

Online Complaint Handling: The Effects of Politeness and Grammaticality upon Perceived Professionalism and Loyalty

Pierre-Nicolas Schwab and Sandra Rothenberger

Positioned within the context of online complaint-handling, the present study aimed to examine the potentially mediating role of perceived professionalism in the relationships between message content (grammaticality) and form (politeness) on the one hand and customer loyalty on the other. A path analysis revealed that: (1) grammaticality impacts upon loyalty indirectly through the message recipients' perceptions of the credibility and competence of the sender; (2) politeness impacts upon loyalty directly as well as indirectly through the message recipients' perceptions of the credibility and competence of the sender, and (3) both perceptions of credibility and perceptions of competence strongly (positively) impact upon customer loyalty. These findings suggest that in an on-line, text-based complaint-handling context, the perceived professionalism of firm representatives plays a key explanatory role in the relationship between message form and content on the one hand and consumers' repurchase intentions on the other. Implications for practitioners are discussed and recommendations formulated to better handle complaints enhance odds of repurchase intentions.

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**ONLINE COMPLAINT HANDLING: THE EFFECTS OF POLITENESS AND GRAMMATICALITY
UPON PERCEIVED PROFESSIONALISM AND LOYALTY**

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ABSTRACT

Positioned within the context of online complaint-handling, the present study aimed to examine the potentially mediating role of perceived professionalism in the relationships between message content (grammaticality) and form (politeness) on the one hand and customer loyalty on the other. A path analysis revealed that: (1) grammaticality impacts upon loyalty indirectly through the message recipients' perceptions of the credibility and competence of the sender; (2) politeness impacts upon loyalty directly as well as indirectly through the message recipients' perceptions of the credibility and competence of the sender, and (3) both perceptions of credibility and perceptions of competence strongly (positively) impact upon customer loyalty. These findings suggest that in an on-line, text-based complaint-handling context, the perceived professionalism of firm representatives plays a key explanatory role in the relationship between message form and content on the one hand and consumers' repurchase intentions on the other. Implications for practitioners are discussed and recommendations formulated to better handle complaints enhance odds of repurchase intentions.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase in online firm-customer interactions and a gradual transition from a dependence upon traditional email exchanges to more innovative conversations via a wide range of social media tools. This ever-increasing use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in firm-customer interactions poses communication issues that McAndrew and De Jonge (2011) describe as “perhaps unique in human history” (p. 403). Although the popularity of CMC voice communication such as Skype and other forms of Voice-over-Internet Protocol (‘VoIP’) has increased in recent years, text-based CMC enjoys historical precedence and remains the most popular form of computer-mediated communication (Herring 2010). However, since this mode of CMC—whether enacted privately (for example, via email) or publicly (for example, via web sites)—is void of the contextual cues that enable individuals to fully assess the thoughts and feelings of the sender (Adkins and Brashers 1995; Menchik and Tian 2008), the recipient must process information from a socially impoverished source and form perceptions on the basis of written cues only (McAndrew and De Jonge 2011).

In the context of complaint management, customers’ perceptions concerning firms’ responses to complaints are of critical importance, since they determine the customer’s overall satisfaction with the firm and, ultimately, customer loyalty (see, for example, Maxham III and Netemeyer 2002; Van Vaerenbergh, Lariviere and Vermeir 2012). Firms must, therefore, understand which message cues impact upon customers’ loyalty behaviors in order that they may use them to their advantage. Whether in an online or offline context, the most influential written cues that recipients rely upon when forming an impression of the sender are grammar and spelling (McAndrew and De Jonge 2011). These language attributes are aspects of message *content* and influence impression formation, especially message recipients’ perceptions of the professionalism of the sender (Carr and Stefaniak 2012; English, Manton and Walker 2007; Jacobson 1999; Jessmer and Anderson 2001; Liu and Ginther 2001). In addition to the role of message content, the *form* of the message—that is, whether the customer is addressed politely or not—is also expected to be influential. Politeness is a critical aspect of customer-firm interactions and is an

inherent part of service quality (Parasuraman, Zithalm and Berry, 1988; Avkiran 1999; Winsted 2000; Lloyd and Luk 2011); it has been shown to be directly associated with customer loyalty (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005; Dayan, Al-Tamimi, and Elhadji, 2007) and is one of the desired qualities of professionals in complaint settings (Gruber, Szmigin, and Voss 2009).

To date, no research has simultaneously examined the effects of message form (politeness) and message content (grammaticality) in an online complaint setting. Moreover, the importance of perceived professionalism for customer loyalty has received scant research attention, despite evidence to suggest that establishing loyalty is the key strategic goal of firms in today's competitive business environment (Oliver 2009). The present study aimed to examine how the content (grammaticality) and form (politeness) of a firm's response to a complaint influences the customer's perceptions and repurchase intention. The present authors address this aim by conducting a field experiment and subjecting the data to a PATH analysis. In order to arrive at causal inferences, grammaticality and politeness are manipulated and their effects upon perceived professionalism and loyalty are assessed.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Complaint management

Since mistakes are an avoidable aspect of all human endeavor and, thus, also of service delivery (Boshoff, 1997), complaints from customers are inevitable. Effective complaint management—the process by which complaints are handled and customers recovered (Johnston 2001)—is critical for company growth and sustainability, since good complaint processes reduce negative emotions (Wen and Chi 2013), result in increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gelbrich and Roschk 2010) and, ultimately, lead to enhanced financial performance (Johnston 2001).

Current recommendations for complaint-handling are predominantly based upon findings from research conducted within the traditional—offline—complaint-handling context. These recommendations address the three dimensions of the justice theory framework: *distributive justice*—the complainant's perception of the outcome of the complaint process; *procedural justice*—the procedures that frame the complaint handling process; and *interactional justice*—the complainant's perception that he or she has been treated with dignity

and respect. One might wonder, however, whether the managerial recommendations from the past still apply in the current era of advanced electronic technology, and whether some dimensions of complaint handling are now more important than others in driving customer loyalty. Specifically, attributes of interactional justice are likely to be especially important in the context of on-line text-based messages where impressions of the sender are automatically formed on the basis of written cues alone (Antheunis, Schouten, Velkenburg, and Peter 2012; Tidwell and Walther 2002; Walther, Loh, and Granka 2005; Spitzberg 2006). In text-based CMC, therefore, customers may pay more attention to the writing skills and politeness of firm representatives than to distributive and procedural elements of justice.

2.2. Written communication skills and impression formation

The actions and attitudes of company employees play important roles in corporate image or reputation (Kennedy 1977). Company image involves an alignment between internal and external stakeholders'—that is, employees and customers, respectively—perceptions of a firm (Hatch and Schultz 2001), since “both can be affected and will interact” (Chun 2005). Firm representatives who are in contact with customers thus play a pivotal role in helping to forge the image of the company. In today's complaint-handling context, much of this interaction takes the form of computer-mediated text-based exchanges (for example, e-mails; posts on public forums); consequently, the written communication skills of company representatives likely play a more important role than ever in helping to forge and maintain organizational prestige.

Language in computer-mediated environments possesses unique characteristics that require exploration (Adkins and Brashers 1995): Although electronic messages are used for conversational purposes (Herring 2010), they lack the formality of a letter; they are asynchronous (compared to the synchronous nature of oral conversations), and offer few if any social context cues (Adkins and Brashers 1995; Carnevale and Probst 1997). As with face-to-face (FtF) interactions, evidence suggests that individuals can form very strong perceptions of others via CMC (Hancock and Dunham 2001); CMC can even lead to extreme impressions due to the scarcity of social and interpersonal information (Hancock and Dunham, 2001: 328). Humans do not need all cues present in FtF interactions (for example, non-verbal

cues such as body language and vocal patterns) to form impressions since they can rely upon pre-existing cognitive structures to “fill in their gaps of knowledge about another person” (Switzer 2008: 100). As such, it has been shown that written linguistic style is an important conveyor of cues which influence a wide range of social perceptions in CMC (Adkins and Brashers 1995; Epley and Kruger 2005; Lea and Spears, 1992; Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer 2003; Pennebaker and King 1999), including interpersonal impressions (Adkins and Brashers 1995) and social judgments (Lea and Spears 1992). Adkins and Brashers (1995) showed for example that powerful language elements influence interpersonal impressions, such that the credibility, attraction and persuasiveness of individuals can be increased. Notwithstanding this evidence on the importance of written linguistic cues for impression formation, relatively little research has examined whether and, if so, how elements of written language in the CMC context impact upon customers’ perceptions of firms’ responses to their complaints and their subsequent behavior; moreover, even within the context of communication research, the majority of studies have used researcher-generated linguistic stimuli as opposed to naturally occurring stimuli such as real-life responses to customer complaints (Walther 2007). The present research addresses these gaps.

2.3. Conceptual model and hypotheses

2.3.1. Grammaticality and professionalism in complaint handling communication

Correct spelling, punctuation and grammar are key competencies for effective communication (English et al. 2010) and, thus, critical for front-line personnel who directly communicate with complainants (Waner, 1995). In addition, professionals appear to be aware of the impact of their written communication skills upon the perceptions of message recipients (Banghart 2013; Bergren 2005) and can use these skills to foster favorable impressions in the message recipient (Walther, 1996). Written linguistic skills play an important role in the construction of a professional identity (English, Manton and Walker 2010), and have a significant impact upon the perceptions and judgments of message recipients (English, Manton and Walker 2007; Jacobson 1999; Liu and Ginther, 2001; Switzer 2008). When a message is correct in terms of its content, the message sender is perceived as more professional, more intelligent, and

more employable (Adkins and Brashers 1995; Carr and Stefaniak 2012; Scott et al. 2014). Written communication skills are likely to be especially important in text-based CMC where impressions must be formed upon the basis of language, typographic and chronemic information alone (Walther and Parks 2002); consistent with this reasoning, Switzer (2008) showed that poor grammar and incorrect spelling lower perceptions of professionalism which, in turn, can lead message recipients to regard senders as inappropriate business partners. Theorizing also suggests that the capacity for fostering positive impressions through written linguistic style is potentially infinite in the CMC context, since the sender can change the content and appearance of the message before it is transmitted, spend an unlimited amount of time editing, composing, and controlling 'leakage' of non-deliberate cues (Walther 1996). In sum, there are good grounds—both empirical and theoretical—to anticipate that grammaticality will positively impact upon message recipients' perceptions of the professionalism of firm representatives in the context of on-line complaint-handling. According to Carr and Stefaniak (2012), professionalism is comprised of both credibility and competence, and Eisend (2006) found that credibility and competence were strongly (positively) associated. In light of the foregoing evidence, the following hypotheses are formulated:-

H1 : higher perceptions of competence of a firm's representative will be associated with higher perceptions of credibility;

H2 : the more spelling mistakes and grammatical errors made by a firm's representative, the lower his/her perceived credibility;

H3 : the more spelling mistakes and grammatical errors made by a firm's representative, the lower his/her perceived competence.

2.3.2. The role of politeness in customer–firm interactions

Politeness— which has been measured largely in terms of politeness 'markers', such as 'Good Morning' or 'Thank You'— is an essential element of firm-customer interactions (Gruber et al. 2009; Lloyd and Luk 2011). Politeness prevents the exacerbation of negative feelings in the complainant (Davidow 2003; Tax, Brown and Chandrashekar 1998), induces perceptions of interactional justice (Tax et al. 1998),

and has a significant (positive) impact upon post-complaint satisfaction (Dickinger and Bauernfeind 2009; Mattsson et al. 2004; Orsingher et al. 2010). Conversely, impoliteness can be a significant source of dissatisfaction and complaining behaviors (Bolkan 2007; Cowan and Anthony 2008; Harrisson-Walker 2001; Schwab 2015a; Spurgeon 2001; Sulaiman, Areni and Miller 2009; Wildes and Seo 2001).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is a strategy for managing 'face-threatening acts'. Specifically, impoliteness leads to complaining behaviors from customers because it negatively impacts upon protagonists' 'faces'; politeness, on the other hand, represents respectful treatment aimed at preserving the other's faces. Accumulated empirical evidence generally supports this conceptualization of politeness (Darics 2010; Harrisson 2000; Morand and Ocker 2003; Schwab 2015b; Schwab and Rosier, 2013; Vinagre 2008). For example, in an experiment on group collaboration, Stürmer, Simon and Loewy (2008) found that fairness, neutrality and politeness "fostered collective identification and willingness to contribute to group goals even under conditions where participants received negative performance evaluations from fellow members" (p. 7). Perhaps most importantly within the current context, evidence suggests that politeness is an important conveyor of the professionalism of the message sender (Carr and Stefaniak, 2012; English, Manton, and Walker, 2007; Jessmer and Anderson, 2001) since, as an aspect of the rule-governed system of language, politeness can be more generally characterized as a social norm or expectation for appropriate interactions (Banghart 2013). Indeed, theoretical evidence suggests that the perception of professionalism is based not only upon hard skills (for example, grammaticality) but also 'soft' skills which include, inter alia, politeness or courtesy (Banghart 2013). On the basis of this evidence, the following hypotheses are proposed:-

H4 : the more polite the message, the higher the perception of credibility

H5 : the more polite the message, the higher the perception of competence

2.3.3.Loyalty

Loyalty represents the customer's intention to continue to do business with a firm (de Ruyter and Wetzels 2000) or the customer's 'repurchase intention' (Blodgett, Hill and

Tax 1997), and is the key strategic goal of organizations in today's competitive business environment (Oliver 2009). Loyalty is primarily determined by cumulative satisfaction—that is, the customer's level of overall satisfaction with a product or service (Worsfold, Worsfold and Bradley 2007)—the key driver of which is interactional justice (Gelbrich and Roschk 2012). Affect Control Theory is particularly relevant in the service recovery context and posits that interactional justice strengthens repurchase intentions as a result of its positive impact upon emotion, since customers' behavioral reactions confirm their emotions (del Rio-Lanza, Vazquez-Casielles, and Diaz-Martin 2009; Wen and Chi 2013). Consistent with this theorizing, findings from two studies (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005; Dayan et al. 2008) demonstrated that the influence of interactional justice—which incorporates politeness (Blodgett et al. 1997; Tax et al. 1998)—upon loyalty (versus exit) is partially mediated by positive and negative affect (for example, joy and anxiety, respectively); importantly, findings from both of these studies suggest that of the three justice dimensions, interactional justice is the most important predictor of loyalty-exit intentions. However, neither of these studies included the role of grammaticality in their operationalizations of interactional justice, despite evidence to suggest that perceived language adequacy is a key component of interactional justice (*cf.* Bies and Moag 1986). On the basis of the foregoing evidence, the following hypotheses are generated:-

H6: more grammar and spelling errors in firms' responses to complaints will be associated with less willingness of the customer to remain loyal to the culprit firm;

H7: less politeness in firms' responses to complaints will be associated with less willingness of the customer to remain loyal to the culprit firm.

In their study conducted in an entertainment setting, Tkaczynski and Stokes (2005) found that the majority of the variance in service quality was accounted for by professionalism; findings also revealed that professionalism was a significant (positive) predictor of repurchase intention. This latter finding has been replicated in more recent studies: Mardanov and Ricks (2013) obtained a significant correlation between pharmacists' professionalism and customer loyalty; Bell and Eisingerich (2007) confirmed the positive correlation between professionalism and loyalty in the financial

services industry. In view of the foregoing evidence, the following hypotheses are formulated:-

H8: the higher the perceived credibility of a firm's representative, the higher the complainant's willingness to remain loyal to the company;

H9: the higher the perceived competence of a firm's representative, the higher the complainant's willingness to remain loyal to the company.

The research model derived from the study hypotheses is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1. This model hypothesizes that both grammar and spelling errors and politeness in firms' responses to customer complaints affect the customer's willingness to remain loyal to the culprit company, both directly and indirectly through their associations with perceived professionalism (credibility and competence). Thus, the research model postulates that perceptions of credibility and competence will partially mediate the impacts of both the form (politeness) and content (grammaticality) of a firm's response to a customer's complaint upon customer loyalty.

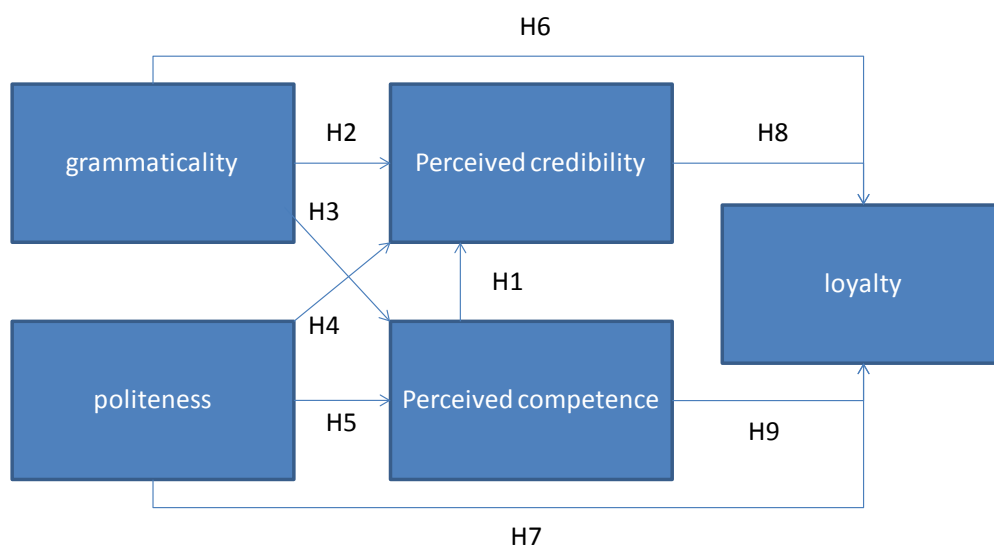


Figure 1. Research model tested

4. Research design

4.1. Participants

A total of 384 undergraduate French-speaking students from different academic disciplines in a major Belgian university volunteered in a cross-sectional questionnaire survey. The mean age of respondents was 23.30 years ($SD = 8.10$) (56.52% female). The first language of the majority of the students (73.48%) was French.

4.2. Procedure and Design

Participants were asked to imagine they had made an online purchase and had subsequently complained because they had not received their order. Respondents were then exposed to two hypothetical online responses to their complaints from the culprit company. These responses corresponded to two levels of politeness (very impolite vs. very polite) and two levels of grammaticality (grammatical vs. ungrammatical). After reading the firms' responses, respondents were asked to indicate both the extent to which the responses were professional and their willingness to repurchase from the culprit firm (both on 7-point Likert scales).

Participants received one of two versions of the questionnaire: The first version included responses to complaints that were very polite/ungrammatical and very impolite/grammatical; the second version included responses to complaints that were very polite/grammatical and very impolite/ungrammatical. Thus, in one condition, high (low) politeness was combined with low (high) grammaticality, and in a second condition, high (low) politeness was combined with high (low) grammaticality. The two versions of the questionnaire were identical in every other respect. The responses utilized were actual responses that had been retrieved and analyzed in the course of the main author's previous research. To optimize validity, two independent raters assessed the politeness of the two responses ("very impolite" versus "very polite"); an inter-rater correlation of 1.0 was obtained. The "very impolite" response was already ungrammatical and was left unedited; the "very polite" response did not contain any grammatical errors. The very impolite response was corrected for use in the "very impolite/grammatical" condition, and the very polite response was edited to include an identical number of grammatical errors as the very impolite/ungrammatical response. Results of a pretest of the four responses among a sample of 62 students of French mother tongue indicated that the messages were perceived as intended. Perceived grammaticality was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= very

ungrammatical; 7= very grammatical). The message manipulated to be 'ungrammatical' was perceived as such ($M = 1.032$; $SD = 0.18$). The message manipulated to be exempt of grammar and spelling mistakes was also recognized as such by all students with the exception of two students who provided the same numerical response to all questions; after removing these biased responses, the mean score for the 'grammatical' message was 6.41 ($SD = 0.87$).

4.3. Measurement instrument

Consistent with Svensson (2006), professionalism was operationalized at the individual level and assessed via a series of statements on 7-point Likert scales. Since professionalism is a multidimensional construct (Carr and Stefaniak 2012), measures of both credibility and competence were utilized (*cf.* Carr and Stefaniak, 2012).

All questionnaire items were adapted from previous research: Credibility was assessed using five items from Flanagin and Metzger (2000); competence was measured using five items from McCroskey and Teven's (1999) scale; repurchase intention (customer loyalty) was assessed via the 2-item scale used by Conlon and Murray (1996). Sample items are: "To what degree do you find the person writing the message to be biased?" (*credibility*); "The person who wrote this response is inexpert / expert " (*competence*); "How would you rate your willingness to do more business with the company in the future?" (*repurchase intention*).

The questionnaire was pretested on small groups of people and items modified where necessary: comprehension problems were largely due to translation issues. One item from the competence scale (evaluation of "bright" vs. "stupid") was removed since respondents could not differentiate between this item and the "intelligent" versus "unintelligent" item.

Respondents were informed that the researchers were interested in their initial reactions and that they should not, therefore, spend too much time evaluating the spelling and grammaticality of the texts (*cf.* Dabrowska 2010). In order to control for the potentially confounding influence of age (*cf.* Burke and Mackay 1997), responses from participants aged 60 years and older were excluded.

5. Results

5.1. Preliminary Analyses

Construct validity was assessed by calculating the loadings of each factor on the underlying constructs. Stevens (2002) recommends that factor loadings exceed 0.4, and Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham (2006) suggest values above 0.5. Since factor loadings ranged from 0.5945 to 0.88, the measured constructs can be regarded as valid (cf. Stevens 2002; Hair et al. 2006). With the exception of three items (4, 6, 8), Cronbach alphas were around or above the threshold of 0.7 suggested by Kline (1999). The descriptives for all study variables are presented in Table 1.

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbac h's α	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Loyalty 1	.67	.93	.73	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Credibility 1	.35	.04	.69	.58	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Credibility 2	.12	.07	.73	.57	.62	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Credibility 3	.37	.96	.59	.43	.53	.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Credibility 4	.02	.77	.75	.60	.60	.68	.53	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Credibility 5	.20	.93	.57	.50	.48	.44	.37	.50	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. Competence 1	.34	.96	.72	.48	.44	.52	.41	.50	.36	-	-	-	-	-
8. Competence 2	.65	.86	.59	.37	.40	.45	.42	.45	.31	.57	-	-	-	-
9. Competence 3	.27	.92	.77	.56	.53	.54	.44	.57	.45	.74	.53	-	-	-
10. Competence 4	.41	.80	.66	.47	.40	.49	.36	.51	.31	.64	.52	.64	-	-
11. Competence 5	.20	.07	.65	.53	.34	.44	.36	.47	.37	.65	.51	.63	.59	-
12. Loyalty 2	.49	.86	.72	.76	.60	.58	.45	.59	.50	.50	.34	.55	.43	.46

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and inter-item correlations for the measured variables

5.2. Test of the proposed model

A path analysis was performed to examine the fit between the proposed research model and the data obtained. A key advantage of path analysis over Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is that hypotheses can be tested concurrently rather than sequentially. Path analysis also enables the researcher to test both direct and mediated relationships between the predictor variables and the outcome variables. The PATH analysis was carried out using SAS 9.3.

5.3. Hypotheses testing

In a first step, all causal paths were evaluated at the 99% confidence level to find possible non-significant paths. In a second step, the non-significant paths were removed and the analysis re-run. At the 99% confidence level only the Grammaticality → Loyalty path (Hypothesis 6) was non-significant. We removed the non-significant grammaticality → loyalty causal path from the model and carried out the analysis once more. The results are presented in Table 2.

	Causal Path	Path Coefficient ($p < 0.01$)	S.E.	t Value	Significant?
1	Grammaticality → Credibility	1.24	0.03	44.48	Yes
2	Grammaticality → Competence	-0.14	0.02	-6.61	Yes
3	Politeness → Credibility	-0.19	0.03	-6.46	Yes
4	Politeness → Competence	0.76	0.03	23.12	Yes
6	Politeness → Loyalty	0.12	0.04	3.38	Yes
7	Credibility → Loyalty	0.56	0.02	23.36	Yes

8	Competence → Loyalty	0.61	0.02	26.83	Yes
9	Competence → Credibility	0.27	0.03	10.44	Yes

Table 2. Results of the second step of the PATH analysis

In the second run, all paths became significant. Figure 2 graphically displays the results of the final PATH analysis. All hypotheses were tested at the 99% confidence level.

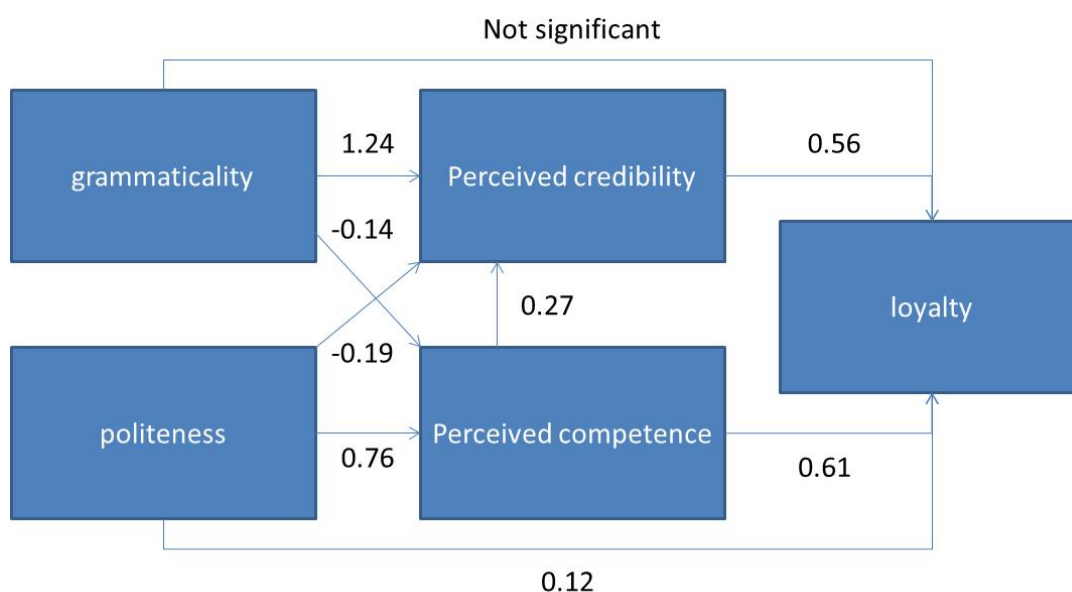


Figure 2. Results of the final path analysis

It is usual to use a series of fit indices to assess the acceptability of the research model. In addition to the ratio of χ^2 to its degree of freedom, we assessed the model on the basis of the following indices (values obtained are indicated between brackets): Goodness of Fit Index GFI (0.9879), Bentler-Bonett NFI (0.9989), Bentler Comparative Fit Index CFI (0.9995), RMSEA (0.0288) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual SRMR (0.0051). The levels of acceptable fit are those proposed by Teo (2010).

6. Discussion

The present study was positioned within an on-line complaint-handling context. Its key aim was to examine the potentially mediating role of perceived professionalism in the relationships between message content (grammaticality) and form (politeness) on the one hand and customer loyalty on the other. A path analysis revealed that: (1) grammaticality impacts upon loyalty only indirectly through both the message recipients' perceptions of the credibility of the sender and their perceptions of the sender's competence; (2) politeness impacts upon loyalty directly as well as indirectly through both message recipients' perceptions of the competence of the sender and their perceptions of the sender's credibility, and (3) both perceptions of credibility and perceptions of competence strongly (positively) impact upon customer loyalty. The key contribution of these findings is that they suggest that in an on-line, text-based complaint-handling context, the perceived professionalism of firm representatives plays a key explanatory role in the relationship between message form and content on the one hand and consumers' repurchase intentions on the other.

Our finding that grammaticality significantly impacted upon perceptions of professionalism replicates findings by Carr and Stefaniak (2012). These authors found that, in the context of electronic communication, grammatical accuracy was positively correlated with the message recipient's perception of the professionalism of the message sender. Importantly, however, findings from the present study expand upon those obtained by Carr and Stefaniak (2012) by showing that grammaticality has differential impacts upon professionalism depending upon how the latter construct is measured: Grammaticality not only has a stronger impact upon perceived credibility than perceived competence, but has a strong positive impact upon the former and a weak *negative* impact upon the latter. This latter finding runs counter to previous research findings (for example, Jessmer and Anderson, 2001). One potential explanation for this latter, contradictory, finding is that the ungrammatical messages were associated with the perception that the message was transmitted via a mobile device which, in turn, led to increased perceptions of competence. Mobile devices serve as a high-warrant cue that the sender is a 'busy business professional' (Koeske, Koeske and Mallinger 1993) and, as such, mitigate the effect of cues of lesser warranting value such as errors in content (Carr and Stefaniak 2012). Thus, participants in the present study may have perceived senders of the ungrammatical messages as more professional because they inferred that these messages had been transmitted from a mobile device. Further research is required in order to explore the role of the

communication medium in the link between message content and perceptions of competence and credibility within the context of on-line complaint handling.

With regard to the influence of politeness upon professionalism, findings from the present study supported predictions with regard to competence but ran counter to predictions with regard to credibility. With regard to the former, more politeness was associated with heightened perceptions of competence; with regard to the latter, more politeness was associated with less (rather than more) credibility. Although the former effect emerged as considerably stronger than the latter (coefficients = 0.76 and -0.19; t -values = 23.11 and 6.46, respectively), it is worth noting that there is evidence to suggest that, relative to impolite text-based messages, polite text-based messages are associated with the perception that the sender is of a lower status (Holmes 1995; Jessmer and Anderson 2001). Since high status individuals are typically regarded as more persuasive than low status individuals (Lee, 1996), our finding that more politeness was associated with less perceived credibility might have been due to participants inferring that senders of the polite messages were of lesser social status than senders of the impolite messages. Further research is needed to test these speculations.

With regard to professionalism, findings from the present study confirmed the prediction that higher perceptions of competence would be associated with higher perceptions of credibility; thus, the more competent a firm's representative is perceived, the more credible he/she will appear in the eyes of the customer. This finding replicates that obtained by Eisend (2006) who found that competence, together with trustworthiness and attraction, is one of the key antecedents of credibility.

7. Managerial recommendations

In today's interactive world, there is a growing tendency for customers to use electronic text-based media to voice their complaints, and for firm representatives to do likewise when handling complaints. Since text-based CMC is void of the social cues that are used to form impressions and make judgments in FtF contexts, it is critical that firms understand the roles played by the form and content of their electronic text-based responses to customer complaints.

Findings from the present study suggest some potentially important implications for practitioners. To increase repurchase intentions of complaining customers, firms should ensure that their answers convey signs of both competence and credibility; the customer uses grammar, spelling and politeness as cues when forming an opinion of the firm's professionalism and deciding whether to

stay loyal. The present findings suggest that perceived credibility is most strongly influenced by message *content* (grammaticality and spelling), whereas perceived competence is most strongly influenced by message *form* (politeness). Thus, customers' perceptions of the competence of firm representatives in the complaint-handling context might be considerably enhanced by firms' utilization of politeness strategies in their responses; on the other hand, customers' perceptions of the credibility of firm representatives might be considerably enhanced by ensuring that on-line text-based responses are accurate in terms of grammar and spelling. Although these recommendations may seem obvious, many firms still fail to ensure accurate or appropriate language in their (electronic) text-based responses to customer complaints (Schwab 2015a). Firms that fail to ensure grammatical accuracy in their responses to customer complaints are potentially placing themselves at risk of losing credibility in the eyes of both existing customers and prospective customers.

Perceptions of competence are a critical driver of customers' purchase decisions and behavior (Adjei, Noble, and Noble 2010; Chen and Dhillon 2003; Lau and Lee 1999) and the present findings relating to politeness suggest that a key way in which firms might instill such perceptions is by ensuring that their responses articulate acceptance of a threat to the face—positive or negative—of the company. To achieve this goal, the response should contain an apology; it should also acknowledge the customer's complaint, avoid displaying emotions or a lack of control, and propose a clear next step and timeframe. The firm's response should also avoid threats to the customer's positive and negative faces; this involves avoiding criticizing the customer's behavior, and the avoidance of irony, reproaches, and mockery. Previous research has also shown that requests for factual information from the customer to 'prove' the relevance of his or her complaint can be perceived by the customer as face-threatening (impolite) (Enache and Popa 2008). Implementation of these recommendations in firms' responses to complaints—whether online or offline—should maximize the firm's chances of being perceived as credible and competent and, as a result, increase the probability that unsatisfied customers will purchase from the culprit firm again.

8. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although every effort was made to ensure a robust methodology in the present study, the authors acknowledge that there are a number of limitations which limit the generalizability of his findings.

Firstly, findings were based upon an experiment rather than on primary data. It would have been desirable to survey the customers faced with grammatically erred / impolite messages. An experiment with a convenience sample (students) was regarded as the best way in which to explore our research questions; however, in order to assess the validity of the present findings, future research should explore whether the findings are replicated among non-student samples.

Second, in the present study, professionalism was operationalized only at the individual-level; thus, different findings may have emerged had the authors included the “organizational prestige” dimension of perceived professionalism (*cf.* Fogarty 1992). Company reputation is a key antecedent of customer loyalty since it instills stronger feelings of trust among customers (Lau and Lee 1999). The authors’ decision to exclude this dimension was based upon the fact that most companies represented in his study were Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Further research should utilize responses from both strong and weaker company brands.

Finally, we investigated the direct causation paths to loyalty as well as the mediating effect of professionalism. Other potential mediating mechanisms include trust (Di Luzio 2006; Harris and Goode 2004), emotions (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005) and satisfaction (Oliver 2009) which should be included in future research.

9. References

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