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**Social media marketing
communication and its
impact on consumer reactions**

**Faculty of Management,
Economics and Social Sciences**

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51363/unifr.eth.2026.039>

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Social media marketing communication and its impact on consumer reactions

DOCTORAL THESIS

submitted to the Faculty of Management, Economics and
Social Sciences of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

by

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from Paderborn, DE

in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Management (PhD)

Approved by the Faculty of Management, Economics and
Social Sciences on June 8, 2026, at the proposal of
Prof. Silke Bambauer-Sachse (first supervisor)
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Fribourg, 2026

The Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) neither approves nor disapproves the opinions expressed in a doctoral thesis.

They are to be considered those of the author (Faculty council decision 23.01. 1990).

Acknowledgments

Embarking on this research journey has been both a challenging and rewarding experience. I would not have been able to complete this doctoral thesis without the encouragement, guidance, and support of many individuals. This section is a small token of my appreciation for those who have accompanied me along the way, offering their expertise, assistance, and motivation.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Dr. Silke Bambauer-Sachse, for her constant guidance, insightful feedback, and valuable advice throughout this research. Your expertise and profound knowledge have been fundamental in shaping and guiding my academic journey. I am truly grateful for the opportunities you have provided and your belief in my abilities. I sincerely hope our paths will cross again in the future.

My heartfelt thanks go to my colleagues, particularly Ashley Young, Chloé Bailod and Olivier Schorro, for their support and companionship. Working with you has not only enhanced my research but has also brought remarkable people into my life. Your readiness to assist with questions and offer help whenever needed has made this experience enjoyable and enriching.

With my whole heart, I would like to thank my family for their love and support throughout this journey and my entire life. My parents, Claudia and Hartmut, who have always believed in me and supported me unconditionally, made it possible for me to achieve this accomplishment. You have shown me, through your own example, what it means to be courageous, compassionate, and persistent – that life is about never giving up and always moving forward. I will forever be grateful for the values you shared with me, the love you gave me, and the life you enabled me. My dearest granddad, Karl-Heinz, may no longer be with us, but his outlook on life and belief in me shaped who I am today. I carry his influence with me in this and future endeavors.

To my siblings, Niklas, Leja and Felicitas, thank you for the grounding presence you bring into my life. Your open ears and the laughter we have shared along the way have meant a lot to me.

My sincerest gratitude goes to my beloved Benjamin, who has been a constant source of strength for me. Your unwavering encouragement, patience, comfort, and love have supported me through this journey and will continue to uplift me in all the years to come. Thanks to your family, I have found a second home in Switzerland, filled with kindness, support, and care.

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to my closest friends, Alicja, Aline, Julia, Lea, Marina, Sarah and Theresa, whose presence over the years and support throughout this journey have shown me the true value of friendship.

Foreword

This doctoral thesis investigates the effects of corporate social media marketing communication within the context of social networks. The motivation for this research stems from the central role that social media plays today in shaping consumer behavior, fostering customer relationships, and driving business success. Social networks are inherently interactive and enable multilateral communication. This creates new channels for customer service and customer relationship management, making the development and implementation of effective social media strategies a fundamental component of modern marketing practices.

This doctoral thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and sets the research context. Chapter 2 outlines the current research state, identifies gaps related to essential elements of social media marketing communication, and defines the overarching research objective. Building on this, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present research papers that provide empirical insights and contribute to closing the identified research gaps. Chapter 6 then synthesizes the key findings and their broader implications. Efforts have been made to minimize redundancies. However, as the introduction as well as the research overview, gaps and overarching objective are intended to provide context for the topic, some repetition in certain sections was unavoidable to ensure clarity and coherence.

Two of the three research papers presented in this doctoral thesis are published in peer-reviewed academic marketing journals. At the time of submission of this doctoral thesis, the first paper “How do complainants and observers become ambassadors: Importance of customer orientation and entertainment value in generating favorable social media engagement” was a working paper under review at Marketing ZFP and co-authored with Prof. Dr. Silke Bambauer-Sachse. The second paper “Effective complaint management on social networks: The impact of response strategy, type, and account on consumer reactions” is published in the *Journal of Services Marketing* and co-authored with Prof. Dr. Silke Bambauer-Sachse. The third paper “Unlocking (re)purchase potential through corporate responsiveness on social networks: The role of perceived customer orientation” is published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* as a single-authored work. The papers are presented in their original form, with minor adjustments to chapter titles and organization, i.e., naming and separation of sections, to ensure a consistent structure in the doctoral thesis. For clarity and readability, a complete list of references is provided at the end of the thesis.

My research includes examining the corporate response strategy of replying to some positive and negative consumer comments. This strategy is referred to as the “reply to random comments” strategy in the paper “Unlocking (re)purchase potential through corporate responsiveness on social networks: The role of perceived customer orientation”. In this doctoral thesis, the term “reply to some positive and negative comments” strategy is predominantly used, as it is more precise and comprehensible. However, both terms refer to the same strategy, and the original term “reply to random comments” strategy is retained in Chapter 4, where the paper is presented, to maintain consistency with the terminology used in that publication.

Additionally, six conference papers were presented at international conferences:

Bambauer-Sachse, S., & Stuhldreier, S. M. (2023). Effects of complaint management strategies in social networks on observers’ emotional attachment and brand commitment: An abstract. In Jochims, B., & Allen, J. (Eds.), *Optimistic Marketing in Challenging Times: Serving Ever-Shifting Customer Needs. Proceedings of the 2022 AMS Annual Conference, May 25-27, Monterey, CA, USA* (pp. 353-354). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Bambauer-Sachse, S., & Stuhldreier, S. M. (2023). Effects of corporate response patterns in social networks on brand attitudes and purchase intentions of observing consumers: An abstract. In: *Welcome to the new normal: Life after Chaos. Book of Abstracts of the 2023 AMS Annual Conference, May 17-19, New Orleans, LA, USA*.

Bambauer-Sachse, S., & Stuhldreier, S. M. (2024). Social media marketing communication: Do purchase intentions depend on corporate response strategies? The role of perceived response appropriateness: An abstract. In: *Marketing and AI: Shaping the future together. Book of Abstracts of the 2024 AMS Annual Conference, May 22-24, Coral Gables, FL, USA*.

Bambauer-Sachse, S., & Stuhldreier, S. M. (2025). Fast track to satisfaction? The role of response type and speed in online customer service on social networks: An abstract. In: *Going back to the roots of marketing. Book of Abstracts of the 2025 AMS Annual Conference, May 21-23, Montréal, Canada*.

Stuhldreier, S. M. (2022). The impact of managerial response patterns on consumer engagement in social networks. In: *Book of Abstracts of the SAMS conference 2022, October 18, Lucerne, Switzerland*.

Stuhldreier, S. M. (2024). How does the corporate response rate to random consumer comments affect (re)purchase intentions of social network users? The role of perceived customer orientation. In Rasouli, S., & Timmermans, H. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 30th Recent Advances in Retailing and Consumer Science Conference, Fuerteventura, June 27-30, 2024* (pp. 179-

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1. Introduction

The digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of communication. With the emergence of Web 2.0, the Internet has become the primary platform for communication purposes (Darwish and Lakhtaria, 2011; Jothi et al., 2011; Mata and Quesada, 2014). The so-called second generation of the Internet marked a pivotal shift from static, read-only websites to dynamic, user-generated content and interactive platforms (Harris and Rea, 2009). This led to a significant empowerment of consumers, who transitioned from passive information receivers to active participants in creating, sharing, and engaging with content (Stocker and Tochtermann, 2009). As a result, online communication has increasingly shifted toward reciprocal exchange and user-driven collaboration (Darwish and Lakhtaria, 2011; Lee et al., 2008).

Central to this transformation is the rise of social media (Berthon et al., 2012; Muntinga et al., 2011; Wirtz, 2024). Commonly used definitions of social media demonstrate both its technological advancement and its central role in communication. On the one hand, social media can be described as *“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This definition emphasizes the technological evolution that has made user-generated content a defining social media feature. On the other hand, social media contains *“Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content”* (Carr and Hayes, 2015, p. 49). This definition further highlights distinct key characteristics such as disentrainment, meaning that interactions are not bound by time, and persistence, referring to the continued accessibility of content over time. Additionally, it describes social media as a masspersonal communication tool, illustrating the unique ability of social media to merge mass communication with interpersonal interaction. Another defining characteristic of social media is its rapid communication speed, which enables real-time interactions and the instant exchange of information (Taprial and Kanwar, 2012).

Social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (now called X) represent a central subset of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) that focuses on social connections and networked interactions. Social networks were originally designed to help individuals stay connected with acquaintances, such as family and friends (Ellison et al., 2007). Over time, they have evolved into multifaceted environments where users can not only connect with others but also share content, participate in communities, and shape global trends (Darwish and Lakhtaria,

2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Thus, social networks evolved from simple communication tools into complex systems that influence not only how information is created and disseminated but also how people communicate and interact (Strauss and Frost, 2016). As of today, around 64% of the global population is active on social networks, with usage continuing to rise (Chaffey, 2025).

What further distinguishes social networks from traditional media is their ability to enable consumers to assume different roles. Social network users can actively engage by commenting on posts, sharing opinions, and participating in discussions, which enables direct interaction with companies and other consumers (Dhaoui and Webster, 2021; Heinonen, 2011). This active involvement fosters a sense of community and encourages dialogue (Shao, 2009). Besides, social network users can adopt a more passive role. They may choose to follow conversations, read comments, and gather insights without contributing directly (Dolan et al., 2019; Gainous et al., 2021). This observational perspective allows consumers to stay informed about trends, company reputations, and consumer experiences without active participation (Kang et al., 2014). Consequently, consumers use social networks for a variety of reasons. While some users search for information or inspiration, others use these platforms to seek entertainment or engage with users or brands (Azar et al., 2016; Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Whiting and Williams, 2013). Moreover, many consumers rely on social networks to learn about companies and their products as well as to share their brand experiences (Chun and Lee, 2016; Stephen, 2016; Vinerean, 2017).

As a result, social networks have become essential business tools for companies and serve as vital platforms for customer service (Das et al., 2022; Zeller, 2025). Recent statistics indicate that approximately 77% of companies have adopted social networks as a primary communication channel (Kumar, 2024), as they enable them to reach large audiences, rapidly disseminate marketing content, and engage directly with consumers (Gómez-Vásquez and Soto-Vélez, 2011; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014; Wright and Hinson, 2009). Moreover, an active social network presence can positively affect corporate reputation and image (Floreddu et al., 2014; Jumalik and Oktaviany, 2023). Based on the most recent data available in 2025, Instagram is considered the most effective social network for companies, followed by X, Facebook and TikTok (HubSpot, 2025). Social networks have emerged as not only powerful marketing tools but also cost-effective communication channels that facilitate the creation and cultivation of customer relationships (Kapoor et al., 2018; Öztamur and Karakadilar, 2014; Wibowo et al., 2021). They are recognized as an effective means for fostering connectivity and encouraging

interactions with both existing and potential customers (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Tuten and Solomon, 2016; Yadav and Rahman, 2017). The growing emphasis on multilateral communication highlights the importance of social networks in shaping marketing strategies and driving business growth and competitiveness (Abney et al., 2017; Schröder, 2014).

Engaging with the audience on social networks allows companies to demonstrate genuine care for customers and active interest in their experiences, needs, and opinions. A company's interactivity on social networks signals openness, accessibility, and transparency (Ravaonrohanta and Sayumwe, 2020). It can stimulate further interactions (Chevalier et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017), decrease churn rates (Maecker et al., 2016), and turn customers into brand advocates (Sashi et al., 2019). By maintaining an active and responsive social network presence, companies create value for both consumers and the company (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2010; Meire et al., 2017) by increasing brand trust and equity (Haudi et al., 2022; Heidari et al., 2023; Samarah et al., 2022). Corporate interactivity on social networks can positively influence consumer reactions, such as brand evaluations (Jeesha and Purani, 2021; Sung and Kim, 2014), attitudes (Khan, 2022; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017), purchase intentions (Bozkurt et al., 2021; Lopes et al., 2024), and engagement intentions (Li et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2020). A solid corporate social network presence can ultimately enhance company performance and drive sales (Kumar et al., 2018; Lui et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023).

The vivid and constantly evolving nature of social networks creates a need for companies to implement effective marketing and communication strategies that adapt to this distinct environment (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Yet, many companies lack the knowledge, resources, or budget to develop a sound strategy, limiting their ability to harness the full potential of their social network presence (Culnan et al., 2010; Goel and Donaldson, 2021; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012).

A recent definition of a corporate social media marketing strategy describes it as “*an organization's integrated pattern of activities that, based on a careful assessment of customers' motivations for brand-related social media use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, transform social media connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes*” (Li et al., 2021, p. 54). This definition emphasizes three essential principles: the necessity for a strategically aligned, consumer-focused approach; the comprehension of customer motivations for interacting with companies; and the deliberate development of engagement initiatives. It suggests that companies on social networks should prioritize fostering meaningful interactions over merely maintaining a

presence. When effectively implemented, such efforts can not only drive short-term engagement but also support long-term marketing success by cultivating active, committed, and loyal consumers (Carlson et al., 2019; Dessart, 2017; Verma et al., 2025).

A main area where these principles are particularly important is the management of consumer comments (Lopes et al., 2023). Companies encounter a vast amount of consumer comments on social networks daily (Olujimi and Ade-Ibijola, 2022). Most crucial are the consumer comments posted directly on the company's social networking site, such as under corporate posts. Companies' replies to these comments play a key role, as they not only contribute to raising brand awareness (Hutter et al., 2013; Sun, 2021) but also publicly reflect how the company handles consumer feedback and engages with its audience (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2015). Their visibility and relative controllability make them a central focus of strategic communication efforts. The way companies react to consumer comments on their social networking site can significantly shape their reputation (Chang et al., 2015; Crijns et al., 2017; Rose and Blodgett, 2016), as well as the perceptions and behaviors of both commenting and observing social network users (e.g., Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017; Weitzl et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020). On this basis, companies must first decide whether to respond to consumer comments and, if so, *which* comments to address. In the case of responding, additional strategic considerations include *how* to respond (response type and characteristics), *who* responds (response sender), *when* to respond (response timeliness), and *where* to respond (response channel) (Lopes et al., 2023). Although only a subset of these aspects is examined in this doctoral thesis due to its particular relevance, all factors are briefly outlined for contextual completeness.

Response strategy. The response strategy (i.e., strategically selecting *which* comments to address) represents the foundation of corporate social media marketing communication (Lopes et al., 2023; Van Doorn, 2011). A company may choose to respond to no comments, only to positive comments, only to negative comments, to some positive and negative comments, or to all comments on social networks. If a company responds to consumer feedback but does not address all comments, it may also need to determine the response rate, i.e., the share of comments to address under the chosen strategy (Lui et al., 2018; Sheng, 2019). The approach of not responding is the most ineffective (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2015), as it does not provide any value to consumers and contradicts the inherently interactive nature of social networks (Sung and Kim, 2014). Responding to positive comments may encourage favorable engagement and support consumers in co-creating the company-customer relationship (Dickinger and Lalicic, 2014; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015). This approach demonstrates a company's

appreciation for consumers' active participation and strengthens loyalty by fostering a multi-way relationship. However, research indicates a significant rise in consumer complaints on social networks, driven by an increasing tendency among customers to publicly express negative opinions (Schäfers and Schamari, 2016; Sigurdsson et al., 2021; Xia, 2013). Negative comments can damage a company's image and require careful attention in order to maintain consumer trust (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018; Chevalier et al., 2018; Dean, 2004). While ignoring negative comments likely has more severe consequences than disregarding positive feedback (Gu and Ye, 2014; Liu et al., 2020a), responding only to negative comments can, in turn, inadvertently encourage more complaints and increase negative engagement (Cheng et al., 2024; Chevalier et al., 2018; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015) as the corporate social networking site may be regarded as a complaint channel. Therefore, companies may choose to reply to both positive and negative comments either by replying to some comments of each valence or by addressing all comments to demonstrate appreciation of positive feedback while ensuring adequate customer care for dissatisfied consumers. In light of this strategic complexity and its broad implications for engagement dynamics, this doctoral thesis provides empirical insights into comparative effects of different response strategies.

Response type. After deciding which comments to respond to, companies must choose the response type, thus determine *how* to respond (Lopes et al., 2023; Lopes et al., 2024). Based on the chosen response strategy, a company needs to appropriately reply to positive and/or negative consumer feedback. When responding to positive comments, companies can adopt a straightforward approach by expressing gratitude, showing enthusiasm, and thanking commenters for their positive feedback (Farias et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2020). In contrast, addressing negative comments presents a more challenging and complex task. Negative comments on social networks are publicly visible, which can amplify their impact (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Effectively addressing these comments can not only help to rebuild the relationship with dissatisfied customers (Istanbuluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Li et al., 2018; Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl et al., 2018) but may also increase brand trust and purchase intentions of potential customers who merely observe the company-customer interactions (Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017; Zhao et al., 2020a). Thus, companies must choose between two primary response types: accommodative or defensive (Lopes et al., 2023). Accommodative responses are characterized by a proactive and empathic approach where the company acknowledges consumers' concerns and provides a constructive and satisfactory resolution for the customer (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020). This approach typically involves offering an apology, assuming responsibility, and

proposing corrective actions (Lee and Song, 2010). Conversely, using defensive responses constitutes a rather passive approach where the company avoids taking responsibility for the issue by rejecting blame, withholding an apology, and justifying its actions. In some cases, companies may even shift blame onto the consumer (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020). The choice of response type shapes consumer perceptions, influences consumer behavior, and ultimately affects long-term customer relationships (Kim et al., 2025; Lee and Song, 2010; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). Given its pronounced impact on consumers in complaint handling, an important component of social media communication, the response type is examined in greater detail in this doctoral thesis.

Response sender. Humanized communication plays an important role in shaping consumer perceptions, which is why companies must also define the response sender, i.e., *who* responds to consumer comments (Lopes et al., 2023). Especially on social networks, which are perceived as engaging and personal, responses that do not clearly indicate who is communicating on behalf of the company can seem automated and distant. Consumers may believe that the company uses AI-generated chatbots, which can result in negative consumer evaluations (Castelo et al., 2023). Conversely, responses from a human-like communication partner can convey social presence and increase trustworthiness (Fan et al., 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Lu et al., 2022; Park and Lee, 2013). Especially in complaint management, the presence of a designated communication partner can enhance consumer forgiveness by strengthening corporate credibility and reinforcing the sincerity of efforts to resolve complaints (Tathagata and Amar, 2018). A humanized customer service enhances consumers' beliefs that they are interacting with and being cared for by a real human (Cheng and Pan, 2021). As a result, responses from a specific employee with a digital social presence may enhance perceived relationship investment from the company (Lu et al., 2022) and increase customer loyalty (Herhausen et al., 2020). Considering the salient importance of humanized communication in company-customer interactions on social networks, this doctoral thesis examines the role of the corporate response sender as a timely and increasingly relevant aspect of digital customer communication.

Response timeliness. Concerning the response timeliness, which implies *when* to respond, research outlines that timely corporate responses can yield favorable consumer outcomes, such as higher fairness perceptions (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Gligor and Bozkurt, 2022), increased trustworthiness and perceived attentiveness (Sparks et al., 2016), and higher intentions to engage with the company (Li et al., 2017; Sheng, 2019; Sheng et al., 2021). However, when specifically evaluating the effectiveness of complaint resolution on social networks, response

speed appears to play a minor role (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Min et al., 2015). As previous research suggests that consumers place greater importance on the content and problem-solving quality of corporate responses than on their promptness, response timeliness is not further considered in this doctoral thesis.

Response channel. The final component of a social media marketing communication strategy concerns the response channel, thus deciding *where* to respond. Research highlights the importance of replying to consumer comments on corporate-owned pages, such as a company's official social networking site, whereas corporate responses on consumer-generated platforms, such as review platforms or online forums, are considered less influential in shaping brand-related evaluations (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). On social networks, companies can respond either publicly or redirect the conversation to private channels (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Research indicates that, when addressing positive comments, the choice of response channel does not have a significant effect on consumer reactions (Zhang et al., 2020). In contrast, for negative feedback, a public response is generally recommended to demonstrate a company's willingness to resolve issues (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015), convey transparency (He et al., 2021; Hogreve et al., 2019; Honora et al., 2022), signal active listening and empathy (Herhausen et al., 2023), enhance perceived service quality and trust (Hogreve et al., 2019), improve the usefulness of comments (Zhang et al., 2020) and positively influence users' word-of-mouth and purchase intentions (Hogreve et al., 2019). As publicly addressing consumer comments regardless of their valence aligns with the public nature of social networks and appears to be the most effective approach, this aspect is not examined further in this doctoral thesis. Instead, attention is directed toward the outlined response-related characteristics that allow companies to actively shape their communication strategies.

2. Research overview, gaps, and overarching objective

2.1. Overview and discussion of previous research

The literature review presents previous research related to the *response strategy*, *response type*, and *response sender*. Each table is structured in a systematic and chronological order.

Although this doctoral thesis focuses on corporate responses within social networks, the literature review deliberately adopts a broader social media perspective and encompasses studies conducted across different types of social media platforms, such as social networks (e.g., Instagram), review platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor) and online forums (e.g., Reddit). This approach is motivated by the limited and fragmented body of research that examines corporate response

behavior on social networks. To establish a sound theoretical foundation, the literature review therefore draws on insights from related research contexts in which corporate response behavior has been studied more extensively. Despite structural and functional differences between platforms, social networks, review platforms, and online forums share several characteristics that are central to corporate response behavior, including publicly visible interactions and the potential for corporate responses to affect not only the commenting consumers but also a wider audience of observers. Findings from studies conducted on platforms other than social networks are therefore useful for understanding general response mechanisms that operate across public, interactive online environments. At the same time, the transferability of these findings to social networks is constrained by differences in how these platforms are typically used. Review platforms and online forums primarily function as spaces for consumers to exchange experiences, opinions, and recommendations with other consumers (Chan et al., 2022). Social networks, by contrast, are commonly used as direct communication channels between companies and consumers. The visible and ongoing presence of companies on social networks thus creates stronger expectations of interaction and responsiveness (Martins and Patricio, 2013), suggesting that corporate responses may play a more integral and influential role in this context.

2.1.1. Previous research on the response strategy

Drawing on previous literature as well as the research agenda proposed by Lopes et al. (2023), the corporate response strategy (*which* comments to address) is outlined as a central element of a corporate social media marketing strategy that requires thorough examination. Table 1 provides an overview of existing research on the effects of different corporate response strategies on social media on company outcomes, such as corporate performance, sales, or ratings. Given the unique nature of social networks, where consumers can choose to either actively engage by leaving comments or only passively observe conversations, the literature reviews about the effects of different corporate response strategies on consumers are presented separately per user perspective. Thus, Table 2 outlines previous research on the effects of corporate response strategies on commenters, while Table 3 presents prior research on the reactions of passive observers. Examining the impact on both active commenters and passive observers offers a comprehensive understanding of how corporate response strategies influence different types of social media users, highlighting their significant and far-reaching influence.

Table 1. Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact company outcomes

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Xie et al. (2014)	review platform forms	company ratings (1-5)	company replies (yes, no), number of reviews (low vs. high), variation in rating valence (low vs. high)	company performance	data from 843 hotels	The higher the company ratings, the better the company performance. Company replies, high numbers of reviews and high variation in rating valence increase this positive effect.
Kim et al. (2015)	review platform forms	response rate to negative reviews (%), company ratings (1-5), number of reviews	-	company performance	data from 128 hotels	The higher the response rate to negative reviews and the higher the company ratings, the better the company performance. There is no effect of the number of reviews on company performance.
Liu et al. (2015)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	-	company ratings	data from 145 hotels	Responses improve company ratings, especially if the company responds to negative reviews.
Ander-son & Han (2016)	review platform forms	response rate (%)	-	company revenue	data from 65195 hotels	Replies to reviews, especially negative reviews, increase company revenues, but only up to a response rate of 85 %. Exceeding this response rate leads to lower revenues than not responding at all.
Xie et al. (2016)	review platform forms	company ratings (1-5), number of reviews	company replies (yes, no)	company performance	data from 1045 hotels, 56283 reviews	The higher the company ratings and the number of reviews, the better the company performance. Company replies increase these positive effects.
Li et al. (2017)*	review platform forms	response rate (%), speed ($\emptyset$ hours), length ($\emptyset$ words)	hotel category (budget vs. premium)	company popularity ranking	data from 212 hotels	For budget hotels, a higher response rate and faster response times increase the company's popularity ranking. There is no differential effect for premium hotels. Response length has no effect.
Proserpio & Zervas (2017)*	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	-	company ratings	data from 3264 hotels, 806342 reviews	Responses to negative comments lead to more positive company ratings.
Xie et al. (2017)	review platform forms	response rate (%), length ($\emptyset$ words), speed ($\emptyset$ days), rate of executive responses (%), content repetition rate from reviews in corporate response (%)	number of reviews (low vs. high), company ratings (1-5)	company profit	data from 3537 hotels, 76649 reviews	The higher the response rate and length, the higher the company profit. High numbers of reviews increase (decrease) the positive effect of the response rate (length). High company ratings decrease (increase) the positive effect of the response rate (length). The slower the speed, the higher the rate of executive responses and the higher the content repetition, the lower the company profit. High company ratings and high numbers of reviews increase these negative effects.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. *The results for commenters are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact company outcomes

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Kumar et al. (2018)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	competition (direct vs. indirect: same or different restaurant category)	company performance, performance of non-replying competitors	data from 4922 restaurants, 587903 reviews	Responses improve the company's performance. In the case of direct (indirect) competition, responses provided by the company have a negative (positive) effect on the performance of competing, non-replying businesses.
Lui et al. (2018)	review platform forms	response rate (%), strategy (no response, response to extreme, all, or random reviews)	company ratings (1-5)	company profit compared to competitors	data from 588 hotels, 27635 reviews	The higher the response rate, the higher the company profit compared to competing businesses (revenue per available room). Low company ratings increase this effect. Responses to extreme, all and random reviews have a more positive impact on company profit than no responses.
Wang & Chaudhry (2018)	review platform forms	response rate to negative vs. positive reviews (%)	response customization (yes vs. no)	company ratings	data from 65099 hotels	The higher the response rate to negative reviews, the better company ratings. Customized responses enhance the positive effect. The higher the response rate to positive reviews, the lower the company ratings. Customized responses intensify the negative effect.
Liang & Li (2019)*	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews, commenters' experience and reputation ($\emptyset$ number and valence of previous reviews, $\emptyset$ number of helpful votes)	-	company ratings	data from 201 luxury hotels, 353897 reviews	Responses increase company ratings, especially if the company responds to negative reviews.
Sheng et al. (2019)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	review valence (negative vs. positive)	company ratings	data from 770 hotels, 40604 reviews from repeating commenters, 23106 company replies	Responses increase company ratings. This effect is stronger if the company responds to negative reviews.
Hernández-Maestro (2020)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	expression of gratitude (yes, no)	company ratings	data from 766 accommodations, 9864 reviews, 1552 company replies	Responses to negative reviews improve company ratings. The expression of gratitude in replies enhances this effect. Responses to positive reviews have no effect.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. *The results for commenters are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact company outcomes

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Liu et al. (2020a)	review platform forms	response rate (%), responses to negative vs. positive reviews	product price (low vs. high), product heterogeneity (low vs. high)	company sales	data from 3379 clothing sellers	The higher the response rate, the higher the company sales. High product price and product heterogeneity increase this effect. Responses to negative reviews have a more positive effect than responses to positive reviews.
Huang et al. (2021b)	review platform forms	number of responses to negative vs. positive reviews (%)	market position (weak vs. strong), competition intensity (weak vs. strong)	company sales	data from 8098 restaurants	If market position is weaker (stronger), a higher number of responses to negative reviews increases (decreases) sales. There is no moderating effect of competition intensity. If market position and competition intensity are weaker (stronger), a higher number of responses to positive reviews increases (decreases) sales.
Proserpio et al. (2021)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	gender (self-identified female vs. male)	company ratings	data from 5431 hotels, 2028872 reviews, 962395 company replies	Responses increase company ratings, particularly due to their positive effect on self-identified females.
Sheng et al. (2021)	review platform forms	response rate (%), speed ($\emptyset$ days), length ($\emptyset$ words), valence (negative vs. positive), standardization (low vs. high)	review valence (negative vs. positive), number of reviews (low vs. high)	company ratings	data from 1037 hotels, 765082 reviews, company replies to roughly 70% of reviews	Higher response rates, faster responses, and positive response valence lead to higher company ratings. These effects are stronger for negative than for positive reviews. There is no moderating effect of the volume of reviews. There is no direct or interaction effect of response length and standardization.
Rezvani & Rojas (2022)	review platform forms	response rate (%)	-	company ratings	data from 432 hotels, 384047 reviews	The higher the response rate, the higher the company ratings.
Yang et al. (2023)	review platform forms	response rate (%)	-	company ratings (mediator), company sales, company profit	data from 317 tours offered by China's largest travel agency	The higher the response rate, the higher the company ratings, which in turn increase company sales and profit.
Wu et al. (2024)	review platform forms	responses to negative vs. positive reviews	response similarity (low vs. high), competitors' response strategy (responses to negative vs. positive reviews)	company ratings, short-term/long-term company performance	data from 4782 hotels, 804991 reviews, 393389 company replies	Responses to negative reviews have short-term negative and long-term positive effects on company ratings and financial performance, with an overall cumulative negative effect. Responses to positive reviews increase company ratings and financial performance. High response similarity and competitors' responses to positive (negative) reviews attenuate the positive (negative) effect of replies to positive (negative) reviews on company ratings.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

The literature review in Table 1 highlights the significant impact of corporate responses on social media on a company's overall business success.

Many studies find that companies that respond more frequently to *customer reviews* see improvements in company performance (Kumar et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2016), sales (Huang et al., 2021b; Liu et al., 2020a; Yang et al., 2023), and profit (Lui et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2023). Replying to reviews furthermore improves companies' ratings (Liang and Li, 2019; Liu et al., 2015; Proserpio et al., 2021; Rezvani and Rojas, 2022; Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023) and popularity rankings on review platforms (Li et al., 2017). Responding to *negative reviews* tends to have stronger positive effects than responding to *positive reviews* (Hernández-Maestro, 2020; Liang and Li, 2019; Liu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020a; Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018), with one exception outlining the opposite (Wu et al., 2024).

Moreover, studies indicate that response characteristics such as the expression of gratitude (Hernández-Maestro, 2020), reply similarity (Wu et al., 2024), and reply customization (Wang and Chaudhry, 2018) can influence the effectiveness of company replies on review platforms. Other factors may also play a moderating role in shaping company outcomes, such as the number of consumer reviews (Sheng et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2017) and their valence (Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2014), company characteristics like the hotel category (Li et al., 2017) and product attributes (Liu et al., 2020a), and the competitive context, i.e., competition intensity (Huang et al., 2021b; Kumar et al., 2018) market position (Huang et al., 2021b), and competitors' strategies (Wu et al., 2024).

Overall, previous research indicates corporate advantages of responsiveness to reviews, with a tendency to greater benefits when replying to *negative reviews*. Yet, since these studies focus exclusively on review platforms and do not compare different strategies, it remains unclear to what extent the findings can be applied to strategic communication on social networks.

Next, the literature on the effects of corporate response strategies on commenters is presented to gain insights into how corporate responses influence user perceptions and behaviors of actively engaged consumers on social media.

Table 2. Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact commenter reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Gu & Ye (2014)	review platform forms	responses to an initial negative vs. positive review	response to other reviews (yes, no)	valence of subsequent reviews	data from 5831 hotels, with 7% of commenters who reviewed the hotel twice	Responses to negative reviews result in more positive subsequent reviews from these customers. Responses to positive reviews have no differential effect. If customers notice that the company responds to other reviews, but not to their own negative (positive) review, their subsequent review will be more negative (there is no effect on their subsequent review).
Hom-burg et al. (2015)	online forums	corporate responsiveness (low vs. high)	response speed (low vs. high), comment type (social vs. functional)	consumer sentiment (valence of subsequent comments)	data from 115000 consumer comments across 10 online forums	High (low) corporate responsiveness negatively (positively) affects consumer sentiment. This effect holds for consumer comments addressing functional needs, but there is no effect for comments addressing social needs. There is no moderating effect of response speed.
Ma et al. (2015)	social networks	responses vs. no responses to negative comments	-	customer-company relationship, volume and valence of subsequent comments	data from a telecommunications firm, 714 comments, company replies to 50% of negative comments	Responses to negative comments improve the company-customer relationship and increase the volume of subsequent customer comments, but the subsequent customer comments are more negative.
Li et al. (2017)	review platform forms	response rate (%), speed (Ø hours), length (Ø words)	hotel category (budget vs. premium)	volume and valence of subsequent reviews	data from 212 hotels	The higher the response rate and speed, the higher the volume and the more positive subsequent reviews. For budget hotels, a higher response rate and speed further increase volume and positive subsequent reviews. There is no differential effect for premium hotels. Response length has no direct or interaction effect.
Proserpio & Zervas (2017)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	-	volume, valence and length of subsequent reviews	data from 3264 hotels, 806342 reviews	Responses lead to more positive reviews and fewer but longer negative reviews.
Chevalier et al. (2018)	review platform forms	response rate (%)	-	volume, length and valence of subsequent reviews	data from 1807 hotels	The higher the response rate, especially to negative comments, the higher the volume of subsequent reviews, but the more negative the valence of the reviews. The response rate does not influence the length of reviews.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 2 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact commenter reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Chen et al. (2019)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	response length ($\emptyset$ words)	volume and valence of subsequent reviews	data from 943 hotels, roughly 21% of hotels responding	Responses increase the volume of subsequent reviews but do not influence the valence of the reviews. Responses to positive (negative) reviews increase (decrease) the volume of subsequent reviews, but lengthy responses attenuate the positive (negative) effect of company replies.
Liang & Li (2019)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews, commenters' experience and reputation ($\emptyset$ number and valence of reviews, $\emptyset$ number of helpful votes)	-	volume of subsequent reviews	data from 201 luxury hotels, 353897 reviews	Responses increase the volume of subsequent reviews, especially if the company responds to negative reviews. The experience and reputation of commenters have no effect.
Liu et al. (2019)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	service failure severity, compensation, response speed	recovery satisfaction (mediator) attitudes, eWOM continuance intentions	2 (service failure severity: low, high) x 2 compensation: yes, no) x 2 (response speed: slow, fast) between-subjects design + control group with no company replies, n=201, context: hotel service failure	Responses to negative reviews do not influence attitudes, but they increase eWOM continuance intentions. Responses to reviews about less severe service failures have a stronger impact on attitudes than responses to reviews about more severe service failures. When the perceived service failure severity is low (high), compensation (response speed) has a stronger positive influence on recovery satisfaction than response speed (compensation). Recovery satisfaction increases eWOM continuance intentions.
Sheng (2019)	review platform forms	response rate (%), speed ($\emptyset$ days), length ($\emptyset$ words)	star rating (0-5), company ratings (1-5), chain affiliation (yes, no)	volume of subsequent reviews	data from 1024 hotels, roughly 46% of reviews with company replies	A higher response rate, faster responses and longer responses have a positive impact on the volume of subsequent reviews. There is no interaction effect of star rating, company ratings and chain affiliation with response rate, speed or length.
Xu et al. (2020)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	number of expert reviews (low vs. high)	sense of reciprocity (mediator), volume of subsequent reviews	data from 3.6 million reviews on a travel platform across 197 Chinese cities	Responses increase the volume of subsequent reviews directly and indirectly through an increased sense of reciprocity. A high number of expert reviews weakens the effects.

Note. Only relevant studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 2 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact commenter reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Zhao et al. (2020b)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	response delay (short vs. long)	customer satisfaction in subsequent reviews	data from the largest B2C e-commerce platforms in China, 31374 reviews	Responses, especially to negative reviews, increase customer satisfaction in subsequent reviews. A long response delay negatively moderates this effect.
Proserpio et al. (2021)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	gender (self-identified female vs. male)	valence of subsequent reviews	data from 5431 hotels, 2028872 reviews, 962395 company replies	Responses reduce the likelihood of self-identified females writing negative reviews. There is no differential effect in the valence of subsequent reviews of self-identified males.
Deng & Ravichandran (2024)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	-	valence of subsequent reviews		Responses to both positive and negative reviews have a positive effect on review valence, while responses to only positive reviews have a negative influence on review valence.
Istanbuloglu & Sakman (2024)	social networks	responses vs. no responses to negative comments	-	trust (mediator), repurchase intentions	survey with 325 consumers who had complained on Facebook or Twitter	Responses to negative comments increase repurchase intentions directly and indirectly through increased trust.
Lopes et al. (2024)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	-	purchase intentions	data from 7 hotels, 18329 reviews, 5564 company replies	Responses have a positive impact on purchase intentions.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

The studies presented in Table 2 mainly focus on review platforms but highlight a significant impact of corporate responses on commenting social media users.

Corporate responses to *reviews* in general (Lopes et al., 2024) and particularly *negative comments* on social networks (Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024) can increase (re)purchase intentions. However, existing research does not fully align on the effects of response strategies on commenters' subsequent engagement. While most studies in the context of review platforms suggest that a company's responsiveness to reviews (Chen et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; Sheng, 2019; Xu et al., 2020) and particularly *negative reviews* (Gu and Ye, 2014; Liang and Li, 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Zhao et al., 2020b), leads to more positive subsequent reviews, other research on review platforms (Chevalier et al., 2018), online forums (Homburg et al., 2015) and social networks (Ma et al., 2015) indicates that responding to *only negative reviews* or *comments* may actually increase negative engagement. The literature is moreover divided on whether responding to *only positive reviews* leads to more favorable (Chen et al., 2019) or less favorable consumer engagement on review platforms (Deng & Ravichandran, 2024).

Additionally, the studies highlight potential moderating factors that may influence the effectiveness of the response strategy on commenter reactions. These include response-related aspects such as the response speed (Homburg et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2020b), the response length (Chen et al., 2019), whether the company provides compensation (Liu et al., 2019) and whether it replies to other reviews but not to the own (Gu and Ye, 2014), company characteristics such as company ratings and chain affiliation (Sheng, 2019) as well as hotel category (Li et al., 2017), and contextual elements such as service failure severity (Liu et al., 2019), comment type (Homburg et al., 2015), and commenters' gender (Proserpio et al., 2021).

Altogether, determining the most effective strategy based on previous research is difficult while effects may also depend on the social media platform. Consequently, it remains unclear which response strategy is most effective in positively influencing commenter reactions on social networks.

The subsequent table presents the effects of different corporate response strategies on observers, offering a deeper understanding of whether and how company replies influence users who only observe company-customer interactions and do not (yet) actively engage with the company.

Table 3. Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Van Noort & Willemssen (2012)	online blogs	responses vs. no responses to negative comments	platform type	brand evaluations, perceived company-customer interactivity	3 (response strategy: proactive, reactive, no response) x 2 (platform type: consumer-generated, brand-generated) between-subjects design, n=163, context: negative comments on a car recall announcement, additional consumer question in the reactive condition	Responses to negative comments, both proactive and reactive, have a more positive effect on brand evaluations than no response. Proactive responses on brand- (vs. consumer-) generated platforms elicit more positive brand evaluations and better perceived company-customer interactivity, while there is no differential effect for reactive responses.
Mauri & Minazzi (2013)	review platforms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews, review prevalence	-	consumer expectations, purchase intentions	3 groups (prevalence of positive reviews and no responses, prevalence of negative reviews and no responses), n=349, context: hotel reviews	Consumer expectations and purchase intentions are higher if positive compared to negative reviews are prevalent. Responses (vs. no responses) to negative reviews decrease purchase intentions, while there is no differential effect on consumer expectations.
Sung & Kim (2014)	social networks	response rate, content	company type	perceived relationship investment, purchase intentions, loyalty, brand attitudes	2 (response rate: low, high) x 3 (response content: promotional, non-promotional, mixed) x 2 (company type: real, fictitious), between-subjects design, n=465, context: grocery retailer's Facebook page	For the real and fictitious company, response content does not influence the dependent variables. For the fictitious company, a high (vs. low) response rate positively impacts the dependent variables. For the real company, a high response rate only improves perceived relationship investment.
Colliander et al. (2015)	social networks	responses vs. no responses to comments	-	perceived effort and care (mediator), brand attitude, purchase intentions	2 groups (response strategy: no response, response), plus two control groups (brand-familiar, no stimuli exposure, split by response strategy), n=298, context: follow one of six well-known brands on Twitter for a week	Responses enhance brand attitude and purchase intentions directly and indirectly through higher perceived effort and care.
Schamari & Schäfers (2015)	online forums, social networks	responses vs. no responses to positive comments	platform type	surprise about company response, perceived human voice (mediators), engagement intentions	3 (response strategy: no response, personal response, impersonal response) x 2 (platform type: consumer-generated: private forum, brand-generated: Facebook) between-subjects design, n=188, context: positive comments about one's car brand	Impersonal and personal (vs. no) and personal (vs. impersonal) responses increase engagement intentions only on consumer-generated platforms, with surprise about the company response mediating the effect of responses (vs. no responses) and perceived human voice mediating the effect of personal (vs. impersonal) responses. On brand-generated platforms, perceived human voice mediates the effect of responses (vs. no responses).

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold.

Table 3 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Rose & Blodgett (2016)	review platform forms	number of negative reviews, responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	complaint issue	brand evaluations	2 (responses to negative reviews: yes, no) x 2 (number of negative reviews: one out of five, two out of five) x 2 (complaint issue: controllable, non-controllable) between-subjects design, n=255, context: hotel reviews	Higher numbers of negative reviews (responses to negative reviews) lead to lower (higher) brand evaluations. For controllable complaint issues, responses and fewer negative reviews have a stronger impact on brand evaluations than no responses and a higher number of negative reviews. There is no differential effect for non-controllable factors.
Sparks et al. (2016)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews, response sender, voice, speed, problem resolution	-	trustworthiness, perceived company attentiveness	2 (response sender: high (general manager), low (guest service agent)) x 2 (response voice: conversational, professional) x 3 (response speed: fast, moderate, slow) x 2 (status quo of problem resolution: fixed, not yet fixed) between-subjects design + control group with no company replies, n=820, context: hotel reviews	Responses to negative reviews , a conversational voice and fast responses increase trustworthiness and perceived company attentiveness . The status quo of the problem solution and the response sender have no effects.
Vendemia (2017)	social networks	responses vs. no responses to comments	-	perceived responsiveness (mediator), attitude, purchase intentions	3 groups (no response, responses with low personalization, responses with high personalization), n=126, context: local apparel brand's Facebook page	Responses enhance attitudes and purchase intentions through higher perceived responsiveness.
Bhandari & Rodgers (2018)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	problem attribution, product type	brand trust (mediator), purchase intentions	2 (response strategy: no response, response to negative reviews) x 2 (problem attribution: brand, consumer) x 2 (product type: laptop (Dell), TV (LG)) between-subjects design, n=447, context: negative product reviews	Responses to negative reviews positively influence brand trust, which in turn increases purchase intentions. Problem attribution to the company decreases purchase intentions through lower brand trust. The positive effects are stronger and the negative effects are weaker for the TV than for the laptop (due to prior brand attitudes). There is no interaction effect between responses and problem attribution.
Chevalier et al. (2018)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	customer experience	eWOM intentions	3 (response strategy: no response, response to all, to only negative reviews) x 3 (customer experience: positive, negative, mixed) between-subjects design, n=1202, context: hotel reviews	Responses to all and only negative reviews lead to higher eWOM intentions than no replies. Responses to all (only negative) reviews lead to higher eWOM intentions in the case of positive and mixed (mixed) customer experiences.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold.

Table 3 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response strategies on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Wang et al. (2020)	review platform forms	responses to reviews	review valence	purchase intentions	3 (response strategy: response to all, random, extreme reviews with the highest/lowest evaluation) x 2 (review valence: positive, negative) between-subjects design, n=168, context: restaurant reviews	For negative reviews, responses to all (vs. random vs. extreme) reviews and extreme (vs. random) reviews increase purchase intentions. For positive reviews, responses to random and extreme (vs. all) reviews and random (vs. extreme) reviews increase purchase intentions.
Olson & Ro (2020)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to negative reviews	-	purchase intentions, WOM intentions	2 groups (response, no response to negative reviews), n=111, context: restaurant reviews	Responses to negative reviews increase purchase intentions and WOM intentions.
Golmohammadi et al. (2021)	social networks	responses to negative comments		quality and value perceptions	Study 1: data from Twitter communication of 375 S&P 500 firms	Responses to negative comments negatively impact quality and value perceptions.
		responses to negative comments		negative engagement intentions	Study 2: data from Twitter communication of 107 firms with product recalls	Responses to negative comments increase negative engagement intentions.
Jeesha & Purani (2021)	review platform forms	responses to reviews		brand evaluations	Study 1: 4 groups (response to all, only positive, only negative, no reviews), n=140, context: hotel reviews	Responses to all and only negative reviews have more positive effects on brand evaluations than responses to only positive reviews and no replies.
			review valence	brand evaluations	Study 2: 4 (response strategy: response to all, only positive, only negative, no reviews) x 3 (review valence: mainly positive, mainly negative, balanced) between-subjects design, n=420, context: hotel reviews	If reviews are mainly positive, responses to all and only negative reviews lead to better brand evaluations than the other strategies. If reviews are mainly negative, responses to all reviews lead to better brand evaluations than the other strategies.
			first review's valence	brand evaluations	Study 3: 4 (response strategy: response to all, only positive, only negative, no reviews) x 3 (first review's valence: positive, negative), between-subjects design, n=280, context: hotel reviews	If the first review is positive, responses to all reviews lead to better brand evaluations than the other strategies. If the first review is negative, responses to all and only negative reviews lead to better brand evaluations than the other strategies.
Tran et al. (2025)	review platform forms	responses vs. no responses to reviews	response content	satisfaction (mediator), perceived service quality, purchase intentions	3 (response strategy: response to all, selective, no reviews) x 3 (response content: customized, rote) between-subjects design, n=260, context: hotel reviews	Responses to all reviews lead to higher satisfaction than responding to selective and no reviews. Customized responses to all reviews lead to the highest satisfaction. Satisfaction positively influences perceived service quality and purchase intentions.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 3 outlines that, in comparison to the company and commenter perspective, a few more studies examine the effects of the response strategy on observing users in the context of social networks.

Corporate responsiveness to consumer comments on social networks seems to enhance observer reactions, e.g., brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Colliander et al., 2015; Sung and Kim, 2014; Vendemia, 2017). These positive effects may be due to higher perceived effort and care (Colliander et al., 2015).

However, findings across different social media platforms remain mixed regarding whether responding to *only negative comments* or *reviews* leads to positive effects on observers on review platforms (Olson and Ro, 2020) and online blogs (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012) or negative effects on observers on review platforms (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013) or social networks (Golmohammadi et al., 2021). In turn, replies to *positive comments* on social networks may increase engagement intentions (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015).

Some studies comparing different response strategies on review platforms suggest that responding to *all reviews* or *only negative reviews* tends to result in better observer outcomes, like enhanced brand evaluations or increased electronic word-of-mouth intentions, than replies to *only positive reviews* or *no reviews* (Chevalier et al., 2018; Jeesha and Purani, 2021).

Yet, the effectiveness of these strategies may be moderated by response characteristics, such as the response content (Tran et al., 2025), review characteristics, such as the review valence (Jeesha and Purani, 2021; Wang et al., 2020), the platform type (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012), and contextual factors, such as the commenting consumers' experience (Chevalier et al., 2018), the complaint issue (Rose and Blodgett, 2016) and the observers' problem attribution (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018).

While previous research on social networks suggests that a company's interactivity has positive effects on observers, no conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of specific response strategies. Additionally, there is a lack of research examining the strategy of responding to positive and negative comments in a systematic manner. These gaps are similarly evident in the literature on commenters (see Table 2), highlighting the need for more targeted research that compares the effects of different response strategies with a specific focus on social networks.

2.1.2. Previous research on the response type

Beyond the response strategy (*which* comments to address), the response type (*how* to respond) plays an important role in developing a sound social media marketing communication strategy (e.g., Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Lopes et al., 2023; Song and Kim, 2016; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). How companies respond to consumer comments, particularly negative comments, can significantly shape perceptions of different types of social media users.

Therefore, a literature overview of the effects of corporate response types on commenters is presented in Table 4. Table 5 offers an overview of the impact of response types on observers. Considering both consumer perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of how response types affect not only engaged and involved but also non-participating and observing social media users.

Table 4. Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact commenter reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Einwiller & Steilen (2015)	social networks	response type and speed	-	webcare satisfaction	data from 34 large US companies' Twitter and Facebook pages, 15045 comments (5023 complaints, 4153 company replies, 3335 follow-up comments, 2534 comments from other users)	Accommodative (vs. defensive) responses enhance webcare satisfaction. Corrective actions, signs of gratitude, and internal complaint transfer increase webcare satisfaction, while seeking further information, providing explanations, redirecting to other units, and expressing understanding decrease webcare satisfaction. Response speed, apology and expression of regret have no effect.
Weitzl et al. (2018)	social networks	response type	prior failures, other consumers' responses	failure attributions (locus, stability, controllability) (mediators), webcare satisfaction, negative WOM intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (prior failures: few, multiple) x 2 (other consumers' responses: no, defending), between-subjects design, n=812, context: consumers with service failure experiences who complained on the company's Facebook/Twitter pages	For complainants with few prior failures, accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses reduce failure attributions. Defensive (vs. no) responses reduce locus and controllability attribution. For those with multiple prior failures, all response types lead to equal locus, stability and controllability attribution, while accommodative (vs. no) responses increase stability attribution. Other consumers' defending responses reduce locus and controllability (stability) attribution with no or defensive (accommodative) responses. Locus and stability attribution reduce webcare satisfaction and negative WOM intentions.
Weitzl (2019)	social networks	response type	complainant type	webcare and brand satisfaction, brand image, brand loyalty, positive/negative WOM intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (complainant type: constructive, vindictive) between-subjects design, n=195, context: complaint on the company's Facebook page about an underperforming product	For constructive complainants, accommodative (vs. no), defensive (vs. no) and accommodative (vs. defensive) responses increase webcare and brand satisfaction, brand image, brand loyalty and positive WOM intentions, while accommodative responses are most effective. Defensive (vs. accommodative and no) responses increase negative WOM intentions. For vindictive complainants, the response type has no differential effects.
Weitzl & Einwiller (2020)	social networks	response type	complainant type	negative WOM intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (customer commitment: low, high) x 2 (desire for revenge: low, high) between-subjects design, n=588, context: restaurant service failure	For revengeful loyalists (high commitment, high revenge desire), the response type has no differential effects. For constructive loyalists (high commitment, low revenge desire), accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses decrease negative WOM intentions. For constructive unattached customers (low commitment, low revenge desire), accommodative (vs. defensive) and defensive (vs. no) responses decrease negative WOM intentions.
Tsao & Su (2021)	social networks	response type	commenters' argument strength	corporate image, purchase intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (argument strength: weak, strong) between-subjects design, n=180, context: bank service failure	Accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses enhance corporate image and purchase intentions. The effect on purchase intentions is strongest if commenters' argument strength is weak. Argument strength does not influence the relation between the response type and corporate image.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 4 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact commenter reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Hutzinger & Weitzl (2023)	social networks	response type	relationship strength	revenge intentions	Study 1: 2 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (relationship strength: low, high) between-subjects design, n=316, context: restaurant service failure	Regardless of the relationship strength, accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses lead to lower revenge intentions.
		response type	relationship strength, prior failures	revenge intentions	Study 2: online survey with 492 consumers who have recently experienced a service failure and recovery failure (double deviation) and complained on the company's social media page	In the case of few prior failures, accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses lead to lower revenge intentions regardless of relationship strength. In the case of multiple prior failures, accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses lead to higher revenge intentions when relationship strength is high while the response types lead to similar revenge intentions when relationship strength is low.
Van Mulken & Heslenfeld (2025)	social networks	response type	blame attribution	customer indignation	4 (response type: defensive, accommodative with an apology, accommodative with promising actions, accommodative with an apology, promising actions and a high level of empathy) x 3 (blame attribution: low, intermediate, high) within-subjects design, n=152, context: product failure	When blame attribution is high, defensive responses lead to more indignation than accommodative responses with an apology, accommodative responses with promising actions and accommodative responses with an apology, promising actions and a high level of empathy. An accommodative response with an apology, promising actions and a high level of empathy are the most effective in reducing indignation. There is no interaction effect between blame attribution and response strategy when blame attribution is low or intermediate.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Although research on the effects of response types on commenters remains relatively limited, the focus of existing research is on social networks, outlining the significance of the response type in this context.

The studies presented in Table 4 suggest that *accommodative responses* to customer complaints generally lead to more favorable commenter reactions, such as increased webcare satisfaction (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Weitzl, 2019), purchase intentions (Tsao and Su, 2021), brand loyalty (Weitzl, 2019), lower revenge intentions (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2023), and reduced indignation (Van Mulken and Heslenfled, 2025) than *no or defensive responses*.

However, several factors can play a moderating role and influence the effectiveness of response types, such as the complainant type (Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020), commenters' argument strength (Tsao and Su, 2021), the relationship strength (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2023), prior failures (Weitzl et al., 2018), and blame attribution (Van Mulken and Heslenfled, 2025). Specifically, complainants' prior experiences with service failures and their perceptions of how other users respond to their complaint may influence the extent to which they attribute blame to the company. While accommodative responses generally help mitigate negative attributions among those with limited prior failures, defensive responses might be equally effective for complainants who have encountered repeated failures (Weitzl et al., 2018). Furthermore, defensive or no responses lead to lower revenge intentions when complainants have a strong relationship with the company and have experienced multiple prior failures (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2023). Additionally, while accommodative responses tend to resonate more with constructive complainants, they may have limited effects on those driven by vindictive motives (Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020). These findings indicate that, under certain conditions, defensive responses may represent an equally appropriate or even better response type than accommodative responses.

Thus, although accommodative responses tend to be beneficial overall, determining the most effective response type is more complex, as its impact may vary across contexts.

The next table outlines existing research on the effect of corporate response types on consumers who merely observe the interaction between a company and complaining commenters. Gaining insights into the impact on observers helps to understand how corporate responses influence brand perceptions among the wider audience on social media platforms.

Table 5. Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Lee & Song (2010)	complaint sites	response type	-	failure attribution to the company, company evaluation	3 groups (no response, defensive, accommodative), n=234, context: negative comments on a complaint site	Defensive (vs. no) responses increase observers' failure attribution to the company, with no differential effect compared to accommodative responses. Accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses enhance company evaluation.
Xia (2013)	social networks	response type	company type, brand personality, relationship strength (measured)	perceived response sincerity, respectfulness, appropriateness, satisfaction, purchase intentions, positive WOM intentions	2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (company type: Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks) between-subjects design, n=173, context: negative brand-related comments	Accommodative (vs. defensive) responses are perceived as more sincere, respectful and appropriate, and increase satisfaction, purchase intentions and positive WOM intentions. There is no interaction effect with the company type. If the brand personality is perceived as positive (negative) and the relationship is strong (weak), defensive (accommodative) responses are perceived as more appropriate.
Lee & Cranage (2014)	review platforms	response type	other reviewers' consensus	external causal attribution, brand attitudes	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (other reviewers' consensus: low, high) between-subjects design, n=241, context: negative restaurant reviews	If other reviewers' consensus is low, defensive (vs. accommodative and no) responses lead to higher external causal attribution, while accommodative and defensive (vs. no) responses enhance brand attitude. If other reviewers' consensus is high, the response type has no differential effect on external causal attribution, while accommodative and no (vs. defensive) responses enhance brand attitudes.
Chang et al. (2015)	online forums	response type, failure severity	-	attribution of locus and controllability (mediators), brand reputation, negative eWOM intentions	2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (failure severity: minor, severe), between-subjects design, n=282, context: negative comment about a damaged product delivery	Defensive (vs. accommodative) responses and severe (vs. minor) failures increase attribution of locus. The higher attribution of locus (controllability), the lower (higher) organizational reputation. The higher attribution of locus and the lower reputation, the higher negative eWOM intentions.
Dens et al. (2015)	review platforms	response type	review balance	perceived trust (mediator), brand attitudes, patronage intentions, positive WOM intentions	6 (response type: no response, refutation, apology only, apology + explanation, apology + compensation, apology + explanation + compensation) x 3 (review balance: negative, neutral, positive) between-subjects design, n=973, context: negative restaurant reviews	If the review balance is positive, the response type has no differential on brand attitudes and patronage intentions, but an apology + an explanation, and an apology + an explanation + a compensation increase positive WOM intentions. If the review balance is neutral or negative, an apology + an explanation + a compensation positively influence the dependent variables. Perceived trust mediates the relation between the response type and the dependent variables only if the review balance is neutral.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 5 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Song & Kim (2016)	social networks	response type, voice, and sincerity	-	brand attitudes, purchase intentions	3 (response type: defensive, accommodative, generic) x 2 (response voice: professional, human) x 3 (response sincerity: low, neutral, high) between-subjects design, n=185, context: negative comment on a restaurant's Facebook fan page	Accommodative (vs. defensive and generic) responses and high (vs. low and neutral) response sincerity enhance brand attitude and purchase intentions . Response voice has no influence. There are no interaction effects.
Jahng & Hong (2017)	social networks	response type and voice	prior brand attitudes	corporate performance, corporate reputation, purchase intentions	2 (response type: defensive, apologetic) x 2 (response voice: corporate (company), human (employee)) x 2 (prior brand attitudes: negative, positive) within-subjects design, n=304, context: comments on crisis news stories from Target or United Airlines on Twitter	Response type, voice and sender do not influence corporate performance and reputation. For consumers with a positive (negative) prior brand attitude, defensive (accommodative) and corporate (human) voice increase purchase intentions.
Weitzl & Hutzinger (2017)	social networks	response type	-	brand attitudes, brand trust, purchase intentions, positive WOM intentions (favorable), purchase risk, negative WOM intentions (unfavorable)	10 groups (accommodative: apology, redress, apology + redress, apology + explanation + redress, defensive: deny fault, accuse customer, accuse third party, passive: accommodative response by brand-advocate, no company action, redirection from company), n=731, context: negative comments on a coffeehouse brand's Facebook page	Accommodative (vs. no) responses increase favorable and decrease unfavorable reactions. Defensive vs. no responses have no differential effect. Accommodative (vs. defensive) responses increase favorable but do not decrease unfavorable reactions. Highly accommodative (vs. less accommodative and brand-advocate) responses (apology and explanation and redress) increase brand attitudes and trust. Highly accommodative and brand-advocate responses lead to similar purchase intentions and similar lower levels of negative WOM intentions. Brand-advocate (vs. no) responses increase brand attitudes and purchase intentions but do not mitigate unfavorable reactions.
Li et al. (2018)	review platforms	response type	review type	failure attribution to the company (mediator), purchase intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (review type: ordinary, product failure) between-subjects design, n=297, context: negative reviews of a hiking shoe brand	For ordinary (product failure) reviews, defensive (accommodative) responses increase purchase intentions directly and indirectly through reduced failure attribution to the company.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold.

Table 5 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Johnen & Schnittka (2019)	social networks	response type	context	perceived benefits	Study 1: data from 20 Facebook brand pages with 56322 user comments and 33938 company replies	In hedonic contexts, defensive (vs. accommodative) responses increase perceived benefits. The response type has no differential effect in utilitarian contexts.
			context	perceived benefits	Study 2: 2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (context: hedonic, utilitarian) between-subjects design, n=217, context: sportswear brand' Facebook page	In hedonic (utilitarian) contexts, defensive (accommodative) responses increase perceived benefits.
			complaint reasoning	perceived benefits (mediator), purchase intentions	Study 3: 2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (context: hedonic, utilitarian) x 2 (complaint reasoning: unreasoned, reasoned) between-subjects design, n=570, context: sportswear brand' Facebook page	In hedonic (utilitarian) contexts, defensive (accommodative) responses increase purchase intentions through higher perceived benefits if the complaint is unreasoned. The response type has no differential effect in both contexts if the complaint is reasoned.
			response style	perceived benefits (mediator), purchase intentions	Study 4: 2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (context: hedonic, utilitarian) x 2 (response style: formal, informal) between-subjects design, n=287, context: sportswear brand' Facebook page	In hedonic contexts, defensive (accommodative) responses increase purchase intentions through higher perceived benefits if the response style is informal (formal). In utilitarian contexts, accommodative responses increase purchase intentions through higher perceived benefits if the response style is informal. The response type has no differential effect if the response style is formal.
Casado-Díaz et al. (2020)	review platform, social networks	response type	platform	brand attitudes, purchase intentions	3 (response type: no response, defensive, accommodative) x 2 (platform: TripAdvisor, Twitter), n=132, context: negative comments/reviews about a hotel	Accommodative (vs. defensive and no) responses enhance brand attitudes, with stronger effects on TripAdvisor. There are no differential effects on purchase intentions.
Zhao et al. (2020a)	review platform	response type	complaint focus	problem stability (mediator), distrust, purchase intentions	3 (response type: no response, defending, apology) x 2 (complaint focus: integrity, competence) between-subjects design, n=279, context: negative reviews on a travel agency website	If a review targets the company's competence (integrity), an apology (defending response) reduces distrust and increases purchase intentions through lower perceived problem stability.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 5 (continued). Previous research on how corporate response types on social media impact observer reactions

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Car-pentier & Van Hoya (2021)	review plat-forms	response type	- reviewers' consensus on the company	review credibility, organizational trustworthiness (mediators), or- ganizational attractiveness	Study 1: 3 groups (response type: no response, denial, accommodative), n=142, context: negative company review on Glassdoor Study 2: 3 (response type: no response, denial, accommodative) x 2 (reviewers' consensus on the company: positive, negative) between-subjects design, n=205, context: negative company review on Glassdoor	Denial (vs. accommodative and no) responses lead to higher organizational attractiveness through lower review credibility and higher organizational trustworthiness. Accommodative vs. no responses have no differential effect. If the reviewers' consensus is positive, denial responses increase organizational attractiveness through higher organizational trustworthiness. If the reviewers' consensus is negative, there are no differential effects.
Sura-chart-kum-tonkun et al. (2021)*	review plat-forms	response type	failure severity, attribution, reviewers' opportunistic intention	brand attitudes	2 (response type: defensive, accommodative) x 2 (failure severity: minor, severe) x 2 (failure attribution: company, reviewer) x 2 (opportunistic intention: low, high) between-subjects design, n=505, context: negative hotel reviews	If the failure is perceived as severe and the reviewers' opportunistic intentions are perceived as high, defensive (vs. accommodative) responses increase brand attitudes. If the failure is attributed to the company, there is no differential effect between response types.
Suwan-dee et al. (2021)	social networks	response type	commenters' homophily and consensus	brand attitudes	2 (response type: defensive vs. accommodative) x 2 (commenters' homophily: low, high) x 2 (commenters' consensus: low, high) between-subjects design, n=328, context: negative comments about a hotel on Facebook	Regardless of the level of homophily and commenters' consensus, accommodative (vs. defensive) responses increase brand attitudes.
Salehi-Esfahani et al. (2023)	review plat-forms	response type	failure type	webcare satisfaction, perceived corporate reputation, purchase intentions	3 (response type: no response, apology, compensation) x 4 (failure type: bad food + bad service, bad food + good service, good food + bad service, good food + good service) between-subjects design, n=264, context: negative hotel reviews	Compensation and no response (vs. apology) increase webcare satisfaction. Compensation and apology (vs. no response) increase perceived corporate reputation and purchase intentions. There is no interaction effect between response type and failure type.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold. *Not all possible interaction effects are examined in this study.

The literature review in Table 5 indicates that *accommodative responses* to negative comments on social networks tend to result in better observer reactions, such as higher brand attitudes (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020; Song and Kim, 2016; Suwandee et al., 2021; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017; Xia, 2013) and purchase intentions (Song and Kim, 2016; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017; Xia, 2013) than *no and defensive responses*.

However, studies across different social media contexts highlight boundary conditions under which defensive responses can be equally or more effective than accommodative responses. These conditions involve observer-related factors such as positive prior brand attitudes (Jahng and Hong, 2017), favorable perceived brand personality and a strong relationship with the brand (Xia, 2013), complaint characteristics like a hedonic consumption context and unreasoned complaints (Johnen and Schnittka, 2019), severe service failure and reviewers' opportunistic intentions (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021), and review/comment-related factors such as the commenters' positive consensus about the company (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021) and ordinary review types (Li et al., 2018).

Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether accommodative or defensive responses are inherently more effective in positively influencing observers on social networks, as brand and complaint perceptions may play an influencing role.

2.1.3. Previous research on the response sender

Identifying *who* should respond to consumer comments, i.e., the corporate response sender, is another essential element of a social media marketing communication strategy. On the one hand, social media interactions are shaped by a sense of community, driven by their interpersonal and relational character. On the other hand, social media interactions take place online and likely increase distance perceptions due to the lack of face-to-face communication. As a result, companies may consider incorporating humanized communication, such as personal photos, names, or contact details of the responding employees, to make the response sender appear more human and tangible as well as to reduce perceived distance. In light of this, Table 6 presents a literature review of the effects of humanized company-customer communication on social media.

Table 6. Previous research on humanized company-customer communication on social media

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Keller (2009)	online blogs	humanlike communication, relational commitment	-	trust, satisfaction, commitment, perceived mutual control	survey about Microsoft's brand communication with commenters on a blog hosted by Microsoft, n=629	The higher the commenters' perceptions of corporate humanlike communication and relational commitment, the higher trust, satisfaction, commitment and perceived mutual control.
Park & Lee (2013)	social networks	human presence	-	conversational human voice, relational outcomes (trust, control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction), communication, WOM intentions	2 (presence: organizational (brand logo, signature), human (manager's avatar, name) x 2 (organization type: nonprofit vs. for-profit) within-subjects design, n=40, context: brands' Twitter pages	Regardless of the organization type, human (vs. corporate) presence increases perceived conversational human voice, relational outcomes and WOM intentions. There is no effect on communication intentions.
Schamari & Schäfers (2015)	online forums, social networks	human presence in webcare	platform type	surprise about company response, perceived human voice (mediators), engagement intentions	3 (webcare: no response, impersonal response through company account, personal response through employee account with picture and name) x 2 (platform type: consumer-generated (private user forum), brand-generated (Facebook)) between-subjects design, n=188, context: positive user comment about one's car brand	Impersonal and personal (vs. no) and personal (vs. impersonal) responses increase engagement intentions only on consumer-generated platforms , with surprise about the company response mediating the effect of responses (vs. no responses) and perceived human voice mediating the effect of personal (vs. impersonal) responses. On brand-generated platforms, perceived human voice mediates the effect of responses (vs. no responses).
Song & Kim (2016)	social networks	response type, voice, and sincerity to negative comments	-	brand attitudes, purchase intentions	3 (response type: defensive, accommodative, generic) x 2 (response voice: professional, human) x 3 (response sincerity: low, neutral, high) between-subjects design, n=185, context: negative comment on a restaurant's Facebook fan page	Accommodative (vs. defensive and generic) responses and high (vs. low and neutral) response sincerity enhance brand attitude and purchase intentions. Response voice has no influence. There are no interaction effects.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold.

Table 6 (continued). Previous research on humanized company-customer communication on social media

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Sparks et al. (2016)	review platforms	responses vs. no responses, response sender, voice, speed, problem resolution	-	trustworthiness, perceived company attentiveness	2 (response sender: high (general manager), low (guest service agent)) x 2 (response voice: conversational, professional) x 3 (response speed: fast, moderate, slow) x 2 (status quo of problem resolution: fixed, not yet fixed) between-subjects design + control group with no company replies, n=820, context: hotel reviews	Responses to negative reviews, a conversational voice and fast responses increase trustworthiness and perceived company attentiveness . The status quo of the problem solution and the response sender have no effect .
Crijns et al. (2017)	social networks	response voice	comment valence	conversational human voice, consumer skepticism (mediators), organizational reputation	2 (response voice: corporate (formal tone, phone number and e-mail address of customer service), personalized (informal tone, name, phone number and e-mail address of employee)) x 2 (comment valence: positive, negative) between-subjects design, n=264, context: car recall announcement of Mercedes on its Facebook page	For positive and negative comments, personalized responses increase organizational reputation through higher perceived conversational voice. If the comments are positive (negative), personalized responses increase (decrease) consumer skepticism. Consumer skepticism only has a negative indirect effect on organizational reputation if personalized responses are provided to positive comments.
Jahng & Hong (2017)	social networks	response type and sender to negative comments	prior brand attitudes	corporate performance, corporate reputation, purchase intentions	2 (response type: defensive, apologetic) x 2 (response sender: corporate (company), human (employee)) x 2 (prior brand attitudes: negative, positive) mixed-subjects design, n=304, context: comments on crisis news stories from Target/United Airlines on Twitter	Response type, voice and sender do not influence corporate performance and reputation . For consumers with a positive (negative) prior brand attitude, defensive (accommodative) and corporate (human) voice responses increase purchase intentions .
Barcelos et al. (2018)	social networks	response voice	type of consumer goal	hedonic value (mediator), purchase intentions	2 (response voice: corporate (brand logo, formal tone), human (employee's avatar, informal tone)) x 2 (consumer goal: hedonic, utilitarian) between-subjects design, n=174, context: hotel's Facebook page	The more human the response voice, the higher the hedonic value of the online experience, which in turn increases purchase intentions. This effect is stronger (weaker) when the consumer goal is hedonic (utilitarian).

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles. Studies examining multiple communication elements of interest may appear in more than one table, with findings relevant to the table's focus highlighted in bold.

Table 6 (continued). Previous research on humanized company-customer communication on social media

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Esmark Jones et al. (2018)	review platform forms	responder types	-	product satisfaction, brand attitudes (mediators), purchase intentions	4 groups (no response, company response, response by a named employee, consumer response) between-subjects design, n=118, context: product picture, description, and negative review about a printer	A consumer response leads to the highest product satisfaction, while a company response, a response by a named employee and no response have no differential effects. A company response, a response by a named employee or a consumer response leads to similar and more favorable brand attitudes than no response. The higher product satisfaction and brand attitudes, the higher purchase intentions.
Tathagata & Amar (2018)	review platform forms	argument quality, response type, sender	failure severity	consumer forgiveness (mediator), brand attitudes, webcare satisfaction, purchase intentions	2 (argument quality: strong, weak) x 2 (response type: accommodative, mix of accommodative and defensive) x 2 (response sender: spokesperson, team) x 2 (failure severity: high, low) between-subjects design, n=496, context: negative customer reviews about a fine-dining restaurant	Strong (vs. weak) arguments, a mix of accommodative and defensive (vs. accommodative) replies and replies by a spokesperson (vs. team) positively affect consumer forgiveness, with a negative moderating effect of failure severity. Webcare with a mix of accommodative and defensive replies by a spokesperson has more positive effects on consumer forgiveness than a mix of accommodative and defensive replies by a team, accommodative replies by a spokesperson and accommodative replies by a team. Argument quality and response sender have no interaction effect. Consumer forgiveness increases brand attitudes and webcare satisfaction, which in turn boost purchase intentions.
Olson & Ro (2020)	review platform forms	justice perceptions and digital social presence	-	trust (mediator), purchase intentions	2 (procedural justice: high (quick response, regular monitoring), low (slow response, no regular monitoring)) x 2 (interactional justice: high (apology, explanation), low (no apology, no explanation)) x 2 (social presence: high (direct contact information, photo of manager), low (generic contact information, no photo)) between-subjects design, n=410, context: negative hotel reviews	High (vs. low) procedural and interactional justice positively influence trust, while there is no direct effect of social presence. There is no interaction effect between procedural or interactional justice and social presence. There is a three-way interaction effect with high social presence positively influencing the effects on trust when procedural justice is low and interactional justice is high. When procedural justice, interactional justice and social presence are high, the highest levels of trust result. Trust mediates the effects of procedural justice, interactional justice and social presence on purchase intentions.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

Table 6 (continued). Previous research on humanized company-customer communication on social media

Study	Context	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Key findings
Park & Jiang (2021)	social media	brand communication strategy: content type and social presence	-	engagement (consuming/contributing brand-related activities)	exploratory survey about brand communication and consumer behavior with users who have communicated with brands via social media, n=629	Trendy and informative content as well as social presence have a positive effect on consuming engagement activities, while there is no effect of promotional content. Social presence and trendy posts positively influence contributing engagement activities, but there is no effect of informative or promotional content.
Huang & Ki (2023)	social networks	response voice	construal level of response	social presence, perceived organizational listening (mediators), company reputation	2 (response voice: organizational (written in third person, formal tone, no personal contact information), human (written in first-person, informal tone, specific sender information)) x 2 (construal level of response: abstract (generalized solution), concrete (specific solution)) between-subjects design, n=206, context: coffee company's responses to complaints on Twitter	Human (vs. organizational) voice enhances company reputation directly and indirectly through increased social presence and perceived organizational listening. When the response is concrete, human (vs. organizational) voice leads to a better company reputation. Response voice has no differential effect when the response is abstract. There is no interaction effect of response voice and construal level of response on social presence and perceived organizational listening.
Lopes et al. (2024)	review platform forms	responder types	-	purchase intentions	data from 7 hotels, 18320 reviews, 5564 company replies	Indicating the responding manager's name and function (vs. staff members or hotel name) increases booking intentions.

Note. Only studies/results relevant to the specific research context are presented for multi-study articles.

The literature review in Table 6 suggests that *humanized communication*, such as the use of a personal, human, and informal voice (Barcelos et al., 2018; Huang and Ki, 2023; Kelleher, 2009), and the provision of information about the responding employees, such as names, contact details, or photos (Crijns et al., 2017; Lopes et al., 2024; Park and Lee, 2013; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015; Tathagata and Amar, 2018) has positive effects on consumer reactions, particularly on social networks (Barcelos et al., 2018; Huang and Ki, 2023; Crijns et al., 2017; Park and Lee, 2013; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015). These effects may be due to higher perceived social presence and organizational listening (Huang and Ki, 2023), higher willingness to forgive the company (Tathagata and Amar, 2018), higher hedonic value of the online experience (Barcelos et al., 2018), higher perceived conversational human voice and lower consumer skepticism (Crijns et al., 2017), and higher perceived human voice (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015).

The reason some studies do not find a significant effect across different social media platforms, i.e., social networks (Jahng and Hong, 2017; Song and Kim, 2016) and review platforms (Esmark Jones et al., 2018; Sparks et al., 2016), may stem from the low levels of humanization implemented in those studies. This assumption indicates the importance of incorporating multiple and clear cues of humanization in company-customer interactions on social media.

Additionally, the impact of humanized communication may vary depending on different factors such as the platform type (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015), comment valence (Crijns et al., 2017), prior brand attitudes (Jahng and Hong, 2017), type of consumer goal (Barcelos et al., 2018), failure severity (Tathagata and Amar, 2018), and construal level of the corporate response (Huang and Ki, 2023).

Given the current state of research, further examination of how humanized communication operates within a company's strategy to positively influence consumer reactions would offer valuable insights for enhancing communication effectiveness on social networks.

2.2. Identified research gaps

Based on the comprehensive review of the existing literature in the field of the response strategy (see Tables 1, 2, and 3), response type (see Tables 4 and 5), and response sender (see Table 6), several notable research gaps have emerged. The following gaps are central to this doctoral thesis and form the basis of the empirical investigations presented in the papers.

1) Comparison of response strategies

While most research on corporate response strategies investigated the effects of responding vs. not responding, comparatively little attention has been paid to how response strategies vary in their relative effectiveness. Yet, comparing the effects of different strategies is essential for assessing their impact and deriving valuable recommendations for marketing practice.

2) Strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments

There is a lack of research on the strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments. Given the mixed valence of user feedback on social media platforms and the inconsistent findings regarding whether addressing only one type of feedback elicits positive or negative consumer reactions, examining the effects of responding to a selection of both positive and negative comments is particularly relevant for effective relationship management.

3) Research in the context of social networks

Existing research, particularly on the response strategy, has primarily focused on review platforms, while social networks have received comparatively limited attention. Given the inherently interactive nature of social networks, where consumer expectations differ, and reciprocal communication likely plays a more pivotal role, the need for more focused investigation in this context becomes evident.

4) Comparison between different user types

Although previous studies have examined the effects of corporate responses on commenting and observing users, there is little research that directly compares these effects. Due to the public nature of social networks, understanding whether and how distinct types of users respond differently to corporate replies is essential for developing effective communication strategies.

5) Effects of response types on commenters

Most studies have explored the impact of different response types (defensive vs. accommodative) on observers rather than on commenters. However, since corporate responses directly address commenters, gaining a clear understanding of their reactions is essential. Such insights are particularly important given the significant implications for service recovery and customer

retention. Moreover, building on existing research and the research agenda of Lopes et al. (2023), there is a need for a more nuanced examination of whether accommodative responses are inherently more effective than defensive responses, and whether specific conditions exist under which defensive responses are equally or even more effective in social media interactions.

6) Role of humanized communication

Although humanized communication has shown promising positive effects, there remains a research gap in defining its role within a company's social media strategy. Systematic research is needed to assess the impact of humanized communication and how it influences the effectiveness of other communication elements. Such investigations can support the development of a more nuanced and effective communication approach that better captures the personal nature of social networks.

Beyond these research gaps addressed in this doctoral thesis, the reviewed literature reveals several additional avenues for further research. First, prior studies on response strategies exhibit methodological limitations, as much existing research relies on observational data, with comparatively fewer experimental designs that empirically test effects. Additional methodological constraints include the frequent use of proxy measures for relational constructs (e.g., company ratings or the volume and valence of subsequent reviews) in research on response strategies. While these limitations are addressed in this doctoral thesis, they are not formulated as primary research gaps, as existing research on response types and humanized communication is less affected by these issues. Second, contextual gaps emerge from the literature, including a strong research focus on service industries, particularly the hospitality sector, and comparatively few studies examining companies that sell products. This doctoral thesis likewise adopts the hospitality context, as it is a common setting that consumers can easily relate to and in which the importance of building long-term customer relationships makes company-customer interactions highly relevant. Additional contextual gaps concern limited comparative research across different social media platforms in the effectiveness of communication approaches. While comparative analyses between review platforms and social networks would be theoretically valuable, addressing these gaps would require broader comparative designs and multi-context data. This doctoral thesis therefore deliberately focuses on social networks to allow for a context-specific and internally consistent examination of communication strategies. Cross-cultural differences in the effectiveness of corporate communication also remain underexplored in the existing literature. A systematic examination of such differences would require a dedicated and distinct theoretical focus and is therefore beyond the scope of this doctoral thesis. Third, explanatory

limitations emerge in the literature. Existing research provides limited insights into the underlying mechanisms through which communication elements influence consumer outcomes as well as boundary conditions under which such mechanisms may vary. While this doctoral thesis advances the understanding of underlying mechanisms by incorporating relevant mediators, it does not examine boundary conditions. The research instead prioritizes the identification and systematic examination of core explanatory relationships, which is a necessary step for theory development before assessing contextual contingencies.

2.3. Overarching research objective

Against this background, the *overarching objective* of this doctoral thesis is to advance the understanding of how corporate marketing communication on social networks affects consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions across different user types, with a particular focus on the relative effectiveness of different response strategies, including the strategy of systematically replying to some positive and negative comments, the type of response, and the use of humanized communication through different account types. This research advances the theoretical understanding of consumer reactions on social networks by identifying and explaining underlying mechanisms.

On this basis, this doctoral thesis aims to develop a comprehensive framework that translates empirical findings into actionable guidance for social media managers. Such a framework supports companies in designing interactions that are strategic, adaptable, and consumer-centered, while effectively facilitating relationship management and complaint handling. The doctoral thesis thus contributes to companies' stronger presence on social networks, more favorable user perceptions, and the development of sustainable customer relationships, thereby supporting competitive advantages in consumer-driven social media environments.

The three research papers are designed to build on one another and examine corporate response strategies on social networks from complementary perspectives. To ensure conceptual coherence across studies, selected core constructs such as perceived customer orientation, which is highly relevant in company-customer exchanges yet remains underexplored in social network contexts, are examined across the papers. At the same time, each study introduces distinct variables and design elements to capture different strategic response approaches and organizational constraints. Depending on the research focus, the studies either adopt a broader perspective by considering both complaining commenters and observing users, reflecting the public and inherently visible nature of corporate responses on social networks, or focus

exclusively on complaining commenters to gain deeper insights into consumer reactions in complaint handling contexts, where expectations toward corporate responsiveness are particularly salient. This approach allows the doctoral thesis to address diverse corporate contexts, including companies facing varying levels of resource availability and complaint volumes as well as differing strategic marketing priorities, and to derive implications for strategic decision making across changing organizational conditions. To generate comprehensive and well-grounded insights, each paper adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative focus groups with empirical studies.

As the conceptual starting point of the doctoral thesis, the *first paper* aims to establish an initial understanding of corporate response strategies on social networks by examining the different approaches of replying only to positive comments, only to negative comments, some positive and negative comments, and all comments. In doing so, the paper examines the complete strategy set under the assumption that companies are not constrained by resource limitations and can deliberately choose among alternative response approaches. By examining this strategy set, the doctoral thesis captures the spectrum of approaches commonly observed in practice, assesses their relative effectiveness, and lays the foundation for subsequent analyses. The paper adopts both the perspective of complaining commenters and that of observing users to account for potentially different reactions across key user groups. The study focuses on favorable engagement intentions as an early and platform-specific user response that is central to social network interactions and may precede more attitudinal or behavioral outcomes. Based on the insights derived from focus groups and theoretical considerations, the paper then empirically examines the effects of two corporate response strategies, namely replying to some positive and negative comments vs. all comments, which emerged as the most effective approaches. To explain these effects, it investigates the mediating roles of perceived customer orientation and entertainment value, both of which were identified as salient mechanisms in the qualitative study. Perceived customer orientation is introduced as a central explanatory mechanism that recurs across all three papers whereas entertainment value is examined exclusively in this paper due to its particular relevance for explaining engagement-related outcomes.

The *second paper* shifts attention to professional complaint handling on social networks and concentrates exclusively on complaining commenters. Extending the scope of the first paper, this study addresses the common managerial challenge of managing corporate responsiveness under resource constraints. Accordingly, it compares two selective response strategies, namely replying to some positive and negative comments vs. only to negative comments. This

comparison reflects common marketing practice, as companies often selectively respond to both positive and negative user feedback, while prior research suggests that complaining commenters in particular expect explicit complaint handling. Beyond the choice of response strategy, the paper extends the framework of the first paper by examining additional response elements that shape consumer responses in service recovery situations. Specifically, it investigates the role of the response type (defensive vs. accommodative) and the account type used for replying (standard vs. humanized) to capture nuanced variations in corporate communication and to develop a sound framework for professional complaint handling. To explain the effects of these response elements, the study examines perceived customer orientation, complaint satisfaction, and response perceptions as underlying mechanisms. These mediators were identified as salient in the qualitative study and are widely recognized as central factors in complaint handling situations, yet remain underexamined on social networks. The paper focuses on complaining commenters' attitudes toward the firm as the primary outcome variable. Complaint handling encounters are particularly influential for shaping consumers' evaluations of the firm and the company-customer relationship. Accordingly, the emphasis of this paper lies on understanding how communication approaches improve consumer attitudes rather than capturing behavioral intentions (like engagement intentions in the first paper). The selection of these mediators and outcome variables reflects the paper's specific focus on professional complaint handling as a targeted and meaningful domain of marketing communication on social networks.

The *third paper* provides more in-depth insights into the strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments by examining the effects of a low vs. high response rate. This focus is motivated by the limited existing research on this strategy, its widespread use in practice, and its demonstrated relevance in the preceding papers. By examining variation in response rates, the study extends the analysis of selective responsiveness beyond complaint handling contexts and addresses situations in which firms seek to maintain visibility and interaction on social networks but may lack the resources or strategic incentives to respond to all comments. To capture the full scope of corporate responsiveness, the paper considers both complaining commenters and observing users, thereby assessing how publicly visible company-customer interactions influence not only directly involved consumers but also a wider audience. The mediating role of perceived customer orientation is examined, as it emerged as a salient factor in the focus groups and serves as a consistent explanatory mechanism across the papers. This study focuses on repurchase intentions among complaining commenters and purchase intentions among observing users in order to assess the economic implications of corporate responsiveness

on social networks. The selection of this outcome variable enables the doctoral thesis to trace consumer responses across stages, from early engagement intentions to evaluative complaint handling responses and ultimately to downstream behavioral outcomes in the form of (re)purchase intentions.

Table 7 presents an overview of the context, variables, methodology, and the research gaps addressed by the papers. The three papers are presented afterwards.

Table 7. Overview of the papers' context, variables, methodology, and underlying research gaps

	Con- text	Independent variable(s)	Moderator(s)	Mediator(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Methodology	Underlying research gaps
<i>First paper</i>	social net- works	response strategy	user perspective	perceived customer orientation, perceived entertain- ment value	favorable engage- ment intentions	2 (response strategy: reply to some positive and nega- tive comments vs. all com- ments) x 2 (user perspec- tive: commenter vs. ob- server) between-subjects design, n=249, context: comments on a hotel's promotional post	1) Comparison of response strategies 2) Response strategy to some positive and negative comments 3) Research in the context of social networks 4) Comparison between different user types
<i>Second paper</i>	social net- works	response strategy, response type	account type	perceived customer orientation, perceived re- sponse fac- ets, com- plaint satis- faction	attitudes toward the firm	2 (response strategy: reply to some positive and nega- tive comments vs. only negative comments) x 2 (response type: defensive vs. accommodative) x 2 (account type: standard vs. humanized) between-sub- jects design, n=419: com- ments on a hotel's promo- tional post	1) Comparison of response strategies 2) Response strategy to some positive and negative comments 3) Research in the context of social networks 5) Effects of response types on commenters 6) Role of humanized com- munication
<i>Third paper</i>	social net- works	response rate	user perspective	perceived customer orientation	(re)purchase intentions	2 (response rate to some positive and negative com- ments: low vs. high) x 2 (user perspective: com- menter vs. observer) be- tween-subjects-design, n=242; context: comments on a hotel's promotional post	2) Response strategy to some positive and negative comments 3) Research in the context of social networks 4) Comparison between different user types

3. First research paper: How do complainants and observers become ambassadors: Importance of customer orientation and entertainment value in generating favorable social media engagement¹

Abstract

Interactions between consumers and companies can leverage the corporate social network presence by encouraging favorable social media engagement. However, do companies need to reply to every user comment? This research investigates the effects of different corporate response strategies on complainants' and observers' intentions to engage favorably with firms on social networks, as well as the mediating roles of perceived customer orientation and entertainment value using a mixed-methods approach. We present focus group insights, build on social network and social exchange theory, and examine two response strategies that emerged as most effective from the qualitative findings (replying to some positive and negative vs. all comments) in a quantitative study. The results show that replying to all comments indirectly triggers favorable engagement intentions through differing underlying mechanisms depending on the user perspective. Accordingly, companies striving to enhance their social network presence and having sufficient resources should be highly interactive and reply to all user comments on their corporate social networking site. Corporate posts and replies should demonstrate customer orientation and generate entertainment value as perceived customer orientation is essential for complaining commenters, while perceived entertainment value matters in triggering observers' favorable social media engagement. The findings provide valuable insights that help social media managers engage their audience, thereby building and enhancing customer relationships.

Keywords

Social networks, Social media marketing, Response strategy, Favorable social media engagement, Customer orientation, Entertainment value

¹ At the time of submission of this doctoral thesis, this paper was a working paper under review at Marketing ZFP. The final published version may differ from the version presented here due to revisions, modifications, and adaptations made during the review and publication process.

Introduction

Social networks have become modern channels for company-consumer interactions that incentivize favorable consumer reactions, such as purchasing (Bozkurt et al., 2021), and increase brand equity (Estrella-Ramón et al., 2019). For many companies, digital interactions are integral to their core business, and a social network presence enhances brand trust and strengthens customer relationships (Mills and Plangger, 2015). Consumers who engage with firms on social networks create value (Kumar et al., 2010) and act as unpaid brand ambassadors by virtually spreading corporate content (Lipsman et al., 2012; Pentina et al., 2018). Consequently, examining social media engagement gains relevance and research interest (Halaszovich and Nel, 2017; Lopes et al., 2023). From a marketing perspective, social media engagement refers to consumers' interactions with companies and corporate content on social networks (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2014). It signifies a shift from passive message reception to active user participation in information creation, contribution, and distribution (Men and Tsai, 2013; Smith and Gallicano, 2015). Favorable social media engagement is consumers' positive behavior toward firms expressed in the form of following, liking, commenting, sharing, and recommending corporate social media content (e.g., Cao et al., 2021; Men and Tsai, 2013; Smith and Gallicano, 2015; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Thus, it comprises supportive social media activities and positive electronic word of mouth.

While some social media users engage favorably with companies, others show no or negative engagement. Addressing these latter users is both challenging and promising (Ravazzani and Hazée, 2022). Negative comments can harm the corporate image (Tathagata and Amar, 2018) and affect consumers' brand perceptions (Javornik et al., 2020), which highlights the importance of addressing these comments appropriately. Following Lopes et al.'s (2023) call for further investigation, our research focuses on users who leave negative comments and users who only observe firm-consumer interactions on corporate social networking sites. It is beneficial for companies to motivate complaining consumers to engage favorably and passive observers to actively contribute. From the users' perspective, engaging with firms is an effort for which they want to be rewarded (Azar et al., 2016; Rehnen et al., 2017), most often by getting a reply. Users can estimate the likelihood of their future comments receiving a reply by paying attention to firms' response strategies on social networks. According to social network theory, frequent interactions with network members foster strong and reciprocal relationships (Granovetter 1973). Therefore, the response strategy can be an important driver of social media engagement (Cheung et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2022). Companies can reply to all user comments on

their social networking site (referred to as “reply to all” strategy), only positive comments (“reply to positive only” strategy), only negative comments (“reply to negative only” strategy), some positive and negative comments (“reply to some positive and negative” strategy) or not reply at all. Replying to all comments sends the strongest signals, but social media managers may find this strategy too costly or time-consuming.

Recent observations on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram show that many leading companies (e.g., Amazon, Burger King, Marriott, Microsoft, Uber Eats, and Walmart) only selectively respond to comments. Thus, fully automated or AI-driven approaches are not yet widely used on social networks to preserve human touch and foster meaningful engagement. While AI tools may assist in less complex complaint situations or with social media routine tasks and data analysis, customized and empathetic responses from human representatives are essential (Agnihotri et al., 2021) to reflect the inherently personal and relational nature of social networks, which are rooted in human connection and interaction.

Among alternative strategies, replying only to negative comments is less appropriate as it frames the corporate social networking site as a complaint channel and reinforces unfavorable engagement (Cheng et al., 2024; Chevalier et al., 2018; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015). Replying only to positive comments disregards negative comments and cannot trigger favorable social media engagement of initially complaining commenters. Prior research underlines that negative user comments should not be ignored (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018; Dekay, 2012). Not replying at all contradicts social networks’ interactive nature and does not incentivize engagement (Vendemia, 2017). Therefore, these three strategies can be less recommended. However, replying to some positive and negative user comments might be a viable compromise, limiting the potential damage of negative comments while reinforcing favorable social media engagement.

Many studies examine the effects of accommodative vs. defensive responses (e.g., Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Tsao and Su, 2021; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025), but little is known about the effectiveness of response strategies in favorably engaging users who have posted a complaint and users who are merely observing (Lopes et al., 2023). Scholars have further highlighted the lack of research on factors that positively influence social media engagement, despite its high practical relevance (Halaszovich and Nel, 2017; Islam and Rahman, 2016; Lopes et al., 2023).

Given the limited research in this field, we conducted focus groups to examine commenting and observing users' perceptions of corporate response strategies ("reply to positive only", "reply to negative only", "reply to some positive and negative", "reply to all") and factors influencing their engagement intentions. Based on our qualitative insights that users are more likely to engage with firms acknowledging both positive and negative comments, we developed a theoretical framework drawing on social network theory to explain strategy selection and on social exchange theory to provide a foundation for the importance of fair and reciprocal interactions. Accordingly, our main study compared the "reply to some positive and negative" and "reply to all" strategies as potentially effective approaches for fostering favorable social media engagement among different user types. To understand the processes underlying these effects, we investigated the mediating role of perceived customer orientation and entertainment value, two aspects identified in our focus groups that have not yet been examined in this context. Digital customer orientation is essential (Castell et al., 2023; Sun and Zhang, 2021), but only a few studies (e.g., Varela-Neira et al., 2023; Witek-Hajduk and Zaborek, 2022) examine its role on social media. Entertainment value is also likely to play an important role in our context because social network users may seek entertainment (Azar et al., 2016; Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. We advance social network theory and social exchange theory by applying their principles to the effects of corporate response strategies on consumers' engagement intentions on social networks. Specifically, we extend the current understanding of social network theory by demonstrating that response strategies influence network structures and user outcomes through indirect pathways, thereby uncovering complex indirect network effects that prior research has not considered. We further advance social exchange theory by introducing concepts, perceived customer orientation and entertainment value, which have not yet been considered in this context. These concepts mirror the mechanisms underlying engagement intentions and provide a deep understanding of how social exchange unfolds between customers and firms on social networks. By applying both theories to the context of social networks, which is an underexplored area of research compared to research on review platforms, we provide new insights into how relational dynamics and reciprocity norms shape consumer engagement on such dynamic networks. Finally, by considering the perspectives of commenters and observers, we address the research gaps identified by Lopes et al. (2023) and shed light on how to engage challenging social network users.

Our findings offer companies valuable insights into users' reactions to corporate response strategies on social networks and demonstrate how to foster relationships with existing and new customers. We show that companies with sufficient resources should reply to all comments to enhance favorable engagement and increase their visibility on social networks. In this context, perceptions of customer orientation play an important role for users who have posted negative comments, while the perceived entertainment value can trigger favorable engagement intentions of observing users who have not yet commented. Consequently, social media managers should consider both concepts in their social network activities to effectively engage a broad audience of social network users.

Previous research on the effects of corporate response strategies

As research on corporate response strategies on social networks is limited, we include research on review platforms. However, review platforms like TripAdvisor primarily target information sharing between consumers (Martins Gonçalves et al., 2018), while social networks like Instagram are used for consumer-consumer and firm-consumer interactions (Tsai and Men, 2017). Although companies may reply to users on different platforms, the impact of replies is likely stronger on social networks (than on review platforms), where consumers seek direct exchange with firms. Therefore, we include research on review platforms but assume that the effects are more pronounced and beneficial on social networks.

Commenters. Prior research on commenters does not systematically distinguish between the strategies of consistently replying to all comments and replying to only some positive and negative comments. Most studies examine general corporate responsiveness, showing positive effects of corporate replies to reviews on engagement (Chen et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Sheng, 2019; Xie et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020), customers' company ratings (Li et al., 2017; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2016), and purchase intentions (Lopes et al., 2024). However, some studies suggest that increased corporate interactivity on review platforms leads to diminishing returns (Anderson and Han, 2016; Homburg et al., 2015) and declining consumer sentiment (Homburg et al., 2015), resulting in mixed findings. Company replies to specifically negative reviews have a positive impact on commenters' company ratings (Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018). Previous research has provided mixed findings on whether replies to positive reviews increase (Wu et al., 2024) or decrease customers' company ratings (Wang and Chaudhry, 2018) or have no influence on commenters' engagement (Gu and Ye, 2014). On

social networks, firms' replies to negative comments increase repurchase intentions through increased trust (Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024), enhance engagement, and improve firm-consumer relationships by demonstrating the firms' willingness to recover failures (Ma et al., 2015). At the same time, they might increase negative engagement due to rising consumer expectations (Cheng et al., 2024; Chevalier et al., 2018; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015).

Due to a lack of systematic research on different strategies, a focus on review platforms, and inconsistent findings, it is difficult to identify the most effective response strategy. Furthermore, most studies examine the effects of responding vs. not responding rather than comparing the effectiveness of response strategies, which limits the transferability to our context and highlights the need for new research.

Observers. Research indicates that company replies to all reviews positively affect brand evaluations (Jeesha and Purani, 2021), brand attitudes, and purchase intentions (Colliander et al., 2015; Vendemia, 2017). Research on social networks shows that strong corporate engagement positively influences attitudes, perceived relationship investment, loyalty, and purchase intentions (Sung and Kim, 2014). Replies (vs. no replies) to negative reviews have positive effects on observers' brand evaluations (Jeesha and Purani, 2021; Rose and Blodgett, 2016; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012), purchase intentions (Hogreve et al., 2019; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Olson and Ro, 2020), word-of-mouth intentions (Hogreve et al., 2019), trustworthiness (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018; Sparks et al., 2016), perceived firm-customer interactivity (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012), and perceived firm attentiveness (Sparks et al., 2016). Although this stream of research suggests that response strategies should include replies to negative comments, previous research (Chevalier et al., 2018; Golmohammadi et al., 2021) does not consistently outline how this latter strategy affects observers' engagement intentions. Additionally, Schamari and Schäfers (2015) demonstrate a positive effect of corporate replies to positive comments on social networks on observers' engagement intentions, which implies for our research that response strategies addressing positive comments may have positive effects on engagement intentions. Wang et al. (2020) suggest that replying to all (vs. random) negative reviews and random (vs. all) positive reviews leads to higher purchase intentions. Although this study is the only one to compare different strategies and consider replies to only some reviews, it does not examine the effects of replying to some positive and negative reviews. Since positive comments are more prevalent than negative comments (East et al., 2007) but negative comments have a greater influence (Park and Lee, 2009), addressing comments of all valence may

be an effective strategy worth further investigation. Moreover, while the body of research on the effects of company replies to reviews on observers is broad, only a few studies concentrate on social networks, with only one (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015) examining social media engagement.

Overall, previous research neither compares the effects of different strategies nor systematically examines the impact of replying to some but not all positive and negative comments on both user perspectives. As previous research does not provide a comprehensive answer to our research questions and focus group discussions offer deep insights into individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and emotions (Moser and Korstjens, 2018), we next present the insights from our focus groups.

Focus groups

Objective, research context, and method

The focus groups aim to establish the foundation for our hypotheses. Using focus groups to generate real-world insights and support theoretical development is a well-established approach in exploratory research, enabling the derivation of grounded and meaningful hypotheses (Lim, 2025).

We conducted four 30-minute online focus groups, comprising a total of 16 participants (aged 25 to 33 years, with equal gender distribution) in January 2024. We opted for four participants per group to ensure manageable and efficient group coordination and create an environment where all participants can engage in the discussion. Such intensive participation generates in-depth insights into consumer opinions (Krueger, 1998; Smithson, 2007). We conducted two focus groups per user perspective to enhance the robustness of the findings and generate sufficient insights. Following the argument that qualitative research emphasizes information power over sample size (Barbour, 2007), we assume this procedure led to a reliable sample.

We shared the call for participation on social networks to acquire participants with an active social network account. The participants had to follow at least one company to ensure familiarity with the research context. One researcher guided the semi-structured discussions, while an assistant monitored the technical setup and ensured adherence to the interview guidelines. The group discussions were additionally recorded and transcribed.

The research context was a stay at a fictitious hotel. We asked the participants to imagine that they planned a holiday trip and found a hotel's special offer on a social network. We used

a scenario and a fictitious hotel to control factors that could bias the results, such as brand attitude or familiarity, while ensuring that participants could easily imagine themselves in the situation. The hospitality industry presents a suitable research context as the intangibility of services makes company-customer interactions on social media an important source of information (Machura and Pituala, 2015), influencing consumer uncertainty and loyalty (Shin et al., 2017).

The participants assumed the perspectives of either complaining commenters or observers. The commenter scenario asked participants to imagine that they had booked the hotel and then learned at check-in that the social network offer was invalid for their reservation and that a cancellation fee would apply. The participants were further told to imagine that they stayed but decided to write a comment under the hotel's post to express their disappointment about the invalid offer. The observers were told that they had not booked the offer (yet) and wanted to browse through the social media comments related to the offer before making their decision. As such, these participants were asked to take on a purely observational role and to assume that they did not post any comments. Then, the participants viewed a simulated social network thread displaying the offer, along with four positive and three negative user comments. As positive comments appear more often (East et al., 2007; Melián-González et al., 2013) and negative comments are usually longer (Homburg et al., 2015), this combination of comments is realistic and generates comparable amounts of overall information across the experimental conditions.

The simulated social network resembled Instagram, one of the most popular and fastest-growing social networks (Bastero, 2025). In the threads, we implemented the four response strategies ("*reply to positive only*": e.g., "Thanks", "We are happy to hear that..."; "*reply to negative only*": e.g., "We are very sorry to hear that ...", "We would like to find a solution", "We would like to give you a 20% discount on your next booking"; "*reply to some positive and negative*" (operationalized as replies to two positive and two negative user comments); "*reply to all*"). The simulation of these strategies was based on recently observed marketing communication on social networks. Replying to some positive and negative comments was intended to represent a selective yet fair approach, with equal attention to positive and negative comments. Such an approach is common practice, as it is easy to implement and manage. Examples of the stimulus material are presented Figure A1 in the Appendix. The hotel responded to the negative comment of the user that the "commenter" participants were asked to identify with. The replies came from a personalized employee account (including a picture, name, and the

employee's email address), as previous research highlights the benefits of human-like communication partners on social networks (Park and Jiang, 2021; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015).

The participants first consented to the session recording. After an explanation of the study background, they were asked to put themselves into the commenter (focus groups 1 and 2) or observer (focus groups 3 and 4) scenario and were presented with the hotel's special offer, related user comments (including the comment the "commenter" participants were asked to identify with) and the four different versions of response strategies (with the order counterbalanced across groups). The participants were informed that the hotel aimed to stimulate favorable social media engagement but had not yet determined a strategy. They were then invited to share and discuss their perceptions.

Insights from the focus groups

The key statements from the focus group participants are summarized in Table 1. Table 2 provides an overview of the key insights from these statements.

Table 1. Focus group participants' key statements

Focus groups 1 and 2: commenter perspective	Focus groups 3 and 4: observer perspective
What is your first impression of the response strategies?	
<i>"It doesn't help me as a complainant if companies only reply to positive comments."</i> <i>"It would be frustrating if they only address positive comments while ignoring me and other complainants."</i> <i>"If companies respond to only positive comments, they seem not open to criticism and don't help me. If they address only negative comments, these comments are disproportionately accentuated and positive comments are ignored. Replying to some positive and negative comments seems fairer while replying to all comments seems the best as it combines openness to criticism with commitment to customer care."</i> <i>"Only responding to positive comments seems inauthentic, responding to only negative comments seems desperate. Providing feedback to comments of different valence feels fairer, like a real employee was answering, not just a chatbot filtering through."</i> <i>"Companies that respond to negative comments and genuinely seek to understand the concerns are courageous. When they reply in a personal and authentic manner, it makes me more likely to buy their product or service again. When they additionally acknowledge positive feedback, it leaves an even better impression as they seem to really care."</i>	<i>"It appears insensitive and negligent if companies only respond to positive comments but only replying to negative comments seems ungrateful."</i> <i>"If companies only reply to positive comments, it seems they deliberately ignore negative feedback. Companies should pay attention to critical comments, but if they only reply to negative comments, they fail to appreciate customers who leave positive feedback. Both approaches create an unprofessional company image."</i> <i>"Companies should respond to both positive and negative comments to show that they are in control of their social media channel, actively monitor it, and value feedback."</i> <i>"Companies replying to all users use social media to deliver great customer service, which makes them appear very professional and approachable. It signals that they are attentive and available."</i> <i>"What matters to me as an observer is my overall impression of corporate interactivity and responsiveness to various types of comments."</i> <i>"Responding to positive and negative comments creates an authentic and interactive company perception."</i>
Would the hotel's response strategy motivate you to leave positive comments on the hotel's social media site?	
<i>"I have no personal advantage when writing positive comments. The only incentive and positive reinforcement is a reply from the company. If companies respond to all trustworthy comments, I know that I will receive a reply."</i> <i>"If companies address only selective comments, I can't be sure if I get a response from the company."</i> <i>"I would consider writing a positive comment if my negative comment and positive comments get a reply, so I know I would get a reply from the company either way."</i> <i>"It would encourage me to leave a positive comment, even a more detailed one, if fine, as I may receive feedback, and my input is likely being read."</i> <i>"Companies respond to positive feedback. It makes me feel noticed and valued."</i> <i>"I would likely write something positive if I knew they would respond, almost as if they remembered me. If I receive no response, it would feel pointless, as if I had left with it."</i> <i>"Receiving a reply would feel rewarding."</i>	<i>"I want companies to appreciate my effort in writing a comment. It makes them more and shows their interest in consumer interactions."</i> <i>"I appreciate when positive and negative feedback is addressed. Knowing that the company is active and engages with the audience would motivate me to participate."</i> <i>"I would write a positive comment if I knew that I got a reply from the company."</i> <i>"Responding to all comments shows that feedback is acknowledged and meaningful exchanges are created. Replying to some positive and negative comments seems also"</i> <i>"Companies should address all comments to value efforts of commenting. Sharing positive feedback is much more rewarding if the company acknowledges and engages"</i> <i>"I am more likely to engage favorably if the company responds to all comments. It shows they value all customer feedback and are reliable."</i>

Which factors would influence your intention to engage favorably with the hotel?

"Strong customer orientation. I would engage if the company shows genuine interest and customer care." *"Entertainment value. Companies should be interactive and proactive. That's fun and encourages my participation in the discussions."*

"Getting a reply to my negative comment and my future positive comments." *"If companies respond in a personal rather than standardized manner. For example, a human touch in the communication is fun and enjoyable."*

"The more authentic the communication, the more likely I would engage favorably." *"Getting a reply from a concrete person with a name, pictures and further details."*

"If a human being is communicating with me and not a robot with automatic replies."

Do you see a link between the response strategies and customer orientation?

"Replying only to negative or positive comments is one-sided and offers little value. It is most customer-oriented to reply to all user comments."

"Replies to only positive comments seem artificial. Is the chatbot not sufficiently developed to reply to negative comments? Talking to a real person is customer-oriented and authentic."

"Seeing companies respond to different or even all comments makes them customer-oriented. Getting a reply creates a sense of belonging, like I am part of something. Companies should engage with a range of feedback. Responding to both positive and negative comments shows they acknowledge different input, which is customer-oriented, especially if they reply to all comments."

Do you see a link between the response strategies and entertainment value?

"It is most entertaining if the company answers all comments. It is personal, vivid, and diversified. It is kind of an invitation to be part of the discussion, too."

"It is entertaining if companies reply to all comments, as it allows me to learn about critical feedback."

"I don't find it very entertaining when companies respond only to comments of one valence. I want to see how they interact with a range of different customers. That would make me curious about how they would respond to my comment."

"It would be best if a concrete employee answers all comments. It makes the communication partner more tangible and the interaction more fun."

Table 2. Key insights from the focus groups

Discussed response strategy	Focus groups 1 and 2: commenter perspective	Focus groups 3 and 4: observer perspective
Replying only to positive comments	<i>Negative impression:</i> • unhelpful • inauthentic • leads to customer frustration	<i>Negative impression:</i> • negligent • insensitive • unprofessional
Replying only to negative comments	<i>Rather negative impression:</i> • disproportionately accentuates complaints • desperate • unappreciative	<i>Negative impression:</i> • ungrateful • unappreciative • unprofessional
Replying to some positive and negative comments	<i>Positive impression:</i> • fairer • authentic • shows customer appreciation and care	<i>Positive impression:</i> • interactive • responsive • authentic
Replying to all comments	<i>Very positive impression:</i> • fair • appreciative • rewarding • attentive • customer-oriented • shows customer appreciation and care	<i>Very positive impression:</i> • interactive • responsive • attentive • professional • entertaining • shows great customer service
Strategies for further investigation: “reply to some positive and negative”, “reply to all”		
Factors influencing favorable engagement:	• strong customer orientation • firm’s reply to the own negative comment • firm’s replies to positive comments • genuine and authentic communication • human communication partner	• high entertainment value • firm’s reply to the own positive comment • personalized firm replies • human communication partner

The focus groups provide the following insights. According to the participants who assumed the *commenter* perspective and those assuming the *observer* perspective, replying only to positive or only to negative comments cannot necessarily trigger favorable engagement, whereas replying to some positive and negative or, at best, all comments appears more effective. These insights align with prior research, which outlines that commenters have higher engagement intentions when more reviews of different valences are addressed (Li et al., 2017; Sheng, 2019). At the same time, we go beyond these findings by comparing different response strategies rather than response rates, offering strategic insights, and examining social networks, where interactivity is more crucial. We also add to research showing that replying to all comments positively affects observers' reactions (Jeesha and Purani, 2021) by examining specific effects on engagement intentions.

Complaining *commenters* seem to expect to be acknowledged and feel ignored when companies only respond to positive comments, which likely increases their dissatisfaction. Replying to only negative comments appears to indicate a focus on damage control rather than genuine engagement with consumers. *Observers* perceived that these two strategies lack professional social media management. Overall, replying to some positive and negative or even all comments seem to be fairer, more authentic, and less one-sided, signaling to *commenters* and *observers* that the effort of writing positive comments will (likely) be acknowledged.

Moreover, in the *commenter* groups, perceived customer orientation emerged as an important factor, with the “reply to all” strategy conveying the strongest customer orientation. Thus, complaining commenters seem to carefully observe how companies treat complainants and other commenters when deciding whether to engage favorably in the future. By attentively addressing all types of comments, companies signal customer care and likely make commenters feel they deserve positive feedback.

Furthermore, the participants in the *observer* groups revealed perceived entertainment value as a key driver of favorable social media engagement, with the “reply to all” strategy being perceived as the most entertaining and engaging. Observers seem to follow interactions between companies and consumers to be entertained, and they may be more likely to engage when a firm's way of interacting with others is entertaining.

Overall, the focus group insights suggest that commenters and observers have little incentive to engage favorably if companies reply only to positive or negative comments. The participants perceived the “reply to all” strategy as the most effective way to elicit favorable engagement,

but also mentioned that replying to some positive and negative comments could be an alternative. Perceived customer orientation may positively influence favorable engagement intentions among commenters, while perceived entertainment value may motivate observers to write positive comments.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Building on the focus group insight that replying to all or to some positive and negative comments seems to be most effective in triggering favorable engagement of both user groups, we apply social network theory to our research context to explain why the “reply to all” and “reply to some positive and negative” strategies are conceptually meaningful but may produce different outcomes in our research context. We additionally develop a theoretical framework grounded in social exchange theory to derive hypotheses about the effects of interest, which we then systematically test in a quantitative study.

Rationale underlying the selection of the “reply to all” and “reply to some positive and negative” strategy for further investigation

Social network theory (SNT; Granovetter, 1973) was developed in offline contexts and is a framework for examining social structures through the relationships (ties) between entities (nodes). According to this theory, nodes represent individuals, groups, or organizations, while ties are the relationships or interactions connecting them (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Key concepts include centrality, measuring how connected or influential a node is; density, reflecting the level of interconnection within the network; structural holes, referring to gaps where connections between actors are missing; and clusters, consisting of groups of nodes that are more tightly connected (Freeman, 1978; Kadushin, 2004). The theory focuses on how the dynamics and strength of relationships within a network influence the flow of information, shape behaviors, and strengthen community cohesion (Granovetter, 1973).

We apply SNT to social network interactions between companies and users and argue that the corporate response strategy shapes relationships and user reactions. Accordingly, nodes correspond to firms and social network users, while ties denote the interactions between them. Frequent interactions between companies and users can foster strong ties and enduring relationships. Engaging with different clusters of commenters (those leaving positive or negative comments) reduces perceptions of privileging one group over another and fills structural holes, enhancing the sense of interconnectivity between companies and users. This argument suggests that the

strategies of replying to all comments and to some positive and negative comments should be considered, but replying to only positive or only negative comments seems unsuitable.

Replying to all comments creates a dense, centralized network in which companies and users are directly connected, allowing strong relational ties to form. By being responsive to all users, the company signals openness and attentiveness, which may encourage users to reciprocate through continued engagement to maintain the relationship and remain part of the network. Replying to *some positive and negative comments*, in turn, creates structural holes in the network since some comments remain unanswered, and reduces the company's network centrality and density by providing fewer bilateral exchanges. This might weaken the relational ties between companies and users and provide fewer incentives to engage and stay active within the network.

These theoretical rationales suggest that replying to all comments may generate more positive consumer reactions than replying to some positive and some negative comments. At the same time, the widespread use of the “reply to some positive and negative comments” strategy in marketing practice creates an interesting area of tension that merits further empirical investigation.

Rationale underlying consumers' engagement intentions on social networks

Social exchange theory (SET), initially developed to explain offline social behavior aims to explain why people initiate, maintain, or terminate social interactions or relationships (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959) and seems well-suited for our context, as the focus group insights indicate reciprocity as a key driver of favorable engagement. Based on a personal cost-benefit analysis, individuals see social behavior as an interpersonal exchange in which they balance the inputs (costs) with potential outputs (rewards) (Homans, 1958). Costs related to social interactions can include tangible and intangible aspects such as money, time, or effort (Homans, 1961). Based on a reciprocity norm, individuals typically strive for payoffs and expect a comparable or higher benefit (e.g., approval, respect, etc.) in exchange for their investment (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). When social interaction requires more effort than it provides in benefits, individuals perceive a lack of benefits and are most likely to abandon it. If individuals receive equal or greater rewards in return, the costs pay off from their perspective (Homans, 1958). Therefore, the theory suggests that reciprocity involves mutual and fair exchange, resulting in a balanced cost-benefit ratio that can strengthen relationships and foster interpersonal connections (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Applying SET to our research context, we argue that responding to both positive and negative comments reflects the interactive and public nature of social networks that are based on reciprocal communication as well as attentive responses to diverse user feedback (Surma, 2016). Notably, social network users spend time and effort writing comments for which they want to be rewarded (Jang et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2015). When engaging with companies, consumers seek functional benefits such as purchase-related information or social benefits by building social connections with firm representatives (Homburg et al., 2015). We argue that companies can mitigate the impact of negative user comments and recognize complainants' writing efforts by offering functional benefits, i.e., complaint-related information, compensation, or other forms of support. However, if users write a positive comment, their only reward is a reply that signals appreciation and provides social benefits. Although other users might respond, the primary reward is receiving a reply from the intended recipient, the company. By replying to a comment, firms also indicate a commitment to a reciprocal relationship (Gefen and Ridings (2002) argue similarly about implementing a CRM system). Our focus group insights support these arguments, highlighting the importance of receiving a reply as a sign of reciprocity and a reward for favorable social media engagement.

Based on the focus group insights, we argue that different response strategies signal varying likelihoods of receiving a corporate reply and influence consumers' engagement intentions. Below, we develop our hypotheses by drawing on these arguments as well as the insights from previous research and the focus groups.

Effects of the response strategy through perceived customer orientation and entertainment value on consumers' favorable social media engagement intentions

Commenters: Applying SET, we argue that consumers complaining on corporate social networking sites likely consider both the effort already spent and the anticipated effort related to future engagement. Since such cumulated input leads to perceiving high costs (Fan and Niu, 2016), commenters need to be assured of receiving a response in return for future positive comments (Gu and Ye, 2014). Consequently, the "reply to all" strategy may encourage consumers to engage favorably by addressing their concern, signaling reciprocal fairness, and ensuring that future positive comments will receive responses. In contrast, replying only to some positive and negative comments may not sufficiently convey reciprocity or assure commenters that their efforts will be rewarded. SNT additionally suggests that replying to all comments fosters denser, more cohesive company-consumer interactions, which strengthen relational ties and encourage

reciprocal exchange. These arguments are backed by previous research showing that higher corporate response rates increase consumer engagement (Li et al., 2017; Sheng, 2019) as well as by our focus group insight that the “reply to all” strategy seems more reliable and rewarding than replying to some positive and negative comments. We therefore assume:

H1: Replying to all comments leads to more favorable social media engagement intentions of commenters than replying to some positive and negative comments.

Due to high costs, lost time, and inconvenience caused by the failure (Fan and Niu, 2016), complaining commenters are critical when considering favorable engagement, pay more attention to specific cues (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2019), and likely focus on appropriate customer care. In line with SET, complaining commenters likely expect compensating benefits, such as attentive and customer-oriented replies from the company. If the corporate reply signals genuine concern, the perceived reward may restore a sense of balance in the exchange between the firm and the complaining customer, thereby increasing the likelihood of future favorable engagement. From a SNT perspective, social media complaints occur within a publicly visible network where complaining commenters evaluate corporate responses not only based on their own benefit but also in terms of how they perceive the company’s position within the network community. Customer-oriented replies demonstrate reliability and strengthen relational ties.

While replying to all comments involves more intensive interactions and may be perceived as more entertaining than responding to some positive and negative comments, the perceived entertainment value of company-consumer interactions is probably less important for complaining commenters, whose primary motivation is to report a complaint and restore fairness. Our focus group insights likewise suggest the importance of customer orientation, with no mention of entertainment value influencing complaining commenters’ favorable engagement intentions. Thus, we expect:

H2: The more positive effect of replying to all (vs. replying to some positive and negative) comments on *commenters’* favorable social media engagement intentions is mediated by perceived customer orientation rather than entertainment value.

Observers: Observers have spent no effort yet in interacting with the company and only consider potential inputs when deciding whether to engage favorably. They are likely to estimate costs and benefits based on expected efforts and rewards related to their future engagement (Zheng et al., 2015). Based on the arguments derived from SET, we suppose that companies’ replies to all comments allow observers to recognize a consistent response pattern in which

positive engagement is reliably rewarded, signaling that they can expect balanced costs and benefits for future engagement. In contrast, replying to some positive and negative comments may seem less reliable, reducing observers' perceptions of reciprocity. From an SNT perspective, replies to all comments enhance users' perceptions of network density, interconnectivity, and community cohesion through more reciprocal interactions. This effect may increase the likelihood that observing users join the network and engage favorably. These arguments are backed by previous research showing that observers likely engage if they perceive the company as interactive (Vendemia, 2017) and responsive to positive comments (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015). The focus group participants further indicated that receiving replies to their positive comments would be important, supporting the notion that selective responses may create a certain level of uncertainty about whether engaging would be rewarded. We therefore assume:

H3: Replying to all comments leads to more favorable social media engagement intentions of *observers* than replying to some positive and negative comments.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of entertainment on social networks (Barger et al., 2016; Enginkaya and Yilmaz, 2014). SET suggests that individuals engage in interactions when they perceive rewards that compensate for the invested time and effort. For observers on corporate social networking sites, these rewards may not be direct service benefits, since they are not personally affected by a service failure, but enjoyable and entertaining interactions. SNT further emphasizes the importance of network density, suggesting that company-consumer interactions that are dynamic and rich increase the perceived value of participation. These arguments align with our focus group insight that entertainment may be a central driver of observers' favorable engagement. The insights further suggest that the "reply to all" strategy appears more entertaining than the "reply to some positive and negative" strategy, as it provides more comprehensive insights into company-customer exchanges. While replying to all comments may signal higher customer orientation, the entertainment value is likely a stronger motivator of observers' engagement intentions. Thus, we assume:

H4: The more positive effect of replying to all (vs. replying to some positive and negative) comments on *observers'* favorable social media engagement intentions is mediated by perceived entertainment value rather than customer orientation.

Next, we test these hypotheses in our quantitative study.

Quantitative study

Method

Our study employed a 2 (response strategy: “reply to some positive and negative” vs. “reply to all”) x 2 (user perspective: commenter vs. observer) between-subjects design. We focused on the two strategies that emerged as most promising in the focus groups and examined two user perspectives, as research agendas in the literature have highlighted the importance of considering different types of social network users (Lopes et al., 2023). In the case of the “reply to all comments” strategy, the company replied to all positive and negative user comments. In the case of the “reply to some positive and negative comments” strategy, the company replied to some (but not all) positive and to some (but not all) negative comments.

We used the scenarios described for the focus groups. We created videos where the fictitious hotel’s post about the special offer, along with related user comments and the hotel’s replies, appeared successively to simulate the vivid social network environment as realistically as possible (screenshots are shown in Figure A1 in the Appendix). As both focus groups highlighted the need for human interaction, we used a personalized social media account for this study. In the simulated thread, the comment containing the complaint related to the invalid promotion always received a reply from the hotel (regardless of the commenter vs. observer condition and the response strategy).

We shared the questionnaire link on social networks (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) from February to April 2024. The participants were required to have a social network account and follow at least one company. Six individuals did not meet these criteria and were excluded. The final sample consisted of 249 social media users (63% female, 35% male, and 2% diverse; average age: 30.5 years). Most participants (76%) used social networks multiple times a day, and nearly all others at least once a day or several times a week.

The participants were randomly assigned to the commenter or observer scenario. After watching the video simulating the social network thread, the participants first rated their intentions to engage favorably with the company on the social network, followed by their perceptions of customer orientation and entertainment value (see Table 3).

Table 3. Measures

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived customer orientation adapted from Homburg et al. (2007), Valenzuela et al. (2010)	The [...] hotel is aware that customers are important factors that influence their success. The [...] hotel emphasizes customer-related activities. The [...] hotel has a customer-oriented culture. Customers are the focus of the [...] hotel's activities.	0.85
Entertainment value adapted from Agarwal and Karahanna (2000), Kim and Ko (2019)	Following the interaction on social media was fun. Following the interaction on social media was enjoyable. Following the interaction on social media was exciting. Following the interaction on social media was interesting.	0.79
Favorable social media engagement intentions* adapted from Chu and Chen (2019), Tsai and Men (2017)	I could imagine... following the [...] hotel's social media site. liking the [...] hotel's postings on its social media site. engaging in conversations on the [...] hotel's social media site. using a hashtag from the [...] hotel on social media. sharing the [...] hotel's social media postings. spreading positive word-of-mouth about the [...] hotel on social media. recommending the [...] hotel to friends on social media. telling my friends to check out the [...] hotel's social media site if they were looking for a hotel.	0.93
Scenario realism (3 separate facets)	(1) The described situation was realistic to me. (2) I was able to put myself well in the situation. (3) It is likely that social network users experience such corporate response behavior in real life.	-
Social media usage (3 separate facets)	(1) I see myself as an active and engaging social media user. (2) I regularly like posts and leave comments on social networks. (3) How frequently do you use social media?	-

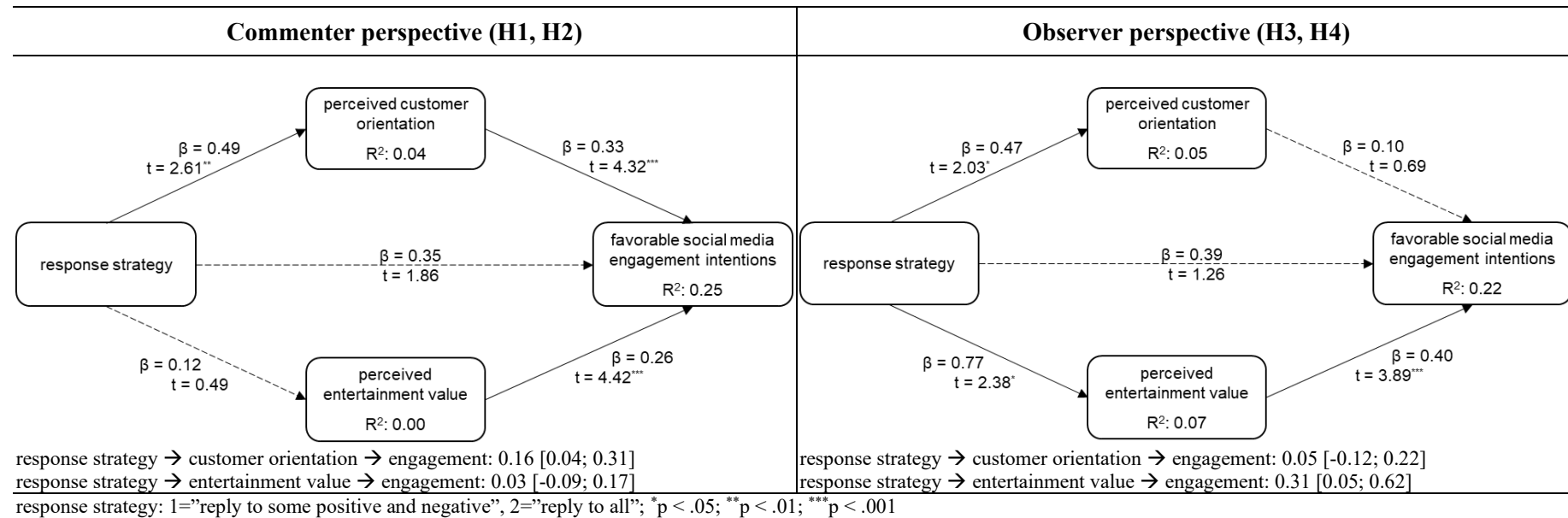
*An exploratory factor analysis shows that all eight items load on one factor. *Note.* Scales for all items (apart from usage frequency): 1="totally disagree" to 7="totally agree". Scale for usage frequency: 1="less often than once a month" to 7="several times a day"

Afterwards, they completed the manipulation checks by indicating whether the hotel responded to all or only some positive and negative comments (one option to select) and whether they were asked to identify with an alias who left a comment under the hotel's post (yes/no answer). Finally, the participants were asked to rate statements on scenario realism and social media usage (see Table 3) and provide their demographic data. Following the recommendation of Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017), we limit order effects and related bias with this measurement order. Such bias is likely to occur when manipulation checks are measured before the dependent variables (Kühnen, 2010), which is not the case in our study setup. The groups did not differ in scenario realism ((1): $F(3, 245)=2.611, p>0.05$; (2): $F(3, 245)=1.582, p>0.10$; (3): $F(3, 245)=1.520, p>0.10$) and social media usage ((1): $F(3, 245)=0.769, p>0.10$; (2): $F(3, 245)=0.916, p>0.10$; (3): $F(3, 245)=0.297, p>0.10$). We only used data from participants who correctly completed the checks (final sample: $n=249$).

Results

To examine our hypotheses, we ran PROCESS (Version 4.3) models separately for the commenter and the observer perspective (model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples; IV: response strategy; parallel mediators: perceived customer orientation, perceived entertainment value; DV: favorable social media engagement intentions; see Figure 1) to clearly illustrate potential differences in underlying mechanisms.

Figure 1. Effects of the response strategy through perceived customer orientation and entertainment value on favorable engagement intentions



For *commenters*, the response strategy does not directly affect favorable engagement intentions (no support for **H1**), and perceived entertainment value has no mediator effect. However, replying to all comments enhances perceived customer orientation, which in turn increases the intentions to engage favorably (support for **H2**).

For *observers*, the response strategy does not affect engagement intentions directly (no support for **H3**) or indirectly through perceived customer orientation. When companies respond to all comments, observers perceive a stronger customer orientation, but this perception does not result in higher engagement intentions. The main path runs through perceived entertainment value. Observers experience more entertainment when companies respond to all rather than some positive and negative comments, which in turn boosts their intentions to engage favorably (support for **H4**).

The findings do not provide support for the hypotheses proposing direct effects of corporate response strategies on engagement intentions, but they show interesting indirect effects through mechanisms that differ for commenters and observers. These results point to the importance of reciprocity (as supposed by social exchange theory) and dense network structures (as proposed by social network theory) but show more complex processes that elicit user engagement through intermediate mechanisms.

Conclusion

Discussion

Our research investigated how corporate response strategies influence the intentions of different social network users to engage favorably with companies. We conducted focus groups to explore commenters' and observers' perceptions of various response strategies and important factors influencing their engagement intentions. Building on these insights as well as on social network and social exchange theory, we conducted a quantitative study to test the most effective response strategies and examine the mediating roles of perceived customer orientation and entertainment value in driving users' favorable engagement. Our mixed-methods approach deepens the understanding of the research topic and enhances the validity of the results.

The focus groups reveal that replying to comments of different valence seems to encourage favorable social media engagement, with the "reply to all" strategy likely activating more engagement of commenters and observers than replying to some positive and negative comments. The focus groups also highlight that perceived customer orientation may be crucial for

complaining commenters, while perceived entertainment value appears to be important for observers.

The key finding of our quantitative study is that the response strategy does not directly influence engagement intentions. Instead, it works through mediating mechanisms. While the “reply to all” strategy indirectly encourages more favorable commenter engagement by enhancing perceived customer orientation, this strategy works through creating higher entertainment value for observers. These findings confirm the focus group insight that replying to all comments most effectively activates favorable social media engagement and provides valuable insights into underlying processes.

Our findings extend previous research on corporate responses on social networks (e.g., Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Ma et al., 2015; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015; Sung and Kim, 2014) by comparing the effects of relevant response strategies on social network users’ engagement intentions. We go beyond the research of Wang et al. (2020), who analyzed replies to either some positive or some negative reviews and contribute to the research agenda proposed by Lopes et al. (2023) by offering new insights into the impact of the examined response strategies on different social network user types (i.e., commenters and observers). Our results highlight the significant distinction between review platforms and social networks. In line with our argument that consumers primarily use review platforms to exchange with other consumers and thus appreciate firms’ interventions less, prior research on review platforms found negative effects of high firm interactivity (Anderson and Han, 2016; Homburg et al., 2015). Our results support the argument that users often seek direct interaction with companies on corporate social networking sites, making companies’ responsiveness more important, and demonstrate that the most responsive strategy is most effective in stimulating favorable user engagement.

Moreover, our results align with those of Gu and Ye (2014), demonstrating that the response strategy does not directly influence engagement. We extend this study by revealing the processes underlying the indirect effects and by showing that these processes differ depending on the user perspective. The corporate response strategy influences consumers’ perceptions of customer orientation, a concept well-established in broader service contexts (e.g., Brady and Cronin, 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2021; Rafaeli et al., 2008; Susskind et al., 2003). Customer orientation, in turn, can foster future favorable social media engagement of complainants, thereby shedding light on an underexplored yet important context. This finding aligns with the study of Sung and Kim (2014), which shows that high firm interactivity on social

networks enhances perceived relationship investment. We therefore emphasize the importance of sending customer care signals on social networks. Additionally, building on previous research on consumers' motivations to use social media (Azar et al., 2016; Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Whiting and Williams, 2013), we outline the role of entertainment value in transforming passive observers into active contributors through an incentivizing corporate response strategy.

Theoretical implications

This research makes meaningful theoretical contributions by advancing the application of social network and social exchange theory to company-customer interactions on social networks.

Social network theory, rooted in the analysis of relational dynamics, offers a novel framework for examining corporate response strategies on social networks and how different response strategies impact user engagement. Previous research applied this theory to social media in contexts such as corporate presence on digital platforms (e.g., Birkel and Müller, 2024; Vakeel et al., 2021), influencer marketing (e.g., Akar and Dalgic, 2018; Mulholland et al., 2025), and consumer-to-consumer interactions (e.g., Jeseo et al., 2024; San-Martín et al., 2016). We apply social network theory to a new research context of companies' responses to user comments on social networks and develop and test assumptions about how such interactions influence network structures and user reactions.

Moreover, we extend previous applications of social exchange theory, grounded in understanding interpersonal interactions, by demonstrating how corporate response strategies shape perceptions of reciprocity and drive user engagement on social networks. While previous research in online contexts has mainly applied social exchange theory to examine how communication dynamics unfold in digital consumer-to-consumer exchanges (e.g., Benoit et al., 2016; Jahan and Kim, 2021; Munzel and Kunz, 2014; Surma, 2016) or interactions between streamers/influencers and their audiences (e.g., Kim and Kim, 2021; Luo et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025), our SET application suggests that, on social networks, users carefully weigh the costs and benefits of their exchange with companies and respond positively to companies' reciprocal actions. The theory's principles gain particular importance in our context because the public visibility of interactions on social networks reinforces fairness expectations not only among commenting users but also among observers, thereby amplifying the impact of reciprocal responses.

We extend the applied theories by introducing concepts, perceived customer orientation and entertainment value, which were not part of these theories' initial scopes. Demonstrating the relevance of these mediators enhances current theoretical understanding and illustrates that the effects derived from these theories, such as higher density and reciprocity resulting from companies' replies to all rather than only some positive and negative comments on social networks, indirectly promote favorable user engagement through perceptions of stronger customer orientation and greater entertainment value. Revealing these mechanisms provides new theoretical insights into the relational and reciprocal dynamics on social networks, highlighting the importance of examining underlying mechanisms and indirect pathways within the context of these theories.

Additionally, we contribute to the literature by examining response strategies on social networks, a context that has received little attention compared to review platforms and which, as highlighted by the applied theories, particularly requires strong relational ties and mutual exchange. Considering the perspectives of commenters and observers further allows us to fill gaps identified by Lopes et al. (2023) and offers a deeper understanding of how to effectively engage challenging users on social networks.

Practical implications

Our findings provide valuable implications for companies that seek to optimize their social network presence and have sufficient resources. Based on our results, social media managers should reply to (almost) all comments as this strategy motivates challenging social network users, *complaining commenters* and *observers*, to favorably engage with the company. Investing in interactive social media communication and generating ongoing favorable consumer engagement will pay off by expanding the company's visibility and audience on social networks. Moreover, our results suggest that social media managers should go beyond complaint handling and adopt an incentivizing response strategy that fosters favorable engagement of satisfied and active users, as well as of complainants and observers, by responding to positive comments. It remains essential to address negative comments professionally and empathetically to encourage future favorable engagement from complaining users. Since only few companies currently use this strategy, firms replying to all comments will stand out from competitors, attract more consumer attention, and maximize the benefits of their social media marketing communication.

Social media managers should use their posts to demonstrate customer orientation and generate entertainment value. If companies receive many negative comments on social networks,

they should prioritize conveying a strong customer orientation by directly addressing complaints, demonstrating empathy and understanding, and offering personalized responses. If the primary issue is that they have many passive followers, companies can focus on entertainment to engage these passive users. The entertainment value of corporate posts can be enhanced through interactive content (e.g., videos broadcasting the brand experience) as well as individual and engaging corporate responses to user comments. Companies should also integrate humanized communication and accounts, as these are perceived as more entertaining and engaging.

Limitations and future research

Our study has some limitations that serve as starting points for future research. We used a fictitious hotel and scenario to limit bias. Future research could explore real brands to assess external validity and consider different sectors to examine potential differences. Furthermore, we used a simulated social network thread. To make the study context more realistic, future research should replicate our findings using a specifically designed social networking site that allows for real participant interaction. Our simulated social network thread resembled the layout of Instagram, which may limit the generalizability of our results to similar social networks. However, we did not explicitly mention Instagram in the study, and with the chosen study setup, we believe that the respondents' associations with a particular social network are not likely to have biased their responses. Nonetheless, new studies should test the effects observed in our study on other social networks to ensure a better generalizability of our findings. In our study, the "reply to some positive and negative" strategy involved responses to an equal number of positive and negative comments. However, an equal quantity of responses does not necessarily translate into equal impact. Since negative comments are often more influential, future research should explore variations in response ratios of positive vs. negative comments to capture potential differential effects. Another limitation is the potential response bias introduced by companies' selective responses to specific comments, which may influence engagement outcomes. Future research should explore how different selective strategies (e.g., prioritizing extreme, lengthy, or repetitive comments) affect consumer reactions. New studies could build on our findings by including other message-related characteristics such as response time, content, or tone, as these factors might also affect consumers' social media engagement. The perceived likelihood of receiving a firm's response and whether the problem of complaining commenters is solved might be further aspects to consider.

Figure A1. Stimulus examples

The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of a Facebook post from 'sama_hotel' and its comment section, illustrating the concept of selective visibility.

Left Screenshot (Replying to all comments, commenter perspective):

- Post:** A landscape photo of mountains with the text "TIME OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS AHEAD -20% OFF". The caption reads: "sama_hotel Time out in the mountains ahead! We have a great offer for you: book your stay with us within the next two weeks and benefit from a 20 percent discount! Please find additional information on our website." It has 103 comments and was posted 10 days ago.
- Comments (Visible):**
 - andrewwww: Your offers are awesome, guys. @liliana let's go for another hiking weekend. (1 Like)
 - sama_kim: Thanks
 - sophie.adr: Thanks for the great deal. We had a fantastic stay. It's worth it 🥰👍
 - sama_kim: We are happy to hear that
 - thisisnico: This is crap. Start to communicate transparently @sama_hotel. You fooled me the last time.
 - sama_kim: Hey, we are very sorry to hear that you are not happy with us. Can you tell us what exactly happened? We would like to find a solution. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)
 - sandra91: Cool
 - sama_kim: Thanks
 - jess.23: At check-in, they told me that the offer is only valid for stays of at least 3 nights and wanted to charge me a cancellation fee. This is not okay, there is no such information!
 - sama_kim: Hey, we are very sorry for the confusion. The terms and conditions of the offer are on our website. However, we would like to give you a 20 % discount on your next booking (no matter for how many nights). Please check your pm. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)
 - maike.foerster: 🙄🙄🙄
 - sama_kim: Thanks
 - albertius: your service could be better...
 - sama_kim: Hey, we are very sorry to hear that since we put high emphasis on excellent service. It would be great if you could help us improving our service by telling us what exactly happened. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

Right Screenshot (Replying to some positive and negative comments, observer perspective):

- Post:** Identical to the left screenshot.
- Comments (Visible):**
 - andrewwww: Your offers are awesome, guys. @liliana let's go for another hiking weekend. (1 Like)
 - sama_kim: Thanks
 - sophie.adr: Thanks for the great deal. We had a fantastic stay. It's worth it 🥰👍
 - thisisnico: This is crap. Start to communicate transparently @sama_hotel. You fooled me the last time.
 - sandra91: Cool
 - sama_kim: Thanks
 - jess.23: At check-in, they told me that the offer is only valid for stays of at least 3 nights and wanted to charge me a cancellation fee. This is not okay, there is no such information!
 - sama_kim: Hey, we are very sorry for the confusion. The terms and conditions of the offer are on our website. However, we would like to give you a 20 % discount on your next booking (no matter for how many nights). Please check your pm. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)
 - maike.foerster: 🙄🙄🙄
 - albertius: your service could be better...
 - sama_kim: Hey, we are very sorry to hear that since we put high emphasis on excellent service. It would be great if you could help us improving our service by telling us what exactly happened. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

The comparison highlights that in the left view, all comments are visible, while in the right view, certain comments (like those from 'thisisnico' and 'albertius') are selectively hidden, leaving gaps in the conversation.

4. Second research paper: Effective complaint management on social networks: The impact of response strategy, type, and account on consumer reactions²

Abstract

Social networks have become important firm-customer touchpoints, challenging service firms to manage consumer feedback and develop effective communication strategies. This study aims to examine how corporate response strategies (replying to only negative vs. some positive and negative comments), response types (defensive vs. accommodative) and account types (standard vs. humanized) affect the reactions of complaining social network users. The authors provide insights into common marketing practices and then present a quantitative preliminary study and focus groups to build the foundation for a new theoretical framework. The authors also draw on accessibility-diagnostics theory, apply it to the research context and test its application empirically. The authors subsequently test the combined effects of response strategies, response types and account types in the quantitative main study. The response type influences complainants' attitudes toward the firm through complaint satisfaction, response perception and perceived customer orientation. The response strategy affects attitudes only through perceived customer orientation. There is an interaction between response type and account type. The findings suggest that social media managers using a selective response strategy should address all negative comments, use humanized accounts, and provide accommodative responses. If defensive responses are necessary, humanized accounts may help mitigate negative effects. The mixed-methods approach offers comprehensive insights into communication strategies on social networks. The authors validate a new theoretical framework by applying accessibility-diagnostics theory to the context and reveal the benefits and novelty of humanized communication on social networks, which increases flexibility and strategic advantages by mitigating negative effects of defensive replies but remains uncommon among service firms.

Keywords Social media marketing; Communication strategy; Response perception; Complaint satisfaction; Customer orientation; Attitudes toward the firm

² Bambauer-Sachse, S., & Stuhldreier, S. M. (2026). Effective complaint management on social networks: The impact of response strategy, type, and account on consumer reactions. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-03-2025-0215>

Introduction

Social networks have become key touchpoints between service firms and consumers, shaping consumer behavior (e.g., Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Tsao and Su, 2021; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025) and customer relationships (Oncioiu et al., 2021). Yet many service firms struggle to strategically manage the growing volume of user comments in line with customer expectations (Cheng et al., 2024). While advanced artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly integrated into customer service, the contextual and communicative complexities of social networks, such as sarcasm and irony, limit their effectiveness (Sykora et al., 2020). Social networks require authentic interaction, while communication failures are visible and damage the firm's reputation. Therefore, our overarching aim is to examine how service firms can enhance the effectiveness of their social media strategies through different communication elements. Specifically, we investigate three interrelated service firm strategies that shape consumers' overall impressions of the service firm: the response strategy (i.e., which comments to address), the response type (i.e., how to reply), and the account type (i.e., how the reply is delivered) (Lopes et al., 2023). We focus on complaining users because online complaints are highly influential and quickly shape user perceptions of a firm, making effective communication crucial for increasing customer satisfaction (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Weitzl et al., 2018) and improving attitudes (Stauss and Seidel, 2019). Accordingly, our research examines key service recovery outcomes, namely, complaint satisfaction and attitudes toward the firm, as well as users' perceptions of customer orientation, which reflect the extent to which a service firm is seen as genuinely attentive and shape the evaluation of its service recovery efforts on social networks. Additionally, we include perceptions of the service firm's response as a variable capturing how users assess the firm's reply to their online complaint.

First strategic decision: Response strategy. Replying to all comments is most customer-oriented but many firms lack the resources to do so (Guha et al., 2018). Selective strategies include responding only to positive, only to negative or to some positive and negative comments. As it is important to address complaints (Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024), replying to only positive comments appears inadequate. Yet it remains unclear whether and how firms should balance replies to positive and negative comments. Focusing on negative comments risks framing the social network as a complaint channel by encouraging more complaints (Cheng et al., 2024; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015), whereas addressing positive feedback may reinforce favorable comments and audience perceptions (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015). Replying to some but not all comments leaves potentially problematic comments unaddressed.

Considering this dilemma and the lack of systematic research, our first research objective is to compare user reactions to firms' replies to only negative vs. some positive and negative comments.

Second strategic decision: Response type. Well-crafted responses can signal customer orientation and be perceived as useful (Demmers et al., 2018), helpful (Jin et al., 2023), credible (Verčič et al., 2019), and emotional (Herhausen et al., 2023). Accommodative responses can have positive effects (e.g., Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Weitzl et al., 2018; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025), but defensive responses may also be suitable in some contexts (e.g., Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020). Responding to the call for research on the effectiveness of accommodative vs. defensive responses (Lopes et al., 2023), our second research objective is to examine how defensive vs. accommodative responses affect user reactions.

Third strategic decision: Account type. Consumers generally prefer human service (Huang et al., 2024), but firm-customer interactions on social networks often feel impersonal, leaving users uncertain whether they are communicating with human employees or chatbots (Cheng and Pan, 2021). Accordingly, our third research objective is to investigate the moderating effects of standard vs. humanized account types that service firms can use on social networks.

Recent practice shows that leading service firms predominantly use selective response strategies, accommodative responses, standard accounts, and rarely implement humanized communication (see Table 1). These patterns, along with the limited research in this area, underscore the need to critically evaluate common practice and systematically examine its implications.

Drawing on the practical insights in Table 1, a preliminary study on the effects of selective response strategies on complaining users' perceptions of customer orientation and attitudes toward the service firm, and in-depth focus group discussions exploring complaint satisfaction, attitudes, perceived customer orientation and response perceptions, we develop our conceptual framework for the main quantitative study. We additionally draw on accessibility-diagnostics theory (ADT), which explains how different response approaches affect users' ability to retrieve relevant information (accessibility) and to evaluate its importance (diagnostics), making it well-suited to public, dynamic, and information-rich social network interactions.

With this research, we make several key contributions. We advance service marketing theory by applying ADT to effective complaint management on social networks. We develop a novel framework by linking ADT to core service marketing concepts and providing empirical measures of accessibility and diagnostics on online networks. Furthermore, our study extends

social media and webcare, service recovery, and strategic communication research, highlighting the theoretical relevance of humanized account types and perceived customer orientation as key factors in social network settings. These contributions extend the theoretical understanding of how consumers process service firm responses to complaints and offer a methodological foundation for more effective digital service communication strategies.

Moreover, our findings offer clear practical guidelines. Although marketing practice is often complex, our findings suggest that service firms using a selective response strategy should at least reply to all negative comments. Social media managers should use humanized accounts and provide accommodative responses to complaints. Since marketing practice requires flexibility and defensive responses may occasionally be unavoidable, responding from humanized accounts provides novel benefits by mitigating negative effects and differentiating firms through a highly personal communication style that remains rare in practice. By providing helpful, emotional and credible responses, and signaling strong customer orientation, service firms can foster complainants' understanding and may even trigger positive reactions.

Analysis of service firms' response strategies on Instagram

To gain insights into marketing practices, we examined real firm-consumer interactions on Instagram. Instagram is one of the most popular and fastest-growing social networks (Bastero, 2025), with many users following and engaging with firms (Meta, 2019).

In February 2023, we searched for international service firms that ranked among the top ten in their industries, maintained Instagram accounts, and had over 50,000 followers. This minimum number of followers ensured a realistic level of social media activity and adequate insight into firm-consumer engagement. We examined service firms from eight different industries (hotels, restaurants, food delivery, airlines, logistics, communication, retail, and e-commerce) to gain broad insights. Given that qualitative research emphasizes information depth over quantity (Barbour, 2007), we selected 3 firms per industry, resulting in a sample of 24 service firms. Three firms (American Airlines, Alibaba, and Dunkin') fulfilled the selection criteria but were excluded from the analysis as they did not respond to consumer comments during the period under research. An overview of the remaining firms' response strategies, types, and accounts for November 2022 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of service firms' response strategies on Instagram

Firm	Industry	Response approach			
		Followers ¹⁾	Response strategy (Replies to ... comments)	Response type ²⁾	Account type ³⁾
Accor	hotel	75.8 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Hilton		400 t	only positive	accommodative	standard
Marriott		533 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Pizza Hut	restaurant	1.7 m	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Starbucks		17.9 m	all	accommodative	standard
Deliveroo	food delivery	99.2 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Door Dash		321 t	only positive	accommodative	standard
Uber Eats		546 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
United	aviation	936 t	only positive	accommodative	standard
Emirates		7.1 m	only negative	accommodative	standard
Kroger	retail	161 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Home Depot		954 t	only positive	accommodative	standard
Walmart		2.9 m	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
DHL Express	logistics	101 t	only negative	accommodative	standard
UPS		198 t	only negative	accommodative	standard*
FedEx		299 t	only negative	accommodative	standard*
Wayfair	e-commerce	101 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard
Amazon		198 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard*
Verizon	communica- tion	255 t	some positive and negative	accommodative	standard*
AT&T		392 t	only negative	accommodative	standard
T-Mobile		530 t	only negative	accommodative	standard*

¹⁾t=thousand, m=million, order of firms by number of followers per industry; ²⁾accommodative responses to complaints typically include apologies and/or corrective actions and/or compensation (Lee and Song, 2010); defensive responses involve denying responsibility, justifying actions, and/or shifting blame (Li et al., 2018); responses to positive comments usually convey appreciation and acknowledgment; ³⁾standard account=official company account featuring the company logo and the profile photo; humanized account=employee account including a personal photo, name and contact information; *inclusion of the first name of the responding employees

The observation that most service firms in our sample adopt a selective strategy by responding to some positive and negative comments suggests that they aim to acknowledge different feedback to interact with diverse consumers without spending the effort to address all comments. The prevalence of accommodative responses across industries, with replies to positive comments expressing appreciation and replies to negative comments including apologies and efforts to correct service failures, appears to reflect a common trend in social media marketing communication. Additionally, the widespread use of standard company accounts to reply to consumer comments, with some firms including the first names of responding employees, suggests that many service firms do not seem to use humanized communication.

In light of these observations, it seems essential to examine the strategy of selectively replying to some positive and negative comments, a common practice among service firms, from a scientific perspective. Systematically analyzing the effects of accommodative vs. defensive responses may help service firms determine whether accommodative responses are overall more effective or whether defensive approaches can also be used. Investigating potential benefits of humanized communication generates novel insights and practical guidance for improving firm-consumer interactions on social networks.

Literature review

We discuss previous research on firm-customer communication and complaint handling of service firms on social networks from our perspective on complaining commenters.

Research on response strategies

Due to limited research on which consumer comments service firms should address on social networks, we also consider studies on firms' responses on review platforms. Service firms aim to elicit positive consumer reactions in both contexts and must decide which comments to address. However, consumers mainly visit review platforms to exchange experiences with other consumers and do not necessarily appreciate firm interventions (Anderson and Han, 2016). Social network users, in contrast, primarily visit corporate social networking sites to engage with firms (Tsai and Men, 2013; Varnali and Cesmeci, 2022). As social network interactivity further intensifies the need for reciprocal communication, firms' response strategies are likely to have a different impact on social networks where consumers actively seek direct engagement and are more attentive to receiving a firm's reply.

Prior research shows that replying to *negative reviews* can positively affect complainants' company ratings (Hernández-Maestro, 2020; Liang and Li, 2019; Rezvani and Rojas, 2022; Sheng et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2021; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018) and brand evaluations (Sparks and Bradley, 2017) in service recovery settings. Nevertheless, previous research on review platforms does not align on whether such corporate replies decrease (Liang and Li, 2019; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Proserpio et al., 2021) or increase (Chevalier et al., 2018) complainants' unfavorable engagement. Research on social networks shows similarly mixed patterns. Replying (vs. not replying) to *negative comments* can trigger further complaints, i.e., unfavorable engagement (Cheng et al., 2024; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015), especially if complainants notice that firms respond to others but not to them (Gu and Ye, 2014). However, replying to negative comments might increase favorable engagement of complainants who receive a reply (Gu and Ye, 2014). Further research emphasizes that responding to negative comments on social networks improves the relationship between the firm and the complainant (Ma et al., 2015) and increases complainants' repurchase intentions through increased trust (Istanbuloglu and Sakman, 2024).

Although these findings point to more positive effects if firms reply to negative comments, drawing conclusions for our research context is difficult, as no study systematically compared the strategies of replying to some positive and negative comments and replying to only negative

comments, and only a few studies examined social networks (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Gu and Ye, 2014; Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Ma et al., 2015).

Research on response types

Despite the broad body of literature on different types of responses to complaints on social media, most studies related to social networks examine passive network users who only observe firm-customer interactions and do not participate in the conversation (e.g., Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). Given our focus on active users and the limited research on the effects of response types (defensive vs. accommodative) on complaining commenters on social networks, we again include studies on review platforms.

With *accommodative* responses, which typically include apologies, corrective actions, and compensation (Lee and Song, 2010), firms acknowledge customer concerns, assume responsibility, and provide constructive solutions (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020). With *defensive* responses, firms deny responsibility, blame external factors, and avoid acknowledging fault (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018). Accommodative responses in online service recovery can enhance corporate image (Tsao and Su, 2021), purchase intentions (Tsao and Su, 2021; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025), and complaint satisfaction (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). While accommodative responses typically reduce negative attributions for complainants with few prior failures, defensive responses can have similar effects for those with multiple prior failures (Weitzl et al., 2018). Likewise, if complainants experienced multiple failures but have a strong relationship with the firm, defensive responses lead to lower revenge intentions (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2023). Additionally, accommodative responses benefit constructive complainants but may have little effect on vindictive ones (Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020).

Prior research has focused on external factors and left a gap in understanding the role of communication elements within a service firm's control. Therefore, exploring how specific communication strategies shape the impact of different response types on complaining commenters is an important step toward examining the contingent effectiveness of accommodative vs. defensive responses.

Research on humanized marketing communication

Humanized marketing communication means that a real person is (at least digitally) present and actively engaged in an interaction. Research on service recovery suggests that customers

prefer interactions with human representatives over automated systems, as they are perceived as more empathic and trustworthy (Huang et al., 2024). Providing visual and personal information about the response sender (e.g., photo, name, role, contact details) can enhance perceptions of accessibility, customer orientation and service quality on service websites (Herhausen et al., 2020). This finding highlights the relevance of investigating complainants' customer orientation perceptions in the context of humanized marketing communication on social networks. Although one study finds no significant differences between standard and humanized accounts in terms of complainants' satisfaction and brand attitudes on review platforms (Esmark Jones et al., 2018), other studies show that providing detailed sender information can increase complainants' willingness to forgive the firm if combined with mixed accommodative and defensive replies (Tathagata and Amar, 2018), and lead to fewer complaints (Cheng and Pan, 2021).

Most studies focus on the effects of humanized communication on observing social media users (e.g., Barcelos et al., 2018; Huang and Ki, 2023; Lopes et al., 2024; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015; Park and Jiang, 2021; Olson and Ro, 2020), with only one study (Cheng and Pan, 2021) examining the effects of humanized communication on complainants on social networks. Thus, prior research offers only limited insights into the impact of humanized communication on complaining commenters and the combined effectiveness of response accounts, strategies, and types in service recovery settings.

Given the limitations of previous research, we conducted a preliminary study (see Table A1) to develop an initial understanding of how replying to only negative vs. some positive and some negative comments affects complainants' perceptions of service firms' customer orientation and their attitudes toward the firm. The results of the preliminary study interestingly show that perceived customer orientation was higher with the "response to only negative comments" strategy, suggesting that this strategy might have more positive effects than replying to some positive and negative comments, which is common in marketing practice. Next, we present insights from focus groups based on the preliminary study's initial findings.

Focus groups

Objective, research context, and method

With the dynamic focus group discussions, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of our field of research, get a multifaceted picture of complainants' reactions to various forms of social media marketing communication, and lay the foundation for our theoretical framework.

We conducted two semistructured focus groups with participants recruited via Instagram (January 2024, each lasting 40 minutes, eight participants in total, equal gender distribution, ages ranging from 24 to 32 years). The focus groups discussed defensive vs. accommodative service firms' replies to only negative consumer comments separately for each account type. We focused on the strategy of replying to negative comments, as the preliminary study indicated that this strategy elicited more favorable commenter perceptions (see Table A1). The stimulus material was developed based on our analysis of service firms' response behavior on social networks and was pretested for clarity and realism (see Figure A1).

We selected participants who used social networks at least several times per week, were over 18 years old and had prior experience complaining on a service firm's social networking site. Potential participants completed a brief prescreening survey verifying these criteria before being invited to participate. With this selection procedure, we ensured that participants had first-hand experience with digital complaint situations and generated meaningful insights.

The participants consented to record the meetings and were briefed on the study context and the scenario (see Table A1). They watched two simulated social network threads (one for each account type, with the order counterbalanced). Each thread displayed the service firm's post, consumer comments (including the comment from the alias they were asked to identify with), and the service firm's replies to negative comments (see Figure A1). The participants shared their impressions of the firm's response, complaint satisfaction, attitudes toward the firm, and their perceptions of customer orientation. To ensure the rigor and reliability of the focus group analysis, we audio-recorded and transcribed all discussions. Following the coding process outlined by Bingham (2023) and Bingham and Witkowsky (2022), we used an inductive approach, allowing the coding scheme to emerge directly from the data. We then organized the codes into overarching themes through iterative analysis to capture recurring topics and patterns across participants and reflect shared perspectives.

Focus group insights

The overarching themes and the participants' statements are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Focus group insights

Focus group 1: accommodative response to only negative comments, standard vs. humanized account	
Key insights	Participants' key statements
Reply should be useful, helpful, credible, and empathetic	<i>"A helpful reply with useful information is key to understanding the situation and resolving the problem."</i> <i>"Providing useful responses shows the firm is trying to fix its mistakes."</i> <i>"Responses should help both complainants and potential customers. Everyone gets a better impression of the firm."</i> <i>"With many comments on social networks, transparent and informative responses build credibility – without showing credibility, there is no point in replying."</i> <i>"Responses should include apologies, empathy, and emotional engagement."</i>
Accommodative reply enhances complaint satisfaction	<i>"As a complaining user, my first impression is positive because the firm provides helpful, solution-oriented responses."</i> <i>"I would be satisfied with the complaint handling since the firm shows goodwill, provides details, and offers compensation."</i> <i>"I would be happy with the complaint handling. I get a helpful answer and the firm feels trustworthy and sincere."</i>
Accommodative reply is customer-oriented	<i>"The way the firm responds is very customer-oriented because it addresses my and other complaints and seems to genuinely care about resolving the issues."</i>
Accommodative reply enhances attitudes	<i>"The firm's effort and empathy improve my attitude."</i> <i>"I feel positive about the firm because the problem is solved. It listened, showed understanding, and offered a solution."</i> <i>"I appreciate the firm's effort to provide useful and satisfying responses."</i> <i>"My impression and attitude are good because I get a helpful response."</i>
Humanized account is more credible and personal	<i>"Having a concrete communication partner makes the reply more credible. It's fine if the firm responds from a standard account, but it feels less personal."</i>
Humanized account is more customer-oriented	<i>"I feel more comfortable with a concrete and tangible contact person."</i> <i>"Having a contact person makes the responses even more appealing."</i>
Focus group 2: defensive response to only negative comments, standard vs. humanized account	
Key insights	Participants' key statements
Reply should be useful, credible, and emotional	<i>"The response should be useful."</i> <i>"Credibility is important, especially on social networks."</i> <i>"Complainants are emotional, so I expect a certain degree of empathy – like an apology."</i>
Defensive reply lacks appropriate emotions	<i>"The firm doesn't try to understand customers or offer emotional support."</i> <i>"We, as complainants, are emotional, but the firm responds with denial and lacks emotional engagement."</i>
Defensive reply decreases complaint satisfaction	<i>"It's disappointing that there is no apology or solution."</i> <i>"The firm at least responds, but I am more frustrated than before."</i> <i>"Denying responsibility doesn't help me – it makes complaining pointless."</i>

Defensive reply is not customer-oriented	<i>"The firm's replies are neither customer-oriented nor helpful. There is no solution or compensation."</i>
Defensive reply negatively affects attitudes	<i>"My attitude wouldn't be great. I miss a solution and understanding." "How can I like the firm if it isn't even trying to help?"</i>
Humanized account is better but does not offset negative effects of defensive replies	<i>"The photo and name help me connect with a real person." "I find the humanized account more credible because I get more information about the person." "The humanized account offers contact details for further communication, but I wouldn't call it customer-oriented." "My attitude wouldn't be great either way, but having a direct contact might help a little." "A response from a firm representative is better, but I am still unhappy with how my complaint was handled."</i>

The focus group discussions suggest that replying to only negative comments may enhance user reactions when service firms provide an accommodative response, which increases perceptions of firms' sincerity and trustworthiness. The participants perceived the account type as less important in the context of the response strategy. However, the more tangible and credible response sender using a humanized account seems to mitigate the negative effects of defensive responses. Overall, the participants emphasized that firms should provide useful, helpful, credible, and emotional replies to complaints on social networks. The focus groups confirm and contextualize principles of complaint management, such as the importance of helpfulness and credibility for the specific setting of social media interactions. They illustrate how accommodative responses to negative comments and the use of humanized accounts can positively influence user perceptions.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

We synthesize arguments from previous research and the insights from the preliminary study and the focus groups to develop our theoretical framework. We position our research in three major streams of the service literature: (1) social media and webcare research, which examines how firms' online responses shape user perceptions and relational outcomes (e.g., Hogueve et al., 2019; Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Sparks et al., 2016; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020); (2) service recovery literature, which provides established mechanisms explaining how recovery efforts influence satisfaction and attitudes (e.g., Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Orsingher et al., 2010; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998); and (3) strategic communication research, which emphasizes how overarching principles like message consistency, transparency, and credibility affect consumer evaluations and trust (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Holland et al., 2021; Sharma and Patterson, 1999). We additionally apply accessibility-diagnostics theory (ADT) to our research context, as accessible and diagnostic communication is essential in firm-customer interactions on social networks.

Effects of response strategy and response type

According to ADT, information accessibility and diagnostics affect individuals' evaluations and choices (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Information accessibility refers to the ease with which information can be accessed and made available for cognitive processing. Information is considered accessible when consumers can retrieve it effortlessly and conveniently (Herr et al., 1991). Information diagnostics refers to how consumers assess the usefulness of information

(Jiang and Benbasat, 2004). High diagnosticity is given when information assists the consumers' decision-making (Chen et al., 2024). The more accessible and diagnostic the information, the more consumers can rely on it (Herr et al., 1991), form positive brand perceptions and exhibit favorable reactions. ADT has been applied to various marketing contexts, including advertising (e.g., Huang et al., 2021a), pricing (e.g., Vaidyanathan, 2000) and electronic word of mouth (e.g., Chen et al., 2024).

We apply ADT to our research context to explain how complainants process service firms' recovery attempts on social networks. Social networks expose consumers to a continuous stream of firm- and user-generated content that varies in accessibility (i.e., how easily it can be retrieved or noticed) and diagnosticity (i.e., how useful and credible it is for forming judgments). Consumers rely most on information that is highly accessible and diagnostic (Herr et al., 1991). We argue that a firm's response strategy (i.e., the types of comments service firms address: only negative or some positive and negative comments) determines the visibility and salience of the firm's engagement, and thus conveys accessibility. The response type (defensive vs. accommodative) and the account type (standard vs. humanized) mirror the helpfulness and credibility of the responses and thus convey diagnosticity. This dual perspective helps to ground the multifaceted effects of social media marketing communication theoretically and provides a novel framework for capturing user reactions to firm-customer interactions on social networks. Based on the application of ADT to our research context, we describe the accessibility and diagnosticity paths as follows.

Accessibility path: This path runs from the response strategy through customer orientation perceptions to attitudes toward the firm. Since we examine which comments service firms address, we do not expect response strategies to influence complaint satisfaction or response perceptions, as these aspects primarily depend on the content of the reply. The information firms make accessible by replying to consumer comments helps complainants evaluate the firms' customer orientation. Replying to some positive and negative comments may demonstrate the firm's accessibility and commitment to a broad range of (potential) customers. Consequently, this strategy may be a well-integrated approach to complaint handling and relationship management, reinforcing the firm's customer orientation. However, replying to negative comments likely provides more accessibility than replying to some positive and negative comments, as replying to only negative comments leaves clear and easily recognizable patterns in social network threads, while replies to positive and negative comments may appear less systematic, and users may not recognize the criteria behind the reply patterns.

Given that accessible information guides attitude formation (Glasman and Albarracín, 2006), complaining commenters are likely to draw on salient firm-related cues when forming attitudes in response to a service failure. The publicly visible response strategy conveys information that may influence complainants' attitudes toward the firm (Liu et al., 2019; Stauss and Seidel, 2019). In social media and webcare research, the response strategy signals a firm's willingness to acknowledge, address and remediate customer problems (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Webcare in the form of responding to complaints on social networks enhances perceptions of service quality and trust (Hogreve et al., 2019), strengthens favorable firm evaluations and behavioral intentions (Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012), as well as firm-customer relationships (Ma et al., 2015).

By replying to *all negative comments*, service firms systematically manage complaints, demonstrating effective customer care (Colliander et al., 2015). As service recovery literature emphasizes the importance of complainants' fairness perceptions (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Tax et al., 1998) and as addressing all complaints can increase such perceptions (Orsingher et al., 2010), this strategy is likely more effective in fostering positive attitudes than replying to some positive and negative comments, which leaves some complaints unaddressed. This assumption aligns with previous research, which shows that complaining commenters react negatively when a firm responds to others but not to their own complaint (Gu and Ye, 2014). From a strategic communication perspective, maintaining consistency is essential (Coombs, 2007; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Sharma and Patterson, 1999). In this regard, consistent and systematic replies to complaints signal trustworthiness and concern (Sparks et al., 2016), as well as effort and empathy (Abney et al., 2017), reflecting a customer-oriented approach. Our focus group insights and the results of our preliminary study further suggest that service firms' replies to negative comments signal a willingness to resolve customer issues and positively affect perceptions of customer orientation in service recovery settings. These arguments lead to:

H1: For complaining commenters, service firm replies to only negative comments trigger perceptions of stronger customer orientation than replies to some positive and negative comments.

From a social media and webcare perspective, visible responsiveness to complaints signals attentiveness and reliability, which shapes customers' evaluations of the firm and its services (Hogreve et al., 2019; Sparks et al., 2016; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). A firm's perceived

effort and care in firm-customer interactions can, in turn, enhance brand attitudes (Colliander et al., 2015). Service recovery literature further indicates that a firm's commitment to addressing customer issues enhances perceived service quality (Black et al., 2014; Tax et al., 1998). From a strategic communication perspective, transparent and credible messaging can positively influence customer attitudes toward the firm (Holland et al., 2021), as it might be seen as customer oriented. Building on these insights, we position customer orientation as a key concept for complaining customers, for whom the way their complaints are handled on social networks influences service recovery outcomes. This assumption is supported by our focus group insights, which indicate that stronger perceptions of customer orientation are likely to lead to more favorable attitudes toward the firm, as consumers value firms that prioritize customer care and demonstrate a serious commitment. We therefore assume:

H2: Perceptions of a stronger customer orientation result in more positive attitudes toward the firm.

Diagnosticity paths: Service firms can respond to negative comments defensively or accommodatively, which may lead to different levels of perceived response diagnosticity. These paths run from the response type through (a) perceptions of the firm's response and (b) complaint satisfaction to perceived customer orientation and finally to attitudes toward the firm.

Diagnosticity path a): Service firms' replies on social networks and in the context of webcare reveal information that enables users to assess the responses and related benefits (Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Weitzl et al., 2018). Service recovery research suggests that complainants appreciate compensation, followed by an explanation and apology from the firm (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998), when the failure occurs at the beginning of the relationship (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015). Since only accommodative responses provide monetary benefits (i.e., compensation) and social benefits (i.e., apology) (Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020) that compensate for the service failure and the effort required to complain, the diagnostic cues of accommodative responses are salient. This aligns with social media research showing that accommodative responses are particularly beneficial as the provision of specific benefits helps restore balance in the firm-customer relationship (Weitzl et al., 2018). Previous research in this domain suggests that defensive responses can be effective when complainants have experienced multiple prior failures (Weitzl et al., 2018) or exhibit vindictive behavior (Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020), but neither condition applies to our research context.

Principles of strategic communication outline the importance of credible, transparent, and emotional messaging (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017), as well as perceived usefulness (Demmers et al., 2018) and helpfulness (Jin et al., 2023) of replies. Research on social networks shows that accommodative responses are perceived as more credible than defensive responses (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). This aligns with our focus group insights, indicating that effective responses should be emotional, helpful, useful, and credible – characteristics that the participants associated with accommodative but not with defensive responses. We thus argue that complainants who recognize that service firms respond accommodatively by showing emotions (e.g., through a sincere apology), providing helpful and useful information (e.g., clarifying the service recovery process, providing compensation) and acting credibly (e.g., giving transparent explanations) are more likely to perceive the response as diagnostic. Hence, we assume:

H3: For complaining commenters, accommodative responses generate more positive perceptions of the service firm's response (as useful, helpful, emotional, and credible) than defensive responses.

Consumers experiencing service failures are typically in high arousal emotional states. When firms listen to what customers say and show empathy in social media and webcare contexts, complainants are more likely to feel acknowledged and grateful (Herhausen et al., 2023). Online responses that convey customer care cues, such as active listening (Herhausen et al., 2023) or effort (Colliander et al., 2015), signal that the firm takes the customer seriously, thereby fostering perceptions of strong customer orientation. These positive perceptions of the firm's response likely enhance complainants' service recovery attitudes (Colliander et al., 2015; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). Service firms should consequently integrate clear and compelling message signals to improve outcomes, aligning with strategic communication insights (Holland et al., 2021) and service recovery research emphasizing the importance of fair and just complaint handling (e.g., Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Tax et al., 1998). In this regard, the focus group insights suggest that responses perceived as useful, helpful, emotional, and credible are likely to reinforce the impression that the firm values its customers and takes their concerns seriously, thereby demonstrating strong customer orientation and resulting in more favorable attitudes toward the firm. These arguments result in:

H4: More positive perceptions of the service firm's response (as useful, helpful, emotional, and credible) enhance perceived customer orientation and attitudes toward the firm.

Diagnosticity path b): The response type reveals how service firms acknowledge customer concerns. Literature on social media and webcare shows that firms can increase complaint satisfaction by demonstrating attentiveness and willingness to solve problems (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Weitzl, 2019). In this regard, perceptions of higher response diagnosticity enhance service perception and complaint satisfaction (Huang and Ha, 2020). Service recovery research outlines that perceptions of justice (i.e., distributive justice: compensation; interactional justice: empathy, politeness and visible effort) enhance service recovery outcomes (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Orsingher et al., 2010; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998). Research on strategic communication demonstrates the positive effects of effective communication on firm-customer relationships (Sharma and Patterson, 1999).

Accommodative responses signal the firm's effort to resolve customer concerns and fair customer treatment by offering solutions, apologies, and compensation (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Lee and Song, 2010). Accommodative responses may thus be highly effective and diagnostic because they provide customers with valuable information to evaluate the service firm's commitment to resolving issues. *Defensive* responses, in turn, do not necessarily provide explanations or information about the complaint-handling process and are thus less diagnostic. Defensive responses are also perceived as less justice-restoring and fair, as lost time, high costs and inconvenience caused by the failure remain unacknowledged (Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020). Supported by our focus group insights, we thus derive:

H5: For complaining commenters, accommodative responses generate higher complaint satisfaction than defensive responses.

When complainants are satisfied with how their complaint is publicly handled, they tend to make positive inferences about the firm's concern for customers (Sparks et al., 2016). This aligns with service recovery literature showing that complainants who are satisfied with the complaint handling perceive increased firm credibility (Triadi et al., 2024). Moreover, complaint satisfaction enhances customer trust and commitment (Tax et al., 1998), as well as behavioral intentions (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010). Consequently, complaint handling satisfaction reflects the firm's commitment to valuing customers' needs and actively addressing issues, a point that also emerged from our focus group discussions. Thus, complaint handling satisfaction can improve further customer reactions, leading to:

H6: Higher complaint satisfaction enhances perceived customer orientation and attitudes toward the firm.

Moderator effects of account type

Perceived information diagnosticity increases with more cues that help consumers evaluate a firm (Chen et al., 2024). This makes strategic communication insights particularly relevant, emphasizing the influential role of credible, empathetic, and emotional communicative signals (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Sharma and Patterson, 1999). Humanized accounts, featuring diagnostic cues such as names, photos and contact details, contribute to more humanized marketing communication and increased accessibility in online contexts (Herhausen et al., 2020). Standard accounts often convey an impression of an automated or impersonal response process, making it challenging for consumers to assess the firm's credibility and reducing the diagnostic value of its responses. The absence of specific sender information additionally decreases accessibility as the communication appears more abstract. We argue that account type and response strategy do not interact, as complaining commenters likely focus on receiving a reply rather than the account from which it comes. The focus group insights support this argument by indicating that the account type is less relevant in the context of the response strategy. However, the focus group insights, as well as previous research, suggest potential interaction effects between the account type and the response type in online complaint handling, given their combined influence on consumer forgiveness (Tathagata and Amar, 2018). This interaction is likely because both factors relate to the reply content and may jointly shape perceptions of accessibility and diagnosticity. In the following, we develop the arguments related to the interaction between account type and response type.

Standard account: Standard accounts seem less accessible and diagnostic. Accommodative responses from a standard account are perceived as helpful and diagnostic, provide valuable insights into the firm's commitment to addressing customer concerns and are likely to offer a more satisfying complaint experience than defensive responses from a standard account. This argument is supported by our focus group insights, which indicate that accommodative responses enhance trustworthiness. Thus, even when delivered from standard accounts, accommodative responses can make complainants feel acknowledged and enhance their perceptions of the firm, as the diagnostic value may help offset the account's lack of accessibility and diagnosticity. In contrast, service firms that provide defensive responses tend to avoid constructive dialogue with customers and offer replies with limited diagnostic value. The limited diagnostic

value of a standard account further intensifies this lack of diagnosticity. This combination is likely to result in negative reactions from complainants. These arguments lead to:

H7a) If service firms address complaints from standard accounts, accommodative responses generate more positive perceptions of the firms' responses (as useful, helpful, emotional, and credible) and higher complaint satisfaction than defensive responses.

Humanized account: Social presence cues have positive effects on perceived diagnosticity of product information in social media contexts (Poirier et al., 2024), and humanized marketing communication (e.g., through providing the employee's photo and contact details) positively affects service quality perceptions in online contexts (Herhausen et al., 2020). Accommodative responses to complaints elicit favorable consumer reactions regardless of social presence (Olson and Ro, 2020), likely because they provide clear and informative cues. Humanized accounts do not further increase the diagnosticity of accommodative responses. This assumption aligns with our focus group insight, indicating that participants had no preferred account type when an accommodative response was given. Building on ADT and our focus group insights that tangible communication partners may enhance consumer reactions and signal openness, we argue that humanized accounts can attenuate the defensive tone of defensive responses and make responses seem more genuine. This may foster greater consumer forgiveness (Tathagata and Amar, 2018) and mitigate the lower diagnostic value of defensive replies. We therefore assume:

H7b) If service firms address complaints from humanized accounts, accommodative responses no longer generate more positive perceptions of the firms' responses (as useful, helpful, emotional, and credible) and higher complaint satisfaction than defensive responses.

Accessibility-diagnosticity theory application study

With the ADT application study, we linked and empirically tested our arguments derived from ADT to the factors response strategy, response type, and account type that we then examined in the main study. We chose this two-step approach of conducting a separate application study to keep the main study concise and focused on the effects of the approaches to social media marketing communication (i.e., response strategy, type, and account). Detailed information on the study setup, the arguments' links with the response strategy, type, and account, as well as direct measures of accessibility and diagnosticity, are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. ADT application study

Data collection	January/February 2024; questionnaire, distributed on social networks
Sample	267 active European social media users (60% female, 37% male, 3% diverse, average age 28 years) 81% used social networks several times a day, the others once a day or several times a week
Experimental design	2 (response strategy: reply to negative only vs. some positive and negative) x 2 (response type: defensive vs. accommodative) x 2 (account type: standard vs. humanized) between-subjects
Study context	See Table A1
Procedure	Watching the video with the simulated social media thread (the hotel's post, the consumer comments, and the hotel's replies) → rating statements measuring the link between the arguments derived from ADT and response strategy, response type, and account type (see below) → evaluating scenario realism → providing information about social media usage (see Preliminary Study) and demographics
Scenario realism across groups	(1) "The described situation was realistic to me": $F=0.902$, $p>0.10$ (2) "I was well able to put myself in the situation": $F=0.480$, $p>0.10$ (3) "It is likely that social media users experience such firm response behavior in real life": $F=0.186$, $p>0.10$
Social media usage across groups	(1) "I see myself as an active and engaging social media user": $F=0.647$, $p>0.10$ (2) "I regularly like postings and leave comments on social media": $F=0.417$, $p>0.10$ (3) "I regularly take part in discussions on social media": $F=1.398$, $p>0.10$
Response characteristic	Measures and results
Response strategy: The hotel's strategy of replying to only negative vs. some positive and negative comments...	leaves clear patterns in the social network thread that are easily and quickly recognizable: $M_{neg_only}=5.82$, $M_{pos_neg}=3.96$ ($t=15.566$, $p<0.001$) is systematic (consumers quickly understand the hotel's criteria for replying to comments): $M_{neg_only}=5.50$, $M_{pos_neg}=3.89$ ($t=12.608$, $p<0.001$) shows a consistent approach to addressing consumer feedback: $M_{neg_only}=5.87$, $M_{pos_neg}=4.49$ ($t=9.714$, $p<0.001$) demonstrates the hotel's genuine care for its customers: $M_{neg_only}=5.62$, $M_{pos_neg}=4.24$ ($t=10.164$, $p<0.001$) is accessible: $M_{neg_only}=5.06$, $M_{pos_neg}=3.53$ ($t=11.342$, $p<0.001$) is diagnostic: $M_{neg_only}=4.45$, $M_{pos_neg}=3.38$ ($t=8.099$, $p<0.001$)
Response type: The hotel's strategy of apologizing and showing effort to solve the issues vs. rejecting responsibility and showing no effort to solve the issues...	reveals useful and helpful information that is relevant to my situation: $M_{def}=2.54$, $M_{acc}=6.00$ ($t=-24.599$, $p<0.001$) offers value to me as a complaining customer: $M_{def}=1.76$, $M_{acc}=6.31$ ($t=-40.515$, $p<0.001$) compensates for the effort I have spent on writing the complaint and addressing related issues: $M_{def}=2.59$, $M_{acc}=6.02$ ($t=-25.806$, $p<0.001$) demonstrates the hotel's genuine care for its customers: $M_{def}=1.64$, $M_{acc}=6.31$ ($t=-40.003$, $p<0.001$) is accessible: $M_{def}=4.29$, $M_{acc}=4.50$ ($t=-1.419$, $p>0.10$) is diagnostic: $M_{def}=2.40$, $M_{acc}=6.31$ ($t=-28.718$, $p<0.001$)
Account type: The hotel's strategy of replying from the standard firm account vs. a humanized account	shows human touch: $M_{stand}=2.60$, $M_{hum}=6.14$ ($t=-33.598$, $p<0.001$) makes the communication partner tangible: $M_{stand}=2.44$, $M_{hum}=6.36$ ($t=-38.522$, $p<0.001$) increases the hotel's authenticity: $M_{stand}=3.19$, $M_{hum}=5.84$ ($t=-19.519$, $p<0.001$) demonstrates the hotel's genuine care for its customers: $M_{stand}=3.27$, $M_{hum}=5.93$ ($t=-17.930$, $p<0.001$)

(with personal details like is accessible: $M_{stand}=3.18$, $M_{hum}=6.20$ ($t=-25.296$, $p<0.001$)
photo/name/contact infor- is diagnostic: $M_{stand}=3.22$, $M_{hum}=6.01$ ($t=-20.633$, $p<0.001$)
mation)...

Note: neg_only: replying to only negative comments, pos_neg: replying to some positive and negative comments; def=defensive, acc: accommodative; stand=standard, hum=humanized; scale: 1=completely disagree, ..., 7=completely agree, except information accessibility: 1=not at all accessible, ..., 7=very accessible, information diagnosticity: 1=not at all diagnostic, ..., 7=very diagnostic

The results in Table 3 indicate that replying to only negative comments leaves clear and recognizable patterns, is perceived as a systematic and consistent approach to addressing customer feedback, demonstrates customer orientation, and is evaluated as more accessible than replying to some positive and negative comments. Accommodative responses appear to offer useful and helpful information for complainants, provide value, compensate for the effort of complaining, demonstrate the firm's customer orientation, and are more diagnostic than defensive responses. Humanized accounts are perceived as more human and tangible, increase the firm's authenticity, demonstrate the firm's customer orientation, and appear more accessible and diagnostic than standard accounts. Overall, these findings support our ADT-based arguments and provide an appropriate theoretical rationale for the hypothesized effects. In the main study presented next, we test the hypothesized relationships.

Main study

Method

As we were interested in the effects of three factors with two levels each (i.e., two alternative response strategies, two response types, and two account types), the main study was based on a 2 (response strategy: reply to negative only vs. some positive and negative) $\times$ 2 (response type: defensive vs. accommodative) $\times$ 2 (account type: standard vs. humanized) between-subjects design. When the “reply to only negative comments” strategy was used, the firm responded to all negative comments but not to any positive ones. In the case of the “reply to some positive and negative” strategy, the firm responded to two positive and two negative comments to demonstrate a selective yet fair approach that considers both favorable and unfavorable feedback and is easy for firms to implement (see details in Table A1). While service firms may adjust the content of their social network posts to specific social networks (Shen, 2023), firms typically maintain consistent communication strategies across platforms to preserve brand coherence (Rashkova et al., 2024; Tao and Wilson, 2015), thereby minimizing the likelihood of platform-related biases. Thus, service firms likely select a specific response strategy and use this strategy across platforms.

In early 2024, we collected our data through an online questionnaire shared on social networks and the international data collection platform Prolific.com that connects researchers with comprehensively screened study participants for academic and scientific studies (final sample: 419 active social network users who passed the manipulation checks; 59% female, 39% male, 2% diverse; average age: 32 years; 53% European, 47% American). The participants needed to

be at least 18 years old and have prior experience with complaints on social networks. Those who did not meet these criteria were redirected and informed that they did not qualify to participate and thus did not proceed with the survey. 75% of the participants used social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, X) several times a day, while the others used them once a day or several times a week.

With the international sample, we aimed to achieve greater representativeness. Given the global reach of social networks, service firms need to develop social media communication strategies that effectively engage an international audience. Europe and America are among the geographical regions with the highest numbers of social network users worldwide (Dixon, 2025). Potential bias due to cultural differences should be a minor concern here, as both regions are considered individualistic, which leads to comparably positive attitudes toward social networks (Alsaleh et al., 2019) and high service quality expectations (Donthu and Yoo, 1998).

The participants were asked to imagine that they had booked a hotel's special offer from a social network and learned at check-in that the promotion's conditions did not apply. Unable to cancel, they decided to stay. They then had to imagine sharing their negative experience under the hotel's post using an alias. With these instructions, we ensured that the respondents adopted the perspective of the complaining commenter. The participants saw the hotel's post about the special offer, consumer comments, including their alias' comment, and the firm's replies in a video.

After seeing the introductory scenario and the video simulation of the social network thread (please refer to the descriptions of the stimulus material in Table A1), the respondents rated their attitudes toward the firm, complaint satisfaction and perceptions of the firm's response and customer orientation (see Table 4).

Table 4. Measures

Variable	Item	OW/OL ²	t-value	Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceptions of the firm's response (formative) based on focus group insights	(not at all useful...extremely useful) ¹	-	-	-	-	-
	not at all helpful...extremely helpful	0.65	9.074***			
	not at all emotional...extremely emotional	0.20	3.38**			
	not at all credible...extremely credible	0.37	4.75***			
Complaint satisfaction ³ (reflective) adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), Varela-Neira et al. (2010)	I would be satisfied with the way the hotel handled my complaint.	0.96	156.74***	0.95	0.96	0.90
	Complaining to the hotel seems to be a positive experience.	0.94	108.90***			
	In my opinion, the hotel provides a satisfactory answer to my problem.	0.95	104.13***			
Customer orientation perceptions ³ (reflective) adapted from Homburg et al. (2007), Valenzuela et al. (2010)	The hotel is aware that customers are important factors that influence their success.	0.89	63.94***	0.94	0.96	0.85
	The hotel emphasizes customer-related activities.	0.93	78.12***			
	The hotel has a customer-oriented culture.	0.95	133.95***			
	Customers are a focal point of the [...] hotel's activities.	0.92	52.04***			
Attitudes toward the firm (reflective) adapted from Spears and Singh (2004)	unappealing...appealing	0.90	61.00***	0.96	0.97	0.87
	bad...good	0.93	91.88***			
	unpleasant...pleasant	0.95	134.79***			
	unfavorable...favorable	0.95	175.24***			
	unlikeable...likeable	0.95	130.06***			

1: The first indicator was excluded from the analysis because of high correlations with the other indicators; low to moderate correlations between the remaining indicators; 2OW: outer weights (formative indicators), OL: outer loadings (reflective indicators); CR: composite reliability, AVE: average variance extracted; 3scales for complaint satisfaction and customer orientation perceptions: 1=completely disagree, ..., 7=completely agree; model fit: SRMR=0.03; NFI=0.93; ***: p<.001, **: p<.01, *: p<.05; The stars do not represent footnote designators. They indicate statistical significance levels. The meaning of the stars as significance levels is explained in the table's footnote

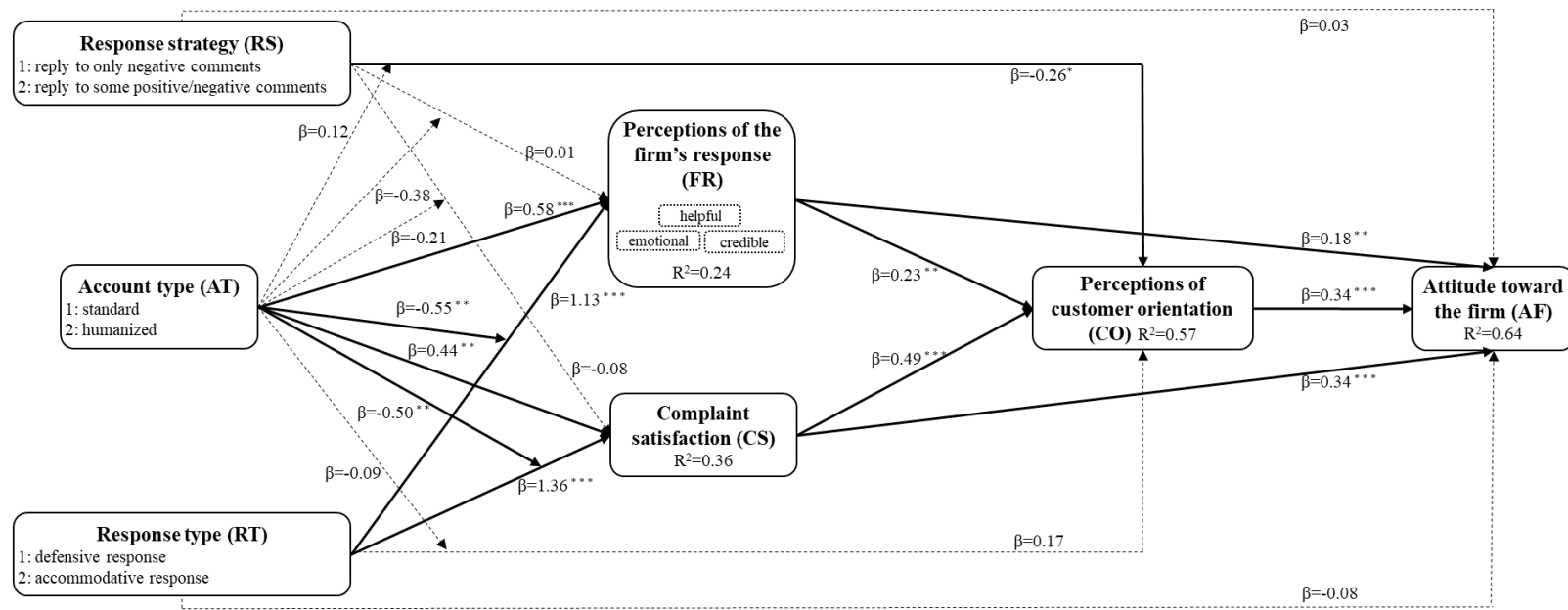
Next, they indicated whether the hotel replied to only negative or some positive and negative comments, in a defensive or accommodative way, and from a standard or humanized account (one option to select for each manipulation check). Approximately 80% of the respondents (initial sample) correctly recognized all manipulations. This percentage is sufficiently high for the study context, as not all social network users pay much attention to such threads in real situations. Finally, the respondents completed scenario realism checks, assessed their social media usage behavior (see Table A1), and provided demographics.

The fit indices (see Table 4) for the measurement model are appropriate. All factor loadings (reflective indicators) are significant and exceed 0.70, confirming convergent validity (Bagozzi et al., 1991). All composite reliabilities surpass 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All Cronbach's alpha values exceed 0.70 (Ponterotto and Ruckdeschel, 2007). The AVE values surpass all squared correlations between the respective pairs of latent variables ($r^2_{CS_CO}=0.54$; $r^2_{CS_AF}=0.54$; $r^2_{CO_AF}=0.50$), proving discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Results

A contingency analysis shows that response strategy and response type are independent (coefficient of contingency: 0.001). We examined all hypothesized effects (see Figure 1) simultaneously using SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2022). Although partial least squares structural equation modeling does not make any assumptions about variable distributions (Hair et al., 2011), we assessed the construct scores, composed of single items, for skewness and kurtosis, as recommended by Hair et al. (2022). All skewness values lie between -1 and 1 (complaint satisfaction (CS): 0.472, perceptions of customer orientation (CO): -0.067, attitude toward the firm (AF): 0.596), and the kurtosis values lie between -2 and 2 (CS: -1.027, CO: -0.957, AF: -0.118). According to Hair et al. (2022), values falling into these intervals can be interpreted as not too far from normal. Thus, the variable distributions seem to be adequate for the planned analysis.

Figure 1. Path analysis



Control variables: region of the data collection ($\beta=0.32^{**}$), age ($\beta=0.09^*$), gender ($\beta=-0.03$), active social media user ($\beta=0.01$), active commenter ($\beta=0.09$), scenario realism ($\beta=0.03$), ease of imagining the situation ($\beta=-0.01$), realistic firm response behavior ($\beta=-0.08$); NFI=0.93

Significant indirect effects from response strategy/type to attitude toward the firm:

- RS → CO → AF (accessibility path): -0.09^*
- RT → FR → AF: 0.21^*
- RT → FR → CO → AF (diagnosticity path a): 0.09^*
- RT → CO → AF: 0.46^{***}
- RT → CS → CO → AF (diagnosticity path b): 0.22^{***}
- AT x RT → CS → AF: -0.17^*
- AT x RT → CS → CO → AF: -0.08^*

Note. For clarity reasons, unexpected, non-significant effects are not visualized; ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$

Response strategy's effects. As Figure 1 illustrates, the response strategy does not affect perceptions of the firm's response ($\beta=0.01$, $p>0.10$) and complaint satisfaction ($\beta=-0.08$, $p>0.10$). Instead, it affects perceived customer orientation directly ($\beta=-0.26$, $p<0.05$) and attitudes toward the firm indirectly (response strategy $\rightarrow$ perceptions of customer orientation $\rightarrow$ attitudes toward the firm: -0.09 , $p<0.05$). Thus, complaining commenters consider the corporate response strategy when evaluating a firm's customer orientation. The negative sign of the coefficient representing the effect of the response strategy on perceived customer orientation indicates that replying to all negative consumer comments triggers perceptions of stronger customer orientation than replying to some positive and negative comments. Stronger customer orientation perceptions, in turn, result in more positive attitudes toward the firm. This result aligns with the preliminary and the ADT application study findings. It suggests that replying only to negative comments is a more recognizable, consistent, and systematic approach to complaint management and, thus, more accessible and diagnostic. These results support **H1** and **H2**, confirming the hypothesized accessibility path. The account type does not moderate the response strategy's effects.

Response type's effects and interaction with the account type. The response type does not directly affect customer orientation perceptions ($\beta=0.17$, $p>0.10$) but has indirect effects through perceptions of the firm's response (response type $\rightarrow$ perceptions of the firm's response $\rightarrow$ perceptions of customer orientation $\rightarrow$ attitudes toward the firm: 0.09 , $p<0.05$) and complaint satisfaction (response type $\rightarrow$ complaint satisfaction $\rightarrow$ perceptions of customer orientation $\rightarrow$ attitudes toward the firm: 0.22 , $p<0.001$). The positive path coefficient in Figure 1 ($\beta=1.13$, $p<0.001$) indicates that accommodative responses (coded as 2) lead to perceiving the firm's response as more helpful, emotional, and credible, and to higher complaint satisfaction than defensive responses (coded as 1). These results support **H3** and **H5** and align with our ADT application study, which indicated that accommodative responses offer customers greater insight and diagnostic value. Furthermore, more positive perceptions of the firm's response and higher complaint satisfaction lead to perceiving a stronger customer orientation and more positive attitudes toward the firm, confirming the hypothesized diagnosticity paths (support for **H4** and **H6**). Moreover, there are significant interaction effects of response type and account type on response perceptions ($\beta=-0.55$, $p<0.01$) and complaint satisfaction ($\beta=1.36$, $p<0.001$).

Table 5 contains the mean values illustrating these interaction effects identified in the path analysis.

Table 5. Mean values related to the interaction effect identified in the path analysis

	Complaint satisfaction		Perceptions of the firm's response					
			helpful		emotional		credible	
<i>Account type</i>	standard	humanized	standard	humanized	standard	humanized	standard	humanized
<i>Response type</i>								
accommodative	4.22	3.90	4.22	3.84	3.63	3.40	4.39	4.31
defensive	1.71	2.28	2.15	2.72	2.65	3.22	3.04	3.44
Δ	2.51	1.63	2.07	1.12	0.98	0.18	1.35	0.87
t-value	12.71***	6.18***	8.95***	3.83***	4.60***	0.67	5.82***	2.98**

***: $p < .001$, **: $p < .01$, *: $p < .05$

The results confirm that accommodative responses more positively affect perceptions of the firm's response and complaint satisfaction than defensive responses. Thus, **H7a** regarding standard accounts is supported. **H7b** regarding humanized accounts is not supported, as humanized accounts reduce but do not entirely offset the superiority of accommodative over defensive responses. Linking this finding to our ADT application study suggests that humanized accounts increase accessibility and diagnosticity but cannot entirely eliminate the negative effects of defensive service firm responses.

Conclusion

Discussion

Going beyond previous studies that analyzed observing consumers (e.g., Huang and Ki, 2023; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Lopes et al., 2024; Park and Jiang, 2021; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017) and single aspects of corporate communication (e.g., Chevalier et al., 2018; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Huang et al., 2024; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025), we investigated the combined effects of strategic communication elements on complaining commenters in a service recovery context. While previous studies primarily examined the impact of corporate response approaches on review platforms (e.g., Esmark Jones et al., 2018; Rezvani and Rojas, 2022; Tathagata and Amar, 2018), we focused on social networks. We thereby contribute to the existing literature on social media, service recovery, and strategic communication.

The first insight from our studies is that, from the perspective of complaining commenters, service firms' replies to only negative comments are more effective than replies to some positive and negative comments. This finding not only aligns with service recovery literature emphasizing the importance of fair complaint handling (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Tax et al., 1998), but also reflects strategic communication principles highlighting the value of consistent organizational communication (Coombs, 2007; Frandsen and

Johansen, 2017; Sharma and Patterson, 1999). We advance both research fields by translating fair and consistent communication into a social media-based complaint-handling approach. This finding can also be linked to social media and webcare research indicating that ignoring complaints can trigger negative reactions of complainants (Gu and Ye, 2014), while addressing them strengthens firm-customer relationships (Ma et al., 2015), and improves repurchase intentions (Istanbulluoglu and Sakman, 2024), brand evaluations (Sparks and Bradley, 2017), and (favorable) engagement intentions (Gu and Ye, 2014; Liu et al., 2019; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017). However, as these studies only consider responses to complaints (reply vs. no reply), our findings on replies to some positive and negative comments go beyond these previous insights. Moreover, by comparing the effects of different response strategies and focusing on active complainants, we extend Van Noort and Willemsen's (2012) research, showing that observing users evaluate a firm more favorably when it provides proactive complaint handling by responding to negative comments. Thus, our research adds novel insights by revealing that responses to complaints can lead to better outcomes than broader response strategies on social networks.

In terms of user perceptions of firm responses, we advance the finding that perceived effort and care, signaled through a company's interactivity on social media, positively influence brand attitudes (Colliander et al., 2015) by examining the impact of specific response strategies and shifting the focus from passive observers to actively complaining customers. Additionally, we extend the findings of Sparks et al. (2016), who investigated how responses to reviews shape observers' perceptions of a firm's trustworthiness and customer concern, by focusing on social network interactions and the perceptions of the complainants. Moreover, while customer orientation is well established in offline service contexts, our study is among the first to examine this important construct within social media interactions and to show that the mechanism underlying this effect is the increased accessibility of replies to negative comments.

The second insight from our research is that, on social networks, accommodative responses from service firms lead to more favorable complainant reactions than defensive responses. We thereby confirm previous research outlining the positive effects of accommodative responses on complainants in social media and webcare contexts (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Tsao and Su, 2021; Van Mulken and Heslenfeld, 2025), as well as service recovery (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998). We show that service firms' defensive responses to complaints are inappropriate, which challenges previous studies suggesting that defensive responses can be equally or more effective in some situations (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2023; Weitzl, 2019; Weitzl and Einwiller, 2020; Weitzl et al., 2018). We further extend prior research

on strategic communication by showing that accommodative responses are perceived as more helpful, emotional, and credible, and by shedding light on these perceptions and complaint satisfaction as key drivers of perceived customer orientation and attitudes toward the firm. Beyond that, we identify information diagnosticity as the mechanism underlying the effect of the response type on user perceptions.

Our third insight is that using humanized accounts can help mitigate the negative impact of defensive responses in service recovery settings. This result offers novel insights into how firms can enhance the effectiveness of their defensive responses. We advance the findings of Herhausen et al. (2020), who showed that employees' digital presence enhances perceived customer orientation in a website context, by demonstrating that this effect also holds on social networks. Moreover, our findings extend previous research suggesting that specific sender information on social media can improve observing consumers' reactions (Barcelos et al., 2018; Huang and Ki, 2023; Lopes et al., 2024) by providing insights into the effects on actively complaining commenters. As only one study examined the interaction between response type (accommodative vs. mixed accommodative-defensive) and response sender on complainants in a review context (Tathagata and Amar, 2018), we advance this line of research by clearly differentiating accommodative and defensive responses, focusing on social networks, and examining combined effects of response and account type on response perceptions, perceived customer orientation, and attitudes toward the firm. Our findings diverge from those of Esmark Jones et al. (2018), who found no significant difference between account types. An explanation could be that they only presented the employee's name, whereas our humanized account additionally included a photo and contact information, which may enhance perceptions of accessibility and diagnosticity. Thus, we contribute novel evidence by outlining the importance of humanized communication, particularly in complaint management, and its role in increasing both accessibility and diagnosticity in firm-consumer interactions on social networks.

Theoretical contributions

We extend the scope of ADT by applying it to social network interactions between service firms and complaining customers, a field of research where ADT application has remained limited. Prior studies in online contexts have applied ADT to areas such as review helpfulness on review platforms (Chen et al., 2024), observer reactions to recovery strategies on online platforms (Huang and Ha, 2020), and decision-making based on AI recommendations (Stergiou and Nella, 2024). We provide a unique contribution by empirically demonstrating the role of

accessibility and diagnosticity of different communication elements (response strategy, response type, and account type) for complaining commenters in social media marketing communication. In service recovery settings on social networks, accessibility and diagnosticity emerge as critical factors for firms seeking to influence their customers' perceptions positively. Our measures, empirically tested in the ADT application study, extend previous applications of ADT and can be used in future studies.

Beyond extending ADT, our study contributes to the social media, webcare, service recovery and strategic communication literature by presenting a novel response strategy framework to explain how customers react to complaint handling strategies in interactive social network settings, drawing on key constructs such as complaint satisfaction, perceived customer orientation, and attitudes. Our findings demonstrate that firms' responses are not only operational recovery actions but also send strategic communication signals. By showing that different combinations of response strategies, types, and accounts trigger distinct processing paths, we enrich the theoretical understanding of consumer reactions to digital complaint handling. Importantly, we reveal the benefits of humanized account types on social networks. While service research in online contexts has largely focused on automated digital interactions and customers' perceptions of human touch in AI-driven service encounters (e.g., Khan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2022), our study shifts attention to the importance of genuine human contact in social network environments. Although providing empathetic and tangible support to customers is recognized as a core dimension of service quality (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zygiaris et al., 2022), its implications for social media-based service recovery remain underexplored. We address this lack of research by highlighting the importance of humanized communication on social networks to strengthen relational and emotional elements that contribute to successful service recovery. We furthermore identify perceived customer orientation as a central mechanism that links service recovery communication to complaining customers' attitudinal responses on social networks. While prior research has extensively examined perceived customer orientation in face-to-face service interactions (e.g., Kim et al., 2012; Sommovigo et al., 2019; Yoo et al., 2015), this construct has received limited attention in social network contexts. We additionally enrich service recovery literature, often centered on fairness perceptions (e.g., Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Tax et al., 1998), by introducing perceptions of customer orientation as an important, explanatory dimension.

Practical contributions

Our initial analysis of real service firms' response behavior outlines that selective response strategies, accommodative replies and standard accounts are widespread marketing practices on social networks. Our findings challenge these common approaches and offer recommendations for more effective communication. The insights from our studies provide the following set of practical guidelines for service firms seeking to leverage their social media marketing communication, even if responding to every comment is not feasible.

Prioritize responses to negative comments: Service firms may often find it complex to identify the user comments they should reply to, and one strategy might not work for all firms or contexts. Nevertheless, we recommend that service firms facing limited resources, frequent complaints, high customer churn or low complaint satisfaction respond consistently to all negative comments on their corporate social networking site. Visible and professional complaint handling signals customer care, thereby enhancing consumers' attitudes toward the firm. Once all negative comments have been addressed, remaining capacities can be allocated to replying to positive ones.

Favor accommodative over defensive responses: Social media managers should use accommodative responses whenever possible, as they lead to higher complaint satisfaction, more favorable perceptions of the firm's response and customer orientation, and more positive consumer attitudes. At the same time, we recognize that marketing practice requires flexibility and defensive replies may sometimes be necessary. In such cases, a humanized communication approach can mitigate the negative effects of defensive responses while maintaining professionalism and credibility.

Implement humanized account types: Our findings suggest that human agents, rather than impersonal AI systems, should reply. Displaying the replying employee's name, photo and contact details requires minimal effort, does not affect labor costs, aligns with the personal and reciprocal nature of social networks, enhances customer perceptions, and helps firms stand out from competitors. This novel finding can also be applied to other online customer service contexts, where implementing humanized communication strategies may benefit firms.

Signal strong customer orientation: Social media managers should proactively demonstrate the firm's customer focus in their responses. Highlighting attentiveness, willingness to help, and understanding of the complainant's situation reassures social network users that the service

firm values its customers. Using a humanized account enhances perceptions of customer orientation by making the service representative more concrete and tangible.

Ensure that responses are helpful, emotional, and credible: Service firms' social media managers should provide responses that are helpful, emotional, and credible from both the firm's and the complainant's perspectives. Purposeful and well-structured responses, rather than offhand replies, help complaining users and likely even observers to better understand the situation and form positive impressions of the firm. While empathetic responses are well-established in traditional complaint management, our findings offer clear guidance for complaint handling on social networks, highlighting the positive impact of humanized communication on perceptions of firm responses in these public yet personal online environments. In light of the critical role of customer relationship management in the service sector, implementing these recommendations can help retain complaining customers.

Limitations and further research

Our studies focused on complaining social network users. Future studies could investigate the combined effects of response strategy, type, and account on perceptions of other visitors of the corporate social networking site, e.g., observing or favorably engaging consumers. Furthermore, since our research used a specific scenario, the findings may not be directly applicable to other contexts. Future research should therefore examine our research questions for other types of service providers and complaints, as well as other comment volumes. Moreover, we only simulated the experience of scrolling through a social media thread. Future research could replicate our findings using real social networking sites to make the study even more realistic and enhance validity. We also purposely examined two selective response strategies that service firms with limited social media marketing budgets can use. Future studies could include the "reply to all comments" strategy to examine whether and under which conditions it justifies additional budget allocation and outperforms the two strategies examined here. Moreover, we examined replies to two positive and two negative comments for the "reply to some positive and negative comments" strategy. Future research should systematically vary the number of positive and negative comments being addressed. When selective response strategies are used, the influence of justice perceptions should also be evaluated, as some consumers may not receive replies, which could impact their justice perceptions and subsequent reactions. Additionally, we assumed that firms consistently provide accommodative or defensive responses. For future studies, examining consumer reactions to responses that combine accommodative and

defensive elements would be an interesting topic. Moreover, as service firms may have valid reasons for replying in different ways depending on the context, we suggest that future studies examine which (combinations of) strategies are most effective for different interactions between service firms and customers on social networks. Finally, future studies may consider boundary conditions such as platform type, complaint severity, industry context, or cultural differences.

Appendix

Table A1. Preliminary study

Objective	Examining how reasonable selective response strategies affect complainants' customer orientation perceptions and attitudes toward the firm.
Data collection	November 2023, questionnaire distributed on social networks
Sample	140 active European social network users (64% female, 34% male, 2% diverse; average age: 29 years) 74% used social networks several times a day, the others once a day or several times a week
Experimental design	2 groups (response strategy: reply to negative only vs. some positive and negative)
Study context	Fictitious hotel stay: The participants had to imagine that they had booked a hotel's special offer from a social network and learned at check-in that the promotion's conditions do not apply. Unable to cancel, they decided to stay. They then had to imagine that they shared their negative experience under the hotel's post using an alias. The participants saw the hotel's special offer post, the consumer comments, including the comment of their alias, and the firm's replies in a video.
Stimulus	7 consumer comments appeared one after another to realistically simulate scrolling through a vivid social network thread 4 positive and 3 negative comments (as there are usually more positive than negative comments, East et al., 2007, but negative comments are often longer, Homburg et al., 2015); based on actual firm response behavior and pretested
Experimental conditions	<i>reply to only negative comments</i> : hotel replied accommodatively to all negative comments by apologizing (e.g., "we are very sorry to hear that ..."), showing the willingness to recover failures (e.g., "we would like to find a solution for ..."), and/or offering compensation ("we would like to give you a 20% discount on your next booking") <i>reply to some positive and negative comments</i> : hotel replied to 2 negative comments (see above) and 2 positive comments (by expressing appreciation, "We are happy to hear that", and gratitude, e.g., "Thanks")
Account type	Humanized account with photo, name, and email address
Procedure	Watching the video with the hotel's post, consumer comments, and hotel's replies → rating attitudes toward the firm and perceptions of customer orientation (see Table 4) → indicating whether the hotel replied only to negative or some positive and negative comments (one option to tick, all participants passed this check) → evaluating scenario realism → providing information about social media usage and demographics
Scenario realism across groups	(1) "The described situation was realistic to me": $t=-0.023$, $p>0.10$ (2) "I was well able to put myself in the situation": $t=0.140$, $p>0.10$ (3) "It is likely that social media users experience such response behavior in real life": $t=-0.323$, $p>0.10$
Social media usage across groups	(1) "I see myself as an active and engaging social media user": $t=-0.734$, $p>0.10$ (2) "I regularly like postings and leave comments on social media": $t=-1.331$, $p>0.10$ (3) "I regularly take part in discussions on social media": $t=-1.022$, $p>0.10$

Results	Perceived customer orientation: $M_{\text{neg_only}}=4.68$, $M_{\text{pos_neg}}=4.27$ ($t=2.077$, $p<0.05$) Attitude toward the firm: $M_{\text{neg_only}}=4.17$, $M_{\text{pos_neg}}=4.00$ ($t=1.017$, $p>0.10$)
Interpretation	Complaining commenters perceive service firm replies to only negative comments as more customer-oriented than replies to some positive and negative comments when accommodative responses are provided from humanized accounts (no direct effect on attitudes toward the firm). As replying to only negative comments seems to result in better perceptions among commenters and address complaints more effectively, we investigate the impact of accommodative vs. defensive responses and the role of standard vs. humanized accounts related to the “reply to negative only” strategy in more detail through focus groups.
Note: neg_only: replying to only negative comments, pos_neg: replying to some positive and negative comments; all items measured on 7-point scales (1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree)	

Figure A1. Stimulus examples

Replying to some positive and negative comments,
accommodative responses, humanized account

sama_hotel

TIME OUT
IN THE
MOUNTAINS
AHEAD
-20% OFF

Liked by snjstl and others

sama_hotel Time out in the mountains ahead! We have a great offer for you: book your stay with us within the next two weeks and benefit from a 20 percent discount! Please find additional information on our website.

#sama #samahotel #hotelinthemountains #timeout #holidays #relaxation #hiking #specialoffer #discount

View all 103 comments

10 days ago

sama_hotel

andrewwww

Your offers are awesome, guys. @liliana let's go for another hiking weekend

1d 1 Like Reply

sophie.adr.

Thanks for the great deal. We had a fantastic stay. It's worth it 🥰🥰

22h Reply

sama_hotel

We are happy to hear that Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

3h Reply

thisisnico

This is crap. Start to communicate transparently @sama_hotel. You fooled me the last time.

19h Reply

sandra91

Cool 🥰

17h Reply

sama_hotel

Thanks ❤️ Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

3h Reply

jess.23

At check-in, they told me that the offer is only valid for stays of at least 3 nights and wanted to charge me a cancellation fee. This is not okay, there is no such information!

15h Reply

sama_hotel

Hey, we are very sorry for the confusion. The terms and conditions of the offer are on our website. However, we would like to give you a 20% discount on your next booking (no matter for how many nights). Please check your pm. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

3h Reply

maike.foerster

🥰🥰🥰

14h Reply

albertius

your service could be better

5h Reply

sama_kim

Hey, we are very sorry to hear that since we put high emphasis on excellent service. It would be great if you could help us improving our service by telling us what exactly happened. Kim from Sama Hotel (kim@sama.com)

3h Reply

Add a comment

Replying to only negative comments,
defensive responses, standard account

sama_hotel

TIME OUT
IN THE
MOUNTAINS
AHEAD
-20% OFF

Liked by snjstl and others

sama_hotel Time out in the mountains ahead! We have a great offer for you: book your stay with us within the next two weeks and benefit from a 20 percent discount! Please find additional information on our website.

#sama #samahotel #hotelinthemountains #timeout #holidays #relaxation #hiking #specialoffer #discount

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Thanks for the great deal. We had a fantastic stay. It's worth it 🥰🥰

22h Reply

thisisnico

This is crap. Start to communicate transparently @sama_hotel. You fooled me the last time.

12h Reply

sandra91

Cool 🥰

7h Reply

jess.23

At check-in, they told me that the offer is only valid for stays of at least 3 nights and wanted to charge me a cancellation fee. This is not okay, there is no such information!

12h Reply

sama_hotel

Hey, you can find the terms and conditions, including the information about the minimum duration, on our website. we cannot do anything about the fee. If you cancel last minute, the probability of a new booking for the room for the same day is extremely low. Your team from Sama Hotel

3h Reply

maike.foerster

🥰🥰🥰

6h Reply

albertius

your service could be better..

5h Reply

sama_hotel

Hey, we care about excellent services and are rated as one of the best service providers in town. We recommend to give direct feedback to the responsible parties during your stay. Your team from Sama Hotel

3h Reply

Add a comment

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5. Third research paper: Unlocking (re)purchase potential through corporate responsiveness on social networks: The role of perceived customer orientation³

Abstract

Social media marketing offers companies a new opportunity to connect with consumers through customer interactions. However, resource constraints may prevent companies from responding to every consumer comment. In light of this, the “reply to random comments strategy” emerges as an innovative approach where companies choose to respond to a mix of positive and negative comments. Yet, there is a lack of research and no standard practice for this strategy. This research used a mixed-methods approach and signaling theory as a theoretical framework to provide extensive insights into how consumers react to various corporate response rates to random comments on social networks. Qualitative insights were gained through focus group discussions, while an empirical investigation was conducted using least squares modeling. The findings highlight the advantages of a high corporate response rate and the importance of signaling a strong customer orientation to enhance (re)purchase intentions of commenting and observing social network users. They also reveal the crucial mediating role of perceived customer orientation as a novel variable in this context. This research provides social media managers with guidelines on enhancing social network users’ (re)purchase intentions by implementing a customer-oriented response strategy. The insights help practitioners build and maintain customer relationships, contributing to a company’s long-term success.

Keywords

Social media marketing; Social networks; Corporate communication; Corporate response strategy; Customer orientation; (Re)Purchase intention

³ Stuhldreier, S. M. (2024). Unlocking (re)purchase potential through corporate responsiveness on social networks: The role of perceived customer orientation. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 81, 104041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.104041>

Introduction

Social media is a growing field that offers many opportunities for marketing activities (Si, 2015) and allows companies to reach large audiences with little or no cost (Wright and Hinson, 2009). Notably, social networks with highly interactive and interpersonal characteristics (Sung and Kim, 2014) support corporate attempts to connect with target groups through company-customer interactions (Coelho et al., 2018; Li et al., 2023). Due to the public nature of social networks, non-targeted consumers can also observe a company's interactions with its customers. Therefore, a company's response strategy can affect company-related perceptions and behaviors of both actively commenting and passively observing social network users (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2022; Javornik et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Customers value a company's ability to provide superior digital customer service. A company can demonstrate its interest in customer concerns by having an effective response strategy and showcasing its high customer orientation (Liu et al., 2020b; Varela-Neira et al., 2023). Additionally, companies can take advantage of social networks to boost purchase intentions. A company's response strategy has the potential to enhance its credibility and reduce uncertainty in purchase situations (Zinko et al., 2021). This can ultimately increase the chances of consumers making a purchase (Gutierrez et al., 2023; Nisar and Whitehead, 2016; Wang et al., 2020; Zinko et al., 2021). As a result, effective corporate communication on social networks can support the creation and maintenance of customer relationships (Ellison et al., 2007; Lim et al., 2015; Rau et al., 2008).

A company's interactivity and, accordingly, response rate to consumer comments play a pivotal role in the corporate response strategy (Ma et al., 2022; Sung and Kim, 2014). However, companies face an ever-increasing number of positive and negative consumer comments as well as budget constraints. Thus, they face the challenge of implementing a response strategy that is feasible and positively influences consumer reactions. Replying to all comments seems to be the most customer-oriented strategy, but many companies do not have the resources to do so (Wang et al., 2020). This can lead to companies only replying to negative comments to increase customer satisfaction or to only positive comments to foster more positive social media engagement from consumers. Nonetheless, enhancing customer satisfaction and increasing favorable social media engagement are both important aspects of a successful social network strategy (Schamari and Schäfers, 2015). Therefore, a company may conclude to reply to some positive and negative comments, referred to as the "reply to random comments" strategy.

Previous research shows that high response rates can lead to more positive consumer reactions (e.g., Sheng et al., 2021; Sung and Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, existing studies focus on the response rate to negative comments (e.g., Kim et al., 2015) or positive comments (e.g., Wang and Chaudhry, 2018). Only a few studies examine the corporate response rate to random consumer comments (e.g., Xie et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020b; Lui et al., 2018), but they do not look at the effects of responding to positive and negative comments equally. Previous research has also concentrated on commenters and neglected the observer perspective, even though a company's response strategy can influence both types of social network users. Moreover, a look at corporate response behavior in marketing practice shows a wide variation in response rates to random comments. While the food delivery service Uber Eats responds randomly to only a few positive and negative consumer comments on Instagram, the leading American grocery retailer Kroger replies to way higher numbers of comments of different valence. These examples show that there is no standard practice or established theoretical understanding regarding the impact of varying response rates to random consumer comments.

Therefore, this research examines the potential differing effects of the response rate when a company uses the “reply to random comments” strategy, i.e., responding to an equal number of positive and negative consumer comments. The focus is on customers posting a complaint and consumers who observe company-customer interactions because it is particularly challenging for companies to activate these consumers' (re)purchase intentions. This research pursues the following objectives:

- 1) Gain insights into how complaining commenters and observers perceive a company's communication strategy on social networks based on its response rate to random comments.
- 2) Systematically analyze the effects of a company's response rate to random comments on customer orientation perceptions and (re)purchase intentions of both types of social network users.
- 3) Examine the potential mediating role of perceived customer orientation in the relation between the company's response rate and consumers' (re)purchase intentions.

A qualitative study addresses the first research objective and provides insights into consumer reactions in this little-studied research context. It highlights perceived customer orientation as a novel and relevant variable to be considered in this context. A subsequent quantitative study expands on the qualitative findings and focuses on the remaining two research objectives. Using least squares modeling, the quantitative study empirically investigates the combined effects of

a company's response rate to random comments (low vs. high) and consumer perspective (complaining commenter vs. observer). It also examines whether perceived customer orientation is an underlying mechanism in the relation between the response rate and consumers' (re)purchase intentions. The mixed-methods approach enhances the validity and generalizability of findings by providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Ivankova and Wingo, 2018).

This research contributes to the existing literature on social media communication by providing valuable insights into the "reply to random comments" strategy, the distinct paths of commenters and observers, and the important mediating role of perceived customer orientation. Additionally, it builds upon prior research by applying signaling theory to the considered context and emphasizing the importance of salient signals in a company's response strategy.

The findings provide guidance for social media managers on how to implement a strong communication strategy on social networks, even with limited resources. This research emphasizes the benefits of a high response rate when companies reply to random consumer comments and the importance of signaling a strong customer orientation in the company's communication strategy. The results suggest effective practices that contribute to a company's long-term success by increasing (re)purchase intentions and establishing sustainable relationships with existing and potential customers through corporate responsiveness on social networks.

Literature review

Response rate

The response rate refers to how frequently a company responds to consumer comments (e.g., Lui et al., 2018; Sheng, 2019). A low corporate response rate indicates that a company addresses a relatively small proportion of consumer comments, whereas a high corporate response rate suggests that the company responds to a significant majority of consumer comments. Although there is no universally agreed-upon threshold, response rates below 35% are generally considered low, while those above 75% are considered high (Avram, 2014; Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Sitta et al., 2018). High corporate response rates can have a positive impact on company profits (Lui et al., 2018), sales (Liu et al., 2020a), performance (Kumar et al., 2018; Lui et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2014), and revenues (Li et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2017). However, there is evidence suggesting that revenues may increase only up to a certain response rate (Anderson and Han, 2016). The level of corporate responsiveness varies considerably across companies, even among those operating in the same industry (e.g., Anderson and Han, 2016; Chevalier et al., 2018; Park and Allen, 2013).

Effects of the response rate on commenters

From the perspective of *commenters*, a high corporate response rate increases consumer engagement (Chen et al., 2019; Chevalier et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Liang and Li, 2019; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Sheng, 2019; Xie et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2020). However, there are inconsistent findings on whether it leads to more positive engagement due to a higher motivation to provide positive feedback (Li et al., 2017; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017) or negative engagement due to increasing customer expectations (Chevalier et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015). Further research explores the influence of gender in this context. It outlines that a high corporate response rate reduces negative consumer engagement, particularly among self-identified females (Proserpio et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence shows that commenters are more likely to leave positive company ratings when the company is highly responsive (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Proserpio et al., 2021; Rezvani and Rojas, 2022; Sheng et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2017). Nevertheless, research in this regard outlines divergent results based on the valence of the comments that receive a corporate reply. While some studies outline that corporate replies to negative (positive) comments can improve (deteriorate) commenters' ratings of the company (Liu et al., 2015; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018), others suggest the opposite effects (Wu et al., 2024). Further evidence suggests that a high response rate to negative comments can improve these commenters' relationships with the company (Ma et al., 2015) and reduce their negative emotions (Herhausen et al., 2023).

Effects of the response rate on observers

From the perspective of *observers*, research indicates that a high response rate to consumer comments positively influences their perceived corporate relationship investment, purchase intentions, loyalty, and brand attitudes (Sung and Kim, 2014). However, a high response rate to negative comments reduces the quality and value perceptions of the company while encouraging observers to show negative consumer engagement (Golmohammadi et al., 2021).

Considering the objectives of this research, certain gaps remain unaddressed by the body of existing literature. First, if a company aims to respond equally to positive and negative consumer comments, this is referred to as the "reply to random comments" strategy. Although previous research points to the potential benefits of addressing both positive and negative comments, no study has yet examined the effects of the response rate of such a strategy. Second, most studies focus on the impact of the corporate response rate on review platforms rather than on social networks. However, social networks are highly interactive and require reciprocal

communication (Sasser et al., 2014). Therefore, a company's response rate is likely to be even more important and to have an even greater impact on social networks. Third, there is a lack of research on observers or systematic comparisons between commenters and observers. Lastly, regarding the variables of interest, only one study investigated the effects of the response rate on the purchase intentions of observers, while the effects on the repurchase intentions of commenters and customer orientation perceptions remain unexplored.

Customer orientation

Customer orientation is a core element in marketing that signals the extent to which the company puts customers' interests first (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). It can be defined as a firm's commitment to attract and maintain consumers by consistently striving to meet their needs throughout corporate activities (Deshpandé et al., 1993). Thus, customer orientation implies a company's efforts to build relationships with its customers (Feng et al., 2012; Homburg et al., 2011a; Singh and Koshy, 2011). A customer-oriented approach drives customer loyalty and business performance (e.g., Brady and Cronin, 2001; Chao et al., 2007; Gäthke et al., 2022; Homburg et al., 2011b; Kirca et al., 2005). Customer orientation also plays a mediating role in business contexts (e.g., Cho et al., 2024; Ghlichlee and Bayat, 2021; Homburg et al., 2004; Mathe et al., 2016; Zhang, 2010), e.g., in the relationship between manager communications and customer satisfaction (Mathe et al., 2016).

The significance of customer orientation has increased with the shift toward interactivity and connectivity (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Research shows that a customer focus on interactions strengthens the link between customer orientation and loyalty (Homburg et al., 2011a). Therefore, responding to customer feedback and queries is an essential aspect of customer orientation (Racela and Thoumrungroje, 2020). A literature review by Zhao (2022) suggests examining the role of customer orientation on social media, as this topic has received little attention in previous research. Consequently, this research responds to the need for research and explores the role of customer orientation in corporate communication on social networks.

As prior research does not provide sufficient groundwork for developing the theoretical framework, a qualitative study was conducted to gain greater insights.

Qualitative study

Objective, research context, and method

In October 2023, two online focus groups were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers react to different corporate response rates to random consumer comments on social networks. Focus group discussions in qualitative research can provide in-depth insights into how people perceive, think, and feel about a particular topic (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). They also collect information that may not be captured through quantitative research methods (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Qualitative research focuses on information power over other aspects like specific sample sizes or statistical generalizations (Malterud et al., 2021). The participants were recruited via Instagram using criterion sampling to obtain an appropriate sample of active social network users. The sample size of four participants per group is considered adequate for homogeneous target groups (Barbour, 2007; Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014) and provides diverse yet in-depth insights into consumer perspectives (Krueger, 1998). The study involved Swiss participants aged 23 to 31 with an equal gender distribution (50% female, 50% male).

The research was conducted in the context of a (potential) stay at a fictitious hotel. For experience-based products like hotel stays, it is difficult for consumers to evaluate a service before purchasing. The intense competition within the hospitality industry makes it even more challenging for consumers to make purchase decisions (Gursoy, 2019). Therefore, consumers rely on comments on social media to make informed choices, especially in this field (Bigné et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2024). In addition, since services are intangible, interactions between the company and the consumer are crucial in shaping the brand experience and managing relationships (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). Consequently, a hotel's high service quality (Ali et al., 2021), strong online presence (Xie et al., 2016), and sound response strategy (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018) are essential. Given the study's context, the Swiss sample is an appropriate choice due to Switzerland's well-established reputation in the hospitality industry (Tajeddini and True-man, 2012) and strong customer focus (Tajeddini et al., 2013).

Participants were asked to picture themselves organizing a vacation, looking for a suitable hotel through online research, and discovering a hotel's special offer on a social network. In the scenario of the complaining commenter, participants were instructed to picture themselves making a hotel reservation and discovering upon check-in that the social media promotion did not apply to their booking. They were also informed that cancellation would incur a fee. Subsequently, the participants were instructed to conceive of staying while expressing their

dissatisfaction with the invalid discount offer in a comment under the hotel's promotional post. In the observer scenario, participants were instructed to imagine that they had not yet booked the special offer and first browse through the comment section of the hotel's post.

To realistically simulate a dynamic social network environment, videos were created to show the different response rates. The videos sequentially displayed the hotel's special offer, related consumer comments, and corporate replies. The design of the simulated social network resembled Instagram. The videos displayed 18 consumer comments (50% positive and 50% negative). The hotel always responded to the negative comment that participants in the commenter condition imagined to have written under a given alias. The hotel provided accommodative responses to negative comments by apologizing, assuming responsibility, trying to find customer-oriented solutions, and offering compensation. Service recovery literature highlights accommodative responses as the most appropriate approach (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Lee and Song, 2010; Song and Kim, 2016; Zhao et al., 2020a). The hotel responded to positive comments by expressing gratitude and thanking the customers for their feedback. The hotel's replies were sent from an employee account with a professional photo and the employee's name. The employee's email address was included in responses to negative comments. A personalized response account was used since previous research emphasizes the benefits of more tangible corporate communication partners on social media (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Schamari and Schäfers, 2015).

The manipulation of the response rates was based on previous research specifying response rates below 35% as low and above 75% as high. In the *low response rate* condition, the hotel replied to three positive and three negative comments (response rate of 33%), while it responded to seven positive and seven negative comments in the *high response rate* condition (response rate of 78%). To verify the validity of the manipulations, a pretest was conducted with 30 participants as the recommended sample size for such purposes (Perneger et al., 2015). The pretest was shared on social networks to reach the intended audience. Participants watched two videos with the manipulated response rate, with the order counterbalanced. After each video, they were asked to rate the response rate as either low or high (one option to tick). All participants correctly recognized the manipulations.

As for the study procedure, the participants first agreed to have the meeting recorded. Following a brief explanation of the study context, participants were asked to put themselves in the position of either the complaining commenter (focus group 1) or the observer (focus group

2). Afterward, they got to see the simulations of the hotel's post, the consumer comments, and the hotel's response strategy with a low and high response rate to random comments (in two videos, with the order counterbalanced in each group). One researcher led the discussions, while another observed participants' nonverbal cues.

Insights from focus group 1 (commenter perspective)

The participants in the complaining commenter condition were first asked to share their initial impressions. One participant outlined: *"A high response rate is more authentic as the company takes the consumers more seriously. More commenters, like me, who made the effort of leaving a comment get a response from the company."* Two other participants nodded, and one of them added: *"The high response rate leaves a better impression. As a complaining customer, I feel that the company takes my concerns and those of others seriously. If the company only replies to a few of the comments, the company seems less professional and, in a way, indifferent about consumers' inputs."* Another participant mentioned that not every comment needs a corporate response, but she appreciates it when a company makes an effort to reply. She also values the company's personalized responses with additional information about the responding employee.

The participants perceived the high response rate as more customer oriented. One statement was: *"The response rate indicates a company's customer focus and provides insight into its service quality. I perceive a company's service quality to be higher when it responds to more comments."* Another participant outlined that a high corporate response rate leads to more customers receiving replies, improving the company's customer-oriented image.

When the participants were asked if the response rate would influence their repurchase intentions, one participant expressed that the corporate response rate alone would not influence his repurchase intentions. The other participants nodded in agreement and added that other factors, such as the content of the reply and the company's efforts to make amends for the failure, would also affect future purchases.

The last part of the discussion focused on whether perceiving high levels of customer orientation would influence the participants' repurchase intentions. All participants agreed that a company's strong customer orientation positively impacts their intention to repurchase. One participant outlined: *"The company's efforts to meet my and the other customers' needs enhance*

the corporate image. Knowing that the company cares about its customers increases my likelihood of making another purchase.”

In summary, participants in the commenter condition evaluated a high (vs. low) corporate response rate to random comments as a better and more customer-oriented response approach. Although a high response rate may not directly lead to increased repurchase intentions, participants indicated that perceiving a company’s high level of customer orientation enhances their intention to repurchase. The relevance of high customer orientation perceptions in this context can be linked to previous research that shows the crucial role of commenters’ sense of reciprocity in company-customer interactions. The study suggests that a company’s strong customer focus may activate a sense of reciprocity and lead to positive consumer outcomes (Xu et al., 2020).

Insights from focus group 2 (observer perspective)

One participant started the discussion by sharing his first reflections: *“I understand that companies may not have the time to respond to all consumer comments. By replying to positive and negative comments, the company strives to treat customers equally, no matter if they praise or complain. However, observing that the company responds to only a few comments seems arbitrary. In contrast, when a company responds to more comments, it appears more systematic. That gives a better impression.”* The other participants agreed and added that a low response rate indicates a lack of interactivity and that the company places insufficient emphasis on engaging with its customers.

Regarding whether customer orientation perceptions differ based on the response rate, a participant said: *“A high response rate shows more customer orientation. Lack of corporate replies may imply less care for customer feedback.”* Another participant added: *“As an observing consumer, I look for customer-oriented signals that are visible to me. One such signal is a high corporate response rate. I focus more on whether they reply rather than what they reply, as this allows me to evaluate the company more quickly. The more interactive the company is, the more credible and trustworthy it seems.”* A further remark was that companies should actively engage with customers on social networks, as that is the primary purpose of such channels.

The participants commonly outlined that a high response rate would positively impact their purchase intentions. One participant explained: *“When a company responds with a high response rate, it is present and attentive. It shows that it values the customers’ opinions and is*

committed to providing good customer service. This gives me a sense of reassurance and increases my willingness to give the company a chance.” Another statement was that companies actively responding to consumer comments appear more professional, resulting in higher purchase intentions. Furthermore, the participants emphasized the importance of communicating with actual employees rather than chatbots. They appreciated the personal touch of the company’s response account because it fosters authentic communication.

The participants agreed that their perception of customer orientation positively affects their intention to make a purchase. One participant mentioned that she would be more likely to purchase from a company that has a strong customer focus as it demonstrates that the company values its customers, therefore making her feel more confident in booking with them. Another participant added: *“I have not interacted with the company, but I can empathize with those who have left comments. In my opinion, a company that actively responds to customer feedback is more focused on meeting its customers’ needs. This makes me more likely to consider booking with them, as I assume they would also be attentive to my needs.”*

To summarize, the participants in the observer condition preferred a high over a low response rate. According to the participants, a high response rate increases customer orientation perceptions and purchase intentions, while high perceptions of customer orientation also result in higher purchase intentions. This aligns with previous research highlighting the positive effect of a high corporate response rate on the purchase intentions of observers (Sung and Kim, 2014).

The insights from the two focus group discussions suggest that a high corporate response rate to random comments has more positive effects on different social network users than a low response rate. In both focus groups, the participants believed that a high response rate indicates that the company is customer oriented. They also stated that stronger customer orientation perceptions lead to higher chances of purchasing (again). Nonetheless, the insights suggest that the response rate has only a direct effect on the purchase intentions of observers but not on the repurchase intentions of commenters. These findings contribute to the development of the theoretical framework.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

The signaling theory (Spence, 1973) builds the foundation of the theoretical framework. This theory is applied to social or organizational settings where information asymmetries between parties exist (Na et al., 2020). In this regard, the signaler, the signal, the receiver, and the feedback play a role. In situations with unequal amounts of information, the signaler provides signals to reduce asymmetries (Carlini et al., 2024). The receiver then interprets the signals and reacts accordingly (Connelly et al., 2011).

Scholars refer to the signaling theory to explain how corporate signals in company-customer communication affect consumer reactions (e.g., Li et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2015a; Suryani et al., 2022). A company (signaler) can provide relevant information (signals) to consumers (receivers) and favorably influence their reactions (feedback) at the point of purchase (Decker and Baade, 2016). Social media communication can effectively signal qualities and favorably influence user perceptions and reactions (Na et al., 2020).

Applied to the current context, a salient signal for consumers on social media is a company's response strategy (Lee and Cranage, 2014; Li et al., 2017). A company's responsiveness to customer feedback reveals valuable information about its customer focus and service quality (Li et al., 2017). Replying to positive and negative comments indicates a company's interest in different consumer feedback. However, varying response rates might signal different levels of customer care, resulting in varying consumer reactions.

Effects of the response rate on commenters

Commenters who publicly complain about a negative experience on a company's social networking site are more critical of the firm. Therefore, the company must send stronger and more salient signals to positively influence the complaining commenters' reactions (Kharouf et al., 2020). Stronger signals can include both the company's response to a high proportion of consumer comments and its reply to the commenter's negative comment. The company thereby creates value for commenters (Kao et al., 2016) and demonstrates its commitment to addressing customer needs (Sparks et al., 2016). Signal strength is also linked to signal visibility (Ramaswami et al., 2010). When a company responds with a high compared to a low response rate, it sends visible signals of a proactive approach to customer service. Thus, the company demonstrates that it values consumer feedback and is committed to providing good customer service (Li et al., 2017). This likely creates a positive impression of a company's customer orientation. The qualitative study supports these arguments, leading to the first hypothesis:

H1: A high (vs. low) corporate response rate positively influences the perceived customer orientation of *commenters*.

Yet, complaining commenters are more cautious regarding other purchases from the company. Their prior negative experience influences the perceived risk associated with making another purchase (Martin et al., 2015b). Therefore, they carefully refer to the company's response signals to evaluate the potential risk (Piehler et al., 2019). In this regard, it is likely that commenters pay attention to various signals. According to the qualitative study, the reply content and the company's effort to make amends for the failure are also influencing future purchases. As a result, it is unlikely that the corporate response rate directly influences complaining commenters' repurchase intentions.

Effects of the response rate on observers

Observers without prior experience seek signals of credibility and trustworthiness (Mavlanova et al., 2012; Sparks et al., 2016). Although observers do not directly interact with the company, publicly observable signals allow them to assess the quality of the company's services (Connelly et al., 2011). Based on the qualitative study, observers seek cues that allow a quick company evaluation. A company's response strategy can easily indicate its customer focus (Li et al., 2017). The effectiveness of signaling increases when the receiver obtains more signals (Brunner et al., 2019). Therefore, when a company has a high compared to a low response rate, it shows stronger customer care by replying to a large number of customer comments. The company's active listening likely leads to more favorable consumer perceptions regarding the company. These theoretical derivations, together with the insights from the qualitative study, result in the second hypothesis:

H2: A high (vs. low) corporate response rate positively influences the perceived customer orientation of *observers*.

Observers rely on signals as diagnostic cues for evaluating potential purchase risks (Biswas and Biswas, 2004). A company that provides more information lowers consumers' uncertainty and enhances communication outcomes (Otondo et al., 2008). The company provides more signals through more interactions by replying with a high compared to a low response rate (Li et al., 2017). These signals can lead to favorable consumer reactions due to higher credibility perceptions (Breitsohl et al., 2010). The company's replies to positive comments likewise emphasize positive feedback and reduce the impact of negative comments (Ho et al., 2017). When

a company responds to a high percentage of comments, the overall proportion of comments and the proportion of positive comments that receive a response increase. This leads to better impressions of the company and reduces perceived risk and uncertainty related to a purchase (Brunner et al., 2019). Previous research emphasizes that a high response rate enhances observers' purchase intentions (Sung and Kim, 2014). Additionally, insights from the qualitative study suggest that a company with a high response rate is perceived as more attentive to consumer needs, which enhances observers' purchase intentions. Thus, these derivations and arguments from the qualitative study lead to the third hypothesis:

H3: A high (vs. low) corporate response rate positively influences the purchase intentions of *observers*.

The mediating effect of perceived customer orientation

Consumers attach great importance to a company's customer orientation (Homburg and Fürst, 2005). Therefore, noticing that a company invests in maintaining relationships by addressing consumer feedback can positively impact repurchase intentions (Vázquez-Casielles et al., 2017). Further research underlines that high customer orientation perceptions lead to increased customer loyalty (Chao et al., 2007). The qualitative study provides further valuable insights since there is a research gap on the effects of customer orientation perceptions on social media (Zhao, 2022). Both complaining commenters and observers consider a company's perceived customer orientation important in triggering purchase intentions. According to the qualitative study, a company's high compared to a low response rate to consumer comments on social networks shows higher levels of customer orientation. These higher levels of customer orientation enhance the corporate image for complaining commenters and create a sense of trust for observers, resulting in increased (re)purchase intentions. These combined findings from previous research and the qualitative study result in the fourth hypothesis:

H4: Perceived customer orientation mediates the relation between a company's response rate and (re)purchase intentions of both *commenters* and *observers*.

The following quantitative study tests these hypotheses to gain empirical insights into the effects of a company's high vs. low response rate and potential underlying mechanisms.

Quantitative study

Method

The study was a 2 (low vs. high response rate to random consumer comments) x 2 (complaining commenter vs. observer perspective) between-subjects design. An a priori power analysis was conducted with G*Power to determine the minimum sample size of 210 participants (effect size: 0.5; α : 0.05; power: 0.95). The data was collected from October to November 2023 through an online survey distributed on social networks. The study used purposive sampling to target active social media users, resulting in a sample that matches the research objectives. Participants had to follow at least one company account on social media to ensure familiarity with the study environment. Participants who fulfilled the precondition were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. The scenarios and stimulus materials were the same as for the qualitative study. Participants first read the respective scenario and watched the simulation of the hotel's post, related consumer comments, and corporate replies. Afterward, they were asked to rate the items for repurchase intentions in the *complaining commenter* condition or purchase intentions in the *observer* condition (adapted from Dodds et al., 1991) and perceived customer orientation (adapted from Homburg et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2010). Table 1 displays the items along with additional statistical values.

Table 1. Measures

Variable	Items	OL	t-value	Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived customer orientation (reflective)	The [...] hotel is aware that customers are important factors that influence their success.	0.93	85.03***	0.95	0.96	0.86
	The [...] hotel emphasizes customer-related activities.	0.93	96.26***			
	The [...] hotel has a customer-oriented culture.	0.92	78.56***			
	Customers are a focal point of the [...] hotel's activities.	0.94	109.80***			
(Re)Purchase intentions (reflective)	The probability that I would consider booking a room at the [...] hotel (again) is high.	0.96	242.90***	0.98	0.98	0.94
	I would be interested in booking a room at the [...] hotel (again).	0.97	251.71***			
	My willingness to book a room at [...] hotel (again) is high.	0.97	284.16***			
	It would be likely that I book a room at the [...] hotel (again).	0.97	267.46***			
Model fit: SRMR=0.03; NFI=0.95; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; OL: outer loadings; CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted						

Manipulation checks followed for the response rate (The [...] hotel randomly responded with a low response rate to only a small part of the consumer comments; The [...] hotel randomly responded with a high response rate to a large part of the consumer comments; one option to tick) and the consumer perspective (In the described situation, I was asked to identify with the alias [...] who left a comment under the hotel's post; yes/no option). Only data from participants who completed these checks successfully were used. In the next part, participants were asked to rate the items for the realism checks for the scenarios ((1) "The described situation was realistic to me," (2) "I was able to put myself in the situation well," (3) "It is likely that social network users experience such corporate response behavior in real life"). Additional data was collected about participants' social media usage ((1) "I see myself as an active social media user," (2) "I regularly like posts and leave comments on social networks"), their social media usage frequency, and demographics. All items were measured on a seven-point scale from 1="completely disagree" to 7="completely agree," apart from usage frequency, which was measured from 1="less than once a month" to 7="several times a day."

After excluding eight participants who did not answer the manipulation checks correctly, the final sample consisted of 242 social network users (51% female, 48% male, 1% diverse; predominantly Swiss; average age: 31). Almost 60% of participants indicated using social networks several times a day, with almost all remaining participants stating to use it once a day or several times a week.

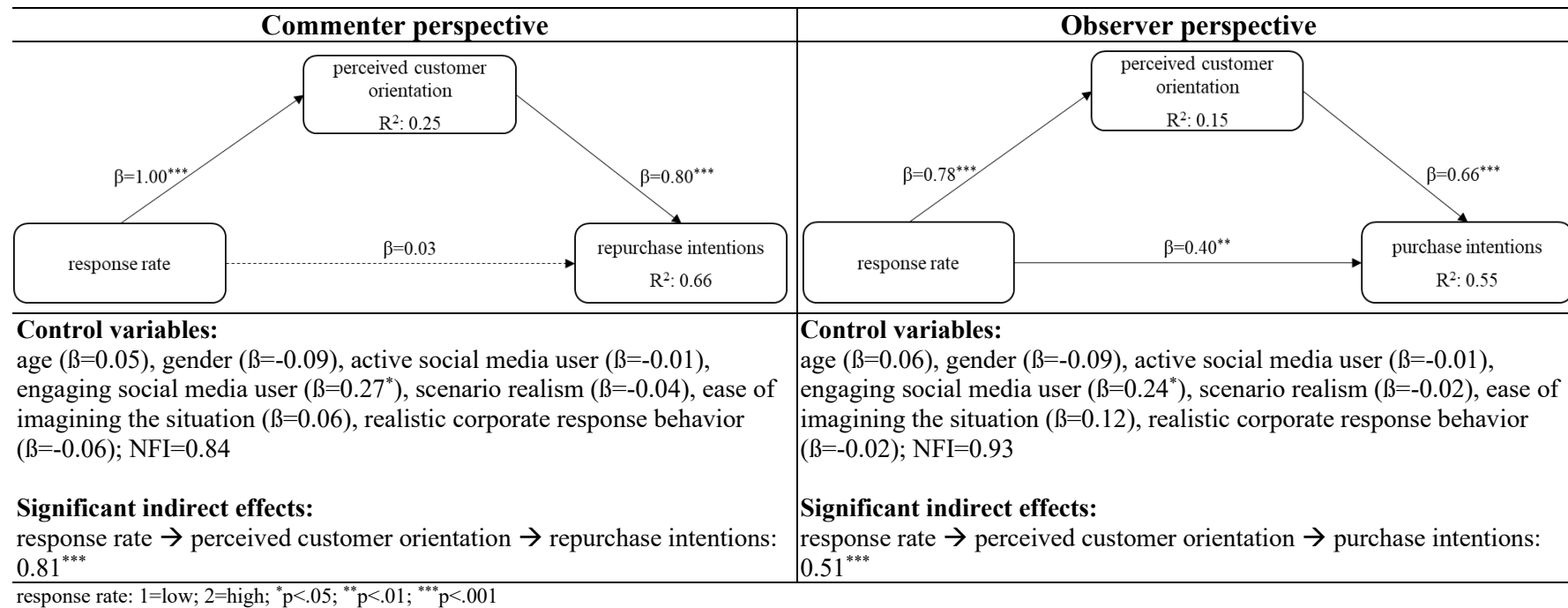
Results

The software SmartPLS 4 is used for hypothesis testing. It utilizes partial least squares path modeling for variance-based structural equation modeling. This statistical technique analyzes the relationship between latent and observable variables while accounting for measurement errors and ensuring robustness (Hair and Sarstedt, 2019). Using this statistical method is becoming more prevalent in marketing due to its high accuracy in estimating structural model parameters (Hair et al., 2017). The model fit indices in Table 1 show a strong fit between the measurement model and the data. Convergent validity is given as all factor loadings are significant and above 0.70 (Bagozzi et al., 1991). Discriminant validity is established as AVE values exceed the squared correlation between perceived customer orientation and (re)purchase intentions ($r^2=0.70$) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, the composite reliability of both variables exceeds the threshold of 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The Cronbach's Alpha values

higher than 0.70 confirm the internal consistency of the constructs (Ponterotto and Ruckdeschel, 2007). Therefore, the measures are considered reliable and valid.

A moderated mediation (SRMR=0.03; NFI=0.95) outlines a direct effect of the response rate on perceived customer orientation ($t=4.67$; $p<0.001$) and (re)purchase intentions ($t=3.07$; $p<0.01$). It furthermore highlights an interaction effect between the response rate and the consumer perspective on (re)purchase intentions ($t=2.33$; $p<0.05$). The paths displayed in Figure 1 present the direct effects of the corporate response rate on perceived customer orientation and (re)purchase intentions per consumer perspective. The paths additionally outline the underlying role of perceived customer orientation in the relationship between the response rate and (re)purchase intentions for commenters and observers.

Figure 1. Effects of the response rate through perceived customer orientation on (re)purchase intentions



For *commenters*, the findings show that the response rate directly affects perceived customer orientation, with a high response rate being perceived as more customer oriented. These results confirm **H1**. In line with our theoretical derivation and qualitative study, the response rate does not directly affect complaining commenters' repurchase intentions. For *observers*, the path illustrates a direct effect of the response rate on perceived customer orientation as well as purchase intentions. Thus, a high corporate response rate positively influences observers' perceived customer orientation and purchase intentions. These findings support **H2** and **H3**. The fourth hypothesis reflects that perceived customer orientation plays an underlying role in the relationship between the corporate response rate and (re)purchase intentions for both consumer perspectives. The paths analysis of commenters and observers demonstrates significant indirect paths and shows that a high corporate response rate has an indirect positive effect through perceived customer orientation on *commenters'* repurchase intentions and *observers'* purchase intentions. These results confirm **H4**, outlining the important underlying mechanism of perceived customer orientation in corporate communications on social networks.

Conclusion

Discussion

This research investigated the effects of a low vs. high corporate response rate to random consumer comments on customer orientation perceptions and (re)purchase intentions of complaining commenters and observers on social networks. The mediating role of perceived customer orientation was also examined in this regard. Given the limited research on this subject, a mixed-methods approach was applied to gather extensive data. The combination of exploratory and confirmatory research provides more comprehensive insights (Ivankova and Wingo, 2018). It allows for practical suggestions while supporting academic findings. This methodological triangulation strengthens the validity and generalizability of findings (Migiro and Mangangi, 2011).

The qualitative study offered insights into different social network users' perceptions of the corporate response rate to random consumer comments and its effects on consumer outcomes. The focus group discussions revealed that participants in the complaining commenter and observer condition favor a high response rate and that a high response rate increases their customer orientation perceptions. However, only the participants in the observer condition indicated that a high response rate enhances their purchase intentions. Yet, participants in both conditions highlighted the importance of a company's high customer orientation and its positive impact on

their (re)purchase intentions. Not only do these insights serve as the foundation of the quantitative study, but they also create new opportunities for future research. The insights of the qualitative study emphasize the importance of further exploring customer orientation perceptions in this context. They also point to the significance of authentic communication by having actual employees, rather than chatbots, reply to customer feedback. This is supported by a recent study suggesting that the utilization of artificial intelligence on social media decreases brand authenticity (Brüns and Meißner, 2024).

The qualitative study, together with signaling theory, built the framework for the empirical study. The results of the quantitative study supported the findings of the qualitative study, providing stronger evidence for a conclusion. The corporate response rate does not directly influence the repurchase intentions of *commenters* who complain on a company's social networking site. However, a high corporate response rate indirectly affects repurchase intentions through perceived customer orientation. Similar to past work (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; Liang and Li, 2019; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Sheng et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2017), this research indicates the more positive effects of a high response rate on commenters. Nonetheless, previous research has examined the impact of the corporate response rate on commenters' reactions other than repurchase intentions. Therefore, this study's findings expand beyond previous research by both considering the impact on repurchase intentions and revealing the crucial role of perceived customer orientation as a mediator in this context. Commenters who had an unfavorable experience may expect increased corporate efforts and customer-oriented measures before considering further purchases. They emphasize the importance of a company's focus on its customers. Therefore, commenters first evaluate a company's customer orientation based on its response rate before developing intentions to repurchase. Research in similar contexts suggests that corporate responses activate a sense of reciprocity in online communications, leading to commenters' positive reactions as a payback (Xu et al., 2020). Other research shows that a company's active listening during service recovery on social media evokes gratitude among customers (Herhausen et al., 2023). Linked to this study's findings, commenters may be more likely to repurchase when a company sends strong customer orientation signals through a high response rate as they feel acknowledged and develop a desire to reciprocate. Thus, commenters' positive feelings towards the customer-oriented behavior result in a higher likelihood of making another purchase.

With regard to *observers*, the findings suggest that a high response rate directly enhances their purchase intentions, which supports previous findings (Sung and Kim, 2014). For

observers who are unfamiliar with the company, a high response rate may reveal more information about how the company manages different consumer feedback. Thus, the high corporate responsiveness is more diagnostic and makes the company more trustworthy. This may reduce observers' risk perceptions of a potential purchase. The results of this research build upon previous research that primarily examined the effects of message-related elements, such as the response type (accommodative or defensive), on the purchase intentions of observers (e.g., Casado-Díaz et al., 2020; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017; Zhao et al., 2020a). The results additionally demonstrate that a high response rate indirectly influences observers' purchase intentions through customer orientation perceptions. Previous research shows that strong customer orientation signals service quality (Aburayya et al., 2020; Dean, 2007). Therefore, a high response rate shows that the company cares about its customers and provides good customer care. Observers may infer that the company would also care for them in case of a purchase, leading to reduced risk perceptions and increased value perceptions. This can be linked to studies in similar contexts, outlining that consumers' perceived value positively influences purchase intentions (Chakraborty and Paul, 2023; Chakraborty et al., 2023).

The findings of this research illustrate the distinct paths of commenters and observers in enhancing their (re)purchase intentions and highlight the crucial role of perceived customer orientation as a novel factor to be considered in this context. A high corporate response rate has a direct and indirect positive effect on the purchase intentions of observers. However, high customer orientation perceptions are necessary to improve the repurchase intentions of commenters. Consequently, a company's perceived customer orientation is an important underlying mechanism to boost (re)purchase intentions of different consumers through corporate responsiveness on social networks.

Theoretical contributions

This research makes some substantial theoretical contributions. It is the first to offer systematic insights into how the corporate response rate to the "reply to random comments" strategy affects the perceived customer orientation and (re)purchase intentions of complaining commenters and observers. The insights gained through the mixed-methods approach provide a more thorough understanding of how consumers react to corporate response rates. They demonstrate the differing effects of a low vs. high response rate and the differing effects depending on the consumer perspective. Thus, this research adds value to the growing body of literature examining corporate communication on social media (e.g., Golmohammadi et al., 2021; Johnen

and Schnittka, 2019; Wu et al., 2024). It reveals the effects of a company's response strategy on observers, a consumer group often neglected in previous research. It also addresses the call to examine the role of customer orientation on social media (Zhao, 2022) and stresses the importance of a company's strong customer orientation in customer interactions on social networks. In this regard, this study further builds upon prior research by extending signaling theory to the current context and emphasizing the importance of salient signals in a company's response strategy.

Practical contributions

This study offers practical guidance for marketing practitioners, as many companies still underestimate the importance of responding to consumer comments on social networks. It particularly provides valuable insights for social media managers seeking to retain and win customers through responsive engagement while operating within limited resources.

First, companies can signal their interest in different consumer feedback by responding to positive and negative comments equally. Second, companies that implement the "reply to random comments" strategy should reply with a high response rate to a large number of consumer comments. To demonstrate high corporate responsiveness, it is recommended that the companies respond to at least three-quarters of the consumer comments. This helps social network users quickly recognize a company's high responsiveness amid a large amount of information on social networks. Third, companies should adopt a customer-oriented approach when responding to customers. This can be achieved by incorporating customer-oriented signals, such as responding to a variety of consumer comments. Additionally, companies should aim to provide authentic communication by ensuring that actual employees respond to customer comments. It can be useful to include information about the responding employee, such as a picture or a name, to make the corporate replies more personal and help social network users distinguish between interacting with real employees and chatbots. The results not only provide valuable insights for social media managers to optimize their company's social network presence but also contribute to overall business success by leveraging social networks to retain existing customers and attract new ones. Thus, this research supports building and maintaining sustainable customer relationships through customer-oriented communication on social networks.

Limitations and further research

This research provides the foundation for future research and opens new research opportunities by acknowledging its limitations. The first limitation is the lack of a clear definition for low and high response rates. Although the validity of the response rates in this research has been confirmed, better conceptualization is required. Additionally, this research has not considered any boundary conditions. Boundary conditions such as consumer involvement or service type could be integrated into future studies to improve practical applications. It must also be noted that the level of social media engagement among participants may have influenced the results. Although this study considered this variable as a controlled variable, it still showed a significant impact in both conditions. To eliminate the possibility of this variable being an alternative explanation for the findings, future research could replicate this study. Furthermore, the company responded to the same number of positive and negative consumer comments in the “reply to random comments” strategy. However, companies may need to adopt a more flexible approach to their marketing practices. If a company consistently receives more positive or negative comments, the impact of responding more to comments with the dominant valence could be examined. To further enhance the practical implications, future studies could likewise explore whether purposefully selecting the positive and negative comments to be answered, e.g., the most extreme comments, would affect the results. In this context, it would be interesting to measure whether social network users still perceive corporate responses as random, as they might not comprehend the company’s underlying criteria for comment selection. These additional insights could indicate whether comments can be chosen randomly or rather strategically, with the latter being more time-consuming. Lastly, this research does not consider other communication elements, such as the corporate response content or response time, which could be included in additional research.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Main findings and contributions

This doctoral thesis comprises three research papers on social media marketing communication within the context of social networks. All studies employed a mixed-methods approach by using focus groups to gain qualitative insights that help develop the theoretical framework for the main quantitative studies. On this basis, the research papers provide robust insights into the effects of corporate social media marketing communication. Across the studies, not only the importance but also the complexity of strategic and reciprocal corporate communication to consumer comments on companies' social networking sites is highlighted. While the interactive nature of social networks offers companies valuable opportunities to develop and sustain customer relationships, the effectiveness of corporate response approaches is contingent upon the deliberate use of communication that aligns with both consumer expectations and corporate marketing objectives.

The *first paper* provides evidence that replying to all comments leads to higher favorable engagement intentions of different social network users than replying to only some positive and negative comments. This effect occurs indirectly, and the underlying mechanisms differ depending on the user type. For complaining commenters, the effect is mediated by perceived customer orientation, meaning they are more likely to favorably engage when they perceive the company as attentive and customer centered. For observers, the effect is driven by perceived entertainment value, suggesting that engaging and dynamic company-customer interactions enhance their intentions to favorably interact with the company.

These findings imply that corporate responses on social networks fulfill different functions for different user groups. While complaining commenters primarily evaluate responses as signals of relational commitment and care, observers respond more strongly to the entertaining qualities of publicly visible exchanges. This distinction underscores that engagement intentions are shaped by different evaluative processes depending on whether users are directly involved or merely observing interactions.

This research extends previous research by providing novel insights into the effectiveness of response strategies, particularly the commonly used yet under-researched approach of replying to some positive and negative comments, and by advancing understanding of the processes that drive engagement across user types on social networks. It sheds light on the role of corporate communication on social networks, a context that received little attention in comparison to

review platforms despite its inherently interactive nature. Furthermore, it extends social network theory and social exchange theory to digital company-customer interactions by illustrating how network dynamics and reciprocity shape favorable consumer responses in social network environments.

While the first paper demonstrates that responding to all comments is most effective for stimulating engagement when resources are available, the *second paper* addresses a fundamentally different question: how firms should respond to comments under conditions of selective responsiveness. Focusing exclusively on complaining commenters, the second paper shows that replying only to negative comments leads to higher perceived customer orientation and indirectly to more favorable attitudes toward the firm than replying to some positive and negative comments. This finding indicates that, in service recovery contexts, consumers prioritize systematic responses to negative feedback. While the first paper highlights engagement-oriented strategies that appeal to a broad audience of commenters and observers, the second paper thus demonstrates that efficient complaint handling operates according to different effectiveness criteria.

Beyond response strategy selection, the second paper demonstrates that the way firms respond to complaints plays an important role. Accommodative responses lead to higher complaint handling satisfaction and more favorable response perceptions than defensive responses, which in turn strengthen perceived customer orientation and improve attitudes toward the firm. The findings also demonstrate that the use of humanized accounts can mitigate the negative effects of defensive responses, underscoring the strategic role of communication style and sender cues in service recovery situations.

By focusing on attitudes rather than engagement intentions, the second paper extends the analytical scope of this doctoral thesis from early, platform-specific reactions to more evaluative outcomes that are particularly salient in complaint handling contexts. The distinct set of mediators examined in this paper reflects this shift, as response perceptions and complaint satisfaction capture process-oriented evaluations that are central to service recovery.

Overall, the second paper contributes to research in the domains of social media communication, webcare, and service recovery by examining how selected response strategies and response elements jointly shape complaint handling effectiveness. These insights are particularly meaningful for companies facing many complaints or high churn rates. It advances understanding of the role of humanized communication and underlying mechanisms that explain these

effects. Moreover, it extends accessibility-diagnostics theory by demonstrating that both the accessibility of response information and the diagnosticity of complaint-related response cues shape complaining commenters' attitudes toward the firm.

While the first two papers focus on engagement-oriented and complaint-handling outcomes, the *third paper* extends the analysis to downstream behavioral outcomes by examining the effects of corporate response rates on (re)purchase intentions. The paper demonstrates that a high response rate to some positive and negative comments, compared to a low response rate, increases repurchase intentions among complaining commenters and enhances purchase intentions among observing users. It therefore complements the other papers by accounting for companies' limited resources while adopting a broader communication perspective that extends beyond complaint handling.

The findings reveal that these effects occur through different pathways depending on the user role. For complaining commenters, the impact of a high response rate on repurchase intentions is fully mediated by perceived customer orientation, indicating that high corporate responsiveness strengthens relational perceptions that motivate repeat purchasing. For observers, a high response rate influences purchase intentions both directly and indirectly via perceived customer orientation, suggesting that publicly visible responsiveness not only signals relational commitment but also directly enhances the firm's attractiveness to potential customers.

Whereas the first paper highlights engagement-oriented benefits of extensive responsiveness and the second paper demonstrates a more targeted logic for complaint handling, the third paper shows that maintaining a high level of visible responsiveness can be particularly effective for influencing purchase-related decisions among both directly involved and observing users.

This research contributes to the literature on social media communication by providing insights into the effects of variations in response rates within the commonly used yet underexamined strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments on social networks. Moreover, it advances signaling theory by demonstrating that high and consistent corporate responsiveness on social networks serves as a credible signal of customer orientation, thereby shaping consumers' perceptions of the firm and their behavioral intentions

6.2. Discussion and recommendations

Across all three studies, the potentially promising strategy of equally responding to some (but not all) positive and negative consumer comments was examined. While this approach may seem inclusive and balanced, the findings suggest that its effectiveness is limited and rather context dependent. Specifically, the strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments is less effective in generating favorable social media engagement among different user types compared to the comprehensive approach of addressing all comments. Responding to all comments appears to function as a best-practice benchmark by offering consistent communication that aligns with the interactive nature of social networks and the reciprocal expectations of social network users. Nevertheless, when it is not feasible to respond to all comments, maintaining a high corporate response rate by addressing a large number of both positive and negative comments can represent a viable and effective alternative. High corporate responsiveness to different feedback has positive effects on user perceptions and behaviors, particularly among observing social network users. However, compared to a more targeted approach where companies respond to only but all negative comments, the strategy of replying to some positive and negative comments reveals its limitations, especially among complaining commenters. This consumer segment seems to prioritize effective complaint resolution and may evaluate corporate responses based on the degree of attentiveness to customer concerns and the perceived commitment to customer service in service recovery settings. For these users, selective corporate engagement with some positive and negative consumer comments may appear inconsistent and inattentive, as not every customer complaint receives a corporate response. Consequently, the findings emphasize that response strategies must be carefully evaluated not only in terms of operational feasibility but also in light of the expectations of distinct consumer segments and the strategic intent behind the company's social media communication.

A central and recurring insight across the three studies is that the perception that a company genuinely values consumer concerns and feedback drives favorable consumer outcomes. This perception, captured through perceived customer orientation, proves to be a key determinant of consumer reactions to social media marketing communication on social networks. Perceived customer orientation not only helps explain the effectiveness of certain response strategies but also emphasizes how attentive users are to the way companies present themselves in interactions on social networks. This insight implies that companies must adopt a consumer-centric approach by placing significant emphasis on conveying genuine customer care and service orientation in online company-customer exchanges. Across different types of social network users,

corporate responses to consumer comments serve as a direct reflection of the company's commitment to customer service and relationship management. Therefore, companies need to ensure that their communication on social networking platforms consistently signals strong customer orientation to foster positive consumer responses and maximize the effectiveness of social media marketing communication efforts.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the interdependent effects of various communication elements in shaping consumer reactions on social networks. It is not only important *which* comments companies choose to address, but also *how* they respond and *who* delivers the response, especially when managing customer complaints. Accommodative responses are the most effective response type. However, companies may occasionally need to provide defensive responses, for example in cases of unreasonable complaints or false accusations. In such situations, using a humanized account for corporate communication is particularly beneficial as it can help reduce potential damage and mitigate the negative impact of defensive messaging. Consequently, companies should use humanized response accounts that include the responding employee's photo, name, and contact information when interacting with users. By delivering essential knowledge on how to navigate difficult interactions, this insight enables companies to gain strategic control and a competitive edge while fostering communication that reflects the personal and tangible dynamics of social networks.

This research provides a deeper understanding of how companies can leverage social media marketing communication within the specific context of social networks. The personal and reciprocal environment of social networking platforms creates distinct expectations for corporate communication, making genuine and interactive engagement more critical than in other, less dialogical social media settings. In light of this, the findings of this doctoral thesis underscore that the success on social networks extends beyond merely having a corporate presence and depends on active involvement and two-way interactions with users. Marketing communication and complaint handling on social networks requires a strategic and context-aware approach that balances practical feasibility with genuine interactions. While companies may face budgetary or personnel constraints that limit their ability to respond to every consumer comment, the key lies in conveying attentive and authentic customer care. Social networks are inherently relational environments in which users expect interactions that signal care and commitment rather than standardized or purely transactional replies. Against this background, the use of fully automated AI tools for replying to consumer comments appears limited in its suitability for communication on social networks. Although recent advances in artificial intelligence have

substantially improved the efficiency and linguistic quality of automated content, such tools risk undermining the perceived authenticity and relational value of corporate responses. This concern is particularly salient in publicly visible interactions, where responses function not only as informational cues but also as social signals of human presence and genuine engagement. Rather than replacing human interaction, AI may serve a supportive role, for instance by assisting in data analysis, response preparation, or prioritization. Therefore, for companies that receive a high volume of complaints on social networks and/or generally face high churn rates, prioritizing responses to negative comments can be effective, whereas companies that encounter a fair amount of both positive and negative comments but cannot respond to all comments should aim for a high response rate across different comment types to maintain engagement and demonstrate responsiveness. Companies that have sufficient resources can actively boost their social network presence by responding to all consumer comments and creating an engaged online community.

By adopting a targeted and customer-oriented communication strategy, companies can foster brand perceptions, generate more favorable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes among different types of social network users and ultimately build and strengthen customer relationships. Ongoing customer-company interactions not only support short-term marketing goals such as increasing consumer engagement but also lay the foundation for long-term success including customer loyalty and brand trust, which are more crucial than ever in today's competitive market landscape.

6.3. Limitations and directions for future research

While this research provides meaningful insights into marketing communication strategies on social networks and advances the understanding of how complaining and observing social network users react to different approaches of corporate communication, several limitations across the studies should be noted.

First, all three studies implemented the same scenario in which users who are searching for a hotel for an upcoming trip come across a hotel's promotional post on a social network. While this consistent scenario across studies strengthens internal validity, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should investigate other sectors, such as retail, event services, and companies that offer products, to assess the extent to which the effects observed in this research apply beyond the hotel context. It may also be valuable to examine other types of complaint situations, since the nature and perceived severity of the issue raised by the

complaining commenters could affect both their reactions to different response approaches and the reaction of observing users.

Another factor that was held constant across the studies was the use of a stimulus material simulating a social network thread. The hotel's promotional post, along with user comments and responses from the hotel, was presented in the form of a video in order to resemble the interface and interaction style of Instagram. While this method allowed experimental control and a visually engaging stimulus, it also limits the realism of the setting. Participants were not able to interact with the content, navigate freely, or experience the dynamic nature of a real social network environment. Future research should consider creating a fully functional simulated social network that allows for more natural interaction and exploration. Moreover, only a limited number of user comments were displayed in the videos. In actual social media environments, users can view extensive comment threads and scroll through multiple posts. Particularly for participants in the observer role, having access to a broader range of comments and posts might influence their perception of the company and their decision-making process. To better reflect real-world social media use, future studies could let participants navigate through a complete corporate social networking site featuring multiple posts and dynamic comment threads. Additionally, although Instagram is one of the most recognized and widely used social networks, the decision to model the interface on this platform may have influenced participants' responses. Platform-specific features such as layout or user expectations might shape how consumers perceive and react to content. To reduce the risk of platform-related biases, future research could test different social media interfaces or build a custom environment.

A further limitation concerns the range of response strategies examined in the quantitative studies. The first research paper explored the full set of commonly used response strategies in focus groups, including replies to only positive comments, only negative comments, some positive and negative comments, and all comments. However, the subsequent empirical study and the second research paper compared only two of these strategies, while the third research paper focused on the response rate of one specific strategy. To gain more comprehensive insights, future research could empirically examine the full range of response strategies. This would provide a clearer understanding of their relative effectiveness and help determine whether responding to all comments truly represents the most effective strategy.

This research focused on complaining commenters who constitute a highly relevant consumer group since an increasing number of individuals use social networks to voice their dissatisfaction publicly. Observers represent another important segment in public social networks,

as they can follow a wide range of conversations without directly participating. Across the studies, we assumed that observers had no prior experience with the company and were encountering it for the first time. Since additional types of social network users exist, future research should consider including these consumer groups, such as commenters who post positive comments and observers with prior brand experience. Comparing the effects across an even broader range of social network user types could provide more nuanced insights into how different audiences perceive and respond to corporate communication on social networks, as well as which approaches appear to be most effective overall.

Furthermore, the research papers primarily focused on core phenomena without necessarily considering boundary conditions that might influence the effects. Future studies could contribute to the research field by considering boundary conditions such as complaint severity, industry context, consumer involvement or cultural differences. In this regard, the severity of complaints, ranging from minor inconveniences to serious service failures, could affect how consumers judge the appropriateness of response approaches. Industry-specific factors, such as the hospitality sector's emphasis on personalized service versus the retail sector's focus on convenience, might also shape norms around appropriate company-customer communication. Moreover, consumers making high-involvement purchases, such as booking a vacation, may pay more careful attention to consumer complaints and corporate responses compared to those in low-involvement situations like everyday grocery shopping. Likewise, customers who are very familiar with the company may respond differently to complaint handling or overall communication strategies than first-time buyers. Finally, cultural differences, for example, between individualistic and collectivistic societies, might also shape both complaint behaviors and reactions to a company's social media marketing communication. Given the global reach of social networks, future research could thus benefit from examining these cultural influences.

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