

# **Politeness matters: The antecedents and consequences of politeness in a complaint handling setting**

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## ABSTRACT

Marketing scholars have used justice theory to investigate how consumers' perceptions affect post-complaint satisfaction. Less attention has been given to how those perceptions are formed and what organizations should do to enhance them. This paper explores the concept of politeness, a component of interactional justice, in a complaint handling setting, with two complementary studies: a quantitative discourse analysis, and a survey. In study 1, the effects of 16 antecedents of politeness in a dataset of naturally occurring firms' responses to customers' complaints are investigated. Results show that Face-Threatening-Acts (FTAs) are better predictors of perceived politeness than antecedents previously used in marketing research. Study 2 explores the consequences of politeness with a survey demonstrating that politeness is positively correlated with repurchase intention and perceived firm professionalism.

## INTRODUCTION

Today's business interactions often lack a sense of decorum. "All too frequently we observe customers and staff almost competing with each other to be the most abrupt, rude, and uncooperative" (Fisk et al., 2010). Complaining customers represent a fantastic opportunity for firms; by voicing their complaint, customers show a sincere interest in continuing the relationship with the firm and remaining loyal. Firms must therefore carefully consider *how* they respond to complainants. Displaying the requisite level of politeness is essential to normalize the communication, resolve the complaint, and retain the customer.

Much of the marketing research on complaint handling has focused on responses and used a justice theory framework to develop antecedents of customer satisfaction (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998; Homburg & Fürst, 2005; del Rio-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles, & Díaz-Martín, 2008). Politeness, a component of this framework, has been shown to play an important role in the origin of complaints (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Bolkan, 2007; Cowan & Anthony, 2008). Despite a rich politeness literature in both socio-linguistic and marketing fields, the respective methodologies and findings are not complementary, leading to an incomplete understanding of the antecedents and consequences of politeness in complaint interactions. Most marketing research of politeness has focused on the customer side (Davidow, 2003; Parasuraman, 2006; Homburg, Fürst, & Koschate, 2010) and researchers have largely ignored politeness as an important component of firm's responses (Homburg et al. 2010). Most studies to date assess correlations between the different components of the justice framework and customer satisfaction, but fail to integrate politeness in their models. Socio-linguistics research has focused on qualitative methods to examine the role of politeness within interactions. Face theory (Goffman, 1959) remains the reference framework for politeness. To date, no quantitative work has been conducted to determine how to effectively enhance the politeness perception in an interaction.

The effective resolution of complaints has been shown to improve customer satisfaction and customer retention (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser Jr, 1989; Tax *et al.*, 1998), improving firms' financial

metrics, particularly profitability (Halloweel, 1996). Moreover, marketing research has demonstrated that politeness can be crucial in customer-firm relationships, especially in online settings. While impoliteness leads to complaining behaviors (Harrison-Walker, 2001), firms may also use politeness to minimize the effect of a complaint on the customer's loyalty. In today's connected world, politeness can therefore be seen as a strategy for firms to manage reputation, improve brand image and enhance customer retention: three pillars of marketing strategy.

The purpose of this paper is to use socio-linguistic frameworks and marketing theories to answer important questions for marketers and managers especially in handling complaints. On one hand this research offers an understanding of politeness perception drivers in a firm-customer interaction, and on the other hand it aims to show that politeness is a cue customers use to judge the professionalism of a firm, and it can influence customers' behavioral outcome. This paper reports two studies investigating the antecedents and consequences of politeness. Study 1 examines which politeness markers and components of face theory and Grice's (1975) cooperation principle can be considered as antecedents of perceived politeness. Study 2 then highlights the consequences that politeness has on a complainant's perception of professionalism and behavioral outcome.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Politeness theory in a complainant context

Politeness theory was formulated by sociolinguists Brown and Levinson (1978) as an extension of Goffman's (1959) face theory. In face theory (Goffman, 1959), everyone has a public self-image that they seek to construct and protect. Confronted with an embarrassment, which is to "lose face", we seek to "save face", or restore our desired public image. Insults and other personal slights, verbal or nonverbal, threaten to damage our desired public image, and are termed "face-threatening acts" (FTA) (Goffman, 1959; McCready, Asher, & Paul, 2013). Politeness is seen as the

range of actions to save another's face, and essentially consists of avoiding FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Face-threatening-acts play an important role in constructing cultural norms, however, as different FTA types are used to culturally regulate interactions (Kerbat Orrechioni, 1986). This approach posits that politeness requires protagonists to adapt their speech register (i.e. formality level) to the cultural context. In formal exchanges the participants will expect more politeness, resulting in a higher frequency of politeness markers or cues. With less formal exchanges, the participants tacitly accept that politeness will not result in frequent politeness markers, which does not mean the exchange lacks politeness.

Politeness also depends on the level of cooperation between the parties (Kerbat-Orecchioni, 1986). In the complaint setting, where one protagonist (the complainant) seeks compensation, being cooperative is essential to reach a positive outcome. Kerbat-Orecchioni (1994) explains that different levels of cooperation exist: between confrontation and consensus, companies tend to choose the latter to ensure higher customer satisfaction. The importance of cooperation to complaint resolution leads us to include Grice's (1975) cooperation principle in our research.

#### The role of politeness within perceived justice

Perceived justice and its three-pronged sub-categorization is generally accepted by marketing scholars as a framework of reference to analyze complaint exchanges (Tax et al. 1998, Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis, 2010; Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011). Politeness belongs among other antecedents to interactional justice. Sabadie, Prim-Allaz, and Llosa (2006) differentiate the antecedents of interactional justice as those related to respect for the customer versus those related to the decision or the fundamental problem. Among those related to respect, politeness and empathy emerge as important dimensions (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997; Mattila and Cranage, 2005; Johnston, 2001).

Politeness is however not always stated as an exclusive component, despite its recognized importance. Whereas Tax et al. (1998) mentioned it explicitly, other authors embed politeness within broader constructs. Davidow (2003) for instance states that politeness is part of “attentiveness” under the form of “having a courteous [...] response”. Boshoff (1999) embeds politeness in “atonement” (“When I complain about poor service, I expect employees to be polite”). Little research investigates politeness in a customer complaint context. Harrison-Walker (2001) shows the preponderance of impolite behaviors as drivers of complaints, and Lerman (2006) stresses the importance of politeness in a B2C setting.

Antecedents of politeness in a complaint setting have been the focus of only two research reports, both of which follow a formalism-based approach that reduces politeness to certain words or expressions. Mattsson, Lemmink, and McColl (2004) investigated complaint letters and evaluated procedural and relational politeness by counting salutations “Dear” and closings “yours sincerely” and “yours truly” to represent procedural politeness, and “Thank You”, “Please”, “Look forward”, and “Appreciate” to represent relational politeness. Dickinger and Bauernfeind (2009) considered politeness as an antecedent of quality by evaluating airline companies’ written responses along four criteria: the presence/absence of an appropriate salutation, an acknowledgment, the firm representative’s identity and the firm’s identity. These two papers correlate the level of politeness to the occurrence and frequency of certain words, but lack evidence as to whether this effectively measures perceived politeness. This limitation has led us to study politeness using alternative and perhaps more accurate indicators of how customers perceive politeness. We therefore posit:

H1: The presence of markers of politeness in a complaint exchange is positively correlated to perceived politeness.

#### Theory of face

Socio-linguistics defines politeness as a regulation of exchanges and adaptation of linguistic

registers (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1986). This need for regulation emphasized the broadly accepted concept of face and of Face-Threatening Act (FTA) which have been examined in the complaint context (Reiter, 2005; Lerman, 2006).

In Goffman's (1959) face theory, exchange participants seek to simultaneously defend their personal territory and give a positive image of themselves. Territory relates to how a person uses space and time to create distance from others; they can be spatial, temporal, or material. Brown and Levinson (1978) built upon Goffman's concept of territory to define what they call negative and positive faces. Positive face was defined as "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants". Negative face was defined as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (p. 66). In other words, positive face is the need to create a positive public image, while negative face is the need to have our personal liberties respected.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness is used as a strategy to reformulate an unavoidable FTA. In a complaint setting, face theory suggests that firms will defend their ethos in being consensual and adapt their responses to the customer's communication (Maingueneau, 2000). Most complaint interactions occur between two protagonists; thus, four faces should be considered: the positive and negative faces of the firm and those of the customer. Based on definitions of positive and negative faces, (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Van Mulken 1996; Enache and Popa, 2008) Table 1 gives examples of concrete FTAs in a complaint setting.

Based on these assumptions, we surmise that if the consumer perceives FTAs, perceptions of the firm's politeness will decrease; conversely, if the firm accepts threatening its own faces (for the relationship), the consumers' perception of politeness will increase. Therefore we hypothesize:

H2: If customers' faces are threatened, perceptions of politeness will decrease.

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Table 1 about here



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### Grice's Maxims in a complaint setting

To successfully communicate, parties must cooperate. This is essential. Grice (1975) identified four cooperation principles underlying all successful communication:

- The maxim of *quality* ensures that a contribution is true to the best of the person's knowledge.
- The maxim of *quantity* controls the amount of information given. It is enough, but not too much.
- The maxim of *relevance* states that the response should be pertinent to the discussion.
- The maxim of *manner* points to clarity, avoidance of ambiguity and obscure expressions, and brevity.

Maximum communication efficiency is reached when the speaker adheres to these maxims and ensures appropriate conversational timing so as to be fully and immediately understood (Stewart 1992). A speaker may lean heavily on one maxim (Fraser 1990), and all maxims may not be fulfilled at all times by all speakers. However, Grice assumes that they are always observed and that failure to do conveys an implicit message of its own.

Hence we propose:

H3: Achieving the Maxims of Grice has a positive impact on the perception of politeness.

## Politeness and Professionalism

Creating and maintaining one's public identity involves emitting cues in communication which the hearer can use to formulate an impression. These cues are carefully emitted in the business setting to convey an image of professionalism, despite the nebulosity and multidimensionality of the professionalism construct (Carr and Stefaniak, 2012). Communication skills appear essential for professionalism. For instance, Kutzberg and Naquin (2010) found that email recipients, lacking face-to-face nonverbal information at their disposal when reading the message, are more likely to rely on external cues such as spelling and grammar in evaluating a message and constructing an image of the sender (Adkins and Brasher, 1995). In the company's interest it is therefore vital to have employees with excellent writing skills which help the customer form a positive judgment.

Professionalism is certainly a highly sought-after impression that firms want to leave. Banghart (2013) showed that the perception of professionalism relies on hard skills as well as soft skills that convey the employee's personality. As Carr and Stefaniak (2011) state "The content, structure, and grammar of a message rely on the sender's language abilities, and thereby demonstrate certain identity traits" (p. 406). Politeness and grammaticality are two such cues that can be used to form expectations of professionalism. In their study Carr and Stefaniak (2012) used competence, credibility and organizational prestige to evaluate the professionalism construct. We extend this, with the assertion that:

H4: Perceptions of politeness have a positive impact on professionalism.

## Perception of Politeness and Loyalty

Managing customer dissatisfaction is part of operating a business. Effective resolution of complaints has been shown to improve behavioral intention, customer satisfaction and customer

retention (Hart et al., 1989; Tax et al., 1998). Given the benefits of customer retention on firms' financial metrics, particularly profitability (Halloweel, 1996), firms should pay specific attention to fulfilling loyalty criteria in complaint handling situations. Most authors have shown the indirect path to loyalty, i.e. the influence of politeness on loyalty through satisfaction (e.g. Liao 2007). Divett, Crittenden and Henderson (2003), however, developed a model where loyalty was directly influenced by "approachability" which encompassed the politeness dimension. Other authors like Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) also investigated the direct effect of politeness on loyalty and found a positive correlation. Hence we hypothesize:

H5: The perception of politeness positively influences the loyalty of the complainant

This paper concentrates on a conceptual framework of consumers' perceptions of politeness: antecedents and consequences of politeness. Our proposed framework emphasizes variables like politeness markers, face-threatening-acts, and Grice's maxims. These independent variables have an important impact – as antecedents – on consumers' perception of politeness in a complainant context (H1, H2, H3). Further, politeness shows a positive impact – as a consequence – on professionalism and loyalty (H4, H5). Figure 1 depicts our research framework, which we elaborate based on two studies in the following sections:

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Figure 1 about here

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STUDY 1

Research indicates that inappropriate response to a customer's complaint is likely to have very negative consequences on the firm: decreased customer satisfaction, decreased loyalty and negative word-of-mouth (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Magnini, Ford, Markowski & Honeycutt Jr. 2007; Michel & Meuter, 2008). When interacting with a complaining customer, employees need to adapt their speech register, manage their emotions and be polite. However, this logical recommendation is not applied consistently and employees frequently show aggressive and impolite behaviors towards customers (Grandey 2003, Reynold and Harris 2006; Fisk et al. 2010). Study 1 aims to highlight appropriate and inappropriate communication behaviors in a complaint setting that will increase a customer's perception of politeness. Therefore study 1 will address:

- H1: Markers of politeness in a complaint exchange have a positive impact on the perception of politeness of the complainant.
- H2: If customer's faces are threatened by a face-threatening-act (FTA) perception of politeness will decrease.
- H3: Achieving the Maxims of Grice has a positive impact on the perception of politeness.

## METHOD

### Data Collection

Our analysis uses a culturalist model of politeness (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1994), drawn from Brown and Levinson (1978), where the politeness and cooperation principles are clearly differentiated. Complaints remain cooperation exchanges despite their inherent conflict. Politeness as a verbal strategy allows consensus-seeking and permits smooth dialogue (Bradley, Sparks, McKoll-Kennedy, Jimmieson, and Zapf, 2010). Politeness should be studied within the appropriate context (Simonin, 2010) and therefore we propose to use Study 1 to verify our hypotheses 1-3 based on our conceptual model (Figure 1). Hypotheses 4 and 5 will be checked with Study 2.

For this study, we performed a quantitative discourse analysis on naturally occurring text from an Internet forum where firms and complainants interact. Text was numerically coded and statistical tests were run on the data. Using online forums as a source of primary data for research is a well-accepted practice, and has been used in a complaint setting (Harrison-Walker 2001). The exchanges on such forums can be used for a content analysis (McAlister and Erffmeyer 2003). The online forum we chose is managed by a non-profit organization whose goal is helping customers get unresolved complaints addressed. Whenever a complaint is posted, the association acts as intermediary and invites companies to post replies online.

The initial sample comprised 19,117 exchanges between French companies and their complainants in the French language. Both researchers are fluently bi-lingual, so no translations were needed. We identified 226 active accounts. Because companies tend to give homogenous complaint responses, we reduced the sample to one exchange per company (Mattson et al., 2004; McLaren, 2001). Finally, we removed all responses that were not in French, were not addressing a complaint, or were sent after the complaint had been resolved. We ended up with 184 exploitable answers. Table 2 shows the industry breakdown of our sample which was spread across the industrial segments with a special focus on e-commerce platforms and IT and telecommunication.

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Table 2 about here  
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The purpose of the discourse analysis was to qualify firms' usage of relevant politeness concepts. To achieve this, we coded the exchanges based on the dimensions identified in the literature: six marks of politeness as defined by Mattsson et al. (2004) and Dickinger and Bauernfeind (2009); compliance with Grice's four maxims (1975); and presence of the four FTA possibilities (Brown and Levinson 1978). We also added FTAs for the firm's representative to reflect our finding

(conform to Dickinger & Bauernfeind, 2009) that responses tended to mix the use of we/us/our and I. In total, we coded 16 different variables (referred to as “items”) within three dimensions which represent the independent variables of our conceptual model (see Figure 1). Table 3 shows the variables and their respective dimensions.

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Table 3 about here  
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### Data Analysis

Our goal was to determine how politeness might best be conceptualized. We sought to assess the correlations between 16 independent variable items and perceived politeness. The 16 independent items belonged to the three theories outlined in the literature review: markers of politeness, Theory of Face, Maxims of Grice.

To obtain this measurement, we rated each of the 184 firms’ responses on how ‘polite’ they were. For each of the 184 responses, the overall degree of politeness was assessed using a double-blind rating of perceived politeness on a 5-point Likert scale (Cherry, 1988; Lerman, 2006; Burke and Kraut, 2008), with 1 representing impolite and 5 representing very polite. Two native French-speaking undergraduate research assistants each rated all responses. To avoid any bias, we provided only practical instructions on how to rate the answers, but not as to what the definition of politeness was or what the purpose of the study was (Jansen and Janssen 2010). The two students received the 184 non-identifiable responses on individual sheets of paper. Responses had been edited for consistency of font and color presentation, but otherwise retained the original forum formatting (e.g. capitalization). We achieved an initial inter-rater correlation of 0.84. Differences in coding between the two authors were resolved through discussion (Taylor 1999).

The binary nature of the independent variables invalidates the use of a linear regression method and requires that a Logit regression be used (Mattsson et al., 2004). The calculations were performed with Stata.

## RESULTS

Each reviewer evaluated each of the 184 responses for its overall politeness level/along each of 16 politeness antecedents. Results of politeness assessments are below.

### Common marks of politeness

Salutations and closings were used almost systematically in the sample (84%; 70%). The name of the company is mentioned in our sample only in 45% of the cases. Customers' names were used 18% of the time, and customers were thanked in 15% of responses.

### Face-threatening acts

Customers' positive faces were threatened 43% of the time. In other words, the company criticised the customer, refuted the customer's claim, or used irony or ridiculed the customer (Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann, 2003). The company asked the customer to perform an action 36% of the time, which is a negative fact threat (Enache & Poppa, 2008).

Fifty-three percent of the firms' responses (item 9) contained an apology which represented a willing FTA to the firm's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Thus, in 47% of the answers, the firm did not apologise for the customer's problem. Also, 50% of the responses contained no promise (item 10) that would threaten the firm's negative face.

Finally, 45% of the answers contained both we/us/our and I. In 21% of those answers mixing the first persons singular and plural, did the firm's representative apologise (item 11); in 42% the employee made a promise (item 12).

### Maxims of Grice

In a complaint setting, cooperation is unbalanced from the beginning since the customer expects resolution; the customer has the right to be less cooperative. The company, on the other hand, has to satisfy the client although the complaint itself threatens both of its faces.

Maximally cooperative communication exchanges follow Gricean maxims: they are true, brief, relevant, and clear. Companies flout the maxim of quality (truth) in implying the customer is not telling the truth, or in making untrue or difficult-to-verify claims. Unnecessarily long answers flout the maxim of quantity (brevity). Failing to address the complaint's subject violates the maxim of relation (relevance). The maxim of manner (clarity) is violated when companies' responses are less than clear.

Although most company responses fulfill the maxim of quality (90%) and of manner (85%), more than one-fourth of the answers violated the maxims of quantity and relevance (26%; 27%). In particular, firms flout the maxim of quantity when they produce lengthy answers with records of detailed facts as an answer to a complaint which was itself based on factual and detailed arguments. Even more intriguing is the fact that only 73% of firms' answers are relevant (maxim of relation), indicating that 27% of the responses failed to address the very subject of the complaint. This is particularly problematic as relevance is considered the most important maxim (Sperber and Wilson, 1989).

### Hypotheses



Table 4 illustrates the logistic regression results. In sum, a Log Likelihood of -171.46 and a McFadden Pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.3099 were obtained.

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Table 4 about here  
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Out of six politeness markers H1, the measure of the effect of politeness markers on perceived politeness, is only validated for item 3 - the "closing phrase". It shows, unremarkably, a correlation of 0.89 ( $p=0.018$ ). All other markers of politeness were not significantly correlated to the response. This is not really a surprise. In the culturalist approach, where the very context is taken into account to evaluate the politeness strategies between the speaker and the hearer, expectations of these markers would be lower and the recipient's (complainant's) emphasis is on other dimensions. In online communication channels, relevance of common markers of politeness adjusts for the online context.

H2, investigating the correlation between Face-Threatening-Acts (FTAs) and perceived politeness, is confirmed for the customer's positive face, with a high and statistically very significant coefficient of -1.2677 ( $p=0.003$ ). This shows that firms criticizing customers or using insulting irony in their responses expose themselves to negative politeness perceptions. Although this may seem intuitive, the results show that 43% of firms' answers contain a FTA of this type. Review of these two results questions the satisfaction policy claimed by most firms and highlights most companies' lack of guidelines for responding to complaints.

H2 is not confirmed for the customer's negative face. The coefficient of 0.7358 ( $p=0.036$ ) is positive, indicating perceived politeness increases with a threat of the customer's negative face (e.g. telling the customer to take some action). Although counterintuitive for most contexts, this result can be explained by the very nature of the threats. Most firms requested information from the customer to research the origin of the problem. Customers could perceive this as the firm's effort to

resolve the complaint. Research indicates effort is positively correlated to customer satisfaction, possibly explaining the correlation (Tax et al. 1998).

Regarding the firm representative's positive face, H2 is validated, resulting in a positive and very significant correlation of 1.6016 ( $p=0.008$ ). No significant correlation could be found for the firm's faces and the firm representative's negative face. Hypothesis 3, asserting that achieving the maxims of Grice is positively correlated to perceived politeness, could only be validated for the maxim of manner (clarity) with a high, but not quite statistically significant correlation of 1.0458 at  $p=0.051$ . This result underpins the importance of providing clear answers to complaining customers and to respect the principle of cooperation even in situations where the lack of objectivity on the part of the customer may impede his perception.

## STUDY 2

Given the threat that public discussion in general and complaints in particular can pose to a company's reputation and sales (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009; Amblee and Bui, 2011; Hajili, Lin, Featherlan, & Wang, 2014), firms must produce complaint responses that both satisfy the complainant and do not put the firm's financial metrics at stake, while still conveying a positive image to other potential customers that are likely to read it.

Study 2 proposes to fill the research gap about individuals' perceptions formed on the basis of a "socially impoverished source" such as an online firm's answer to a customer complaint (McAndrew & De Jonge, 2011). In particular, study 2 measures the influence of politeness on customers' assessments of a firm's professionalism (H4) and on repurchase intention (H5).

## METHOD

### Survey design

A paper-based survey methodology offers the optimal route for exploring H4 and H5. Given that students do not complain in ways that are different compared to other populations (Bolkan, Griffin and Goodboy, 2014), we chose to carry out the survey with a sample of 429 undergraduate students from major Belgian university in the French language.

We instructed participants to assume that they had made an online purchase and had already complained because they had not received their order. Each respondent was presented with two actual responses (one assessed as very polite, one as very impolite) from Study 1 (Jessmer & Anderson, 2001) with an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 1.0.

For each response, participants were asked to fill out a survey questionnaire consisting of seventeen politeness-related statements. These statements were borrowed from other politeness surveys in the extant literature. The satisfaction and loyalty items were taken from Conlon and Murray (1996); credibility was assessed using items from Flanagin and Metzger (2000); and competence was measured using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) 6-item scale. We employed a questionnaire (Appendix A) using 7-point scales to collect measures for the main construct, professionalism, which we broached through assessments of credibility and competence (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). No time constraints were set and the task was usually completed in less than 10 minutes.

The questionnaire was administered in the French language. Questions were derived directly from existing research and translated into French by the main author, who is fluently bilingual in French and English. Questions were they back-translated to English by an uninvolved party to ensure translation accuracy. We pilot-tested the questionnaire and modified it as appropriate, adjusting for language-related comprehension issues.

Data Analysis

A systematic analytical approach was followed using SAS 9.3. First, descriptive statistics were run to better understand distribution of variables. Given the quantitative design and the nature of the variables included, the ANOVA model was deployed using a General Linear Model (GLM) approach in SAS using Proc GLM. ANOVA assumptions were tested prior to fitting. The normality assumption was tested for each variable and appeared normally distributed for each category. Descriptive by categories helped assess the assumption that population variances were equal. Given similar variances, the assumption was deemed to be met. Models were then fit separately for the three dependent variables of interest (credibility, loyalty, and competence). Multiple mean comparisons were performed to assess differences across conditions. A Tukey adjustment was employed to control for Type I error. Results are presented in Table 5.

## Results

Study 2 sought to test Hypotheses 4 and 5. Hypothesis 4 proposed that perceptions of politeness have a positive impact on professionalism. The conceptualization of professionalism was based on both competence on and credibility. Hypothesis 5 proposed that perceived politeness will correlate positively with repeat business.

Mean differences in competence items are highly significantly positive at  $p < 0.0001$  for all items. The differences range from 0.70 in item 4 (“accurate” vs. “inaccurate”) to 1.41 for item 9 (“incompetent” vs. “competent”). All items support a positive correlation between the level of politeness of the firm and its perceived level of competence ( $5.67 \leq t \text{ values} \leq 11.05$ ).

Mean differences in credibility items were all positive and highly significant at  $p < 0.0001$ . The effect of the question on the perception of competence varies substantially: whereas for item 4 (accuracy) the effect is only 0.70, it goes up to 1.86 for item 6 (bias). Not all items seem to contribute equally to the perception of credibility. Item 6 results indicate that respondents give particular value to the absence of bias in a company’s response and rely on this absence of bias as a strong indicator

for perceived credibility. Despite the differences in values between the different items, the direction of all mean differences is consistent. The positive effects of politeness on perceived credibility and perceived competence provide support for H4.

Hypothesis 5 proposed to test the positive correlation between perceived politeness and loyalty. ANOVA tests on the loyalty items show positive mean differences in both cases between the “low politeness” and “high politeness” situations. In the low-politeness condition the mean of item 1 is 1.85 and 1.83 for item 12. In the high-politeness condition the mean of item 1 is 3.54 and 3.15 for item 12. The mean differences are respectively 1.69 and 1.32 for items 1 and 12, and both differences are significant at  $p < 0.0001$ . Therefore conclude that the politeness of the firm’s answer is positively correlated with the satisfaction and loyalty of the customer. Hence, H5 is supported.

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Table 5 about here  
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## CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Past research has acknowledged justice theory as a reference framework for the study of complaining behavior (Davidow 2003; Homburg et al. 2010). The importance of interactional justice in general, and politeness (one of its components) in particular, has been shown to have a significant impact upon post-complaint satisfaction (Dickinger & Bauernfeind 2009; Mattsson et al. 2004; Orsingher et al. 2010). Yet, past research has largely focused on the consumers’ side and has used consumers’ perceptions to approach antecedents of post-complaint satisfaction (e.g. Tax et al. 1998). Therefore, an understanding of how those perceptions are formed is missing. We addressed this gap in Study 1. Moreover, besides the post-complaint satisfaction, few researchers have explored the other direct effects produced by politeness. In study 2 we investigated and confirmed the

correlations between politeness and perceived professionalism on the one hand, and loyalty on the other hand.

The results of Study 1 show that apologizing and producing clear and understandable answers are better and statistically more significant strategies than using common markers to increase politeness perceptions. The highly negative effect of criticism indicates that perceived politeness can be greatly increased when firms refrain from threatening the customer's positive face. These are important findings for firms when answering customer complaints.

From an analytical viewpoint, our findings show some convergence with previous research conducted on letters (Mattsson et al. 2004, Dickinger and Bauernfeind 2009) but also some major differences. In particular, our sample shows that companies seldom use the customer's name or pseudonym in the salutation and even more rarely thank the customer for the complaint. The online forum, which remains informal and conveys lower expectations of politeness markers (Marruccia, 2005), can account for this. We also hypothesized that the cultural context may play a role; in US culture (Dickinger and Bauernfeind, 2009), companies acknowledge more easily than in Europe (van Mulken and van der Meer, 2005).

For Grice's cooperation principle, we found that firms regularly flout Grice's maxims. The high rate of relation violations (27%) puts the very outcome of the complaint at risk. Further, any violation of cooperation efforts is bound to frustrate the receiving party. In a complaint situation, this is adding insult to injury.

Despite the general usage of some commonly accepted forms of politeness, we find that firms frequently threaten customers' faces and try to preserve their faces as much as possible. Jansen and Janssens (2010) observation that firms must maintain the balance between "keeping the client happy and preserving the image of the organization" applies here. This behavior is particularly damaging in the online context since the threats to the customer's faces are public, which contributes to a negative firm reputation. Our study suggests that firms' actual practices do not reflect "satisfaction guaranteed" policies.

Regarding consequences of politeness, as assessed in Study 2, we find that politeness is used by customers to form an opinion about the firm's representative but also to decide on whether or not to stay loyal to the firm as a whole. We show that politeness both enables the complainant to infer the firm's professionalism, and influences his/her willingness to repurchase from the company (Chebat and Slusarczyk, 2005; Dayant, Al-Tamini, & Elhadji, 2008).

At the individual level, politeness is positively correlated with the perceived credibility and competence of the firm's representative. As mentioned by Davidow (2003) in the act of complaining the consumer wants to assess "the credibility of the organization [...], thus potentially increasing his or her satisfaction from the response" (p 242). The personification of the company in the eyes of the complainant probably leads to a superposition of the firm's representative perception and of the perception of the firm as a whole. Maintaining a professional image towards the outer world (and in particular towards future customers) is of utmost importance. Attending to politeness is an effective way of demonstrating credibility and enhancing customers' perceptions.

We also show that a lack of politeness is perceived by the customer as a lack of respect, hence threatening his/her positive face. Finally, politeness is also used to form expectations about the outcome of the complaint and in particular whether the handling process will be satisfactory in the eyes of the complainant.

The perceived justice framework has long been acknowledged in examining complaining behaviors and the outcome of complaint handling practices. Several studies have shown the role of interactional justice on post-complaint satisfaction. Our findings align with these conclusions and show in particular that politeness, as a component of interactional justice, is correlated with repurchase intention. By assessing quantitatively how perceptions of politeness are formed in the customer's minds, we bring a first partial confirmation of the "Postcomplaint Customer Behavior Responses Model" proposed by Davidow (2003, p. 247). First of all, our proposed conceptualization of perceived politeness in a complaint setting (Study 1) allows us to enhance the understanding of the relationship between the "personal interaction" component of the "organizational response"

construct on the one hand, and the “perceived justice” construct on the other hand, leading to consider Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) as the most significant predictor of politeness within interactional justice. Second, we show that the consumer’s response evaluation is not limited to satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Possible direct effects (perceived professionalism, loyalty) are confirmed in Study 2. These facets are important because they may affect the continued relationship with the firm.

These findings are a step toward addressing Homburg and Fürst (2005; 2007) and Homburg et al. (2010) calls for better managerial guidance. Regarding the antecedents of politeness in a complaint setting, our research suggests that managers should better pay attention to avoiding FTAs than relying on common markers to increase the perceived politeness of their complaint responses. Depending on the cultural context, managers could in particular teach employees how to avoid criticism and refusal of customers’ arguments, and encourage them to apologise in their own name. Employees should also be taught how to respect the cooperation principle and more precisely how to produce clear answers that can be easily understood even under emotional circumstances.

For companies operating in a B2C context and likely to be criticized in online forums, these conclusions matter. The openness of online forums and their influence on the purchase decisions of others should motivate firms to create a positive public image of themselves. This positive image can be constructed in a non-complaint setting where consumers ask questions and look for quick answers, but also in online places where dissatisfied consumers complain. Using politeness to counterbalance dissatisfaction and underlying aggressiveness is an efficient way to keep customers loyal and convey an image of professionalism. This image is likely to be perceived as such by other readers and to influence their purchase decisions.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH



First, politeness is culture- and language-based. The exchanges we examined were in French, so the results apply only to the French language and culture. Research performed in another cultural setting would certainly help account for international differences.

Second, the differences between our research and Dickinger and Bauernfeind (2009) also suggest that the medium used for answering a complaint (letter vs. email) influences the formalization and the expectations in terms of politeness. Our results are therefore limited to online communications and complaint settings, suggesting that a broader look should be taken at firms' complaint-handling practices that include CMC, the medium of choice for many today.

Third, the results are limited to the scope of one particular dimension of interactional justice. They however do not give the order of magnitude of politeness of loyalty and professionalism when compared to other dimensions. It would therefore be of interest to apply the justice theory framework in its entirety to determine which dimensions are the most efficient to leverage.

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Threatening act for	<b>Negative face</b>	<b>Positive face</b>
<b>Firm</b>	<p>The negative face of the firm can be threatened by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making a promise to the customer</li> <li>• Accept an offer made by the customer</li> <li>• Making an offer reluctantly to the customer</li> </ul>	<p>The positive face of the firm can be threatened by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confessing a previous FTA</li> <li>• Accepting a compliment</li> <li>• Confessing guiltiness</li> <li>• Apologizing</li> <li>• Acknowledging the customer's complaint</li> <li>• Not controlling one's own reaction or emotions</li> </ul>
<b>Customer</b>	<p>The negative face of the customer can be threatened by a firm's :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request to provide evidence and factual information</li> <li>• Ban on the customer to do something</li> </ul>	<p>The positive face of the customer can be threatened by the firm through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticism of the customer's behaviour or arguments</li> <li>• Irony</li> <li>• Reproaches</li> <li>• Mocking</li> </ul>

Table 1. The dimensions of positive and negative faces for the firm and for the complainant (adapted from Brown and Levinson, 1987; Van Mulken 1996; Enache and Popa, 2008)

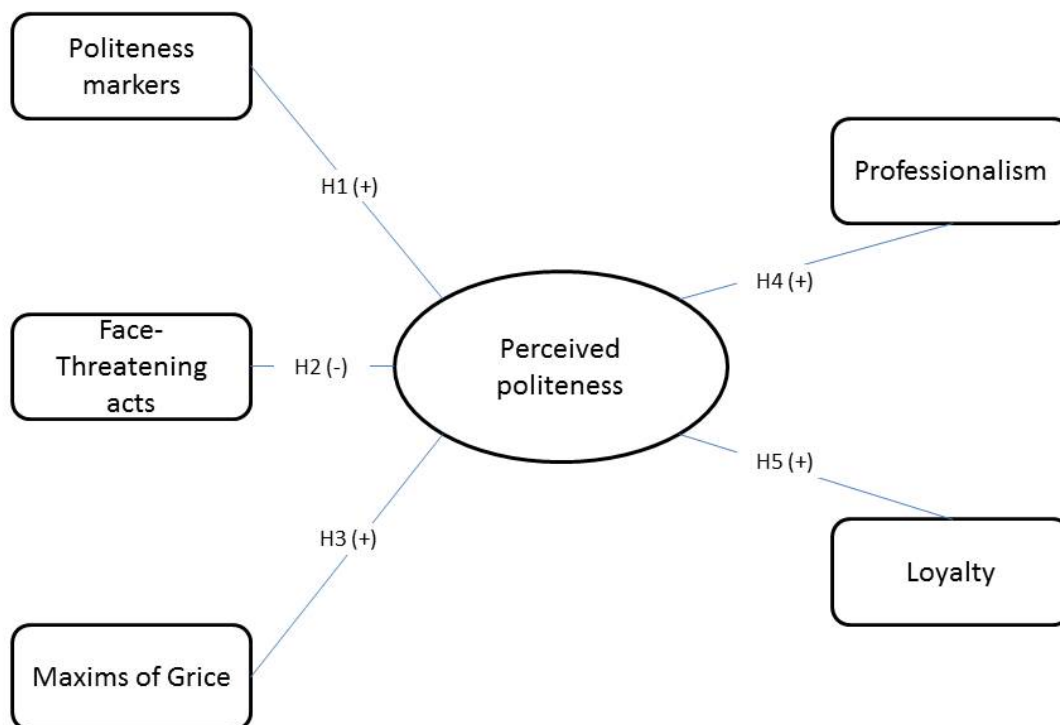


Figure 1: Conceptual model antecedents and consequences of politeness

Industry	%
Automotive	2,65
Bank & Insurance	2,65
Construction	3,10
e-Commerce Platform	23,55
Energy	0,44
Furniture & Appliances	9,73
Hotel	0,44
IT & Telecommunication	19,91
Leisure	8,85
Pharmacy	2,65
Real Estate	0,88
Other	2,65
Retail	22,57%

Table 2. Industry Breakdown

Dimension		Item°	Mean	S.D
Politeness Markers				
	Salutation	1	.84	.365
	Name of the customer or pseudonym	2	.18	.389
	Closing phrase	3	.71	.457
	“Thank you” or equivalent	4	.15	.355
	Identity of the company’s representative	5	.45	.498
	Identity of the company	6	.45	.498
FTA				
	FTA for customer’s positive face	7	.43	.497
	FTA for customer’s negative face	8	.36	.482
	FTA for firm’s positive face	9	.52	.501
	FTA for firm’s negative face	10	.51	.501
	FTA for firm’s representative’s positive face	11	.10	.305
	FTA for firm’s representative’s negative face	12	.24	.431
Maxims of Grice				
	“Be Brief” (Maxim of quantity)	13	.74	.440
	“Be True” (Maxim of quality)	14	.89	.312
	“Be Relevant” (Maxim of relation)	15	.72	.449
	“Be Clear” (maxim of manner)	16	.85	.355

Table 3. Dimensions, variables, mean, standard deviation and Cronbach Alpha

Criteria	Item no.	Logit regression	
		Coefficient	P
Salutation	1	-0.5082872	0.25
Name of the customer or pseudonym	2	0.0370948	0.928
Closing phrase	3	0.8991231	0.018**
“Thank you” or equivalent	4	-0.0800534	0.869
Identity of the company’s representative	5	-0.0130702	0.967
Identity of the company	6	0.2290661	0.498
FTA for customer’s positive face	7	-1.267728	0.003***
FTA for customer’s negative face	8	0.7358564	0.036**
FTA for firm’s positive face	9	0.514153	0.181
FTA for firm’s negative face	10	0.3075718	0.367
FTA for firm’s representative’s positive face	11	1.601635	0.008***
FTA for firm’s representative’s negative face	12	0.6025905	0.133
“Be Brief” (Maxim of quantity)	13	0.3298832	0.469
“Be True” (Maxim of quality)	14	0.6575666	0.267
“Be Relevant” (Maxim of relation)	15	-0.2816236	0.468
“Be Clear” (maxim of manner)	16	1.045841	0.051*

Table 4. Results of the Logit regression (N = 226,  $p < .10^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$ )

Level of politeness	Variable label	credibility scale (Flanagin & Metzger 2000)	Competence scale (McCroskey & Teven's 1999)	Loyalty scale (Conlon & Murray 1996)	Mean	S.D.	Mean Difference	T Value	P value
HIGH	IT1			x	3,54	1,90	1,69	14,13	<.0001
LOW					1,85	1,57			<.0001
HIGH	IT2	x			4,30	1,67	1,43	11,1	<.0001
LOW					2,87	2,04			<.0001
HIGH	IT3	x			3,67	2,10	1,02	7,39	<.0001
LOW					2,65	1,91			<.0001
HIGH	IT4	x			3,73	1,84	0,70	5,29	<.0001
LOW					3,03	2,02			<.0001
HIGH	IT5	x			3,61	1,66	1,13	9,75	<.0001
LOW					2,48	1,71			<.0001
HIGH	IT6	x			4,15	1,65	1,86	15,68	<.0001
LOW					2,29	1,78			<.0001



HIGH	IT7		x		3,95	1,88	1,18	9,19	<.0001
LOW					2,77	1,86			<.0001
HIGH	IT8		x		4,01	1,78	0,71	5,67	<.0001
LOW					3,30	1,88			<.0001
HIGH	IT9		x		3,99	1,78	1,41	11,5	<.0001
LOW					2,58	1,78			<.0001
HIGH	IT10		x		3,90	1,69	0,96	8,02	<.0001
LOW					2,94	1,78			<.0001
HIGH	IT11		x		3,74	2,01	1,08	7,81	<.0001
LOW					2,66	1,99			<.0001
HIGH	IT12			x	3,15	1,89	1,32	11,02	<.0001
LOW					1,83	1,59			<.0001

Table 5. Descriptive statistics, mean, standard deviation and results of the ANOVA of Study 2 (N = 429)