

TOO LATE TO APOLOGISE?

THE EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL STRATEGIES IN REPLIES TO COMPLAINTS ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract

Due to the Internet in general and social media in particular, the importance of satisfying service recoveries has never been so high. Therefore, the effects of service recovery strategies have been subject to increased academic scrutiny. Yet, the linguistic realization of those strategies is still understudied. This study examines the effects of the formulation of four different response strategies, namely personalization, formality, apology and empathy, on customer outcomes in Dutch replies to support-seeking complaints on Facebook. A scenario was created based on a selection of existing response procedures, in which the response of the fictitious company Shop.com was manipulated nine times. The effects of these manipulations were examined by means of a questionnaire, which was set up and distributed using the programme Qualtrics. No significant effects on customer outcomes were found. Still, some interesting patterns could be noticed. Not mentioning the customer's and employee's name in the salutation versus mentioning them, and expressing empathy versus offering an apology were perceived as less genuine, and increased the respondents' propensity to tell their friends about their experience. The significant effects regarding the company's authenticity seem to support Manika et al.'s (2017) suggestion that trustworthiness is more important in complaint handling on social media than satisfaction is. Still, further research should examine the impact of trust in an online context in more detail. (220 words)

1 INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the Internet and social media in particular, companies and customers can connect, interact and build relationships with each other more easily than they used to (Gretry et al., 2017). Still, this means customers can express their dissatisfaction with a service or product more easily as well. These negative reviews or complaints then get a chance to be seen by thousands or millions of people, which may have an impact on the evolution of firms and their size distribution (Heyes & Kapur, 2012). Consequently, it is of major importance for firms to handle complaints in an efficient way, so that they can restore customer satisfaction and even win over other consumers.

The effects of several complaint-handling strategies have been subject to increased academic scrutiny. Both Ohrsinger et al. (2010), and Gelbrich and Roschk (2011) provide a meta-analysis of satisfaction with complaint-handling in services with a focus on justice dimensions. The impact of interactional justice –while subject to debate regarding its actual strength compared to distributive and procedural justice – cannot be denied. Therefore, it is worth examining what the effect of the linguistic realisation of customer-oriented moves on interactional justice and by implication on satisfaction with complaint handling is.

Furthermore, most of the studies focus on how to respond to e-mails or online reviews (Strauss & Hill, 2001; Zhang & Vasquez, 2014; Bonfanti et al., 2016). However, few studies concentrate on complaint handling on social media (Gretry et al., 2017; Manika et al., 2017). Since this kind of communication lacks nonverbal cues and provides a more informal context, it is particularly interesting to examine the effects of different formulations of interpersonal strategies on Facebook.

This study was designed to evaluate the impact of the linguistic realizations of empathy, apology, level of personalization, and level of formality in Dutch replies to support-seeking complaints on Facebook. Firstly, the motivation and aim of this study will be explained in more detail. Secondly, a literature review of significant studies will be given. Thirdly, the methodology of this study will be clarified. In summary, a company response to a complaint was manipulated in nine different ways in order to examine which formulations had which effects on customer outcomes, and these effects were measured by means of a questionnaire. Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare the differences between the respondents' perceptions, which will be presented in the chapter "Results". These results will

then be discussed in chapter 7, after which more information about the study's limitations will be given. A conclusion will finish this study.

This study is set up in order to answer the following questions:

- Do the interpersonal strategies apology and empathy have the same effects on customer outcomes?
- Do the different linguistic realizations of apology yield the same results?
- Does the level of personalization and formality have an effect on customer outcomes?

2 MOTIVATION AND AIMS

Many studies have already been conducted on companies' service recovery processes and on how customers evaluate the service recovery efforts of the organization. Yet, because all customers are different and there are a lot of context variables which should be taken into account, there is not just one generic solution for complaint management that satisfies all customers. Researchers have still not been able to fully understand how customers evaluate service recovery efforts and what drives their evaluations (Van Vaerenbergh & Ohrsinger, 2016). Therefore, further research is necessary to contribute to the current literature and provide insights on how complaints should be handled in order to improve customer outcomes. With the rise of the Internet in general and social media in particular, the importance of satisfying service recoveries has never been so high. Satisfied and dissatisfied customers can make or break a product in online reviews which may be read by millions of people (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). Furthermore, instead of engaging in one-to-one complaint communication with one of the company's employees, customers increasingly complain on social media to and with other customers and consumers. As a consequence, the service recovery process is publicly accessible and can cause others to evaluate the company negatively, not only based on the complaint itself, but also on the way it has been handled. In view of the large coverage and the possible impact of online complaining via social media, more research is needed to investigate those complaint management strategies that work best in online environments. One of the areas companies struggle with is that of striking the right tone in online complaint replies. On the one hand, they have to engage in face repair of the customers and themselves which requires diplomacy and tact while on the other hand they have to do so in an environment that is primarily characterised by informal language. Finding the right balance between deference and conviviality is no mean feat in such circumstances, as also observed in Gretry et al. (2017), who suggest that the operationalization of an informal communication style versus a formal communication style should be examined more thoroughly.

The aim of this study is to examine if and how the linguistic realization of empathy, apology and personalized messaging in company replies to complaints on Facebook affects customer outcomes. First, we will examine whether showing empathy or expressing apologies have different effects on customer outcomes. Secondly, we will examine to what extent the use of first name address forms in salutations or as end vocatives have an impact on customer

outcomes. Lastly, the impact of different levels of formality will be investigated. As such, we hope to be able to provide guidelines regarding the effectiveness of degrees of personalisation, degrees of formality and expressions of empathy or regret to companies that engage in online communication on Facebook.

3 STATE OF THE ART

3.1 Complaint management 2.0

As Hart et al. already stated in 1990, “mistakes are an inevitable part of every service activity” (p. 148). No company can prevent them from happening, as hard as they might try. However, what they can do, is offer an excellent service recovery process. Grönroos (1990) defined service recovery processes as “actions in which a firm engages to address a customer complaint regarding a perceived service failure” (p. 5). A complaint is defined as “a statement that something is unsatisfactory or unacceptable” (Oxford University Press, 2017). The company’s recovery efforts involve social exchanges between customer and service provider, which affect satisfaction (Wirtz & Matilla, 2004), and consequently customer loyalty and word of mouth, which are explained in more detail below. During the last few years, the effects of service recovery have been subject to increased academic scrutiny. As a result, the literature is rich in synonyms for the customer’s evaluation of how well a service company has handled a problem. Ohrsinger et al. (2010) call this concept SATCOM (satisfaction with complaint handling), Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) use the term satisfaction with service recovery and Harris et al. (2006) refer to satisfaction with the remedy. According to Gruber (2011, p. 86), “complaint satisfaction is the result of a subjective evaluation process” during which customers will compare their expectations regarding the company’s complaint handling activities with their perceptions. As a consequence, they will be satisfied if the complaint handling experience exceeds their expectations, and dissatisfied if the company fails to meet their expectations. Furthermore, customers will be neither satisfied nor dissatisfied if their perceptions equal their expectations. According to McCollough and Bharadwaj (1992), an excellent complaint handling experience can induce “service recovery paradox”, which means that customers perceive a higher level of satisfaction after experiencing a service failure than those who did not experience a failure at all. However, if customers are not satisfied with the company’s service recovery process, they might engage in negative word of mouth, change providers, or both. Therefore, it has always been important for companies to handle complaints in an efficient way.

In the current day and age, however, managing complaints efficiently has become a huge challenge. Due to Web 2.0, customers can voice complaints on social network sites, brand

communities, review sites or blogs (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) instead of relying on one-to-one communication. According to van Noort and Willemsen (2011), these online complaints have a negative effect on consumers' evaluations of companies to which the complaints are addressed. In addition, negative electronic word of mouth (NWOM) affects all phases of the consumer decision-making process, which includes brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behaviour and brand loyalty (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chiou & Cheng, 2003; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Furthermore, negative reviews affect decision-making more than positive ones (Min, 2015), they are viewed more, and perceived as more useful.

Due to the negative effects of online complaints and NWOM, companies have started to monitor and intervene in NWOM. These actions are referred to as webcare (Beukeboom et al., 2010). Webcare includes both responding to complaints (reactive webcare), and to NWOM without a request from a complainant to respond (proactive webcare) (van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). Yet, how companies should handle complaints in an online context in order to increase or restore customer satisfaction is still understudied. In the following paragraphs, the effects of the organization's response to complaints on customer satisfaction, and consequently loyalty and WOM will be explained.

3.2 Customer outcomes

3.2.1 Justice theory

Justice theory plays a major role in understanding how dissatisfied customers evaluate complaint responses (Gruber, 2011). According to this theory, complaining customers develop fairness perceptions by evaluating three dimensions: distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Distributive justice focuses on the perceived fairness of the redress offered to the customer in order to resolve the complaint (Blodgett et al., 1997). In other words, distributive justice is the perceived outcome of a decision or exchange (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Redress includes refunds, exchanges, repairs, discounts on future purchases, or some combination of these (Blodgett et al., 1997). Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the means of decision making and conflict resolution used by the organization (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Procedural justice involves the processes, policies and rules by which recovery effort decisions are made (Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999). Interactional justice focuses on the interactional treatment during the service recovery process. Apology, perceived

helpfulness, courtesy and empathy of the service staff in dealing with the recovery are typically associated with interactional fairness (Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). As mentioned above, the organizational response influences the customers' justice perceptions. Compensation is effective in restoring perceptions of distributive justice, while recovery speed affects procedural fairness perceptions (Blodgett et al., 1997; Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998). Finally, the presence or absence of an apology or empathy is strongly linked to customers' perceptions of interactional justice (Ohrsinger et al., 2010; Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Smith et al., 1999).

Past research has indicated that all three justice dimensions completely mediate the relationship between organizational responses and post-complaint satisfaction (Karande et al., 2007; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002). In a complaint-handling context, there are two types of satisfaction, namely transactional satisfaction and overall satisfaction. Transactional satisfaction or SATCOM is a transaction-specific form of satisfaction (Homburg & Fürst, 2005). According to Homburg and Fürst (2005), being satisfied with the complaint handling process increases the "stock" of overall satisfaction towards the firm. Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) define overall satisfaction, also known as cumulative satisfaction, as the customer's satisfaction with all prior exchanges, including the satisfaction from the most recent exchange. Overall satisfaction is cumulative in nature and consequently a long-term consequence of SATCOM (Ohrsinger et al., 2010). Yet, Gelbrich and Roschk (2011) argue overall satisfaction is directly influenced by justice perceptions rather than by SATCOM. These two path models are presented below:

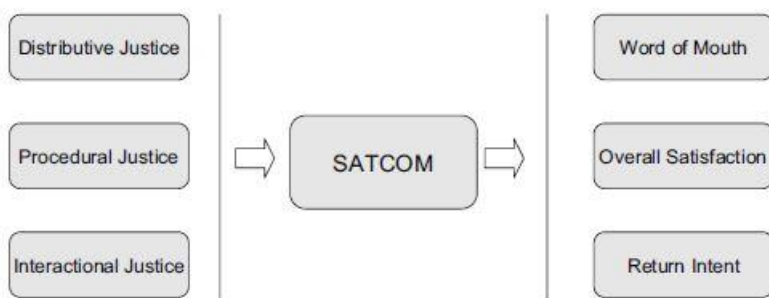


Figure 1 Meta-analytic framework by Ohrsinger, Valentini and de Angelis (2010)

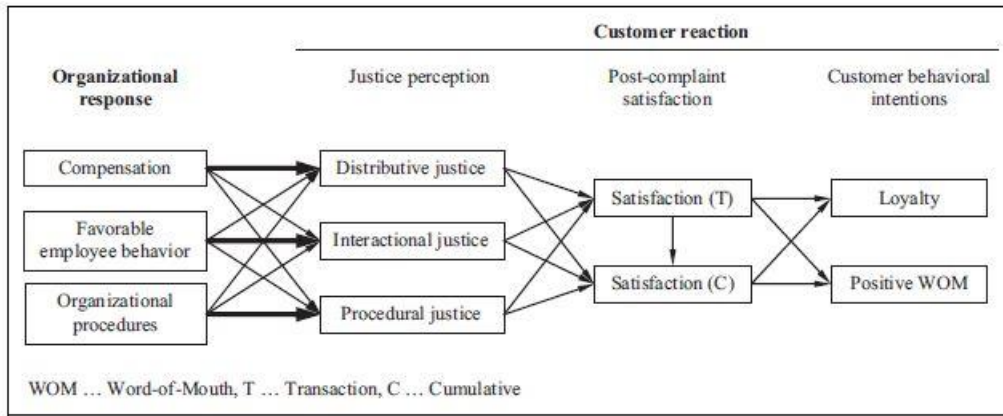


Figure 2 meta-analytic framework by Gelbrich and Roschk (2011)

Yet, the effect size of the justice dimensions on satisfaction fluctuates remarkably. Ohrsinger et al. (2010) found that distributive justice is the most strongly related to SATCOM, which underlines the central role of compensation in complaint handling. Interactional justice affects SATCOM to a lesser extent, followed by procedural justice, which only has a weak effect on SATCOM. However, according to Gelbrich and Roschk (2011), this is only true for transaction-specific satisfaction. They argue that cumulative satisfaction depends slightly more on interactional justice than on distributive justice. As a consequence, compensation does not play a salient role for cumulative satisfaction, whereas polite and friendly employee behaviour does. In addition, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) found that “offering compensation might not add value in situations where the recovery process is well-implemented” (p. 161). Furthermore, they concluded that compensation does not make up for a poor recovery effort. Lastly, they argued that offering compensation to the customer is expensive, whereas the economic costs of interactional justice are considerably smaller. In conclusion, research on the strength of interactional justice compared to distributive and procedural justice has yielded different results. Still, the impact of interactional justice cannot be denied. Therefore, it is worth examining how the linguistic realisation of customer-oriented moves affects interactional justice and by implication SATCOM. For this reason, this study will focus on interactional justice.

3.2.2 Word of mouth and return intent

A complainant can engage in two main behaviours based on the effect of the organizational response to the complaint on his or her SATCOM. Firstly, the complainant can decide whether or not to spread news about his or her disappointing experience and the service recovery attempt by the company, which is called word of mouth (WOM). WOM can be

either negative or positive. Secondly, the complainant can decide whether or not to repurchase the services he or she originally complained about, which is called return intent (Davidow, 2000).

Word of mouth has widely been documented by previous research. Maxham (2001) states that firms may restore customers' propensity to spread positive communications by ensuring satisfactory problem handling. If a company handles complaints effectively, this will not only reduce the customers' propensity to spread negative WOM, but increase the likelihood that customers will recommend the service to other people as well (Blodgett et al., 1997; Davidow, 2000; Maxham, 2001). Return intent is defined as the likelihood of making future purchases from a specific retailer (Holloway et al., 2005), and is typically associated with loyalty. According to Gelbrich and Roschk (2011), and Ohrsinger et al. (2010), and Maxham III and Netemeyer (2002), cumulative satisfaction is a stronger predictor of loyalty than transaction-specific satisfaction. This may be, because an overall assessment of all experiences with a company is more powerful in predicting customer loyalty (Fournier & Mick, 1999). On the other hand, WOM is mainly affected by transaction-specific satisfaction, which in turn is mainly affected by distributive justice (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002; Ohrsinger et al., 2010; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011).

Coombs and Holladay (2007) suggest that unhappy customers typically tell six to fifteen other people about their dissatisfaction. However, because of the Internet in general and social media in particular, consumers and other stakeholders have a wide variety of options to choose from when they want to express their opinions or spread information on organizations and their products (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). As a consequence, consumers can easily get access to unbiased product information from other consumers and their reviews get a chance to be seen by thousands or even millions. Yet, Einwiller and Steilen (2015) argue electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is a two-edged sword: both positive and negative feedback can be seen by many people, which may have significant impact on the evolution of firms and their size distribution. According to Heyes and Kapur (2012), especially large firms are more vulnerable to reputational damage through e-WOM, because "they are more likely to feature on freely accessible review websites, and their larger customer base may generate greater instances of complaints" (p. 825). People may read those blogs or posts long after the event happened. This way, the customer posting the message may no longer be dissatisfied or angry, but his or her angry words could still affect the purchase intentions of others (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). In

addition, the rise of social media has enabled companies to reach large audiences and their customers can comment on messages in a comfortable way. Instead of on one-way communication, the focus is now on two-way communication and social media are often regarded as more credible, dialogic, authentic and interactive (Schultz et al., 2011). As the effects of social media on recipients in complaint handling are still understudied, this study will focus on the effects of efficient complaint handling on Facebook.

3.3 Managing interactional justice

In those we will focus on the various ways in which interactional justice may be achieved and on the different linguistic ways in which attention to interactional justice may be realised.

3.3.1 Personalization

Personalization is a phenomenon worthy of attention. Interest in one-to-one marketing has grown and companies have started personalizing products, services, and communications to an unseen extent. Ball et al. (2006) define personalization as any creation or adaptation of a service to fit a customer's individual demands. According to their research, personalization of services enhances loyalty through several routes. Firstly, service personalization improves customer satisfaction, which is an antecedent of loyalty. Research by Carvajal et al. (2011) corroborates this result. Secondly, personalized services increase trust, because they encourage the customer to believe the company really cares, which, in its turn, is an antecedent of loyalty. Lastly, personalization directly affects loyalty, because personalized services are seen by customers as difficult to replace with another provider. These results are corroborated by research conducted by Gruber (2011), who found that complainants desire a personalised approach. In addition, Ball et al. (2006) found that a personalized relationship even compensates for a decline in brand image. Put differently, negative WOM has no influence on customers if they know the company personally.

Attentiveness can be seen as a component of personalization. Davidow (2000) found that attentiveness is the most important organizational response dimension, which affects both WOM likelihood and repurchase intentions. Attentiveness can be defined as the interaction

between the complainant and the company representative and involves respect and courtesy for the complainant (Bossone, 1994; Martin & Smart, 1994), a willingness to listen (Plymire, 1991; Whitely, 1994), empathy for the complainant's situation (Berry, 1995; Zemke, 1994), and extra effort of the representative. Due to the involvement of people rather than procedures, attentiveness is a complicated dimension. Davidow's (2000) research reinforces Mittal and Lassar's (1996) conclusion, namely that personalization in interactive encounters with customers is the most important determinant of customer satisfaction and return intent. Davidow (2000) concluded that it is not so much the compensation that is key, but the way the complaint is handled and what the company tends to do about it. Yet, attentiveness does not have a significant effect on WOM valence.

The use of conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment can be linked to personalization. Searls and Weinberger (2000) found that the human voice of the people who form the organization is of paramount importance to online communication. During complaint handling, many people speak for a particular company in many different ways. However, by allowing multiple voices from within an organization to get involved in online communication with the public, communication becomes more effective and adaptation more efficient (Searls & Weinberger, 2000). Conversational human voice is typically approached as a set of dispositions, namely welcoming conversational communication, treating others as human, being open to dialogue, and providing prompt feedback (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Zhang, 2014). Yet, the channel via which people communicate with each other is important as well. Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) examined the impact of blogs on relationships during organizational crises and found that conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment were top factors in explaining variance in relational maintenance strategies. In addition, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) concluded that blogs were more effective than control conditions in "lowering in participants' perceptions of the severity of an organizational crisis" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). Digital media offers companies the opportunity to interact with their customers in a humanized or conversational way. Blogs, but communication on Twitter or Facebook as well, typically approach a set of dispositions, namely treating others as human, providing prompt feedback, being open to dialogue, and so on. Yet, because conversational human voice is a construct which consists of many variables, research tends to overlook some of them. One of the crucial and yet neglected aspects is that of the strategic use of language in the realisation of conversational human voice. Gruber (2011) has therefore conducted research

with a focus on obvious linguistic features such as proper names and first-person pronouns. He found that the contact employees' authenticity, competence and active listening skills are the most important attributes for complaining customers. Gruber's (2011) study was based on 40 respondents with real-life complaining experience. Therefore, Gruber (2011) suggests that further research should focus on customers who complain on the web. This type of complaining lacks nonverbal communication cues and can consequently generate other results. Furthermore, Kelleher and Miller (2006) and Kelleher (2009) found that communicated relational commitment and conversational human voice correlate positively with trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment. Trust can be defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 19). Satisfaction as "[t]he extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 20), control mutuality as "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 19) and lastly, commitment as "the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 20).

Still, personalization is a very vague concept. It involves an adaptation of services, showing respect, being courteous, and showing a willingness to listen. Furthermore, the concept personalization depends on many variables such as context and the employee's abilities. As a consequence, it is difficult to define how personalized a company's response to a complaint should be in order to satisfy the customer's expectations and what this personalization entails. Furthermore, the linguistic realisation of personalization has not been looked into in great detail. This study will examine the effects of mentioning the customer's and employee's name in the salutation, which will be discussed in further detail in section 5.

3.3.2 *Apology*

Several studies have been conducted regarding the importance and effects of including an apology in company responses to complaints. Davidow (2003) defines apology as an acknowledgement by the organization of the complainants' distress, which resembles a psychological compensation. According to Liao (2007), by making an apology to the customer, the organization accepts the responsibility for the service failure and shows regret for what happened. According to Tax et al. (1998), apology helps to restore social equity and

redistribute esteem, because it is an intangible response outcome which compensates loss of face and threat of self-esteem. As a consequence, several researchers consider apology as a form of compensation (Davidow, 2000; Hess, Ganesan & Klein, 2003; Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). According to Estelami (2000), compensation is the primary reason for a complaint. As compensation is a form of distributive justice, which is the justice dimension which is most strongly related to SATCOM, apology is supposed to have a positive effect on customer outcomes. Yet, the effects of apology yield mixed results. While some studies found no relationship (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015), others found a negative relationship (Davidow, 2000). Yet, the majority of the researchers found a positive relationship (Smith et al., 1999; Mattila & Wirtz, 2004; Liao, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Gruber, 2011).

Liao (2007) found that offering an apology affects customer satisfaction with service recovery positively through the mediation of customer-perceived justice. This result corroborates research by Seiders and Berry (1998), Smith et al. (1999), and Mattila and Wirtz (2004), who found that apologies are positively associated with customer's fairness perceptions and interactional fairness in particular. Mattila and Wirtz (2004) even concluded that compensation may not enhance satisfaction when the recovery process consists of an immediate response combined with an apology. In addition, Davidow (2000) found that apology affects WOM valence positively, whereas it affects repurchase intention negatively. He argues that complainants could not make a distinction between a complete apology (where the company takes the blame) and a blameless apology. Gruber (2011) concluded that employees should genuinely apologise for the problem. As a consequence, credibility is of high importance and an incredible apology by the company may therefore lead to a negative outcome. Furthermore, Coombs and Holladay (2007) argue that automatically using a full apology and compensation should be avoided, because overreactions can have a boomerang effect. Customers may think the problem is much worse, due to the heavy reaction of the company. In addition, offering an apology is an expensive measure, because the company opens itself to lawsuits and financial loss by accepting responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Consequently, the apology by the organization can be used as evidence in court to win lawsuits against the company. Still, the company should apologize when it knows it is at fault. Davidow (2002) suggests that further research should be conducted in order to investigate the benefits and pitfalls of offering apologies. Fuchs-Burnett (2002) argues that corporations should analyse the social context in which the apology takes place, and the relative status,

interests, resources and moral assumptions of the consumers, before uttering the apology. According to Kerkhof et al. (2011), the choice of medium for communicating crisis response messages has an impact on consumer outcomes. Online videos, for example, are found to be more persuasive than online text for conveying service failure apologies (Elliot et al., 2009). Social media varies in richness and self-disclosure (Manika et al., 2017). For example, YouTube has low self-disclosure and medium media richness. Consequently, YouTube serves as a good communication channel for official statements, because it is not too media rich and leaves authority for the organization (Venäläinen, 2014). In addition, the persuasiveness of service failure apologies is affected by the medium. Manika et al. (2017) argue that trustworthy and expert spokespersons should communicate the apology message, since trustworthiness may be more important than satisfaction in a social media context.

Furthermore - and particularly relevant for this study - the way an apology is formulated is of importance. Patel and Reinsch (2003), and Robbennolt (2003) argue that there are two types of apologies: a simple apology, which is an expression of sympathy without acceptance of responsibility, and an apology with an explicit statement of accepting responsibility. “I am sorry you are hurt” is an example of the former and “I am sorry that I hurt you” of the latter. In addition, Lazare (2004) suggests that consumers perceive the words “we are sorry” and “we apologize” differently regarding the acceptance of responsibility by the firm. In addition, “we are sorry” can be viewed as an apology or an expression of sympathy depending on the context (Schlenker, 1980). Pace et al., (2010) found that an apology should be accompanied by an explicit statement of accepting responsibility to protect the company’s reputation in a crisis context. These results indicate how the wording of the message can have different effects on customer outcomes. As a consequence, different effects across studies of apology on customer outcomes may be due to different perceptions generated by different wording. Pace et al. (2010) argue that further research on the impact of wording should be conducted.

3.3.3 *Empathy*

As mentioned above, interactional justice positively affects customer satisfaction (Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Empathy is one possible manifestation of an interactional justice construct (Simon, 2013). Preston and de Waal (2002, p. 4) define empathy as “any process where the intended perception of the object’s state generates a state

in the subject that is more applicable to the object's state or situation than to the subject's own prior state or situation." Empathy is uttered by expressing apprehensiveness for the welfare of others, which results in altruistic behaviour (Batson, 1991; Buchheimer, 1963). Yet, since empathy is a multidimensional construct which includes both emotional dimensions, such as empathic concern and emotional contagion, and a cognitive dimension, namely perspective taking (Wieseke et al., 2012), the effects of empathy on customer satisfaction highly depend on the employee's ability to sense and react to a customer's feelings, experiences and thoughts during service interaction (Castleberry & Shepherd, 1993). Min (2015) argues that the customers' dissatisfaction and anger can be eased by showing sympathy and expressing that the company understands their anger and frustration, whereas responses without empathy sound automatic and generic. In addition, Hodgson and Wertheim (2007) argue that empathy is capable of lessening dissatisfying experiences in social interactions. By expressing empathy, the company's representative shows he or she may feel the same way after experiencing a dissatisfying service (Min, 2015). Yet, Wieseke et al. (2012) argue that next to employee empathy, customer empathy is of importance as well. Customer empathy refers to the customer's ability to take the employee's perspective and understand his or her feelings and experiences. Wieseke et al. (2012) term this process as "forgiveness". Thompson et al. (2005) define forgiveness as the tendency of people to start releasing negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours towards the wrong-doer, and transforming them into positive thoughts, emotions and behaviours. According to Macaskill et al. (2002), and Worthington and Wade (1999), empathy is a necessary condition before forgiveness can take place. In addition, empathy has been found to predict the tendency to forgive others in a number of studies (Konstam et al., 2001; Paleari et al., 2005). Zechmeister and Romero (2002) argue that cognitive perspective taking is the most important form of empathy. Cognitive perspective taking refers to the fact that the customer is able to take the company's viewpoint and consider what might have motivated the company's actions. This process enables the customer to become more able to forgive the wrong-doer. Furthermore, Wieseke et al. (2012) found positive relationships between customer empathy and customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and employee empathy and customer loyalty. These results corroborate previous research (Min, 2015). According to Aggerwal (2005), customers found employees with higher empathy more trustworthy, and were therefore more satisfied. Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggest respondents foster similar reactions to sympathy, compensation, and apology response strategies in a crisis situation. However, most research is confined to

face-to-face channels, where non-verbal communication can help to express empathy. The validity and effectiveness of empathy should therefore be tested in an online context as well.

3.3.4 Level of formality

In general, most complaint handling research focuses on e-mails or online reviews (Strauss & Hill, 2001; Zhang & Vasquez, 2014; Bonfanti et al., 2016). These types of communication are more formal. As a consequence, they typically consist of a selection of moves. Zhang and Vasquez (2014) argued that online reviews resemble the structure of a traditional business letter. They found a typical sequence of moves that occurs in many hotel responses to negative reviews, namely: opening pleasantries, gratitude, apology, feedback to the complaint, invitation for a second visit, solicit response and closing pleasantries. Research by Ascaniis et al. (2015) corroborates these results. Yet, solicit responses did not dominate in their analysis.

However, this study focuses on complaint handling on Facebook, a social medium on which unhappy customers can post their dissatisfaction with a company's service directly on the company's Facebook page. Because Facebook has 1.86 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2017), the consequences of an inefficient company response reach further than in one-to-one communication. Companies should therefore take complaint handling very seriously, and see it as an opportunity to win back complainants and win over observers of the interaction (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). According to Kerkhof et al. (2015), brands seem to employ an informal communication style on their social media. McArthur (1992) defines informal as familiar, casual, nonofficial, common, and often colloquial, which contrasts with formal. It can be argued, that an informal communication style and human conversational voice are very similar. Yet, an informal style does not necessarily mean that the communication partners treat each other as human and are open to dialog. Therefore, we consider conversational human voice and informal communication style as different. A formal style reflects written language, whereas an informal style is associated with spoken language (Biber, 1986). Gretry et al. (2017) argue that companies employ an informal communication style, because they assume it fosters consumer-brand relationships and conveys closeness. Therefore, they often refer to their customers by their first name, use abbreviated expressions and/or use emoticons. Delin (2005) argues that an informal style reduces social distance

between interlocutors and softens hierarchical relationships of power. As a consequence, informal communication is likely to foster trusting relationships. However, Gretry et al. (2017) found that using an informal communication style does not increase brand trust when the customer is unfamiliar with the brand. An inappropriate informal style even decreases trust in the brand. Yet, when the consumer is familiar with the brand, the use of an informal communication style increases brand trust.

3.3.5 Demographics

Demographics such as age and gender moderate the relationship between justice dimensions and customer outcomes as well (Roschk et al., 2013). According to Roschk et al. (2013), researchers should draw on developmental stages of adulthood when assessing age-related differences. They transferred the stages of adulthood employed by Levinson (1986) to the service recovery context. Four stages were identified with three five-year transition periods in between. These stages are: young adulthood (18-27 years), early adulthood (33-43 years), middle adulthood (49-57 years), and late adulthood (from 63 years onward). Regarding the three justice dimensions, Roschk et al. (2013) found that distributive justice has the greatest impact among middle adults. Put differently, distributive justice predicts post-complaint satisfaction for middle adults the strongest. With respect to procedural justice, Roschk et al. (2013) found that especially early adults value timely and flexible problem resolution processes, followed by young adults. The impact of interactional justice is the lowest for early adults. In conclusion, age has a non-linear effect on the relationship between justice dimensions and post-complaint satisfaction. However, regarding the likeliness to complain, different studies have yielded mixed results. Kowalski (1996) argues older individuals are more likely to complain, whereas Day and Landon (1977), and Singh (1990) found that young adults have a tendency to complain more than older ones. The latter can be explained by the changing context of people. As people age, they are likely to have more resources to address problems and can cope without complaining (Drewery, 2013). In addition, their perception of the utility of complaining might change with age (Kowalski, 1996). Respondents from 18 to 30 years participated in this study, they are all at the stage of young adulthood.

Gender is another variable which has an impact. Men and women perceive the different justice dimensions differently. Regarding distributive justice, Brockner and Adsit (1986) concluded that men tend to react more strongly than females to inequitable outcomes.

However, regarding procedural justice, Kulik et al. (1996) found that women appear to favour an outcome-oriented procedure rather than a procedure that favours social harmony. According to Kowalski (1993), women tend to complain more than men. Drewery (2013) argues that this might be due to their greater willingness to self-disclose information. Yet, Kolodinsky (1995) believes men complain more than women, because men tend to be more instrumental and women more expressive. Therefore, men would have a higher tendency to complain to the company about the service failure, whereas women would be more likely to spread negative WOM (Drewery, 2013). In addition, Hollandsworth and Wall (1977) found that men tend to be more assertive than women in a complaint handling context. Richins (1983) concluded that people who are more assertive are more likely to complain, which proves that men tend to complain more. In this study, both men and women participated and their perceptions of the company's response will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Personalization, formality, apology and empathy are factors which will be manipulated in this study. Additionally, the influence of age and gender on customer outcomes will be examined. Yet, these are not the only variables which affect customer outcomes. The following section will deal with additional variables which have an impact on customer satisfaction, and consequently customer loyalty and WOM as well.

3.4 Variables affecting customer outcomes

In the following paragraphs, several variables will be discussed which have an influence on customer outcomes. These will not be studied as independent variables in this study, though kept stable as much as possible. Firstly, different complaint types will be addressed. Secondly, the effects of facilitation will be discussed. Thirdly, the impact of timely responses will be addressed. Lastly, the effects of culture and service failure severity on customer outcomes will be discussed.

3.4.1 *Complaint type*

Customers react in a different way when they experience a service failure. Some customers may react rationally and switch supplier for purely “rational” reasons, namely because the perceived quality fails to match their pre-purchase expectations. Heyes and Kapur (2012) argue this is a cognitive process which corresponds to the notion of disconfirmation. Yet, emotional reactions due to bad service are generated as well. Chebat and Ben-Amor (2005) found that customers develop emotions such as anger, the emotion most loaded with energy, when they are dissatisfied. Anger is a hostile emotion which is linked with an urge to punish the wrong-doer (Heyes & Kapur, 2012). De Quervain et al. (2004) offer neurological evidence for this process. They argue that pleasure centres in the brain are activated when those are harmed, who previously acted selfishly in an experimental economic transaction.

In a complaint handling context, customers react to failure induced anger and frustration in different ways. They cope with their anger by confronting the company or by seeking support. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as the behavioural and/or cognitive efforts of individuals to manage situations that tax or exceed their resources. Confrontative coping refers to attacking the other party aggressively in order to get him or her to change his or her mind and to express negative emotions (Yi & Baumgartner, 2004). In a complaint handling context, confrontative coping is generally referred to as retaliatory behaviour (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). According to Bonifield and Cole (2007), Bougie et al. (2003) and Folkes et al. (1987) there are two types of retaliation, namely vindictive complaining and vindictive nWOM. Vindictive complaining is a direct and public act which refers to criticizing a company severely and forcing employees to change their minds. Vindictive nWOM is indirect and involves negative communication with others which aims to malign a company and advise others not to use its services (Bougie et al., 2003). Angry customers with high levels of helplessness tend to engage in vindictive nWOM, whereas angry customers with low levels of helplessness are likely to complain in an aggressive way.

Support-seeking coping is a typical reaction of frustrated customers who experience negative emotions which do not include external attribution such as anxiety or worry. (Frijda et al., 1989; Menon & Dubé, 2007; Yi & Baumgartner, 2004). These customers seek help to remedy the situation rather than blaming the organization and harming it (Menon & Dubé, 2007). Similar to vindictive coping, there are two types of support-seeking coping, namely support-seeking complaining and support-seeking nWOM. Support-seeking complaining means that

customers interact with the company after a service failure in order to resolve their problem (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). As a consequence, it is a constructive process between customer and company. Support-seeking nWOM means that customers spread information about their experience to others in their environment in order to receive empathy and understanding (Yi & Baumgartner, 2004; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). This study focuses on support-seeking coping, the same complaint was used in all cases.

3.4.2 Facilitation

Previous studies by Blodgett et al. (1995), and Kolodinsky (1992) have shown that facilitation has a significant impact on repurchase intentions. Facilitation can be described as the tools, policies, and procedures a company offers to support customer complaints (Davidow, 2000). As a consequence, facilitation enables the consumer to get a complaint heard, but does not guarantee a favourable outcome. A company should encourage customers to complain, because it enables the company to address the complaint and consequently increases the chance of retaining that customer. In contrast, assuming that noncomplaining customers are happy, decreases that chance (Spreng et al., 1995). In this study, complaint handling on Facebook, which guarantees a hassle-free complaint procedure, will be examined.

3.4.3 Timeliness

Many researchers have investigated the influence of timeliness on customer outcomes. Gelbrich and Roschk (2011) refer to the findings of Tax et al. (1998, p. 62), namely that the complaint procedure is considered fair when it is assumedly “easy to access, provides the complainant with some control over the disposition, is flexible, and is concluded in a convenient and timely manner”. Strauss and Hill (2001) found that e-mails which were received quickly, addressed the specific problem, and were signed with the company representative’s name affected satisfaction positively. In addition, research by Davidow (2000) corroborates this result. He found that response speed has a positive influence on repurchase intentions and satisfaction. In addition, it was found that response speed even decreases the amount of negative WOM. Furthermore, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) found that recovery speed interacts with apology on post-recovery satisfaction. An immediate response combined with an apology is highly effective, whereas offering an apology with a delayed

recovery is less powerful. In an online complaint handling context, timely responses are very important, because they cannot only resolve the complainant's issue, but stop the follow-up attacks by other consumers exposed to the public complaint as well (Hong & Lee, 2005). Furthermore, the results of Hong and Lee (2005) corroborate those of Davidow (2000), namely that response speed increases satisfaction, loyalty and WOM. The variable timeliness was kept stable across all the cases examined in this study.

3.4.4 Culture

Every customer is different and reacts in a different way to experiencing service problems. As a consequence, apologizing and showing sympathy may be an effective complaint handling strategy for one person, whereas another person will not be pleased with this process. These differences between people can partly be explained by cultural differences.

Hofstede (2016) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. He set up several dimensions, including power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance, which he uses to evaluate 50 countries and 3 regions. Power distance is the dimension which deals with the fact that all individuals in societies are unequal. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. Individualism addresses “the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members.” In individualist societies people rely on themselves and their direct family. Yet, in collectivist societies people are part of a group which takes care of them in exchange for loyalty. Uncertainty avoidance refers to “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these.” (<https://geert-hofstede.com>)

According to Hofstede (2016), Belgium scores high for power distance and very high for both individualism and uncertainty avoidance. This means that hierarchy is very important and the attitude towards people who are higher in rank is more formal. In addition, information is associated with power and therefore unequally distributed. Yet, because individualism is very important, individual and private opinions are favoured. In the work environment, it is important that the manager has personal contact with everyone in the structure, which gives

the impression that everyone is important. Still, rules and security are of paramount importance as well. Belgian people prefer planning everything so that stress is reduced. Furthermore, some level of expertise is favoured, as they desire an immediate and professional response in unclear situations (Reimann et al. 2008; Patterson et al. 2006).

Applied to a complaint handling context, Mattila and Patterson (2004) found that offering a compensation and an apology restores justice perceptions more effectively in America rather than in Malaysia and Thailand. This result suggests that the specific behaviour of the employees and offering compensation are more valued in individualistic than in collectivistic societies. This corroborates research conducted by Hui and Au (2001), who found that compensation had a stronger impact on Canadian customers (individualistic society) than on Chinese customers (collectivistic society). Furthermore, Ohrsinger et al. (2010) found that the relationship between interactional justice and satisfaction with complaint handling is higher in individualistic cultures. Yet, they found that the relationships between SATCOM and interactional and procedural justice were lower in high power distance cultures. The status of the employee may explain this result. Patterson et al. (2006) found that a high status of the employee has a positive effect on justice perceptions in high power distance cultures. Accordingly, the results of Ohrsinger et al. (2010) may indicate that a lower status of the employee affects the impact of interactional and procedural justice on SATCOM negatively in high power distance cultures. Ohrsinger et al.'s (2010) research indicates that uncertainty avoidance moderates the relationship between interactional and procedural justice and SATCOM. They found that the effect sizes are higher in uncertainty avoiding cultures. The variable "culture" was kept stable in this study, since only Flemish people participated.

3.4.5 Service failure severity

In order to ensure the integrity of the study results, service failure severity or service magnitude should be taken into account when discussing service failure and recovery (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1990; Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993; Webster & Sundaram, 1998). Weun et al. (2004) define service failure severity as a customer's perception of the service problem intensity. The more severe customers perceive the failure intensity, the greater the customer's perceived loss (Wang et al., 2011). Weun et al. (2004) concluded that service failure severity affects satisfaction, trust, commitment and negative WOM. Research by Wang et al. (2011) corroborates these results. They found that service failure severity has a negative

relationship with customer loyalty. In addition, Wang et al. (2011) found that interactional justice moderates the relationship between service failure severity and customer loyalty. Higher figures for interactional justice lead to a lower negative relationship between service failure severity and customer loyalty. The same scenario was used for all cases. As a consequence, the variable “service failure severity” did not affect customer outcomes differently across the cases.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

The objective of this study is to analyse the effects of the formulation of four interpersonal strategies, namely empathy, apology, formality and personalization, on customer outcomes in Dutch replies to support-seeking complaints on Facebook. A between-subject design was used, so that we could assess the effects of the different formulations on customer outcomes. Three cases were created in which four kinds of interpersonal strategies were manipulated in the responses of a company towards the customer. In addition to the three cases, six cases were created, which are examined in MA-papers by Eeckhout (forthcoming) and Vermeiren (forthcoming). Those cases will be discussed in more detail in section 4.4. The actual scenario was based on a selection of existing response procedures to ensure scenario realism. In our scenario, the customer asks for more information in order to resolve the situation, which is linguistically realized with the line: “Hoe komt dit?”. Furthermore, the cases were created in such way that the scenario layout completely resembled a real complaint on Facebook. Case 1 includes empathy and a personal approach, case 2 an apology and a personal approach, case 3 an apology and a less personal approach.



Figure 3 Case 1



Figure 4 Case 2



Figure 5 Case 3

The translation of the complaint situation is presented in the following paragraph:

“Kim Nijssen ordered some books on the online shopping company shop.com. However, she did not receive the extra gift she was supposed to get. Since Kim is entitled to get that present, she sends a message to shop.com on their public Facebook page. They send her an answer on the same day.”

The scenario realistically represents postings on Facebook by a well-known Dutch online shopping company. The three responses are formulated in an informal way. We used vocabulary as “hoi Kim” and “groetjes” to reflect the informal communication style. As studies by Gruber (2011) have already shown, conversational voice affects the customer outcomes positively. Following the example of Mattila and Patterson (2004), we opted for scenarios, because this method avoids the problem of intentionally imposing service failures on customers. In addition, the fictitious company name *Shop.com* was constructed in order to rule out confounding effects of pre-existing attitudes toward the organization, which is common in self-reports of service failures (Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999). According to Coombs (2007), an organization with a more favourable prior (pre-crisis) reputation will still have a stronger post-crisis reputation because it has more reputational capital to spend than an organization with an unfavourable or neutral prior

reputation. As a result, a favourable prior reputation means that an organization suffers less and rebounds more quickly. By using a fictitious company name, respondents are not influenced by the reputation of the company. Furthermore, the names mentioned in the scenario are gender neutral. As a consequence, gender cannot affect the customer outcomes. We did examine how male and female respondents perceived the different answers of Shop.com. Furthermore, we did not alter the time frame across the three cases, since we focus on interactional justice and not on procedural justice. Changing the time frame between the complaint was uttered and the company responded might have had confounding effects on customer outcomes. As mentioned in the state of the art, many researchers have already found a positive relationship between timely responses and customer outcomes (Davidow, 2000; Wirtz & Manilla, 2004; Hong & Lee, 2005). Respondents from 18 to 30 years participated, who were asked to mention their exact age in an additional question at the end of the survey. This age frame was opted for, because they are all at the stage of young adulthood. Moreover, we opted for respondents with Dutch as a mother tongue, since the scenario was based on a complaint published on the Facebook page of a well-known Dutch company. Each respondent was given a survey kit consisting of one of the three scenarios and a questionnaire, which will be discussed in more detail in the next paragraph.

4.2 Measures and constructs

The questionnaire consists of 41 questions and participants had to indicate their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree). In addition, participants had to indicate which characteristics they would attribute to the response of Shop.com on 7-point semantic differential scales. Furthermore, several manipulation checks were added at the end. Firstly, the respondent had to indicate how formal or impersonal the answer of the company was. Secondly, the respondent was asked whether or not the name of the customer was mentioned in the opening pleasantries and if the customer wanted to receive help. The latter was asked in order to make sure the respondents perceived the complaint as a support-seeking complaint. The questionnaire can be found in the appendix. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as the customer in one of the scenarios.

The questionnaire was set up in such way so that each dependent variable could be measured. The variables we investigated are: interactional justice, satisfaction with service recovery, repurchase intentions, favourable WOM intentions, WOM likelihood and valence, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity. We assessed interactional justice using seven questions, such as “de medewerk(st)er ging op een beleefde manier met me om”, based on Maxham and Netemeyer’s (2002) model. These questions allow us to measure how consumers perceive the employee’s effort, tone, friendliness, respect, courtesy and sympathy. Respondents indicated their satisfaction with the service recovery by answering three questions (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Furthermore, three questions were asked to analyse the repurchase intentions of the customers, based on research by Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). In addition, favourable WOM intentions were measured by asking three questions based on Maxham and Netemeyer’s (2002) study. Three questions employed by Schultz et al. (2011) were used to measure WOM valence and likelihood. Conversational human voice was measured by using five questions based on research by Kelleher (2009). Respondents indicated their perception of the efforts made by the company by answering three questions based on research by De Wulf et al. (2001). We added six questions which allowed us to assess the customers’ perceptions of the company’s professionalism and failure severity. Cronbach Alpha scores were calculated for each construct in order to measure the significance of the constructs. A total score for these constructs was formed by adding up the results of the responses to the different questions. Semantic differentials were added at the end of the survey in order to analyse which characteristics consumers relate to the different answers. Data was gathered by using the programme Qualtrics and by distributing surveys on the train. Following the example of Wieseke et al (2011), the influences of gender and age were controlled for. We used the non-parametric test Kruskal-Wallis in order to compare the results of the different scenarios with each other. Furthermore, in order to find out where the significant results were situated, we consulted the legacy dialogues and conducted Mann-Whitney U tests. We treat results with a p-score lower than 0.05 as significant in view of existing debate on the necessity of implementing Bonferonni in three-way comparisons.

4.3 Respondents

Flemish people aged between 18 and 30 were randomly assigned to one of the three cases. This age group was opted for, because these people are highly acquainted with Facebook and online shopping. In addition, since satisfaction for students is mainly driven by distributive justice (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011), it is interesting to investigate how interpersonal strategies can influence customer outcomes, so that distributive justice is of less importance. Roughly 40 people were assigned to each case and a total of 122 people participated in the experiment.

4.4 Additional cases examined by other MA-students

As previously mentioned, six additional cases were created to test the impact of the linguistic realization of interpersonal strategies on customer outcomes. These cases are examined in other Ma-papers by Vermeiren (forthcoming) and Eeckhout (forthcoming). The scenario of these cases is completely the same as discussed in section 4.1. The responses in these cases differ in degrees of personalization and formality. As can be seen below, the effects of the use of end vocatives will be investigated by Vermeiren (forthcoming) as well. All nine cases can be ranked on a scale from informal (1) to formal (9). An overview of the linguistic differences of all cases as well as their layout is provided below.

Case 1: Hoi Kim, wat een tegenvaller [...] Groetjes, Dominique

Case 2: Hoi Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes Dominique

Case 3: Hoi, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes

Case 4: Sorry hiervoor, Kim [...] Groetjes Dominique

Case 5: Dag Kim, sorry hiervoor [...] Groetjes Dominique

Case 6: Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor [...] Groeten

Case 7: Beste Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groeten, Dominique

Case 8: Beste, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet

Case 9: Onze excuses hiervoor [...]

 **Kim Nijssen** Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?
Vind ik leuk · Antwoorden · 12 oktober om 8:38 · Bewerkt

 **shop.com** Sorry hiervoor, Kim. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken die direct bij shop.com besteld zijn. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als je ons het bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt dan kijken we met je mee. Groetjes, Dominique

Figure 6 Case 4

 **Kim Nijssen** Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?
Vind ik leuk · Antwoorden · 12 oktober om 8:38 · Bewerkt

 **shop.com** Dag Kim, sorry hiervoor. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken die direct bij shop.com besteld zijn. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als je ons het bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt dan kijken we met je mee. Groetjes, Dominique

Figure 7 Case 5

 **Kim Nijssen** Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?
Vind ik leuk · Antwoorden · 12 oktober om 8:38 · Bewerkt

 **shop.com** Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als je ons het bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt dan kijken we met je mee. Groeten

Figure 8 case 6



Kim Nijssen Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 8:38 [Bewerkt](#)



shop.com Beste Kim, onze excuses hiervoor. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken die direct bij shop.com besteld zijn. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als u ons uw bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt, dan kijken we met u mee. Met vriendelijke groet, Dominique

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 18:27

Figure 9 case 7



Kim Nijssen Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 8:38 [Bewerkt](#)



shop.com Beste, onze excuses hiervoor. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken die direct bij shop.com besteld zijn. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als u ons uw bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt, dan kijken we met u mee. Met vriendelijke groet

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 18:27

Figure 10 case 8



Kim Nijssen Heb afgelopen weekend kinderboeken besteld, maar er zat geen kinderboekenweekgeschenk bij. Jammer. Hoe komt dit?

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 8:38 [Bewerkt](#)



shop.com Onze excuses hiervoor. Dit kan verschillende oorzaken hebben. Het kinderboekenweekgeschenk wordt automatisch meegestuurd bij bestellingen van minimaal €10.00 aan jeugd- en kinderboeken die direct bij shop.com besteld zijn. Bij boeken die worden geleverd door externe verkopers wordt het geschenk niet automatisch meegestuurd. Als u ons uw bestelnummer in een privébericht stuurt, dan kijken we met u mee.

Vind ik leuk [Antwoorden](#) 12 oktober om 18:27

Figure 11 case 9

5 HYPOTHESES

As already mentioned in the state of the art, Coombs and Holladay (2008) found that respondents foster similar reactions to sympathy, compensation and apology response strategies in a crisis situation. Therefore, we suggest that empathy and apology response strategies to complaints on Facebook will foster similar reactions as well. The following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Case 1 (empathy) and 2 (apology) will foster similar effects on customer outcomes.

Furthermore, Ball et al. (2006), Carvajal et al. (2011), and Gruber (2011) found that personalization increases customer satisfaction. Since customer satisfaction is an antecedent of return intent, increased personalization has a positive effect on return intent as well. In scenario 1 and 2, the customer's name and employee's name were mentioned, whereas in scenario 3 this was not the case. Therefore, we expect to find significant differences for satisfaction and return intent between scenario 1 and 2, and scenario 3. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H2: Increased personalization in case 1 and 2 will affect satisfaction to a higher extent than case 3.

H3: The effect of case 1 and 2 on return intent will be bigger than that of case 3.

6 RESULTS

6.1 Manipulation checks

We added four manipulation checks to our questionnaire. First, respondents had to indicate their level of agreement with the following quotes: “The response of Shop.com is formal” and “The answer of Shop.com is impersonal”. However, no significant differences for these questions were found across the first three cases. This result suggests that the changes we made are too small in order to be perceived as different in terms of degrees of formality and impersonalisation by the respondents (see discussion for further comments). Yet, the level of agreement of the respondents with the statement “The employee mentioned my name in the salutation” did differ significantly between case 1 and 3, and case 2 and 3, confirming the manipulation we carried out. In addition, most of the respondents agreed with the statement “with this post I want to receive help”, confirming the nature of the helping-seeking complaint we took as the starting-point of our experiment.

6.2 Construct validity

We calculated the Cronbach Alpha scores for each construct to measure the consistency of the questions. Satisfaction with recovery ($\alpha = 0,835$), return intent ($\alpha = 0,876$), positive word of mouth ($\alpha = 0,883$), interactional justice ($\alpha = 0,943$), conversational human voice ($\alpha = 0,906$), professionalism ($\alpha = 0,937$), perceived relationship investment ($\alpha = 0,940$), and failure severity ($\alpha = 0,889$) yielded results higher than 0,7. As a consequence, we were able to calculate a total score for each construct and compare the different constructs with each other. Yet, the Cronbach Alpha for word-of-mouth likelihood and valence was lower than 0,7 ($\alpha = 0,386$). Consequently, we could not add up the results and treat the answers to the three questions as one construct. The low Cronbach Alpha score suggests that the three questions are too different from each other to treat them as one construct. In the first question, respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were to tell their friends about their experience. Secondly, they were asked how likely they were to post an online reaction to the post. Lastly, respondents had to indicate how negative or positive the tone of their online reaction would be. It seems that respondents perceive these three questions as different,

although they are all about WOM. Still, the nature of the questions is different. In the first two questions, the customer is asked to indicate his or her likeliness to spread WOM, whereas the third question relates to WOM valence. Consequently, if respondents are not satisfied with the company's answer they are very likely to spread WOM (7 on Likert scale), which will have a negative tone (1 on Likert scale). Therefore, we will discuss the different questions separately.

6.3 Impact of scenario 1, 2 and 3

Constructs	Significance (p-values)
Satisfaction	0,476
Return intent	0,648
Positive WOM	0,584
Interactional justice	0,975
Conversational human voice	0,668
Professionalism	0,297
Perceived relationship investment	0,519
Failure severity	0,554

Figure 12 Results Kruskal-Wallis tests for all constructs except for WOM likelihood and valence

When comparing the results for each construct in general (except for WOM valence and likelihood) across the first three cases, no significant effects were found. As a consequence, it can be argued that the different formulations of the company response have no significant impact on interactional justice, satisfaction with service recovery, repurchase intentions, favourable WOM intentions, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity in our study. Consequently, an expression of empathy (in our case “wat een tegenvaller”) seems to have the same effect on customer outcomes as offering an apology (in our case “onze excuses hiervoor”). This result supports hypothesis 1, namely that case 1 and 2 foster similar reactions. Furthermore, regarding the level of personalization, mentioning the customer's first name in the opening pleasantries, and the employee's name in the closing pleasantries versus not mentioning them did not affect the dependent variables. This result does not support hypotheses 2 and 3, which stated that the higher level of personalization in case 1 and 2 would affect satisfaction and return intent to a higher extent than case 3.

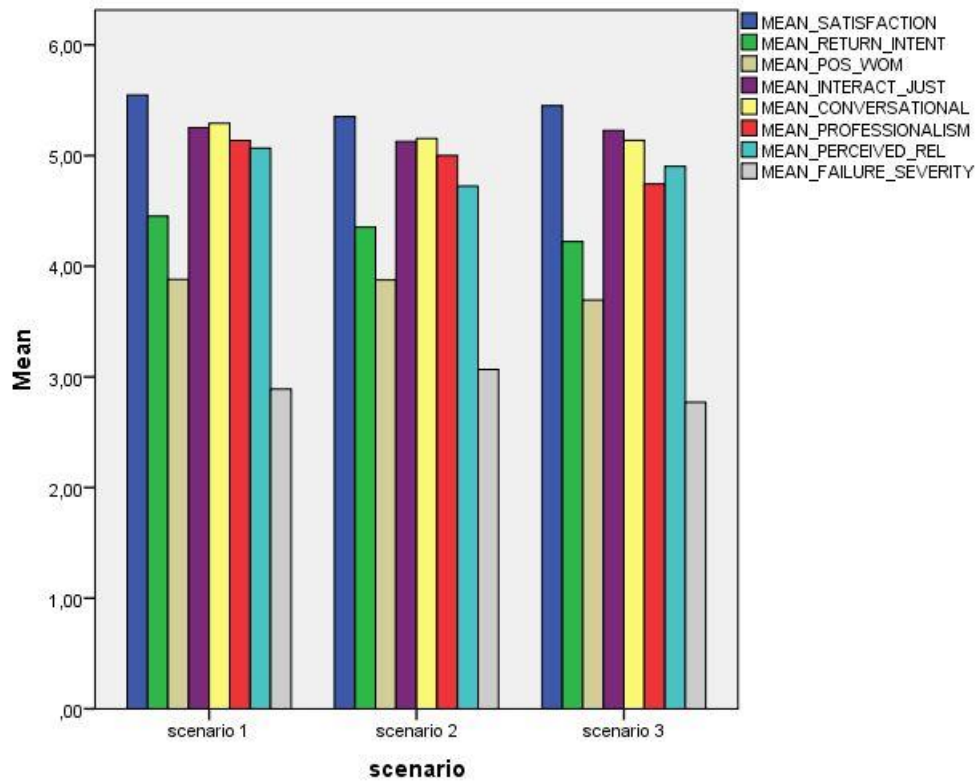


Figure 13 Mean results for the constructs satisfaction, return intent, positive WOM, interactional justice, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity

As previously mentioned, there were no significant differences between the cases for the different constructs. Still, it is interesting to analyse which values the customers attributed to the constructs. Respondents attributed scores between 5,35 and 5,55 to the construct satisfaction. Therefore, it can be argued that they seemed to be satisfied with Shop.com’s answer. Furthermore, the construct return intent yielded results between 4,22 and 4,45. These values are situated in the middle of the Likert scale, which indicates respondents had mixed feelings about returning to Shop.com. Additionally, respondents attributed values between 5,14 and 5,29 to the construct conversational human voice. This result suggests that the answer of Shop.com appears to be perceived as “human”, although Shop.com does not include the customer’s and employee’s name in case 3. Moreover, the construct professionalism yielded scores between 4,74 and 5,14. Consequently, the answer of Shop.com appears to be perceived as quite professional. Respondents attributed values between 4,72 and 5,07 to the construct perceived relationship investment, which suggests that respondents found Shop.com did an effort to improve the relationship with its customers, and cared about keeping them. Furthermore, the construct positive WOM yielded results between 3,69 and 3,88. This implies that respondents were not keen on spreading positive WOM. Moreover, the service failure was not perceived as severe, since respondents indicated values between 2,77

and 3,07 on the Likert scale. Additionally, respondents attributed scores between 5,11 and 5,26 to the construct interactional justice.

Statements	Significance (p-values)
Hoe waarschijnlijk acht je de kans dat je vrienden zou vertellen over dit incident?	0,013
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarom shop.com de klacht beantwoord? Geveinsd of oprecht?	0,022

Figure 14 Results for the questions: "How likely are you going to tell your friends about your experience?" and "Which characteristic would you attribute to the way Shop.com answered your question: fake or genuine?"

As can be seen in Figure 14, the Kruskal-Wallis test did yield some significant results for some questions. Firstly, the result for the question “How likely are you going to tell your friends about your experience?” was significant ($p = 0,013$). This significant effect was found between case 2 and 3. The latter did not include the names of the customer and employee, the former did. As a consequence, it can be argued that customers who receive a less personalized answer to their complaint are more likely to tell their friends about their experience than those who receive a more personalized answer. Yet, the valence of their messages is unknown. In other words, it is unknown whether they would spread positive or negative WOM. Secondly, significant results were found across the three cases for the question: “Which characteristic would you attribute to the way Shop.com answered your question: fake or genuine?”. The results significantly differ between case 1 and case 2 ($p = 0,010$) and case 2 and 3 ($p = 0,047$). No significant results were found for the other semantic differentials across the cases. This leads to the assumption that showing empathy (case 1) seems to be less genuine than offering an apology (case 2). In addition, not including the names of the customer and employee (case 3) seems to affect the customer’s perception of the company’s honesty negatively. In conclusion, a non-personalized message seems to be perceived as less genuine and increases the likelihood of customers telling their friends about their experience. Furthermore, customers evaluate personalized answers with an apology as more genuine than personalized answers with an expression of empathy.

6.4 Impact of gender

Statements	Significance (p-values)
Shop.com behandelt mij als een mens en niet als een nummer.	0,047
Hoe waarschijnlijk acht je de kans dat je vrienden zou vertellen over dit incident?	0,008

Figure 15 Significant results for gender

Regarding the importance of gender, we found significant differences between the answers of men and women. Women tend to be more likely to tell their friends about their experience ($p = 0,008$) and to post an online reaction to the post ($p = 0,005$). Consequently, women seem to be more likely to engage in word of mouth than men are. These results seem to support research by Drewery (2013), who stated that women are more likely to spread negative WOM. Yet, no significant results regarding WOM valence have been found in this study. Furthermore, women indicated a higher level of agreement in response to the quote “Shop.com treats me as a person and not as a number” than men did ($p = 0,047$). Yet, these results do not take into account the age or level of education of the participants, which may have an influence on the results as well. Therefore, these results should be treated with some caution.

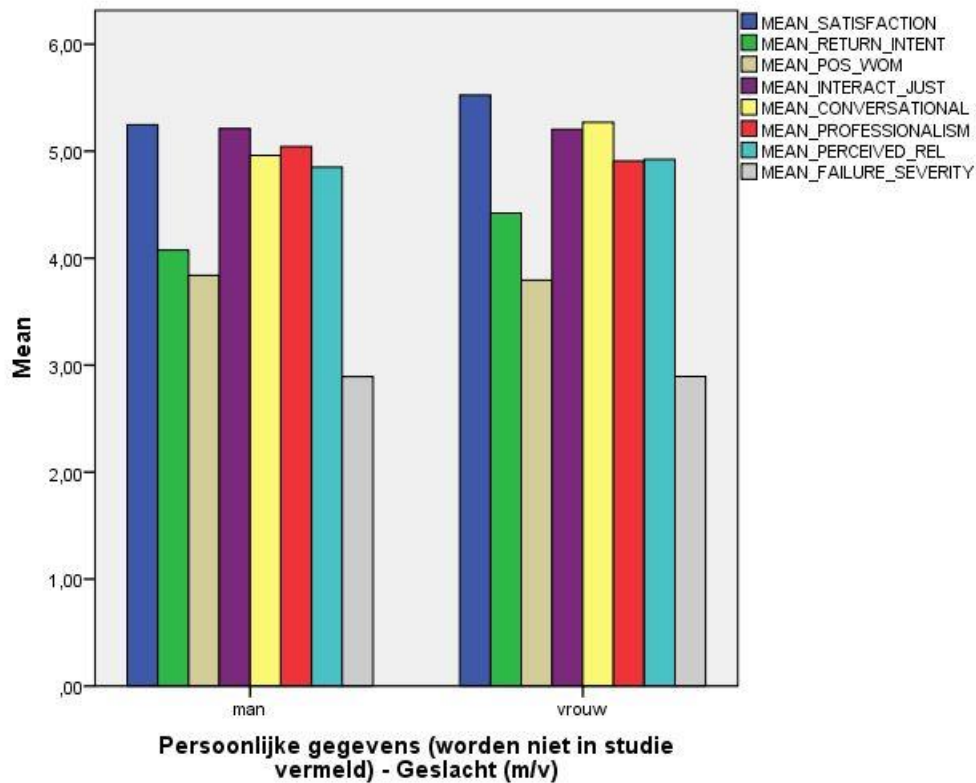


Figure 16 Mean results for the constructs satisfaction, return intent, positive WOM, interactional justice, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity

The values male and female respondents attributed to the different constructs are very similar. Still, some variation could be noticed. Firstly, women (5,52) felt more satisfied than men (5,25). Secondly, men were less eager to return to the company (4,08) than women (4,42). Thirdly, both men (3,84) and women (3,79) were not eager to spread positive WOM. Furthermore, they both valued the construct interactional justice to the same extent (5,21). Moreover, regarding the construct conversational human voice, men (4,96) felt treated less “human” than women (5,26). Furthermore, men perceived Shop.com’s answer as more professional (5,04) than women (4,91). Additionally, men (4,85) and women (4,92) attribute different values to the construct perceived relationship investment. Lastly, both men and women perceived the service failure as not severe (2,89).

6.5 Impact of age

Construct or statement	Significance (p-values)
Satisfaction	0,038
Wat de aanpak van dit specifieke voorval betreft, ben ik tevreden over shop.com	0,040

Figure 17 Significant differences across age groups

In order to test the impact of age on customer outcomes, we divided the respondents into three age groups: group 1 (18 - 21 years), group 2 (22 - 25 years), and group 3 (26 – 30 years). The first age group mainly consists of students, whereas the second age group consists of people with a few years of work experience and the third age group of people who have been working for a longer period. We chose to divide the respondents into these three age groups, because they vary in the amount of resources they have. Students are typically supported by their parents, and may consequently value distributive justice to a lower extent than people who have been working for a few years and do not have the support of their parents anymore. Furthermore, the third age group may have more resources than the second age group, since they have been working for a longer time, which may lead to different effects on justice perceptions and consequently customer outcomes. According to Roschk et al. (2013), who defined four stages of adulthood, the respondents are all at the stage of young adulthood. When comparing the results across the three age groups, there were some significant effects. The results for the construct satisfaction differed significantly between age group 1 and 2 ($p = 0,043$), and age group 2 and 3 ($p = 0,044$). Overall, the figures would appear to suggest that age group 1 and 3 were more satisfied with the answer of Shop.com than age group 2. Furthermore, age group 3 indicated higher scores of agreement with the quote: “I am satisfied with the way Shop.com handled this specific problem” than age group 2 ($p = 0,017$). Contrary to the conclusion of Roschk et al. (2013), our results indicate some variation within the stage of young adulthood.

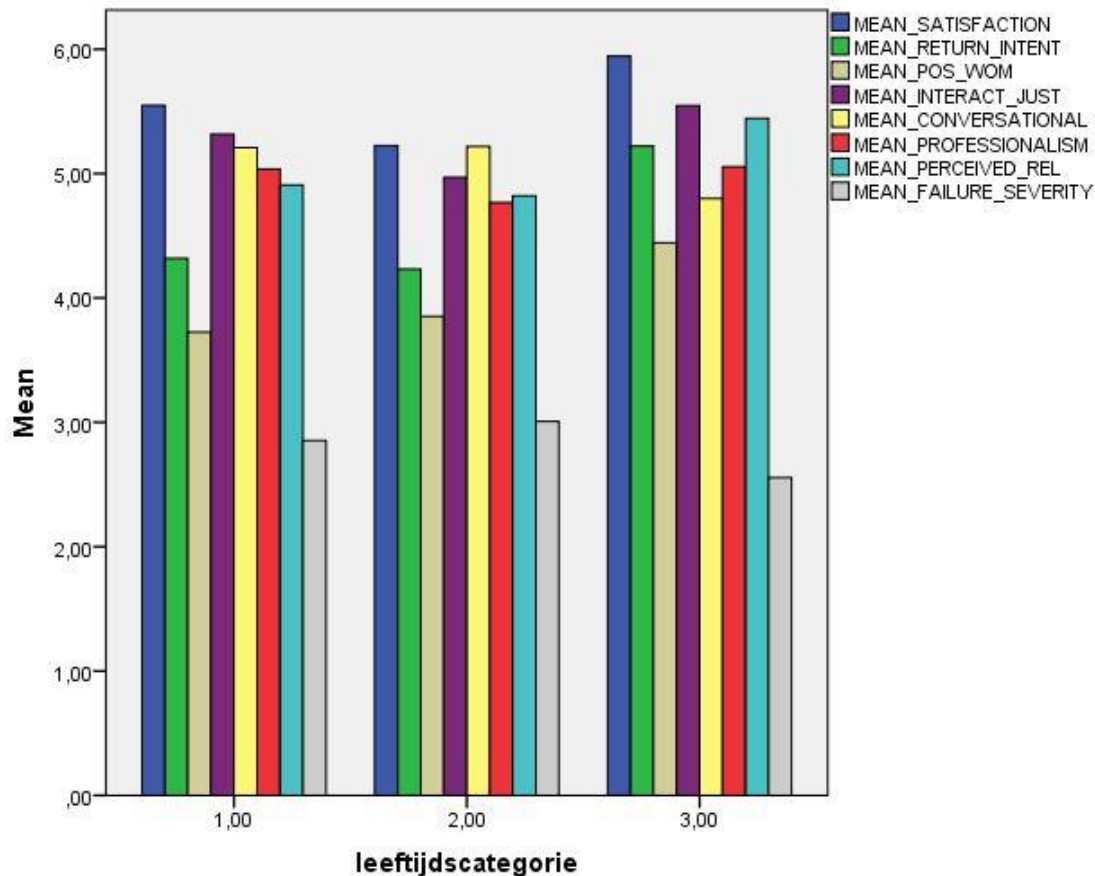


Figure 18 Mean results for the constructs satisfaction, return intent, positive WOM, interactional justice, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity

As can be seen on the figure above, the results of the three age groups are similar. Only the construct satisfaction differed significantly. Still, there seems to be some variation. Firstly, age group 3 (5,94) was more satisfied with Shop.com’s answer than age group 1 (5,55) and 2 (5,22). As Rosck et al. (2013) already argued, age has a non-linear effect on post-complaint satisfaction, which may explain why the first age group attributes higher values to the construct satisfaction than age group 2, and lower values than age group 3. Furthermore, some respondents of age group 3 may already be in the transition stage to early adulthood, and therefore value procedural justice more than the other age groups. Roschk et al. (2013) found that especially early adults value timely and flexible problem resolution processes. Shop.com’s response may be considered as timely and flexible by the respondents, which may have caused this results. Secondly, age group 3 was more eager to return to Shop.com than age group 1 (4,32) and 2 (4,23). Thirdly, the third age group (4,44) was more eager to spread positive WOM than age group 1 (3,73) and 2 (3,85). Furthermore, age group 3 (5,55) attributed higher values to the construct interactional justice than age group 1 (5,31) and 2 (4,97). Yet, age group 3 (4,80) found Shop.com’s answer less “human” than age group 1

(5,21) and age group 2 (5,22). Regarding the construct professionalism, age group 3 (5,06) attributed the highest scores, age group 1 attributed the score 5,04 and age group 2 the score 4,77. Moreover, age group 3 attributed the score 5,44 to the construct perceived relationship investment, age group 1 the score 4,91, and 2 the score 4,82. Lastly, age group 3 found the service failure the least severe (2,55), age group 2 attributed the score 2,85, and age group 3 found the failure the most severe (3,01).

6.6 Comparison with Eeckhout (forthcoming) and Vermeiren (forthcoming)

As previously mentioned, six additional cases were created by fellow MA-students. These cases differ in degrees of formality and impersonalization. A short overview of the six cases is presented below:

Case 4: Sorry hiervoor, Kim [...] Groetjes Dominique

Case 5: Dag Kim, sorry hiervoor [...] Groetjes Dominique

Case 6: Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor [...] Groeten

Case 7: Beste Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groeten, Dominique

Case 8: Beste, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet

Case 9: Onze excuses hiervoor [...]

Statements	Significance (p-values)
Hoe waarschijnlijk acht je de kans dat je vrienden zou vertellen over dit incident?	0,039
Shop.com behandelt mij als een mens en niet als een nummer.	0,006
Het antwoord op de klacht wordt op een professionele manier gebracht.	0,036
De toon van het antwoord getuigt van professionaliteit.	0,046

Het bedrijf hecht belang aan het houden van regelmatige klanten.	0,032
Het bedrijf doet haar best om de band met regelmatige klanten te verbeteren.	0,039
Het antwoord van shop.com is onpersoonlijk.	0,016
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop shop.com je klacht beantwoordt? Onvriendelijk/vriendelijk	0,038
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop shop.com je klacht beantwoordt? Abnormaal/normaal	0,019
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop shop.com je klacht beantwoordt? Geveinsd/oprecht	0,001
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop shop.com je klacht beantwoordt? Onpersoonlijk/persoonlijk	0,000
Welke kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop shop.com je klacht beantwoordt? Onrespectvol/respectvol	0,001

Figure 19 Significant results for all nine cases

In order to compare the nine different cases with each other, a Kruskal-Wallis test was carried out first. Although no significant differences were found between the cases for the different constructs, the test did yield several significant results for some separate questions. Firstly, the respondents' answers to the question about their likelihood to tell friends about their experience differed significantly. Secondly, the results for the question "Shop.com treats me like a person and not like a number" differed significantly across the cases. Furthermore, respondents answered the question about the professionalism of the company's response and

tone dissimilarly. In addition, the results for the questions about the company's effort to keep customers and improve its relation with customers varied across the cases. Furthermore, respondents attributed different values to the statement: "The answer of Shop.com is impersonal". Regarding the semantic differentials, the attributed values differed between the cases for: unfriendly/friendly, abnormal/normal, disrespectful/respectful, fake/genuine, and impersonal/personal.

In order to know between which cases the results were significant, several Mann-Whitney tests were carried out. Respondents of case 7 ($p = 0,004$), 8 ($p = 0,004$) and 9 ($p = 0,008$) indicated they were more likely to tell their friends about their experience than respondents of case 2. Furthermore, the values attributed to the statement "Shop.com treats me like a person and not like a number" were significantly higher for the cases 1 ($p = 0,008$), 2 ($p = 0,033$), and 3 ($p = 0,015$) than for 7. Additionally, Respondents perceived the answer of Shop.com as more professional in case 4 ($p = 0,026$), 5 ($p = 0,049$), 6 ($p = 0,012$) and 9 ($p = 0,003$) than in case 3. In addition, respondents perceived the tone of Shop.com's answer as more professional in cases 5 ($p = 0,011$), 6 ($p = 0,010$) and 9 ($p = 0,002$) than in case 3. Moreover, respondents attributed higher values to case 1 than case 7 in response to the statement: "The company makes an effort to improve its relationship with its customers" ($p = 0,011$). In addition, significant differences were found between case 7 and 1 ($p = 0,001$), 2 ($p = 0,027$) and 3 ($p = 0,004$) and between 1 and 8 ($p = 0,047$) for the statement "The company cares about keeping its customers". Furthermore, case 1 (very informal, and includes customer's and employee's name) was perceived as more personal than cases 7 ($p = 0,009$), which is formal and includes names, and 9 ($p = 0,034$), which is very formal and does not include names. Case 2 (informal and includes names) was perceived as more personal than case 7 ($p = 0,05$). Yet, case 3 (informal, no names) was perceived as less personal than 4 ($p = 0,024$), which is nor formal nor informal, and includes names, and 5 ($p = 0,05$), which is nor formal nor informal, and includes an end vocative. Additionally, case 1 was perceived as less friendly ($p = 0,008$) and less normal ($p = 0,035$) than case 7. Furthermore, case 7 came across as more respectful than case 1 ($p = 0,011$), 2 ($p = 0,035$), and 3 ($p = 0,013$). Regarding the semantic differentials fake or genuine, several significant fluctuations were found across the cases. Firstly, case 1 came across as less genuine than case 4 ($p = 0,004$), 5 ($p = 0,004$), and 6 ($p = 0,008$). However, case 2 was perceived as more genuine than case 7 ($p = 0,006$) and 8 ($p = 0,042$). Furthermore, case 3 came across as less genuine than case 4 ($p = 0,039$) and 5 ($p = 0,036$). Lastly, regarding the level of personality, respondents perceived case 8 as less

personal than case 1 ($p = 0,000$), 2 ($p = 0,002$) and 3 ($p = 0,036$). Case 1 came across as more personal than case 7 ($p = 0,004$) and case 5 as more personal than case 3 ($p = 0,020$).

No significant differences were found between case 2 and case 4,5, and 6.

Put differently, the formulation of case 1, namely “Hoi Kim, wat een tegenvaller [...] Groetjes, Dominique”, is perceived as less genuine than the formulation of case 4 “Sorry hiervoor, Kim [...] Groetjes, Dominique”, case 5 “Dag Kim, sorry hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique”, and case 6 “Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor [...] Groeten”. Furthermore, respondents indicated that they felt treated as a human and not as a number more in case 1 than case 7 (“Beste Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet, Dominique”). In addition, respondents of case 1 attributed higher scores to the statements about the company’s effort to improve customer relations and to keep customers than those of case 7. Furthermore, case 1 was perceived as more personal, friendly, normal, and respectful than case 7. In comparison with case 8 (Beste, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet”), case 1 came across as more personal, and respondents found that the company cared more about keeping its customers. Additionally, the answer of Shop.com came across as more personal in case 1 than case 9 (“Onze excuses hiervoor [...] dan kijken we met u mee).

The results for the formulation of case 2, namely “Hoi Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique”, did not differ significantly with those of case 4, 5, and 6. Yet, respondents of case 7, 8, and 9 indicated they were more likely to tell their friends about their experience than respondents of case 2. Furthermore, respondents indicated they felt more treated as a human and not as a number, and Shop.com cared about keeping its customers to a higher extent in case 2 than in case 7. In addition, respondents perceived the answer of Shop.com as more personal in case 2 than case 7 and 8. Furthermore, case 7 was perceived as less respectful than case 2, and case 7 and 8 as less genuine than case 2.

The answer of Shop.com in case 3, namely “Hoi, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes”, was perceived as less professional, less personal and less genuine than in case 4 and 5. Furthermore, the tone of Shop.com’s answer in case 3 was also perceived as less professional than in case 5, and the company’s response and tone were perceived as less professional than in case 6 as well. In comparison with case 7, customers felt treated as a human and not as a number to a higher extent in case 3. Surprisingly, respondents indicated that Shop.com cared about keeping its customers more in case 3 than in case 7, and the answer was perceived as more respectful than in case 7. Furthermore, case 3 was perceived as more personal than case

8. Lastly, Shop.com's response and its tone was perceived as more professional in case 9 than case 3.

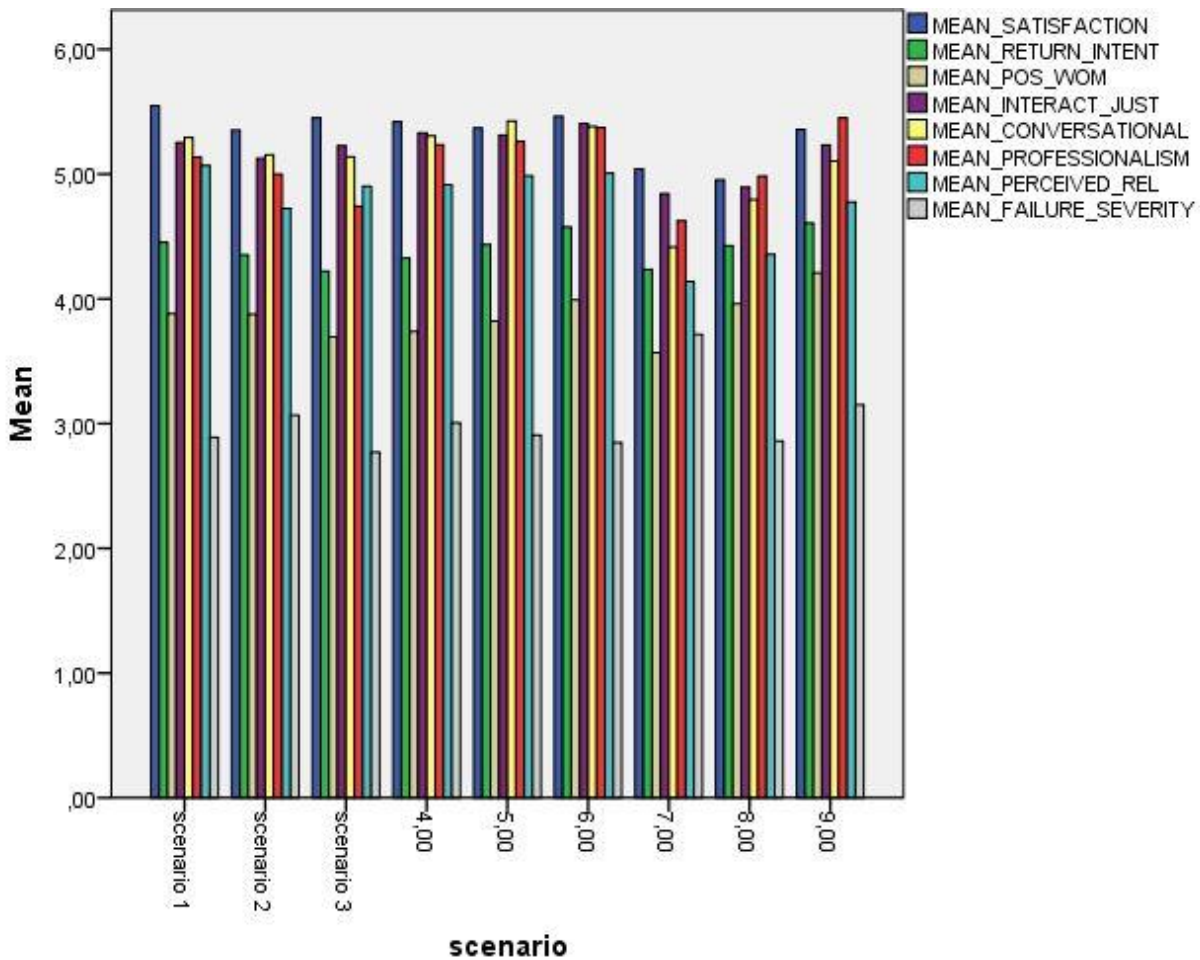


Figure 20 Mean results for the constructs satisfaction, return intent, positive WOM, interactional justice, conversational human voice, professionalism, perceived relationship investment and failure severity

Although no significant differences were found between the nine cases for the constructs as a whole, some interesting patterns can be noticed. The construct satisfaction yielded results between 5 (case 8) and 5,55 (case 1). In addition, respondents attributed values between 4,22 (case 3) and 4,61 (case 9) to the construct return intent. Furthermore, the construct positive WOM yielded results between 3,69 (case 3) and 4,21 (case 9). Moreover, respondents attributed values between 4,84 (case7) and 5,41 (case 6) to the construct interactional justice. Additionally, case 5 yielded the highest results for the construct conversational human voice (5,43) and case 7 the lowest (4,41). In addition, case 9 (5,45) was perceived as the most professional, whereas case 7 as the least professional (4,63). Furthermore, respondents attributed values between 4,14 (case 7) and 5,07 (case 1) to the construct perceived relationship investment. Lastly, the service failure was perceived as the least severe in case 3 (2,77), and as the most severe in case 7 (3,72).

7 DISCUSSION

7.1 Comparison of first three cases

No significant differences were found between the first three cases regarding the manipulation checks for degrees of formality and impersonalisation. However, these manipulation checks did significantly differ across the nine scenarios. Consequently, it can be argued that the changes made in the first three cases were too small to be noticed by the respondents, whereas the differences could be noticed between cases which were more different.

Consistent with prior research Coombs and Holladay (2008) conducted regarding crisis response strategies in print news stories, we found no significant differences between the customer outcomes of case 1 and 2. Consequently, it can be argued that using an apology or showing empathy in company responses to complaints on Facebook affects customer outcomes to the same extent. This result supports hypothesis 1 and is very interesting for companies, since this enables them to vary in their answers to complaints. However, we only compared two linguistic realizations, namely: “Onze excuses hiervoor” and “Wat een tegenvaller”. As a consequence, other formulations of these response strategies may yield different results. In addition, the level of organizational responsibility is important. In our case, the fact that the customer did not receive the free gift may not be entirely Shop.com’s fault. Therefore, expressing sympathy or issuing an apology may yield the same results in this case, whereas an expression of sympathy would not be sufficient to satisfy the customer if he or she has high perceptions of organizational responsibility.

Contrary to previous research by Ball et al. (2006), Carvajal et al. (2011), and Gruber (2011), we found no significant differences across the three cases regarding the level of personalization. Mentioning the first name of the customer and employee in the salutation versus not mentioning them did not yield different results for return intent or satisfaction with the service recovery. This result does not support hypotheses 2 and 3. However, upon closer examination of the responses to the questions separately, it was revealed that the answers to the question “How likely are you going to tell your friends about your experience?” differed significantly between case 2 and 3. Respondents indicated that they were more likely to tell their friends about their experience when the company’s response did not contain their first name in the salutation and the employee’s name in the closing pleasantries. Yet, the valence of their word of mouth is unknown.

In addition, we found significant differences between the respondents' answers to the question: "Which characteristic would you attribute to the way Shop.com answered your question: fake or genuine?". Firstly, respondents perceived case 1 as less genuine than case 2. As a consequence, it can be argued that "wat een tegenvaller" comes across as less genuine than "onze excuses hiervoor". Secondly, respondents perceived case 2 as more genuine than case 3. Put differently, not using the customer's and employee's first name in the company's response to the complaint seems to decrease the customer's perceptions about the company's authenticity. Yet, the question is to what extent perceived authenticity or credibility affects customer outcomes. Based on these results, companies should mention the customer's and employee's name in the salutation, and apologize for what happened in order to come across as genuine.

Several researchers have already conducted research on the influence of credibility. Davidow (2000) found that credibility has a significant positive impact on satisfaction, word-of-mouth valence, and repurchase intention. Davidow (2000) argues that these results seem to confirm that interpersonal communications and lasting impressions affect repurchase intentions the strongest. As a consequence, the way companies apologize or show their sympathy to their customers is of major importance. If a company's answer does not come across as convincing, this may have a negative impact on customer outcomes, even though the company may have done the effort to apologize or explain why something happened. According to Gruber (2011), customers expect a genuine apology. Yet, the question is how a company can come across as genuine. Especially in an online context, it is even harder for the employee to convince the customer of his or her sympathy, because online communication lacks nonverbal communication. In addition, Gretry et al. (2017) concluded that using an informal communication style when the customer is unfamiliar with the brand decreases brand trust.

Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) argue trust reflects the customer's willingness to accept vulnerability based on a positive expectation of the service failure resolution. According to DeWitt et al. (2008), trust completely mediates the relationship between perceived justice and loyalty. As a consequence, a good recovery has a positive impact on customer trust and trust improves loyalty to the company. Yet, Kim et al. (2009) found that trust mediates the relationship between recovery satisfaction, and word of mouth and return intent. Recovery satisfaction has a significant and positive impact on trust (Ganesan, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Tax et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2009), and trust affects WOM and return intent positively (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Kim et al., 2001; Oh, 2002). We did not examine the

impact of trust on customer outcomes. Still, the different results for the statement about the authenticity of Shop.com's answer seems to indicate that credibility and trust are of importance. Furthermore, these results seem to confirm Manika et al.'s (2017) findings, namely that trustworthiness may be more important than satisfaction in a social media context.

Regarding the impact of gender, two significant differences were found. Firstly, women seem to be more likely to engage in word of mouth than men are. Secondly, they valued the statement "Shop.com treats me as a person and not as a number" more highly than men do. This statement measures the impact of conversational human voice on customer outcomes. This result implies that women appear to attribute higher values to this construct than men. Still, because the answers only differed significantly for one statement, this result cannot be generalized to the construct "human conversational voice" as a whole. Furthermore, other variables such as age and level of education have an influence on customer outcomes as well.

Additionally, we found significant differences across the three age groups for the construct satisfaction. Age group 1 and 3 were more satisfied with the answer of Shop.com than age group 2. This result implies that, although all respondents are young adults, there is still some variation in this stage of adulthood. Age group 1 mostly consists of students, and age group 3 of people who have been working for a couple of years. Consequently, it can be argued that age groups 1 and 3 have more resources to address problems, since students are mostly sponsored by their parents. Therefore, distributive justice may be of more importance for age group 2 than for the other age groups. As a consequence, they may be less satisfied with Shop.com's answer than the other two age groups.

7.2 Comparison all nine cases

When looking at all nine cases, no significant differences were found between the cases for the different constructs as a whole. As a consequence, it may be argued, that the level of personalization and formality affects customer outcomes only to a minor extent. However, regarding the significant results of the separate questions, cases 4, 5, and 6 yielded better results than cases 1,3,7,8, and 9. No significant differences were found between case 2 and case 4, 5 or 6. Consequently, the formulations "Hoi Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique", "Sorry hiervoor, Kim [...] Groetjes, Dominique", "Dag Kim, sorry

hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique”, and “Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor [...] Groeten” seem to have the same impact on customer outcomes and are to be preferred. According to Gretry et al. (2017) an informal communication style is to preferred when the consumer is familiar with the brand. In our case, consumers were not familiar with the fictitious company Shop.com. Therefore, the better results for cases 4, 5, and 6 in comparison with the results of cases 1 and 3 can partly be explained by this unfamiliarity. Case 5 (“Dag Kim [...] Groetjes, Dominique”), for example, is perceived as more personal than “Hoi [...] groetjes”, although the latter is more informal. Furthermore, “Dag Kim [...] Groetjes, Dominique” is perceived as more genuine and more professional than the other cases. However, if we compare the results for cases 1,2, and 3, the cases which are situated at the more informal side of the spectrum, with the results for cases 7,8, and 9, the cases at the more formal side of the spectrum, we can conclude that more informal answers are to be preferred. “Hoi [...] Groetjes”, for example, comes across as more personal than “Beste [...] Met vriendelijke groet”. Still, it must be noted that Shop.com’s answer and the tone of its answer is perceived as more professional in case 9 (no salutation) than in case 3 (informal salutation without names). As a consequence, it is better to leave out “hoi” and “groetjes” when not mentioning the customer’s and employee’s name in order to be perceived as more professional.

8 LIMITATIONS

All research has limitations, and this thesis is no exception. Firstly, a hypothetical scenario was used rather than an actual consumption experience. As a consequence, respondents may read through the scenarios fast and will consequently not respond as they would in a real life service encounter, since they may not be able to fully connect with the hypothetical situations (Wirtz & Mattila, 2004).

Secondly, we focused on complaint handling on Facebook. Consequently, our results cannot be generalized to complaint handling on social media as a whole. Further research should be conducted in order to investigate whether or not interpersonal strategies yield the same results on Twitter for example. Since the amount of characters is limited on Twitter, it could be useful for companies to know which strategies to include in their answers to complaints.

Thirdly, our respondents were aged between 18 and 30. As already mentioned in the state of the art, different stages of adulthood have an impact on customers' perceptions of the justice dimensions, and consequently on customer outcomes as well (Roschk et al., 2013). Therefore, the effects of interpersonal strategies in replies to complaints on Facebook on other age groups should also be investigated. Moreover, the combined effects of age, gender, severity, etc. should be examined with more advanced statistical models (e.g. linear regression).

In addition, we studied the effects of the formulations “onze excuses hiervoor” and “wat een tegenvaller” on customer outcomes. Still, since different linguistic realizations of interpersonal strategies yield different results (Patel & Reinsch, 2003; Robbenolt, 2003; Lazare, 2004), the impact of other formulations should be investigated as well.

Furthermore, we did not focus on the impact of trust or credibility in our research. As we found significant differences between the cases for the question about Shop.com's authenticity, this might be a fruitful area of research. Manika et al. (2017) already argued that trust may be even more important than satisfaction in a social media context.

Lastly, failure severity was low in our case. Since the effect of interpersonal strategies depends on failure severity as well, the impact of interpersonal strategies on customer outcomes with more severe problems should also be investigated. It might well be the case

that in those instances conversational human voice or informal approaches might be deemed inappropriate in view of the severity of the complaint.

9 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to the body of complaint-handling research and provides insights on how complaints should be handled in order to improve customer outcomes by focussing on interactional justice. Due to the Internet, customers now have a plethora of possibilities to choose from when they want to express their (dis)satisfaction with a product or service. Therefore, it has become increasingly important for companies to know which response strategies have a positive impact on customer outcomes and how they should be linguistically realized. As complaint handling on social media is a recent and fruitful area of research, and lacks nonverbal communication, it was particularly interesting to investigate how complaints should be handled on Facebook.

In order to examine the effects of interpersonal strategies and their formulation, nine cases were created in which four kinds of interpersonal strategies were manipulated in the responses of a company towards the customer, namely the level of personalization, the level of formality, empathy and apology. The actual scenario was based on a selection of existing response procedures to ensure scenario realism. In order to avoid confounding effects, the fictitious company name Shop.com was created and the names mentioned in the scenario are gender neutral. A questionnaire was developed based on research by Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), Schultz et al. (2011), Kelleher (2009) and De Wulf et al. (2001). This study especially focused on the significant differences between the first three cases, the effects of the other six cases are discussed more briefly. Respondents from 18 to 30 participated in this study.

Drawing on research by Coombs and Holladay (2008), Ball et al. (2006), Carvajal et al. (2011), and Gruber (2011), three hypotheses were formulated. Our results support hypothesis 1, namely that case 1 (“wat een tegenvaller”) and 2 (onze excuses hiervoor) foster similar effects on customer outcomes. Yet, hypotheses 2 and 3, namely that increased personalization in case 1 and 2 (“Hoi Kim [...] Groetjes Dominique) would affect satisfaction to a higher extent than case 3 (“Hoi [...] Groetjes”), and that the effect of case 1 and 2 on return intent would be bigger than that of case 3, were not supported by our results. No significant results were found between case 1, 2 and 3 for the constructs as a whole. As a consequence, it may be argued that the different linguistic realizations of the interpersonal strategies do not affect customer outcomes differently. This result enables companies to vary in their answers to complaints. Still, it should be noted that some of the questions did yield notable differences.

Firstly, respondents of case 3 (“Hoi, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes”) were more likely to tell their friends about their experience than respondents of case 2 (“Hoi Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique”). Consequently, mentioning the customer’s and employee’s name in the response seems to decrease WOM. However, the construct WOM does not differ significantly across the cases. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, it is unclear why participants are more likely to tell their friends about their experience than to post an online reaction. Further research should be conducted to examine what drives customers to tell their friends about their experience rather than to spread electronic word of mouth, and whether privacy issues or the fact that it takes less effort to tell their friends are connected with it.

Secondly, case 1 and 3 were perceived as less genuine than case 2. This leads to the assumption that empathy is perceived as less genuine than apology, and not mentioning the customer’s and employee’s name in the salutation is perceived as less genuine than mentioning them. As a consequence, it can be argued that “Hoi Kim, wat een tegenvaller [...] Groetjes, Dominique” and “Hoi, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes” comes across as less genuine than “Hoi Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique”. As Robbenolt (2003) concluded, an expression of sympathy can be considered as a simple apology. Pace et al., (2010) found that an apology should be accompanied by an explicit statement of accepting responsibility to protect the company’s reputation in a crisis context. The formulation “onze excuses hiervoor” seems to be an acceptance of responsibility, whereas “wat een tegenvaller” is not. Furthermore, leaving out the customer’s and employee’s name seems to affect the perception of the company’s authenticity negatively. Yet, the question is to what extent perceived authenticity or trust affects customer outcomes. Our results seem to corroborate research by Mannika et al. (2017) who suggest that trustworthiness may be more important than satisfaction in a social media context. Future research should analyse the effects of trust on customer outcomes in replies to complaints on social media.

Regarding all nine cases, the results for the different constructs as a whole did not differ significantly. Consequently, it can be argued that the effect of different levels of personalization and formality on customer outcomes is marginal. However, respondents’ answers did differ across the cases regarding the question about their likelihood to tell friends about their experience. Secondly, respondents attributed different values to the statement “Shop.com treats me like a person and not like a number”. Furthermore, the results for the professionalism of the company’s response and its tone were dissimilar. Moreover, the results

of the statements about the company's effort to keep customers and improve its relation with customers varied across the cases. Furthermore, respondents attributed different values to the statement: "The answer of Shop.com is impersonal". Regarding the semantic differentials, as mentioned in section 6.6, the attributed values differed between the cases for: unfriendly/friendly, abnormal/normal, disrespectful/respectful, fake/genuine, and impersonal/personal. Upon closer examination of these significant differences, cases 4 ("Sorry hiervoor, Kim [...] Groetjes, Dominique"), 5 ("Dag Kim, sorry hiervoor [...] Groetjes, Dominique"), and 6 ("Dag Kim, mijn excuses hiervoor [...] Groeten") yielded the best results. Still, no significant differences were found between case 2 and case 4, 5 or 6. Cases 4, 5 and 6 are situated in the middle of the informal/formal scale. Consequently, it can be argued that customers prefer the company's response to be neither too informal nor too formal. This result seems to support research by Gretry et al. (2017) who found that using an informal communication style when the consumer is unfamiliar with the brand decreases brand trust. Furthermore, case 1, 2 and 3 yielded better results than case 7 ("Beste Kim, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet, Dominique"), 8 (Beste, onze excuses hiervoor [...] Met vriendelijke groet"), and 9 ("Onze excuses hiervoor [...] dan kijken we met u mee). In other words, a very informal communication style seems to affect customer outcomes more positively than a very formal communication style.

Still, it must be noted that a hypothetical scenario was used in this study and no real life service encounter. Furthermore, our study only focuses on the effects of interpersonal strategies on the perceptions of 18 to 30-year olds. Additionally, failure severity was low in our case. As a consequence, our results cannot be generalized to all service problems. Notwithstanding its limitations, this study presents some interesting patterns with significant results. Future research could focus on the impact of trust on customer outcomes and on other age groups in various complaint-handling contexts on Facebook or other social media.

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I APPENDIX

We used the questionnaire presented below in order to measure the effects of the different interpersonal strategies on customer outcomes.



Context

Beeld je in dat je Kim Nijssen bent in onderstaand scenario. Je hebt iets besteld bij de online webshop *shop.com*. Bij de levering van jouw pakket ontbreekt echter het kinderboekenweekgeschenk waar je recht op hebt. Je schrijft een klacht op de Facebookpagina van *shop.com* en het bedrijf reageert met onderstaande reactie.

Lees de conversatie en vul daarna de vragenlijst in. Dit zal slechts enkele minuten van uw tijd in beslag nemen. Alvast bedankt!

[insert case]

Beeld je in dat je Kim Nijssen bent en dit antwoord van *shop.com* ontvangt.

1. Gelieve volgende stellingen te beoordelen op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet akkoord) tot 7 (helemaal akkoord).

	Helemaal niet akkoord				Helemaal akkoord			
Ik vind dat <i>shop.com</i> op een tevredenstellende manier op mijn bericht heeft geantwoord	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Ik ben niet tevreden met de manier waarop <i>shop.com</i> dit specifieke probleem heeft aangepakt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Wat de aanpak van dit specifieke voorval betreft, ben ik tevreden over <i>shop.com</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

2. Gelieve volgende stellingen te beoordelen op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet akkoord) tot 7 (helemaal akkoord).

	Helemaal niet akkoord				Helemaal akkoord			
Als ik in de toekomst een product zou moeten kopen, zou ik geneigd zijn het te kopen bij <i>shop.com</i> .	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

Als ik een nieuw product zou kopen in de nabije toekomst, zou ik *shop.com* niet kiezen als leverancier

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Gelieve de volgende vraag te beantwoorden op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet geneigd) tot 7 (heel geneigd).

	Helemaal niet geneigd				Heel geneigd		
Als je een nieuw product zou kopen, hoe geneigd zou je zijn om het te kopen van <i>shop.com</i> ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. Gelieve volgende stellingen te beoordelen op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet akkoord) tot 7 (helemaal akkoord).

	Helemaal niet akkoord				Helemaal akkoord		
Op basis van deze interactie zou ik de producten van <i>shop.com</i> aan vrienden aanbevelen	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Als vrienden op zoek zouden zijn naar een nieuw product, zou ik hen *shop.com* voorstellen

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. Gelieve de volgende vraag te beantwoorden op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet geneigd) tot 7 (heel geneigd).

	Helemaal niet geneigd				Heel geneigd		
Hoe geneigd zou je zijn om na het lezen van deze reactie positieve mond-aan-mond reclame te verspreiden over <i>shop.com</i> ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

6. Gelieve volgende vragen te beantwoorden op een schaal gaande van 1 (weinig waarschijnlijk) tot 7 (heel waarschijnlijk).

	Weinig waarschijnlijk				Heel waarschijnlijk		
Hoe waarschijnlijk acht je de kans dat je vrienden zou vertellen over dit incident?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Hoe waarschijnlijk acht je de kans dat je een online reactie op dit bericht zou posten?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Gelieve de volgende vraag te beantwoorden op een schaal gaande van 1 (heel negatief) tot 7 (heel positief).

	Heel negatief				Heel positief		
Indien je een online reactie op deze berichtgeving zou plaatsen (bv. op Twitter, Facebook, een online nieuwssite), wat zou dan naar alle waarschijnlijkheid de toon van die reactie zijn?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

8. Gelieve volgende stellingen te beoordelen op een schaal gaande van 1 (helemaal niet akkoord) tot 7 (helemaal akkoord).

	Helemaal niet akkoord				Helemaal akkoord		
De medewerk(st)er ging op een beleefde manier met me om	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
De medewerk(st)er hechtte er echt belang aan om een goede oplossing aan te reiken	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bij het zoeken naar een oplossing hield de medewerk(st)er rekening met mijn standpunt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
De medewerk(st)er was vriendelijk en respectvol	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ik voel me gewaardeerd als klant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
De medewerk(st)er toonde medeleven	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
In deze context vind ik de toon van de medewerk(st)er gepast	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Shop.com</i> wil in gesprek gaan met mij	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Shop.com</i> staat open voor dialoog	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Shop.com probeert te communiceren met de klant op een menselijke manier, met een menselijke stem

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Shop.com probeert de communicatie aangenaam te maken

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Shop.com behandelt mij als een mens en niet als een nummer

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

De organisatie die het antwoord gestuurd heeft, is professioneel

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het antwoord op de klacht wordt op een professionele manier gebracht

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

De toon van het antwoord getuigt van professionaliteit

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het bedrijf doet haar best om de loyaliteit van regelmatige klanten te verhogen

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het bedrijf doet haar best om de band met regelmatige klanten te verbeteren

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het bedrijf hecht belang aan het houden van regelmatige klanten

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Ik vind dat het probleem dat ik heb ervaren ernstig was.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Ik vind dat het probleem voor groot ongemak heeft gezorgd

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Ik vind dat het probleem een ernstige fout was

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het antwoord van *shop.com* is formeel 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Het antwoord van *shop.com* is onpersoonlijk 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. Welke van volgende kenmerken zou je toeschrijven aan de manier waarop *shop.com* jouw klacht beantwoordt? Hoe dichter bij het woord je inkleurt, hoe meer je akkoord gaat.

onprofessioneel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	professioneel
vrijpostig	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	gemoedelijk
onvriendelijk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	vriendelijk
schofferend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	joviaal
abnormaal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	normaal
onrespectvol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	respectvol
geveinsd	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	oprecht
betuttelend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	vriendschappelijk
informeel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	formeel
onpersoonlijk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	persoonlijk

10. Antwoord op volgende stellingen door een vakje aan te kruisen

De medewerker gebruikte mijn naam in de aanspreking: Ja Nee

Met deze post wil ik hulp krijgen: Ja Nee

11. Persoonlijke gegevens (worden niet in studie vermeld)

Naam:

Leeftijd:

Geslacht: m / v

