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Successful complaint handling on social media predicts increased repurchase intention

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Successful complaint handling on social media predicts increased repurchase intention: The roles of trust in company and propensity to trust

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships between company responses to social media complaints and consumers' repurchase intentions. An online survey collected data from 325 participants who complained on social media. The relationship between repurchase intention and the five dimensions of complaint handling (timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness) as mediated by consumers' trust in company were examined and consumers' propensity to trust was studied as a moderator in this relationship. The results suggest receiving a response and four dimensions of the response (redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness) are related to stronger repurchase intention through the mediation of increased trust in company. Furthermore, consumers who are low on propensity to trust report a stronger repurchase intention when they perceive the credibility of the company to be high in handling the complaint.

1. Introduction

As more and more consumers use social media to complain (Béal & Grégoire, 2021; Stauss & Seidel, 2019), businesses have no option but to regularly use this channel to address consumer complaints while updating their traditional complaint-handling strategies to match the requirements of the social media platforms (see for example Fan & Niu, 2016; Istanbulluoglu, 2017). However, using social media as a means of complaint handling also brings challenges, because service recovery practices that have been tested and confirmed in the offline contexts cannot always simply be transferred to online channels (Orsingher et al., 2010; Sengupta et al., 2018). This means that it is necessary to investigate the effects of online complaint-handling strategies and identify those that lead to successful recoveries. Indeed, there is a body of literature that concentrates on how companies should design service recovery practices on social media channels to enhance positive outcomes (e.g., Abney et al., 2017; Bacile et al. 2018; Grégoire et al. 2015; Gunarathne, Rui, & Seidmann, 2017; Ma et al., 2015). This is an important area of research because when consumers complain, how the company handles their complaint influences their satisfaction and eventually their post-complaint behaviours such as the decision to repurchase or not (Bitner et al., 1990).

A positive relationship between accommodative strategies and favourable consumer behaviour outcomes has been observed on online platforms (e.g., Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). When businesses employ accommodative strategies as a response to consumer complaining on social media, they should ensure that the way they handle complaints carries elements of effective organisational responsiveness. Davidow (2003) identifies six dimensions of organisational responsiveness: timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, attentiveness, and facilitation. As building blocks of service recovery, these dimensions can provide an outline to help design successful complaint-handling strategies. Previous studies that investigated these in the social media context showed that they are useful as accommodative strategies in terms of increasing consumer satisfaction. For example, faster response time is known to increase consumer satisfaction on social media (Istanbulluoglu, 2017) and consumers prefer businesses that are attentive when replying to online complaints instead of those that employ indifferent approaches, such as boilerplate texts (Mattila et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2013). However, the relationship between online complaining activities and post-complaint behaviours has not been uncovered entirely. Therefore, we join this discussion and examine the use of traditional accommodative strategies on social media to achieve positive outcomes by focusing on five of Davidow's (2003) dimensions of

organisational responses: timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness.

Previous studies in this research stream focused primarily on designing service recovery practices on social media, with a limited number investigating post-complaint behaviours such as consumers' repurchase intentions. Repurchase intention is the operationalisation of the future tendency to engage in consumer repurchase behaviour towards the products and services of a company. Hence, it is worthy of investigation in the context of online complaining. One important aspect of the relationship between consumers and businesses which has mostly been missing from previous studies is consumers' trust in the company. Trust is argued to exist 'when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity' (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). When a service failure occurs, this causes uncertainty about the company's future performance (La & Choi, 2012). By reducing uncertainty, trust encourages consumers to repurchase from the same company in the future (Sichtmann, 2007). This means that trust shapes individuals' attitudes towards institutions, hence trust in the company is critical in the relationships between consumers and businesses (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). As a result, the convergence of repurchase intention and trust towards the company is key for managers, as they need to know how to rebuild trust with their consumers after service failures. Therefore, investigations of how to build complaining consumers' trust via effective complaint-handling strategies are needed. Arguably, the examination of trust as it relates to complaint handling is even more crucial in the online medium, as trust is a psychological construct that is inherently linked with the nature of the interaction. The remote quality of online complaint handling can pose a unique challenge for building and maintaining trust, as increased social distance decreases the likelihood that individuals trust interaction partners (Buchan et al., 2006; Etang et al., 2011). Relatedly, establishing trust in online consumption environments has been identified to be markedly harder than in conventional settings (see Wang & Emurian, 2005 for a review). Building on this, the present study aims to fill the gap in research on complaint handling in online settings vis-à-vis trust and investigates the mediating role of trust in company in the relationship between online complaint-handling activities and the repurchase intentions of consumers.

Furthermore, personality traits and individual differences have been found to be related to crucial consumption outcomes such as consumer satisfaction and other post-purchase behaviours, including complaints, recommendations, and repeat purchase intentions (Mooradian & Olver, 1997; Gunarathne et al., 2017). Research also showed that high propensity to trust increases the likelihood of a target's trustworthiness cues to lead the individual to trust that target and take future risks in that relationship (Mayer et al., 1995). However, we do not know how this affects post-complaint behaviours following an online service recovery. This is a crucial piece of information that is missing from the literature, as it has the potential to inform managers on how to tailor specific trust-building strategies for different customer profiles. To address this gap, this study also investigates the moderating role of consumers' propensity to trust in the relationship between the dimensions of effective complaint handling and repurchase intention.

In this study, we seek to extend the understanding of the potential impacts of company responses to consumer complaints on social media by addressing the aforementioned gaps in the literature. The study investigates the post-complaint behaviour of consumers who post online complaints and explores the effects of accommodative strategies on these consumers' repurchase behaviours. Consequently, the contributions of this study are twofold. First, it builds on Davidow's (2003) framework by exploring how a company's handling of online complaints predicts repurchase intention. Consumers are satisfied only when their complaint is handled in a way that matches their preferences (Nguyen et al., 2012); therefore, it is important to understand how such activities are perceived by consumers. We are also one of the first to explore the mediating role of trust in company in the relationship between

successful online complaint handling and repurchase intention. Previous studies have shown that trust in company has an important mediating role in enhanced loyalty when consumers complain offline (DeWitt et al., 2008). By investigating this relationship on social media, this study develops an understanding of the potential impact of a company's response on consumer trust and eventually on repurchase intention. Second, this study provides insights on how consumers' propensity to trust plays a role in the development of repurchase intention. Understanding how personality traits relate to customers' service evaluation is essential for developing effective complaint-handling strategies, as these will then shape consumers' post-purchase behaviour (Bearden et al., 1998).

In what follows, we first present an overview of our study model and then review the literature in relation to the conceptual framework. Accordingly, we develop hypotheses regarding how various dimensions of complaint-handling activities will predict repurchase intention via trust in company. We then introduce consumer's propensity to trust as a personality trait and study it as a moderator in the said relationship based on our conceptual framework.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Considering the central importance of trust in consumer behaviour, our main aim in this study is to explore the relationships between online complaint-handling activities and repurchase intention from the perspective of trust. We base our study model on Davidow's (2003) framework of organisational responses to consumer complaining. Previous research showed positive relationships between consumer satisfaction and consumers' repurchase intentions (Liao et al., 2017; Pappas et al., 2014). Particularly, satisfaction with complaint handling has a positive effect on repurchase intention (Davidow & Leigh, 1998). Moreover, the distinct dimensions of successful complaint handling in Davidow's model have also been linked to enhanced repurchase intention (e.g., Mack et al., 2000; Mattila & Mount, 2003; Strauss & Hill, 2001; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). In accordance with this theoretical framework and past research, we propose that higher repurchase intention will be predicted by better online complaint-handling activities, as measured by whether a response is given to the consumer's complaint and the extent to which that response is perceived as successful on the dimensions put forward in the model. Importantly, different from previous work, we argue here that trust plays a pivotal role in this mechanism.

Building on Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust that differentiates between the trust an individual has at a given point in time in a specific target and the individual's general dispositional tendency to trust others (i.e. their *propensity to trust*), we measure both the level of trust the consumer feels for the company after the online complaint handling, and their own propensity to trust as a stable personality trait. Mayer et al.'s (1995) theoretical framework posits that higher perceived trustworthiness of the target leads to a feeling of trust, which leads the individual to take risks in the relationship in the future. Accordingly, we predict that successful online complaint-handling activities will signal trustworthiness and hence predict higher trust in company, which in turn will predict higher repurchase intention, an indicator that the consumer is willing to take a risk in further engaging with a company they were dissatisfied with. Mayer et al.'s (1995) trust model further argues that this link unfolds differently as a function of individual differences in propensity to trust. Accordingly, we predict that the mediation of the relationship between online complaint-handling activities and repurchase intention through trust in company will be moderated by the individual's propensity to trust. Our study model is depicted in Fig. 1.

2.1. Trust in company mediating the relationship between complaint handling and repurchase intention

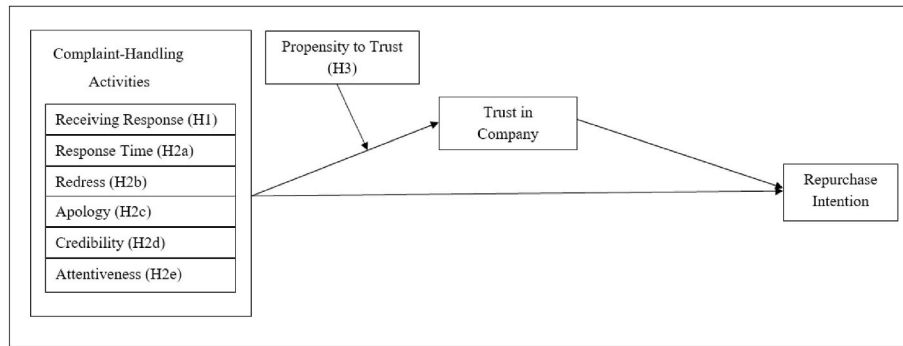Trust lies at the essence of building successful and lasting

Fig. 1. Study model.

relationships and long-term value (Aijo, 1996). Trust in a company is influenced by many factors, including the company's image, consumers' experiences with the company, and the company's reaction to praise and complaints. Here, we investigate the role of trust in company in the prospective relationship between the company and the consumer after a service failure by building on Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust. This theoretical framework argues that higher perceived trustworthiness of the target leads to a feeling of trust, which leads the individual to feel secure enough to take risks and keep engaging in the relationship in the future.

When a consumer's complaint is handled successfully and the consumer is satisfied with how their complaint has been managed, this builds trust in the company (Ong & Teh, 2016; Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Simon, 2013), because the company shows that they have the power to solve the problem and demonstrates reliability, which signals trustworthiness (Tax et al., 1998). As a result, the consumer knows that the company is willing to deal with complaints and has procedures for taking the necessary action (Sichtmann, 2007). By conducting the service recovery in a way that builds trust, companies can reduce consumers' perceived risk (DeWitt et al., 2008). This means that consumers will then believe that even if they have problems, the company will eventually solve them (Hirschman, 1970). Conversely, if consumers have poor experiences with the complaint-handling process, they will perceive the company as untrustworthy (DeWitt et al., 2008) and their trust will deteriorate (Ku et al., 2021).

When consumers have trust in the company, this gives them the sense that the company will consistently satisfy them, which leads them to stay loyal and continue to give patronage. Studies investigating the relationship between trust in company and repurchase intention in the online context have identified that trust in company indeed positively affects repurchase intention when consumers shop online (Chiu et al., 2009; Fang et al. 2011). This link between trust in company and repurchase intention can be especially crucial after a service failure, as whether the consumer will take the risk of doing business again with a company that failed them will depend on the trust they have in the company. However, the role of trust in company in repurchase intention following a service recovery situation is not well investigated to date. Based on the literature reviewed above, we propose that trust in company will mediate the relationship between online complaint handling and repurchase intention after a service failure. Specifically, we argue that successful online complaint handling will predict higher trust in company, which in turn will predict higher repurchase intention.

Providing a reply. When consumers complain in an online setting, the company must first decide whether to respond to the complaint or not. The arguments against replying to online complaints include that doing so could lead to more complaints in the future, and it may not be profitable for a company to retain all its existing customers (Ma et al., 2015). However, it has also been observed that not responding to complaints increases customer dissatisfaction and reduces intention to repurchase, whether the complaint is made online or offline (Mattila &

Mount, 2003; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Importantly, lack of response from the company has also been identified as the most likely cause for consumer dissatisfaction (del Rio-Lanza et al., 2009). Therefore, despite the arguments for the advantages of lack of response and how it might be beneficial in specific situations (e.g., Johnen & Schnittka, 2019; Ma et al., 2015), it is necessary to reply to consumer complaints for companies whose aim is to retain the repurchase intentions of complaining consumers (Strauss & Hill, 2001; Tax et al., 1998), especially on social media, where transparency in the form of responding to customer complaints helps to generate consumer forgiveness and reduces the intention to switch to other companies (Honora et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a strong positive relationship between communication and trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Responding to online consumer complaints is an effective way of engaging consumers in communication, and therefore stimulates trust.

It is also important to acknowledge that a mere response to a complaint is usually not enough, and consumers consider the quality of the response as well. Especially on online communication platforms, such as social media, companies can use boilerplate texts which they can copy and paste as an answer to many, or even all, complaints. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the characteristics of company responses to appraise the success of online complaint handling. To accomplish this, we focus on five of Davidow's (2003) six dimensions of organisational responses: timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness. The sixth dimension, facilitation, refers to the procedures and structures that support customer services (e.g., internal policies and the structure for allocating complaint-handling tasks) (Davidow, 2003). We did not include facilitation because this study is not concerned with companies' internal structures, but rather focuses on the characteristics of company responses on social media.

Timeliness. The relationships between response time and post-purchase behaviours have been researched extensively. Some studies found that timeliness has no effect on repurchase intention (Blodgett et al., 1997), while others showed that a quick response has a positive impact on repurchase intention (Conlon & Murray, 1996; Hart et al., 1990). According to this, the longer consumers wait for an answer, the less fair they perceive the company to be (Clark et al., 1992). Recent research also showed that there is a difference between public apologies and private apologies: when companies apologise publicly via online channels, shorter response times generate perceptions of higher company remorse (Wang et al., 2020). A speedy response is also found to reduce consumer anxiety and increase trust in company (Ong & Teh, 2016).

Redress. Redress refers to refunds, replacements, free repairs, and compensation for damages (Day & Landon, 1977). Providing redress in response to a complaint has a positive impact on satisfaction and repurchase behaviour (Conlon & Murray, 1996; Mack et al., 2000; Bae et al., 2021). Redress also improves the company's relationship with the consumer and builds trust (Ma et al., 2015; Ong & Teh, 2016). Answering a consumer's complaint might be enough to maintain a

relationship, but if the company wants to increase repurchase behaviour, it should also provide redress (Clark et al., 1992). For example, recent research on social media complaint-handling practices shows that even low redress has a greater effect on positive attitudes towards the company than providing a timely response (Armstrong et al., 2021).

Apology. Apology is a company's acknowledgement of the complaining consumer's suffering (Davidow, 2003). Apologies are what complaining customers desire the most (Mack et al., 2000) and they are found to be more effective in eliciting consumer forgiveness than economic recovery efforts (Wei et al., 2020). Research done specifically in the online context has also shown that apologies improve the relationship between the company and the customer (Fan & Niu, 2016; Tripp & Gregoire, 2011) and mitigate the negative effects of the complaint on trust (Ong & Teh, 2016).

Credibility. Credibility is the 'willingness to present an explanation or account for the problem' (Davidow, 2003, p. 232). If the company acknowledges the problem and explains the reasons for the failure, consumers perceive the company as more credible and are more likely to believe that the problem was caused by factors outside the company's control (Baer & Hill, 1994), and this influences consumers' perceptions of service recovery positively (Mattila, 2006). When perceived credibility is high, consumers believe that the service recovery will provide a positive experience, which increases trust in company (Sichtmann, 2007; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017) and repurchase behaviour (Bitner et al., 1990; Tax et al., 1998; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Conversely, when consumers believe the company had control over the problem, they tend to blame the company and are less likely to repurchase (Richins, 1987).

Attentiveness. Attentiveness refers to qualities of the interpersonal communication between the company and consumers, such as empathy, willingness to help, and respect. In the context of online complaints, if a consumer realises the company is using the same boilerplate text while handling complaints, they consider this as shunting or as a discarding policy (Mattila et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2013). However, answers that are specifically tailored for each complaining consumer are found to have positive effects on perceptions of trust (Wei et al., 2013). Similarly, consumers who are directed to other departments feel worse at the end of the service recovery progress, highlighting the importance of empowering social media teams (Gunarathne et al., 2017). Therefore, companies should employ methods to signal that they are attentive towards their consumers in addition to just responding to their complaints. For example, expressing empathy and personalising the message (e.g., using the consumer's name) increase consumer satisfaction (Abney et al., 2017; Simon, 2013). Moreover, if the response is tailored to refer to the particular problem raised by the consumer, satisfaction, and repurchase intention increase (Strauss & Hill, 2001), because this shows that the company is acknowledging the specific problem (Smart & Martin, 1992; Wei et al., 2013). In addition, acknowledgement and affirmation also build individuals' trust in the other party (Rempel et al., 1985). Hence, in situations where the consumer feels that the company is acknowledging them, trust in company increases.

Based on the literature reviewed above, we propose the following hypotheses:

Providing any response (*H1*), a quicker response (*H2a*), redress (*H2b*), and an apology (*H2c*) to complaining consumers on social media will predict higher repurchase intention through the mediation of higher consumer trust in company.

When consumers perceive the credibility (*H2d*) and attentiveness (*H2e*) of the company as high, this will be related to higher repurchase intention through the mediation of higher trust in company.

2.2. Moderating role of propensity to trust

In addition to factors related to the company response, previous research examined several psychological factors that affect consumers' complaining behaviours. These include propensity to complain (Bodey & Grace, 2007; Richins, 1982), the developmental stages of adulthood (Roschk et al., 2013), empathy (Simon, 2013), and positive and negative emotions (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). However, the relationship between the personality trait of propensity to trust and repurchase intention has not been studied. This angle deserves exploration, as many studies have shown that propensity to trust is linked with many economic decisions. Examples include the Investment Game, where two players decide how much money to allocate to themselves and their counterpart (Evans & Revelle, 2008), the prisoner's dilemma and public goods problems (Yamagishi et al., 2005), online shopping behaviour (Hsu et al., 2012), consumer-to-consumer electronic commerce (Leonard & Jones, 2021), and purchase intention in uncertain contexts (Chen & Huang, 2013). These links suggest that propensity to trust could make a crucial contribution to understanding the mechanism behind consumer evaluations of responses to online complaints and the subsequent direction of their repurchase intention.

Propensity to trust: Conceptualising trust as a personality trait. Trust is typically conceptualised as a psychological state where the individual accepts their vulnerability to depending on others' behaviours (Rousseau et al., 1998). Although trust is a universal emotion, people differ in their inherent inclination to accept this vulnerability and trust others. To capture this individual difference, which reflects a relatively stable temperamental characteristic, trust as a personality trait is conceptualised as the general expectation that others can be relied on, and this dispositional tendency to trust others is termed *propensity to trust* (Mayer et al., 1995). People who are high in propensity to trust find it easier to open up to others, take risks, and engage in situations whose outcomes are determined by other people, because their inherent perception of vulnerability is low and they judge that there is a small risk of others harming them. Conversely, people who are low in propensity to trust do not let their guard down easily or allow others to influence their end results, because they are predisposed to perceive vulnerability as high and therefore tend to mistrust others. Propensity to trust has been isolated as a distinctive personality trait and the level of propensity to trust an individual possesses has been theorised to be shaped by different developmental experiences, personality types, and cultural backgrounds.

Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust posits that high propensity to trust increases the likelihood that cues of trustworthiness of the target lead the individual to trust that target, which in turn leads them to take future risks in the relationship. Building on this framework, Evans and Revelle (2008) developed a measure of propensity to trust as a predictor of economic behaviour. They showed that this individual difference in perception of vulnerability is indeed associated with future risk-taking in economic contexts in the theorised directions. The repurchase decisions that are being studied in the present research are also settings where people are in a position of vulnerability – there is always the risk of another failure, especially considering the consumer has already been let down by the company they complained about. Building on Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust, we reason that people who are high in propensity to trust (i.e., who are more inclined to perceive low vulnerability) could be more likely to experience an enhancement in their level of trust in company and consequently develop higher repurchase intention when the company responds to their needs in a positive manner. Successful complaint handling, as measured in the present study, can be a good proxy for such responsiveness on the company's part. As such, we expect that people high in propensity to trust will be more likely to interpret this responsiveness of the company as an indication of their trustworthiness and experience higher trust in company, which in turn will predict higher future repurchase intention. Specifically, we predict that people who have a high propensity to trust will be more likely to interpret receiving a response, especially a response that is quick, as a sign that the interaction partner (i.e., the company) is less likely to deceive them and in turn feel higher trust for them. In a similar vein, receiving redress and being apologised to might work better on people higher in dispositional trust in terms of signalling trustworthiness

and in turn eliciting feelings of trust. Finally, we expect that higher credibility and attentiveness also have a higher chance of being perceived as indicators of lower risk of deception by individuals who have a higher tendency to trust others, who would in turn be more likely to build trust for the company and engage in future interactions (i.e., develop repurchase intention). Building on all these, we propose the final hypothesis:

H3. As compared to consumers who are low in propensity to trust, consumers who are high in this personality trait will experience higher increased trust in company when the company handles their complaint successfully on the different dimensions of complaint handling (i.e., by providing a response, responding quickly, offering redress, apologising, being credible, and being attentive); and in turn this increased trust will mediate the relationship between successful online complaint handling and higher future repurchase intention.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

An online survey was administered to 325 (57.8% female, $M_{Age} = 20.53$, $SD_{Age} = 0.65$) consumers who had complained on social media, namely, Facebook or Twitter. We opted to use an online survey to be able to recruit a high number of participants, to receive responses in a fast manner, and also to increase the assurance of anonymity. Since participants were individuals who had complained on the Internet, using the same medium to reach them and administer the surveys on an online platform was deemed an appropriate method. We limited the social media platforms where the complaints were made to only Facebook and Twitter because these two platforms are the most popular social media sites and are heavily used for online complaints (e.g., Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Armstrong et al., 2022). Participants were recruited by: (1) sending email invitations to students and staff at two European universities and inviting them to participate if they had complained on Facebook or Twitter and (2) sending direct messages to consumers who had complained on Facebook or Twitter. For the first recruitment method, there was no constraint on the company that was complained about. For the second recruitment method, to reach consumers, we observed the official accounts of the companies listed in the Social Index as those with the high social media presence (Brandwatch, 2016). We monitored the Facebook and Twitter accounts of these companies for 3 months at random intervals and sent messages to all consumers who had posted complaints in the last 72 h of our observation of the account.[1]

3.2. Materials and procedure

Institutional research ethics approval was obtained before data collection started. Participants were given an informed consent form containing full information on confidentiality and rights. Those who gave consent proceeded to the online survey on Qualtrics. They were first asked to recall a specific complaint that they had posted on Facebook or Twitter. Then, they were asked which platform they had complained on, what the complaint was about, and which company they were complaining about. The survey continued with the following measures:

3.2.1. Complaint-handling activities on social media

Participants were asked whether they had received a response from the company (with a yes/no question). If the participant reported that

they received a response, the survey then gathered information about the response time, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness to assess the dimensions of the company's complaint-handling activities.

3.2.2. Response time

Participants were asked to select a response time among the options describing the number of hours that had passed since the complaint (see Table I).

3.2.3. Redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness

Participants were asked yes/no questions regarding whether they had received any redress or compensation from the company in response to their complaint (*redress*) and whether the company had apologised to them (*apology*) (see Table I). They were also asked to rate the extent to which the company was willing to explain or account for the problem (*credibility*) and took the problem seriously (*attentiveness*) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *low*, 7 = *high*) (see Table I).

3.2.4. Propensity to trust

The moderator variable of the study, propensity to trust, was measured using the Trust Subscale of the Propensity to Trust Survey (Evans & Revelle, 2008). This subscale aims to tap into trust as a personality trait and consists of seven items that indicate how dispositionally inclined an individual is to trust others (e.g., 'I believe that most people would lie to get ahead'). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale was found to be internally consistent within the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$).

3.2.5. Trust in company

The mediator variable of the study, trust in company, was measured using the Brand Trust Scale (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). The scale aims to tap into the extent to which an individual trusts a specific company and consists of eight items (e.g., 'I could rely on X to solve the problem'). The online survey was designed so that the company name provided by each participant appeared in place of 'X' in these items in their survey. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale showed internal consistency within the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$).

3.2.6. Repurchase intention

Finally, repurchase intention was measured by three items (Chiu et al., 2009): 'If I could, I would like to continue purchasing products/services from X', 'It is likely that I will continue to purchase products/services from X in the future', and 'I intend to continue purchasing products/services from X in the future'. The company name provided by each participant appeared in place of 'X'. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale was internally consistent within the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$).

Previous research showed that the problem severity (e.g., Brown & Beltramini, 1989; Richins, 1983) and exit barriers (e.g., Stewart, 1998; Tronvoll, 2007) influence consumers' complaining behaviours; hence, these constructs were used as covariates to control for their effects. Participants rated how severe they perceived the problem to be on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not severe at all*, 5 = *very severe*). Consumer's perceptions about the exit barriers to switch from the company they had complained about were measured by their ratings of how much they agreed with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*): 'It takes me a great deal of time and effort to get used to a new company', 'It costs me too much to switch to another company', 'In general it would be a hassle switching to another company' (Jones et al., 2000). This measure was also found to be internally consistent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$).

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[1] Of the 325 total participants, 273 were recruited by sending email invitations and 52 were recruited by sending direct messages on Facebook or Twitter. No significant differences were identified between the two recruitment groups on any of the study variables, so that, the groups were combined for the main analyses to increase the statistical power.

Table 1
Sample overview.

	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Female	188	57.80				
Male	137	42.20				
Age					20.53	.65
	No		Yes			
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Response (Y/N)	148	45.50	177	54.50		
Redress (Y/N)	91	51.40	86	48.60		
Apology (Y/N)	43	24.30	134	75.70		
Credibility (rate)[a]					4.06	1.05
Attentiveness (rate)[a]					4.04	1.09
Trust in company (rate)[b]					2.74	.97
Repurchase intention (rate)[b]					3.12	1.24
Propensity to trust (rate)[b]					3.13	.67
Severity (rate)[b]					3.08	1.17
Exit barriers (rate)[b]					2.86	.96
Response time[c]			Frequency	Percentage		
Less than 1 h after complaint			20	11.30		
1–3 h after complaint			31	17.50		
3–6 h after complaint			26	14.70		
6–12 h after complaint			22	12.40		
12–24 h after complaint			21	11.90		
24–48 h after complaint			23	13.00		
More than 48 h after complaint			34	19.20		

Notes: (Y/N) denotes the variables that were elicited as answers to yes/no questions; (rate) denotes the variables that were elicited as ratings on a Likert scale.
$N = 325$ (entire sample) for response (Y/N), trust in the company (rate), repurchase intention (rate), propensity to trust (rate), severity (rate), and exit barriers (rate). Of these 325 total participants, 273 were recruited by sending email invitations and 52 were recruited by sending direct messages in response to their complaints on Facebook or Twitter. The key variables were investigated for any differences between the two recruitment methods. No significant differences were identified.
$N = 177$ (participants who received a response from the company, and hence answered the rest of the questions about the other complaint-handling activities) for response time, redress (Y/N), apology (Y/N), credibility (rate), and attentiveness (rate).
[a] Measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *low*, 7 = *high*).
[b] Measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).
[c] The instructions for this measure were given as follows: 'Please choose the category that starts with the number of hours that had at least passed since you posted your complaint at the time you received the response (e.g., please choose "3–6 h after complaint" if more than 3 h (but less than 6 h) had passed since you posted your complaint at the time you received the response)'.

4. Results

The dataset contained no missing values or univariate or multivariate outliers. The inspection of skewness and kurtosis values, histograms with normal curves and bivariate scatterplots revealed that it satisfied the assumptions of normality and linearity. A Harman's Single Factor Test was conducted to detect any common method variance issues that may arise from using the same method to collect our data (i.e., a survey). Work by Hair et al. (2017) confirms that Harman's single factor test is a satisfactory tool for examining common method bias. Accordingly, we used this test by creating a single latent factor from all the survey items in an exploratory factor analysis. The total variance explained by this single latent factor was 30.58%, much lower than the conventional threshold of 50%, indicating that our dataset did not suffer from common method variance problems. All in all, the dataset was deemed suitable for further statistical analysis.

We first used bivariate correlation analysis to depict pairwise relations between the study variables. Next, we employed a set of mediation analyses to investigate if the different dimensions of online complaint handling predict higher repurchase intention through enhanced trust in company. Finally, we used a set of moderated mediation analyses to examine whether the relations among the dimensions of online complaint handling and repurchase intention, which are mediated by trust in company, depend on individual differences in propensity to trust.

4.1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the main study variables

In total, 177 (54.50%) participants reported that they had received a response to their complaint. The mean scores for the main study variables are available in Table I. No significant differences in the main study variables were found among different sex, age, income, or data source groups.

As expected, the bivariate correlational analyses yielded significant positive relationships among the dimensions of complaint handling, while trust in company and repurchase intention were positively related to many of these facets (see Table II). In line with the predictions, trust in company and repurchase intention were found to be strongly correlated ($r = 0.74$; $p < .001$). Moreover, all dimensions of complaint handling, except for response time ($r = -0.12$; $p = .106$), were significantly related to repurchase intention ($r = 0.39$; $p < .001$, $r = 0.26$; $p = .001$, $r = 0.21$; $p = .005$, $r = 0.28$; $p = .002$, and $r = 0.36$; $p < .001$ for receiving a response, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness, respectively). The response time and propensity to trust variables were not significantly correlated with any of the other study variables.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Mediation analyses. To test whether the dimensions of online complaint handling predict stronger repurchase intention through increased trust in company, mediation analyses were conducted for all variables via the bootstrapping method of 5,000 samples using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. This method tests the mediation model by investigating the statistical significance of the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable through the mediating variable. The indirect effect is tested for statistical significance through bootstrap confidence intervals, where a sampling distribution for the indirect effect is empirically generated with several iterations (e.g., with 5,000 bootstrapped samples). A confidence interval for this bootstrapped sampling distribution is calculated and used to determine the statistical significance of the indirect effect, and ultimately to judge the

Table 2

Bivariate correlations between the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Response (Y/N)								
Response time	n/a							
Redress (Y/N)	n/a	.04						
Apology (Y/N)	n/a	−.03	.23**					
Credibility (rate)	n/a	−.15	.21*	.00				
Attentiveness (rate)	n/a	−.16	.27**	.12	.65***			
Trust in company (rate)	.39***	−.11	.40***	.29***	.48***	.54***		
Repurchase intention (rate)	.39***	−.12	.26**	.21**	.28**	.36***	.74***	
Propensity to trust (rate)	.07	−.07	−.11	−.13	.02	−.02	−.10	.04

Notes: (Y/N) denotes the variables that were elicited as the answers to yes/no questions; (rate) denotes the variables that were elicited as ratings on a Likert scale; n/a: correlation coefficient could not be computed because at least one of the variables is constant; here, the constant variable is receiving a response from the company – only participants who did receive a response from the company answered the questions about response time, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness.
$N = 325$ (entire sample) for response (Y/N), trust in the company (rate), repurchase intention (rate), and propensity to trust (rate).
$N = 177$ (participants who received a response from the company, and hence answered the rest of the questions about the other complaint-handling activities) for response time, redress (Y/N), apology (Y/N), credibility (rate), and attentiveness (rate).
$*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$

statistical significance of the mediation. For each mediation model, power analyses based on sample size were conducted using Schoemann et al.'s (2017) procedure, which is again based on the bootstrapping method. Adequate power to detect a significant effect was achieved for all models (0.98 for receiving an apology, and 1.00 for all other models). The severity of the problem and exit barriers were entered as covariates in each analysis.

Receiving a response from the company significantly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($B = 0.93; t(321) = 7.44; p < .001$) and higher levels of the mediator, trust in company ($B = 0.76; t(321) = 7.69; p < .001$). In addition, receiving a response and trust in company jointly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($F(4,320) = 107.48; p < .001$). Confirming *H1*, which predicted that receiving a response would predict stronger repurchase intention via increased trust in company, a significant indirect effect ($B = 0.65$, 95% CI [0.45,.84]) revealed that trust in company significantly mediates this relationship.

The relationship between response time and repurchase intention was not significantly mediated by trust in company, revealed by an insignificant indirect effect ($B = −.02$, 95% CI [–0.07,.04]). Thus, *H2a* was not supported. However, all the other dimensions of complaint handling were significantly related to repurchase intention via the mediation of trust in company (see Table III).

Receiving redress from the company after making a complaint significantly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($B = 0.58; t(173) = 3.39; p = .001$) and trust in company ($B = 0.70; t(173) = 5.71; p$ $< .001$). Redress and trust in company also jointly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($F(4,172) = 36.48; p < .001$). The significant indirect effect ($B = 0.62$, 95% CI [0.40,.90]), along with the fact that receiving redress ceased to be a significant predictor of repurchase intention when the mediator was entered into the regression ($B = −0.04; t(172) = −0.24$, ns) confirmed *H2b* and showed that receiving redress after the complaint predicts higher repurchase intention, mediated by higher trust in company.

Receiving an apology after a complaint also significantly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($B = 0.53; t(173) = 2.59; p = .011$) and trust in company ($B = 0.56; t(173) = 3.75; p = .001$). Receiving an apology and trust in company jointly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($F(4,172) = 36.48; p < .001$). The fact that receiving an apology was statistically insignificant when the mediator was entered into the regression ($B = 0.04; t(172) = 0.23$,ns), combined with the significant indirect effect ($B = 0.49$, 95% CI [0.21,.80]), suggests that receiving an apology after a complaint predicts stronger repurchase intention, mediated by higher levels of trust in company.

The results were similar for the company's credibility in handling complaints. Higher levels of credibility predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($B = 0.29; t(114) = 3.17; p = .002$) and trust in company ($B = 0.34; t(114) = 6.17; p < .001$). The perception of company credibility in complaint handling and trust in company jointly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($F(4,113) = 19.86; p < .001$). Credibility became insignificant when the mediator was included

Table 3

Mediation analyses.

Repurchase intention (RI)					
Mediator (MED): trust in company	CH predicting RI	CH predicting MED	CH and MED predicting RI together	Indirect Effect	
Complaint-handling (CH) variable:	B(CH)	B(CH)	B(CH)	B(MED)	B [95% CI]
1. Response(Y/N)	.93***	.76***	.28**	.86***	.65 [.45, .84]

Repurchase intention (RI)					
Mediator (MED): trust in company	CH predicting RI	CH predicting MED	CH and MED predicting RI together		Indirect Effect
Complaint-handling (CH) variable:	B(CH)	B(CH)	B(CH)	B(MED)	B [95% CI]
1. Response time	−.05	−.02	−.03	.88***	−.02 [−.07, .04]
2. Redress (Y/N)	.58**	.70***	−.04	.89***	.62 [.40, .90]
3. Apology (Y/N)	.53*	.56**	.04	.87***	.49 [.21, .80]
4. Credibility (rate)	.29**	.34***	−.05	.97***	.33 [.20, .48]
5. Attentiveness (rate)	.34***	.36***	.07	.77***	.28 [.16, .43]

Notes: (Y/N) denotes the variables that were elicited as the answers to yes/no questions; (rate) denotes the variables that were elicited as ratings on a Likert scale.
$N = 325$.
$*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$
Notes: (Y/N) denotes the variables that were elicited as the answers to yes/no questions; (rate) denotes the variables that were elicited as ratings on a Likert scale.
$N = 177$ (participants who received a response from the company, and hence answered the rest of the questions about the other complaint-handling activities) for response time, redress (Y/N), apology (Y/N), credibility (rate), and attentiveness (rate).
$*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$

in this final step of the analysis ($B = -0.05$; $t(113) = -0.56$, ns), and the indirect effect was significant ($B = 0.33$, 95% CI [0.20,.48]). Thus, *H2d*, which predicted that consumers' perceptions of the higher credibility of complaint-handling activities on social media would predict higher repurchase intention, mediated by higher trust in company, was supported.

Finally, participants' ratings of the company's attentiveness in complaint handling yielded similar results. Attentiveness predicted higher levels of repurchase intention ($B = 0.34$; $t(138) = 4.42$; $p < .001$) and trust in company ($B = 0.36$; $t(138) = 7.32$; $p < .001$). Regarding the company as having high attentiveness and trust in company jointly predicted higher levels of repurchase intention. Attentiveness became insignificant when the mediator was included in this final step of the analysis ($B = 0.07$; $t(137) = 0.82$, ns), and the indirect effect was significant ($B = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.16,.43]). Thus, *H2e* was confirmed.

Moderated mediation analyses. To test whether the relationships between the dimensions of online complaint handling and repurchase intention that are mediated by trust in company are conditional on individual differences in propensity to trust, moderated mediation analyses were conducted for all the complaint-handling variables. The bootstrapping method of 5,000 samples was followed, using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. The severity of the problem and exit barriers were again entered as covariates in all analyses. Power analyses based on sample size were conducted for the full regression model for each of the moderated mediations using the G*Power software (Version 3.1) (Faul et al., 2009). Adequate power to detect a significant effect was achieved (1.00 for all models).

The only significant moderated meditation pertained to the relationship between the credibility of the company in complaint handling and repurchase intention (see Table IV). The company's credibility rating was a significant predictor of trust in company ($B = .34$; $t(114) = 6.06$; $p < .001$). Trust in company ($B = 0.97$; $t(111) = 5.86$; $p < .001$), propensity to trust ($B = 0.31$; $t(111) = 2.20$; $p = .030$), and the interaction of propensity to trust and credibility ($B = -0.29$; $t(111) = -1.83$; $p = .070$) all predicted repurchase intention ($F(6,111) = 12.47$; $p < .001$). The credibility variable ceased to be significant ($B = -0.03$; $t(111) = -0.31$, ns) in this step, and the index of moderated mediation was significant ($B = .33$, 95% CI [0.20,.49]). Together with the marginally significant interaction term, these results showed that the moderated mediation model is valid.

To investigate the conditional mediation for high versus low propensity to trust and depict the patterns of the interaction between credibility and propensity to trust, a simple slope test was employed and interactions between the variables were plotted by generating simple regression equations for a given variable at low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) versus high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) levels of the variable (Aiken & West, 1991). The results revealed that higher levels of propensity to trust do not predict the relationship between credibility and repurchase intention, which is mediated by trust in company ($B = .07$; $t(114) = 0.55$, ns). However, contrary to expectations, lower levels of propensity to trust were significantly related to higher levels of repurchase intention when credibility was rated as high, which was mediated by trust in company ($B = 0.52$; $t(114) = 3.54$; $p = .001$) (see Fig. 2).

These results offered support to *H3*, in showing that propensity to trust is indeed a moderator of the relationship between a complaint-handling characteristic (namely credibility) and repurchase intention, which is mediated by trust in company. However, unexpectedly, the observed effect was in the opposite direction: high credibility emerged as related to stronger repurchase intention through increased trust in company for individuals who are low (but not high) in propensity to trust.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study contributes to the online consumer complaining literature

Table 4
Moderated mediation analyses.

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in company)	
Response (Y/N) *(a path)*	.76***
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Response (Y/N) *(c' path)*	−.21
Trust in company *(b path)*	.88***
Propensity to trust	.16
Propensity to trust × response (Y/N)	.14

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in company)	
Response time *(a path)*	−.02
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Response time *(c' path)*	−.04
Trust in company *(b path)*	.90***
Propensity to trust	.28
Propensity to trust × response Time	.00

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in company)	
Redress (Y/N) *(a path)*	.70***
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Redress (Y/N) *(c' path)*	.86
Trust in company *(b path)*	.92***
Propensity to trust	.42*
Propensity to trust × redress (Y/N)	−.28

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in company)	
Apology (Y/N) *(a path)*	.56**
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Apology (Y/N) *(c' path)*	−.33
Trust in company *(b path)*	.90***
Propensity to trust	.21
Propensity to trust × apology (Y/N)	.13

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in Company)	
Credibility (rate) *(a path)*	.34***
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Credibility (rate) *(c' path)*	−.03
Trust in company *(b path)*	.97***
Propensity to trust	.31*
Propensity to trust × credibility (rate)	−.29†

Predictor	B
Mediator variable model (DV: trust in company)	
Attentiveness (rate) *(a path)*	.36***
Dependent variable model (DV: repurchase intention)	
Attentiveness (rate) *(c' path)*	−.01
Trust in company *(b path)*	.83***
Propensity to trust	.23
Propensity to trust × attentiveness (rate)	.02

$N = 325$ (entire sample).
†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
$N = 177$ (participants who received a response from the company, and hence answered the rest of the questions about the other complaint-handling activities).
†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
$N = 177$.
†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

and online service recovery literature (see Fan & Niu, 2016; Istanbulluoglu, 2017). The main contributions of the study are twofold. First, we explored how a company's handling of online complaints predicts repurchase intention. Building on Davidow's (2003) framework of organisational responses to consumer complaining, this investigation identifies the mediating role of trust in company in the relationship between successful online complaint handling and repurchase intention. Second, we investigated the role of propensity to trust in the development of repurchase intention. The findings show that when consumers receive a response, an apology, and redress from the company, and when
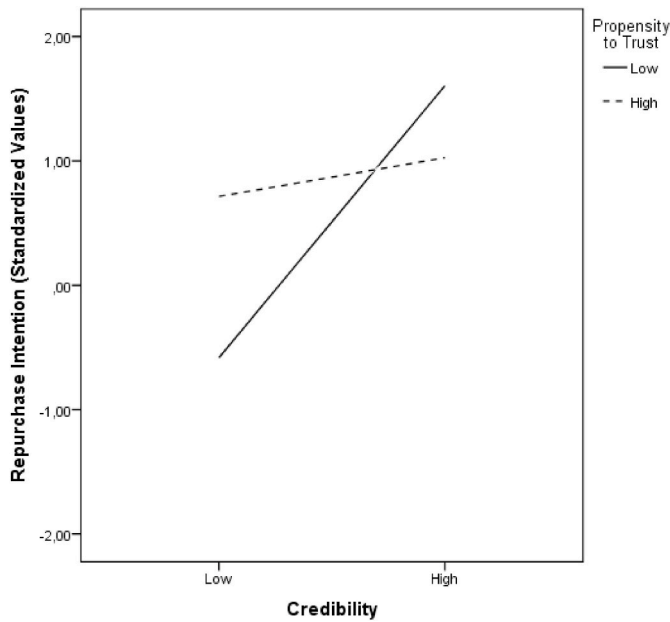
Fig. 2. The moderating effect of propensity to trust on the relationship between credibility and repurchase intention.

they perceive the company's credibility and attentiveness in complaint handling as high, these are all related to stronger repurchase intention through the mediation of increased trust in company. The relationship between credibility and repurchase intention, which is mediated through trust in company, is also moderated by propensity to trust. This suggests that individuals who are low in propensity to trust report stronger repurchase intention via increased trust in company when they regard the company as highly credible in handling their complaint.

Building on Davidow's (2003) framework of organisational responses to consumer complaining, our first contribution provides insights into how company responses to online complaining on social media predict consumers' repurchase intentions as well as expanding the understanding of the role of trust in company in the relationship between successful online complaint handling and repurchase intention. Previous studies on social media complaint handling identified how various complaint-handling strategies, such as redress, apology, and responsiveness influence complaining consumers (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2021; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Wang et al., 2020). Our results expand these by showing that receiving a response and four dimensions of online company responses (redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness) on social media positively predict repurchase intention through increased trust in company. Although previous studies on company response, redress, and apology showed that they increase consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention following both offline and online complaint-handling practices (e.g., Conlon & Murray, 1996; Mack et al., 2000; Wei et al., 2020; Bae et al., 2021; Honora et al., 2022), the current study provides support for these by including the role of trust in company in this relationship. In addition, this study also extends the understanding of attentiveness and credibility in online complaint-handling situations (e.g., Mattila, 2006; Wei et al., 2013; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). When companies are attentive, they show that they are willing to help and appreciate consumers' input. Hence, consumers' trust in company increases and this also has a positive effect on repurchase intentions. This is in line with previous work showing successful handling of complaints increases trust (Paparoidamis et al., 2019), while the opposite effect is also true (Ku et al., 2021). Similarly, when consumers receive an explanation in response to their social media complaints, they perceive the company as credible, and this potentially contributes to a belief that the company had no control over the problem (Baer & Hill, 1994). Arguably, this increases consumers' trust in

company and, in turn, their repurchase intentions.

Surprisingly, the hypothesised relationship between response time and repurchase intention mediated by trust in company was not found to be significant. Past research focusing on response time in traditional settings has stated that timeliness affects repurchase intention and customer satisfaction (e.g., Gilly, 1987; Tax et al., 1998). Moreover, more recent studies focusing on online context showed similar relationships (e.g., Bacile et al., 2020; Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015; Tripp & Gregoire, 2011). However, our research failed to show this relationship in the social media context. A possible explanation for this unexpected result could be that consumers who regularly use these channels might be used to receiving quicker responses (e.g., Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014; Istanbulluoglu, 2017). As a result, they may not notice the timeliness of the responses, and instead attach more value to other dimensions of complaint handling.

The second contribution of this study stemmed from our exploration of the propensity to trust. Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust posits that high propensity to trust increases the likelihood that cues of trustworthiness in the target lead the individual to trust that target, which in turn leads them to take future risks in the relationship. Accordingly, the final hypothesis predicted that consumers who are high in propensity to trust would report stronger repurchase intentions than customers who are less trusting, as they would experience higher trust in company following successful complaint handling. The results offered support for this expectation for one characteristic of successful complaint handling, namely credibility. The results showed that propensity to trust in fact moderates the level of trust in company, which mediates the relationship between perceived credibility of the company in handling the complaint and repurchase intention. This is quite understandable, because credibility is a variable that indicates how trustworthy a company is perceived to be. It can be argued that whether an individual is predisposed to trust shapes how much they trust a company following perceiving it as credible, which in turn predicts their repurchase decisions. Interestingly, the direction of this moderation was contrary to our expectations: individuals who were low in propensity to trust reported higher levels of repurchase intention when their trust in a company increased following stronger perceptions of credibility. This unpredicted finding could potentially be explained by previous research which shows that disposition to mistrust affects high-risk perceptions in e-commerce (McKnight et al., 2004), and people with low propensity to trust are more positively affected by reassurances, such as organisational support (Poon et al., 2007). People who are more mistrusting can be more hypervigilant about high-risk threat cues for being betrayed; thus, a reaffirmation of credibility might strongly predict positive repurchase behaviour via increased trust in company. People who are already high in propensity to trust may not exhibit a significant change in their repurchase intention through higher trust in company created by perceived credibility, because they are already likely to trust the company. Moreover, this unexpected finding could be explained by the conjecture that people who do and do not choose to complain online might differ in their propensity to trust, and hence in their motivations. Future studies could investigate propensity to trust in people who both did and did not complain online and see whether this distinction explains the effect.

Contrary to our expectations, propensity to trust did not play a statistically significant role in the relationship between the other dimensions of successful complaint handling and repurchase intention, as mediated by trust in company. These null findings can be attributed to the fact that credibility is a complaint-handling dimension that relies on the subjective evaluation of the individual, as opposed to other dimensions that are more objective, such as whether there was redress or not, whether the company apologised or not, or the timing of the response. A personality trait (i.e., propensity to trust), which colours an individual's perceptions and reactions in unique ways, might not have played a critical role in the incorporation of these objective factors into the behavioural patterns of the participants. Admittedly, attentiveness

also depends on the subjective evaluation of the participants to a certain extent, and the fact that no significant moderated mediation effect was detected for this variable is interesting. We think this might be attributable to the fact that even though some facets of attentiveness, such as the company representative showing respect and courtesy, also depend on subjective evaluations by consumers; in the online service recovery context, attentiveness can also be an objective construct. For example, using a boilerplate text as an answer instead of a specifically tailored one, or directing customers to generic communication channels (e.g., customer service phone numbers, company web links) are strategies that are identified as discarding policies (Mattila et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2013), leading to objective evaluations of attentiveness as low in the online service recovery context.

Moreover, our model of trust contributes to the literature consisting of models that conceptualise trust as a multidimensional factor (see Gefen et al., 2008 for a review) by offering a unique perspective to the study of trust. Previous models argued that trust comprises different constructs such as integrity, ability, and benevolence of the party in question of trust (e.g., Gefen, 2002; Gefen & Heart, 2006; McKnight et al., 2002). These models have been very useful in showing that these distinct dimensions of trust uniquely predict different consumer behaviours (e.g., Gefen & Heart, 2006; Pavlou & Dimoka, 2006). Our model builds on these by showing that distinct actions of the interaction partner (i.e., how a company handles a case of service failure) uniquely predicts behavioural intention through enhanced trust, lending support to the idea that trust is a multifaceted construct. Our model also adds to these by showing that this relationship is not unitary but is conditional on the customer's dispositional tendency to trust others.

5.1. Practical implications

The findings of this study provide important implications for companies which want to use social media to address service recovery. Firstly, the findings suggest that successfully responding to complaints on social media is important for retaining customers. This contribution to practice is in line with previous research that has shown that if a company ignores consumer complaints, either face-to-face or online, dissatisfaction increases and intention to repurchase declines (Mattila & Mount, 2003; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Moreover, more recent studies have shown that consumers prefer accommodative strategies, particularly apologies, to defensive or denial strategies when dealing with crises (e.g., Im et al., 2021). Consumers now consider social media accounts to be official communication channels and expect companies to answer their posts on these channels. Therefore, companies are likely to benefit from engaging actively on their social media accounts and empowering employees who use these channels to communicate with consumers. Relevant procedures should be designed so that employees can meet consumers' expectations and handle complaints as necessary. For example, consumers also expect to receive direct redress and apology when they use social media platforms to voice their complaints, and our results show that providing redress and apology on these channels increase repurchase intention by building trust in company.

The findings further demonstrate that the characteristics of responses to complaints on social media are also important. Simply providing redress or apology is not enough by itself and even though the timing of the response is important, consumers value other dimensions of complaint handling as well. This means that it is necessary to provide responses with redress and apology in a timely manner but while demonstrating credibility and attentiveness. Thus, when companies design their strategies for dealing with consumer complaining on social media, they should not only focus on the outcome of the recovery activities but also aim to include communication elements that will enhance the credibility and attentiveness of the conversations that they have with their complaining consumers.

Finally, it is also important to note the implications regarding propensity to trust and credibility. Although they run counter to the

predictions, the results regarding propensity to trust present a unique perspective: individuals who are less trusting can be appealed to by increasing credibility. This means that if companies handle online complaints in a more credible manner, they can increase repurchase intention, especially from those who are less trusting, by showing willingness to explain and account for a problem. If managers can measure propensity to trust through consumer surveys, this knowledge will also give them the chance to tailor their complaint-handling activities accordingly, which shape repurchase behaviour, as our findings indicate.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The results of the present study should be interpreted considering its limitations. First, the study employed a self-report survey; therefore, reports on the features of the company responses (e.g., response time) rely on individuals' recollections. These issues could be further explored by gathering data from the companies or by observing online conversations between the consumer and the company as they happen. Second, to diversify recruitment methods and to increase sample size, two distinct recruitment strategies were used. Although the final dataset did not show any statistical differences between these two groups on any of the study variables, it is likely that some of the consumers who were contacted by email had experienced complaint-handling activity earlier than the rest of the group, which may have affected their memory of the incident. Moreover, instead of measuring redress and apology in a dichotomous fashion (i.e., as either received or not), assessing the perception of the appropriateness of these complaint-handling activities with continuous measures could be useful in extracting deeper information. Last, we did not experimentally manipulate complaint-handling activities and trust; consequently, causal relationships between these variables and repurchase intention cannot be drawn from this data. Even though the significant mediation analyses point to potential causal relationships (Agler & De Boeck, 2017) in the expected directions, future research should test these relationships in experimental settings.

Due to the nature of social media being a channel visible to others, it is also important to understand how online service recovery activities are perceived by potential future consumers, who are able to browse and observe these communications easily (Bacile et al., 2020; Béal & Grégoire, 2021; Schaefers & Schamari, 2016). Using corporate communication theories, such as signalling theory, future research can consider how the relationship between the five dimensions of complaint handling and consumers' propensity to trust affects the purchase intentions of bystanders of service recovery communications on social media. Similarly, it is important to consider how knowledge of bystanders being present might influence motivations to complain online and expectations of company responses. Research shows that when consumers observe bystanders commenting and supporting complaints on social media, their own likelihood to complain increases (Armstrong et al., 2022). This three-way interaction between the consumer, the company, and the bystanders introduces an interesting avenue for research. Relatedly, another important aspect of how social media is used in the handling of online complaints is whether the response is posted publicly or delivered in a private message. Public commitment of the company to solve the issue can have different effects on both the complaining consumer and the bystanders. This could be an intriguing new avenue for future research. The novel types of social media also offer a range of further research opportunities. For example, Snapchat and TikTok use different communication attributes and features such as ephemeral content, filters, or videos (Fox et al., 2018) that consumers might use to interact with the company and with each other. The influence on other consumers of complaining using these novel methods of communication is not known and should be examined by future studies.

Finally, employing novel analysis techniques that identify the distinct set of conditions for certain behavioural outcomes to occur, such as Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Ragin, 2009), could be

highly informative in obtaining deeper information about how complaint-handling relates to post-purchase consumer behaviour. With these methods, the distinct dimensions of online complaint handling can be investigated together to see which specific sets of combinations are better predictors of repurchase intention, as has been investigated in other areas of e-commerce (e.g., Pappas, 2018; Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Overall, furthering the study of characteristics of online complaint activities within the context of trust can be productive in understanding post-purchase consumer behaviours.

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