–2022, $n = 74$ )	Summarises online SF literature by developing conceptual framework integrating antecedents, mediators, moderators and consequences; future directions-theory, context, characteristics, methods
<a href="#">Baliga et al. (2020)</a>	Review of SFR research in B2B markets	Morphological analysis (1990–2020, $n = 114$ )	Summarises B2B SFR literature by identifying research dimensions in prior research; future opportunities based on intersections of dimensions
<a href="#">Manu and Sreejesh (2021)</a>	Review of SFR research in online platforms across multiple disciplines	Systematic literature review ( $n = 61$ )	Summarises online SR literature by identifying methods, theories, types of SR, platforms, recovery perspectives, characteristics and outcomes; future directions

(continued)

**Table 1.** Continued

Article	Research context	Method	Contributions
Arora and Chakraborty (2021)	Review of CCB research across multiple disciplines	Bibliometric Analysis (2000–2020, <i>n</i> = 729)	Summarises CCB literature by identifying knowledge clusters; social network analysis to understand centrality in CCB research; future directions
Fouroudi <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Review of SFR research in marketing and business	Bibliometric analysis (1993–2019, <i>n</i> = 416)	Summarises SFR literature by identifying knowledge clusters; analysis of highly cited articles; development of integrative framework; future directions
Arora and Chakraborty (2020)	Review of CCB research across multiple disciplines	Systematic literature review ( <i>n</i> = 226)	Identification of antecedents of legitimate/illegitimate CCB; assessment of deficiencies in extant taxonomies, and refinement
Grégoire and Mattila (2021)	SFR research directions in marketing and business	Editorial	Assessment of the state of the field; future research directions-advocates expanding the customer-firm dyad, new contexts, theories, bigger data and better data and advanced analytics
Khamitov <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Review of BT, SFR and PHC research in marketing and business	Integrative review (2000–2019, <i>n</i> = 236)	Integrates SFR, PHC and BT under the umbrella of negative events in marketing; identifies characteristics, theories, processes, and methods in three types of negative events; highlights linkage between stages of a negative event; future directions-theoretical, dynamic, longitudinal and methodological considerations
Koc (2019)	Review of SFR research in hospitality and tourism	Narrative review (1996–2017, <i>n</i> = 77)	Discussion on the link of SFR with customer satisfaction, loyalty and service quality, culture, equity, justice and fairness, empowerment and attribution
Van Vaerenbergh <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Conceptualisation of SRJ, review of prior SR research to establish SRJ framework	Systematic literature review (1975–2018, <i>n</i> = 230)	Conceptualisation of SRJ, encompassing three phases: pre-recovery, recovery, and post-recovery; synthesis of organisational responses to SF and integration with the SRJ perspective; future directions-response options in pre-recovery, recovery and post-recovery, interaction between regular journey and SRJ, considerations for more impactful SR research
Cleeren <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Review of PHC research in marketing	Systematic literature review (1970-, <i>n</i> = 25)	Summarises PHC literature by identifying antecedents, consequences, moderators, mediators, theories and methodologies; future directions
Istanbulluoglu <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Review and taxonomy of CCB research across multiple disciplines	Systematic literature review ( <i>n</i> = 210)	Development of taxonomy covering traditional and new ways of complaining; clarification of ambiguities and overlapping constructs in previous taxonomies

(continued)

**Table 1.** Continued

Article	Research context	Method	Contributions
Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher (2016)	Review of SR research in operations, marketing and HRM	Integrative review (1988–2014, $n = 360$ )	Development of interdisciplinary and multilevel integrative framework linking organisational investments in SR to organisational, employee, and customer outcomes; key themes in SR research within and across macro and micro levels; future directions
This study	Identification of boundary-breaking opportunities in SFR research	Review of SFR literature reviews ( $n = 19$ ) and analysis of recent publications ( $n = 116$ )	A meta-review that examines SFR at a macro level by identifying and challenging ten underlying assumptions in the field; offers alternative perspectives for each assumption reflecting recent conceptual development in the marketing/service literature, and dynamic changes in the marketplace; offers methodological and contribution related insights to enhance impact

**Note(s):** SFR: Service failure and recovery, SF: Service failures, SR: Service recovery, CCB: Customer complaint behaviour, SRJ: Service recovery journey, PHC: Product harm crises, BT: Brand transgression  
**Source(s):** Developed by the authors

*Alternative Perspective 1: Service failures can occur across a wider service ecosystem.* Service-dominant (S-D) logic redefines service as the application of resources by one actor for the benefit of others (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). This reconceptualization broadens the concept from services (i.e. a market offering) to all interactions fundamental to social and economic exchange (Akaka and Vargo, 2015). Adopting this perspective automatically expands the scope of SFR to contexts beyond specific types of services or service encounters. This presents an opportunity for SFR researchers to move beyond their predominantly customer-centric worldview (Arora and Chakraborty, 2021; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) and examine a broader spectrum of conflicts involving diverse stakeholders, such as citizens, employees, suppliers, investors, communities and even nations. While this expanded view of service failure influences many of the alternative perspectives discussed later, we outline a few specific opportunities arising from it.

A broadened perspective allows researchers to explore service failures across diverse contexts, including governments, public services, religious institutions, nonprofits, sports, and entertainment. One opportunity involves exploring service failures related to government policies, which often lead to widespread dissatisfaction among citizens. Increasingly, individuals hold policymakers accountable through mass protests, petitions, and direct engagement on social media. For example, residents across Europe are participating in anti-tourism protests, pressing local authorities to restrict tourist numbers in their cities (Stockwell, 2024). In these contexts, SFR researchers can investigate how individuals and stakeholder groups (e.g. tourists and tourism organisations) respond to such events, and how each group pressures policymakers into corrective actions. Service failures are also pervasive in nontraditional sectors such as media, entertainment, and sports. In these domains, failures may result from individual actions (e.g. celebrities, athletes, and public figures) or collective entities (e.g. musical groups, sports teams, and entertainment studios). These failures may be performance-related (e.g. underperformance by sports teams) or values-related (e.g. celebrity scandal). For instance, Hollywood actor Will Smith's act of aggression at the 2022 Oscars drew widespread criticism and disappointment from fans, many of whom were shocked by his



**Table 2.** Conceptual recommendation frequency matrix

SFR reviews	A1 AP1	A2 AP2	A3 AP3	A4 AP4	A5 AP5	A6 AP6	A7 AP7	A8 AP8	A9 AP9	A10 AP10	A11 AP11	A12 AP12	A13 AP13	A8 AP14	A9 AP15	A9 AP16	A10 AP17	A10 AP18	A19 AP19
Sahaf and Fazili (2024)	✓			✓	✓					✓				✓					
Akarsu et al. (2023)										✓	✓								
Kim and So (2023)						✓				✓	✓								
Mir et al. (2023)						✓				✓	✓						✓		
Liu et al. (2023)				✓										✓					✓
Suresh and Chawla (2022)				✓			✓										✓		
Adil et al. (2022)						✓					✓			✓					
Baliga et al. (2020)																			✓
Manu and Sreejesh (2021)				✓															
Arora and Chakraborty (2021)				✓	✓	✓					✓								
Fouroudi et al. (2020)				✓	✓														
Arora and Chakraborty (2020)				✓	✓							✓							
Grégoire and Mattila (2021)	✓			✓		✓		✓						✓	✓	✓			
Khamitov et al. (2020)	✓					✓		✓						✓					
Koc (2019)						✓		✓		✓				✓					
Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019)		✓				✓				✓				✓			✓	✓	✓
Cleeren et al. (2017)				✓			✓					✓	✓						
Istanbulluoglu et al. (2017)																			
Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher (2016)																	✓	✓	✓
This paper	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Note(s):** “A” refers to Assumption and “AP” refers to Alternative Perspective. Refer to [Web Appendix C5](#) for illustrative examples of these recommendations

*Assumption 1:* Service failures arise during service encounters. *Alt. Perspective 1:* Service failures can occur across a wider service ecosystem. *Assumption 2:* SFR is a post-purchase phenomenon. *Alt. Perspective 2:* SFR extends to pre-purchase. *Assumption 3:* Service failures necessitate firsthand experience and direct impact. *Alt. Perspective 3:* Service failures can result in the formation of coalitions; *Alt. Perspective 4:* Service failures are observed by external actors beyond customers. *Assumption 4:* Service failure arises from the expectation-performance gap. *Alt. Perspective 5:* Conflicts can be unrelated to expectations; *Alt. Perspective 6:* SFR can be a cumulative and dynamic process. *Assumption 5:* Service failures impact individual customers. *Alt. Perspective 7:* Service crises and mega disruptions impacting society at large. *Assumption 6:* Service failures stem from process and outcome deficiencies. *Alt. Perspective 8:* Failures stem from moral transgressions; *Alt. Perspective 9:* Failures stem from polarization and wokeism in the marketplace. *Assumption 7:* The service provider is the primary transgressor. *Alt. Perspective 10:* Any actor in a service delivery network can be the transgressor; *Alt. Perspective 11:* Customers can be the transgressor; *Alt. Perspective 12:* Firms can be fraudulently framed for transgressions; *Alt. Perspective 13:* Firms can be affected by spillover effects from others’ transgressions. *Assumption 8:* Service recovery is what firms do and intend to do. *Alt. Perspective 14:* Recovery mechanisms can take many forms; *Alt. Perspective 15:* Firms are sometimes unwilling to engage in service recovery. *Assumption 9:* Service recovery is necessary and inherently beneficial. *Alt. Perspective 16:* Service recovery can be difficult; *Alt. Perspective 17:* Service recovery may not benefit the organisation. *Assumption 10:* The objective of service recovery is to restore customer satisfaction. *Alt. Perspective 18:* The objective of service recovery can be process recovery; *Alt. Perspective 19:* The objective of service recovery can be employee recovery

**Source(s):** Developed by the authors

uncharacteristic display of violence (BBC News, 2022). Future research could examine how such incidents affect fan relationships with these entities, as well as affiliated products and brands. Moreover, understanding how businesses partnering with these entities can safeguard themselves from negative spillover effects is crucial.

Another intriguing avenue is the study of intra-organisational service failures, where services are rendered between units or actors within the same enterprise. Such failures may occur during service provision from head office to subsidiaries (e.g. corporate group and brand), between functional units (e.g. sales and marketing) or between firms and their employees. These conflicts often stem from competition between units, misaligned goals, and ineffective coordination. Business-to-employee (B2E) failures present a compelling research area, where firms fail to meet employee needs, causing dissatisfaction, reduced performance, and higher turnover. Disgruntled employees increasingly voice their grievances on online platforms (e.g. Glassdoor and Indeed) and through media outlets. As with traditional service failures, firms must recover from these negative events to safeguard their employer brand. In these scenarios, researchers can examine how intra-organisational SFR differs from traditional buyer-seller interactions and how external actors (e.g. customers, suppliers, and prospective employees) are affected by these conflicts.

#### *Assumption 2: SFR is a post-purchase phenomenon*

A general taken-for-granted assumption in the field is that SFR is a post-purchase phenomenon. Originating from the complaining literature, SFR research has traditionally focused on customer dissatisfaction with services provided during the core service encounter and the organisation's response to the failure (Sahaf and Fazili, 2024; Voorhees et al., 2017). Implicit in this understanding are the prerequisites of a transaction and the idea that customer responses are based on their "in the factory" experiences. However, these assumptions often lead researchers to overlook negative events occurring before the core service encounter. In fact, customer experiences and value-creation processes could begin even before the commencement of service provision (Tronvoll, 2012). As indicated in Table 2, Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019) is the only review to discuss SFR as a pre-purchase phenomenon, highlighting an opportunity for further research in this phase.

*Alternative Perspective 2: SFR extends to pre-purchase.* The pre-purchase stage encompasses all customer interactions with the firm and its environment before the transaction (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). During this phase, customers interact with frontline employees (FLEs), gather information from firm communications, reviews, and online communities, and evaluate the value proposition (Voorhees et al., 2017). Service failures are just as likely to occur at this stage as customers go through need recognition, information search, and consideration. A typical setting for such failures is during pre-announcements and new product launches. For example, Sony's poorly coordinated PlayStation 5 launch triggered an overwhelming surge of traffic on retail websites, causing widespread crashes. This disruption, combined with limited stock availability, led to significant customer frustration and extensive media coverage (Gilbert, 2020). Pre-purchase failures can also arise during interactions with sales personnel, such as when they fall short of buyer expectations during requirements definition, solution demonstrations, proposals, and negotiations. Such failures may also occur during co-production, where customers actively participate in the product or service design. Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019) note that research on pre-purchase service failures is scarce, creating opportunities to study their impact on customer evaluations, lost sales, and negative WOM. Furthermore, it is also important to understand how organisations can recover from pre-purchase failures. Pre-purchase recovery is challenging because customers are less inclined to voice dissatisfaction or provide feedback compared to post-purchase failures, leading to a lack of actionable insights.

#### *Assumption 3: Service failures necessitate firsthand experience and direct impact*

A fundamental premise of the service failure concept is that customers experience unsatisfactory performance firsthand and are directly impacted (Khamitov et al., 2020).

However, service failures today are rarely private, as customers increasingly share their negative experiences online. The emergence of social media and new technologies has led to the democratisation of customer complaints (CCMC, 2023). Therefore, firms are compelled to turn to digital channels to de-escalate customer complaints and initiate recovery (Golmohammadi *et al.*, 2021). This shift makes SFR instantly visible to many observers across geographically dispersed locations. While observers do not endure failures firsthand, they vicariously experience the customer's ordeal (Xu *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, they assess the firm's recovery performance and even reconsider their relationship with the organisation despite not being directly involved in the encounter (Hogreve *et al.*, 2019). A growing stream of research has begun examining triadic contexts, where a third entity (e.g. virtually present others) is affected by or affects the complainer-provider interactions (e.g. Hogreve *et al.*, 2019; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019). However, future research must move beyond the mere presence of a third actor to understand the social dynamics that develop within these triadic contexts (Roschk *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, observers are not limited to customers but could also include regulators, news media and competitors whose presence or participation could impact how the negative event unfolds (Sahaf and Fazili, 2024). While prior SFR reviews often highlight the observer perspective, the social dynamics angle offers a novel pathway (see Table 2).

*Alternative Perspective 3: Service failures can result in the formation of coalitions.* During service failures, some third-party actors remain passive, while others actively influence the situation by forming coalitions. Roschk *et al.* (2023) define a coalition as a process where an observer sides with either the complainer or the organisation to shape SFR outcomes. A key focus of coalition research is understanding how relationships within a triadic structure influence each other. Coalitions involving complainers and observers are widely prevalent on social media, such as when observers comment on a complainer's post, sharing similar experiences. Some coalitions may metamorphose into large, organised campaigns against firms. For example, over 93,000 Canadian consumers coordinated a boycott campaign on Reddit against Loblaws, protesting the supermarket's perceived excessive pricing (Judd, 2024). Such cases offer researchers opportunities to explore how complainer-observer coalitions form and how these alliances impact relationships with the transgressing firm. From a managerial perspective, it is crucial to identify effective recovery strategies that firms can employ to mitigate the effect of complainer-observer coalitions and prevent their expansion (Roschk *et al.*, 2023). Coalitions can also form when observers (e.g. brand enthusiasts and advocates) side with the firm or FLEs against detractors and illegitimate complainers. Here, researchers can examine when firm-observer coalitions develop and how firms should respond to support from coalition partners.

*Alternative Perspective 4: Service failures are observed by external actors beyond customers.* When complainers go on stage, service failures become visible to numerous observers beyond other customers. These other observer types remain under-researched in the SFR literature. For instance, entities such as consumer protection watchdogs (e.g. Better Business Bureau), government agencies (e.g. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau), and news media (e.g. CBC Marketplace) play a vital role in safeguarding consumers. The Better Business Bureau facilitates complaint resolution, provides trustworthiness ratings, and maintains public complaint histories. Similarly, news media publicise customer complaints and engage in investigative journalism to expose unethical practices and wrongdoings by firms. However, research on how customers engage regulators and other actors during service failures remains limited (Arora and Chakraborty, 2021).

Observers can also include social media influencers, who amplify the complainer's voice through product reviews, hashtag campaigns, and live-stream discussions. These actions can generate widespread awareness and spark online firestorms, where a surge of negative comments rapidly spreads across social media, targeting the transgressor. Another observer could be the competitors of the transgressing firm, who seize the opportunity to capitalise on their rival's misstep (Cleeren *et al.*, 2017). Competitors may launch comparative advertising,

employ humour or satire to mock the mistake or offer promotions to attract affected customers. Other observers may include investors and analysts who become sensitive to online chatter about a negative event and swiftly adjust their investment strategies or market forecasts (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Finally, observers may include FLEs who have witnessed transgressions by the firm or their colleagues. Although FLEs are usually expected to align with their employer, they may face moral dilemmas when confronted with ethical lapses and the firm's refusal to resolve complaints. In extreme cases, FLEs may become whistleblowers, exposing wrongdoing to protect customers and other stakeholders. These instances highlight the need to examine how observer involvement shifts SFR dynamics. Researchers could explore how customers react to observer participation, mobilise their support, how organisations address these interventions, and the repercussions for providers who fail to act effectively.

*Assumption 4: Service failures arise from the expectation-performance gap*

SFR is conceptually rooted in the expectancy-disconfirmation (ED) paradigm (Sahaf and Fazili, 2024). The general assumption is that customers hold pre-purchase expectations against which service performances are evaluated. Service failures occur when there is negative disconfirmation of customer expectations (Smith *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, customers are presumed to hold a recovery expectation against which recovery efforts are judged. However, these assumptions may not sufficiently address situations where customers lack predictive expectations or where complaints occur in the absence of any dissatisfaction (Arora and Chakraborty, 2020). Another limitation of the ED framework is the characterisation of SFR as a static evaluative state, even though dissatisfactory experiences often unfold dynamically across the customer journey (Fournier and Mick, 1999; Tronvoll, 2012; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). Prior reviews have rarely challenged the underpinning provided by the ED model in SFR research, although several papers emphasise studying dynamic contexts (See Table 2).

*Alternative Perspective 5: Conflicts can be unrelated to expectations.* In certain purchase scenarios, customers may have limited pre-consumption expectations due to the novelty or complexity of the offering. In such cases, they may lack pre-existing standards to compare the performance with (Fournier and Mick, 1999). Instead, they gradually realise the benefits of the offering and develop their expectations through use. Similarly, with credence-type offerings, customers often lack the technical knowledge to develop expectations or assess service quality. One area where predictive expectations are particularly limited is in artificial intelligence (AI) related technologies. As AI becomes more integrated into products and technology-mediated interactions, there is a heightened risk of encountering service failures (e.g. misdiagnoses in disease detection by AI systems) and experiencing harm (e.g. discriminatory pricing algorithms exploiting marginalised communities) (Puntoni *et al.*, 2021). These incidents provide opportunities to explore how customers evaluate failures associated with emerging technologies, given their latent and often ambiguous pre-consumption expectations.

It is also important to recognise that customers sometimes engage in complaining behaviours even in the absence of post-purchase dissatisfaction (Tronvoll, 2012). Arora and Chakraborty (2020) identify four primary motives for such complaints: pursuing underserved economic gain (e.g. freeloading or fraudulent returns), harbouring a negative attitude towards business (e.g. anti-corporate sentiment), inflating one's ego (e.g. enhance self-worth) and managing social impressions (e.g. desire to be seen negatively). Given that these types of complaints are under-researched compared to dissatisfaction-driven complaints (Arora and Chakraborty, 2020), researchers have an opportunity to explore the underlying customer motivations and customer characteristics that drive these behaviours. Moreover, further evidence is needed on how firms can effectively address complaints not rooted in dissatisfaction.

*Alternative Perspective 6: SFR can be a cumulative and dynamic process.* Employing the ED framework restricts SFR as a discrete evaluative state. Van Vaerenbergh *et al.* (2019) criticise this perspective for failing to account for the dynamic nature of service delivery and

the interconnectedness of service encounters. The customers' dissatisfactory experiences and complaining behaviours may result from a chain of activities (Tronvoll, 2012). Similarly, service recovery efforts often unfold as ongoing processes throughout the consumption journey. For example, in B2B solutions, buyers access the supplier's offerings over predetermined contract periods. During this time, service failures may involve daily incidents (e.g. software bugs) or the customers' long-term assessment of the product's inability to meet desired outcomes (e.g. software failing to enhance efficiencies). Recovery efforts may involve using customer support to resolve daily issues or employing customer success managers to intervene in the buyers' usage processes. Consequently, B2B buyers' views on SFR are shaped less by specific encounters and more by the value derived through ongoing use and summative assessment of experiences with firms (Ravald and Gronroos, 1996). Future research should assess how customers evaluate service failure in long-term contracts. Researchers should also consider recovery not as an episodic event but as a series of mechanisms designed to migrate customer relationships from damaged to positive states over time (Zhang *et al.*, 2016). Van Vaerenbergh *et al.* (2019) recommend incorporating goal theory to better understand customers' goal-based, rather than purely exchange-based, responses to SFR. By considering customer responses based on beneficiary goals (i.e. individual or collective) and goal hierarchy (i.e. subordinate to superordinate), future research can offer a more nuanced perspective on SFR within cumulative and dynamic service contexts.

*Assumption 5: Service failures impact individual customers*

The SFR literature has traditionally focused on contexts where service failures have consequences for individual customers tied to the service encounter (Khamitov *et al.*, 2020). Much of this research examines interactions between a single customer and service provider, framing the failure as an individually experienced phenomenon (Albrecht *et al.*, 2017; Du *et al.*, 2014). However, there is a growing prevalence of large-scale service failures that simultaneously impact large groups of customers (e.g. system-wide outages, data breaches and supply chain interruptions). Studying these failures is critical due to the complex interactions between affected customers (and even unaffected ones), which can heighten emotional responses and escalate tensions with service providers (Du *et al.*, 2014). Managing large-scale service failures also poses unique challenges for firms, as they must resolve issues for a high volume of customers while addressing concerns from broader stakeholders who become aware of these incidents (e.g. media and government). Although emerging research has begun to explore group-level service failures, large-scale service crises and mega disruptions remain notably underexplored within the SFR literature (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2024). Table 2 illustrates how previous SFR reviews have overlooked the implications of large-scale crises, highlighting the need for further research.

*Alternative Perspective 7: Service crises and mega disruptions impacting society at large.*

In recent years, macro-level service failures have become increasingly common causing widespread turmoil in the marketplace and affecting broader society [2]. A service crisis refers to a severe disruption that simultaneously impacts a large number of customers, resulting in significant and lasting damage to perceived service quality (Gijzenberg *et al.*, 2015). These crises typically occur in mass-consumption services such as telecom, social media, cloud services and utilities. Their effects are far-reaching, often extending beyond geographic boundaries and disrupting multiple stakeholder groups. For instance, Meta's 2021 service outage affected 3.5 billion users as well as the entire service ecosystem, including businesses, advertisers, public figures, and their followers. Service crises are similar to product-harm crises in that both affect large groups of customers. However, during product harm crises, timely recalls of defective or dangerous products can minimise harm to customers and mitigate implications for firms. In contrast, in service crises, no such recall is possible (Gijzenberg *et al.*, 2015). In fact, the lack of clear recovery solutions makes service crises more challenging to manage (Rasoulzian *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, compared to individual-level service failures,

large-scale service crises garner considerable media attention and public scrutiny. During such events, social media amplifies negative reactions, misinformation, and disinformation, fuelling mass panic and escalating the crisis into a public relations disaster. Future research should investigate how social dynamics that arise during service crises influence customer reactions. Additionally, researchers should identify effective recovery strategies to manage collective emotions, rebuild trust, restore stakeholder confidence, and mitigate financial repercussions.

More recently, [Vredenburg et al. \(2024\)](#) introduced the concept of service mega-disruptions, defined as unforeseen environmental stressors or threats (e.g. pandemics, geopolitical crises, and extreme weather events) that impede an organisation's ability to deliver desired services. While mega-disruptions are not traditional firm transgressions, they can act as precursors to negative marketplace events. For instance, such disruptions can trigger panic buying, the spread of rumours, and the polarization of customer opinions. Firms face workforce challenges and supply chain breakdowns, leading to impaired service delivery, price volatility and stockouts, all causing significant reputational damage. Even when these macro-level disruptions are beyond a provider's control, customers may still blame the firm for poor service outcomes. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, customers frequently directed their frustrations at service providers (e.g. airlines and restaurants) for enforcing mandatory health protocols, despite these measures being dictated by external regulations and public health policies. Further research is needed to explore how customers evaluate mega-disruptions and how organisations entangled in such crises can effectively recover.

*Assumption 6: Service failures stem from process and outcome deficiencies*

SFR research has traditionally examined performance deficiencies in service processes or outcomes ([Fouroudi et al., 2020](#)). However, many customer-firm conflicts in today's marketplace may not be linked to substandard performance. Rather, they relate to social or ethical concerns associated with the firm's actions. SFR researchers can draw inspiration from the brand and moral transgression literature to investigate negative events where customers perceive the firm has engaged in symbolic misconduct or socially debatable actions ([Huber et al., 2009](#)). Addressing these values-related transgressions is critical, given the emerging view of service's wider applicability in society ([Vargo and Lusch, 2017](#)) and calls for research highlighting its role in enhancing the welfare of stakeholders ([Ostrom et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, customers are increasingly vigilant about moral issues, which leads them to assess service performance more holistically. Finally, the SFR field, with its extensive knowledge of the recovery stage ([Khamitov et al., 2020](#)), is well-positioned to offer guidance on addressing these broader transgressions. [Table 2](#) highlights the limited attention given to nonperformance-related transgressions in previous SFR reviews. This oversight is understandable, as such transgressions have traditionally been studied within other fields. Nevertheless, we encourage SFR researchers to expand their focus beyond substandard performance to remain relevant in the evolving marketplace.

*Alternative Perspective 8: Failures stem from moral transgressions.* Company moral transgressions refer to organisational actions that breach social and moral norms. Customers possess belief systems about what is right or wrong, shaping their expectations of what organisations should and should not do ([Xu et al., 2021](#)). Moral transgressions are particularly problematic as customers perceive organisations as acting out of greed and causing harm for profit ([Grappi et al., 2024](#)). These actions often spark moral outrage, prompting customers to retaliate (e.g. product boycott), which in turn may lead to plummeting sales and stock market values ([Xu et al., 2021](#)). A current example is the allegation that grocery chains are engaging in price gouging amidst the ongoing cost of living crisis ([Liew, 2023](#); [Taylor, 2024](#)). Similarly, customers accuse businesses of practising shrinkflation and skimflation, which pertains to reducing quantity and service levels while maintaining original pricing. Another contentious issue relates to hiring practices, such as when the coffee chain Tim Hortons faced criticism for



prioritising foreign workers over local candidates (Robertson, 2024). Other controversial actions include service policies (e.g. tipping practices), cultural and racial insensitivity (e.g. lack of inclusivity in advertising) and unethical marketing (e.g. fear-based marketing). SFR researchers should explore the internal mechanisms driving customer reactions to moral transgressions and how these responses vary based on customer, firm, and transgression characteristics. Given the significant harm moral transgressions can inflict on firms, a vital consideration is how managers should respond to customer pushback.

*Alternative Perspective 9: Failures stem from polarization and wokeism in the marketplace.* Social and political developments worldwide have increasingly polarized the marketing landscape. Polarization occurs when societal beliefs diverge towards two extreme positions (e.g. in politics, religion, and social justice), causing individuals to exhibit hostility towards those with incompatible views. In such environments, customers often interpret firm behaviours through a partisan lens (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021). When firms take sociopolitical stances or even engage in seemingly uncontroversial actions, their moves are often perceived as contentious, triggering customer activism. For instance, Starbucks and McDonald's faced boycotts during the recent Middle East crisis, resulting in a noticeable decline in both sales and stock values (Lucas, 2024). Similarly, brands aligning with social issues (e.g. diversity, inclusivity, and environmental responsibility) are increasingly labelled as woke (Bond, 2023). While woke brands appeal to certain customer segments, they and their supporters face backlash from others. They become targets of the pervasive cancel culture, where individuals publicly shame and punish them for adopting specific positions. Boycotts and cancel culture are not limited to business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts but are also common in B2B environments, where organisations may sever ties with transgressing firms. For instance, many firms suspended advertising on social media platform X after its owner, Elon Musk, posted an antisemitic conspiracy theory (Conger and Hsu, 2023). Given these developments, researchers can examine how critics and supporters of transgressing firms evaluate such events and how firms can effectively manage the consequences of being cancelled.

*Assumption 7: The service provider is the primary transgressor*

The SFR literature largely assumes that service failures are attributable to firms (Grégoire and Mattila, 2021). This focus on the service provider as the transgressor is logical, given that most failures arise from inadequate firm or FLE performance. However, in some cases, the negative event may partly or wholly result from the actions and participation of other entities. Emerging business models, technological developments, and socioeconomic trends are fostering environments where transgressions may also originate from customers or other members of the service ecosystem. Previous SFR reviews have highlighted opportunities related to sharing economy platforms and customer incivility (see Table 2). However, limited attention has been given to scenarios where firms are targeted by fraud or affected by negative spillover effects.

*Alternative Perspective 10: Any actor in a service delivery network can be the transgressor.* Service delivery networks (SDN) are ubiquitous in today's marketplace, spanning digital platforms, healthcare networks, public-private partnerships, outsourced services, and brand collaborations. SDNs exemplify the service ecosystem concept proposed by S-D logic, where multiple resource-integrating actors interact to co-create value (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Failures in SDNs can arise from the substandard performance of any actor within the service ecosystem (e.g. Airbnb or Host) (Mir et al., 2023; Tax et al., 2013). However, in the eyes of customers, a specific actor or the entire network may be held responsible for the failure (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). For instance, Amazon, eBay, and Facebook have faced scrutiny as third-party sellers exploited these platforms to offer counterfeit and stolen items (Tarasov, 2022). Transgressions in SDNs, such as platform models, should also be examined from the perspective of platform partners (e.g. Airbnb host or Uber driver). Partners often face abuse or misbehaviours from customers (e.g. property damage, fake reviews, and physical threats),

which may deter their participation. For example, after an Uber driver was assaulted and the company refused to cooperate with law enforcement, the driver ceased working with the platform, holding it accountable for its lack of support (Mortimer, 2019). Given the complexity of SFR in SDNs, future research should explore how customers and other actors attribute responsibility for failures and how they can independently or collaboratively engage in effective recovery (Khamitov *et al.*, 2020; Kim and So, 2023; Mir *et al.*, 2023; Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2019).

*Alternative Perspective 11: Customers can be the transgressor.* Customer incivility is increasingly prevalent in the marketplace, driven by polarization and shifting moral standards in society (Danatzis and Möller-Herm, 2023). Customer incivility refers to dysfunctional and aberrant customer behaviours in service settings (i.e. offline and digital) that violate generally accepted norms of conduct (Kim and Baker, 2019). An industry survey revealed that 46% of consumers encountered two or more instances of uncivil customer behaviours in the past year (CCMC, 2023). Customer incivility can be directed at a focal customer, such as when an uncivil customer engages in verbal abuse, online trolling, physical threats, or monopolises shared resources. It can also manifest as behaviours directed at firms (e.g. vandalism and theft), FLEs (public rebuke and non-cooperation) or the public environment (e.g. disorderly conduct and discrimination). Customer incivility impacts the focal customer by disrupting service delivery, heightening tensions in the service environment, and ultimately diminishing their overall experience. For instance, a mass brawl on a Ryanair flight caused an emergency landing, leaving 200 passengers stranded overnight and severely disrupting their travel plans (Pollina, 2024). Although academic interest in customer incivility is growing, fewer studies have explored its impact from the perspective of affected customers (i.e. directly involved or as an observer) (Kim and Baker, 2019). Researchers could examine how affected customers react to incivility and their expectations from FLEs and firms in terms of interventions, conflict resolution, and ensuring a safe service environment. Many customers may abandon a provider after witnessing or experiencing customer incivility, even when the firm is not at fault. This can be due to emotional discomfort, fear of future incidents, or a diminished perception of service quality. Thus, it is crucial to study how firms can solicit customer cooperation, regain trust, and encourage continued patronage after instances of customer incivility.

*Alternative Perspective 12: Firms can be fraudulently framed for transgressions.* Organisations are increasingly misrepresented in the marketplace through impersonation, fake advertisements, fraudulent reviews, and disinformation. Fraudulent companies deploy spoofing scams to impersonate legitimate firms to respond to customer complaints on social media (Foran, 2024). When unsuspecting customers fall prey to these deceptions, the focal firm becomes entangled in a compounded double deviation. These impersonations are becoming harder to decipher as fraudsters leverage AI technologies to create audio/video deepfakes of CEOs and other representatives, placing organisations in compromising positions (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2020). Firms are also vulnerable to fake reviews that tarnish their reputation and erode credibility with customers. Such reviews may be posted by disgruntled actors seeking revenge or by competitors looking for economic gains (Arora and Chakraborty, 2020). However, firms combating fake reviews must proceed cautiously, as it is often challenging to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate reviews. Efforts to remove genuine reviews may backfire, causing the complainant and other observers to unite in retaliation against the transgressor. Firms can also become targets of disinformation campaigns, whereby false claims may severely damage their reputation. For instance, a rumour on WhatsApp falsely claiming that the UK-based Metro Bank was facing financial difficulties prompted large numbers of customers to withdraw their money and belongings from its branches (Katwala, 2019). Overall, organisations framed by fraud face the dual challenge of absolving themselves of blame and demonstrating effective measures to prevent future occurrences. Future research should explore how organisations recover from being falsely implicated and examine strategies for restoring customer confidence.



*Alternative Perspective 13: Firms can be affected by spillover effects from others' transgressions.* Organisations may be susceptible to negative spillover effects when a change in customer evaluation of one actor (e.g. after a competitor's transgression) alters their assessment of another actor (e.g. the focal firm) (Schumann et al., 2014). This challenges the assumption that service encounters are discrete and independent events and that customers' evaluations of specific episodes remain unaffected by prior experiences with other entities (Yue et al., 2022). For example, customers affected by a data breach at Home Depot might hesitate to share personal information with Lowes, even though the latter has not faced similar issues (Martin et al., 2017). Such reactions stem from attributions of globality, where customers perceive the causes of service failures as generalisable across settings rather than confined to specific instances (Hess et al., 2007). Negative spillover effects can take multiple forms in the marketplace. For instance, customers may negatively evaluate firms due to transgressions linked to suppliers (e.g. a retailer selling a faulty brand), employees (e.g. uncivil FLE behaviour), technologies (e.g. rogue chatbot) other customers (e.g. uncivil customers), platform users (e.g. users posting egregious social media content) and country of origin (e.g. during a political crisis) (Cleeren et al., 2017). Future research should investigate when and how these negative spillover effects occur and their implications for customer behaviours. SFR researchers also have the opportunity to explore strategies firms can use to counter negative evaluations by association.

*Assumption 8: Service recovery is what firms do and intend to do*

SFR literature generally assumes that firms are primarily responsible for initiating and managing the recovery process. Although substantial research examines customer participation in service recovery (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2018), the locus of recovery in these situations largely remains with firms. This assumption limits the exploration of scenarios where customers or other third-party actors undertake recovery. It is also assumed that firms will prioritise complaint handling and ensure post-complaint satisfaction (Tax et al., 1998). The assumption overlooks situations where firms may have no desire to engage in service recovery. Previous SFR reviews discuss positively valenced behaviours (e.g. grace and forgiveness) as self-recovery mechanisms following service failures (see Table 2). However, there has been little discussion on other forms of recovery and where firms are unwilling to initiate service recovery.

*Alternative Perspective 14: Recovery mechanisms can take many forms.* Customers often undertake independent service recovery efforts with minimal firm involvement (Dong et al., 2016). While the SFR literature has primarily focused on firm-led and co-created recovery, limited research has examined customer-initiated recovery (Zhu et al., 2013). Given that customers have increased access to information (e.g. online communities) and other resources (e.g. tools and skills), they may engage in do-it-yourself (DIY) recovery (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Firms are also likely to leverage emerging technologies such as generative AI, augmented reality, and the metaverse to empower customers in DIY recovery. This creates an opportunity for SFR researchers to examine how customers engage in DIY recovery. Additionally, researchers should explore whether firms should encourage customer recovery and how they can effectively support these self-directed efforts. During some service failures, a rival firm may step in to capitalise on the shortcomings of the original provider (e.g. Allen et al., 2015). Future research could explore how customers update their relationships with transgressing firms after self-initiated or third-party-facilitated recovery.

In some instances, customers may initiate recovery by engaging in motivational processes (e.g. forgiveness and escapism) to cope with self-discrepancies and relinquish any vengeful thoughts or feelings about the transgression (Mandel et al., 2017; Tsarenko et al., 2019). Not all customers react adversely to SFR (Khamitov et al., 2020), with some responding pragmatically to restore their well-being (Tsarenko et al., 2019). Research on positive customer responses and the boundary conditions affecting reactions to SFR provides a

*Alternative Perspective 15: Firms are sometimes unwilling to engage in service recovery.* Many firms may exhibit no real desire to respond to customer complaints. For instance, organisations in public services and monopoly-like markets may be less inclined to address service failures (Grégoire and Mattila, 2021). These situations arise as these organisations do not face competition or go out of business, giving them minimal incentive to react (Van de Walle, 2016). Consequently, customers may remain entrapped in the relationship due to dependence on the firm or lack of alternatives (Fliess and Volkers, 2020). This reluctance to resolve complaints is prevalent in other sectors, as evidenced by the Better Business Bureau's list of repeat offenders, which includes companies that have failed to resolve hundreds of complaints. Some businesses not only fail to address service failures but actively suppress the complainant's voice. For example, firms may seek to have negative reviews removed or even resort to threatening customers with legal action (Lofaro, 2018). Additionally, these firms may agree to settle provided customers consent to non-disclosure agreements that keep the incident confidential. Future research should examine why some transgressing firms refuse to engage in service recovery despite facing the risk of the incident being exposed to a wide audience. This is puzzling, given that the proliferation of avenues for reviews, complaints, and heightened transparency should make companies more vigilant and responsive in addressing service failures. Further, it is important to study how affected customers and observers respond when firms are unwilling to offer resolutions or seek to silence them.

*Assumption 9: Service recovery is necessary and inherently beneficial*

It is widely acknowledged in SFR literature that effective complaint handling is pivotal for managing customer relationships and enhancing retention (Tax et al., 1998). Meta-analyses demonstrate that service recovery and customer participation in the recovery process significantly influence post-complaint satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2018). Consequently, it is generally assumed that recovering and satisfying customers following service failures is always necessary and can provide firms with a sustainable competitive advantage. Also implicit in this assumption is the belief that service recovery is feasible in the first place. These perspectives often overlook the possibility that, in some cases, service recovery may be futile or even detrimental to the firm. While there is consensus on the need for further research into the return on recovery investment, prior SFR reviews have largely overlooked the feasibility and potential drawbacks of service recovery under certain conditions (see Table 2).

*Alternative Perspective 16: Service recovery can be difficult.* There may be instances when service recovery is challenging or even impossible (Grégoire and Mattila, 2021). This occurs when the failure is severe, its impacts are long-lasting or irreversible, the provider has committed repeated offences, or customers hold unrealistic expectations. For instance, many service failures in the healthcare and financial sectors may have minimal scope for recovery. An investment advisor's mismanagement of a client's portfolio can lead to irrecoverable monetary loss. Similarly, a data breach can permanently expose a customer's confidential information to the public. In such cases, the psychological impact of failures may be profound, lingering long after the incident. In certain instances, firms may persist in repeated offences to the extent that customers are lost for good. After multiple failures, such as double or triple deviations, customers may lose trust in the provider, making it highly unlikely that they will return. Additionally, some customers may have unrealistic recovery expectations that far exceed the provider's capacity for resolution. Service recovery can also become challenging when the failures result from environmental factors beyond the firm's control (e.g. natural disasters) (Baliga et al., 2020). Future research should investigate how firms can respond effectively when service recovery is difficult, and traditional recovery may not be feasible or adequate.

*Alternative Perspective 17: Service recovery may not benefit the organisation.* Although the SFR literature often advocates service recovery as inherently beneficial, there are instances where such efforts can be counterproductive for the organisation. For instance, firms face significant challenges in recovering from severely damaged customer relationships. Research shows that customers do not fully regain trust even after an ostensibly successful service recovery (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, attempting recovery with difficult customers can be challenging, especially when they hold unrealistic expectations, exhibit confrontational behaviour, or exploit power asymmetry. Thus, it is crucial to assess the economic viability of recovering long-lost and difficult customers (Suresh and Chawla, 2022). On the contrary, there are instances where highly loyal customers may not expect or require recovery, as their trust and commitment remain intact despite failure. While recovering and retaining such customers seems like an obvious course of action, it is worth questioning whether these efforts justify the investment and to what extent they are necessary to maintain loyalty. Service recovery processes are resource-intensive, necessitating significant investments in compensation, training, and recovery systems. These efforts can also impose considerable psychological strain on FLEs, contributing to burnout and negatively impacting their well-being and job performance (Liu *et al.*, 2023; Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016). In many cases, the costs of rectifying a service failure may outweigh the potential benefits. Future research should provide prescriptive insights into the specific contexts where service recovery may be counterproductive or inefficient. Additionally, should firms adopt a selective approach to recovery (e.g. Dukes and Zhu, 2019), it is important to study how they can balance the cost-effectiveness of service recovery with the long-term effects on customer loyalty and brand equity.

*Assumption 10: The objective of service recovery is to restore customer satisfaction*

The SFR literature generally assumes that the primary aim of service recovery is to address customers' negative reactions and restore their satisfaction (Koc, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2023). However, scholars argue that service recovery should not only be about recovering dissatisfied customers but should also focus on driving improvements within the organisation (Johnston and Michel, 2008; Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016). Researchers and practitioners often adopt a narrow view by prioritising customer recovery while underestimating the importance of process and employee recovery (Johnston and Michel, 2008). Michel *et al.* (2009) emphasise that service recovery often fails due to tensions between customer, process, and employee recovery, which are typically siloed across functions. To address this, SFR researchers should examine how service failures create opportunities for process and employee recovery. Furthermore, they should explore how improvements in these areas can synergistically enhance overall firm performance. Perspectives on process and employee recovery have received limited attention in previous SFR reviews (see Table 2).

*Alternative Perspective 18: The objective of service recovery can be process recovery.* Process recovery refers to the systematic use of data from service failures to drive continuous organisational improvements (Johnston and Mitchel, 2008). Learning from failures may be more beneficial than merely recovering individual customers, as such incidents provide valuable inputs to improve systems and processes and help prevent future incidents. Today, firms leverage digital technologies like AI, machine learning, digital twins, and IoT to collect and analyse real-time service failure-related data. These capabilities enable firms to pre-emptively anticipate problems and foster ongoing process improvements (Porter and Heppelmann, 2015). For instance, companies like GE and Rolls Royce use digital twins to monitor aircraft engines in real time. These digital replicas allow them to optimise performance, predict maintenance needs, and improve operational efficiency, reducing the likelihood of future service failures. Future research should investigate how organisations can harness emerging technologies to systematically learn from disruptions during customer usage, enhancing both service delivery and recovery. Furthermore, prior research indicates

that communicating process recovery to customers leads to more favourable customer evaluations (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2012). Further research is needed to explore how firms can improve such communication, given rising anti-business sentiment and customer scepticism about the authenticity of process recovery initiatives.

*Alternative Perspective 19: The objective of service recovery can be employee recovery.* Employee recovery refers to management practices that enhance FLEs' ability to recover customers after service failures while helping them manage the negative emotions these situations create. Following service failures, FLEs often find themselves caught between customer grievances and the firm's rigid and unyielding positions (Michel *et al.*, 2009). Customers frequently place full blame on FLEs, even when failures result from circumstances beyond their control. FLEs must also cope with dysfunctional customer behaviours, and at times, the unethical actions of their firm or colleagues. These encounters leave FLEs vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, psychological strain, and burnout (Subramony *et al.*, 2021). When FLEs are left alone to absorb service failure pressures, they experience learned helplessness, leading to disengagement and maladaptive responses during recovery efforts (Johnston and Michel, 2008). Liu *et al.* (2023) note that employee reactions have received considerably less attention in the SFR literature. We agree there is substantial opportunity for research into employees' emotional and behavioural responses during SFR. Future research should examine interventions (e.g. psychological support and training) that firms can implement to help FLEs recover from challenging interactions. Such research is especially timely, as service industries in countries like the United States are witnessing a significant exodus of FLEs (Logan *et al.*, 2024). It is also important to study how innovative technologies enabling cognitive and emotional enhancements (e.g. wearable robotics and predictive analytics) can better equip FLEs for post-complaint interactions (Mende *et al.*, 2023). Finally, since FLEs are typically best positioned to understand customer problems and operational issues, research should examine how they can be better set up internally to contribute to process recovery.

## General discussion

This paper aimed to present boundary-breaking research opportunities in SFR by challenging some of the central assumptions of the field. We identified ten key assumptions within the SFR field, critically assessed their limitations, and proposed nineteen alternative perspectives aligned with recent developments in the literature and the evolving marketing environment. Table 2 highlights how often recommendations aligned with these assumptions have been suggested in earlier SFR reviews. We introduce two alternative perspectives (AP3 and AP9) that have not been addressed in prior SFR reviews, offering novel avenues for further exploration. Additionally, we developed several perspectives (AP5, AP7, AP12, AP13, AP15, AP16, and AP17) that were previously mentioned only in passing. These underexplored areas offer promising and potentially groundbreaking opportunities that could significantly advance research in the SFR field. While some ideas have appeared in multiple reviews, their frequency reflects a broad consensus on their importance and signals a need for deeper exploration. Thus, we also elaborate on these ideas to provide fresh perspectives and further their development. While some research has begun to challenge these SFR assumptions, we believe that such endeavours are relatively limited in number. There remains much to learn about contemporary marketplace conflicts, and we believe our alternative perspectives on SFR provide a useful starting point for further exploration. We build on the assumptions and alternative perspectives to come up with some specific research questions in Table 3.

Our research also aimed to identify implicit boundaries related to how SFR research is executed (i.e. how we study SFR). The SFR field has clear preferences in terms of its unit of analysis, study contexts, methods, analyses, and measurement techniques. Despite increased calls for methodological sophistication, our review of recent SFR research trends shows the field's reliance on familiar approaches (See Web Appendix D). Nevertheless, we limit our discussion of these methodological considerations, given the abundance of guidance available

**Table 3.** Service failure and recovery future research directions

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
Assumption 1: Service failures arise during service encounters	<i>Alternative Perspective 1:</i> Service failures can occur across a wider service ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do different stakeholder groups (e.g. citizens, NGOs, local businesses) react to public service standards (such as in healthcare) and government policy, and what mechanisms do they use to pressure governments into corrective actions?</li> <li>• How does performance-related and values-based SF (such as in the entertainment and sports sectors) impact customer loyalty and brand affiliations? What strategies can organisations use to mitigate negative spillover effects?</li> <li>• What are the key factors contributing to intra-organisational SF, and how are these failures perceived by external stakeholders? What strategies can organisations implement to prevent such conflicts?</li> <li>• How can firms effectively recover from B2E SFs to minimise negative impacts on employees and protect their employer brand in the digital age?</li> </ul>
Assumption 2: SFR is a post-purchase phenomenon	<i>Alternative Perspective 2:</i> SFR extends to pre-purchase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the key drivers of SF during the pre-purchase stage, and how do these negative events influence customer perceptions of the firm's value proposition?</li> <li>• How does customer involvement in co-production during the pre-purchase stage influence their evaluations of SF?</li> <li>• How do a firm's pre-announcement and product launch strategy contribute to negative customer reactions, and what are effective recovery strategies to regain trust and drive purchase decisions?</li> <li>• How can organisations effectively recover from pre-purchase SF when customer feedback is often limited or non-existent?</li> </ul>

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**Table 3.** Continued

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
<i>Assumption 3:</i> Service failures necessitate firsthand experience and direct impact	<i>Alternative Perspective 3:</i> Service failures can result in the formation of coalitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do observers form coalitions with customers or firms? How do the coalition dynamics influence the complainant's evaluations and relationship with the transgressing firm?</li> <li>• What SR strategies can managers implement to address the demands of large coalitions?</li> <li>• How should firms strategically manage and respond to the support received from observer-firm coalitions?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 4:</i> Service failures are observed by external actors beyond customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers engage consumer protection agencies and other regulators in response to SF?</li> <li>• What roles do news media, influencers, and other observers play in shaping the narrative during complainant-transgressing firm exchanges on social media?</li> <li>• How do competitors capitalise on marketplace transgressions or SF by the focal organisation? How do complainants respond to these competitive interventions?</li> <li>• How do SF and other forms of organisational misconduct (i.e. by firm or other FLEs) impact the performance and well-being of FLEs? When do FLEs side with the affected customer(s), and how do they intervene?</li> </ul>
<i>Assumption 4:</i> Service failures arise from the expectation-performance gap	<i>Alternative Perspective 5:</i> Conflicts can be unrelated to expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers evaluate SF related to new technologies where they lack predictive expectations or comparative standards? How can organisations effectively recover from instances where AI-enabled agents engage in discriminatory and exploitative behaviours?</li> <li>• What psychological and behavioural mechanisms drive customers to engage in illegitimate complaints that are not related to post-purchase dissatisfaction?</li> <li>• How can firms effectively recover from illegitimate customer complaints that are not based on post-purchase dissatisfaction?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 6:</i> SFR can be a cumulative and dynamic process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers assess SF within long-term contractual commitments (e.g. Software-as-a-service)?</li> <li>• Can goal theory provide a suitable framework for examining SFR in long-term contractual services? How does the evolution of customer goals (i.e. from beneficiary and hierarchical level) influence these reactions?</li> <li>• Following repeated occurrences of SF in B2B relationships, what strategic actions can firms undertake to migrate the relationship from a negative/damaged to a positive state?</li> <li>• How do initially angry customers forgive a transgressing firm over time, and how do interactions with other customers and actors influence this process?</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** Continued

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
<i>Assumption 5:</i> Service failures impact individual customers	<i>Alternative Perspective 7:</i> Service crises and mega disruptions impacting society at large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers react to large-scale service failures (e.g. system-wide outages or data breaches)? How do social dynamics emerging from their sociocultural context shape and amplify these reactions?</li> <li>• What is the impact of large-scale service crises (e.g. service outages and data breaches) on a firm's financial and market performance (e.g. brand metrics, customer sentiments)?</li> <li>• How can firms manage large-scale service crises that attract significant media and public attention?</li> <li>• How do customers assess and attribute blame for SF caused by mega-disruptions (e.g. pandemics, adverse weather events, geopolitical conflicts)?</li> <li>• What strategies are most effective for organisations in mitigating negative customer reactions to widespread service disruptions caused by external factors?</li> <li>• What role do misinformation and disinformation play in amplifying public reactions during service mega-disruptions, and how can firms counteract these effects?</li> <li>• How are SFs evaluated in a collective context (e.g. B2B, B2G, family)? How do the heterogeneous goals, perceptions and interactions among group members shape their evaluation of the negative event, recovery expectations, and subsequent customer outcomes?</li> </ul>
<i>Assumption 6:</i> Service failures stem from process and outcome deficiencies	<p><i>Alternative Perspective 8:</i> Failures stem from moral transgressions</p> <p><i>Alternative Perspective 9:</i> Failures stem from polarization and wokeism in the marketplace</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the various types of moral transgressions that occur in the marketplace?</li> <li>• What are the reactions and psychological processes of customers experiencing moral transgressions? How do these reactions vary depending on the nature of the transgression, company and customer-related factors?</li> <li>• How do customers respond to price gouging, skimpflation, skimpflation and tipping prompts? How can firms implement operational efficiency measures without arousing customer resentment?</li> <li>• What are woke brands? In an increasingly polarized world, how do brands win over those who do not align with their political views and values while keeping those who support them?</li> <li>• Why do business customers boycott other organisations? How do a business's own customers react to such actions?</li> <li>• What are the implications for a firm when it is cancelled, particularly in terms of its market position, stakeholder relationships, and long-term sustainability?</li> <li>• How can firms/brands effectively navigate and mitigate the negative consequences of being cancelled?</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 3.** Continued

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
<i>Assumption 7:</i> The service provider is the primary transgressor	<i>Alternative Perspective 10:</i> Any actor in a service delivery network can be the transgressor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers attribute failure responsibility when the service is delivered through an SDN (e.g. digital platforms, healthcare networks, franchise models, outsourced services)?</li> <li>• How could firms in the SDN independently or collaboratively engage in SR?</li> <li>• What expectations do users/consumers have from platform-based entities (eg. marketplaces and social media networks) in regulating harmful content?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 11:</i> Customers can be the transgressor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customer and firm transgressions impact the participation of platform partners in SDNs?</li> <li>• What types of uncivil behaviours do customers encounter in offline and digital service environments? Can a taxonomy be developed to categorise these behaviours?</li> <li>• How do observing customers react to customer incivility directed at service firms and FLEs (e.g. sabotage, theft and verbal abuse) and what roles do they assume in these situations? Do they ever side with the uncivil customer?</li> <li>• What expectations do affected customers have from the FLEs and firms in response to customer incivility?</li> <li>• How does customer incivility, whether directed at focal customers or the provider, affect their future engagement with the firm?</li> <li>• How can firms encourage continued patronage from customers who have witnessed or experienced customer incivility?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 12:</i> Firms can be fraudulently framed for transgressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers reevaluate their relationship with a focal firm that has been framed by fraud (e.g. impersonation, fake advertisement, disinformation)?</li> <li>• How should organisations identify and respond to fake reviews on online marketplaces and review sites?</li> <li>• How do organisations successfully navigate recovery and rebuild customer confidence after being falsely implicated through disinformation and fake reviews?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 13:</i> Firms can be affected by spillover effects from others' transgressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do customers transfer negative associations related to a transgressing entity to other entities?</li> <li>• How can organisations counteract negative evaluations resulting from spillover effects from transgressions by suppliers, employees, technology, other customers, platform users and country of origin?</li> </ul>
<i>(continued)</i>		



**Table 3.** Continued

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
<i>Assumption 8:</i> Service recovery is what firms do and intend to do	<i>Alternative Perspective 14:</i> Recovery mechanisms can take many forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does customer-initiated SR look like? Should firms encourage customers to engage in DIY recovery? If so, when, and how should they facilitate customer recovery?</li> <li>• How do customers update their relationships with transgressing firms when the recovery was self-initiated or facilitated by a third actor (e.g. competitor)?</li> <li>• What coping and self-healing strategies (e.g. forgiveness, dissociation, and escapism) do customers use to overcome negative thoughts and feelings resulting from marketplace transgressions? What roles do firms play in encouraging customers to adopt these positive reactions?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 15:</i> Firms are sometimes unwilling to engage in service recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do customers react when firms intentionally neglect or refuse to address their complaints? What strategies do customers use to obtain restitution when firms deliberately refuse to engage in SR?</li> <li>• Why do some firms refuse to engage in SR despite facing the risk of significant reputational damage?</li> <li>• How do affected customers and other observers respond when transgressing firms seek to silence them (e.g. threatening lawsuits, non-disclosure agreements)?</li> </ul>
<i>Assumption 9:</i> Service recovery is necessary and inherently beneficial	<i>Alternative Perspective 16:</i> Service recovery can be difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What organisational responses can firms adopt when faced with situations where traditional SR is not possible (e.g. healthcare, investment, data breach)?</li> <li>• How do firms manage customer expectations when SR is constrained by external factors beyond their control?</li> <li>• What strategies are most effective for firms when addressing unrealistic SR expectations of difficult customers?</li> </ul>
	<i>Alternative Perspective 17:</i> Service recovery may not benefit the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it worthwhile for businesses to invest in recovering long-lost and difficult customers, and what are the psychological implications of such recovery efforts on FLEs?</li> <li>• Under what specific conditions can SR become counterproductive for organisations? When should firms persist in recovering such customers, and when is it more beneficial to abandon these efforts?</li> <li>• What strategies can firms adopt to manage customer complaints cost-effectively, while minimising the negative impact on customer loyalty and brand equity?</li> </ul>

*(continued)*

Table 3. Continued

Assumptions	Alternative perspectives	Research questions
<i>Assumption 10:</i> The objective of service recovery is to restore customer satisfaction	<i>Alternative Perspective 18:</i> The objective of service recovery can be process recovery  <i>Alternative Perspective 19:</i> The objective of service recovery can be employee recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How can organisations leverage SF data obtained through digital technologies (e.g. AI and machine learning, IoT, digital twins) to drive process recovery and continuous improvement?</li><li>• How can organisations more effectively communicate process recovery efforts to customers in a way that counters scepticism and anti-business sentiment?</li><li>• What is the impact of process recovery on both employee and customer recovery, and how does it ultimately influence firm performance?</li><li>• What competency-building initiatives should firms prioritise to better equip FLEs for managing SFs?</li><li>• How can emerging technologies (e.g. wearable robotics, predictive analytics, AI) that enhance cognitive and emotional capabilities better support FLEs during SFs?</li><li>• What are effective organisational interventions that can help FLEs manage the emotional toll of SFs?</li><li>• What roles do FLEs play in process recovery, and how can organisations better set them up to effectively contribute to this process?</li></ul>
<b>Note(s):</b> SFR: Service failure and recovery, SF: Service failures, SR: Service recovery <b>Source(s):</b> Developed by the authors		

in prior SFR reviews. Instead, we summarise key methodological recommendations from prior SFR reviews in [Web Appendix C](#). Our general recommendation is that, as with the field's assumptions, SFR researchers move beyond these default methodological choices to generate more impactful research. In fact, it may be imperative for researchers to consider alternative methodological strategies to better address the boundary-breaking opportunities discussed in this article. We also offer some reflections on the field's motivations behind conducting SFR research (i.e. why we study SFR). Since its inception, SFR has been a managerially oriented field, addressing real-world problems and informing managerial thinking and actions. We strongly advocate for the SFR field to preserve this managerial focus. However, to do so, it must stay up to date with emerging marketplace conflicts and avoid being bound by traditional ways of framing SFR. Finally, given SFR's wide-reaching impact today, we must generate insights for a broader range of stakeholders beyond managers, including governments, non-governmental organisations, consumer rights groups, the media, and society at large.

### Conclusion

After decades of prolific growth, the SFR field has reached maturity and now may be at a crossroads. Despite its maturity, we argue the field has potential for renewed growth. Customer-firm conflicts are inevitable, and newer conflicts, contexts, and methods offer opportunities to generate additional knowledge. With this in mind, this paper identifies boundary-breaking opportunities to reinvigorate SFR research. Our paper makes several contributions to the academic literature. First, we critically evaluate some of the foundational assumptions of SFR and highlight their limitations. By bringing these previously implicit assumptions to light, we aim to spark dialogue that encourages rethinking SFR and exploring new avenues for its development. Second, we offer alternative frames of reference that capture what extant views fail to accommodate given evolving marketplace conflicts. Third, within these alternative perspectives, we identify promising areas for future research. Through a recommendation frequency matrix, we highlight future research directions with broad consensus, areas briefly mentioned but with strong potential, and entirely new opportunities. This is the first SFR review to systematically highlight the frequency of recommendations across studies, providing a valuable tool to identify trends, gaps, and patterns in the literature. Fourth, to the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first in the service literature to adopt a review-of-reviews approach, offering a novel method to assess and further the field's development. Finally, we discuss the SFR field's default methodological choices and suggest ways to conduct more impactful research that can influence broader stakeholders.

Our research has several limitations. Our analysis and recommendations are based on SFR reviews, along with recent articles drawn from twelve marketing and service journals. While we acknowledge the contributions of related disciplines such as hospitality, tourism, and operations to this literature, we do not delve into these areas in this review. This limitation may be somewhat mitigated by our review-of-reviews approach, which focuses on review papers offering multidisciplinary coverage. Similarly, while we aimed to capture a broad range of conflicts relevant to our assumptions and alternative perspectives, this paper does not encompass all types of negative events that can occur in the marketplace. Despite these limitations, we believe that this paper will offer SFR researchers a clearer direction for future research. We are confident that expanding the boundaries of SFR will provide the impetus for a stronger growth trajectory for the field.

### Notes

1. We cover articles published in eight marketing journals (*Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *International Journal of Review in Marketing*) and four service journals (*Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Service Management*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*).

2. In Alternative Perspective 1, we focus on “where” service failures occur, recommending the exploration of nontraditional contexts beyond typical service encounters. In contrast, Alternative Perspective 7 emphasises the “scale” and “consequences” of large-scale service failures and macro-level events that impact entire populations or ecosystems.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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