



## **“Great to see ur staff are doing their job properly”: Customer (dis)affiliation on corporate Facebook pages**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The emergence of new technologies has changed the way people communicate. Social media have allowed businesses to connect with customers and to market their products more efficiently. However, these platforms also allow customers to share information and opinions with the company and fellow customers, diverting from previous online service encounters which only allowed the interaction between the service provider and the customer. This new digital space of communication is in need of research. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to analyze how customer (dis)affiliation is discursively realized on Facebook. To do so, a corpus of comments published by customers on the Facebook page of a British grocery chain was compiled. The data were analyzed drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). The findings show that customers used a varied range of Appraisal resources to evaluate the company and express (dis)affiliation with it and fellow customers.

**KEYWORDS:** Service encounters, social media, Facebook, (dis)affiliation, Appraisal Theory, evaluation.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The technological advances which have emerged in recent decades have changed the way societies communicate and interact. Due to the rising popularity of new mobile devices, people are integrating social media platforms into their daily lives while performing other activities (Bou-Franch, in press; Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). Social media have emerged as powerful platforms which allow Internet users to stay connected and to share (personal)

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information with other users from anywhere in the world (Page, Barton, Unger & Zappavigna, 2014). Facebook is considered to be one of the most successful social media networks (Page, 2012; Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). With its increasing popularity, this platform is being exploited by businesses that try to widen their audiences, build rapport with current customers, and provide an innovative service.

Facebook commercial interactions can be analyzed in terms of service encounters, since communication between service providers and customers is involved. However, these interactions depart from traditional service encounters since it also allows communication among customers (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). Despite the importance of the influence of social media in people's lives and its exploitation by businesses, very few language-based studies have been devoted to service encounters in social media platforms (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine the discursive strategies and patterns used by customers to signal their (dis)affiliation with a company. The methodological approach draws on Martin and White's Appraisal Theory (2005), and further takes into account recent applications of studies on the theory to computer-mediated communication and social media platforms (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015; Page, 2012). It is expected that customers will employ different Appraisal resources to express their (dis)affiliation with the company and fellow customers.

The paper has been organized in the following way. Section 2 begins by describing the notion Web 2.0 to introduce the emergence of social media and the relevance of Facebook to the study. It mainly focuses on their commercial use. This helps to understand Section 3, which is concerned with previous research on service encounters from a mainly linguistic standpoint. This section illustrates a gap in the literature regarding service encounters carried out via social media and substantiates the argument that these platforms have had an impact on online commercial interactions. Then, section 4 provides details of the corpus and shows how Appraisal Theory has been previously applied to the analysis of the computer-mediated discourse of virtual communities. Section 5 presents the results of the analysis undertaken and discusses how customers resort to different Appraisal resources depending on their positioning towards the company. The conclusion (Section 6) synthesizes the different discursive strategies employed by customers to express their (dis)affiliation on corporate Facebook pages. Lastly, it also considers more general findings derived from the framework employed.

## **2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND FACEBOOK**

In the Web 2.0 era, digital platforms are dynamic and user-friendly. Internet users can create new content or modify the already existing one, shifting their role from passive users

(consumers) to active users (generators of content). The term Web 2.0, also known as participatory media, is used to refer to the “new era of interaction” (Page et al., 2014: 8; Tagg & Seargeant, 2014), in which web-based platforms include content created by web users (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). However, some authors claim that this term was first coined by Tim O’Reilly with the purpose of reframing e-commerce in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Herring, 2013; Page et al., 2014). In fact, the term was initially employed to refer to “viral marketing rather than advertising and [to have] a focus on services over products” (Herring, 2013: 2). This suggests that marketers deemed it necessary for e-commerce to shift from its focus on the delivery of products through static websites to the delivery of a service in which customers could also share information about the companies (see Section 3).

Social media platforms are described as Internet-based services which encourage social interaction and the exchange of information between a network of users, and which include content published by any Internet user (Page, 2012; Page et al., 2014). These new technologies allow for a distinctive form of computer-mediated communication since they are “collaborative, dialogic, emergent, personalized, and context-rich” (Page, 2012: 8), and are characterized by the integration of various semiotic modes, such as audio-visual and textual elements which set them apart from the previous exclusively text-based communication (Page et al., 2014). Social media discourse is characterized by its permanence, replicability, searchability and scalability. These features can benefit those companies which prompt their customers to share their opinions about the company as this information may be accessed by a large audience at any time (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Herring, 2013; Tagg & Seargeant, 2014; Zappavigna, 2011). Furthermore, with the increasing popularity of smartphones, tablets and similar technological tools, Internet users can access social media while engaged in other activities, allowing continuous connectivity and integrating these platforms into their daily lives (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016).

From 2003 to 2006, there was a rapid growth of social media platforms which allowed the interaction among web users in online spaces (Page et al., 2014). Facebook, the object of interest in this paper, is a case in point. It was launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg as an online platform for Harvard college students only. Due to its rapid development and success among other college students, Zuckerberg saw the opportunity to open it up to any Internet user in 2006, whether individuals or corporations. In 2012, it reached the astounding amount of one billion users (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). Currently, Facebook claims that their site has more than 1.18 billion daily active users on average (1.09 billion of which access the platform through their smartphones), and that 84.9% of the daily active users are from outside the United States of America and Canada (Company info, n.d.).

Facebook is also characterized by “multimodality . . . intertextuality and convergence” (Lee, 2011: 112). These are fundamental features that attract Internet users who are interested in entertainment, social interaction and knowledge sharing (Márquez-Reiter, Orthaber &

Kádár, 2015). Facebook's current aim is to help people "to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Company info, n.d.). This means that Facebook influences how people relate to each other and how they access and evaluate information (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). However, Facebook is also being exploited by businesses, among others, to become more visible, to build rapport with their customers and to reach a wider audience (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017; Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015; Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). In fact, the social network had more than 60 million active corporate pages by September 2016 (Facebook Pages for Marketing your Business, n.d.).

Up to now, scholars have mainly focused on analyzing personal Facebook pages (e.g. Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2018; Lee, 2011; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015; Maíz-Arévalo & García-Gómez, 2013; Page, 2012). Despite being a mass phenomenon, very few linguistic and discursive studies have been devoted to analyzing the impact of social media on commercial interactions (exceptions include Bou-Franch, in press; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017; Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015). Since Facebook commercial interactions can be understood in terms of service encounters, in the next section, a description of the genre of service encounters is provided from a discourse analysis standpoint by giving a brief overview of the literature on the genre.

### 3. SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

Service encounters have been traditionally defined as an institutional genre that fosters social interaction between two or more participants with, in most cases, a transactional objective (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Fernández-Amaya & Hernández-López, 2015; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2008; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017; Ventola, 2005). Participants in such encounters play the roles of service provider, who should provide a satisfactory service or goods, and customers, who seek and receive the service (Guiry, 1992). The service outcome and the experience of the customer with the service delivery are a key factor for business, which impacts on the level of customer satisfaction (Guiry, 1992; Massad, Heckman & Crowston, 2006). However, not all service encounters revolve exclusively around transactional exchanges. Some, if not all, service encounters also include interpersonal exchanges to establish rapport with customers (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2008; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017).

Traditional research on service encounters focuses on face-to-face interactions (Bayyurt & Bayraktaroglu, 2001; Guiry, 1992; Placencia, 2008, to mention a few). Face-to-face interactions might take place between regular service providers and customers, or between individuals who may not be in contact with each other again (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich &

Bou-Franch, 2008; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). However, the appearance of telephone-mediated communication allowed the exchange of information and the transaction process at distance at an affordable price (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). As a novelty in service encounters, the telephone-mediated interaction can also be started by the service provider, who “imposes” his/her presence upon the customer's “private domain” (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). These new features stirred the interest of discourse analysts (e.g. Cameron, 2000; Friginal, 2008; Orthaber & Márquez-Reiter, 2011). This situation persists in computer-mediated service encounters, since corporate representatives initiate the interaction in most cases, such as posting news on official websites, or publishing status updates on Facebook, and invite customers to interact with them (Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015).

Previous research on face-to-face and telephone-mediated service encounters cannot be fully applied to computer-mediated communication as it focused on interpersonal exchanges between the service provider and the customer (Fernández-Amaya & Hernández-López, 2015). Traditional e-commerce (prior to Web 2.0) avoids this type of interactions, thus preventing personal contact between participants (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2008; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). In fact, it seems that customers sometimes prefer e-commerce to avoid the pressure of the service provider (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015). Traditional e-commerce began with the emergence of computer-mediated communication in the mid-1990s and mainly consisted in text-based communication, which later was supplemented with graphics and other multimedia features, whose main aims were to provide information to the customer and to enhance credibility (Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Nevertheless, many companies still use this traditional one-to-many communication to promote their products, to facilitate the transaction, to broaden their audience and to maintain their credibility (Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Due to the constant use of websites, current language-based research on service encounters mostly focuses on website-mediated communication (e.g. Bou-Franch, 2015; Garcés-Conejos & Bou-Franch, 2008; Placencia, 2015). In fact, in most cases, corporate representatives publish hyperlinks to the company’s official webpage in social media interactions to redirect customers to it and to complete the transaction process.

In contrast, social media allow the negotiation process and the interaction between service providers and customers as well as among customers themselves (Kelly-Holmes, 2016; Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017). The fact that people are integrating social media into their daily lives by using these platforms through their smartphones, opens an opportunity for companies to intensify the “omnipresence of marketing in people’s everyday lives” (Kelly-Holmes, 2016: 214). In social media, not only does the company share information about a product and create value for itself, but the customers also have the choice to collaborate (or not) with the company (Kelly-Holmes, 2016).

The affordances of social media allow customers to play an active role and to be free to post what they wish. This situation involves a loss of control on the part of the company since now customers can share their opinions about certain products and evaluate them, positively or negatively (Kelly-Holmes, 2016; Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015). This also means that there is a shift from “expert advice” to “peer advice”: customers seem to rely more on shared experiences, instead of on professional experiences published by the company (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015; Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Given the fact that customers have the ability to communicate among themselves and to rate and share information about companies’ services and products (Kelly-Holmes, 2016), companies that have a presence in social media are represented by corporate representatives, also known as community managers. Community managers try to strengthen the customers’ loyalty and to maintain the harmonious and cooperative relationship that is expected to exist between customers and service providers (Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015; Meso, Mendiguren & Pérez, 2014).

To date, there is scant language-based research devoted to the study of service encounters in social media, despite their huge impact in people’s lives and in the business’ world. Some studies examined this genre on Facebook. For instance, Márquez-Reiter and Bou-Franch (2017) analyzed Facebook interactions from a politeness perspective. In their case study, customers mutually cooperated and reinforced solidarity among them, while they established a positive relationship with each other. Nevertheless, social media also allow customers to create alliances against the company. In an analysis of customer dissatisfaction on Facebook, Márquez-Reiter et al. (2015) pointed out that customers affiliated with fellow customers to voice their complaints against the company. Moreover, Bou-Franch (in press) analyzed relational practices in service encounters on Facebook and claimed that customers use different interactional patterns to form alliances. These studies support the idea that customers establish communities based on their interests and their positioning towards companies.

As stated above, one of the most relevant features of service encounters in social media platforms is the fact that customers can communicate among themselves and evaluate companies and products. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the discursive patterns that customers use to signal their (dis)affiliation with the company, paying special attention to the use of evaluative language (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015; Martin & White, 2005; Page, 2012;). The research question which guides this study is: How is consumer (dis)affiliation discursively realized?

The next section describes the data, theoretical framework and procedures used in this research in order to answer this research question.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Data description

The corpus on which this research is based consists of 6 status updates and 814 comments (31,928 words) published on the corporate Facebook page of the British multinational retail company Tesco. For the purpose of this study, only those comments published by customers ( $n = 614$ ) were further analyzed. All the information unnecessary for the present study, such as the number of likes and publication date, was erased from the corpus. Customers' names were replaced by the label "customer" followed by a number to ensure anonymity.

Tesco PLC, founded in 1919 by Jack Cohen, is one of the largest retailers in the world, and has subsidiaries throughout the United Kingdom and in other European and Asian countries, such as Ireland, Czech Republic, India and Malaysia (Our businesses, n.d.). When the data were collected, December 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Tesco already had more than 2 million likes on its Facebook page.

### 4.2. Appraisal Theory

This study mainly relies on Appraisal Theory, which is concerned with how speakers use language to express evaluative comments, construct authorial identities, adopt stances and position themselves in relation to a particular discourse or community (Martin & White, 2005; White, 2008). Martin and White (2005: 35) define Appraisal as a linguistic resource used to construct interpersonal meaning, which is divided into three sub-domains: a) attitude, which is concerned with emotional reactions and the evaluation of ethics of behavior and things; b) engagement, which "deals with sourcing attitudes" and positioning the writer and the reader towards an evaluative discourse; and c) graduation, which increases or decreases the intensity of feelings and evaluations. Previous research which applied Appraisal Theory to virtual communities has shown that Internet users employ Appraisal resources to build communities based on their interests and needs (see Drasovean & Tagg, 2015; Page, 2012; Zappavigna, 2011). However, no study has so far applied the framework to service encounters in social media.

The present research focuses on how customer (dis)affiliation is discursively realized. Therefore, the following paragraphs will focus specifically on attitude. Attitude resources are used by the speaker to provide positive or negative assessments of emotions, people and things. Attitude is divided into three subcategories:

1. Affect, which is "concerned with registering positive and negative feelings" towards people, things, events, etc. (Martin & White, 2005: 42).
2. Judgment, which refers to the moral assessment of human behavior, which might be praised or condemned.

3. Appreciation, which consists of the social evaluation of things, including “objects, artifacts, texts, states of affairs, and processes” (White, 2008: 569), such as their aesthetic value, social significance, harm or benefit, etc.

Interestingly for this study, Page (2012) and Drasovean and Tagg (2015) claim that, given that participants in computer-mediated communication do not always engage in face-to-face interactions, Internet users also resort to paralinguistic resources (e.g. iconic communication, acronyms for laughter and kisses and hugs) to express emotional stance (affect). These authors expand the original language-based framework to include some computer-mediated communication specific features.

In addition, attitudinal meaning can be expressed implicitly (inscribed) or explicitly (invoked, tokens). White (2008) distinguishes between attitudinal inscription and attitudinal tokens. Attitudinal inscription applies to expression in which “the attitudinal value (positive or negative assessment) is largely fixed and stable across a wide range of contexts” (White, 2008: 573). On the other hand, attitudinal tokens are “formulations where there is no single lexical item which, of itself and independently of its current co-text, carries a specific positive or negative value” (White, 2008: 573). Attitudinal tokens might be formulations which do not contain evaluative lexis, or which do contain evaluative elements but which are not explicitly positive nor negative (White, 2008). That is to say, the author might implicitly add evaluative tokens to a sentence/utterance, and it is the reader’s work to interpret that evaluation depending on his/her social and ideological positioning. The use of attitudinal tokens also allows the writer/speaker to convey more than one subcategory of attitude simultaneously, thus creating hybrid realizations (e.g. combining inscribed affect with tokens of judgment or appreciation) (Martin & White, 2005).

### **4.3. Procedure**

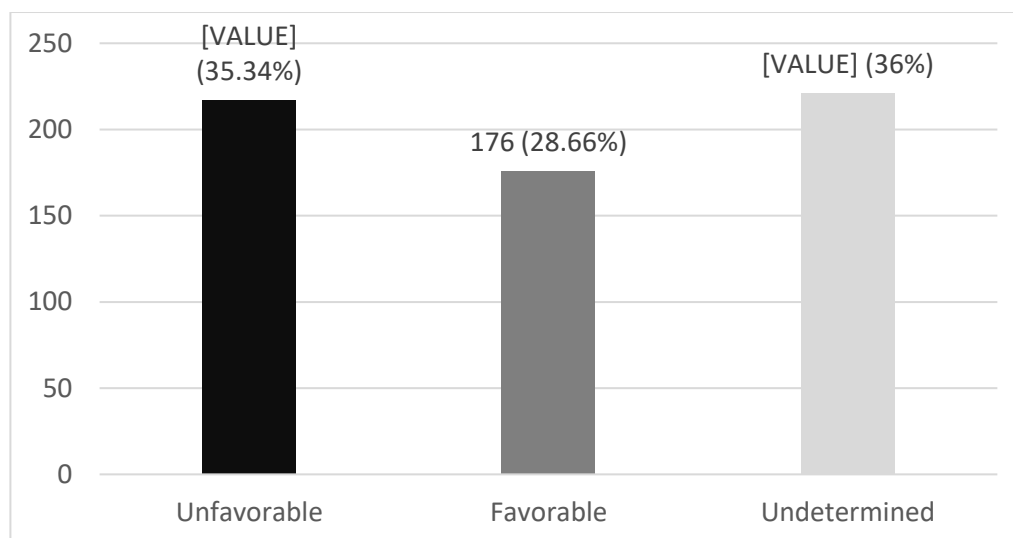
The analytical procedure in the analysis involved two steps. The first step in the analysis consisted in examining the different comments published by customers, considering their explicit negative or positive positioning towards the company. Comments were divided into three categories: 1) unfavorable, 2) favorable, and 3) undetermined. Those comments posted by customers which were labeled as “undetermined” in the first part of the study were not further scrutinized. The second step in the analytical procedure involved the micro-analysis of the comments published by customers drawing on Appraisal Theory. The results obtained from the analysis are described and discussed in Section 5.



## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Quantitative analysis

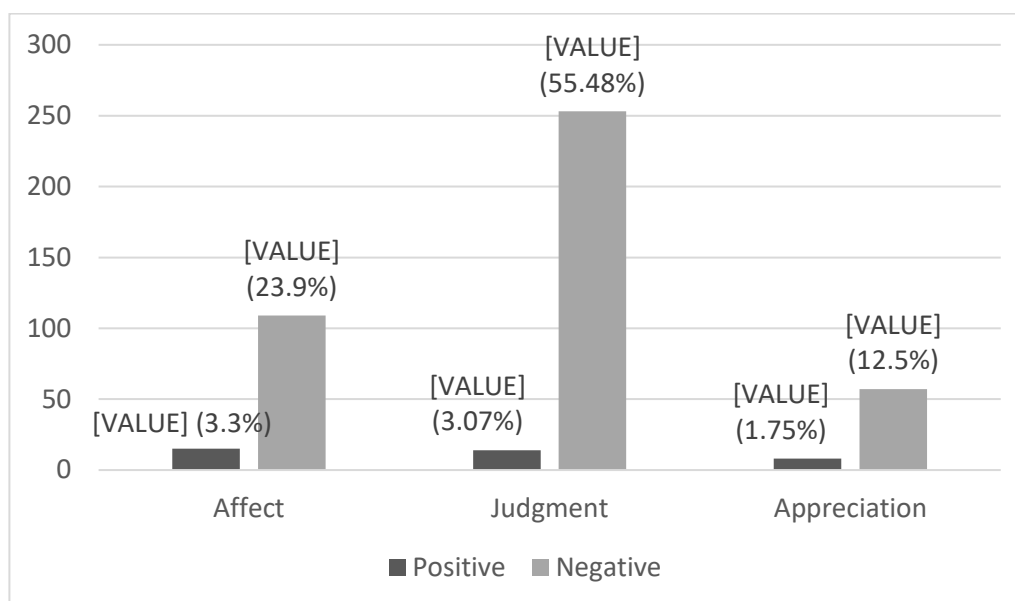
The first step of the analysis sought to determine the positioning of customers by analyzing the content of the messages. As can be seen in Figure 1, unfavorable comments made up 35.34% (217 comments) of the sample and were published by customers who voiced their complaints and disaffiliated with the company. On the other hand, customers' positive positioning was found in 176 comments (28.66%), which included positive experiences and praises. Regarding undetermined comments (221 comments, 36%), this category included off-topic conversations, appreciation messages such as "thank you" and questions which did not express (dis)affiliation explicitly. Although a third of the comments were coded as "undetermined", the present study focuses on the explicit (dis)affiliation of those customers who shared their experiences and evaluated the company. Therefore, undetermined comments were not further scrutinized as they are open to different interpretations.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of customers' positioning.

The second part of the analysis consisted in identifying the evaluative language used by customers to signal their (dis)affiliation by positively or negatively evaluating the companies' services and products. The results obtained after analyzing the use of attitude resources in unfavorable comments are shown in Figure 2. Customers signaled their negative positioning through lexical terms which carried negative values of attitude, especially negative judgment. Negative judgment takes up more than half of the identified attitude resources. However, it seems that customers preferred to use tokens of judgment to negatively evaluate the company, as 74.7% of all instances implicitly conveyed negative values of judgment (see Table 1). The use of positive attitude resources does not provide any relevant result to this study as these were included in parts of the message which were not

related to the company, or at the end of the comment as leave-taking expressions such as “XX” (kisses) when replying to other customers.

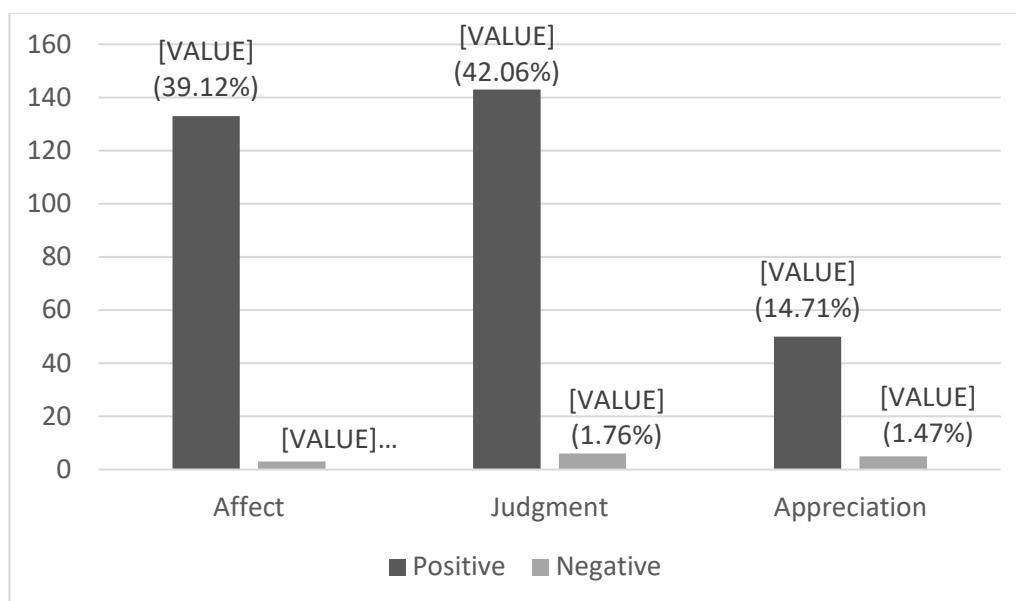


**Figure 2.** Overview of attitude resources identified in unfavorable comments.

INSCRIBED NEGATIVE JUDGMENT	TOKENS OF NEGATIVE JUDGMENT
64 (25.3%)	189 (74.7%)

**Table 1.** Occurrences of explicit and implicit positive judgment in unfavorable comments.

Turning now to the use of attitude resources in favorable comments, the results of the analysis are shown in Figure 3. It can be seen from the results that positive affect and positive judgment were the most frequent attitude resources used by these customers. Positive appreciation was used half as frequently as the previously mentioned resources. Negative attitude was identified in very few comments. However, negative values of attitude were used to disaffiliate with fellow customers, as explained in Subsection 5.3. Interestingly, the results suggest that customers who are in favor of the company prefer to explicitly convey judgment (see Table 2) when compared to unfavorable comments. This might be due to their wish to emphasize the company’s good services by explicitly evaluating them and thus making their affiliative stance more salient.



**Figure 3.** Overview of attitude resources identified in favorable comments.

INSCRIBED POSITIVE JUDGMENT	TOKENS OF POSITIVE JUDGMENT
106 (74.13%)	37 (25.87%)

**Table 2.** Occurrences of explicit and implicit positive judgment in favorable comments.

The following subsections provide a detailed discussion and qualitative analysis of the attitude resources found in unfavorable comments (Subsection 5.2) and favorable comments (Subsection 5.3).

## 5.2. Unfavorable comments

Unfavorable comments were more frequent than favorable ones and were characterized by the complaints against the company that customers published on Facebook. The following examples illustrate the different discursive resources used by customers to signal their negative positioning:

- (1) Customer28: Iv just got back from @Tesco in Beeston, Nottingham and unpacked my shopping to find my prawns are 2 days *out of date!* (*appreciation -*). *Great* (*judgment -*) to see ur staff are doing their job *properly* (*judgment -*). Me and my 2 year old Can't have our stir fry now 🤢 (*affect -*)

Example 1 illustrates how customers use their personal experience to express their dissatisfaction with the company's services. In this instance, the customer complains because the company is selling expired products to customers. The complaint is realized by using

negative appreciation to evaluate an acquired product. The customer provides a detailed description by publishing the address of the shop in which she bought the product. She also uses a rhetorical device, irony (“Great to see ur staff are doing their job properly”), thus implying that the staff is incompetent through values of negative judgment. Some customers used terms which usually convey positive emotions or evaluations to express irony to emphasize their discontent. In this example, the customer seems to use irony to express what she really expected from the company, thus blaming the staff and emphasizing a negative service. At the end of the comment, the customer states how she has been affected by the staff inability to check the quality of the products on sale and adds a nonverbal display of affect (a furious emoji) to show her angry mood.

(2) Customer20: *Yay* (*affect -*) more sweeteners in drinks. (**token of judgment -**)

Some positive interjections were used to convey negative emotions, as seen in Example 2. In this example, Customer20 commented on a status update in which the company advertised a new brand of sugar-free soft drinks. As with example 1, the customer uses irony through the positive interjection “yay” and expresses dissatisfaction with the company. Nevertheless, the fact that she also used implicit judgment suggests that this customer used irony to mitigate her complaint. The customer complains about the excessive use of sweeteners in the drinks, which are considered unhealthy by some customers, thereby condemning a negative behavior. This attitudinal token is reinforced with the aforementioned rhetorical device.

(3) Customer79: Not sure if you received my comments about really *disappointing* (*affect -*) (**token of judgment -**) customer service several e-mails sent

Comments which evaluated the performance of the company’s staff were frequent in the data. Example 3 features a customer who expresses her negative stance by creating a hybrid realization of attitude. In this case, the customer explicitly conveys negative affect, voicing her feelings of discontent through the word “disappointing”. However, the term might also project a negative evaluation of the work performed by the customer service. Therefore, the term “disappointing” can also be considered as a token of negative judgment, since the customer was probably expecting a more competent performance. This combination is considered as a hybrid realization of explicit affect and implicit judgment (see Subsection 4.2.)

(4) Customer166: They're trying to avoid the new sugar tax. (**token of judgment -**)

(5) Customer191: It's the new sugar tax. (**token of judgment -**)

Customers also commented on the Facebook page to denounce the company's actions and abuse of power, and categorized these actions as unethical. In Examples 4 and 5, Customer166 and Customer191 denounce that the company is deceiving customers by making them believe that the staff cares about their health. These users acted as information providers and replied to a thread initiated by another customer on the status update in which the company advertised a new brand of sugar-free soft drinks. Some customers considered the change in the ingredients as a way of avoiding the sugar tax on the soft drink industry, which was introduced in April 2018 in the UK. Customer166 and Customer191 might be implying that the company's executive board is trying not to lose money in the future, thus providing an implicit negative evaluation of the company's actions. Therefore, it seems that customers supported each other by providing a similar negative evaluation of the company's decision to launch the new brand of drinks. However, some customers not only positioned themselves against the retailer, but also against other big corporations and governments, as illustrated by Example 6.

- (6) Customer130: Aspartame has been marked safe by the U.K and E.U . . . that makes no difference when governments worldwide are finding new ways to 'cull' (*judgment -*) populations.

Customer130 accuses governments of poisoning people by introducing artificial sweeteners in drinks, signaling his negative positioning through explicit values of negative judgment. It is interesting that the customer decided to use the term "cull" to refer to populations, maybe implying that people in power do not see customers as human beings. Examples 4, 5 and 6 could be related to anti-consumerism movements which protest against companies and governments' gains to the detriment of a more human approach.

Summing up, the complaining customers addressed the company and emphasized the company's bad actions and the reasons for their discontent with the services and the products. These customers also shared their negative experiences with other customers since Facebook pages are open platforms which can be read by a large audience. Customers expressed their discontent through Appraisal resources which mostly conveyed negative attitude values, especially negative judgment. The preference to use judgment over affect and appreciation might be due to the fact that customers blamed the company and the staff for the lack of quality in its products and services (see Example 1). Nevertheless, negative affect was also used by many customers to express negative emotions towards the company and staff's behavior. The results also suggest that the use of these discursive strategies was not only to disaffiliate with the company, but also to form alliances with other customers who shared the same negative stance and feelings (Bou-Franch, in press; Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015). Some customers replied to comments posted by fellow customers and shared similar experiences or

provided information that should have been answered by the community manager, as seen in Examples 4 and 5 (Bou-Franch, in press). One interesting finding is that customers used these resources to express their dissatisfaction with the company as well as with other big corporations and governments. Some customers seem to have used Tesco's Facebook page to protest against consumerism. This subgroup of complaining customers denounced the abuse of power and the marketing strategies employed to deceive customers and to protect companies' economic interests.

### 5.3. Favorable comments

In those comments labeled as "favorable", customers praised the company's services and, on some occasions, protected it from fellow users who complained about it, thus forming a social group of company supporters. Moreover, these customers also resorted to attitude resources to express their favorable positioning. Examples below show how customers affiliated with the company:

(7) Customer59: I *love* (*affect +*) the *friendly* (*judgment +*) service that we always receive in all tesco stores. Especially the *lovely* (*judgment +*) cashier at bar hill tescos who served us this evening she was *lovely* (*judgment +*) very *friendly* (*judgment +*) and very *helpful* (*judgment +*) in every way possible.. THANKYOU. *X* (*affect +*)

In Example 7, Customer59 expresses her gratitude towards the company's services by praising and describing the cashier as caring and efficacious through the use of the adjectives "lovely", "friendly" and "helpful", which convey explicit values of positive judgment. Furthermore, she praises not only the subsidiary where she buys, but also all the stores managed by the company. The verb "love" and the abbreviation for kisses "X" were used to express authorial affect and the customer's satisfaction with the company.

(8) Customer34: Very *nice* (*appreciation +*)

(9) Customer92: (tagged friend) this looks *nice* (*appreciation +*) and not to *hard* (*appreciation +*) to do for sat *x* (*affect +*)

(10) Customer96: (tagged friend) it all looks *unreal* (*appreciation +*) 😊 (*affect +*)

As briefly mentioned before, appreciation resources were not very frequent when compared to positive values of affect and judgment. However, positive appreciation was used to provide a brief evaluation of what the company offered in the status update, as seen in Examples 8, 9 and 10 above. In this sense, customers could be considered to be cooperating

with the company to create a sense of community, thus affiliating with it and with other fellow supporters. This positive positioning was reinforced through paralinguistic resources, such as the abbreviation for kisses “x” (Example 9) and the “heart eyes” emoji (Example 10), which conveyed positive affect. Moreover, as can be seen in Examples 9 and 10, customers tagged their friends on their comments frequently to share the content of the status update. Customers seem to want to show their friends the products that they liked and try to prompt them to share the same positive evaluation. This act of sharing and tagging contributed to community building.

- (11) Customer58: As usual there is always some *numpty* (*judgment -*) wanting to climb on the “hate Tesco” band wagon.
- (12) Customer65 (complaining customer): I take it you didn't hear about Swindon Tesco's and the manager *bullying* (*judgment -*) and *threatening* (*judgment -*) the poppy collectors?!!
- (13) Customer68: (reply to Customer65) What a load of *rubbish* (*appreciation -*) (**token of judgment -**).

Although much less frequent in the data, positive positioning was also signaled through negative attitude resources, which created a polarization between the company supporters and those who (dis)affiliated from the company. Examples 11 and 12 show how customers negatively evaluated the complaining customers to defend the company from the negative feedback being posted on the Facebook page. Example 11 shows a customer who provides a negative evaluation of those customers who stand against the company by using the word “numpty<sup>1</sup>”, which carries negative values of judgment. On the other hand, Customer68 in Example 12 replies to a comment written by Customer65, a complaining customer. Customer68 uses the word “rubbish” to evaluate the content of the message to which he is replying through inscribed appreciation. However, it might also be considered a token of judgment; “rubbish” can also be used to evaluate the behavior of the complaining customer, who Customer68 considered to be falsely accusing the company.

In summary, these customers praised the company and provided detailed descriptions of their positive experience with the service received. These results suggest that customers express their affiliation with the company through the use of positive attitude resources, especially affect and judgment. As opposed to unfavorable messages, favorable comments were found to include inscribed (explicit) judgment. A possible explanation for this might be that these customers were trying to emphasize their satisfaction with the service provided by the company. Although less frequent in the data, these customers also provided negative evaluations of the complaining customers to defend the company from negative feedback and to maintain the expected harmony between customers and service providers (Meso et al., 2014).

## 6. CONCLUSION

With the emergence of new technologies, companies have taken advantage of social media's influence on people's lives in order to reach wider audiences and to be in constant contact with their customers. Nevertheless, the affordances of social media platforms have empowered customers, who are now able to create content, share their experiences and evaluate a service or a product. Customers can express their (dis)affiliation with companies and align with fellow customers in favor or against companies. The main aim of this study was to analyze the discourse strategies and resources used by customers to express (dis)affiliation on corporate Facebook pages. The research question is next reproduced for clarity: How is consumer (dis)affiliation discursively realized?

The data included comments written by customers who signaled unfavorable or favorable stances on the company by making use of different Appraisal resources. The fact that judgment, a resource to evaluate human behavior, happened so many times in both unfavorable and favorable comments suggests that customers are more interested in the company's service than in its products. Customers mostly praised the company for its good work and efficiency or put the blame on the staff for the lack of quality in the products being sold. Nevertheless, customers who disaffiliated from the company were found to employ more implicit values of negative judgment, in contrast to the use of explicit positive judgment found in favorable comments. This might be due to the fact that Facebook is a social media platform which allows constant communication between friends and prompts social interaction. The use of implicit values of judgment can be related to the customers' wish to mitigate any possible face-threatening act when providing moral evaluations of the company and its staff (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Customers seemed to be aware of the kind of interactions which are expected by other Facebook users and mitigated their complaints through implicit negative judgment and irony. These strategies of (dis)affiliation contribute to the value of the company, since social media have empowered customers and their comments can be read by a broad audience (Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Given the features of social media discourse, customers exploit the affordances offered by Facebook to share information and their experiences in the hope to be read by the corporate representatives and fellow customers (Bou-Franch, in press). This contributes to existing research which supports the idea that customers usually post on corporate Facebook pages expecting their opinion on the company to be read not only by the community managers but also by a large audience (Márquez-Reiter et al., 2015).

An issue which was not addressed in this study is how customers use Appraisal resources in comments categorized as "undetermined" and express potential (dis)affiliation. Although a third of the comments were categorized as undetermined, these comments were not considered relevant for the study as most of them included off-topic conversations or questions regarding products or services and did not show those customers' explicit



evaluations nor stance on the company. However, these comments could be considered to be positive towards the company since customers show an interest in the company or its products and engage in community building. Further research should be undertaken to analyze implicit affiliation in these comments.

Interestingly from theoretical and methodological perspectives, it was necessary to adapt the evaluative framework (Martin & White, 2005) to analyze the comments published by customers. The adaptation was related to the use of irony, since customers sometimes used positive evaluative resources to express ironic messages and, therefore, negative evaluations. Therefore, lexical items which usually convey positive evaluation but were used to express irony had to be carefully analyzed on the discourse level taking into account the context and the extra information provided by the customer in the comment or in the comment thread. This finding suggests the necessity to move beyond lexis towards a discursive-based approach. More research is needed to understand relationship between irony and Appraisal resources.

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## NOTES

- 1 According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a “numpty” is a silly person. See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/numpty>

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