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Coalition formation and firm representatives' answers to complainers on social media: Their interplay and the coalition ripple effect

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ABSTRACT

We ask whether complaint answers *by firm representatives* depend on coalition formation—others taking sides with complainers or firm representatives—and whether coalition formation *by third actors* depends on complaint answers. An online field study revealed that, from the firm representative perspective, the 73.2 % probability of a complaint answer in the absence of any coalition decreases to 10.9 %–12.8 % in the presence of a prior coalition with a firm representative or complainer. From the third actor perspective, the probability of the formation of a coalition with a firm representative decreases by one-third in the presence versus absence of a prior complaint answer; coalitions with complainers are not curtailed. Furthermore, a coalition with a firm representative shifts the average complaint answer from somewhat favorable to unfavorable, which facilitates coalitions with complainers, creating a coalition ripple effect. The results offer managerial guidance, as dissatisfying online complaint handling remains problematic.

1. Introduction

As social media has become a major complaint channel, market reports indicate that up to 55 % of online complaints receive no answer or an unsatisfying answer from firms, causing customer churn (CCMC 2023).[1] Online complaints are also critical because other consumers find it valuable to see how firms approach customer problems (Sprout Social 2023) and can create firestorms by sharing complaint episodes in their networks (Herhausen et al. 2019). Complaint handling on social media is challenging because others regularly engage in complainer–firm interactions, which expands social dynamics and makes them more equivocal (Bacile et al. 2018; Roschk et al. 2023). Simultaneously, firm representatives, who are key to organizational effectiveness, are susceptible to customers' ire (Singh 2000), and for this reason, they might break with their responsibilities in online complaint situations (Wang et al. 2011). Therefore, we examine how expanded social dynamics interrelate with firm representatives' answers to complainers on social media.

Scholars have moved beyond the interaction between a single complainer and a firm representative as follows: by examining (i) the complainer as a group of persons (e.g., Albrecht et al. 2014), (ii) how other individuals, defined as third actors, influence or are influenced by the complainer–firm interaction (e.g., Wan and Wyer 2019), and (iii) how the relationships among the complainer, firm representative, and third actor influence each other (e.g., Kim and Baker 2020). The third research stream analyzes triadic structures, or triads (Vedel et al. 2016), and is the focus of the present research. A phenomenon occurring in triads is coalition formation, where others take sides with the complainer or the firm, which happens regularly in online complaint settings (Roschk et al. 2023). Coalitions can severely impact firm representatives and others; they can isolate firm representatives and thus exacerbate what is already demanding for them (Thibault and Kelley 1959; Wang et al. 2011), which is often accompanied by complainers' negative emotions (Valentini et al. 2021). Coalitions may also create tension and negative effects among community members (Roschk et al. 2023), which can disrupt their positive interactions and the functioning of online communities (Dineva et al. 2023).

Focusing on social media, we take two separate perspectives and ask, *do the complaint answers offered by firm representatives depend on coalitions*

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[1] Throughout this article, we refer to a firm representative's response to a complaint as a complaint answer for two reasons. The term "complaint answer" should be neutral so that it can comprise both excellent and poor recovery efforts. Complaint answer as a term is also more specific than, for example, response, which can refer to other reactions (e.g., being upset) or behaviors (e.g., seeking emotional support from colleagues).

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(firm representative perspective), and, vice versa*, does coalition formation by third actors depend on complaint answers (third actor perspective)?* The complaint answer–coalition formation interplay remains unexplored to date, falling into a desirable research space. Research that moves beyond individual complainer–firm representative interactions is needed (Grégoire et al. 2025), especially with respect to triads (Roschk et al. 2023). While the extant research on triads has examined how third actors impact the relationship sentiment between complainers and firm representatives (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Pugh et al. 2018; Roschk et al. 2023), it has not addressed how triad dynamics shape firm representatives' recovery actions and how their recovery actions shape other consumers' behaviors. Furthermore, the present research's dual perspective responds to recent calls to consider multiple stakeholders (Grégoire et al. 2025) and presents employee-level data, which remain underrepresented in the service failure and recovery field (Khamitov et al. 2020).

In the present research, we conceptualize a failure triad consisting of a complainer (CO), a firm representative (FR), and one or more others as a third actor (TA) for a social media setting. Accordingly, the third actor has two coalition options: taking the side of the complainer (TA–CO coalition) or the side of the firm representative (TA–FR coalition). In this triad, we first focus on the firm representative and examine the probability with which the firm representative answers the complainer due to a prior coalition. Next, we focus on the third actor and examine the probability with which the third actor forms a coalition due to a prior complaint answer. For these effects, we also consider recovery quality to examine the moderating effect of the relative favorability of a complaint answer. We conducted a field study of social media complaint conversations, leveraging textual analysis to examine actual behaviors (Villaroel-Ordenes et al., 2025). This study contributes to research on triads in service failure and recovery situations in three ways.

First, the results reveal that complaint answers offered by firm representatives strongly depend on coalition formation. A coalition reduces the probability of a complaint answer from 73.2 % in the absence of any coalition to 10.9 %–12.8 % in the presence of either a prior TA–CO coalition or a TA–FR coalition. The results enrich the literature by moving beyond relationship sentiments between complainers and firm representatives (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Pugh et al. 2018; Roschk et al. 2023) to firm representatives' recovery actions and how they are shaped by triad dynamics. Employee-level insights are added to predominant consumer-level findings (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023) and advance the research of Pugh et al. (2018), who analyzed the firm representative as a recovery target (of a reprimand) in a manner similar to that of the complainer but not as an actor that provides recovery. The results also substantiate coalition formation as a powerful dynamic (Roschk et al. 2023) and demonstrate novel coalition consequences.

Second, the results reveal that the coalition tendencies of third actors depend on complaint answers. Although a complaint answer reduces the probability of a TA–FR coalition from 42.1 % in its absence to 26.9 % in its presence, it is ineffective at curtailing TA–CO coalitions and can even facilitate such a coalition. While previous research has examined effects originating from other consumers as third actors (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023), we show the opposite causality. The results demonstrate that firm representatives' recovery actions (directed at the complainer) have desirable and undesirable effects on triad dynamics, rendering an interrelation between firm representatives and third actors and granting (some) control of how social dynamics unfold to the firm. Furthermore, the results provide the first evidence of coalition formation drivers in service failure settings.

Third, the results demonstrate that recovery quality moderates the complaint answer–coalition formation interplay. Specifically, a TA–FR coalition yields a greater negative effect on the occurrence of a favorable complaint answer than on the occurrence of an unfavorable complaint answer, shifting the average complaint answer from being somewhat favorable to being unfavorable. In turn, an unfavorable complaint answer furthers TA–CO coalition tendencies (no such effect is present for favorable complaint answers). This finding constitutes a coalition ripple effect in that a TA–FR coalition facilitates a substandard complaint answer that triggers TA–CO coalitions, indicating a self-enhancing dynamic. The coalition ripple effect also enhances the firm representative's role in breaking the influence of the third actor while exerting influence on the third actor.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conceptual framework

The starting point of our conceptual framework (Fig. 1) is the complaint episode, which includes the online complaint and subsequent conversation. We focus on two separate perspectives. First, we take the perspective of the firm representative and analyze the coalition formation → complaint answer relationship, given that the firm representative can answer the complainer while a coalition has or has not yet been formed. Specifically, we examine whether the presence of a prior coalition affects the probability that the firm representative provides a complaint answer compared with the absence of any coalition (H1a and H2a). Next, we take the perspective of the third actor and analyze the complaint answer → coalition formation relationship, given that the third actor may form a coalition with the complainer or firm representative while a complaint answer has or has not yet been made. Specifically, we examine whether the presence (vs. absence) of a prior complaint answer affects the probability that the third actor forms a coalition (H3a and H4a).

Across both foci, the recovery quality of the complaint answer is a moderator (H1b–H4b). A favorable recovery entails higher-quality components in terms of their amount and kind (e.g., compensation plus empathetic apology) that are proportionate to the failure magnitude; an unfavorable recovery entails lower-quality components in terms of their amount and kind (e.g., nonempathetic apology only) or defensive strategies (e.g., denying responsibility) that are disproportionate to the failure magnitude (Roschk and Gelbrich 2014). The definition is adapted from the accommodative-defensive categorization (Hutzinger and Weitzl 2021) and considers that some complaint answers (e.g., "I am sorry, can you send us a private message?") are neither accommodative nor defensive per se but are better described as not propitious (i.e., unfavorable).

2.2. Coalitions in service failure settings

2.2.1. From dyads to triads in prior research

Coalitions form within triads or larger structures. A multiactor setting must fulfill two criteria to qualify as a triad. First, the actors must be associated, which means that relations exist among the triad members; otherwise, the third actor would have no bearing on the situation (Vedel et al. 2016). Thus, the association criterion formally includes the third actor in the setting and presents the transition from a dyadic context to a triadic context (Vedel et al. 2016). Second, triad actors must be connected, which means that at least two relations influence each other (Cook et al. 1983; Vedel et al. 2016). For example, it is not sufficient for actor A to have simultaneous relations with actors B and C. Rather, the AB and AC relations influence each other (see also Ritter 2000), so the separate AB and AC dyads connect to form a network structure (i.e., a triad; Cook et al. 1983).

Table 1 summarizes the extant service failure and recovery research that considers further consumers on the basis of the triad criteria. One research stream considers other consumers but treats them as one entity in that the complainer represents a group actor and thus remains dyadic in the analyzed complainer–firm representative interaction (Table 1: "Dyadic in Interaction"). A second research stream treats other consumers as separate entities—third actors—alongside the complainer and the firm representative (Table 1: "Triadic Contexts"). This approach

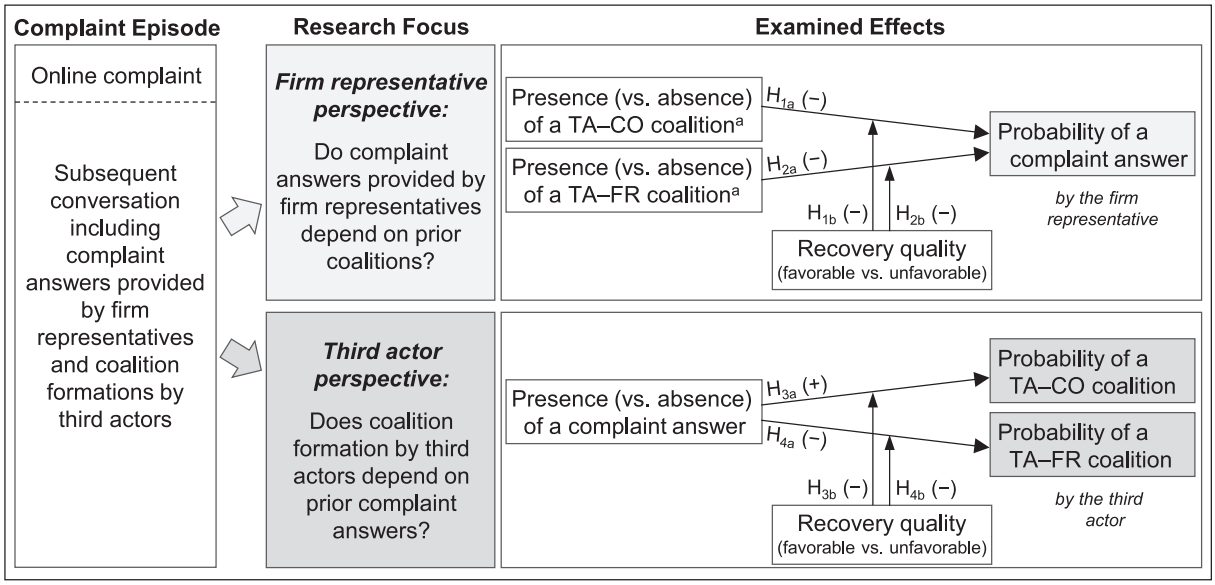


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework. [a]Absence refers to neither a TA–CO coalition nor a TA–SE coalition being present. *Notes:* The negative sign of the moderation effects indicates that the main effect decreases (i.e., more negative in the case of a negative main effect).

conceptualizes the influence among the three actors due to their shared context and examines how the presence of a third actor influences or is influenced by the complainer–firm representative interaction. As actors in such triadic contexts are not connected, a third research stream has started examining how the relations among complainers, firm representatives, and third actors influence each other (Table 1: "Triads").[2]

The present study extends the prior research on triads (Table 1: "Triads"), which has examined how third actors influence the relationship sentiments (e.g., satisfaction) of complainers toward firm representatives (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023) and of firm representatives toward complainers (Pugh et al. 2018). Analyzing the complaint answer–coalition formation interplay provides two advancements. First, while Pugh et al. (2018) analyzed the firm representative as a recovery target in a manner similar to that of the complainer, the present study examines the firm representative as an actor that actually provides the recovery, making it the first study to examine how triad dynamics impact recovery actions (coalition formation → complaint answer relationship). Second, while prior studies have examined how other consumers, as third actors, influence the firm representative–complainer relation (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023), the present study focuses on how firm representatives' recovery actions impact other consumers, making it the first to examine effects on triad dynamics (complaint answer → coalition formation relationship). Consequently, the present study adds novel coalition antecedents and consequences to prior coalition findings (Roschk et al. 2023).

For the present research, the failure triad comprises three actors: a complainer who voices the failure to the firm, a firm representative who acts on behalf of the firm, and a third actor who includes one or more others. In the complainer definition, the complaint can be made for another person. We refer to the firm representative to consider that others can side with the employee, the firm, or both. Coalition theories also require the firm representative to be human and not an automated agent (e.g., Thibault and Kelley 1959).[3] The conceptualization of the third actor as one or more individuals is based on the online setting with an unknown number of others.

2.2.2. *When and why coalitions form*

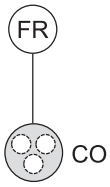
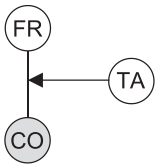
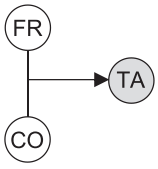
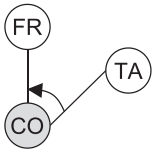
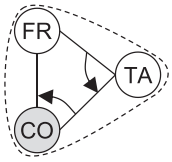
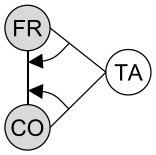
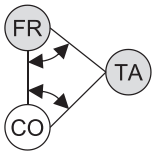
Next, we conceptualize when a behavior presents coalition formation. Coalition formation is a process in which two people form a temporary alliance through joint action (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), mutual use of resources (Gamson 1961), and/or endowment of another to represent the coalition (Vedel et al. 2016). More generally, coalition formation involves cooperation in the joint use of coalition members' resources (Komorita and Chertkoff 1973). For an online service failure situation, we define coalition formation as a process in which another customer collaborates—that is, an expression of taking sides—with either the firm or the complainer (Roschk et al. 2023) by providing emotional resources (e.g., sympathy), informational resources (e.g., facts, own experiences), or both to the coalition partner. Web Appendix A provides exemplary coalitions.

When there is a conflict among individuals, coalitions form because a subgroup of individuals cooperate to "maximize [their] reward" (Komorita and Chertkoff 1973, p. 149). Accordingly, coalitions have been characterized as the sharing of (self-)interests among persons with respect to extracoalition members (Thibaut and Kelley 1959). This shared interest can be due to a common fate, which is the exposure to a common threat or benefit, and the perceived similarity of, for example, a related experience (Cikara 2021). In the failure triad, the conflict pertains to the complainer and firm representative, and the resulting coalition options are TA–CO and TA–FR. As a form of common fate, the third actor may side with the complainer because of a general consumer interest in complaint resolution (i.e., benefit) or with the firm representative because the complaint threatens the firm with which the third actor identifies. The third actor may also vicariously experience the complainer's or firm representative's situation and thus form a coalition. In terms of similarity, the third actor may side with either, owing to similar experiences of a disappointing firm offering or being confronted with complaining customers. These considerations imply that the actors of the failure triad form subjective interpretations of the complaint

[2] The term triad is also used to describe buyer–supplier–customer settings (Modi et al. 2015) and is not based on the criteria used herein. Such cases can represent, depending on the specific approach, the "dyadic in interaction" approach in our classification (Table 1) but with the firm representative as a group actor (e.g., Modi et al. 2015).

[3] We reviewed firm representatives' comments in our data, and the language used did not indicate that automated agents were at work (e.g., typos, grammatical errors, varying names and speech styles).

Table 1
Research approaches expanding the complainer–firm representative dyad.

Schematic representation with *exemplary interaction*		Conceptual focus	Findings	Representative research
Dyadic in Interaction: Impact of the CO as a group on the complainer–firm representative interaction.				
	*A tourist group complains about a delay to a tour guide.*	Complainer's service failure and recovery perceptions	Groups (vs. individuals) show higher levels of anger and complaint intentions and are less receptive to recovery compensation.	Du et al. (2014); Albrecht et al. (2019)
Triadic Contexts: Impact of the TA's presence on the complainer–firm representative interaction, and vice versa.				
	*A customer complains to a store clerk while there are others in the queue.*	Complainer's service failure and recovery perceptions	The TA's presence (vs. absence) may increase complaint intentions and amplify or buffer successful and unsuccessful recoveries.	e.g., Bonifield & Cole (2008); Chen et al. (2020); Schaefers & Schamari (2016)
	*A customer observes on Twitter how a firm reacts with humor to a complaint.*	Third actor's service failure and recovery perceptions	The TA forms affect, attitudes, judgments, and intentions from elements of the CO–FR interaction (e.g., recovery quality, incidental similarity to the complainer).	e.g., Béal & Grégoire (2022); Hutzinger & Weitzl (2021); Mattila et al. (2014); further[a]
Triads (or Triadic Structures): Impact of one relation on another in the triad, resulting in a connected structure.				
	*A guest waits a long time for hotel check-in; another customer listens to the focal guest's concerns.*	Connection of the third actor to the complainer's relation with the firm representative	The complainer carries over positive and negative experiences from the TA–CO relation to the CO–FR relation.	Bacile et al. (2018), Kim and Baker (2020)
	*A customer complains online about a wrong grocery delivery; others side with the complainer or firm.*	Coalition formation as a consumer-relevant dynamic in triads	A TA–FR (vs. TA–CO) coalition shifts the complainer's recovery preferences; each coalition deteriorates the affective tone of the triad.[b]	Roschk et al. (2023)
	*A cashier makes a mistake in a food order; upon correction of the order, the manager steps in.*	Manager reprimand as a recovery focused on the firm representative and complainer	Improved satisfaction in the CO–FR relationship due to the manager (TA) giving a private and civil reprimand to the firm representative for the failure.	Pugh et al. (2018)
	*A customer complains online about a late grocery delivery; others side with the complainer or firm.*	Provision and quality of complaint answers within the triad (i.e., coalition) dynamics	Coalitions deter complaint answers; complaint answers can curtail TA–FR coalitions. A coalition ripple effect exists in that by leading to less favorable complaint answers, TA–FR coalitions trigger TA–CO coalitions.	Present research

Notes: FR, firm representative; CO, complainer; TA, third actor. The unit of analysis is marked in gray. The conceptualization is based on Ritter (2000) and Vedel, Holma, and Havila (2016). We treat the firm representative and complainer as connected in Pugh et al. (2018), which is different from Roschk et al. (2023), for better comparability with the present study.

[a] Further: Sharma et al. (2020), Wan & Wyer (2019), Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017).

[b] The focus on the triad as the unit of analysis is indicated by the dashed line.

episode, which is consistent with recent conceptualizations of service failure and recovery (Grégoire et al. 2025). Web Appendix A provides exemplary coalitions reflecting a common fate and similarity as reasons for coalition formation.

2.3. Impact of coalition formation on complaint answers by firm representatives

We begin our hypothesis development from the firm representative's perspective (Fig. 1, upper panel). A coalition can either isolate (TA–CO coalition) or support firm representatives (TA–FR coalition; Thibault and Kelley 1959), who face both scenarios in light of their service rules, mandating that they treat customers in a professional manner (Wang

et al. 2011). Employees in customer care roles may break with their service rules in demanding situations, such as complaint settings (Valentini et al. 2021), due to resource depletion and emotional reciprocation principles (Wang et al. 2011).

Resource depletion comprises two processes. Demanding situations yield an imbalance in that they require extra resources such as energy, self-regulation capabilities, and social support while preventing resource gains such as feelings of accomplishment, self-esteem, and relatedness, which lead to primary resource loss (Wang et al. 2011). As a result, the protection mechanism is activated. This mechanism leads employees to invest other or the remaining resources they have to counter or compensate for primary resource loss (i.e., secondary resource loss; Hobfoll 1989; Wang et al. 2011). As resource loss outweighs gains (Chen et al. 2015), we expect that firm representatives are predisposed to refrain from offering a complaint answer because it minimizes primary and secondary losses. Similarly, Bell and Luddington (2006) reported that customer complaints negatively affect employees' service commitment.

Emotional reciprocation refers to unfair or low-quality treatment by customers, which induces anger among employees because they process such treatment as a threat to their self-interest and norm violation (Wang et al. 2011). Firm representatives may perceive complaints as unfair because customers and employees often differ in their failure perceptions in that customers tend to blame employees for failures, whereas employees blame external factors and customer behaviors (Bell and Luddington 2006; Bitner et al. 1994). Furthermore, complaints can entail strong negative emotions voiced to employees that may be perceived as a norm violation (Valentini et al. 2021). Injustice-induced anger can result in poor task performance among employees and the reciprocation of injustice (Lavelle et al. 2007). Thus, emotional reciprocation may explain why firm representatives engage in a complaint answer but do so unfavorably.

2.3.1. TA–CO coalitions and complaint answers

When the third actor sides with the complainer (TA–CO coalition), the firm representative may believe that the third actor has violated a relationship norm. Such a norm violation, or perceived betrayal (Grégoire and Fisher 2008), occurs because a TA–CO coalition causes the extracoalition member to be alone (Thibault and Kelley 1959), which conflicts with individuals' general expectation of not being isolated (Blackhart et al. 2009) and receiving support from group members (i.e., other consumers in firm-hosted communities; Benard 2012). This line of thought mirrors prior findings for complainers, who feel betrayed when the third actor sides with the firm representative (Roschk et al. 2023). Feelings of betrayal may draw additional resources from firm representatives, furthering primary resource loss and thus making a complaint answer less likely. Feelings of betrayal are also linked to avoidance behaviors (Grégoire et al. 2009), which align with refraining from making a complaint answer.

A TA–CO coalition may also facilitate firm representatives' perceptions of being treated unfairly because firm representatives may consider isolation from the TA–CO coalition a norm violation. Furthermore, while siding with the complainer, the third actor may be uncivil toward the firm representative, as coalitions can be predatory and aggressive in nature (Cikara 2021; Vedel et al. 2016). Although these effects are driven by the third actor, they may lead to poorer task performance among firm representatives (Lavelle et al. 2007) and thus may impact the complaint answers given to complainers unfavorably; formally, this qualifies the proposed negative main effect of a TA–CO coalition such that it will be greater for favorable recoveries than for unfavorable recoveries. We hypothesize the following:

H1a: The presence of a TA–CO coalition reduces the probability of a complaint answer by the firm representative compared with the absence of any coalition.

H1b: The negative effect of a TA–CO coalition on the probability of a complaint answer is stronger for favorable (vs. unfavorable) recovery.

2.3.2. TA–FR coalitions and complaint answers

Initially, a TA–FR coalition can be considered a resource gain in employees' primary resources (Wang et al. 2011), which facilitates complaint answers by firm representatives. However, there are two opposing arguments. First, firm representatives may not consider the coalition by the third actor to be a substantial resource because inclusion (due to a TA–FR coalition) does not produce positive effects to the same extent as isolation (due to a TA–CO coalition) produces negative effects (Blackhart et al. 2009). Furthermore, to the extent that firm representatives consider the coalition a resource, they may draw from it to counter the primary resource imbalance (i.e., protective mechanism; Hobfoll 1989; Wang et al. 2011) by using it to justify a nonresponse. This argument reflects self-serving over customer-serving resource use[4]; such tendencies align with the coalition literature in that coalitions facilitate norm-breaking behaviors (Cikara 2021). Hence, we expect that a TA–FR coalition deters complaint answers.

In relation to emotional reciprocation, self-serving resource utilization may lead TA–FR coalitions to reaffirm firm representatives' biased beliefs that the cause of failure can be attributed to external factors or customer behaviors (Bitner et al. 1994), furthering the perception of the injustice of the complaint by firm representatives. In this sense, the coalition may also strengthen the perception of being treated unfairly when complaints involve strong negative emotions (Valentini et al. 2021). As before, perceptions of injustice may result in poorer task performance and lower recovery quality. Importantly, the perceptions of injustice relate directly to the complainer, so firm representatives may reciprocate through a lower recovery quality. We hypothesize the following:

H2a: The presence of a TA–FR coalition reduces the probability of a complaint answer by the firm representative compared with the absence of any coalition.

H2b: The negative effect of a TA–FR coalition on the probability of a complaint answer is stronger for favorable (vs. unfavorable) recovery.

2.4. Impact of complaint answers on coalition formation by the third actor

We turn our attention to the perspective of the third actor (Fig. 1, lower panel) and discuss the effects of complaint answers on the formation of the TA–CO coalition and TA–SE coalition. The argumentation is based on common fate (consumer interest or thread and vicarious experience) and similarity as reasons why third actors form coalitions (Cikara 2021; see also Chapter 2.2). We begin our discussions with considerations that are independent of recovery quality and then discuss how recovery quality may (or may not) play a role.

2.4.1. Complaint answers and TA–CO coalitions

A complaint answer may further TA–CO coalitions. For the third actor, the presence of a complaint answer, independent of recovery quality, adds an essential component that creates greater grounds to develop a common fate with the complainer (Cikara 2021; Walter and Bruch 2008), both in terms of a general consumer interest and of the vicarious experience of the complaint episode. Furthermore, a complaint answer adds contextual elements that can trigger similarity to the third actor's own experience. Consistent with this, prior research has shown that both the focal customer's complaint (Chen et al. 2020) and the firm representative's answer to it (Ma et al. 2015) can encourage other customers to voice their problems.

A favorable (vs. unfavorable) recovery quality may lessen the third actor's tendency to side with the complainer. Strong recovery efforts signal to third actors that the complainer's issue is being taken care of.

[4] One might argue that using resources to answer complainers may eventually be more beneficial, but the protection mechanism is inefficient or maladaptive to this end (Wang et al. 2011).

Accordingly, third actors may consider that siding with the complainer is of little additional value, both from a consumer interest perspective and a vicarious perspective (Cikara 2021; Walter and Bruch 2008). A weak recovery effort may have the opposite effect, triggering coalitions to compensate for the lack of responsiveness by the firm representative. Relatedly, Kim and Baker (2020) reported that third actors may help complainers while a recovery is pending. We hypothesize the following:

H3a: The presence (vs. absence) of a complaint answer increases the probability of the formation of a TA–CO coalition by the third actor.

H3b: A favorable (vs. an unfavorable) recovery quality weakens the positive effect of a complaint answer on the probability of the formation of a TA–CO coalition by the third actor.

2.4.2. Complaint answers and TA–FR coalitions

The effect of complaint answers on TA–FR coalitions cannot be formulated independently of recovery quality. As a starting point, we draw on the notion that third actors side with the firm representative because they may experience the complaint as a threat to their self-identification with the firm, may feel vicariously with the firm representative, or may have faced similar incidents in their own work context (Cikara 2021; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). Accordingly, the tendency of third actors to form a coalition depends on the extent to which the firm representatives' complaint answer resolves the complaint, rendering it less threatening, vicariously aversive, or similarly relevant.

While favorable (vs. unfavorable) recovery quality intuitively determines the complaint answers' effectiveness, there are in fact opposing expectations considering that the complaint answer is evaluated by the third actor. On the one hand, individuals are often biased to their own advantage—the third actor taking the firm's position—when allocating resources (i.e., egocentric bias; Ross and Sicoly 1979), such as in recovery settings (Roschk and Gelbrich 2014). Therefore, even an unfavorable recovery may be considered adequate from the third actor's perspective and may deter coalition formation. On the other hand, third actors may differentiate recovery qualities (Roschk and Gelbrich 2014), with favorable (vs. unfavorable) recovery deterring third actors more (vs. less) from siding with the firm representative. Strong recovery efforts may provide the third actor with confidence that the complaint is resolved, whereas weak recovery efforts might still call for support,

Table 2
Overview of the variables.

Variable	Definition	Role in the Analysis	Measurement	Mean (SD)
Variables Firm Representative Perspective (Episode Level)				
Presence TA–CO coalition	A TA–CO coalition formed while a complaint answer was not yet made at that point in the episode. (0 = absence, 1 = presence)	IV	Manual coding	0.33 (0.47)
Presence TA–FR coalition	A TA–FR coalition formed while a complaint answer was not yet made at that point in the episode. (0 = absence, 1 = presence)	IV	Manual coding	0.43 (0.50)
Complaint answer	Firm representative provided an answer to the complainer in the episode. (0 = no, 1 = yes)	DV	Manual coding	0.38 (0.49)
Favorable complaint answer	The complaint answer was accommodative to the complainer, given the magnitude of the failure. (0 = otherwise, 1 = yes)	DV	Manual coding	0.19 (0.39)
Unfavorable complaint answer	The complaint answer was neutral or defensive, given the magnitude of the failure. (0 = otherwise, 1 = yes)	DV	Manual coding	0.19 (0.39)
Variables Third Actor Perspective (Comment Level)				
Presence complaint answer	Comment was made after a complaint answer, or a complaint answer was not (yet) made. (0 = absence, 1 = presence).	IV	Manual coding	0.25[a] (0.43)
Presence favorable complaint answer	Comment was made after an accommodative complaint answer, or a complaint answer was not (yet) made. (0 = absence, 1 = presence).	IV	Manual coding	0.09[a] (0.29)
Presence unfavorable complaint answer	Comment was made after a neutral or defensive complaint answer, or a complaint answer was not (yet) made. (0 = absence, 1 = presence).	IV	Manual coding	0.15[a] (0.36)
TA–CO coalition	Comment by the third actor represented an expression of taking sides with the complainer. (0 = no, 1 = yes)	DV	Manual coding	0.19[a] (0.40)
TA–FR coalition	Comment by the third actor represented an expression of taking sides with the firm representative. (0 = no, 1 = yes)	DV	Manual coding	0.40[a] (0.49)
Industry and Failure Variables (Episode Level)				
Outlet type: coffee chains[b]	Coffee chains, including Costa Coffee and Greggs. (0 = reference category, 1 = coffee chains)	Control	Extraction	0.15 (0.36)
Outlet type: fast-food joints[b]	Fast-food joints, including McDonalds, Burger King, Subway, and KFC. (0 = reference category, 1 = fast-food)	Control	Extraction	0.10 (0.30)
Outlet type: general retailers[b]	General and apparel retailers, including Marks & Spencer, Primark, Dr. Martens, Zara, and Next. (0 = reference category, 1 = general retailers)	Control	Extraction	0.09 (0.29)
Brand buzz	Brand buzz in the United Kingdom (March 2021), indicating if consumers heard positive (>0) or negative things (<0) about a brand. (−100–100).	Control	YouGov	8.69 (3.68)
Failure controllability	The firm could have taken steps to prevent the failure. (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)	Control	Manual coding	5.87 (0.66)
Failure stability	The cause of the failure is likely to vary or is stable over time. (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)	Control	Manual coding	3.50 (1.41)
Outcome failure	The results (outcome) or the means (process) of product or service delivery were flawed. (0 = process, 1 = outcome failure)	Control	Manual coding	0.62 (0.49)
Failure reversibility	The extent to which the failure can be repaired or reversed (or is nonrepairable). (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)	Control	Manual coding	3.53 (1.56)
Failure severity	The size of the loss that is entailed in a failure renders the failure a minor or major problem. (1 = not at all, 7 = severe).	Control	Manual coding	4.92 (0.89)
Initiator	A third actor showing understanding for both the complainer and the firm. (0 = absence, 1 = presence)	Control	Manual coding	0.03 (0.18)
Daytime	The conversation started during daytime (6:00–24:00) or nighttime (0:01–5:59) hours. (0 = nighttime, 1 = daytime).	Control	Extraction	0.95 (0.22)

[a] Based on the subset of comments by the third actor (N = 1091).
[b] Reference category = grocery retailers (Asda, Tesco, Aldi, Sainsbury's, Lidl, Morrisons; N = 213).

mirroring the argumentation for complainers (Kim and Baker 2020). Given that the reasonings speak to a main and a moderating effect, we hypothesize the following:

H4a: The presence (vs. absence) of a complaint answer reduces the probability of the formation of a TA–FR coalition by the third actor.

H4b: A favorable (vs. an unfavorable) recovery quality strengthens the negative effect of a complaint answer on the probability of the formation of a TA–FR coalition by the third actor.

3. Method

3.1. Database development

We scraped user comments from the official Facebook pages of 17 international retailers in the United Kingdom (Table 2). We used Facebook because social media reports suggest that it is customers' preferred channel for voicing problems (CCMC 2023). We focused on retail as an underresearched industry (Khamitov et al. 2020) and chose specific retailers based on an initial screening that indicated frequent consumer and retailer activities. Furthermore, a single-country sample avoids cross-cultural influences (Valentini et al. 2021).

The data collection procedures and sampled complaint episodes were based on previous research (Roschk et al. 2023). All the comments on the retailers' Facebook pages between December 2020 and March 2021 were scraped, yielding an initial dataset of 17,191 episodes (Facebook's predefined comment chains) and 25,374 individual comments. From these data, complaint episodes—a comment chain starting with a complaint to the retailer—were identified. For this purpose, the procedures used machine learning classification and manual coding. The machine learning classification used Preotiuc-Pietro et al.'s (2019) Twitter posts as training data, which were manually categorized into complaints or non-complaints. Although the training data do not refer to Facebook posts, they provide many data points (N = 1,971) across several industries (e.g., retail and apparel), making them appropriate for training the classifier. The classifier identified 1,463 episodes as potential complaints (i.e., the first comment in an episode), which served as a preselection since they also contained false automated detections. Two coders, one research assistant and one of the authors, manually coded these episodes to distinguish actual complaints, defined as an expression of dissatisfaction with a firm's offering (Khamitov et al. 2020), from false automated detections. The coders were trained on the first 35 episodes (88 % agreement), and they subsequently evaluated the remaining episodes.

Manual coding and discussion of disagreements led to the identification of 681 complaint episodes. In the final step, 358 episodes were excluded because they were single complaint posts without further communication, which is needed for our research. The final dataset included 323 complaint episodes, containing 1,925 comments.

3.2. Variables

Table 2 summarizes the study variables. We employed manual coding, automated data extraction, and secondary data sources to measure the variables. For the manual coding, two research assistants coded the variables following the definitions in Table 2. Both coders practiced the coding with 35 complaint episodes and discussed large disagreements in continuous variables ($\geq$4 points on a 7-point scale) on an ongoing basis to develop a normative understanding of the definitions (Wilson 2009). Disagreements occurred in few instances, and the codings improved ($<$4 scale points in coding differences). The coding reliability based on Krippendorf's alpha was 0.81 or greater across the variables, exceeding the 0.80 threshold. Inconsistencies were resolved through discussion with one of the study authors (categorical variables) and by calculating the average of the coded values (continuous variables; Orwin and Vevea 2009).

From the perspective of the firm representative, we look at the complaint episode and measure the variables as follows. The independent variables *presence TA–CO coalition* and *presence TA–FR coalition* denote the formation of a coalition (= 1)—an expression of taking a side—versus the absence of any coalition (= 0) in a complaint episode while the firm representative has not (yet) provided a complaint answer. For the dependent variables, we coded whether (= 1) or not (= 0) a firm representative answered the complainer in a complaint episode (*complaint answer*). We also coded the recovery quality of the complaint answer as favorable or unfavorable; the variables *favorable complaint answer* and *unfavorable complaint answer* denote the respective complaint answer quality (= 1) versus otherwise (= 0; no answer or not the respective type).

From the perspective of the third actor, we look at the user comments and measure the variables as follows. The independent variable *presence complaint answer* was formed by defining all user comments made after a complaint answer as present (= 1) and otherwise as absent (= 0). To assess recovery quality, two dummy variables (*presence favorable complaint answer* and *presence unfavorable complaint answer*) indicate whether the user's comments were made after a favorable complaint answer (= 1), after an unfavorable complaint answer (= 1), or in the absence of a complaint answer (= 0; reference category). For the dependent variables, we coded whether (= 1) or not (= 0) each user comment represented a coalition with the complainer (*TA–CO coalition*) or the firm representative (*TA–FR coalition*).

Finally, we included industry (*outlet type* and *brand buzz*) and failure (*controllability*, *stability*, *outcome failure*, *reversibility*, and *severity*) characteristics to capture contextual influences (Khamitov et al. 2020). Outlet type was operationalized through three dummy variables, comparing coffee chains (= 1), fast-food joints (= 1), general retailers (= 1), and grocery retailers (= 0; reference category). Brand buzz measures whether consumers heard positive or negative things about a brand, ranging from –100 (negative) to 100 (positive). Failure characteristics (Table 2) were manually coded on 7-point scales anchored at "not at all" (= 1) and "very much" or "severe" (= 7), except for the outcome (= 1) versus process (= 0) distinction. We also coded the presence (= 1) versus absence (= 0) of third actors, who showed understanding with the firm and the complainer by helping the complainer while expressing a positive attitude toward the firm. We also included daytime (= 1) versus nighttime (= 0) to consider diurnal mood variations.

3.3. Analysis procedures

We first analyzed the complaint answers by firm representatives, using complaint episodes as the unit of analysis. We regressed *complaint answer* on *presence TA–CO coalition*, *presence TA–FR coalition*, and their interaction.[5] We next analyzed coalition formation by the third actor by using the individual user comments as the unit of analysis. These comments were a subset of the total dataset because not all episodes included comments by the third actor (episodes = 256, comments = 1091). We regressed *TA–CO coalition* and *TA–FR coalition* on *presence complaint answer*. The models included the industry and failure characteristics from Table 2 as controls.

For the moderation of recovery quality, we had to consider that recovery quality could be evaluated only in the presence of a complaint answer. A moderating effect refers to a third variable that impacts the strength of the main effect (Cohen et al. 2003). Thus, we split the complaint answers based on their recovery quality so that we can compare the effects of favorable and unfavorable complaint answers. Accordingly, we reran the complaint answer model using *favorable complaint answer* and *unfavorable complaint answer* as the dependent variables. We also reran the TA–CO and TA–FR coalition models, using *presence favorable complaint answer* and *presence unfavorable complaint answer* as the independent variables.

Because the dependent variables were binary (i.e., 0–1 scale), the models had a binomial specification, and the logistic probability unit

[5] At the episode level, it is possible that both a TA–CO coalition and a TA–FR coalition are present because the third actor comprises multiple others.

(logit) was used as the predicted score, which can be transformed into a probability (Cohen et al. 2003). Furthermore, the TA–CO and TA–FR coalition models used a mixed-effects specification because coalitions occur at the comment level (i) nested within episodes (j) (Bates et al. 2015), with the predicted probability $\hat{p}_{ij}$ given as follows:

$$ln\left(\frac{\hat{p}_{ij}}{1-\hat{p}_{ij}}\right) = \gamma_{00} + \sum_{k=1}^{K}\gamma_{k0}X_{k,ij} + \sum_{l=1}^{L}\gamma_{0l}Z_{l,j} + u_{0j} + r_{ij}.$$

In the formula, γ_{00} is the common intercept; r_{ij} is the level 1 error; u_{0j} is the level 2 error; and γ_{k0} and γ_{0l} are the parameter estimates for the variables at the comment ($X_{k,ij}$) and episode ($Z_{l,j}$) levels, respectively (Table 2). We estimated the models via the glm and glmer functions of the lme4 package for R (Bates et al. 2015), maximizing the log likelihood. The R^2 values were calculated as the proportional reduction in the deviance (Cohen et al. 2003).

We checked three data properties across all the models. First, the sample sizes at both the comment and episode levels provided sufficient power (≥80 %) to detect small effects ($r \approx 0.1$) of the independent variables (Arend and Schäfer 2019; Faul et al. 2009). Second, Web Appendix B provides the correlation matrices for the models. The maximum variance inflation factors were 1.99 or smaller. Third, for the mixed-effects models, the amount of variance due to complaint episode membership was 13.3 %–16.0 %, justifying the multilevel approach.

3.4. Robustness checks

We checked model robustness in two ways. First, we examined outliers and influential cases in the model estimations, as discussed in Web Appendix C. The identified data points did not threaten the robustness of the results. Second, we reran the models without the control variables, yielding similar result patterns.

4. Results

4.1. Impact of coalitions on complaint answers by firm representatives

Table 3 shows the estimated probabilities of a complaint answer, a favorable complaint answer, and an unfavorable complaint answer by coalition condition; the models explained 41.7 %, 39.3 %, and 21.9 % of the variance, respectively. Web Appendix D provides the full model results. Compared with a 73.2 % probability of a complaint answer in the absence of any coalition, the presence of a TA–CO coalition reduced it to 10.9 % (coeff. = −3.11, $p < 0.001$, risk ratio [RR][6] = 0.149), and the presence of a TA–FR coalition reduced it to 12.8 % (coeff. = −2.92, $p < 0.001$, RR = 0.175), supporting H1a and H2a. Both coalitions interacted and yielded a probability of 4.7 % (coeff. = 2.01, $p = 0.018$, RR = 0.064), indicating that the main effects are partially additive.

With respect to recovery quality, the presence of a TA–CO coalition decreased the probability of a favorable complaint answer from 37.9 % in the absence of any coalition to 4.3 % (coeff. = −2.62, $p < 0.001$, RR = 0.112), and the probability of an unfavorable complaint answer decreased from 29.1 % to 4.6 % (coeff. = −2.15, $p = 0.002$, RR = 0.157). The coefficients did not differ from each other ($p = 0.692$), not supporting H1b. The presence of a TA–FR coalition decreased the probability of a favorable complaint answer from 37.9 % to 1.5 % (coeff. = −3.71, $p < 0.001$, RR = 0.039), and the probability of an unfavorable complaint answer decreased from 29.1 % to 9.3 % (coeff. = −1.38, $p = 0.003$, RR = 0.321). The coefficients differed from each other ($p = 0.031$), supporting H2b. Consequently, the average complaint answer composition shifted from 58.6 % favorable (41.4 % unfavorable) in the absence of any coalition to 13.2 % favorable (86.8 % unfavorable) in the presence of a TA–FR coalition.

Table 3
Estimated probabilities of a complaint answer by coalition condition.

TA–CO coalition condition	TA–FR coalition condition	Probability of a … … complaint answer	… favorable complaint answer	… unfavorable complaint answer
Presence	Presence	4.7 %	0.7 %	3.3 %
	Absence	10.9 %	4.3 %	4.6 %
Absence	Presence	12.8 %	1.5 %	9.3 %
	Absence	73.2 %	37.9 %	29.1 %

Notes: Mean probabilities adjusted for the control variables.

4.2. Impact of complaint answers on coalitions by third actors

The TA–CO and TA–FR coalition models explained 3.9 %–4.3 % and 5.4 % of the variance, respectively. Web Appendix D provides the full model results. A complaint answer had no impact on the probability of a TA–CO coalition (coeff. = 0.35, $p = 0.101$, RR = 1.327), with probabilities of 16.8 % and 22.3 % in the absence and presence conditions, respectively. Thus, H3a remains unsupported at this point of the analysis. The presence of a complaint answer reduced the probability of a TA–FR coalition from 42.1 % in its absence to 26.9 % (coeff. = −0.68, $p = 0.003$, RR = 0.640), supporting H4a.

Table 4 shows the estimated probabilities of a TA–CO coalition and a TA–FR coalition by recovery quality condition. Compared with the 16.8 % probability of a TA–CO coalition in the absence of a complaint answer, the presence of a favorable complaint answer yielded a similar probability of 15.5 % (coeff. = −0.09, $p = 0.774$, RR = 0.926), whereas the presence of an unfavorable complaint answer increased it to 27.8 % (coeff. = 0.65, $p = 0.012$, RR = 1.658). Both coefficients differ from each other ($p = 0.026$), supporting H3b. These results also provide partial support for H3a, which is supported when complaint answers are unfavorable. Relative to the 42.1 % probability of a TA–FR coalition in the absence of a complaint answer, both the presence of a favorable complaint answer (coeff. = −0.77, $p = 0.015$, RR = 0.596) and the presence of an unfavorable complaint answer (coeff. = −0.60, $p = 0.049$, RR = 0.678) reduced it to 25.1 % and 28.6 %, respectively. Both coefficients did not differ, and H4b remains unsupported. While the effect of an unfavorable complaint answer is close to 0.05, the robustness checks indicate a lower p value of 0.008 upon the exclusion of influential cases (Web Appendix C).

4.3. Exploratory analyses

Additionally, we explored power as an inherent quality of coalitions, which is the degree of common interest among coalition members (Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Vedel et al. 2016). We assessed coalition power along two dimensions. First, the third actor represents one or more others so that coalitions may vary in size depending on how many consumers side with the complainer or firm representative. Second, third actors express their support to a lesser or greater extent. We tested coalition size (single vs. multiple) and agreement strength (weaker vs. stronger) as moderators of our hypothesized effects. Overall, the results indicated that the identified effect patterns held across coalition size and agreement strength, with only little evidence of moderation. Web Appendix E provides a detailed discussion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Research on triads in service failure and recovery situations remains scarce and focuses on how third actors influence the relationship

[6] Risk ratio = the probability presence condition divided by the probability reference condition, which is the absence of both coalitions (e.g., 0.149 = 10.9%/73.2%).

Table 4
Estimated probabilities of a TA–CO and a TA–FR coalition by recovery quality condition.

	Probability[a] of a …	
Complaint answer condition	… TA–CO coalition	… TA–FR coalition
Presence of a favorable complaint answer	15.5 %	25.1 %
Presence of an unfavorable complaint answer	27.8 %	28.6 %
Absence of a complaint answer	16.8 %	42.1 %

Notes: The mean probabilities are adjusted for the control variables.
[a] Among the comments made by the third actor.

sentiment between complainers and firm representatives (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Pugh et al. 2018; Roschk et al. 2023; Table 1). Moving beyond that, the present study examines the interplay of firm representatives' answers to complainers and coalition formation by other consumers, making three contributions.

First, to date, only Pugh et al. (2018) have studied how triad dynamics impact firm representatives but have done so as a recovery target (of a reprimand), not as an actor providing the recovery. Thus, our findings provide the first evidence of how firm representatives' recovery actions are influenced by triad dynamics (firm representative perspective; Fig. 1). The results show that the probability of a complaint answer decreases from 73.2 % in the absence of any coalition to 10.9 %–12.8 % in the presence of a prior TA–CO coalition or a TA–FR coalition. These findings are consistent with the notion that coalitions lead to primary resource loss (TA–CO coalition) or justify a nonresponse as a protective mechanism (TA–FR coalition); they contribute employee-level data to prior studies, which mostly use consumer-level data (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023). The large decrease in probabilities indicates that coalition formation is powerful (Roschk et al. 2023) and demonstrates novel consequences of coalition formation. The industry setting may have contributed to this result because service employees in retail settings are likely to face high-intensity customer interactions.

Second, while prior research has examined triad dynamics originating from consumers as the third actor (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020; Roschk et al. 2023; also Table 1), we look in the opposite direction and demonstrate that firm representatives' recovery actions affect triad dynamics (third actor perspective; Fig. 1). The presence (vs. absence) of a complaint answer reduces the probability of the formation of a TA–FR coalition by more than one-third (from 42.1 % to 26.9 % among the comments by the third actor). These results support the idea that other consumers take sides because the complaint renders an experience that is threatening to the self-identification with the firm, vicariously aversive, or similarly relevant. The presence (vs. absence) of an unfavorable complaint answer increases the probability that a TA–CO coalition forms from 16.8 % to 27.8 %. Poor recovery may trigger other consumers to compensate for the lack of responsiveness of the firm representatives. Overall, these findings supplement our results on the coalition formation → complaint answer relationship, rendering firm representatives and third actors mutually dependent and revealing coalition drivers in service failure settings.

Third, recovery quality moderates the identified effects. The presence of a TA–FR coalition had a greater negative effect on the occurrence of a favorable complaint answer than on the occurrence of an unfavorable complaint answer. These results align with the notion that the third actor may cause the firm representatives to perceive the complaint as unjust. Because a TA–FR coalition obstructs firm representatives' answers to complainers, the results mirror what has been found for complainers, who also carry their experience with the third actor over to the interaction with the firm representative (Bacile et al. 2018; Kim and Baker 2020). We further find that the presence of an unfavorable complaint answer facilitates the formation of TA–CO coalitions, whereas this effect is nonexistent for a favorable complaint answer, likely because a strong recovery effort marginalizes additional support by third actors. In summary, a coalition ripple effect emerges in that a TA–FR coalition facilitates a substandard complaint answer, which triggers TA–CO coalition tendencies.

Some effects remain unsupported. Recovery quality fails to impact the TA–CO coalition → complaint answer relationship, possibly because firm representatives do not want to 'punish' the complainer for actions by others. Additionally, recovery quality does not moderate the complaint answer → TA–FR coalition relationship, potentially because third actors consider an unfavorable complaint answer already adequate, as they take the firm's position. Furthermore, the observed effects did not change because of coalition size or agreement strength, which suggests that they are tentatively robust; Web Appendix E provides further details.

5.2. Managerial implications

According to market reports, up to 55 % of online complaints receive no answer or an unsatisfying answer from firms (CCMC 2023). A pervasive phenomenon in online complaint settings involves others siding with the complainer or firm representative. Such coalition formation can heavily impact complaint answers by firm representatives and vice versa. Given that research-based findings on the complaint answer–coalition formation interplay are lacking, the present results provide three insights to guide business practices.

First, on the side of the firm representatives, the probability of a complaint answer decreases from 73.2 % in the absence of any coalition to 10.9 %–12.8 % in the presence of a prior coalition of others with the firm representative or complainer. Thus, coalitions may explain the mixed complaint answer rates from market reports well. To address this finding, managers should consider that employees may have service rules but break them due to insufficient resources (i.e., energy, self-regulation capability, and social support). To overcome the nonresponse, a fast complaint answer can partly deter coalitions in the first step. Additionally, managers may implement flexible task organizations (e.g., front- and back-office rotation) so that employees self-manage their complainer exposure. Finally, coaching and empowerment (i.e., a fixed budget for complaint resolution) techniques can bolster employees' resources. To this end, shifting the focus from the 'losses' (customer churn) to the 'wins' (kept customers) may be effective.

Second, on the side of other consumers, complaint answers only partly deter coalitions with the firm representative; they are ineffective in curtailing coalitions with complainers and, when conveying an unfavorable recovery, may even facilitate such coalition formation. Accordingly, managers should look for community communication strategies that address why customers take sides. For example, communication should emphasize that complaints are welcome so that other consumers do not see them as a threat. Communication can also emphasize when and why a complaint answer may be pending or automated (e.g., the issue is privately handled or outside firm policy). Additionally, we advise leveraging coalitions when they cannot be prevented. Coalitions with complainers may lead to the voicing of otherwise unrecognized problems and can be a source for gathering consumer insights; however, both of which should not justify a substandard recovery that facilitates coalitions.

Finally, we find that a TA–FR coalition shifts the recovery quality of an average complaint answer from being somewhat favorable to being

unfavorable, which facilitates the formation of TA–CO coalitions. This coalition ripple effect places firm representatives at the center of the social dynamics. Given the proliferating capabilities of artificial intelligence, managers might be tempted to replace firm representatives with automated agents (e.g., chatbots); however, we advise against this because market reports indicate that complainers seek authentic responses (CCMC 2023)—a deficiency of automated agents (Gelbrich et al. 2025). Instead, automated agents may be employed to prepare complaint answers (partial automation), supporting firm representatives and facilitating them in answering, even though they may consider the complaint unjust owing to a TA–FR coalition.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study's limitations present opportunities for further research. First, given that coalition formation is a consequential dynamic, research could examine (further) the reasons why coalitions form in online complaint settings. Are there, for example, triggers in the language of the complaint or failure characteristics that make coalitions particularly (un)likely? The inferred motives of the complainer and firm could also be a promising avenue (Joireman et al. 2024).

Second, the observational nature of our field data prevented us from testing the theorized mechanisms. Hence, process evidence for why TA–CO and TA–FR coalitions deter complaint answers is needed. While our results reflect resource depletion and emotional reciprocation principles, insights may be sought when firm representatives avoid complaint answers (resource perspective) and when they get back at complainers (emotion perspective). Process evidence is also needed for why complaint answers impact the occurrence of TA–CO and TA–FR coalitions; other mechanisms may also be explored to gain insight into which of the extant processes expand to multiactor settings (Khamitov et al. 2020; Roschk et al. 2023).

Third, research may examine coalitions in greater detail by moving beyond their mere presence versus absence. We largely fail to find evidence that coalition size and agreement strength moderate the effects of coalition formation on complaint answers and vice versa; one reason could be that such nuanced effects require a greater degree of internal validity than what our field data provide. We encourage further examination and expansion of these characteristics, given that coalitions are complex phenomena (Thibaut and Kelley 1959).

Fourth, group dynamics remain a research priority (Grégoire et al. 2025). Thus, expanding the online retailing setting to other underresearched industries (e.g., health and personal care, entertainment, and sports; Khamitov et al. 2020) across online and offline domains is desirable. Furthermore, while we have analyzed group effects for a complaint episode, research could analyze group effects at greater levels of aggregation (e.g., brand communities, society at large). Such analyses may generate insights that help move from dyadic interactions to larger group dynamics and macro perspectives.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval of the data collection was obtained from University of Glasgow (approval no.: 400200194).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Masoumeh Hosseinpour: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition. **Holger Roschk:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Formal analysis. **Jan Breitsohl:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Data curation.

Declaration of Interest statement

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115807.

Data availability

Upon request, the corresponding author explains the data and code used in the analyses to obtain the reported results. Data and code may be made available upon agreement.

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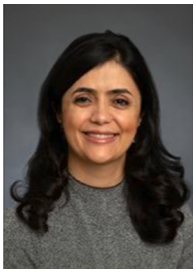

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