

How effective is expressive? Consumer perceptions of new vernacular features in Facebook webcare responses

We investigate how intensifying (e.g. deliberate repetition of punctuation symbols) and non-intensifying (e.g. emoji or chatspeak abbreviations) new vernacular features in responses to consumer complaints on corporate Facebook pages influence perceptions of conversational human voice, interactional justice and corporate credibility, and whether company type and new vernacular usage in the complaint itself moderate these effects. We carried out a 3 (new vernacular features in response: absent, intensifying, non-intensifying) x 2 (new vernacular features in complaint: absent, present) x 2 (company type: progressive, traditional) between-subjects experiment with 718 Flemish consumers. Findings show that organisational responses containing non-intensifying features generate equally positive ratings as those without new vernacular. This points towards an extended norm of appropriate language use in webcare, i.e. adherence to (somewhat informal) Standard Dutch, but with some room for non-intensifying new vernacular. Intensifying expressive compensation strategies, however, negatively impacted conversational human voice, interactional justice and corporate credibility perceptions. The effect on the latter two is mediated to a certain extent by the perceived appropriateness of these features, highlighting the importance of Language Expectancy Theory and Role Theory as underlying frameworks in this field. No clear moderation of company type or new vernacular usage in the consumer complaint was observed.

Keywords: conversational human voice, corporate credibility, interactional justice, Language Expectancy Theory, new vernacular features, webcare

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been an exponential increase in consumers sharing their experiences with a wide range of products and services in the form of, for instance, online reviews via TripAdvisor or complaints filed publicly via Facebook or Twitter. Negative word-of-mouth, in particular, has been shown to prove helpful to consumers looking to make well-informed decisions (Filieri et al. 2019), as a result of which these comments bear potentially disastrous consequences for the focal companies. They may inflict considerable damage to observing consumers' brand attitudes (e.g. Purnawirawan et al. 2015, Filieri et al. 2021) and other (prospective) consumers may be less inclined to consider the companies' services (e.g. Huang & Korfiatis 2015), which may ultimately translate to lower sales figures (e.g. Lee & Choeh 2018, Eslami & Ghasemaghahi 2018). Companies are increasingly aware of these risks, and have strengthened their online presence accordingly. It has become common practice for companies to engage in *webcare*, which Van Noort & Willemsen (2012: 133) describe as "engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback". When performed adequately, webcare is likely to defuse complaint situations and increase post-service failure satisfaction, engender brand loyalty and restore/improve brand evaluations (e.g. Van Noort & Willemsen 2012, Dijkmans et al. 2015, Ghosh & Mandal 2020).

While a successful approach to webcare therefore seems to be indispensable in the toolbox of any company looking for longevity in an increasingly online business environment, more empirical research is still needed to gain insight into what constitutes the most effective strategy to respond to consumer feedback, especially in terms of the linguistic choices that are made (e.g. Decock et al. 2021). As Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) rightfully point out, language plays a fundamental role in service-oriented interactions between dissatisfied consumers

and customer service employees. Not only is it for both parties the vehicle for achieving their respective goals, observers' perceptions of the interaction are frequently based solely on its linguistic product (Javornik et al. 2020). Calls for more scholarly attention for language in webcare have consequently been issued in recent years (e.g. Van Noort et al. 2015, Carnevale et al. 2017, Holmqvist et al. 2017), and a growing body of empirical work is responding by exploring how variation in an organisational response's linguistic wrapping influences consumer perceptions and attitudes. An often-cast theoretical anchor in this field is justice theory, as (observing) consumers' perceptions of the complaint handling procedure's fairness have been shown to mediate the relationship between a service recovery attempt and post-complaint satisfaction, intentions and behaviour (e.g. Gelbrich & Roschk 2011, Orsingher et al. 2010; cf. Section 2.1).

Recent examples of research advancing our understanding of the pivotal role language plays in webcare include Javornik et al. (2020), who examined the effects of response length and tone of voice on observers' perceptions of how a consumer complaint is handled. Notably, the use of a *conversational human voice* (CHV, Kelleher 2009; cf. Section 2.1) was found to yield favourable results: when the company employee adopted a natural and engaging communicative style rather than a formal, corporate tone of voice, the company and its service recovery attempt were evaluated more positively. This held true especially for their respondents' perceptions of interactional justice: the interpersonal treatment received by the complainant was felt to be fairer when they were met with a friendly, informal company response. CHV and its effects on justice perceptions and post-complaint satisfaction were also examined in Decock et al. (2021). Putting two of Van Noort et al.'s (2015) strategies to engender perceived CHV – message personalisation and informal language use (cf. Section 2.1) – to the test, the authors studied how varying degrees of their implementation in webcare responses impact consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. Overall, the preferred tactic seems to be a combination of both: informal linguistic choices and personalisation through lexical variety across organisational responses led to higher perceived CHV and interactional justice ratings, and what is felt to be the more human approach seems to pave the way for increased post-complaint satisfaction levels among consumers. The linguistic operationalisations of (in)formality in Decock et al. (2021) merit closer inspection: the salutation varied between the Dutch equivalents of 'Hi [first name]' and 'Dear Mr/Ms [last name]', for instance, and other rhetorical moves were manipulated as well (e.g. saying 'sorry' versus offering 'our sincere apologies'). Decock et al.'s (2021) manipulations reflect real-world practice, but recent corpus research (Seghers et al. 2021a) has shown that organisational responses to consumer feedback on social media also contain other manifestations of informal language use, which remain underexplored. These include what Androutsopoulos (2011) and Vandekerckhove (2017) refer to as *new vernacular features*, which are essentially strategies to write more efficiently and approximate the pace of a face-to-face conversation (e.g. via abbreviations and acronyms), and compensate (in varying degrees of intensity) for the non-verbal and paralinguistic cues that written communication is alleged to inherently lack (e.g. through the use of emoji; cf. Lo 2008). These linguistic features have been argued to be indexical of one's connection with digital culture (e.g. the use of English in non-English conversation when alternatives are readily available), and they can be used as tools for constructing and expressing one's online identity (Wall et al. 2016, Hilte 2019, Seghers et al. 2021a). While their presence has been documented, it remains relatively unclear whether a company's use of new vernacular features induces CHV perceptions as suggested by Van Noort et al. (2015). Moreover, it is yet to be examined where consumers draw the line: would the stronger emotionality conveyed by intensifying features (e.g. deliberately repeating (or *flooding*) punctuation symbols to enhance the expressive effect) further increase perceived CHV, or would it violate expectations of appropriate communicative behaviour in a professional setting? Since empirical research is sparse in this regard, we aim to contribute to the field of webcare by investigating how a range of new vernacular features impacts consumer perceptions of CHV and interactional justice.

In addition, we aim to investigate whether companies can integrate new vernacular features in their webcare responses (for a variety of reasons, e.g. connecting with their target audience or increasing perceived CHV) without jeopardising their credibility, which has been argued to be a key component of a company's reputation (e.g. Li et al. 2020). Seghers et al. (2021b) report that when consumers use these features in their comments on corporate Facebook pages – and they do so frequently (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a) – they suffer no apparent negative consequences in terms of their perceived credibility. Corporate credibility itself has received its fair share of scholarly attention (e.g. Müller et al. 2018, Jin & Muquaddam 2019), but to the best of our knowledge, the impact of a company using new vernacular in their response to said consumer comments has not yet been explored. We will therefore examine to what extent a company's credibility benefits (or suffers) from these particular linguistic choices, particularly in view of the above-mentioned expectations of appropriate behaviour in a webcare context.

In short, this paper is built on the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of new vernacular features in organisational responses to consumer complaints on consumer perceptions of conversational human voice and interactional justice?

RQ2: What are the effects of new vernacular features in organisational responses to consumer complaints on consumer perceptions of corporate credibility?

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Conversational human voice and justice theory

As can be inferred from the introduction to this paper, one of the concepts central to answering our research questions is (perceived) conversational human voice. It was originally described by Kelleher as “an engaging and natural style of organisational communication” as perceived by consumers based on their interactions with company employees (2009: 117). Such communication diverges from the traditionally adopted formal corporate voice (Dijkmans et al. 2015) and is intended to leave consumers with the impression that they are interacting with a real, friendly human being rather than a distant faceless organisation. A growing body of research has demonstrated the predominantly positive effects of this increasingly common communicative strategy: when consumers perceive CHV in a company's webcare response to their (negative) feedback, they tend to evaluate the company more positively and report increased purchase intentions (Kerkhof et al. 2011, Van Noort & Willemsen 2012, Crijns et al. 2017). In addition, communicating with a CHV is reported to come across as more authentic and trustworthy, as it appears to signal a shift from purely profit-focused communication to a dialogue-oriented, relationship-building approach (Dijkmans et al. 2020). These tendencies can be traced back to the psychological concept of anthropomorphism, a cognitive bias that explains why humans react more positively to inanimate objects and abstract concepts to which human qualities and characteristics are attributed (e.g. Delbaere et al. 2011, Sung & Kim 2018). As Decock et al. (2021) rightfully echo, however, the broad definition of perceived CHV leaves ample room for interpretation, which in its turn allows for a wide range of potential operationalisations in experimental studies. In the same vein, Van Noort and colleagues (2015) list three strategies which provide useful yet fairly general advice for companies to engender perceptions of CHV in their webcare responses. Webcare employees are recommended to personalise messages (e.g. addressing the consumer by their first name or using first-person pronouns), adopt an invitational rhetoric (e.g. encouraging consumers to share their thoughts and experiences) and use informal language when engaging in conversation with dissatisfied consumers. The latter is conceptualised as ‘casual and expressive language’ that in the context of computer-mediated communication contains elements of both written and spoken language use (e.g.

discourse markers). The authors go on to describe typical linguistic elements of this informal language, which in addition to adverbs (e.g. “so”) and interjections (e.g. “oh”) include what we conceptualised above as new vernacular features.

Before we formulate any hypotheses regarding the impact of these new vernacular features on consumer perceptions of conversational human voice, however, we propose a distinction between regular expressive compensation strategies (e.g. the use of emoticons/emoji, cf. Van Noort et al. 2015, Gretry et al. 2017, Vandekerckhove 2017, Hilte 2019) and those with an intensifying character (e.g. capitalisation of entire words or flooding of letters and punctuation symbols, cf. Kim & Gupta 2012 and Folse et al. 2016, for instance). These subcategories are considered separately for two main reasons, the first of which is related to their functionality. Recall from the introduction that some new vernacular features, such as the use of emoticons/emoji or the rendition of laughter (e.g. *haha*), sprang from a desire to compensate for the alleged lack of non-verbal cues and paralinguistic elements in computer-mediated communication. These compensatory properties are shared by the flooding of punctuation symbols or capitalisation of entire words, for instance, but they take it a step further in that they tend to amplify the intensity of the emotionality and expressiveness conveyed in a message. Secondly, there seems to be a considerable discrepancy in terms of the frequency at which non-intensifying and intensifying new vernacular features are employed in webcare. Seghers et al.'s corpus study (2021a) shows that companies often integrate the former in their webcare practice, while the latter are attested only very rarely. The authors' findings also show that consumers themselves tend to frequently use non-intensifying features in their messages as well, which suggests that a company incorporating them in their responses is likely to create the impression of an engaging, natural peer-to-peer-like interaction. In this sense, Dijkmans et al. (2020) argue that the steadily increasing use of emoji in the organisational communication in the Dutch tourism industry makes service encounters feel more human¹, which seems to be a key factor in improving relational outcomes. Consequently, we propose that implementing Van Noort et al.'s (2015) third strategy – using informal language – through the use of non-intensifying new vernacular will increase consumer perceptions of conversational human voice in our study as well:

H1a: The use of emoji and chatspeak abbreviations in company responses to consumer complaints will have a positive effect on perceptions of conversational human voice.

As for the intensifying new vernacular features, we draw on Role Theory (e.g. Solomon et al. 1985) for our hypothesis development. This theory posits that social interactions are successful when all parties involved behave according to their specific role in the relationship between them. Such conformity requires a shared understanding of behavioural norms, and participants evaluate each other's behaviour in terms of its (in)appropriateness within the context of their relationship. In complaint situations, it can be assumed that a company representative's main role is to resolve the complainant's problem in an efficient, calm and collected manner. While communicating empathy and concern is paramount in webcare (e.g. Huang & Ha 2020), 'overdoing' it via the use of intensifying new vernacular features may therefore be considered inappropriate within the professional context of the service encounter. Additionally, the higher degrees of informality and emotionality in the organisational responses may cause the communicative style to be perceived as insincere or dismissive rather than natural and engaging (Fuoli et al. 2020), and consumers may have the impression that they are not taken seriously. Considering, furthermore, that the low frequencies for intensifying new vernacular features

¹ This general observation is also made in Stark and Crawford (2015): emoji add a more human feel to the interactions that transpire on (corporate) social media platforms, showing “the importance, and paradoxical invisibility, of affective and social ties across digital structures of work” (p. 6)

reported in Seghers et al. (2021a) are likely to be a reflection of their perceived inappropriateness in this communicative setting, we propose the following:

H1b: The use of intensifying expressive compensation strategies in company responses to consumer complaints will have a negative effect on perceptions of conversational human voice.

The concept of CHV has also been explored from the perspective of justice theory (e.g. Javornik et al. 2020). The idea central to this theory is that consumers' post-complaint satisfaction levels will be higher (even lower) when they feel as if they were treated fairly (unfairly) during the complaint handling process (Gelbrich & Roschk 2011). Evidence for this conceptual association between justice perceptions and satisfaction has been found in a variety of empirical studies (e.g. Gelbrich & Roschk 2011, Tax et al. 1998, Maxham & Netemeyer 2003). Consumers who are satisfied with how the complaint was handled, in turn, tend to evaluate the company in question more positively (e.g. Mostafa et al. 2015, Javornik et al. 2020) and report increased repurchase and positive word-of-mouth intentions (e.g. Wirtz & Mattila 2004, Hess 2008, Javornik et al. 2020). Crucial to the success of a service recovery is "whether complaining customers have the impression that customer service agents treat them with politeness, friendliness, empathy, honesty and respect" (Decock et al. 2021: 3, based on Orsingher et al. 2010; see also e.g. Blodgett et al. 1997). This idea is referred to as perceived interactional justice and plays a key role in our study as well, as the interpersonal interaction and communication between complaining customers and company employees is where the latter's linguistic choices have the greatest impact. While findings seem to differ depending on study design and research context, prior work by Yang et al. (2010) and Javornik et al. (2020) suggests that communicating with CHV more effectively induces consumer perceptions of interactional justice than a formal, corporate tone of voice. Building on the rationale behind our earlier hypotheses regarding the influence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular on consumer perceptions of conversational human voice, we then suggest the following:

H2a: The use of emoji and chatspeak abbreviations in company responses to consumer complaints will have a positive effect on perceived interactional justice. This effect will be mediated by perceived CHV and the perceived appropriateness of these features.

H2b: The use of intensifying expressive compensation strategies in responses to consumer complaints will have a negative effect on perceived interactional justice. This effect will be mediated by perceived CHV and the perceived appropriateness of these features.

2.2 Corporate credibility

In order to make predictions about the impact of new vernacular features in a webcare response on corporate credibility, a closer look at the concept is required. It has attracted scholarly attention from various fields over the past decades, and can be described in general terms as the extent to which consumers feel that a company has the expertise and knowledge to fulfil their needs, and whether they can be trusted to act honestly and correctly (Alcañiz et al. 2010, Musgrove et al. 2018, Li et al. 2020). The literature thus distinguishes two central dimensions to corporate credibility, i.e. expertise and trustworthiness (e.g. Goldsmith et al. 2000, Alcañiz et al. 2010, Mahrinasari 2019, Li et al. 2020). While the effects of corporate credibility on a variety of customer outcomes have been covered extensively in prior work (e.g. Müller et al. 2018, Jin & Muquaddam 2019), there is a lack of empirical research that focuses on corporate credibility as a dependent variable and how it is affected by a company's linguistic choices in the context of webcare (and new vernacular features in particular). However, insights from extant research on the effects of a company's informal language use on consumer perceptions can still be used to formulate hypotheses in terms of perceived expertise and trustworthiness.

Recent evidence suggests that a company's perceived expertise, i.e. the extent to which consumers deem a company competent and capable of delivering the advertised products and services (e.g. Alcañiz et al. 2010), is highest when employees maintain a more formal tone of voice when engaging in webcare. Decock et al. (2021), for instance, report that companies who use informal language to enhance conversational human voice and interactional justice perceptions were considered less professional. These findings are in line with previous research, in which formal (as opposed to informal) language was associated with being competent and qualified (e.g. Van Dolen et al. 2007). The same idea can be found in Jakic et al. (2017), who advise companies to be careful with informal language in their webcare practice, as it is considered a potential threat to the company's perceived professionalism and competence in the standard language (which could then be seen as a proxy for expertise in general). Additionally, Javornik et al. (2020) note that an informal tone may cause (complaining) consumers to doubt whether the service recovery procedure was followed properly, and whether steps will be taken to resolve the complaint situation in a competent and professional way (cf. Wang et al. 2017 for similar findings). It seems nonetheless reasonable to assume that some degree of informality (operationalised, for instance, via non-intensifying new vernacular features) will still engender perceived expertise. If we consider the positive effects of informal language use on perceived CHV and interactional justice (e.g. Javornik et al. 2020) described above, adopting a moderately informal communicative style (operationalised via emoji and a chatspeak abbreviation) to navigate webcare may also signal expertise and professional competence, provided of course that the (observing) consumer(s) consider the informality appropriate given the professional character of the setting. As a result, a neutral hypothesis seems warranted:

H3a: Company responses to consumer complaints that contain emoji and chatspeak abbreviations will not be rated differently from those without any new vernacular features. This effect will be mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the language used.

The above is unlikely to hold true for intensifying new vernacular features, however, as the strong emotionality they convey may clash with consumer expectations of appropriate behaviour in a professional context (cf. Role Theory discussion in Section 2.1). Moreover, a company employee using them may come across as emotional and irrational rather than calm, rational and objective, which may signal general incompetence to consumers looking for an efficient solution to their problems. We propose the following:

H3b: The use of intensifying expressive compensation strategies in responses to consumer complaints will have a negative effect on perceived expertise. This effect will be mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the language used.

The literature suggests a more positive outlook for perceptions of trustworthiness, i.e. the extent to which consumers believe the company can be relied upon, and whether it is honest with its customers (Alcañiz et al. 2010). Based on the anthropomorphism effect described earlier, a communicative strategy that succeeds in engendering perceptions of CHV will likely result in favourable evaluations of the company. Research in the field of public relations has found support for this idea: Kelleher (2009), Beldad et al. (2010) and Sung & Kim (2018), for instance, show that companies who are perceived as addressing their audience with a human voice foster trust, satisfaction and commitment in their audience. Similar positive effects are reported from the field of webcare: perceived CHV was found to improve brand evaluations (Lee & Park 2013) and purchase/WOM intentions (Park & Cameron 2014), and leads consumers to infer trustworthiness from a company's responses to their posts (Van Noort & Willemsen 2012, Sparks et al. 2016). Building on our earlier reasoning that the use of new vernacular features is likely to increase perceived CHV (cf. Section 2.1), then, we argue that a company's trustworthiness will benefit from their inclusion in webcare responses. This positive effect will likely be restricted to the use of non-intensifying features, however: the strong emotionality conveyed by the intensifying expressive compensation

strategies may be considered insincere (Fuoli et al. 2020) and inappropriate given the professional character of the interaction (cf. Role Theory discussion earlier). Summing up, we hypothesise the following:

H4a: The use of emoji and chatspeak abbreviations will have a positive effect on perceived trustworthiness. This effect will be mediated by the perceived appropriateness of these features.

H4b: The use of intensifying expressive compensation strategies in responses to consumer complaints will have a negative effect on perceived trustworthiness. This effect will be mediated by the perceived appropriateness of these features.

2.3 Moderating role of company type and new vernacular features

Finally, we propose that the hypothesised effects described in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will be moderated by two variables, the first being whether the consumer complaint itself contains new vernacular features. According to Communication Accommodation Theory (e.g. Gallois et al. 2005, Dragojevic et al. 2015), interlocutors tend to adjust their communicative behaviour to appear more similar to one another. By converging to someone's linguistic patterns, one is argued to increase the efficiency of the communication, gain their interlocutor's approval and maintain a positive social identity. When a dissatisfied consumer uses new vernacular features in their complaints, companies may therefore be evaluated positively if they choose to accommodate and use new vernacular features in their response as well. Furthermore, Gallois et al. (2005) note that these positive evaluations are likely to result in positive intentions towards (future) interpersonal interactions with the interlocutor. From a theoretical point of view, then, matching a complainant's linguistic style will have positive effects. The extent to which this is the case in practice, however, seems to be finite. For instance, a company employee may overaccommodate by mirroring a complainant's use of intensifying new vernacular features, which may cause the response to be perceived as parodical (Jones et al. 2014). Additionally, there is empirical evidence which suggests that accommodation may not be the optimal strategy under certain conditions. For instance, consumers who incorporate (intensifying) new vernacular features in their messages tend to come across as (highly) emotional, which has negative effects on their perceived credibility (Vendemia 2017) and rationality (Folse et al. 2016, Vendemia 2017). If observing consumers consider the use of new vernacular features by complainants to be inappropriate, they will likely react more positively to a company that chooses not to accommodate instead. We therefore propose the following moderation hypothesis:

H5: The use of new vernacular features in response to consumer complaints will be evaluated more positively when the complaint also contains new vernacular features, provided they are perceived as appropriate.

The second moderator, company type, owes its relevance to insights from Language Expectancy Theory (e.g. Burgoon et al. 2002). Particularly interesting here is the idea of linguistic bandwidth; it refers to the range of linguistic choices that are acceptable in a given communicative setting (cf. Jensen et al. 2013), which is likely to be limited for companies in the case of service failures (even more so as they increase in perceived severity). Given that the use of new vernacular features is typically associated with younger communicators (e.g. De Decker 2014, Hilte et al. 2017), companies who target younger target audiences and present themselves as informal, dynamic and fun (e.g. Zalando) will likely have more leeway regarding new vernacular feature usage than more traditional companies (e.g. railroad company NMBS in the context of Flanders). In addition to expectations of appropriate behaviour in a professional context (cf. Sections 2.1 and 2.2), it is also reasonable to assume that consumers will expect consistency, both in terms of the company's general communicative style and use of new vernacular features in particular. In this sense, Seghers et al.'s corpus study (2021a) shows that more modern companies with younger target audiences use more types of new vernacular features more frequently. If a more traditional (progressive) company falls out of character and uses more (fewer) new vernacular features than

usual, it diverges from the expected patterns. According to McPeck and Edwards (1975), the effect of this unanticipated behaviour depends on the consumer's initial perception of the company. As complaining consumers are usually negatively predisposed towards the transgressing company prior to the service recovery interaction, the linguistic deviation may then lead to even worse evaluations of the company. In other words, linguistic accommodation may backfire when consumers' expectations of a company's communicative behaviour are violated. The following moderation effect is hypothesised:

H6: The use of new vernacular features in response to consumer complaints will be evaluated more positively when the company targets younger audiences and is perceived as more modern (rather than more traditional).

The hypotheses presented in this section can be summarised schematically as follows. Note that in these conceptual models the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the organisational response and perceived conversational human voice are (parallel) mediators (H2, H3, H4); the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint and company type serve as moderators (H5, H6).

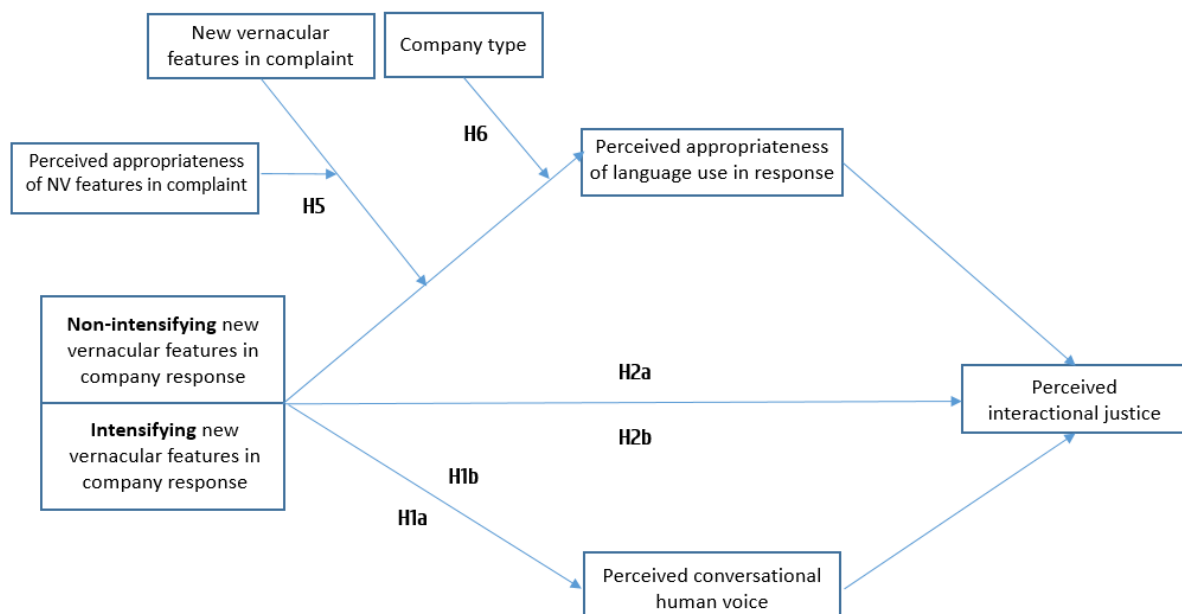


Figure 1: Conceptual model for the relationship between new vernacular features in organisational responses and interactional justice.

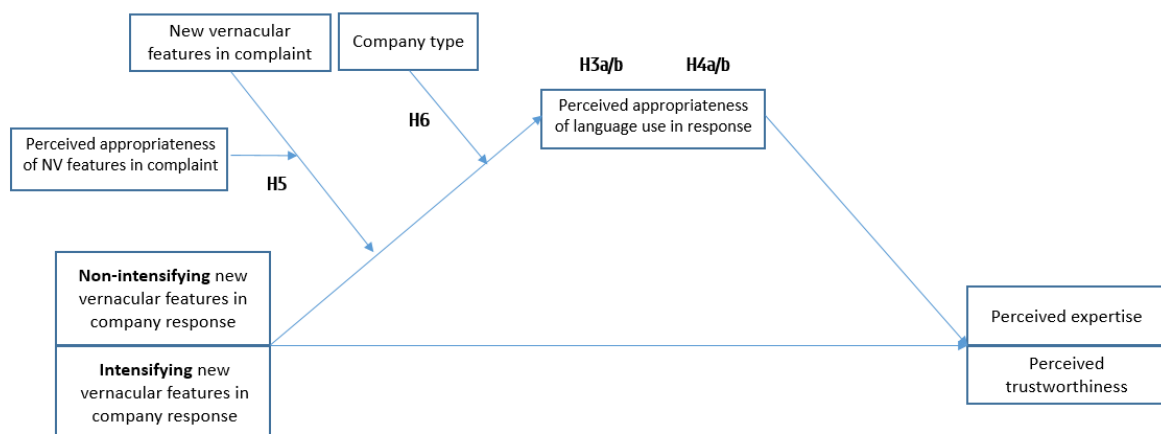


Figure 2: Conceptual model for the relationship between new vernacular features in organisational responses and corporate credibility.

3. Method

3.1 Design and stimuli

To shed some light on how the presence of new vernacular features in organisational responses to consumer complaints impacts perceptions of interactional justice and corporate credibility, taking into account the moderating potential of linguistic accommodation and company type, we set up a 2 (new vernacular features in consumer complaint: absent, present) x 3 (new vernacular features in organisational response: absent, non-intensifying, intensifying) x 2 (company type: modern, more traditional) between-subjects vignette-based experiment. Respondents were randomly allocated to one of the twelve resulting conditions.

Following De Waele et al. (2017), we opted for two complaint scenarios per condition. In addition to enhancing the generalisability of our findings, this technique reduces context effects and allows the researcher to test a broader set of manipulations in the same experimental study. Drawing inspiration from Seghers et al.'s (2021a) corpus of service-oriented interactions on corporate Facebook pages, we build on two recurring complaint themes in the telecom services industry. In the first scenario, the complainant was promised a solution for his ongoing wifi coverage issues in the form of a router replacement, which was to be delivered to him via mail. Two weeks later, however, the complainant learns from the postal service that no packages had so far been received from the telecom company. In the second scenario, the complainant's mobile services have been cut off due to an invoicing blunder on the company's end. In response to the initial private complaint the company promises to rectify the mistake and immediately reactivate the complainant's services, though fails to do so for another week. Both scenarios therefore feature a double service failure, which leads the complainant to address the company publicly in hopes of forcing a solution. These complaints regarding (what can be perceived as) severe service failures are particularly interesting in webcare research. As they are likely to put more strain on consumer perceptions of, for instance, a company's expertise (cf. Sections 2.2 and 2.3) compared to more moderate failures, they cause the company's linguistic bandwidth to be narrower as well (e.g. Jensen et al. 2013, Thon & Jucks 2017). If new vernacular features are deemed acceptable in responses to complaints regarding severe failures, it follows, they can also be assumed to lie within the bandwidth of companies that are responsible for more moderate transgressions.

Responsible for the above-mentioned service failures are Ezphone, who target a younger audience with sharply priced mobile data packs, and Novacom, who target families with a range of affordable all-inclusive deals (internet, digital television and mobile telephony). We decided on fictitious companies to avoid the confounding effects of respondents' existing attitudes and prior experience with actual telecom providers active on the Flemish market. As for the company names, we opted for one that contains chatspeak itself ("ez" being an alternative spelling for "easy") and one with a Latin stem (which ought to create a somewhat static and older image). To ensure that the companies are respectively perceived as rather progressive and rather traditional, however, a pretest was conducted (cf. Section 3.3).

The manipulated new vernacular features were selected based on corpus frequency (Seghers et al. 2021a). Some of the most commonly used expressive compensation strategies were implemented in the base scenario to create the conditions in which the complaint also contains new vernacular (cf. H5). They are in large part concentrated near the end of the complaint (for the expressive effect), and include the capitalisation of entire words and phrases (two and three instances in scenarios 1 and 2 respectively), deliberate repetition or *flooding*

of punctuation symbols (three instances in each scenario) and emoji (two instances each, one of which is flooded). As for the latter, we opted for emoji that are often used in practice: the face with rolling eyes and unamused face were used to express annoyance with the company, and the red pouting face express anger regarding the double service failure. Care was taken to ensure a realistic manipulation density (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a), although it should be noted that results may differ if the number of manipulations/text length ratio is increased (or decreased). With regard to the organisational response, a distinction is made between two 'levels' of new vernacular use. The first translates to a narrower set of features that are actually used in webcare, and involves the use of a chatspeak abbreviation (the commonly used "pb" instead of "*privébericht*") and two emoji. We opted for a sad/frowning emoji to add to the company employee's expression of empathy at the start of the response, and two variations of a smiling face to reinforce the positive closing statement (in which the employee assures the complainant that the situation will be resolved). In the second level, features that are not (or very rarely) used in practice are added as well. Specifically, these are the flooding of punctuation symbols (two instances) and emoji (two instances) and the capitalisation of entire words and phrases (two instances). In terms of linguistic accommodation (and H5), these levels respectively represent partial and full accommodation towards the complaining customer.² An overview of the scenarios is provided in the appendix of this paper.

Given that the majority of comments on corporate Facebook pages are written by men (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a), we opted for a male complainant with the neutral name 'Tom De Smet'. To avoid the contextual influence of the reviewer's physical appearance, we also used the default anonymous profile picture in our scenarios (e.g. Xu 2014). Finally, we decided on the neutral 'Charlotte' for our fictitious company employee for two reasons: approximately 70% of the identifiable telecom company webcare employees in Seghers et al.'s corpus were women, and Charlotte was the only name to occur more than once. The name also tends to be associated with younger women³, who have been shown to use more new vernacular features than their older and male counterparts (Hilte 2019), which further adds to the realism of our scenarios.

3.2 Measures

In the first section of the questionnaire, we inquired about our respondents' demographic information (i.e. their gender, age and level of education) and introduced the fictitious companies by briefly describing their target audiences as well as their products and services. The full vignette was then displayed, and our respondents were invited to share their perceptions of conversational human voice via a five-item scale (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$) based on Decock et al. (2021). They were asked, for instance, whether they thought the company tried to communicate in a human voice, and whether they invited people to conversation. We then measured perceived interactional justice by means of an six-item scale ($\alpha = 0.922$) based on Decock et al.'s work (2021). The two main dimensions of corporate credibility, perceived expertise and trustworthiness, were captured using two four-item scales ($\alpha_{\text{trustworthiness}} = 0.905$; $\alpha_{\text{expertise}} = 0.924$) adapted from Newell and Goldsmith (2001), Erdem and Swait (2004) and Seghers et al. (2021b). The scale used in the pretest to measure failure severity (cf. Section 3.3) was retained in the main questionnaire, and we decided to gauge our respondents' perceptions of the complainant's emotionality (cf. hypothesis development in Section 2) via a two-item scale ($\alpha = 0.820$) as well.

Building on Preston's (2009) argument that respondents must notice the attitudinal object before they can offer their attitudes towards it, we included four checks in the questionnaire as well: respondents were asked to write down the name of the transgressing company, and indicate whether the consumer's complaint contained emoji

² Naturally, this only applies when the consumer complaint contains new vernacular features.

³ According to the 2021 Belgian government statistics, it is the 18th most common name in Flanders in the under-18 category, 33rd in the 18-64 category and 293rd in the 65+ category.

and capitalised words. As for the organisational response, we asked whether it included abbreviations and emoji (representative of the non-intensifying features) and whether it contained repeated punctuation symbols and capitalised words (representative of the intensifying features).

It should be noted that all items were measured on seven-point Likert scales and translated into Dutch given the nature of our target audience (see Section 3.4 below). The main measurement scales can be found in the appendix of this paper.

3.3 Pretesting

We conducted a pretest with 53 participants (51% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 25.19$, $SD = 5.98$, $\text{min} = 19$, $\text{max} = 52$) to check whether our scenarios were sufficiently similar to be jointly considered in the analysis of our main experiment's results. Our respondents were asked whether they thought both parties' language use was realistic in both scenarios for each condition.⁴ Both the complaint with ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 4.5$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 4.92$) and without new vernacular features ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 5$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 5.56$) were considered fairly and equally realistic ($t(22) = 0.664$, $p = 0.257$; $t(27) = -1.239$, $p = 0.113$ respectively). No significant differences were found between both organisational responses either, neither for those with ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 5$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 5.33$; $t(24) = -0.586$, $p = 0.282$) nor without new vernacular features ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 5.38$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 4.85$; $t(19) = -1.136$, $p = 0.135$). Our respondents were also invited to assess the severity of the service failures via a two-item scale based on Weun et al. (2004). Across the conditions, perceived failure severity was rated significantly higher in the second scenario than in the first ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 5.6$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 6.11$; $t(51) = -2.039$, $p = 0.023$). Minimal changes were applied to the original first scenario (which featured mobile reception issues and a promised sim card instead of wifi issues and a router), and a follow-up pretest ($N = 28$) indicated no significant differences ($M_{\text{scenario1}} = 5.04$, $M_{\text{scenario2}} = 5.23$; $t(26) = -0.615$, $p = 0.272$). Finally, three semantic differential scales were subsequently presented to capture our respondents' perceptions of the fictitious company they were allocated, which were 'traditional-modern', 'conservative-progressive' and 'old-young'. Given that these scales show sufficient internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.927$), an average "modernness" score was calculated for each company. Ezphone was considered significantly more modern than Novacom ($M_{\text{Ezphone}} = 6.04$, $M_{\text{Novacom}} = 4.8$; $t(51) = 4.80$, $p < 0.01$), which indicates that the short company introductions were effective.

3.4 Participants and procedure

In collaboration with market research agency Profacts, we recruited 718 Flemish Facebook users (54.31% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.36$ years, $SD = 8.70$, $\text{min} = 25$, $\text{max} = 55$) to participate in our experiment for a financial compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. No significant age (Kruskal Wallis $H = 13.579$, $DF = 11$, $p = 0.257$) or gender ($H = 16.681$, $DF = 11$, $p = 0.118$) differences were found between the conditions. Participants were first provided with a general introduction to the experiment as well as instructions. After an initial section in which respondents' informed consent and demographic information were obtained, they were shown one of the vignettes and asked to read it carefully before filling in the rest of the online questionnaire, which consisted of the measurement scales described above as well as the four checks.

4 Results

In this section, our findings are reported. Due to the nature of our design (cf. Section 2), conditional process analysis is a suitable analytical method to test the hypotheses proposed above. This method is essentially a

⁴ Realism was not measured for conditions with the broad set of new vernacular features, as they are unrealistic *in se* (given their virtual absence in webcare practice, cf. Seghers et al. 2021a).

combination of mediation and moderation analysis; the former “is used to quantify and examine the direct and indirect pathways through which an antecedent variable X transmits its effects on a consequent variable Y through one or more intermediary or mediator variables” (Hayes 2017: 10-11), while the latter “is used to examine how the effect of antecedent variable X on a consequent Y depends on a third variable or set of variables” (ibid.). Hayes’ PROCESS macro in SPSS 26 (IBM Corp. 2019) can be used to carry out such conditional process analyses. However, since it does not currently support moderated moderated mediation with an additional parallel moderator, we ran Model 7 in addition to Model 11 in order to test for both the first (H5) and second (H6) hypothesised moderation effect.

This section is organised as follows. We start by evaluating the hypotheses related to perceived conversational human voice and interactional justice in Section 4.1, and then take a closer look at consumer perceptions of corporate credibility in Section 4.2. The moderation effects of company type and the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint are discussed where relevant in each section.

4.1 Perceived interactional justice and conversational human voice

The first two moderated mediation analyses served to test whether the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the organisational response influences interactional justice, and to what extent this effect is mediated by perceived CHV and the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response (H1, H2a, H2b), and moderated by company type and the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint that prompted the response (H5, H6).

Perceived interactional justice was included as dependent variable in Model 11 of Hayes’ PROCESS macro (2017). In view of H2a and H2b, the analysis was performed twice: the focal independent variables respectively were the presence of intensifying and non-intensifying new vernacular features in the response; perceived CHV and appropriateness of the language used in the response served as mediators. The presence of new vernacular features in the complaint (W) and their appropriateness (Z) were entered as moderators; company type and its product term with the independent variable were included as covariates to account for the limitations of the PROCESS model. Respondent age, gender and level of education, perceived failure severity and emotionality of the complainant and the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the response (whichever was not the focal independent variable) were entered as covariates as well. The same set of variables was used for the analyses performed via Model 7. Company type functioned as the moderator, however, and the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint and their appropriateness as well as their product terms with the independent variable were entered as covariates here instead.

The output for the main regression of Model 11 is provided in Table 1 below. Note that in every table in this section, the white and grey cells respectively contain the results of the analyses with intensifying and non-intensifying new vernacular in the response as independent variable.

Table 1: Moderated mediation analysis for perceived interactional justice, Model 11, main regression

Dependent: Perceived interactional justice Model: 11	R = 0.914; R ² = 0.835; F(11, 706) = 324.403; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.914; R ² = 0.835; F(11, 706) = 324.184; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	P
Constant	-0.037	0.093	-0.396	0.692
	-0.032	0.094	-0.342	0.733
Intensifying NVF in response	0.038	0.052	0.725	0.469

	0.017	0.040	0.415	0.678
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.072	0.039	1.858	0.064
	0.075	0.052	1.452	0.147
Company type	0.010	0.039	0.262	0.794
	0.000	0.055	-0.006	0.996
Perceived failure severity	0.041	0.014	2.944	0.003
	0.041	0.014	2.951	0.003
Perceived emotionality	0.009	0.014	0.660	0.509
	0.010	0.014	0.668	0.504
Perceived conversational human voice	0.701	0.020	35.798	<0.001
	0.700	0.020	35.633	<0.001
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.177	0.016	11.001	<0.001
	0.177	0.016	11.023	<0.001
Respondent gender	-0.028	0.033	-0.857	0.392
	-0.029	0.033	-0.875	0.382
Respondent age	-0.001	0.002	-0.332	0.740
	-0.001	0.002	-0.324	0.746
Respondent level of education	0.032	0.034	0.914	0.361
	0.032	0.035	0.931	0.352
Company type x Intensifying NVF in response	-0.043	0.068	-0.635	0.526
	-	-	-	-
Company type x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	-0.005	0.068	-0.080	0.936

The presence of neither intensifying nor non-intensifying features in the organisational response was found to have a direct effect on consumer perceptions of interactional justice. The majority of the variance is accounted for by perceived conversational human voice, which provides further support for previous findings in this field (Yang et al. 2010, Javornik et al. 2020): the more observing consumers have the impression the company responds to the complaint in a friendly, engaging and natural manner, the fairer the interpersonal treatment of the complainant is perceived to be as well. Significant positive direct effects were also found for perceived failure severity (albeit a very small effect) and appropriateness of the language used in the response. These findings suggest that other consumers appreciate the response more when they thought the service failure was (particularly) bad, and when it meets their expectations of appropriate communication in a professional, public setting (i.e. complaint management on the company's Facebook page).

Table 2: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived interactional justice, Model 11, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

	Non-intensifying NVF in response	Intensifying NVF in response
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NVF in complaint	Appropriateness of language in complaint ⁵	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	3.00	-0.019	0.063	[-0.146, 0.104]	-0.172	0.076	[-0.335, -0.031]
0	5.00	-0.022	0.031	[-0.085, 0.037]	-0.122	0.040	[-0.203, -0.047]
0	6.00	-0.024	0.035	[-0.092, 0.047]	-0.098	0.046	[-0.189, -0.008]
1	3.00	-0.051	0.049	[-0.146, 0.044]	-0.190	0.055	[-0.308, -0.008]
1	5.00	-0.032	0.028	[-0.089, 0.023]	-0.069	0.032	[-0.132, -0.009]
1	6.00	-0.022	0.032	[-0.086, 0.042]	-0.008	0.036	[-0.081, 0.065]
Index		0.011	0.030	[-0.052, 0.071]	0.036	0.035	[-0.035, 0.103]

Table 3: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived interactional justice, Model 11, indirect effect of perceived conversational human voice

NVF in complaint	Appropriateness of language in complaint	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
		Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	3.00	-0.075	0.192	[-0.451, 0.303]	-0.317	0.192	[-0.696, 0.064]
0	5.00	-0.079	0.106	[-0.284, 0.133]	-0.242	0.111	[-0.457, -0.020]
0	6.00	-0.081	0.132	[-0.335, 0.189]	-0.204	0.144	[-0.481, 0.084]
1	3.00	-0.137	0.160	[-0.429, 0.193]	-0.320	0.164	[-0.647, -0.002]
1	5.00	-0.192	0.102	[-0.390, 0.010]	-0.110	0.113	[-0.334, 0.114]
1	6.00	-0.220	0.134	[-0.497, 0.040]	-0.005	0.138	[-0.284, 0.265]
Index		-0.026	0.107	[-0.245, 0.174]	0.067	0.108	[-0.142, 0.282]

Tables 2 and 3 above respectively contain the indirect effects of the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the organisational response on perceived interactional justice via the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the review and perceived CHV, as moderated by the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint as well as their perceived appropriateness. Overall, neither of the two moderated mediation analyses with non-intensifying features as independent variable provides evidence for any (moderated) mediation: the independent variable did not have a significant direct effect on the mediator⁶, and none of the indirect effects are significantly different from zero (cf. the bootstrapped confidence intervals).

There does seem to be some form of mediation in the models with intensifying features as independent variable, although the indirect effects were not consistently significant across the various levels of the moderators. When the complaint that prompted the response did not contain any new vernacular itself, for instance, the independent variable had a significant negative indirect effect on interactional justice perceptions. Put differently, consumers seem to find it inappropriate when a company uses intensifying new vernacular in their response to a complaint (e.g. capitalising entire words or flooding punctuation symbols and emoji), which in turn negatively influences how they perceive the fairness of the interpersonal treatment received by the complainant. The moderated moderation index (which pools over the various levels of both moderators) does not significantly

⁵ The mean for this moderator across all scenarios was 4.75 (on a 7-point scale). It is measured at the 16th, 50th and 84th percentile in each (moderated) moderated mediation analysis.

⁶ The direct effect of the independent variable on the mediator is calculated via a subregression in Model 11 of Hayes' PROCESS macro. It features the same predictors, but appropriateness of the language used in the response is entered as dependent variable. Model statistics: $R = 0.419$, $R^2 = 0.176$, $F(15, 702) = 9.962$; coefficient of IV (presence of NINV in the response) = -0.124, standard error = 0.186, $t = -0.666$, $p = 0.506$.

differ from zero, however, which suggests that these indirect effects – if any – occur regardless of whether the initial complaint also contains new vernacular features.

In view of H1a and H1b, the subregressions of the Model 11 analyses with perceived CHV as dependent variable (which is used to calculate path A in this mediation model, i.e. independent variable->mediator) merit closer inspection. Both subregressions were significant ($R = 0.297$, $R^2 = 0.088$, $F(15, 702) = 4.526$ (intensifying features as independent variable); $R = 0.300$, $R^2 = 0.090$, $F(15, 702) = 4.617$ (non-intensifying features as independent variable)). The presence of non-intensifying features in the response did not have a significant direct effect on perceived CHV ($\beta = 0.011$, $SE = 0.096$, $p = 0.117$ and $\beta = -0.112$, $SE = 0.153$, $p = 0.465$ respectively), whereas the presence of intensifying features was associated with lower CHV ratings ($\beta = -0.359$, $SE = 0.153$, $p = 0.019$ and $\beta = -0.200$, $SE = 0.097$, $p = 0.039$ respectively). While these findings did not provide support for H1a, H1b can be underwritten with some caution (as the effects observed are quite small).

Tables 4, 5 and 6 below contain the results of the moderated mediation analyses performed via Model 7 of Hayes' PROCESS macro (see above for the list of variables included). The main regression output is provided in Table 4, while Tables 5 and 6 respectively show the conditional indirect effects of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the response on perceived interactional justice via the appropriateness of the language used and perceived CHV, by company type.

Table 4: Moderated mediation analysis for perceived interactional justice, Model 7, main regression

Dependent: Perceived interactional justice Model: 7	R = 0.914; R ² = 0.835; F(15, 702) = 237.606; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.915; R ² = 0.837; F(15, 702) = 239.915; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	P
Constant	-0.004	0.094	-0.041	0.967
	0.029	0.094	0.308	0.758
Intensifying NVF in response	0.003	0.053	0.062	0.951
	0.017	0.040	0.417	0.677
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.072	0.039	1.849	0.065
	0.003	0.052	0.061	0.951
NVF in complaint	-0.037	0.039	-0.944	0.345
	-0.112	0.055	-2.028	0.043
Perceived failure severity	0.037	0.015	2.516	0.012
	0.036	0.014	2.456	0.014
Perceived emotionality	0.009	0.014	0.652	0.515
	0.010	0.014	0.722	0.471
Perceived conversational human voice	0.697	0.020	35.565	<0.001
	0.697	0.020	35.657	<0.001
Appropriateness of language used in complaint	0.016	0.022	0.726	0.468
	0.005	0.031	0.159	0.873
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.177	0.016	10.811	<0.001
	0.178	0.016	10.967	<0.001
Respondent gender	-0.028	0.033	-0.842	0.400
	-0.026	0.033	-0.780	0.436

Respondent age	-0.001	0.002	-0.491	0.624
	-0.001	0.002	-0.399	0.690
Respondent level of education	0.034	0.035	0.990	0.323
	0.033	0.035	0.953	0.341
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint	-0.013	0.029	0.448	0.654
	0.023	0.040	0.588	0.557
NVF in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.161	0.240	0.674	0.501
	-	-	-	-
NVF in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.461	0.241	1.911	0.056
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.017	0.036	0.469	0.639
	-	-	-	-
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.026	0.037	0.716	0.474
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	-0.029	0.049	-0.600	0.549
	-	-	-	-
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	-0.071	0.049	-1.456	0.146

Table 5: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived interactional justice, Model 7, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

Company type	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	-0.022	0.033	[-0.089, 0.044]	-0.129	0.041	[-0.214, -0.053]
1	-0.016	0.030	[-0.077, 0.040]	-0.178	0.044	[-0.236, -0.067]
Index	0.006	0.033	[-0.060, 0.072]	-0.015	0.040	[-0.097, 0.063]

Table 6: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived interactional justice, Model 7, indirect effect of perceived conversational human voice

Company type	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	-0.078	0.105	[-0.284, 0.130]	-0.250	0.110	[-0.466, -0.031]
1	0.188	0.106	[-0.024, 0.394]	-0.124	0.114	[-0.347, 0.099]
Index	0.266	0.114	[0.038, 0.484]	0.126	0.119	[-0.097, 0.366]

The output in Table 5 further supports the findings of the moderated mediation analysis (via Model 11) reported above, in that there does not seem to be any moderated mediation effect of perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response on the relationship between non-intensifying new vernacular in the response and perceived interactional justice. No mediation effect of perceived CHV was observed either: although the moderated mediation index points towards a significant positive effect of company type (i.e. a more progressive company's use of non-intensifying features being rated more positively), none of the indirect effects of the independent on the dependent variable differed significantly from zero.

In the model with intensifying new vernacular as independent variable, on the other hand, significant indirect effects via perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response were also observed, at both levels of the moderator company type. This further suggests that a company's use of intensifying new vernacular is considered inappropriate by observing consumers, which in turn affects their perception of the fairness of the interpersonal treatment received by the complainant. Finally, the output for the analysis with perceived CHV as mediator is inconsistent here as well, as the indirect effect is significantly different from zero at only one of the two levels of moderator variable company type.

Summing up, the presence of non-intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response to the complaint did not affect consumer perceptions of interactional justice, neither directly nor indirectly via perceived CHV or the appropriateness of the language used in the response. The presence of intensifying new vernacular did have a significant negative indirect effect, via both perceived appropriateness and CHV, although not consistently across the various levels of our moderating variables.

4.2 Corporate credibility

Four more moderated mediation analyses are reported in this section, whose purpose was to examine whether and how the use of (non-)intensifying new vernacular in organisational responses to complaints affects consumer perceptions of a company's expertise (H3a, H3b) and trustworthiness (H4a, H4b), and how those effects are moderated by company type and the presence of new vernacular in the complaint that prompted the response (H5, H6). The models discussed here are identical to the ones described in Section 4.1, with two exceptions: instead of perceived interactional justice, perceived expertise and trustworthiness are respectively entered as dependent variables, and perceived CHV is no longer included as a mediator.

4.2.1 Perceived expertise

Table 7: Moderated mediation analysis for perceived expertise, Model 11, main regression

Dependent: Perceived expertise Model: 11	R = 0.408; R ² = 0.167; F(10, 707) = 14.125; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.410; R ² = 0.168; F(10, 707) = 14.290; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	p
Constant	0.338	0.229	1.472	0.141
	0.398	0.233	1.706	0.088
Intensifying NVF in response	-0.020	0.139	-0.154	0.878
	-0.027	0.099	-0.278	0.781
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.143	0.096	1.486	0.138
	0.044	0.128	0.345	0.730
Company type	0.128	0.096	1.334	0.182
	-0.008	0.135	-0.056	0.956
Perceived failure severity	-0.214	0.034	-6.272	<0.001
	-0.211	0.034	-6.189	<0.001
Perceived emotionality	0.023	0.035	0.653	0.514
	0.025	0.035	0.719	0.473
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.313	0.030	10.317	<0.001
	0.313	0.030	10.328	<0.001
Respondent gender	0.062	0.081	0.766	0.444

	0.059	0.081	0.728	0.467
Respondent age	-0.012	0.005	-2.528	0.012
	-0.012	0.005	-2.511	0.012
Respondent level of education	-0.044	0.085	-0.517	0.605
	-0.035	0.085	-0.412	0.680
Company type x Intensifying NVF in response	-0.016	0.167	-0.099	0.922
	-	-	-	-
Company type x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.196	0.167	1.178	0.239

As can be observed from Table 7, the presence of neither intensifying nor non-intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response had a significant direct effect on perceived expertise. The perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response did have a significant positive effect, however: the more the phrasing is considered suitable given the nature of the consumer-company interaction, the more consumers believe the company in question is competent (regardless of whether it contained any new vernacular). Failure severity, on the other hand, had a negative influence: as the service failure described in the complaint is judged worse, the less expertise is ascribed to the company responsible for the transgression. Finally, a negligible yet significant negative effect of respondent age was found: older respondents rated the company slightly more negatively in terms of perceived expertise than their younger counterparts. It should be noted, though, that these effects are fairly small (Cohen's F^2 for the full models are only 0.200 and 0.203 respectively (Cohen 1988)).

Table 8: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived expertise, Model 11, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

		Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
NVF in complaint	Appropriateness of language in complaint	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	3.00	-0.033	0.110	[-0.252, 0.180]	-0.304	0.130	[-0.573, -0.053]
0	5.00	-0.039	0.055	[-0.151, 0.066]	-0.216	0.070	[-0.362, -0.086]
0	6.00	-0.043	0.062	[-0.168, 0.077]	-0.173	0.084	[-0.343, -0.017]
1	3.00	-0.090	0.086	[-0.262, 0.082]	-0.336	0.097	[-0.538, -0.152]
1	5.00	-0.056	0.050	[-0.160, 0.038]	-0.122	0.058	[-0.243, -0.013]
1	6.00	-0.040	0.057	[-0.155, 0.070]	-0.015	0.066	[-0.149, 0.110]
Index		0.020	0.053	[-0.087, 0.124]	0.063	0.064	[-0.061, 0.188]

Table 8 above contains the indirect effects of the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the organisational response on perceived expertise via the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the review, as moderated by the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint as well as their perceived appropriateness. Overall, the output for the model with non-intensifying new vernacular features as independent variable does not provide evidence for any moderated mediation: none of the indirect effects are significantly different from zero, at any level of the moderating variables. While the moderated moderated mediation index for the other model (with intensifying features as independent variable) is not significantly different from zero either, there does seem to be simple mediation in this model in some circumstances. When the complaint itself does not contain new vernacular, for instance, the presence of intensifying features in the response has a significant negative effect on perceived expertise via the perceived appropriateness of the

language used (at all three levels of the other moderator, i.e. perceived appropriateness of the language used in the complaint). In other words, a company's use of intensifying new vernacular in response to a complaint seems to be considered inappropriate, which in turn has repercussions for the company's perceived expertise and competence (in terms of responding to the complaint, but also in general).

Tables 9 and 10 below contain the results of the moderated mediation analyses performed via Model 7 of Hayes' PROCESS macro. Recall that the model is identical to the one described in Section 4.1, with perceived expertise as dependent variable (instead of interactional justice), and without perceived CHV as a mediator. The main regression output is provided in Table 9, while Table 10 shows the conditional indirect effects of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the response on perceived expertise via the appropriateness of the language used, by company type.

Table 9: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived expertise, Model 7, main regression

Dependent: Perceived expertise Model: 7	R = 0.419; R ² = 0.176; F(14, 703) = 10.722; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.417; R ² = 0.174; F(14, 703) = 10.547; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	p
Constant	0.380	0.230	1.651	0.099
	0.404	0.234	1.728	0.084
Intensifying NVF in response	0.062	0.131	0.474	0.636
	-0.026	0.099	-0.263	0.792
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.134	0.096	1.394	0.164
	0.157	0.128	1.221	0.222
NVF in complaint	0.069	0.097	0.708	0.479
	0.048	0.137	0.353	0.724
Perceived failure severity	-0.242	0.036	-6.741	<0.001
	-0.243	0.036	-6.758	<0.001
Perceived emotionality	0.023	0.035	0.644	0.520
	0.020	0.035	0.571	0.568
Appropriateness of language used in complaint	0.007	0.055	0.130	0.897
	0.020	0.076	0.260	0.795
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.298	0.031	9.459	<0.001
	0.294	0.031	9.418	<0.001
Respondent gender	0.053	0.081	0.656	0.512
	0.062	0.081	0.764	0.445
Respondent age	-0.012	0.005	-2.591	0.010
	-0.012	0.005	-2.655	0.008
Respondent level of education	-0.011	0.086	-0.129	0.897
	-0.016	0.086	-0.189	0.850
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint	0.127	0.071	1.796	0.073
	0.139	0.098	1.408	0.160
NVF in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.578	0.591	0.978	0.328
	-	-	-	-

NVF in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.411	0.599	0.687	0.492
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.073	0.090	0.814	0.416
	-	-	-	-
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.020	0.091	0.219	0.827
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	-0.164	0.120	-1.361	0.174
	-	-	-	-
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	-0.099	0.120	-0.822	0.412

Table 10: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived expertise, Model 7, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

Company type	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	-0.036	0.056	[-0.150, 0.069]	-0.216	0.070	[-0.363, -0.091]
1	-0.027	0.048	[-0.124, 0.066]	-0.241	0.067	[-0.379, -0.119]
Index	0.010	0.055	[-0.099, 0.122]	-0.025	0.067	[-0.152, 0.111]

These results do not provide any evidence that there is moderated mediation in the model with non-intensifying new vernacular as independent variable either, as the indirect effect is not significant at either level of the moderator. On the other hand, the analysis of the model with intensifying new vernacular in the response again points towards simple mediation: consumers consider a company employee's use of intensifying new vernacular (e.g. flooding of punctuation symbols or capitalising entire words) inappropriate, which in turn negatively impacts the company's perceived expertise. This effect is not moderated by company type, however (as the moderated mediation index does not significantly differ from zero).

In short, the presence of non-intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response did not have a significant effect on consumer perceptions of the company's expertise, neither directly nor indirectly via the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response. The presence of intensifying new vernacular did have an indirect effect via perceived appropriateness, although it was not consistent across all levels of the moderating variables. No moderation effects were observed.

4.2.2 Perceived trustworthiness

The regression output in Table 11 below shows the same pattern for perceived trustworthiness as the one observed for perceived expertise (cf. Table 7): the presence of neither intensifying nor non-intensifying new vernacular in the company response significantly predicted the dependent variable in this model either. Consumers who consider the language used in the response to be appropriate within the context (i.e. a consumer-company interaction on Facebook) seem to place more trust in the company as well. Finally, the same negative effect of perceived failure severity (the worse the service failure, the less trustworthiness is ascribed to the company) and respondent age was observed. Note, again, that these effects are on the smaller side (overall effect sizes of the models: Cohen's $F^2 = 0.312$ and 0.319 respectively).

Table 11: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived trustworthiness, Model 11, main regression

Dependent: Perceived trustworthiness Model: 11	R = 0.488; R ² = 0.238; F(10, 707) = 22.080; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.492; R ² = 0.242; F(10, 707) = 22.556; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	p
Constant	0.545	0.209	2.611	0.009
	0.624	0.212	2.943	0.003
Intensifying NVF in response	0.009	0.117	0.080	0.936
	0.039	0.090	0.439	0.661
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.090	0.088	1.023	0.307
	-0.059	0.116	-0.506	0.613
Company type	0.096	0.087	1.097	0.273
	-0.080	0.123	-0.647	0.518
Perceived failure severity	-0.137	0.031	-4.411	<0.001
	-0.133	0.031	-4.301	<0.001
Perceived emotionality	0.018	0.032	0.566	0.572
	0.021	0.032	0.664	0.507
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.384	0.028	13.926	<0.001
	0.384	0.028	13.953	<0.001
Respondent gender	-0.095	0.074	-1.290	0.197
	-0.099	0.074	-1.340	0.181
Respondent age	-0.016	0.004	-3.771	<0.001
	-0.016	0.004	-3.761	<0.001
Respondent level of education	0.077	0.078	0.997	0.319
	0.089	0.078	1.148	0.251
Company type x Intensifying NVF in response	0.060	0.152	0.393	0.695
	-	-	-	-
Company type x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.295	0.152	1.945	0.052

Table 12 below shows the indirect effects of the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the organisational response on perceived trustworthiness via the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the review, as moderated by the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint as well as their perceived appropriateness. Similarly to the analysis with perceived expertise as dependent variable, no moderated mediation was observed for the model with non-intensifying new vernacular in the response as independent variable – neither the indirect effects (at any level of the two moderators) nor the index of moderated moderated mediation are significantly different from zero. In the model with intensifying features in the response as independent variable, however, the same inconsistent simple mediation mechanism seems to occur: when the complaint that prompted the response does not contain new vernacular, for instance, a company's use of intensifying features is considered inappropriate, which in turn has a negative influence on its perceived trustworthiness (cf. Section 4.2.1). Potential reasons as to why this mediation effect (and the ones in

the perceived interactional justice and expertise analyses) is inconsistent across the various levels of the moderating variables will be discussed in Section 5.

Table 12: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived trustworthiness, Model 11, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

NVF in complaint	Appropriateness of language in complaint	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
		Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	3.00	-0.041	0.134	[-0.306, 0.217]	-0.373	0.156	[-0.687, -0.078]
0	5.00	-0.048	0.066	[-0.179, 0.080]	-0.266	0.084	[-0.439, -0.105]
0	6.00	-0.052	0.075	[-0.196, 0.094]	-0.212	0.101	[-0.425, -0.026]
1	3.00	-0.111	0.102	[-0.307, 0.092]	-0.413	0.116	[-0.647, -0.192]
1	5.00	-0.069	0.059	[-0.184, 0.048]	-0.150	0.071	[-0.291, -0.013]
1	6.00	-0.049	0.068	[-0.186, 0.084]	-0.018	0.081	[-0.179, 0.137]
Index		0.025	0.064	[-0.103, 0.154]	0.078	0.077	[-0.070, 0.227]

Finally, Tables 13 and 14 below contain the results of the moderated mediation analyses performed via Model 7 of Hayes' PROCESS macro. The model is identical to the one described in Section 4.2.1 (though with perceived trustworthiness as dependent variable instead of perceived expertise). Table 8 provides an overview of the main regression model, while Table 9 contains the conditional indirect effects of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the response on perceived trustworthiness via the appropriateness of the language used, by company type.

Table 13: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived trustworthiness, Model 7, main regression

Dependent: Perceived trustworthiness Model: 7	R = 0.488; R ² = 0.238; F(14, 703) = 15.666; p < 0.001			
	R = 0.490; R ² = 0.240; F(14, 703) = 15.837; p < 0.001			
	B	st. error	T	p
Constant	0.635	0.211	3.009	0.003
	0.659	0.214	3.085	0.002
Intensifying NVF in response	0.043	0.120	0.356	0.722
	0.034	0.090	0.381	0.704
Non-intensifying NVF in response	0.088	0.088	1.002	0.317
	0.069	0.117	0.589	0.556
NVF in complaint	-0.062	0.089	-0.705	0.481
	-0.102	0.125	-0.820	0.413
Perceived failure severity	-0.148	0.033	-4.511	<0.001
	-0.149	0.033	-4.541	<0.001
Perceived emotionality	0.017	0.032	0.531	0.596
	0.018	0.032	0.553	0.580
Appropriateness of language used in complaint	0.006	0.050	0.112	0.911
	0.080	0.069	1.155	0.248
Appropriateness of language used in response	0.374	0.029	12.999	<0.001
	0.376	0.028	13.203	<0.001

Respondent gender	-0.087	0.074	-1.177	0.240
	-0.088	0.074	-1.193	0.233
Respondent age	-0.016	0.004	-3.804	<0.001
	-0.016	0.004	-3.838	<0.001
Respondent level of education	0.084	0.078	1.075	0.283
	0.080	0.078	1.021	0.308
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint	0.031	0.065	0.476	0.634
	-0.016	0.090	-0.183	0.854
NVF in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.031	0.541	0.058	0.954
	-	-	-	-
NVF in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	-0.252	0.547	-0.462	0.645
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	0.022	0.082	0.271	0.786
	-	-	-	-
Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	-0.099	0.083	-1.199	0.231
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Intensifying NVF in response	-0.009	0.110	-0.080	0.936
	-	-	-	-
NVF in complaint x Appropriateness language used in complaint x Non-intensifying NVF in response	-	-	-	-
	0.064	0.110	0.585	0.559

Table 14: Moderated mediation analysis of perceived trustworthiness, Model 7, indirect effect of perceived appropriateness of language used in response

Company type	Non-intensifying NVF in response			Intensifying NVF in response		
	Effect	St. error	95% CI	Effect	St. error	95% CI
0	-0.046	0.069	[-0.185, 0.088]	-0.272	0.085	[-0.444, -0.108]
1	0.034	0.063	[-0.154, 0.089]	-0.304	0.081	[-0.466, -0.147]
Index	0.012	0.069	[-0.120, 0.149]	-0.032	0.084	[-0.197, 0.136]

In line with the moderated mediation analyses for perceived expertise, these findings do not provide evidence for any (moderated) mediation in the model with non-intensifying features in the company response as independent variable either – the indirect effect does not significantly differ from zero at either level of the moderator. The analysis with intensifying features in the response as independent variable provides further support for the existence of a simple mediation mechanism in the other model: a company's use of intensifying new vernacular is considered inappropriate, which in turn negatively affects consumer perceptions of the company's trustworthiness. However, this mediation effect is not moderated by company type (similarly to the analysis described in Section 4.2.1)

In sum, the presence of non-intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response did not have a significant effect on consumer perceptions of the company's trustworthiness, neither directly nor indirectly via the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response. The presence of intensifying new vernacular did have an indirect effect via perceived appropriateness, although it was not consistent across all levels of the moderating variables. No moderation effects were observed.

5 Discussion

5.1 Interactional justice and corporate credibility

In the introduction we outlined the main purpose of this study, which was to gain more insight into the effectiveness of certain linguistic choices made when responding to consumer feedback on corporate social media. The literature highlights the importance of conversational human voice (cf. Kelleher 2009) as a catalyst in engendering (observing) consumer perceptions of interactional justice, and by extension post-complaint satisfaction and other customer outcomes (e.g. Yang et al. 2010, Van Noort & Willemsen 2012, Crijns et al. 2017, Javornik et al. 2020, Decock et al. 2021). Our study provides further support for these findings, considering the large direct effects of perceived CHV in every regression with interactional justice perceptions as dependent variable. CHV is usually defined and interpreted in broad terms, which leaves quite a number of options for researchers to operationalise the concept in their experiments. A case in point is Van Noort et al. (2015), in which companies are advised to use “informal language” in their response to consumer feedback to create a more natural, engaging and conversational tone of voice. A number of concrete examples are provided, but Seghers et al.’s (2021a) corpus study shows that a broader range of informal language features can be found in webcare interactions on corporate Facebook pages. Part of our contribution to the literature therefore lies in the further exploration of these manifestations of informal language use, in particular intensifying and non-intensifying new vernacular features, and how they affect perceptions of CHV, interactional justice and corporate credibility.

Two general patterns emerge from the findings reported on in Section 4, the first instance of which was found in the analyses with perceived CHV as the dependent variable. Based on Van Noort et al. (2015), we hypothesised that the implementation of non-intensifying new vernacular in a company’s webcare efforts would engender CHV perceptions (H1). Our data do not provide support for this hypothesis, however: responses that contained non-intensifying new vernacular (i.e. the use of emoji and chatspeak abbreviations in our study) did not lead to any more or less perceived CHV than those without new vernacular features.

One possible explanation lies in the fact that the organisational responses in our scenarios also contained instances of message personalisation (e.g. addressing the complainant by his first name, using second-person pronouns) and an invitational rhetoric (e.g. inviting the complainant to send the company a private message with his customer details), which Liebrecht et al. (2021) have shown to be more effective at engendering CHV perceptions than the use of informal language. The non-intensifying new vernacular features therefore might have increased perceived CHV had they been implemented in isolation, but they did not significantly add to the effects already produced by the other two strategies. Intensifying strategies (i.e. capitalisation of entire words and flooding of punctuation symbols and emoji), on the other hand, had a significant negative effect instead (in line with H1b).

As for the presence of non-intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response, the same trend was observed in the models with perceived interactional justice, expertise and trustworthiness as dependent variables. Hypotheses H2a and H4a were not supported either (although H3a was): responses in which emoji were included in support of the message’s overall sentiment (e.g. a sad face when expressing empathy regarding the customer’s ongoing struggle with the company’s invoicing department) and an abbreviation was used (“pb” instead of “privébericht” (“pm” instead of private message)) were not rated differently by our respondents from responses that did not contain these features. In a similar vein, Flemish consumers seem to find non-intensifying new vernacular features as appropriate in an organisational response to a complaint as default (informal) Standard Dutch. The fact that our scenarios without any new vernacular and those with non-intensifying

strategies generated equally positive ratings provides further support for the idea that Standard Dutch still is the benchmark for (professional) written communication (cf. e.g. De Cock 2013, Lybaert et al. 2020, Seghers et al. 2021a, Seghers et al. 2021b). In fact, our findings suggest that the norm in this communicative setting (i.e. consumer-company interactions on corporate Facebook pages) extends to non-intensifying new vernacular features as well (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a, Seghers et al. 2021b). Keep in mind, however, that we hypothesised the presence of non-intensifying new vernacular to have a positive effect on interactional justice and trustworthiness perceptions (via perceived CHV and appropriateness of the language used in the response). Potential explanations for the absence of positive effects include the idea that these features may no longer be salient to our respondents: emoji and certain chatspeak abbreviations are so often used in practice that they may no longer stand out (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a). Alternatively, the manipulation density in our scenarios might have played a role. While the organisational responses reflect real-world practice (cf. Dineva et al. 2017, Seghers et al. 2021a), the manipulations may not have been salient enough in that the two emoji and one abbreviation may not have made much of a difference to what already was a fairly friendly, engaging and somewhat informally written response to the complaints (which was necessary in the first place to guarantee a smooth and realistic integration of the non-intensifying features).

The results of the analyses with the presence of intensifying new vernacular in the organisational response are more in line with our hypotheses. H2b, H3b and H4b were partially supported: responses in which words were fully capitalised and punctuation symbols/emoji were flooded generated ratings that were significantly lower than responses without any new vernacular at all. Not only did observing consumers therefore ascribe less credibility to the company, they also had the impression that the complainant was treated less fairly when the response they received contained these intensifying features. In each of the models discussed above, this negative effect was mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the language used in the response (which essentially translates to the features themselves due to our between-subjects design). As indicated in Section 4, however, the indirect effects were not significant at all levels of the moderating variables. Interestingly, though, the inconsistency was consistent: the indirect effect of intensifying new vernacular in the response on each of the dependent variables becomes smaller when the complaint contains new vernacular as well, and when the language used in the complaint is considered more appropriate (to the point that the indirect effect is no longer significantly different from zero). In any case, the explanatory potential of the perceived appropriateness of the linguistic choices made by companies in webcare interactions highlights the importance of Language Expectancy Theory (cf. Burgoon et al. 2002) and Role Theory (cf. Solomon et al. 1985) as some of the underlying mechanisms governing what is and what is not acceptable in this communicative setting.

In this regard, we anticipated in Section 2 that the use of intensifying new vernacular features would clash with what is expected from customer service agents in their capacity as representatives of a company tasked with resolving complaints in an efficient, collected and professional manner. Previous work in the field has also advised companies to be careful with informal language use in their webcare practice, as it may not only affect their perceived professionalism, competence and reliability, but also cast doubt as to whether the service recovery procedure is taken seriously (Jakic et al. 2017, Wang et al. 2017, Javornik et al. 2020, Decock et al. 2021). Although our findings suggest that the use of intensifying new vernacular is indeed considered inappropriate (i.e. unfit for use in a professional context) and negatively impacts consumer perceptions in general, it remains relatively unclear why this is the case. On the one hand, excessive informality and emotionality emerge from the literature as potential explanations (e.g. Fuoli et al. 2020). Good intentions on the company's end – highlighting their compassion and empathy towards the complainant, for instance – may also be overshadowed by default negative associations with capitalisation and flooded punctuation symbols as they are often used in other contexts (e.g. aggressiveness in heated arguments). On the other hand, intensifying new vernacular features

deviate more strongly not only from Standard Dutch spelling conventions, but also from the register that is generally applied in written communication. These deviations may then cause observing consumers to doubt the customer service agent's competence, in terms of both language skills and their ability to resolve the complaint. In any case, further research that also adopts a qualitative approach (e.g. via free response items in a questionnaire) would be highly useful to gain a deeper understanding of Flemish consumers' expectations of appropriate language use in this setting.

5.2 Moderating role of company type and new vernacular features

While we did not find any significant moderation effects for the presence of new vernacular features in the complaint (combined with observing consumers' perceptions of their appropriateness), the trends discussed earlier provide some form of support for what we hypothesised in Section 2.3 (H5). There appears to be a limit to the extent to which accommodating a complainant's communicative style has positive effects: not using any new vernacular in the response or matching the complainant's non-intensifying new vernacular, it seems, does not harm the company. Mirroring the use of intensifying features, on the other hand, does not seem to be a good idea, unless observing consumers find them highly appropriate (6+ on a 7-point scale) – although research has shown that this generally does not tend to be the case (e.g. Folse et al. 2016, Vendemia 2017). Based on our findings, companies might also want to steer clear from overaccommodation, e.g. using intensifying new vernacular features when the complaint does not contain them in an attempt to match what the company perceives as the target audience's communicative style.

As for the second hypothesised moderation effect (H6), it appears that company type did not have much of an impact in our study either. Only in one of the moderated mediation analyses did company type have a significant influence on the (insignificant) indirect effects of non-intensifying new vernacular on interactional justice perceptions via conversational human voice. This influence was positive: a more progressive (as opposed to a more traditional one) company's use of emoji and chatspeak abbreviations in their webcare practice might therefore help to engender interactional justice perceptions among observing consumers. The general absence of moderation effects of company type, however, either suggests that Flemish consumers do not distinguish between different company types (in the telecom industry, at least) in terms of their expectations of appropriate linguistic behaviour, or that our manipulation of company type (while successful, cf. Section 3.4) was too subtle to have made a difference their judgements of the different scenarios. In any case, further research into the impact of moderating parameters such as company type (e.g. by contrasting different industries, which may also be further apart on the traditional-progressive continuum), and the presence of new vernacular in the complaint (i.e. the role of linguistic accommodation in webcare) or response type (e.g. accommodative – defensive) would be highly relevant.

6 Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to examine how the presence of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in organisational responses to consumer complaints influences consumer perceptions of conversational human voice and interactional justice, and whether companies can use these features in their webcare practice without jeopardising their credibility. In doing so, we responded to calls issued in the literature for more empirical research into what constitutes the most effective strategies to engage with consumers on corporate social media, especially in terms of the linguistic choices that are made (Van Noort et al. 2015, Carnevale et al. 2017, Holmqvist et al. 2017, Decock et al. 2021). Our contribution lies in the further exploration of new vernacular, informal and generally non-standard language features that are used to, among other purposes, write more efficiently and

shorten messages to mimic the pace of in-person conversation, and compensate for the (alleged) lack of non-verbal and paralinguistic cues in written communication. The latter vary in their intensity: non-intensifying strategies for instance include the use of emoji, while some intensifying strategies are the full capitalisation of entire words or deliberate repetition of punctuation symbols to enhance the expressive effect of one's message. The results of our 3 (new vernacular features in the organisational response: absent, intensifying, non-intensifying) x 2 (new vernacular features in the complaint: absent, present) x 2 (company type: traditional, progressive) between-subjects vignette-based experiment lay bare two general patterns. Firstly, responses that contained non-intensifying new vernacular features (emoji and a chatspeak abbreviation) were rated equally as positively as responses without any new vernacular in terms of perceived interactional justice and corporate credibility (i.e. perceived expertise and trustworthiness). These findings point towards an extended norm of appropriate language use on corporate Facebook pages, i.e. adherence to Standard Dutch, but with room for non-intensifying new vernacular (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a, Seghers et al. 2021b as well). Secondly, the presence of intensifying new vernacular in a company's response to consumer complaints had a negative (indirect) effect on interactional justice and corporate credibility perceptions. This effect was mediated to some extent by the perceived appropriateness of these features: intensifying expressive compensation strategies do not seem to be fit for purpose in this communicative setting, causing further damage to the company's overall image (on top of the service failure(s) highlighted in the consumer complaint that prompted the response). These findings both provide empirical insight as to why intensifying features are infrequently used in practice (cf. Seghers et al. 2021a), and highlight the importance of Language Expectancy Theory (e.g. Burgoon et al. 2002) and Role Theory (e.g. Solomon et al. 1985) as theoretical frameworks in this field.

Our study was limited in several ways, however, which could be remedied in further research. First, the studies described earlier (e.g. Decock et al. 2021) tend to compare informally written organisational responses to (very) formal alternatives. Directly comparing our findings with theirs is rendered somewhat difficult by some of our design choices: to preserve the realism of our scenarios and isolate the impact of adding (non-)intensifying new vernacular, the base scenarios were already somewhat informally written. A (very) formal response might have been a useful point of reference, putting the highest ratings obtained for the base scenarios and those with non-intensifying new vernacular in perspective. Second, while our decision to examine two scenarios for each experimental condition increases the generalisability of our findings somewhat (following De Waele et al. 2017), it is still constrained. Future research efforts could, for instance, focus on or compare industries other than telecom services on Facebook as well as other social media platforms on which webcare is conducted (e.g. Twitter). Many other configurations of (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in organisational responses to consumer complaints are also possible, the exploration of which would be highly relevant to gain a deeper understanding of where the boundaries of acceptability lie in terms of the linguistic choices that companies make in webcare. Third, we limited our scope to consumer complaints; the negative (indirect) effects of intensifying new vernacular features reported here, for instance, may well be different when companies use them in response to other types of feedback (e.g. questions or compliments). Fourth, while consumer perceptions of the appropriateness of the language used in organisational responses seem to have considerable explanatory potential, our data did not provide insight as to why certain features are considered (in)appropriate or (un)professional. As stated in Section 5, research that also includes a qualitative component (e.g. via free response items or interviews) would therefore constitute a valuable addition to the growing body of literature exploring the role of language in webcare.

With regard to managerial implications, finally, this study provides companies with some guidance as to whether it is desirable to accommodate towards the communicative style target audience (which is argued to gain their approval and maintain a positive online social identity, cf. Section 2.3). While extant research shows that

consumers make frequent use of both intensifying and non-intensifying new vernacular features, our findings suggest that companies should continue to steer clear from the former when engaging in webcare conversations (Seghers et al. 2021a). As for the latter, it seems that companies are free to use them for a range of strategic purposes, such as connecting with their target audiences or shaping their desired brand identity. When it comes to generating consumer perceptions of conversational human voice, however, we are inclined to echo Liebrecht et al. (2021) and advise companies to focus predominantly on message personalisation and adopting an invitational rhetoric, as these seem to be the more effective strategies.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A – stimuli

To save space in this contribution, only two scenarios are included below to illustrate the various manipulations (i.e. new vernacular in the complaint and (non-)intensifying new vernacular features in the response). A full overview of the scenarios can be found via the following link: <https://imgur.com/a/YjMV2M7>



Figures 3 and 4: no NV in complaint, non-intensifying NV in response (left); NV in complaint, intensifying NV in response (right). Scenario 1.

Translation:

[Complaint] Ezphone, I've really had enough at this point! After a week of constant wifi outages, I finally got a response to my private messages. After a lot of unclear communication from one of your employees I was told that there was something wrong with the local infrastructure, but a new router would resolve the issue. He suggested sending me one via mail, which I naturally agreed to. Two weeks have passed and I still don't have a new router. I thought the postal service might have been running behind on schedule due to the many deliveries; after all, holidays are coming and you can't go and pick up packages from the store due to the corona measures. I completely understand. I decided to check with the postal service anyway, and guess what they told me? There was no package from Ezphone to be delivered to me whatsoever! Incredible. Will you finally fix my problem? Or will you keep making empty promises and force me to switch to one of your competitors?

[Response] Hello Tom, very sorry to hear that on top of all of the wifi problems you still haven't received the new router. This is of course an all but pleasant situation for you, and we would like to apologise for that. Please send us another private message with your customer details just to be sure; we'll put this right and make sure that the new router is delivered to you after all. Cheers, Charlotte.

Appendix B – main measurement scales

Interactional justice perceptions (Decock et al. 2021, based on Maxham & Netemeyer 2002)

- De medewerker ging op een beleefde manier met de klant om. (*In dealing with my problem, the service provider treated me in a courteous manner.*)

- De medewerker van [naam bedrijf] vond het echt belangrijk om een goede oplossing aan te reiken. *(During their effort to fix my problem, the service provider of [company name] showed a real interest in trying to be fair.)*
- Bij het zoeken naar een oplossing hield de medewerker van [naam bedrijf] rekening met het standpunt van de klant. *(While attempting to fix my problem, the service provider of [company name] considered my views.)*
- De medewerker van [naam bedrijf] was vriendelijk. *(The service provider of [company name] was friendly.)*
- De medewerker van [naam bedrijf] behandelde de klant met respect. *(The service provider of [company name] was respectful.)*
- De medewerker toonde medeleven. *(The service provider showed empathy.)*

Conversational human voice (based on Decock et al. 2021, adapted from Kelleher 2009)

- [Naam bedrijf] wil met de klant in gesprek gaan. *([Company name] invites people to conversation.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] staat open voor dialoog. *([Company name] is open to dialogue.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] probeert op een menselijke manier met de klant te communiceren. *([Company name] tries to communicate in a human voice.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] probeert de communicatie aangenaam te maken. *([Company name] attempts to make communication enjoyable.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] behandelt de klant als een persoon en niet als een nummer. *([Company name] treats me as human.)*

Corporate credibility – expertise (adapted from Newell & Goldsmith 2001 and Erdem & Swait 2004)

- Ik heb de indruk dat [naam bedrijf] heel wat ervaring heeft in de telecomsector. *(I think [company name] has a great amount of experience in the telecom industry.)*
- Ik heb de indruk dat [naam bedrijf] goed is in wat het doet. *(I think [company name] is skilled in what they do.)*
- Ik heb de indruk dat [naam bedrijf] heel wat expertise heeft opgebouwd. *(I think [company name] has great expertise.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] doet me denken aan iemand die competent is en weet waar hij/zij mee bezig is. *([Company name] reminds me of someone who is competent and knows what he/she is doing.)*

Corporate credibility – trustworthiness (adapted from Newell & Goldsmith 2001 and Seghers et al. (2021))

- [Naam bedrijf] vertelt de waarheid. *([Company name] tells the truth.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] komt eerlijk over. *([Company name] comes across as honest.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] komt oprecht over. *([Company name] comes across as genuine.)*
- [Naam bedrijf] komt betrouwbaar over. *([Company name] comes across as trustworthy.)*