



Determinants of an effective webcare strategy:
Conversational human voice, apologies and their effects on people of
different cultures

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Abstract

Webcare, which consists in monitoring and addressing customer feedbacks online, have become highly important with the advent of Web 2.0. In these online interactions, companies can find themselves dealing with customers with different cultural backgrounds. This is why, the aim of this study was to investigate whether the webcare strategy of apology and the conversational human voice have the same effects on people coming from different cultures. The participants ($N = 254$), Dutch and Italians, were asked to read a conversation between a complaining customer and a company on Twitter, in which strategy and tone of voice were manipulated. Their attitude towards the company and trustworthiness was measured. Results showed differences in the way participants appreciated the conversational human voice and the strategy of apology. Conversational human voice resulted in higher attitude toward the company and trustworthiness for Italians. Surprisingly, the apology strategy had lower scores regardless of the reader cultural background. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Determinants of an effective webcare strategy

Conversational human voice, apologies and their effects on people of different cultures

Introduction

About a decade ago, dissatisfied customers had to spend a great amount of time to forward a message or a complaint to companies, which were reachable only by telephones, fax or mail. Today, with the advent of Web 2.0, people can voice their complaints to companies easily from every place, thanks to the Internet. Customers have even more options when contacting an organization, because of the presence of companies' pages on different social networking sites (SNSs) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Many companies, in fact, create pages on Facebook and Twitter specifically to assist customer's needs. Therefore, SNSs today play an important role in this field because they represent a channel of communication that allows companies to diminish the distance between them and their customers. The strategies and the communication styles used by companies cannot be the same ones employed on traditional channel of communication, since the medium and the relation between customers and companies have changed. Consequently, a new strategy that focuses on the management of online communications is needed. This is known as *webcare*, which can be defined as the way the companies support customer and address their feedback online (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011).

Everyone can contact the companies and everyone can read other people's comments on the corporate SNS pages. These posts are word of mouth messages (WOM), which can influence people's behavior towards a company (Goldsmith, 2006). This feature of social media makes the communication between companies and customers not only easier but also uncontrolled and difficult to manage, since negative evaluations can spread quickly throughout the Web (Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015). Therefore, companies should carefully think to their webcare, because it can be a determinant of people's satisfaction and therefore guarantee their loyalty to the brand.

However, applying an unsuitable strategy or tone of voice in webcare, might also damage the company.

Considering its relevance for companies, webcare has been extensively studied in the last decade. Previous research focused mostly on negative WOM and therefore on the ways companies should deal with complaints and avoid crisis (Di Staso, Vafeiadis, & Amaral, 2015; Kerkhof, Beugels, Utz, & Beukeboom, 2011). In fact, complaints and negative WOM, which are available to a large number of people, can have negative implications for both company image and customer satisfaction (Van Noort, Willemsen, Kerkhof, & Verhoeven, 2015). This is what happened, for example, to Alitalia, the major Italian Airline Company, when many customers started complaining about their lost luggage (Figure 1). Clearly this represented a threat to the image and reputation of the company, which can be considered unreliable.

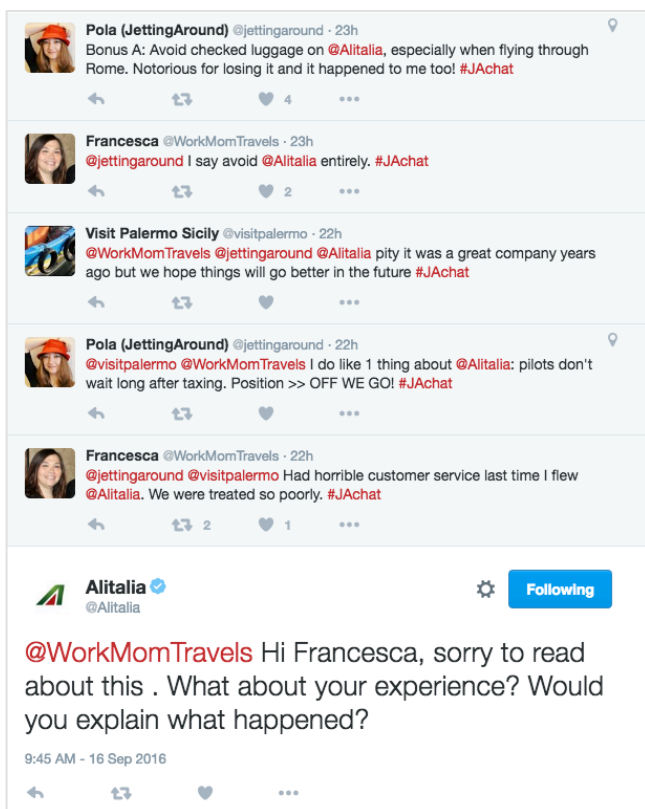


Figure 1 - Alitalia case

The tone of voice that companies use in response to these complaints can help them turn these situations in their favor. Among the tones that companies can employ, the *conversational human voice* has proved to be correlated with positive outcomes such as trust, satisfaction and

commitment of customers to the company (Kelleher, 2009). The conversational human voice can be defined as a natural style of communication that companies use to interact with customers in public (Kelleher, 2009). Moreover, with the adoption of the conversational human voice companies “can leverage to potential of webcare to serve as a tool in support of customer care, public relations, and marketing” (Van Noort et al, 2015, p. 90). These studies suggest that companies should use the conversational human voice when interacting with customers, since it has numerous benefits in different areas. Prior webcare research also focused on this tone of voice in relation to platforms and strategies. In Van Noort and Willemsen (2011), for example, conversational human voice has been found to have an overall positive effect on two platforms types, consumer-generated and brand-generated, and in both proactive and reactive responses. Moreover, combining apologies and conversational human voice resulted in higher credibility and positive attitude towards the response (Kerkhof et al., 2011). It can be concluded that the effects of conversational human voice in webcare studies are overall positive.

Other studies that focused on the strategy that companies should use in webcare, provide evidences that offering apologies when dealing with a complaining customer has been found to be more effective compared to other strategies, such as sympathy or providing information (Di Staso et al., 2015). Moreover, in Kerkhof et al. (2011) apologies created positive attitude of consumers towards the company. These positive effects not only influenced the complainer evaluation of the company, but also the one of the bystanders (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2015).

However, both the tone of voice and the strategy used may be perceived differently from customer to customer. Customers, in fact, could have different characteristic, such as different culture, that the companies should take into account when developing their webcare.

There are a great number of studies that address the problem of cross-cultural communications in different fields, such as medicine or multinational business (Kay, 2005; Kumar & Chakravathi, 2009). According to Hall (1976) there are differences in the way people communicate based on their cultural background. There are, in fact, high-context (HC) cultures and low-context (LC) cultures, which correspond respectively to the collectivistic and individualistic

ones. The first ones, HC or collectivistic, are culture in which meaning is often implicit, leaving something unsaid but present in the mind of the speakers and listeners of that culture. This will let the message be understandable. In the second ones, LC or individualistic cultures, the communication is mostly explicit and direct: what has been said correspond exactly to what the speaker wanted to convey. These differences can create challenges when cross-cultural online communication occurs. For example, miscommunication can easily occur when using these channels because the physical cues, which help the decoding of the meaning, are lower than in face-to-face communication. Consequently, in online communication, HC cultures reader will have more difficulties in successfully comprehend the messages compared to LC cultures readers, since meaning can be implied. Researchers, in fact, demonstrated how these cultural differences, such as miscommunication, arises in website design or Internet consumption, and how these differences have important implications for marketing and advertising techniques (Hermeking, 2005; Wurtz, 2006).

There is reason to believe that, also online, cultural background needs to be taken into account when interacting with others. Specifically, conversational human voice used in webcare may be differently appreciated in high and low context culture, since they differ in the terms of interpersonal relations and may evaluate this human tone as being too informal or not. Moreover, differences may arise also in the appreciation of the apology strategy. Therefore, the research question this study want to answer is: does the conversational human voice and the apology strategy have the same (positive) outcomes among people of different cultures? Specifically, does people coming from high context cultures and low context cultures equally appreciate this tone of voice and this strategy? To assess the successfulness of these variables, attitude towards the company and trustworthiness will be measured, the first being a predictor of consumer behaviors (Mitchell & Olson, 2000) and the second a measured of the confidence consumers place in the company (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of these topics by testing the appreciation and trustworthiness of a company when they employ conversational human voice and

apologies in interacting with customers of different culture. This research will integrate the literature about webcare, conversational human voice and apologies, testing the effects they have on readers. More importantly, this tone of voice and this strategy will be studied in the context of cross-cultural communication. Currently, there are no other webcare studies that took culture into account. It is therefore important to fill this gap in order to assess whether the effects of this tone of voice and the strategy differs across cultures and to help companies dealing with their customers. This study, in fact, will gather insights also for practical implication. Multinational companies deal with customers coming from different cultures. Therefore, knowing what content characteristics have positive or negative outcomes for a specific culture, will help companies to develop an even more precise webcare strategy aimed to customers' satisfaction.

Literature review

Online communication

Since 2005, we talk about Web 2.0. This term was used for the first time by Musser and O'Reilly and defined as “a set of economic, social, and technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet - a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness, and network effects” (Musser & O'Reilly, 2006, p. 4). More and more people have access to the Internet and these people are connected to each other thanks to social media such as Facebook, which in the second quarter of 2016 had 1,712,000 active users per month (Statista, 2016). This revolution concerned also companies that today are closer to their customers thanks to their social media pages on different platforms (Hennig-Thurau, Malhotra, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010). Today, in fact, people can easily contact a company in case of complaints, question, or to share positive comments via social media. This can happen in private conversations between the company and the customer or on the public pages of the companies, the latter being available to many people. The availability of these messages to a large number of people on social media and on the Internet in general, contributed to an exponential growth of *electronic word-of-mouth messages* (eWOM), that are defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler 2004, p.39). These messages can represent both an opportunity and a challenge for companies since positive eWOM can promote the companies. However, negative eWOM can damage the company reputation (Coombs, 2002).

It is therefore important that companies develop the right response strategy for online communication, since the availability of these messages to a multitude of people can have either a positive or negative impact on people's evaluation of the company (Lee & Song, 2010). Moreover, eWOM can also affect the attitude and trust that a customer, or prospect customer, place in the company. In fact, the study conducted by Ladhari & Michaud (2015) demonstrated that readers were influenced by Facebook comments in the choice, trust and attitude towards a company.

Previous Research on Webcare

Considering the importance of WOM messages in online communities, companies need to develop a *webcare* strategy to manage their online communication. Webcare is defined as “the act of engaging in online interactions with consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback” (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011, p.133). Webcare is therefore a mean to improve the relations between companies and their customers (Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010, Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). One of the main aims of webcare is, in fact, to improve the customer services of a company, because using the Internet people can easily contact the company for complains or questions (Van Noort et al., 2014). Moreover, considering the way eWOM messages spread on the Internet, webcare can have an influence also on the public relations of a company because it allow them to manage their online reputation (Combs, 2002).

The research conducted in the last decade has focused mostly on how to handle complaints and how to respond during a social media crisis (Dekay, 2012; Kerkhof et al., 2011; Gregoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). This attention to negative WOM is due to the fact that complaints and critics have proved to be more persuasive for consumers, compared to positive forms of WOM (Sen & Lerman, 2007). The study conducted by Van Noort & Willemsen (2011), for example, confirmed that webcare applied to negative WOM have a positive influence on consumers. In particular, consumers had positive evaluation when a company applied reactive webcare (i.e. when companies reply only when the customer address them directly) compared to proactive webcare (i.e. when the company’s response is unsolicited) (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). We can therefore conclude that it is important for companies respond to negative WOM to mitigate their effects. However, companies should respond when they are directly asked to do so by their interlocutors.

Apologies

It is important that the webcare response strategies are related to the different types of complaints. Gregoire et al. (2015) provide some suggestions to deal with unsatisfied customers,

which can address the company in different ways. For example, in case of directness from the customers, that is when the customers directly address to the company on Social Media to complain or ask for assistance, the company should be promptly reply to them and, if it is possible, either try to resolve the problem publicly or in private, depending on the situation. In both cases, a summary of the solution should be available online. In this way, everyone who follows the company on social media can appreciate the quick and satisfied services offered by the company (Gregoire et al., 2015).

Researchers focused not only on customers but also on prospective customer's reaction to different strategies in webcare. Bystanders, in fact, are also to be taken into consideration, since they are present as observers when the company deals with customers online, and companies' responses can influence them. The study conducted by Purnawirawan et al. (2015) demonstrates how, when negative reviews are in minority compared to positive reviews, the company can ignore these few complaints since the readers, bystanders, will consider these messages less important and as being the product of unreasonable writers. Moreover, the company strategy should be balanced with the customer's complaints. If the balance is negative, the company needs to make an effort to resolve the crisis, offering not only an apology but also a compensation. If the balance is neutral, and an apology combined with a promise that the unwanted event will not happen again makes the company be perceived as trustworthy (Purnawirawan et al., 2015).

Another study by Kerkhof et al (2011) focused on apologies and showed how customers have a more positive attitude towards companies that apologize during crisis. Moreover, if the company uses a personal tone of voice, this will have positive outcomes, not only when apologizing, but also in case of denial, which was the less effective strategy (Kerkhof et al., 2011).

We can conclude from these studies that companies should interact with complaining customers. In doing this, the companies are appreciated if they apologize and behave in a way to promote the communication with their customers. But how can a company create this environment in which customers and company employees can interact easily? The tone of voice used in these interactions can be important.

Conversational human voice

There are many studies that focused on the tone of voice and the linguistics characteristics that the companies need to include in their webcare. Among these, the conversational human voice has proven to have positive outcomes in many studies (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kerkhof et al, 2011). This tone of voice is defined as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics” (Kelleher, 2009, p.177).

The conversation human voice is characterized by features that are not usually related to companies, such as humor, being open to dialogues, admitting their mistakes, and personalization of messages (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2015). Moreover, it can be conveyed using informal speech. In this type of speech, in fact, are present features that are normally found in everyday conversations and this creates a contrast with the more formal and informative language usually employed by companies (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). All these characteristics let customers perceive a “higher relational commitment when compared to a corporate tone of voice” (Kerkhof, 2011, p.19). However, there is not a universal agreement on the features that conversational human voice needs to possess. This could explain contradicting findings of previous studies, positive and negative outcomes that this tone of voice have on customers. Although most studies use the same features, such as personalization and informal speech, no clear and precise guidelines are present for the operationalization of the conversational human voice. This can create some differences among the studies, and therefore their results.

Positive effects of conversational human voice have been found in studies concerning the communication between customers and companies. In a study conducted by Kelleher and Miller (2006), conversational human voice has been proved to have positive effects on customer’s perception of trust and satisfaction. Their experiment, in fact, compared the customers’ evaluations of corporate blogs and websites. In the blogs conditions, the perceived conversational human voice was greater compared to corporate websites, demonstrating that this tone of voice can be important in maintaining relations with customers online (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 408). In Kerkhof et al.

(2011), these comparisons were also applied on social media, such as Facebook. The personal tone of voice has, in fact, demonstrated to be more effective than an impersonal one, since it makes the company be perceived as being more committed to customers (Kerkhof et al., 2011). The same positive effects of conversational human voice as a mediator variable have been found also in the webcare strategies used by companies. In Van Noort & Willemsen (2011), the conversational human voice mediated the relation between type of platform and strategy used. In fact, brand evaluations were higher when conversational human voice was used in reactive webcare responses of negative eWOM. However, the opposite effect was found in consumer-generated platform when the company was proactively responding using the conversational human voice (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011)

Lastly, there are some evidences for the negative effects of the conversational human voice. In a study conducted by Kniesel, Wainguny, & Diehl (2014), the conversational human voice used by companies responding to online reviews was not appreciated as much as the corporate voice in an experiment about hotel reviews. These results contradict previous researches. The authors attribute these results to the cultural background of the participants: other experiments about conversational human voice, in fact, were conducted on Anglo-American participants (for example Kelleher, 2009), whereas in this study the participants were Germans. Therefore, the authors suggest that conversational human voice should be studied in relations with different cultures. This call for further research on the relations between this tone of voice and culture. The author's suggestions, together with the lack of agreement on the operationalization of the conversational human voice, represents the second explanation for the contradicting findings among these studies.

We can finally conclude that results of the effect of conversational human voice in webcare are not clear. Nevertheless, this tone of voice is expected to make the communication among customers and companies more effective. Moreover, this tone of voice has proven to let customers be more satisfied, and the company itself is perceived as trustworthy and committed to the customers. However, more attention should be paid to other variables, such as cultural backgrounds, which may influence the effectiveness of conversational human voice.

Cross-cultural communication

What is culture? There are many definitions of cultures that focus on different aspects, such as nationality, ethnicity or religion. In this study, culture has been defined as mental software: “it is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2010). Moreover, research has proven that “culture and communication reciprocally influence each other” (Giri, 2006, p.124). In fact, cultural differences create difficulties in communications, not only because of the use of different languages but also because of the presence of different mental concepts in these cultures, such as the representations, the image, of objects or animals which we have in our mind (Giri, 2006). For example, when some people think of the category of “birds”, some might have the representation of a robin in their mind, whereas other might have the representation of a bat. These differences in representations present in the mind are related to what we experience and what is present or common in our cultures. Therefore, it is important to take cross-cultural differences into account, especially in contexts such as online communication.

There are many examples of studies on cultural differences (Hall, 1976; Ekman, Friesen, O’Sullivan, Chan, Diacoyanni-Tarlatzi, Heider, & Scherer, 1987; Hofstede, 1986 and 2010; Moran, Abramson, & Moran, 2014) and cross-cultural communication (Tannen, 1983; Kay, 2005). Among these studies, the two most cited models that attempt to categorize cultural differences are the Hall model (1976) and the Hofstede dimensions (2010).

According to Hall (1976) “Culture provide a biased and built in blinders that get in the way of understanding” (p.59). In other words, culture influence the way we understand each other and the way we communicate. Hall states that cultures can be categorized as high-context (HC) cultures and low-context (LC) cultures. HC culture are collectivistic, more focused on interpersonal relations and therefore on group identity. The representatives of these cultures create strong connections with others and are more oriented towards long-term relationships. LC culture, on the other hand, are individualistic. The representative of these culture create short connections with others, and are focused on self-achievement. According to this categorization (Hall, 1976), these

differences between cultures are present in communication. In HC cultures, communication is mostly internalized and therefore messages contain implicit information. People need to refer to the context around the event to completely understand their interlocutor. In LC cultures, communication is the opposite: speakers externalize all the information, and talk explicitly (Hall, 1976). For example, in HC cultures it is important not only what is said, but how it is said, such as the tone of voice used. A representative of HC culture could say, “I am feeling good” with a sarcastic tone, meaning that he or she is not feeling well. In LC culture instead, a speaker would say, “I am not feeling good” directly, without any underlying meaning. Nations can be categorized using this scale. However, “no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale” (Hall, 1976, p.79). Keeping this frame in mind, speakers must adjust their language according to the culture of the receiver. This is especially important in online communication, where there is a considerable lack of cues and miscommunication can easily occur. For example, for HC cultures the tone of voice used is important whereas for LC cultures focus more on words. When physical cues are missing in the communication, as it happens online, HC cultures representatives could have difficulties in understanding the meaning conveyed by a sender of the same culture. This will not happen for LC cultures.

Hall’s model makes a classification of culture that can be related to one of Hofstede dimensions: individualism and collectivism. In HC culture, as already stated, in fact, more importance is placed in the relationships with others, therefore they are more collectivists; the opposite happens in LC cultures. This individualism/collectivism dimension is important in this study because it may influence the way people appreciate conversational human voice. This can happen because individualistic and low-context cultures are more focused toward a direct communication compared to collectivistic and high-context cultures. However, the Hofstede model employs also other dimensions than the individualism/collectivism ones to classify cultures, providing a more complex and detailed classification compared to the one proposed by Hall. In fact, the model developed by Hofstede (2010), based on the results of a worldwide survey that was administered to IBM employees, identifies six dimensions in total (Hofstede, 2011): power of

distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long- or short-term orientation and indulgence dimensions. Of these, the “individualism – collectivism” dimensions, as stated above, is of particular interests for this study since it is a measure of the extent to which “the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the other” (Hofstede, 2010, p.74).

The Hofstede model provides evidences of the existence of systematic differences between nations. Therefore, it is important to recognize these differences, because they contribute to differences also in language and therefore in communication (Hofstede, 2010). Moreover, the advances in communication technology “increase our consciousness of differences between and within countries” (Hofstede, 2010, p.330).

According to these two models, countries like The Netherlands and Italy positions on different poles of these classifications. Based on the Hofstede model (2010), Italy and The Netherlands are ranked differently among the six dimensions. Moreover, according to the Hall classification (1976) and as it can be observed in Figure 1, Italy is considered as being higher context culture compare to German-speaking countries, and therefore the Netherlands.



Figure 1 - High and Low context culture from: (Hall, & Hall, 1990)

The Hofstede model is at the same time the most cited but also criticized model used for culture categorization. In particular, among others critics, McSweeney (2002) argue that nations cannot be used to measure culture, because culture is not necessarily connected to country

boundaries. Although Hofstede replied to this critic by stating that nations are the only unit of measurement available to make a comparison (Hofstede, 2002), classifying culture based on nationality may not be reliable. National borders do not necessarily separate cultures. Cultures are also related to what a person know and experience together with the values and belief of the group to which belongs. However, since in this study two quite distant cultures are compared, one with a German background and the other one a Latin background, nations are still a good measurement unit to take into consideration. These two cultures, in fact, shows great differences for what concerns customs, values and beliefs.

We can conclude saying that nowadays communication among different cultures it is easier because of the Internet, but cultural differences must be taken into account. In fact, there are studies that confirmed the relations between communication and cultures. In Hornikx, & Hoeken (2007) study, cultural differences arose between two European cultures, Dutch and French, in the comparison of persuasiveness perception. In fact, Dutch participants, when exposed to some claims/recommendations, were more persuaded if the message contained expert's evidence. For example, if a recommendation about food consumption was coming from a professor of a well-known university. This did not happened for French participants. Therefore, different strategies in communication are necessary when addressing different cultures, in order to successfully transfer the meaning.

These evidences calls for further research on the relation between culture and communication. There is reason to believe that cultural differences are present in the context of webcare, specifically for the tone of voice and strategy used. Considering that conversational human voice is characterized by an informal tone of voice, and that LC and HC cultures differ in the degree of which they are focused on interpersonal relationship, this tone of voice, which is related to a more close relations between the speakers, might have a different outcomes on people coming from different types of cultures.

For similar reasons a relation could be established between culture and apologies. HC cultures might well perceive a company that apologizes, since this can represent a further element

of interaction with the company, showing that the companies admit their mistakes. The contrary could happen for LC cultures, a more task-oriented culture, which could consider apologies not important to the aims of the interaction between customers and companies. Moreover, this culture do not seek for a personal contact that might be conveyed by an apology.

Research question and dependent variables

Because of the presence of differences in communication among people coming from different culture, and therefore countries, this study want to investigate whether the same differences are present in the context of cross cultural communication online. In particular, the context of consumer-company communication will be investigated. This study will focus on Italian and Dutch culture. In this study the following research questions will be investigated:

RQ: Will people with Italian and Dutch culture background similarly appreciate the conversational human voice in webcare?

As showed in model of culture classification by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2010), differences between these two countries may arise. In particular, these differences are expected because conversational human voice involves a great amount of human communication and therefore this tone may be appreciated differently by different cultures. Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Italians, HC culture, will have a positive attitude and more trust towards the company compared to Dutch, LC culture, when the company response includes conversational human voice.

Since the apologies might be perceived as a further element of personal contact with the company, as explained above, the second hypothesis follow:

H2: Italians, HC culture, will have a positive attitude and more trust towards the company compared to Dutch, LC culture, when the company response includes apologies.

To test potential differences, attitude towards the brand and trustworthiness will be used as dependent variables. Attitude towards the brand, in fact, is “a useful predictor of consumer behavior towards the company” and it is define as “individual’s internal evaluation of the brand” ” (Mitchell

& Olson, 2000, p.318). In this research, attitude measurements will be based on the Spears & Singh (2004) study. For what concerns trustworthiness, this concept has been defined as “as “the confidence a consumer places in the firm and the firm’s communications, and as to whether the firm’s actions would be in the consumer’s interest” (Lassar et al., 1995, p. 13). These variables have demonstrated to be influence by eWOM (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). Moreover, other studies have also used these two measures to assess the successfulness of webcare. Therefore, because these measures were already used in several studies, results will be comparable to other webcare research. This represents, also, an important indicator of consumer’s behavior. In trusting a brand, consumer gives also a high value to the company. More information about the scales used to measure these two items will be provided in the method section.

Method

An online survey was conducted to investigate the effect of independent variables on the dependent variables, attitude towards the company and trustworthiness.

Design

The participants were assigned to a 2 (culture: Italian and Dutch) x 2 (tone of voice: conversational human voice and formal tone) x 2 (strategy: apology and no apology) between-subjects design. For each culture, there were four condition combining the presence and absence of conversational human voice and apologies. Each participant was randomly assigned to one condition. Of this condition, two messages of two different companies were shown (PostNL and KPN in the Dutch version, and Nexive and Wind in the Italian version). After reading each of the two conversations, participants were asked to answer a number of questions and respond to semantic word pairs placed on a seven-point scale. The participants took five to fifteen minutes to complete the final questionnaire. Participants were gathered in one week during which they were contacted via social media or asked in persons to fill in the questionnaire on a provided platform (a personal computer or a smartphone).

Materials

The companies used in the conversations showed to participants were chosen based on their activity on Twitter and taking into consideration the probability to which participants were motivated to contact these types of companies. Moreover, the same types of companies were chosen between the two countries. PostNL (@PostNL) has a great numbers of followers on their webcare twitter account among other Dutch companies (67,7K followers on November 30th, 2016). Moreover, a postal service company is likely to receive most of the complaints because of lost or damaged packages, and since customer wants a quick response, the use of social media to contact the company should be more frequent for this type of company. To match this Dutch company and to reduce the differences between the two cultures conditions, the same type of company was chosen for the Italian participants, which were reading complaints addressed to the webcare account

of Nexive (@NexiveCare), a postal service company, part of the PostNL group, and with a great amount of twitter webcare messages. For the same reason, the Dutch telephone company KPN (@KPN), which webcare account has 66,4K followers on November 30th, 2016, was chosen, and a matching Italian phone company, Wind (@winditalia), which is also a very active company in webcare, was chosen for the Italian participants. The customers of a telephone services company, as the postal services ones, often need and desire a quick response to solve their problems. Therefore, because these types of companies should be the ones that people most likely contact via Social Media in case of problems, these companies were used in the conversations showed to participants.

Conversational human voice is a difficult variable to operationalize since there is not a universal agreement on it. According to Van Noort & Willemsen (2015) the conversational human voice consists in being open to dialogues with customers and admitting the company mistakes. Moreover, according to Kerkhof et al. (2011) this tone of voice is characterized by the informality. It is, in fact, an everyday language, in opposition to a more formal tone of voice usually employed by companies. These features were used to operationalize the independent variables in this study. In addition, the names of the customers and the signature of the company's employee were used, since personalization contributes to the feeling of personal contact (Van Noort et al, 2014; Verhagen, van Nes, Feldeberg, & van Dolen, 2014).

For what concerns the apology strategy, this can be defined as “accepting responsibility and ask for forgiveness” (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, p. 254). This was operationalized with the use of words such as “sorry” or “we regret this happened”, showing that the company did feel sorry and that they express their concerned and regrets about the incident.

The conversations consisted of a negative WOM in which a customer complained about a failed service to the company and a company response in different tone of voice and strategy. The operationalization of these two concepts was pretested as described in the next section.



Figure 2 – English example of the conversation employing a conversational human voice vs. formal tone of voice and apologies.



Figure 3 – English example of the conversation employing conversational human voice vs. formal tone of voice and no apologies.

Pretest

To ensure that the conversational human voice and the formal tone of voice are correctly conveyed, a pretest on the materials was conducted. Moreover, the presence of the strategy, if the company apologizes or not, was pretested.

Design. Eight conversations in English between a complaining customer and a company (either PostNL or KPN) were created for the pretest in a Twitter format. The responses of the companies were manipulated in each of the conversation so to have four responses with a conversational human voice and four with a corporate voice. Among the conversational human

voice responses, the signature or the initials of the employees responding on behalf of the companies were alternated. Moreover, different types of salutes were used (such as “best!” or “cheers!”). These differences allowed selecting the best combinations of characteristics to successfully convey the conversational human voice in the case this tone was not recognized in all the materials. Finally, also the strategy was pretested employing either an apology or a “sorry” in half of the messages, and no apologies in the other half.

Instrumentation & Procedure. The pretest was composed of three parts. In the first part of the pretest, participants were asked to rate the presence of the conversational human voice of these responses based on the five measurements from Kelleher (2009). These five were chosen, not only because they were the most representative and clear ones, but also to reduce the work load for participants. The scale used to measure the conversational human voice, which consisted of five items on a seven-point-scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree) based on Kelleher (2009), had a satisfactory reliability, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$ ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .81$). The scale use to measure the strategy consisted of two items on a seven-point-scale ((1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree) which were assessing whether the company was admitting or take responsibility for their mistakes. These two items had also a satisfactory reliably, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$ ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .80$). In the second part of the pretest, the two types of responses (conversational and formal tone of voice) to a same customer’s complaint were showed and participants were asked to determine whether the two responses were using different tone of voice or not, and to what extent they were sure about their answer. In the third and final part of the pretest, participants were asked if the situations were realistic, whether they were familiar with these online conversations and finally if they had some suggestions to improve the operationalization of the two tone of voice.

Participants. Twenty-five participants took part in the pretest on the materials and responded to all the questions. The link of the questionnaire was send to them via private messages on Facebook or Whatsapp. Also, responses were captured face-to-face using a personal smartphone or personal computer. The participants of the pretest, 14 female and 11 male, were of different

nationalities: five German, five Greek, four Dutch and four Italians, three Chinese, two Hungarian, one Franc and one Slovakian. The mean age of these participants was 24.96 ($SD = 2.90$).

Results. By analyzing the data obtained from the pretest, it is clear how the conversational human voice and the formal tone of voice were both successfully conveyed. Statistical tests were carried on to assess the significance of the differences among the two tone of voice. On average, the conversational human voice ($M = 1.80$ $SD = 0.70$) was successfully recognized compared to the formal tone of voice ($M = 4.60$ $SD = 1.60$). This difference was significant, $t(25) = -7.75$, $p = .00$, $r = .70$, 95% $CI (-3.65, -2.05)$. On average, the presence of apologies ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .80$) was successfully recognized compared to the absence of apologies ($M = 4.60$ $SD = 1.30$). This difference was significant, $t(25) = -7.00$, $p = .00$, $r = .70$, 95% $CI (-2.85, -1.55)$.

When both types of responses were showed, 85% of the participants agreed that there was a difference in the tones used, whereas 14% did not recognize these differences. Moreover, 96% of the participants successfully recognized the formal responses between the two types and they were sure about their decision ($M=6.37$, $SD = 3.05$, on a 7-point-scale).

Finally, 92% of the participants state that they were familiar with these types of conversation but only 52% ever had one. The conversations showed to participants were also considered realistic by all the participants (56% strongly agree, 32% agree, 8% somewhat agree, 4% neutral).

For what concerned the suggestions asked to improve the operationalization of the tones of voice, no useful suggestions were retrieved.

It can be concluded that the material successfully conveyed the conversational human voice and the formal tone of voice. Moreover, also the strategy was successfully recognized. Therefore the materials that had the higher recognition of conversational human voice and apologies were translated in Dutch and Italian and employed in final questionnaire to test the hypothesis.

Participant

The participants of the experiment were 254 in total. The 128 Italian participants were 53 males and 75 female, (42% male and 58% female), mean age of 27.70 ($SD = 6.58$). Most of them

(52%) had a higher education (University/Master/PhD). The 126 Dutch participants were 51 males and 75 females (41% male and 59% female), mean age of 22.97 ($SD = 4.69$). A large portion of them (89%) had a higher education (University/Master/PhD).

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, in order to have a minimum of thirty participants per condition.

Measurement

The participants responded to questions and semantic word pairs which measured the reader's attitude towards the company and if they perceive the company as trustworthy. The questionnaire was in Italian and Dutch. The attitude towards the company was measured using word pairs placed on a seven-point scale describing the companies as explained in the Spears and Singh (2004) study. Trustworthiness was measured with words pairs based on the study of Lassar et al., (1995). The words pairs and questions, which were adapted to the aim of this study, are shown in Table 1. Attitude was measured with five questions, on a seven-point scale. The reliability of the scale was good, $\alpha = .89$ ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.01$). Trustworthiness was measured with four items on a seven-point scale. The reliability of this scale was also good, $\alpha = .72$, ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.01$). Finally, participants' age, nationality and education were measured.

Table 1. Measurement used in the questions (Translation of the adjective pairs are available in the Appendix)

	<i>Attitude toward the brand</i>		<i>Trustworthiness</i>	
<i>Word pairs on</i>	Unappealing	Appealing	Misleading	Reliable
<i>7-point scale</i>	Bad	Good	Doubtful	Believable
	Unpleasant	Pleasant		
<i>Agree/disagree</i>	This is good company.		I trust the brand.	
<i>7-point scale</i>	The brand satisfies customer need.		The brand seems reliable.	

Procedure

In a between subject design, respondents were acting as bystanders and they were reading two conversations between consumers and a company on a social network site (Twitter). These conversations were composed by a negative eWOM messages and the manipulated company reactive response to these messages. Each of the participants read two conversations with the same conditions but concerning two different companies. This contributed in making the study more generalizable, since results are relying on two cases. The participants were gathered with a combination of network and convenience sampling, and the presence of the two different cultures in the group was ensured. The companies responses were manipulated with the presence of the conversational human voice or the formal tone of voice, and either an apology or no apology.

Results

Firstly, a series of tests were performed to assess whether the groups in which participants were divided were comparable. To do this, participant's age was compared between the four groups with an ANOVA. This test was not significant for Dutch participants, $F(3, 125) = .023, p = .995$, and for Italian participants, $F(3, 125) = .205, p = .893$, meaning that there are no differences in age between the groups. Sex and education were also compared between the groups. Since these are categorical variables, a Chi-square test was performed to assess whether participant's sex and education were different among the groups. This test was not significant, meaning that there are no difference in sex, $\chi^2(3, N = 128) = 1.83, p = .607$, and education of participant, $\chi^2(9, N = 128) = 10.33, p = .324$, between Dutch and Italians.

Secondly, different tests were performed to assess whether the demographic of the participants had an influence on the dependent variables, which are attitude towards the company and trustworthiness. A Chi-square test was performed to assess whether sex of the participants had an influence on the measurement. The sex of the participants was not significantly associated with attitude towards the company for Dutch participants, $\chi^2(1) = 37.63, p = .663$, and for Italians participants, $\chi^2(1) = 44.05, p = .744$. Sex was also not significantly associated with trustworthiness for Dutch participants, $\chi^2(1) = 25.34, p = .708$, and for Italians participants, $\chi^2(1) = 55.38, p = .162$.

Another Chi-square test was performed to assess whether the education of participants had an influence on the measurement. The education of participants was not significantly associated with attitude towards the company for Dutch participants, $\chi^2(1) = 164.13, p = .073$, and for Italians participants, $\chi^2(1) = 176.56, p = .093$. Education was also not significantly associated with trustworthiness for Dutch participants, $\chi^2(1) = 77.09, p = .832$, and for Italians participants, $\chi^2(1) = 106.61, p = .978$.

Finally, a Pearson correlation was performed to test whether age had an influence on the measurement. The age of the Dutch participants was significantly correlated with the attitude towards the company, $r = -.180, p = .044$, but not significantly correlated with trustworthiness, $r = -.136, p = .128$. Moreover, age of the Italian participants was significantly correlated with the

measured attitude towards the company, $r = -.178$, $p = .045$, but not significantly correlated with trustworthiness, $r = -.070$, $p = .431$. These results show that age might have influenced the results of the study, when attitude was measured. For this reason, age will be treated as a confounding variable when investigating the attitude towards the company.

Attitude

To determine whether Italians participants have a more positive attitude towards the company when they use the conversational human voice in webcare compared to Dutch participants, a factorial Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed. A part from the tone of voice used, the strategy employed by the company, whether they apologize or not, was also taken into account.

The normality distribution of the data was checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov values. The attitude scores when the conversational human voice was present in the messages deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(132) = .119$, $p = .000$. However, attitude scores when the conversational human voice was not present in the messages, did not deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(122) = .070$, $p = .200$. The attitude scores when an apology was present deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(127) = .110$, $p = .001$. Moreover, attitude scores when there was not an apology in the messages, deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(127) = .098$, $p = .004$. However, these values should be interpreted in relation with the size of the sample. Moreover, the plots do show a pattern in the data. Therefore, the ANCOVA test was performed also if the assumption of normality was not met, because it is a robust test.

The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met because the Levene's test of equality of error variances was not significant, $F(8, 244) = 1.39$, $p = .232$.

The ANCOVA was performed with the attitude scores as dependent factor, the tone of voice, the strategy used and culture as an independent factors and age of participants as a covariate. The test showed a significant main effect of conversational human voice, $F(1, 252) = 11.54$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .045$. Overall, attitude scores for messages with conversational human voice were higher

($M = 5.25$, $SD = 0.84$) than for formal messages ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.88$). There was also a significant main effect of strategy, $F(1, 254) = 4.40$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$. Attitude scores for messages without an apology were higher ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.86$) than for messages containing an apology ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.87$). There was a slightly-significant effect of culture on the attitude towards the company, $F(1, 254) = 3.46$, $p = .064$, $\eta^2 = .014$. Attitude score for Dutch participants ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .98$) were significantly higher than for Italian participants ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .98$), meaning that culture alone can explain differences in attitude towards the company.

The test showed a significant interaction effect of conversational human voice between cultures when attitude was measured, $F(1, 252) = 10.23$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .040$. When the company was using a conversational human voice, the attitude scores were higher for Italian participants ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.89$) than for Dutch participants ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.91$).

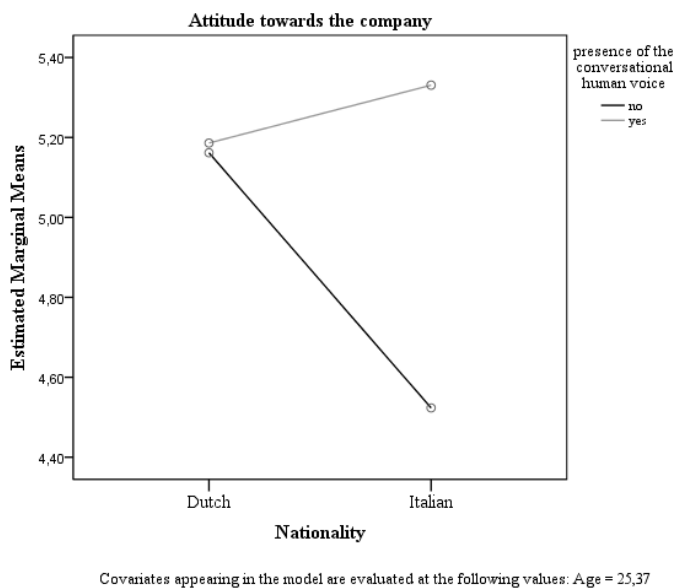


Figure 4 - Attitude towards the company and conversational human voice between cultures

As is shown in Figure 4, the presence and absence of the conversational human voice does make a big difference in the attitude scores among Italians, compared to Dutch participants. A One-way ANOVA was performed, the test showed that there was a significant difference between the attitude scores of the Italian participants when exposed to messages containing the conversational human voice ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.01$) and the more formal ones ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 130) = 19.61$, p

$= .000, \eta^2 = .034$.

The strategy used did not have significantly different attitude scores between Dutch ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.01$) and Italians ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.00$), $F(1,252) = 0.21, p = .886, \eta^2 = .000$. There was also a non-significant interaction effect between tone of voice and strategy, $F(1,252) = .344, p = .558, \eta^2 = .001$. Messages with a conversational human voice and apologies ($M = 5.16, SD = .96$) did not have higher attitude scores than messages with no conversational human voice and apologies ($M = 5.00, SD = 1.00$). Finally, there was a non-significant interaction effect among tone of voice and strategy between Dutch ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.43$) and Italians ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.30$), $F(1,252) = 1.57, p = .210, \eta^2 = .006$.

Trust

The normality distribution of the data was checked using the Kolmogorov - Smirnov values. Trust scores registered when the conversational human voice was present in the messages deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(132) = .078, p = .050$. On the contrary, trust scores when the conversational human voice was not present in the messages, did not deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(122) = .086, p = .027$. The trust scores when an apology was present did not deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(127) = .060, p = .200$. However, trust scores when there was not an apology in the messages, deviate significantly from normal distribution, $D(127) = .095, p = .007$. Nevertheless, these values should be interpreted in relation with the size of the sample. Moreover, the plots do show a clear pattern. Therefore, the ANOVA test was performed also if the assumption of normality was not met, because it is a robust test.

The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met because the Levene's test of equality of error variances was not significant, $F(8, 244) = 1.27, p = .263$.

The ANOVA was performed employing the trust scores as dependent factor and the tone of voice, the strategy used and culture as independent factors. The test showed a significant main effect of culture on trust, $F(1,252) = 18.19, p = .000, \eta^2 = .069$. Dutch participants showed higher trust scores ($M = 5.35, SD = .096$) than Italian participants ($M = 4.83, SD = .096$). Overall, there

was a significant main effect of conversational human voice, $F(1, 252) = 5.27, p = .022, \eta^2 = .021$. Trust scores for messages showing conversational human voice were higher ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.84$) than for more formal messages ($M = 4.95, SD = 0.88$). There was also a significant main effect of apologies, $F(1, 252) = 4.86, p = .028, \eta^2 = 0.19$. Trust scores for messages without an apology were higher ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.86$) than for messages containing an apology ($M = 4.96, SD = 0.86$).

The test showed a significant interaction effect of conversational human voice between cultures when trust was measured, $F(1, 252) = 7.97, p = .005, \eta^2 = .031$. Trust scores for messages using a formal tone of voice (not a conversational human voice) were higher for Dutch participants ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.94$) than for Italian ones ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.94$). Moreover, also for messages with conversational human voice, trust scores were also higher for Dutch participants ($M = 5.32, SD = 1.91$) than for Italian participants ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.81$).

It can be concluded that the trust scores did not differ for Dutch people when exposed to messages with or without the presence of the conversational human voice. This is not true for Italians, which instead trust more the company when they employ the conversational human voice.

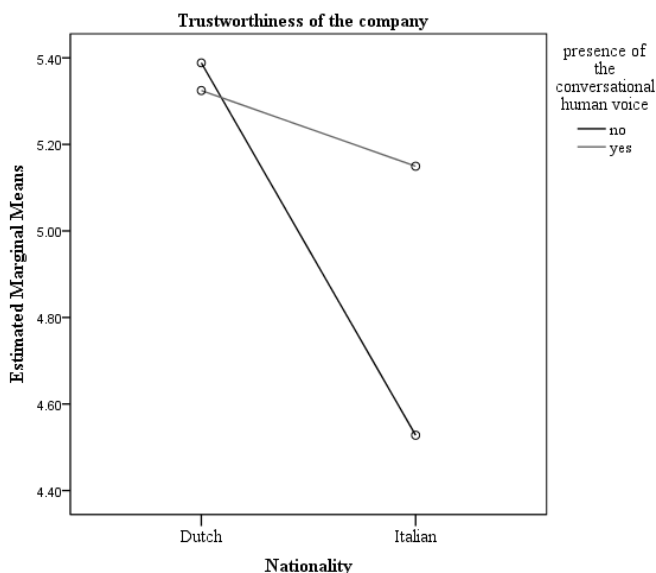


Figure 5 - Trustworthiness of the company and conversational human voice between cultures

Again, as showed in Figure 5, the presence of the conversational human voice does make a big difference in the trustworthiness scores among Italians, compared to Dutch participants. In fact, there was a significant difference between the trust scores of the Italian participants when exposed

to messages containing the conversational human voice ($M = 5.14$, $SD = .98$) or to more formal ones ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.07$), $F(1,130) = 11.04$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .010$.

The strategy used did not have significantly different trust scores between Dutch ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.97$) and Italians ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.98$). $F(1,252) = .51$, $p = .472$, $\eta^2 = .002$. There was a non-significant interaction between tone of voice and strategy, $F(1,252) = .730$, $p = .394$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

Messages with a conversational human voice and apologies ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.01$) did not have higher trust scores than messages with no conversational human voice and apologies ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.97$). Finally, there was a non-significant interaction effect among tone of voice and strategy between Dutch ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.09$) and Italians ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.02$), $F(1,252) = .325$, $p = .569$, $\eta^2 = .001$.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate whether consumers coming from different cultures appreciate differently the conversational human voice. Other than the conversational human voice, also the effect of the strategy used by the company, whether they apologize or not to customers, was taken into account. To measure the extent to which customers appreciate the company, the attitude towards the company and trustworthiness of the company were used as dependent variables.

The results of this study showed that there are differences in the way participants coming from the two different cultures studied, Italian and Dutch, appreciated the conversational human voice and apologies. However, there were unexpected findings regarding the strategy used.

Conversational Human Voice

Based on this study, when the conversational human voice was present in the webcare responses of the companies, the attitudes towards the company was more positive. In the same way, the trustworthiness of the company was higher compared to the conditions where the companies used the formal tone of voice. These results are consistent with previous literature, in which the conversational human voice has demonstrated to have positive outcomes (Kerkhof, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). Moreover, the participants coming from the two cultures taken into account, Italian and Dutch, evaluated the conversational human voice in different ways. This cultural difference is in line with the literature (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). Specifically, when the conversational human voice was present, a more positive attitude towards the company was measured for Italian participants. Italian participants' attitude towards the company, which was using this tone of voice, was slightly higher compared to Dutch participants.

Results showed that the presence or absence of the conversational human voice does make a big difference in the attitudes towards the company for Italians: when the tone of voice of the company is formal, the attitude towards the company is negative. Whereas, this did not happen for Dutch participants, which attitude had a positive tendency in both conditions. These results are in line with the individualism-collectivism dimension identified in Hofstede (2010), which posit

that collectivistic and high-context cultures, such as Italians, are more focused towards an indirect communication. Therefore, they appreciated more indirect communication in which there is an emphasis not only on the words but also on interpersonal relationship between sender and receiver (Joyce, 2012). These features of indirect communication can be related to conversational human voice: a tone of voice that create a sense of personal and human contact between the company and their customers.

A similar pattern appeared when looking at the trustworthiness towards the companies. Companies employing a conversational human voice in their replies were considered as deserving more trust by Italians. However, companies using a more formal tone of voice had higher trustworthiness scores for Dutch participants than Italians. This can also be related to the Hofstede dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2010). Dutch participants, who are classified as an individualistic and low-context culture, trusted more the company when they were employing a more formal communication. This formal tone of voice is related to the characteristics of low-context cultures. In fact, contrary to high-context cultures, low-context cultures does not focus on interpersonal relations, and therefore prefer a more direct contact with the company, excluding all that features, such as tone of voice, that are not useful to the aim of the communication.

However, also in this case, a great difference was found in the trust scores for Italians when the conversational human voice was present or absent. Italians, classified as a collectivistic, high-context culture (Hofstede, 2010), trusted the company less when the replies were formulated in a more formal tone of voice. This tone of voice did not show a relational commitment of the company towards the customer, and therefore is not appreciated by a culture that expect a human contact in communication.

Finally, it can be concluded that these results confirm hypothesis 1, which stated that Italians, HC culture, will have a positive attitude and more trust towards the company compared to Dutch, LC culture, when the company response includes conversational human voice. For Italians the presence of the conversational human voice makes a difference in both their attitude and the

trust they associate to the companies. This is not true for Dutch participants: although they do appreciate this tone of voice, a more formal tone registered higher trusts values.

These results are related to Kniesel et al (2014) findings. As in Kniesel et al (2011), this study confirmed that German, a culture with a German background such as the Dutch cultures, do not perceive conversational human voice positively. However, these findings are contradicted by previous research, such as Kerkhof et al (2011) and Van Noort & Willemsen (2011), in which conversational human voice resulted in having positive outcomes among Dutch participants. One explanation for the different results between this study and previous researches can be found in the main variable of the present study: culture. In fact, this research wanted to compare distant cultures, in order to find differences in the appreciation of conversational human voice, whereas other studies, focused on one culture. As it has been show also in the results section, Dutch participants did appreciate the tone of voice to a certain extent. However, these appreciation was lower compare to Italian participants. However, this explanation cannot account for the Kniesel et al (2014) results. Therefore, more research is needed in order to better investigate the effect of this tone of voice among cultures.

Another possible explanation can be found in the operationalization of the conversational human voice. Although this tone of voice has been extensively studied, there is no universal agreement on the operationalization of this concept. However, it was not possible to retrieve the materials of previous research cited above, and therefore it cannot be assessed whether this explanation is valid.

Apologies

Based on this study, there were unexpected results concerning the strategy used by the companies. Previous literature showed that an apology from the company resulted in positive outcomes (Kerkhof et al., 2011). In this study, however, when the company apologized to the customers, lower scores for both the attitude towards the companies and trust were registered, and

there were non-significant differences between the two cultures. In fact, when the companies did not apologize these scores were higher. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 is rejected.

One possible explanation for this unexpected finding can be found in the materials. There is the possibility that the apologies were not clearly operationalized in the messages. In fact, only using words such as “sorry” might not be enough. In Roschk and Kaiser (2013), the authors studied the effect of apologies used by companies when interacting with complaining customers. They find out that giving an apology did not lead to high satisfaction compared to no apology. This was particularly true when there was not enough empathy in the messages. They suggest, “researchers should use a more vivid statement describing an apology’s empathy and intensity and by this enhance realism of the experiment and provoke more real life reactions and emotion” (Roschk and Kaiser, 2013, p.303). This might explain the results of this study. However, since the participants were asked to act as bystanders, and therefore their involvement in the situation was low, the operationalization used in the study, words such as “sorry” or “we regret that this happened”, should have been sufficient. This was also confirmed in the pretest. However, future studies could operationalize the apologies in different ways, as to assess whether this may result in different evaluations.

Moreover, the conversational human voice could have mitigated the (negative) effects of the no-apology strategy condition. In fact, the conversational human voice, being an informal and personal tone of voice, already creates positive feelings of trust and positive attitude on the reader. This might explain why, when the company did not apologize but used a conversational human voice, the attitude and trust scores were positive. However, no significant interaction effect between the tone used and the strategy was found.

Finally, another possible explanation of these findings can be found in previous research about apologies in online interactions between customer and companies. In the Purnawirawan et al (2015) study, findings underline how, in case of negative balanced reviews, an apology from the company is not enough to restore the relationship between company and customers. Moreover, the readers have also the impression that, when the company apologizes, the negative reviews posted by

the customer was valid. Therefore, the suggestion of the authors to the company is that apologies should be combined with compensations. This can explain why, in the present study, apologies did not have positive effects neither on attitude or trust towards the company. Since the participants were reading negative WOM messages, they could have perceived the apologies as an act of admission of “guilt” by the company. Moreover, they could have think that just an apology was not enough and consequently have a negative attitude and less trust towards the company.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is represented by the age of the participants ($M = 25.35$, $SD = 6.18$), which had an influence on one of the dependent variable, attitude towards the company. Although this was taken into account during the analysis, age is still confounded with the manipulation. Therefore, future research could control this and, moreover, investigate different age groups in order to assess whether there are differences in the appreciation of conversational human voice among them. Age can be an important variable because, being the access to other cultures is facilitate by the Internet, it is possible that cultural differences are not present among younger users, which are more active online, compared adults.

Moreover, it could be further investigates whether other cultures differs in the appreciation of the conversational human voice, and compare these cultures. Previous research has conducted studies mostly involved Anglo-American participants, whereas few others, such as Kerkhod et al (2011), Kniesel et al. (2014) and Van Noort & Willemsen (2011), have conducted a study with German or Dutch participants.

Kerkhof et al (2011) demonstrated how the effects of conversational human voice on Dutch participants are positive, also in when the companies were employing different, and not always successful, strategies. Kniesel et al (2014) found that, similarly as the present study, conversational human voice used in online reviews was not appreciated by German participants as much as the corporate voice. Van Noort and Willemsen (2011), however, found positive results when the Dutch participants were exposed to conversational human voice. These findings contradict each other,

previous studies and this present research. One possible explanation, as stated before, could be found in the operationalization of the conversational human voice. Although this study followed the guidelines provided in the article of Van Noort and Willemsen (2011), it had different results. This may be due to the fact that there is still no universal agreement on the operationalization of this concept. Therefore, further research should also identify the main characteristics of the conversational human voice, in a way that all or most of the researchers can agree on it. Another possible explanation can be connected to Aggarwal & McGill (2007), which found that the “anthropomorphized” companies had negative evaluations from customers. This can be connected to the conversational human voice, which is a style of communication that entails personalization and other features that makes the companies be perceived as “human”. It might be the case that some features of conversational human voice have positive outcomes, whereas other features that make the company be perceived as excessively “human” provoke negative attitude. However, it can be concluded that more research is needed on this topic to shed light on these contradictory, but still interesting, findings.

Relevance and implications

The mixed results of previous literature demonstrate that culture have an important role in communication and in the perception of the conversational human voice. This relate to a large number of studies that attest the differences in communication among cultures. Among these, for example, one illustrates already that there are a series of aspect of communication that vary from culture to culture (Tannen, 1984). Therefore, a more broad and careful comparison among cultures can results in interesting findings, which are of main importance for companies when implementing their webcare. This study had Italians and Dutch participants, two European but distant cultures, one with a Latin and one with a German backgrounds. These cultures demonstrated having different behaviors/preferences in the way companies communicate. It would be interesting to investigate whether the same differences occur with more distant cultures, such as Asia cultures and European for example, cultures that many multinational companies address daily.

Of further interest can be the study of other strategies used in webcare by companies, such as showing sympathy or give customers compensation. It has been already attested how different cultures have different (buying) behaviors, and different communications preferences (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011; Tannen, 1983). Since, in this study, the use of apologies did not showed different behaviors between the two cultures taken into account, it could be interesting to investigate whether customer coming from more distant cultures have different reactions when exposed to compensation, for example, or sympathy. Additionally, differences may arise when customers with different cultural backgrounds are exposed to positive or negative WOM, or reactive and proactive responses. For example, people with different culture background could differ in the appreciation of proactive responses. These could be perceived as an intrusion for LC cultures, whereas HC culture might appreciate proactive responses, considering these an effort of the company increase the engagement with the customers.

This study contributes to a better understanding of the conversational human voice and its effects, and it relates them to cultures. This has important implications for multinational companies and their webcare. Using a conversational human voice, in fact, is especially recommended to companies, particularly when interacting with Italian complaining customers. In the Netherlands, there are not big differences when companies use a conversational human voice or a more formal one. However, a more formal tone of voice will be translated in higher trust towards the company. For what concerns the strategy, apologies showed contradictory findings compared to previous literatures. Therefore, no clear suggestions can be made.

This study confirms that the conversational human voice is overall positively appreciated. However, further studies are needed in order to investigate better the effects of the strategy and to assess which other variables can influence the positive effects of conversational human voice. Culture, as showed in this study, is one of these variables.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Twitter templates used

Conversational human voice with and without apologies (Dutch and Italian):

 <p>Kevin @kevings - 1h Hi @KPN, twee dagen geleden heb ik betaald voor mijn internetoptie, maar deze is nog steeds niet actief op mijn telefoon! Kunnen jullie dit oplossen?</p> <p> KPN @KPN</p> <p>Hi @kevings, excuses daarvoor! :(We gaan het meteen controleren! Kun je ons via DM je persoonlijke gegevens sturen? Groet! Johan</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>3:37 PM - 10 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>	 <p>Johan @johanvdh - 1h Hi @KPN, twee dagen geleden heb ik betaald voor mijn internetoptie, maar deze is nog steeds niet actief op mijn telefoon! Kunnen jullie dit oplossen?</p> <p> KPN @KPN</p> <p>Hoi @johanvdh. We gaan het meteen controleren! Kun je ons via DM je persoonlijke gegevens sturen? Groet! Johan :)</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>1:44 PM - 09 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>
 <p>Kevin @kevings - 1h Ciao @windItalia, ho pagato la mia opzione internet due giorni fa ma ancora non è attiva sul mio telefono! Potete fare qualcosa?</p> <p> Wind @windItalia</p> <p>Ciao @kevings. Scusa per questo problema! :(Possiamo controllare la tua offerta adesso. Puoi darci i tuoi dettagli in DM? Grazie! K</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>12:55 AM - 22 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>	 <p>Johan @johanvdh - 1h Ciao @windItalia, ho pagato la mia opzione internet due giorni fa ma ancora non è attiva sul mio telefono! Potete fare qualcosa?</p> <p> Wind @windItalia</p> <p>Ciao @joanvdh. Possiamo controllare la tua offerta adesso :) Puoi darci i tuoi dettagli in DM? Grazie! K</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>12:55 AM - 22 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>

Formal tone of voice with and without apologies (Dutch and Italian):

 <p>Enrico @enrites -2h Hi @PostNL mijn bestelling is gemarkeerd als bezorgd, maar er is niemand bij mij thuis langs geweest! Hoe is dat mogelijk? Wat kan ik doen?</p> <p> PostNL @postNL</p> <p>Beste @enrites, het spijt ons dat te horen. Als je zo vriendelijk zou willen zijn om in een privé bericht je details te sturen, dan gaan we het verder uitzoeken. Groeten</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>17:27 PM - 09 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>	 <p>Marco @marcoml - 1h Hi @PostNL mijn bestelling is gemarkeerd als bezorgd, maar er is niemand bij mij thuis langs geweest! Hoe is dat mogelijk? Wat kan ik doen?</p> <p> PostNL @postNL</p> <p>Beste @marcoml. Als je zo vriendelijk zou willen zijn om in een privé bericht je details te sturen, dan gaan we het verder uitzoeken. Groeten</p> <p>Reply Retweet Favorite More</p> <p>2:58 PM - 09 Nov 16 · Embed this Tweet</p>
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Appendix B - Semantic adjective pairs used in the questionnaire (Dutch and Italian)

Onaantrekkelijk o o o o o o o Aantrekkelijk

Slecht o o o o o o o Goed

Onplezierig o o o o o o o Plezierig

Misleidend o o o o o o o Betrouwbaar

Twijfelachtig o o o o o o o Geloofwaardig

Non invitante o o o o o o o Invitante

Inappropriata o o o o o o o Appropriata

Sgarbata o o o o o o o Piacevole

Ingannevole o o o o o o o Affidabile

Dubbiosa o o o o o o o Credibile

Appendix C – Complete Questionnaire

Q1 - Nationality

☐ Ik ben nederlandse

☐ Sono italiana/o

Q2 - Italian

La risposta dell'azienda è...

Non invitante o o o o o o o Invitante

Inappropriata o o o o o o o Appropriata

Sgarbata o o o o o o o Piacevole

Ingannevole o o o o o o o Affidabile

Dubbiosa o o o o o o o Credibile

