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## The role of human interaction in complaint handling

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### Abstract

While it is widely accepted that managing customer complaints is crucial for companies, the question of how best to manage these complaints is still a matter of debate. A growing number of studies highlight the effectiveness of digital complaint channels on customer behaviour and satisfaction, suggesting that direct human interaction is no longer necessary in the recovery process. Building on this observation, our research questions the interest of maintaining or not direct human interactions in the management of customer complaints. We carry a quantitative study on 427 respondents, which shows that when the recovery process involves human interaction, customers have a better perception of justice and of the company's relational efforts and are more satisfied with the resolution process. Customers are responsive to human interaction in the service recovery process. Thus, from a managerial point of view, complaint management should be part of a consumer centric approach that includes verbal exchanges (face to face or by phone). As tempting as it may seem to companies to completely digitize complaint management, we believe that maintaining direct human interactions is beneficial to customer relationships.

**keywords:** complaint handling, human interaction, justice theory, customer satisfaction, relational investment, recovery orientation

## **1. Introduction**

The management of customer complaints deserves companies' as well as researchers' attention. A complaint represents a signal from a customer who is dissatisfied but wants to give the company a chance to keep him or her as a client. Complaints can damage a company's image, but when properly handled, they can lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Customers who complain provide the opportunity for the firm to repair the failure of services and rebuild the existing relationship (Tax et al., 1998). The firm can then re-engage the customer and retain him or her. It is in the interest of companies to develop effective complaint management processes, as part of relationship marketing programs aimed at improving customer satisfaction and confidence in the company.

Tax et al. (1998) define complaint handling as a sequence of events in which a process, beginning with the issuance of the complaint, generates a number of interactions through which a decision and an outcome occur. This process, more or less long and complex, can be defined to have one or more interactions with the customer. The nature of the interactions may differ. Multi-channel companies may use several channels to deal with customer complaints, involving direct contact with the company's staff or not. Some channels allow for human interaction, whether face-to-face or remotely, for example by telephone. The individual can interact directly with someone in the company. A personal link is established

and a discussion takes place. Conversely, web-based channels do not allow this direct human interaction. The ability to interact with an individual is a key differentiating attribute between offline and online channels (Harris et al., 2013).

Some studies address complaint management in conventional channels, which involve direct human interaction (face-to-face or phone) (Sabadie et al., 2006; Orsingher et al., 2010; Lopes and Da Silva., 2015; Hazée et al., 2017; Jung and Soeck, 2017; Shooshtari et al., 2018, Shin et al., 2020). Other studies have looked at web-based complaint channels that do not offer direct human interaction (e-mail, online) (Lin et al., 2011; Gupta and Aggarwal, 2018; Sengupta et al., 2018; Sugathan et al., 2018; Javornik et al., 2020). These studies show that web-based channels are most effective in regaining customer satisfaction and positive behaviour towards the company when they exhibit human traits such as empathy in the form of apologies (Sengupta et al., 2018), a conversational tone (Dijkmans et al., 2015; Javornik et al., 2020) or affiliative humour (Shin et al., 2020). These results may suggest that direct, verbal human interaction does not bring any particular benefit to the recovery process. In this respect, online channels may be preferred because they are less expensive to implement and offer a high speed of response (Morgeson III et al., 2020). This raises the question of whether it is still relevant to maintain human interaction in complaint handling protocols. To our knowledge, this question has not been the subject of previous research. Despite the importance of research in the area of consumer-organisation relations, little is known about the degree of human interaction in the complaint process itself and its impact on consumer perceptions and satisfaction. Our study aims to fill this gap by comparing the impact of traditional channels (offering direct human interaction) and web-based channels (without human interaction) on consumer perceptions.

A strong theoretical foundation for the study of complaint management is the theory of justice (Orsingher et al., 2010). This theory is the basis of many recent studies on complaint management (Lopes and Da Silva, 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Sengupta et al., 2018; Sugathan et al., 2018; Javornik et al., 2020). Justice is the assessment of whether the response given by one party to another is appropriate or not, taking into account the harm caused. Perceived justice is a result of the recovery process as well as an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Simon et al., 2013). In this research, we adopt the perspective of justice theory to assess the impact of the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint handling process on customers' satisfaction, on their perception of the company's relational investment and of justice. We build hypotheses from the literature, set up an experiment based on four complaint scenarios that cover online and offline complaint channels, and draw up results that enable us to formulate managerial recommendations aimed at optimising customer satisfaction in the handling of their complaints.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Human interaction in complaint handling, relational investment and satisfaction*

Traditionally, services marketing research has focused on perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. Consumer satisfaction refers to an emotional, favourable, and subjective evaluation; it derives from the psychological state relating to customers' purchasing behaviour (Oliver, 1981). From the 1990s onwards, more attention has been paid to perceived quality defects and dissatisfaction (Edvardsson, 1998; McCollough et al., 2000; Maxham, 2001) as well as to the consequences of service defects on satisfaction and loyalty levels (Orsingher et al., 2010; Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Gelbrich et al., 2016; Morgeson

III et al., 2020). Dissatisfaction arises in most cases as a result of a service incident for which the consumer blames the company wholly or partly. Researchers have sought to understand how to regain customer satisfaction after a service failure. Bitner et al. (1990) identified three sources of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a service relationship: (1) the ability of staff to personalize the service, (2) problem solving, and (3) unexpected elements that arise during the experience. Service failures lead to customer dissatisfaction and the collapse of customer/company relationships (Bitner, 1990). Dissatisfaction arises from unfulfilled or unsatisfied expectations, insufficient, dubious or defective quality, or complaints not taken into account (Edvardsson, 1998). Faced with a service failure leading to dissatisfaction, a customer may react in different ways: by switching provider, by complaining and spreading a negative rumour, or by being angry with his or her own person for not properly communicating expectations (Pai et al., 2018; Valentini et al., 2020). In line with previous research, we distinguish between satisfaction with the company (Smith et al., 1999) and satisfaction with service recovery (Tax et al., 1998; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; Orsingher et al., 2010). Satisfaction with the company concerns the overall evaluation of the company whereas satisfaction with recovery refers to how the complaint is handled.

The services marketing literature emphasizes the need to develop assistance programs to avoid client loss and harmful rumours. Relationship marketing programs can limit the consequences of service failures (Maxham, 2001). Among relationship marketing programs, complaint management protocols aim to reduce customer dissatisfaction by developing procedures to resolve their complaints. The procedures enabling a company to deal with customer complaints can rely on several channels. Choosing a channel is a critical decision. Depending on their relational orientation, companies may favour personalised communication, as opposed to mass communication, in order to communicate personally with the individual through direct contact. They can consider the type of contact and the

degree of humanization of the relationship they wish to establish. They can decide to have a real, direct contact with the customer, either face-to-face or remotely via the telephone or, conversely, opt for a dematerialized contact via web-based protocols. Harris et al. (2013) acknowledge the attractive possibilities offered by Internet technology, source of cost reduction and service reliability, but insist on their careful implementation, as interpersonal relations remain a key element. The internet questions the nature of interactions between customers and employees in the marketing of services (Bitner et al., 2000; Sugathan et al., 2018). For many authors, the service encounter is at the heart of services marketing (Bitner, 1990). The challenge for service providers lies in the balance between online services and face-to-face interactions. Similarly, in the context of complaint handling, the question arises as to what compromise should be made between channels that involve limited costs and channels that allow for direct human interaction.

Harris et al. (2013) identify different perceived benefits of online and offline complaint channels. Customers who prefer to complain by email or online appreciate the anonymity that technology offers them. For those who prefer off-line modes (face-to-face or telephone), the interaction makes it easier to explain and increases the likelihood of finding a solution. It ensures that the company takes the complaint seriously and deals with it effectively. Tax et al. (1998) show that the ability to listen, to exchange and to explain are useful to reduce discontent. Sugathan et al (2018) conclude that traditional complaint channels (hotline) generate customer satisfaction more easily than social media channels, which require very careful implementation as customers' expectations and concerns are more difficult to grasp. Therefore, we hypothesize that the presence of human interactions in the complaint management process is likely to increase customer satisfaction with the recovery and the company. Hence, we formulate:

H1. Customer satisfaction with the recovery is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.

H2. Customer satisfaction with the company is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.

Relational investment refers to the evaluation of the resources and efforts that the company has put in place to maintain and improve its relationship with regular customers. In the context of service recovery, relationship investment refers to any irrecoverable resource that the company invests in to maintain relationships (Simon et al.; 2013). That includes time, attention, facilitation, psychological compensation in the form of an apology, or the costs of failure that exceed the purchase price (Gelbrich and Roschk 2011; Lopes and Da Silva, 2015; Sengupta et al., 2018). While expecting redress, complainants are sensitive to the efforts made to manage their complaints. Therefore, if the customer acknowledges the company's efforts to handle his/her complaint, he/she is likely to have a good opinion of the company and its employees. We assume that human interactions in the complaint process makes the company's relational investment more visible in the eyes of the consumer:

H3: The perceived relational investment is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.

## *2.2 Justice theory*



The theory of justice provides a solid basis for studying satisfaction in the context of customer complaints (Tax et al., 1998; Lin et al.; 2011; Yung and Soeck, 2017; Lee et al., 2018). Justice comprises three dimensions: distributive, procedural and interactional.

Distributive justice refers to what the customer expects and perceives regarding the solution proposed by the company (refund, exchange, repair, discount on future purchases, etc.) (Blodgett et al. 1997). The client considers fair an outcome that brings him a gain equivalent or proportional to his costs or loss, thus creating a sense of equity in the exchange relationship (Goodwin et Ross, 1992; Tax et al., 1998; Smith et al, 1999; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011).

Procedural justice refers to the procedures and criteria used by the company to receive and process the complaint or resolve issues in conflict situations (Orsingher et al., 2010). This form of justice is achieved when firms implement consistent, simple, accessible and impartial procedures, are flexible and responsive (Tax et al., 1998).

Finally, interactional justice refers to the quality of interpersonal treatment during the conflict resolution process (Sabadie et al., 2006). It relates to what is said to the client during the complaint resolution process and how this is formulated to the client. Two elements of interactional justice can be distinguished: consideration for the person (politeness, empathy and benevolence), and the quality of explanations given during the process. Individuals are more tolerant of a decision that is not favourable to them when adequate justification is offered.

We propose that perceived justice in the context of complaint handling is enhanced when the process involves human interaction. Mattila (2001) observed that consumers have less tolerance with service failure in environments that feature less customer-employee interaction, and that more customized customer-employee contact may positively affect

customer perceptions of justice. Maxham and Netemeyer (2003) point out the specific role of front-line staff, who listen to the complaining customer, explain the procedure and may adapt the proposed solutions. Tax et al. (1998) express that the listening and empathic skills of staff reduce clients' feelings of frustration and anger. Human interactions with the client are likely to make him or her feel more listened to, considered and important to the company. Online retailing are also encouraged to adopt more “humanised” interactions in their service recovery strategies with complainants, for instance by using apologies (Jung and Seock, 2017) or a conversational human tone in written responses (personalisation, understanding, explanations and friendly tone) (Javornik et al., 2020). Accordingly, H4 is formulated:

H4. The perception of (a) procedural, (b) distributive, and (c) interactional justice is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.

Numerous studies have shown the significant effect of perceived justice on satisfaction after a service failure resolution (Tax et al, 1998; Smith et al., 1999; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; Lin et al., 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010; Simon et al., 2013; Lopes and Da Silva, 2015; Jung and Seock, 2017; Harun et al., 2018). These studies have measured the respective contributions of each dimension of justice on satisfaction with the company, satisfaction with the recovery process and outcome, repurchase intention, or word-of-mouth. Several studies conclude that the distributive dimension of justice has the greatest impact on customer satisfaction (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002a; Patterson et al., 2006; Orsingher et al. 2010; Chang and Wang, 2012). Others conclude that the procedural and interactional dimensions are more influential in forming overall satisfaction with the company than distributive justice (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002b). For Blodgett et al. (1997), interactional justice has the greatest impact on complainants’ repatronage intentions. Their findings indicate that higher

levels of interactional justice can compensate for lower levels of distributive justice. Sugathan et al. (2018) observed that the dimensions of justice had different impacts in the traditional hotline channel compared to the social media channel, with interactional and distributive dimensions being salient in the social media context. The hierarchy of the dimensions of justice, determining what dimension of justice impacts satisfaction the most, is therefore still a matter of debate. We assume that there is no universal answer to that question, and that the hierarchy of justice dimensions will differ according to the complaint process. Hence:

H5. The dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with the recovery depending on the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint management process.

H6. The dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with the company depending on the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint management process.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Research design*

The objective of this study is to evaluate the effect of human interactions in the complaint handling on the customer's perceived satisfaction with the company and with the recovery, as well as on relational investment.

To test the hypotheses, an experiment was set up. Four scenarios were written, in such a way as to involve direct human exchanges between the company and the client or not. The questionnaire was self-administered on line. Each respondent was assigned to a single scenario, according to a between-subjects design. In all four scenarios, the initial purchase channel, the service failure encountered as well as the solution provided by the company remain identical, only the procedure for handling complaints differs. The service failure presented in the scenarios relates to a touchpad, bought online on the company's website, delivered broken to the respondent's home. The compensation proposed by the company is the replacement of the damaged touchpad with a new one. Product replacement was the compensation most frequently expected by our respondents (by 86.2%, against 9.6% who want a refund and 4.2% a repair).

Three scenarios describe complaint handling processes that involve human interactions. These interactions can take the form of a face-to-face exchange (the procedure requires that the customer goes to the shop), a remote human interaction (the procedure requires that the customer calls the company) or the combination of both (the customer goes to the shop to drop off the pad, the company calls the customer in the afternoon to confirm the replacement). The telephone is an intermediate relational mode in that customers and staff communicate directly without being physically in the presence of each other. The fourth scenario proposes a complaint handling process without any human interaction. It is based solely on the exchange of e-mails. To test our hypotheses, the first three scenarios were grouped as they all display human interactions. We controlled that there were no significant differences between these three scenarios on the study variables (ANOVA and Scheffé tests), thus allowing for grouping. Previous experience with the company, previous opinion of the company, and preferred compensation (replacement, refund, repair) were included as control variables in the study. They do not interfere with the results obtained.

### *3.2 Sampling and data collection*

A pre-test was carried out with 30 individuals to ensure that the scenarios and the questionnaire were well understood and to check the reliability of the measuring instruments. The study was then launched. The final sample consists of 427 respondents. The respondents were randomly directed to one of four scenarios: 320 were directed to one of the three scenarios involving human interactions (face to face in store and/or by phone); 107 were directed to the procedures without human interactions (e-mail)<sup>1</sup>. 67% of the sample is female. The age distribution is as follows: 55% of the respondents are under 20 years old, 38.9% are between 20 and 39 years old, 4.4% are between 40 and 59 years old and 1.2% are 60 years old and over.

### *3.3 Measuring instruments*

All the constructs are assessed on 5-step Likert scales.

#### *3.3.1 Perceived justice*

Respondents assessed their perception of the three dimensions of justice (distributive, procedural and interactional). The Maxham and Netemeyer (2003) scale was used to measure the three dimensions. Items from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002b) were added in the interactional dimension. A PCA was carried out on all three dimensions, confirming the initial structure with an explained percentage of variance of 73%. An item was deleted after the PCA to improve the reliability of the distributive dimension construct. The construct reliability of each dimension is satisfactory, above the commonly accepted threshold value of 0.7 (Nunnally and Berstein, 1994). The items of the scale are compiled in table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> This imbalance is due to the grouping of the three scenarios involving at least one human interaction. The Scheffé test revealed that there was no significant differences between the scenarios. Thus, we were able to group the individuals together, resulting in a group size of 320.

Table 1 - Reliability of Perceived Justice Scale

<p><b>Procedural dimension (Cronbach's alpha = 0.850)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Despite the hassle caused by the problem, the company responded fairly and quickly.</i></li> <li>- <i>I feel the company responded in a timely fashion to the problem.</i></li> <li>- <i>I believe the company has fair policies and practices to handle problems.</i></li> <li>- <i>With respect to its policies and procedures, the company handled the problem in a fair manner.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Distributive dimension (Cronbach's alpha = 0.848)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Although this event caused me problems, the company's effort to fix it resulted in a very positive outcome for me.</i></li> <li>- <i>The final outcome I received from the company was fair, given the time and hassle.</i></li> <li>- <i>Given the inconvenience caused by the problem, the outcome I received from the company was fair.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Interactional dimension (Cronbach's alpha=0.830)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>During their effort to fix my problem, the company employee(s) showed a real interest in trying to be fair.</i></li> <li>- <i>The company employee(s) got input from me before handling the problem.</i></li> <li>- <i>While attempting to fix my problem, the company personnel considered my views.</i></li> <li>- <i>The company employee(s) worked as hard as possible for me during the recovery effort.</i></li> </ul>

Each construct is well discriminated from the others (AVE greater than the square of the correlation with the latent variables of the measurement model)<sup>2</sup>. We used the average value of the measurements per variable as the overall variable values for the data analyses.

### 3.3.2 Satisfaction with recovery, satisfaction with the company, and relational investment

The three items of the Maxham and Netemeyer (2002a) scale were used to measure satisfaction with recovery. We used Oliver's scale (1997) adopted in Allen et al. (2015) to measure satisfaction with the company. Three items from the Palmatier et al. (2009) scale were used to measure relational investment. All constructs have good reliability (Table 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Data can be provided on request

Table 2 - Reliability of satisfaction with recovery, company and relational investment

<p><b>Satisfaction with recovery: (Cronbach's alpha = 0.827).</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>In my opinion, the company provided a satisfactory resolution to my problem on this particular occasion.</i></li><li>- <i>I am not satisfied with the company handling of this particular problem.</i></li><li>- <i>Regarding this particular event, I am satisfied with the company.</i></li></ul>
<p><b>Satisfaction with the company. (Cronbach's alpha =0.905).</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>I am satisfied with this company.</i></li><li>- <i>I think that I did the right thing when I selected this company.</i></li><li>- <i>I am happy with this company.</i></li></ul>
<p><b>Relational investment (Cronbach's alpha =0.847)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>The company worked hard to strengthen our relationship.</i></li><li>- <i>The company made significant investments in building a relationship with me.</i></li><li>- <i>The company devoted time and effort to our relationship.</i></li></ul>

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *Impact of human interaction on customer satisfaction and perceived relational investment*

To test hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, group comparison tests were carried out. The first group includes respondents with one or more direct human interactions (face to face and/or by phone) and the second group consists of respondents without direct human interaction (e-mail).

T-tests are carried out to test the significance of the differences between the two group means (Table 3).

Table 3 - Average group scores (based on 5 point scales) and t-test

	GROUP 1 (Human interactions)	GROUP 2 (No human interaction)	t-test for mean comparisons (p associated)
Satisfaction with recovery	4.010	3.766	t=2,890**
Satisfaction with the company	3.677	3.535	t=1.440 n.s.
Relational investment	3.264	2.996	t=3,094**

\*\*\* sig < 0.01  
\*\* sig. < 0.005

The t-test carried out on satisfaction with recovery reveals significant differences between the groups (t=2,890; p=0.004). Individuals who have had no direct human interaction when dealing with their complaints have a lower perceived satisfaction with complaint handling than those who have had human interactions. Human interaction, whether face-to-face or remotely via the telephone, results in a better perception of satisfaction with recovery. H1 is validated.

Satisfaction with the company is not significantly different between groups (t=1.440, p=0.152). H2 is rejected. The presence of human interaction during the complaint management process does not lead to greater satisfaction with the company.

Finally, the t-test carried out on perceived relational investment shows a significant difference between the groups (t=3,094, p=0.002). The presence of human interaction increases the perception of the company's relational efforts. H3 is confirmed.

#### *4.2 Theory of justice*

The presence of human interactions in the complaint process positively impacts perceived justice. H4 is confirmed. [Details are compiled in table 4.](#)



Table 4 - Average group scores (based on 5 point scales) and t-test

	GROUP 1 (Human interactions)	GROUP 2 (No human interaction)	t-test
Procedural justice	4.20	3.86	t=4.586***
Distributive justice	4.15	3.72	t=4.739***
Interactional justice	3.844	3.481	t=4.366***

\*\*\* sig. <0.001.

The perceived procedural dimension of justice is significantly higher for group 1 (t=4.586, p=0.000), as well as the distributive dimension (t=4.739, p=0.000) and the interactional dimension (t=4.366, p=0.000), thus validating H4a, b, and c.

To test hypotheses 5 and 6, linear regressions were made. Concerning the contribution of justice to satisfaction with recovery, the results show that the dimensions of justice contribute differently in group 1 and group 2 (Table 5). For group 1 (with human interaction), the three dimensions of justice contribute significantly and positively to satisfaction with recovery (procedural  $\beta=0.506$  p=0.00; distributive  $\beta=0.466$  p=0.00; interactional  $\beta=0.173$  p=0.00). The hierarchy of dimensions is as follows: the procedural dimension contributes most, followed by the distributive and then interactional dimensions to a lesser extent. For group 2 (no human interaction), not all dimensions of justice contribute significantly to satisfaction with recovery. The interactional dimension is not significant. The contributions of the other dimensions of justice on satisfaction with recovery are positive and strong (distributive  $\beta= 0.576$ , p=0.00; procedural  $\beta=0.427$ , p=0.00). The distributive dimension contributes more than the procedural dimension.

H5 is validated. The hierarchy of justice dimensions on satisfaction with recovery differs depending on whether the complaints management process includes human interactions or not.

Table 5: Regressions on the variable “Satisfaction with recovery”

	GROUP 1 (Human interactions)	GROUP 2 (No human interaction)
R <sup>2</sup>	45.6	56.7
F	88.43***	45.037***
Béta (β) Procedural justice	0.506***	0.427***
Béta (β) Distributive justice	0.466***	0.576***
Béta (β) Interactional justice	0.173***	0.0801 n.s

\*\*\* sig<0.001

As satisfaction with the company does not depend on the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint process (H2 rejected), no differences in contribution are expected from the dimensions of justice on satisfaction with the company between the two groups: H6 is refuted.

In conclusion, our results confirm that human interaction increases satisfaction with the recovery as well as the perception of the firm’s relational investment; however, they provide no evidence of an effect on satisfaction with the company. Finally, the dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with recovery, depending on whether the protocol contains human interaction or not. In the presence of human interaction, the procedural and distributive dimensions prevail in the formation of satisfaction with recovery, while the distributive dimension is salient when the recovery process is free of human interaction.

A summary of results is presented in table 6.

Table 6: Summary of results

H1. Customer satisfaction with the recovery is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.	Accepted
H2. Customer satisfaction with the company is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.	Rejected
H3. The perceived relational investment is higher when the complaint management process involves human interaction.	Accepted
H4. The perception of (a) procedural, (b) distributive, and (c) interactional justice is higher when the complaint management process involves direct human interaction.	Accepted
H5. The dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with the recovery depending on the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint management process.	Accepted
H6. The dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with the company depending on the presence or absence of human interaction in the complaint management process.	Rejected

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 Role of human interaction in complaint handling on customer perceptions*

The satisfaction with the company does not differ depending on whether or not there is human interaction in the complaint resolution process. Because he or she encountered a service failure, the customer suffered inconvenience and had to complain in order to obtain redress, which represents a cost that is not alleviated when the process includes human interaction: the type of protocol does not affect satisfaction with the company. We can assume that other factors influence more directly satisfaction with the firm. Clients are probably primarily concerned with obtaining a compensation that they feel is fair.

However, our results reveal the importance of including human interactions into the complaint handling protocol. Indeed, customers are more satisfied with the resolution process and they have a greater perception of the relational investment made by the company when there are human interactions between them and the company. In the long term, this can

strengthen customer confidence in the company and create beneficial repercussions such as positive word-of-mouth, positive mind-set, trust or engagement (Gupta and Aggarwal, 2018; Harun et al. 2018; Mahmoud et al., 2018; Valentini et al., 2020).

We may argue that satisfaction with the recovery is greater when there is human interaction, as the company's staff explain directly and clearly to the customer the process to follow for his or her complaint. If the customer requires additional information or explanations, the employee is able to provide them immediately. As a result, the customer feels supported, listened to and accepts the situation better. A direct exchange with a company representative ensures that the consumer has the opportunity to explain his or her situation to a sympathetic ear and ultimately obtain redress.

The firm's relational investment is also better perceived when there is human interaction with the company. Consumers are more aware of the company's efforts to satisfy them when they interact directly with the firm's employees, either face to face or by telephone. They get a stronger and clearer sense of their value to the company, and may get the perception of a personalised treatment – even though the recovery protocol applies equally to all customers. Human interaction improves customer awareness of his or her importance in the eyes of the company.

Contrary to what has been said or suggested in prior research that focuses on the advantages of web-based complaint channels (Jung and Seock, 2017; Morgeson III et al., 2018), we think that maintaining direct human contacts brings unique benefits to the firm in terms of customer relationship.

### *5.2 Hierarchy of justice dimensions on customer satisfaction with recovery*

This study allows us to participate in the debate on the hierarchy of justice dimensions. We have found that the three dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with recovery, depending on the presence or absence of direct human interaction in the process of complaint handling.

When the process involves human interaction, the procedural dimension of justice is the one that contributes the most to satisfaction with the recovery, followed by the distributive and the interactional dimensions. The predominance of the procedural dimension indicates that customers consider fair recovery policies and practices that involve a direct contact with the firm's employees. Having a direct interaction with the employees is viewed as an integral part of the complaint process, likely to ensure a quick response. The distributive dimension also contributes quite strongly to satisfaction with recovery. This result is consistent with numerous studies in the field (Smith et al., 1999; Patterson et al., 2006; Orsingher et al., 2010; Chang and Wang, 2012; Lee et al., 2018; Sugathan et al., 2018). The complainant assesses the appropriateness of the proposed outcome in light of the efforts undertaken to obtain redress. Finally, the interactional dimension also contributes to satisfaction with complaint handling: direct human interactions increase the chances that the company expresses interest in the customer's problem and considers his or her views.

When the process involves no human interaction, the distributive dimension is, in line with prior research (Smith et al., 1999), predominant. The complainant focuses on the actual repair and places more importance on obtaining a fair compensation. The procedural dimension also contributes to post-recovery satisfaction, yet to a lesser extent. As concerns the interactional dimension, it does not contribute to satisfaction with recovery. The customer expects that the exclusive use of dehumanised channels will considerably limit the ability to listen and make it difficult for the company to show empathy. In this sense, the exclusive use of web-based

channels in the management of complaints does not optimise satisfaction with recovery. This result can be nuanced in the light of the study by Lin et al. (2011), who found that in the context of online retailing, the interactional dimension contributed to post-recovery satisfaction provided the company made significant efforts to show empathy, respect and consideration and to provide explanation. Similarly, the interactional dimension was found to come into play in the social media complaint channel, when the company demonstrates a high level of exchange with customers (Sugathan et al., 2018) or when the company uses a conversational human voice (Javornik et al., 2020). Hence, we believe that complaint channels with direct human contact naturally produce interactional justice effects, which is not the case with web-based channels. Companies that choose to implement online channels must make considerable efforts in the way they respond to the customers to generate interactional justice effects.

### *5.3 Managerial implications*

Ideally, a company should not create service failures that result in customer dissatisfaction. However, since failures are inevitable, it is essential that customer orientation includes a recovery orientation (Ray and Sabadie, 2011). Companies need to engage in service recovery strategies. Our study provides insights into how best to operationalise these strategies in complaint channel choices.

Recovery orientation consists in seeing the expression of dissatisfaction as an opportunity, and its redress as an investment rather than a cost. It represents the culmination of customer culture. In France where our study was conducted, AMARC's (Association for customer relationship management) 2018 survey shows that most companies are aware of the importance of customer complaints: 86% of companies analyse the reasons for complaints (+24 percentage points since 2010), and 75% of them consider complaints as levers for

improving products/services, management processes or commercial practices (+25 points since 2010). In firms with a recovery orientation, managers develop recovery policies that are shared and implemented by all front-line employees. Companies with a recovery orientation encourage customers to make complaints. They develop simple and quick processes that are accessible, legible and impartial; this enables customers to find out effortlessly what procedures to follow in order to obtain compensation if they experience a service failure. They organise contact channels, train employees to manage the flow of complaints and encourage discontented customers to express themselves. Formalizing customer complaint policies allows them to improve and secure service performance (Shooshtari et al., 2018). In an omnichannel environment, customers may choose the channel they prefer to express their dissatisfaction; however, we believe that companies should favour channels that allow for human interaction. The human element in complaint processes increases customers' sense of justice, satisfaction with recovery, and their perception of the firm's relational investment. The presence of direct human exchange demonstrates to customers the relational efforts made to satisfy them and contributes to customers feeling listened to and reassured. It signifies to customers their value and underlines the companies' reliability and ability to offer a personalised service. In order to strengthen their customer orientation, companies could also systematically measure post-recovery satisfaction, which would demonstrate an even higher level of commitment and help them assess the relative performance of their recovery channels. When adequately managed, customer complaint handling fosters customers' loyalty, trust and engagement (Gupta and Aggarwal, 2018; Mahmoud et al., 2018; Morgeson III et al., 2020) and their profitability (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015). In this respect, firms should consider maintaining human mediated complaint channels as an investment rather than a cost, both in absolute terms and in comparison with online channels.

Going further, one can ask how much direct contact should be implemented in the recovery process. Is the more the better? To answer this question, additional analyses (t-tests) were performed on our data to compare the individuals who had one human interaction (via shop) and those who had two human contacts (shop and telephone) during the recovery process. We found no significant differences in satisfaction or perceived relational investment. However, with regard to the perception of justice, there is a significant difference for the procedural dimension ( $t=2.151$ ;  $p=0.03$ ). The 1-interaction group presents a higher average (4.36) on procedural justice than the 2-interaction group (4.17). The procedure is therefore more appreciated when it is limited to a single human interaction. We assume that customers prefer it because it appears simpler, more effective and more efficient. Increasing the number of interactions makes the process seem more complex, longer and more uncertain in its outcome. We can draw a parallel with the study by Javornik et al. (2020) who, in the context of social media complaint channels, found that lengthy responses had a negative impact on procedural justice: long corporate replies may discourage the consumer, as the procedure appears more difficult to understand due to the length of the explanation and makes it unclear what outcome will be reached. We therefore encourage companies to favour a single human interaction (e.g. by telephone) and to ensure that the complaint is dealt with at this first contact. Companies should consider first contact resolution as a performance indicator for their complaint handling channels.

## **Conclusion**

This research contributes to the service recovery literature, highlighting the impact of the nature of complaint channels on customer satisfaction and perceptions. It reveals the importance of direct verbal human interactions in complaint handling. Compared to web-based channels, channels allowing for face to face or telephone exchanges with the company



improve customer satisfaction with the recovery as well as customer perception of the firms' relational investment. Complaint management represents an effort in terms of time and money for a company (Hazée et al., 2017; Morgeson III et al., 2020), that should be considered as an investment in a consumer orientation. Based on our results, we recommend that companies implement a single direct human interaction with complainants, either face-to-face or by telephone. This allows customers to perceive the procedure as efficient while limiting costs for the company.

This study also adds to the literature on justice theory by examining how dimensions of justice are perceived in different complaint channels, including or not human interactions. The study reveals that customers have a better perception of justice when the channels include verbal human contact. At a more detailed level, the study also shows that the three dimensions of justice contribute differently to satisfaction with recovery. The procedural dimension is predominant when there is human interaction: the recovery protocol is considered procedurally fair when it includes verbal contact with a company representative. In the absence of human interaction, the distributive dimension contributes most, and the interactional dimension disappears. Interactional benefits are not self-evident in web-based channels, although previous research has shown that they can be achieved provided the company makes significant effort to "humanise" these channels (Lin et al., 2011; Sugathan et al., 2018; Javornik et al., 2020). Using channels with direct human mediation appears to be an easier and safer way to generate interactional benefits for the company.

This research has certain limitations, opening for future research. The initial purchase channel was imposed in the scenarios. A future study could link the purchase channel chosen by the client with the channel used to complain. The nature of the product or service could also be taken into account, recovery situations being experienced differently by consumers

depending on whether the product or service is more or less complex, customised, or luxurious (Harris et al., 2013; Morgeson III et al., 2020). Moreover, the degree of customer involvement or the degree of loyalty to the brand (Gelbrich et al., 2016; Morgeson III et al., 2020) could be considered. In the case of a high degree of loyalty, customer satisfaction may not be affected by the occurrence of an isolated service failure. In addition, the compensation provided for in our scenarios was the replacement of the damaged product with a new one. It would be interesting to vary the nature of compensation. With regard to the choice of dependent variables, other variables, classically used in marketing, could be included, such as trust or repurchase intention. Finally, as regards method, it would be interesting to analyse real consumer experiences (as in Harun et al., 2018) rather than examine consumer perceptions based on hypothetical scenarios.

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