Face-threatening acts and impoliteness on social media – Webcare on Instagram

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Studies of face-to-face analyses and polls of customer behaviour suggest that while customer behaviour in service interactions varies, positive politeness strategies rather than negative strategies as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978) by companies are prevalent (cf. Lerman 2006, Ryoo 2005) in response to face-threatening acts (cf. Du et al. 2010). This paper contributes to the study of webcare interactions through a study of face-threatening acts and impoliteness in customer interaction on the social medium Instagram. The study is based on data collected from the Instagram page of the fashion company ASOS. The dataset was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In a first step, Instagram webcare interactions by the selected company were collected for analysis. Politeness strategies based on both positive politeness and negative politeness were considered in detail, and customer questions initiating webcare interactions were qualitatively analyzed and categorized as potentially face-threatening or not face-threatening. All questions and remarks categorized as face-threatening were considered for further analysis if ASOS responded to them. The company's responses to these potential face-threatening acts were then studied and compared to positive politeness and negative politeness strategies (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978). Potential face-threatening acts by customers, responses by ASOS, as well as replies to the company's response were considered.

A quantitative corpus analysis was performed on the data based upon the qualitative findings of the discourse analysis, counting the total usage of politeness strategies in the data collected. Each webcare response by ASOS was categorized as using positive or negative politeness.

The study illustrates that the usage of positive politeness strategies is a key webcare method on the social medium Instagram in the collected company data when reacting to potential face-threatening acts. This is in line with findings from face-to-face service failure studies (Du et al. 2010, Lee et al. 2013) The findings are then discussed further, also considering the effects of positive and negative politeness on the overall tone of discourse.

References:

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