

# DOCTORAL THESIS



**UCAM**

UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA  
DE MURCIA

## INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL SCHOOL

*Doctoral Programme in Social Sciences*

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Customer and Employee Empathy as Indicators of  
Post-Purchase Behaviour:  
An Analysis of Complaint Behaviour and Complaint Recovery  
Considering Empathy and Emotional Intensity

*Author:*

Neele Inken Abend, M.Sc.

*Supervisors:*

Prof. Dr. María D. De-Juan-Vigaray

Prof. Dr. Mandy Nuszbaum

*Bonn, June 2024*



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## THESIS SUPERVISORS' AUTHORISATION FOR THESIS SUBMISSION

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Which I hereby sign in compliance with Spanish Royal Decree 99/2011, of 28 January, in Murcia, on 24<sup>th</sup> June of 2024.

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Prof. Dr. María D. De-Juan-Vigaray

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<sup>(1)</sup> If the Thesis is supervised by more than one Supervisor, both must be mentioned and both must sign.



## ABSTRACT

Several consumer characteristics and personality traits influence consumer behaviour. Most analyses of empathy as a factor of consumer behaviour consider the empathic employee perspective. There are currently few empirical studies on consumer empathy in the context of unsatisfactory customer-service interactions. The relevance of employee empathy has been part of complaint research for several years.

*Objectives.* The main objective is to analyse whether customer and employee empathy influence post-purchase behaviour (manifested by electronic-worth-of-mouth (eWoM)-giving behaviour and complaint recovery), considering the emotional intensity of dissatisfied online customers. To achieve this goal, this doctoral thesis applies the reciprocal relationship between customer and employee empathy as an indicator of post-purchase behaviour.

*Methodology.* The methodology is based on experimental scenario-based quantitative research designs. Current consumer research has already uncovered specific influences on customers' complaint behaviour. With experimental quantitative research, this thesis aims to extend the existing literature. For this purpose, three situational experiments with failed service interactions are conducted. The research objective of *study 1* is the analysis of customer-employee reciprocity related to a failed service interaction and its predictor-effect of eWoM-giving behaviour (N = 389). The experimental scenario depicts a negative customer-employee service interaction after an online purchase. The study investigates two key areas: (a) the effect of empathy in employees and customers on eWoM-giving behaviour after a service failure and (b) the mediation function of negative emotions. The second and third studies analyse a complaint-recovery situation and how customers' and employees' empathy affects the complaint-recovery success, such as customer forgiveness, with differences in perceived emotional intensities (*study 2*) and variations in recovery types (*study 3*). In study 2, the situation depicts the company's attempt to redress the service failure (N = 654), which is analysed with different customers' perceived emotions. Finally, study 3 depicts variations in recovery types based on different emotional and monetary compensations (N = 580).

*Findings.* In post-purchase behaviour, both customer empathy and employee empathy affect complaint variables, such as stickiness intention, forgiveness, and eWoM-giving intention, often through the mediator effect of perceived emotions. *Study 1 results* indicate that in failed service situations, negative emotions fully mediate the effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving behaviour. Customers' emotions often affect the influence due to the central relevance of emotions in consumer behaviour, as previous research has revealed. *Study 2 findings* demonstrate the relevance of employee empathy for successful recovery performance and increased customer loyalty, when the employee is empathic. Nevertheless, the analysis elicits influences of customer empathy within post-purchase behaviour. *Study 3 findings* reveal enhanced customer forgiveness when customers are empathic.

*Implications.* The research enriches the understanding of empathy in consumers' post-purchase behaviour in the customer-service context. It also reveals theoretical and practical implications for academics and the management of complaint handling, such as how to include customer empathy as a characteristic to improve the customer-service experience, complaint handling effectiveness, and efficiency. Consumers' forgiveness increases when consumers and employees are empathic. Society may benefit from the results of empathy-centric consumer handling when companies apply the suggested approaches.

*Future research and limitations.* Limitations are based on instrumental weaknesses, such as insufficient reliability in some specific measures and difficulties regarding potential gender biases based on empathy. For future research, it is suggested to analyse customer empathy's effect in other complaint situations, such as customer-employee situations with a higher bonding potential (such as a hair appointment or spa treatment).

## KEY WORDS

Customer Empathy, Employee Empathy, Emotional Intensity, eWoM, Customer Complaint Behaviour, Customer Forgiveness, Complaint Recovery, Post-Purchase Behaviour.

## RESUMEN

En el comportamiento del consumidor influyen varias características y rasgos de personalidad. La mayoría de los análisis sobre la empatía como factor del comportamiento del consumidor consideran la perspectiva del empleado empático. Actualmente, hay pocos estudios empíricos sobre la empatía del consumidor en el contexto de interacciones insatisfactorias de servicio al cliente. La relevancia de la empatía del empleado ha sido parte de la investigación sobre quejas durante varios años.

*Objetivos.* El objetivo principal es analizar si la empatía del cliente y del empleado influyen en el comportamiento posterior a la compra (manifestado por el comportamiento de boca a boca electrónico (eWoM) y la recuperación de quejas), considerando la intensidad emocional de los clientes insatisfechos en línea. Para lograr este objetivo, esta tesis doctoral aplica la relación recíproca entre la empatía del cliente y del empleado como indicador del comportamiento posterior a la compra.

*Metodología.* La metodología se basa en diseños de investigación cuantitativa experimental basados en escenarios. La investigación del consumidor actual ya ha descubierto influencias específicas en el comportamiento de queja de los clientes. Con la investigación cuantitativa experimental, esta tesis tiene como objetivo ampliar la literatura existente. Con este fin, se realizan tres experimentos situacionales con interacciones de servicio fallidas. El objetivo de investigación del *estudio 1* es el análisis de la reciprocidad cliente-empleado relacionada con una interacción de servicio fallida y su efecto predictivo en el comportamiento de continuar con el eWoM (N = 389). El escenario experimental representa una interacción negativa entre cliente y empleado después de una compra en línea. El estudio investiga dos áreas clave: (a) el efecto de la empatía en empleados y clientes en el comportamiento de dar eWoM después de un fallo en el servicio, y (b) la función mediadora de las emociones negativas. Los estudios segundo y tercero analizan una situación de recuperación de quejas y cómo la empatía de los clientes y empleados afecta el éxito de la recuperación de quejas, tales como el perdón del cliente, con diferencias en las intensidades emocionales percibidas (*estudio 2*) y variaciones en los tipos de recuperación (*estudio 3*). En el estudio 2, la situación representa el intento de la empresa de subsanar el fallo en el servicio (N = 654), lo

cual se analiza con diferentes emociones percibidas por los clientes. Finalmente, el estudio 3 representa variaciones en los tipos de recuperación basados en compensaciones emocionales y monetarias diferentes (N = 580).

*Hallazgos.* En el comportamiento posterior a la compra, tanto la empatía del cliente como la empatía del empleado afectan a variables de quejas, como la intención de permanencia, el perdón y la intención de dar continuidad al eWoM, a menudo a través del efecto mediador de las emociones percibidas. Los *resultados del estudio 1* indican que en situaciones de servicio fallidas, las emociones negativas median completamente el efecto de la empatía del cliente en el comportamiento de dar eWoM. Las emociones de los clientes a menudo afectan la influencia debido a la relevancia central de las emociones en el comportamiento del consumidor, como ha revelado la investigación previa. Sin embargo, el análisis revela influencias de la empatía del cliente en el comportamiento posterior a la compra. Los *resultados del estudio 2* demuestran la relevancia de la empatía del empleado para el éxito de la recuperación y el aumento de la fidelidad del cliente, cuando el empleado es empático. Los *resultados del estudio 3* revelan un perdón del cliente que se ve mejorado cuando los clientes son empáticos.

*Implicaciones.* La investigación enriquece la comprensión de la empatía en el comportamiento posterior a la compra de los consumidores en el contexto del servicio al cliente. También revela implicaciones teóricas y prácticas para académicos y la gestión del manejo de quejas, tales como cómo incluir la empatía del cliente como una característica para mejorar la experiencia del servicio al cliente, la efectividad y eficiencia del manejo de quejas. El perdón de los consumidores aumenta cuando los consumidores y empleados son empáticos. La sociedad puede beneficiarse de los resultados obtenidos de tratar al consumidor teniendo en cuenta la empatía cuando las empresas aplican los enfoques sugeridos.

*Limitaciones y futuras líneas de investigación.* Las limitaciones se basan en debilidades instrumentales, como una confiabilidad insuficiente en alguna medida puntual y dificultades con los potenciales sesgos de género basados en la empatía. Para futuras investigaciones, se sugiere analizar el efecto de la empatía del cliente en otras situaciones de queja, como situaciones cliente-empleado con un mayor potencial de conexión (como una cita de peluquería o un tratamiento de spa).

## **PALABRAS CLAVES**

Empatía del cliente, empatía del empleado, intensidad emocional, eWoM (boca a boca electrónico), comportamiento de queja del cliente, perdón del cliente, recuperación de quejas, comportamiento posterior a la compra.



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Everyone said, "Enjoy the process". Now that the process is over, I will certainly miss it. But once you cross the finish line, there is always a new challenge waiting. Cheers to what is yet to come!



“Don't let anyone rob you of your imagination,  
your creativity, or your curiosity.  
It's your place in the world; it's your life.  
Go on and do all you can with it,  
and make it the life you want to live”  
Mae Jemison, (1956).



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**ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>CCB</b>	Customer Complaint Behaviour
<b>CE</b>	Customer Empathy
<b>CFA</b>	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
<b>CFI</b>	Comparative Fit Index
<b>EE</b>	Employee Empathy
<b>EI</b>	Emotional Intensity
<b>eWoM</b>	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
<b>RMSEA</b>	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
<b>RQ</b>	Research Question
<b>SEM</b>	Structural Equation Model
<b>SRMR</b>	Standardised Root Mean Squared Residual
<b>TEQ</b>	Toronto Empathy Questionnaire
<b>VIF</b>	Variance Inflation Factor
<b>WoM</b>	Word of Mouth



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# I – INTRODUCTION

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## I - INTRODUCTION

In section 1. Introduction, the reader is introduced to the general topic of the doctoral thesis. The author's motivation as well as the justification and importance of the thesis are presented. The research gap is derived in the following section, [1.2. Objectives and Research Questions](#), and the objectives and research questions are shown. Section [1.3.](#) provides managerial relevance and the scientific contribution. The section concludes with the methodology and the overall structure.

### 1.1. MOTIVATION AND IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Consumer behaviour appears to vary greatly depending on interpersonal differences (e.g., Ekinici et al., 2016; Huang & Chang, 2008). Most have probably observed that people react differently after negative customer experiences. For instance, an impulsive person may seem to complain unreflectively and spontaneously (P. Sharma et al., 2010), or a consumer with a high sense of justice may appear more likely to complain (Phau & Baird, 2008) than a low self-confident (Keng et al., 1995; Phau & Baird, 2008) or neuroticism consumer (Kowalski, 1996; Mooradian & Olver, 1997). Such differences can be observed in not only professional but also personal environments. Substantial personality-based differences exist in customers' willingness to complain and their satisfaction in the recovery process and handling of customer services (e.g., Ekinici et al., 2016; Harris & Mowen, 2001; Kowalski, 1996).

Customers' empathy levels seem to be a differential factor when considering complaints and accepting recovery processes. After observing these considerations and researching the literature, neither a detailed approach nor a coherent explanation was found. This need for theoretical and practical explanations has motivated the author to study the field and conduct the current thesis. Therefore, this doctoral thesis aims to analyse the influence of customer empathy on the post-purchase phase under consideration of service failures.

Reasons for customer complaints include failures, which are unavoidable in every sector, whether in the service or manufacturing industries. The failures considered in this doctoral thesis are service failures from a company's representatives (e.g., customer-service agents) in direct interaction with a customer. Thus, a service failure is the poor human interaction of service employees with customers. Companies cannot eliminate failures, but they can minimise and learn how to embrace failures effectively. Proficiency means handling the problem fairly and reasonably, considering it as a chance to redress customer dissatisfaction and mitigate the negative consequences of service failures (see complaint satisfaction and service recovery paradox) (Foscht & Swoboda, 2011). Allowing the customer to address dissatisfaction and react appropriately to a recovery request increases customer satisfaction significantly as stated by Diehsle (2012), Foscht and Swoboda (2011), Harrison-Walker (2019) and Wuenschmann (2007). Hence, it is unambiguous that revealing customers' motives behind complaint or recovery behaviour is necessary to understand the appropriate complaint-handling strategy for creating customer forgiveness. According to Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021) and Wieseke et al. (2012) customer forgiveness is essential to establish a long-lasting customer relationship after complaint-recovery processes.

A tremendous amount of retail occurs online. As such, the relevance of digital reputation is increasing alongside the growth in online purchases (Gandini, 2020). Worldwide eCommerce revenue in 2019 was 1.83 billion EUR, in 2020 it was 2.33 billion EUR, in 2021 it was 2.81 EUR, and in 2022 it was 3.14 billion EUR (Statista Market Insights, 2023). The forecast for 2023 is 3.41 billion EUR (Statista Market Insights, 2023). However, in Germany, for instance, online retail sales declined for the first time ( -2.5 % in 2022) (Handelsverband Deutschland, 2023) after high growth rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the rates experienced an all-time high. This decline has been caused by several global crises (war, energy crises, high inflation rates). However, in 2023, the German forecast appears to have improved (+ 5.8 %) (Handelsverband Deutschland, 2023). Nevertheless, digital reputation is particularly important to companies (Gandini, 2020).

Modern companies use their digital reputation, online reviews, and evaluation management as fundamental marketing instruments, which are not dispensable for current customer service and consumer marketing. Purchase evaluation is a marketing instrument that can reduce new customers' purchase risk

(Granados et al., 2010). Some customers seek to subsequently validate their purchases because of post-purchase uncertainty. To stimulate their uncertainty, they want to validate their purchases by reading existing online reviews to find confirmation (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). Therefore, from a profit-oriented business perspective, having an excellent digital reputation is essential as this could prevent consumers to return their purchases. For instance, in Germany, consumers can return all online purchases for a specific time due to the “Distance Selling Act”<sup>1</sup> law. Hence, poor customer reviews increase returns because they fail to give consumers the after-purchase security they seek. Second, poor customer reviews increase shopping-cart abandonment because consumers do not obtain confirmation during their online purchases. Thus, customer reviews are an essential part of the consumer-behaviour process and fall under the phase of purchase evaluation (Kotler & Bliemel, 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Gandini (2020) illustrates how inextricably entangled digital reputation, word-of-mouth evaluations, and digital forms of social interaction are and how powerful a digital reputation is. Purchase evaluation is crucial for a company's growth strategy: it stabilises revenue or attracts new customers (Godes & Chen, 2014). Moreover, a returning customer has a much higher customer value than a one-time customer (Wuenschmann, 2007). The customer-acquisition cost of repurchasing customers is significantly lower (Ahn et al., 2020; Verbraken et al., 2014), and, according to Wuenschmann (2007), complaining customers can have up to 88 % higher customer value. Therefore, companies should understand customers' post-purchase reactions based on their personality (Wuenschmann, 2007). In other words, why are customers reacting the way they did? By understanding their behavioural intentions, companies can ensure they respond to the specific needs of each customer. However, this approach implies that companies must consider the specifics of online consumers. Online shoppers, for

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<sup>1</sup> The “Distance Selling Act” is a German regulation that allows consumers to return online purchased goods within two weeks. The German Civil Code §§ 355, 312g, 312c regulates the law (Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch, 2024).

example, demonstrate far greater knowledge and are more informed and demanding as Jung and Seock (2017) stated.

For instance, one customer would like an explanation for the failure, another wants their money back, and a third desires a friendly apology. The recovery approach, in turn, determines whether a customer remains a one-time customer after a service failure or will repurchase. Thus, post-purchase behaviour has a crucial meaning for the manifestation of customer satisfaction and, consequently, repurchase intention (Westbrook, 1987).

In the literature, numerous characteristics of situations and personalities have been identified as predictors of customer complaint behaviour (CCB) (Harris & Mowen, 2001; Jung & Seock, 2017; Mooradian & Olver, 1997; Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004; Weun et al., 2004). However, until now, empathy has been chiefly analysed from the employees' perspective (Markovic et al., 2015; Simon, 2013).

Empathy is pivotal for effective interaction in the social world (Lima & Osório, 2021). It is not only the ability to understand, re-feel, and anticipate others' intentions and to anticipate their behaviour or emotional experience that may arise from an interaction (Lima & Osório, 2021). Empathy is also the ability to respond to the emotions of others appropriately (Lima & Osório, 2021). As such, empathy demonstrates a mediating role in intelligence-pro-sociality science (Guo et al., 2019), which conjectures particularly honest and helpful feedback for a company. Additionally, a strong reciprocity exists between trust and empathy (Frei & Morriss, 2020; Kumra & Sharma, 2022). Empathy will be described in detail in section [2.4. Customer Empathy](#).

The role of customer empathy has been discussed in increasingly more consumer situations. Recently, Yen and Yang (2018) examined the effect of consumer empathy on the relationship between consumer responses to corporate social responsibility. The importance of moral identity to consumer behaviours has been confirmed in previous research, especially in corporate social responsibility (Xie et al., 2015), based on empathy's mediating effect on moral identity and charitable donations (S. Lee et al., 2014). Empathy enhances the human sense of social responsibility and assistance tendencies for others (Chourou et al., 2021). Recently, Raza et al.'s (2023) research supported a mediating effect of consumers' trust in the banking industry on the relationships between frontline employees' empathy and consumer orientation and the employees' performance. Analysing

and understanding consumers' empathy is essential in most consumer-related environments, and it is also crucial in interactions between customers and service agents as well as customer complaint behaviour.

Recently, a systematic review of service-recovery research was conducted suggesting a research gap in globalising service-recovery research. Mir et al. (2023) recommended to analyse the cultural differences influencing the effectiveness of service-recovery strategies in different regions, such as Europe. Furthermore, most service-recovery research has a geographical bias, and differences in cultural contexts must be revealed (Mir et al., 2023). Thus, a German sample is analysed to compare German results with future research concerning customers' complaint behaviour.

In customer complaint behaviour, predominant researchers have focused on empathy from the employees' perspective (Markovic et al., 2015; Simon, 2013) and revealed that customers are more satisfied when the employee is empathic (Markovic et al., 2015). Previous research has also investigated customer and employee empathy (J. Wei et al., 2022; Weißhaar & Huber, 2016; Wieseke et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies have focused on empathy as part of the internal company perspective, such as employees or managers, within consumer behaviour (Hattula et al., 2015). For instance, Hattula et al. (2015) explored the influence of managerial empathy on predicting consumer preferences. However, the combination of customer empathy and employee empathy after a failed service-employee interaction in Germany has rarely been analysed. A recent literature review of frontline employees' empathy in service recovery (Lajante & Remisch, 2023) revealed a critical blind spot:

No study investigated the effects of customers' angry emotions on frontline employees' empathy and its subsequent impact on emotional labor, empathic concern, and prosocial service behaviours. [...] Our discussion offers recommendations fostering research on the mediating effect of frontline employees' empathy on service recovery process quality and customer satisfaction. Lajante and Remisch (2023, p. 3)

In addition to analysing the empathy relationship, it has been recommended that further research incorporate negative emotions into explorations of the relationship between empathy, consumer forgiveness, and the service-recovery

effect (J. Wei et al., 2022). This doctoral thesis will consider the need for studying negative emotions by examining emotional intensity. Therefore, emotional intensity analysis is integrated into an investigation of the relationship between customer empathy and customer complaint behaviour because empathy and emotional intensity seem to interact highly. Additionally, research on trade-offs between economic- and emotional-recovery approaches and the different circumstances has been suggested by C. Wei et al. (2020) to create the best consumer and firm output.

## 1.2. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to illuminate the influence of customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity on post-purchase behaviour in the context of failed service interactions, combined with the recovery of such interactions. A key research objective is thus to analyse negative customer–employee interactions and how empathy and the emotional intensity of the complaint situation and recovery process affect these interactions. As such, this doctoral thesis strives to close the research gap and, therefore, change the perspective, and empathy is mainly considered from the customer perspective.

The study focuses on the eCommerce sector to find evidence. The trade-offs between emotional- and economic-recovery strategies and various emotional intensities are analysed by considering customer and employee empathy. To address this gap in the literature, the doctoral thesis aims to extend scientific knowledge and insights into customer complaint behaviour and the handling of empathic customers in the context of complaint recovery. The research aims to close this gap by providing recovery-handling strategies for customer empathy tendencies. Consequently, the main research question is as follows:

**Main research question.** Do customer and employee empathy influence post-purchase behaviour (manifested by eWoM-giving intention and complaint recovery), considering the emotional intensity of dissatisfied online customers?

In addition to the main research question (RQ), every study has sub-research questions: RQ1 for study 1, RQ2 for study 2 and RQ3 for study 3. These questions are as follows:

**Research question 1.** Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity affect negative eWoM-giving intention and the expectation of complaint recovery? (Study 1)

RQ1.1 Does the customer's previous complaint experience influence negative eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.2 Does the attitude toward complaints moderate negative eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.3 Does the customer's perceived dissatisfaction influence negative eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.4 Does employee empathy mitigate recovery expectations, and is this relationship mediated by eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.5 Do customer and employee empathy have a reciprocity that mitigates negative eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.6 Does customer empathy impact the recovery expectation?

RQ1.7 Does perceived satisfaction influence the recovery expectation?

RQ1.8 Does customer empathy influence eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.9 Does emotional intensity influence eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.10 Does emotional intensity mediate the effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention?

RQ1.11 Does customer empathy impact the attitude toward complaints?

**Research question 2.** Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity influence customer forgiveness and post-recovery satisfaction? (Study 2)

RQ2.1 Does customer empathy mitigate the perceived emotional intensity of service failures, redress the situation, and then enhance customer forgiveness?

RQ2.2 Does the perceived effort of a company's recovery attempt enhance customer forgiveness, which in turn improves the stickiness intention?

RQ2.3 Do customer and employee empathy influence recovery expectations?

RQ2.4 Is the customer's self-esteem positively related to customer empathy?

RQ2.5 Is emotional intensity related to (post-recovery) satisfaction?

RQ2.6 Does employee empathy positively influence recovery performance?

RQ2.7 Does perceived employee empathy enhance the customer's stickiness intention?

RQ2.8 Do dissatisfied customers' reaction types vary depending on empathy and self-esteem?

RQ2.9 Does customer empathy (McBane) mitigate a favourable attitude towards complaints?

**Research question 3.** Do customer and employee empathy influence customer forgiveness and stickiness intention? (Study 3)

RQ3.1 Does customer empathy towards the firm impact customer forgiveness and stickiness intention?

RQ3.2 Does customer empathy towards the firm positively influence employee empathy perception and enhance the customer's perceived effort?

RQ3.3 Does customer empathy towards the firm promote perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention?

RQ3.4 Does positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforce post-recovery satisfaction?

RQ3.5 If compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness, does this effect depend on customer empathy towards the firm?

RQ3.6 Does customer empathy (McBane) positively relate to customers' self-esteem?

### 1.3. MANAGERIAL RELEVANCE AND SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

From a managerial perspective, the results ensure that companies understand customer behaviour. Companies must understand post-purchase behaviour to satisfy their customers, develop strategies to recover the customer relationship after service failures, and influence or react to dissatisfied customers appropriately. Successful customer-complaint recovery significantly influences

companies' financial performance (Tronvoll, 2007). According to a recent study from McKinsey and Company (2022), customer-experience improvement is the fastest-growing priority area for customer-care leaders, with an increase of 20 % from 2019 to 2022. Customer interaction and employee interaction are thus essential touch points for companies. A wide range of digital solutions are provided for customers through digital contact points, but only a minority of customers use these self-service channels, and most require assistance with the solutions. Hence, a reasonable combination of technological and human touch points is required to reinforce the shift to digital solutions (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

It is essential to understand how customer reviews influence new potential customers; thus, it is crucial to react to customer evaluations. Due to these insights, the website or the web shop can be designed, or customer evaluations can integrate into the purchase process to provide confirmation (e.g., Wang et al., 2015). These insights are fundamental to being customer-centric and market-oriented, which are characteristics of successful players in the digital age (e.g., Gandini, 2020). Nowadays, the consumer has almost endless information transparency about different alternatives on the market and is more demanding; the rise of eCommerce changed consumer behaviour to the effect that online consumers are more interactive in communication compared to offline consumers (Miller et al., 2000; Wind et al., 2001). This underlies the importance of positive customer reviews and explains why some companies even pay for better website reviews (Firnkes, 2015). A positive digital reputation enables trust, reinforces digital purchases, and represents a competitive advantage (Gandini, 2020). Companies can develop strategies to handle customers' dissatisfaction by understanding their customers' needs. However, it seems crucial to customise the complaint handling of dissatisfied customers (Harrison-Walker, 2019). Each customer may have a different expectation and intention to complain, as suggested by previous research (e.g., Phau & Baird, 2008; Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004; Wuenschmann, 2007).

Correctly handling angry customers and understanding why a customer acts in given way and for what reason are important parts of customer service. Hence, from the findings, companies can customise the recovery process. Not every recovery attempt fits the customer profile: each customer requires specific

compensation depending on their profile. This customisation enables the author to answer the question of how high investment in complaint recovery should be.

With the current expansion of artificial intelligence (AI), it is even more critical to understand customer empathy in customer complaint behaviour because a lack of emotional competencies is a crucial part of future AI developments for customer-service interactions. For example, communicating with a chatbot is preferred when the chatbot understands the customer's needs, indicating empathy (Chung et al., 2020). Yun and Park (2022) examined the effect of chatbot service recovery on positive WoM, customer-repurchase intention, and customer satisfaction. Therefore, the authors compared two chatbot service recoveries, one with emotional words and the other without. Their findings indicate that AI empathy and interactivity only affected customer satisfaction in the group for chatbots with emotion words (Yun & Park, 2022).

From a scientific perspective, this research contributes considerably to the field of post-purchase behaviour, specifically the purchase-valuation literature. This study develops knowledge on the reasonable handling of complaints through a framework of empathy and emotions of a complaint situation and the recovery process.

The analysis of empathy and emotional intensity is related to a cohesive framework for describing customers' negative post-purchase behaviour under these factors. This approach amplifies the post-purchase research significantly. Until now, science has mainly focused on the employee perspective on empathy; thus, the emphasis is on employee empathy. Empathy plays an important role, especially in customer service and complaint handling. For instance, Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021); Simon (2013) and Wieseke et al. (2012) analysed how empathy affects the relationship with customers.

However, there have been limited empirical studies on empathy in customer–employee interactions in service (Wieseke et al., 2012). Hence, in this thesis, the reverse perspective is applied. Therefore, how does customer empathy affect the customer–employee (or organisation) relationship if customer empathy is part of the customer's predisposition? That predisposition is a central influencing factor of complaint behaviour and has been investigated for decades (see chapter [2.2 Customer Complaint Behaviour](#)).

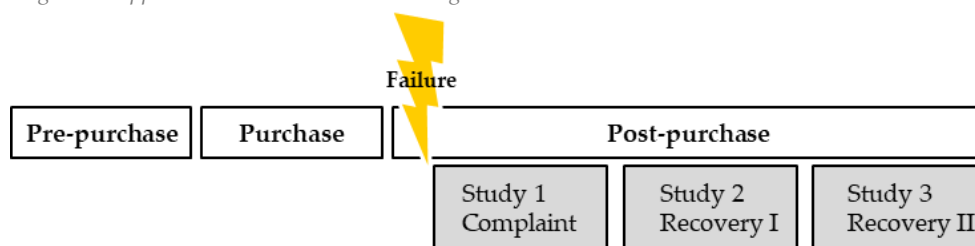
A combined methodology of all constructs aggregates the research objective into a coherent and extensive picture of post-purchase behaviour to answer the main research question. Consequently, there is a high demand to research the phenomenon of purchase evaluation. The purpose is to increase the scientific knowledge in consumer-complaint research by understanding the impact of customer and employee empathy.

#### 1.4. STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on service failures during interactions between employees and customers in the post-purchase phase of the customer journey. To address the identified research gap, a multi-experimental quantitative research design based on three different scenarios was conducted, which aimed to answer the research questions through three different empirical approaches. Therefore, three consecutive experimental studies were performed.

As suggested in the literature, (Blodgett et al., 1997; Hess et al., 2003; H. Liu et al., 2020; McCollough et al., 2000) scenario-based approaches are often used to research negative consumer experiences and service failures. In this sense, each study covers a different post-purchase situation during the purchasing process. Figure 1 presents an overview of the research approach of this thesis, which follows the customer journey through the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases.

Figure 1. Approach to the Thesis' Methodological Structure



Note. Own illustration based on the classic model of consumer behaviour (Kotler & Bliemel, 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

The experimental studies consider customers' level of empathy and perceived emotional intensity. Customers' post-purchase behaviour is operationalised in this doctoral thesis based on their electronic word-of-mouth

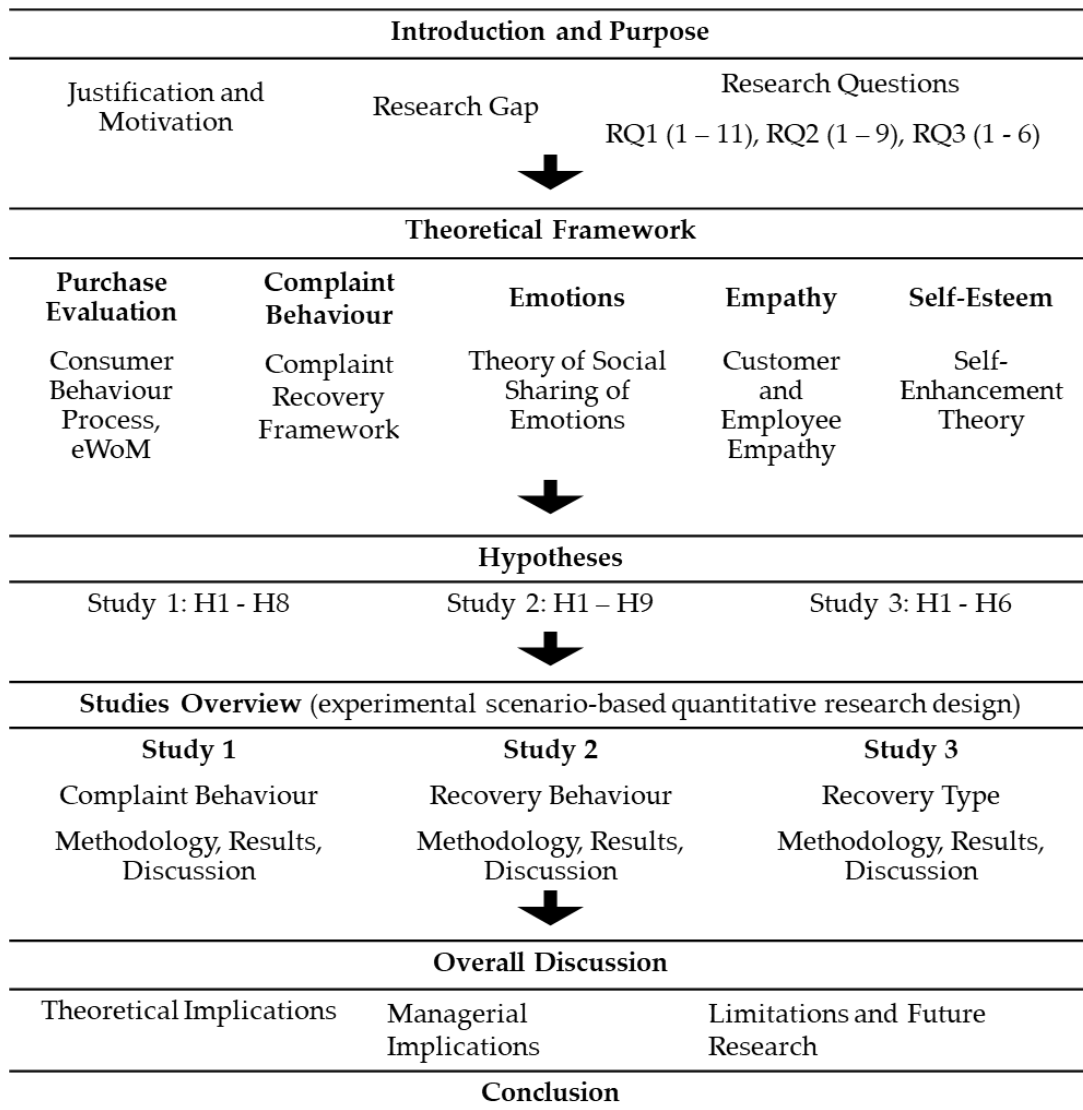
(eWoM) willingness. In this context, eWoM refers to any positive or negative customer evaluation of a product, company, or service made electronically available to many people or institutions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The recovery process represents the company's attempt to facilitate the customer's recovery after a complaint.

The experimental scenarios are based on an online printer purchase. The printer was chosen as a research object because printer purchases are less emotionally involved than commitment purchases, such as a bicycle or a concert, and many households have one. Additionally, printer purchases are typical search goods, meaning consumers can read pre-purchase online reviews.

However, based on the focus of the studies, the failure is the customer-service experience and the recovery experience of a failed service interaction. Hence, the service failure is due to poor customer service and recovery interaction. This doctoral thesis focuses on the customer service of an electronic-goods retailer and not the retailer itself. This approach differs from previous complaint research, where the retailers are often the focus, such as service providers or retailers of grocers, clothing, and electrical goods (Phau & Baird, 2008).

Figure 2 presents the objectives and structure of the doctoral thesis, which is organised into the following parts: introduction and purpose, theoretical framework, hypotheses, methodology, results, and overall discussion.

Figure 2. Doctoral Thesis' Structure



Note. Own illustration.

The research framework is the theoretical purchase process, which consists of the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. The focus is the post-purchase stage, where purchase evaluations are essential. This purchase process is the theoretical umbrella of the thesis.



## **II – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CURRENT RESEARCH**

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## II - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CURRENT RESEARCH

In the following section, the theoretical frameworks of the thesis are presented. First, the theoretical framework of purchase evaluations and complaint behaviour is demonstrated, followed by the theories of emotions and empathy. These theories are the basis for investigating the previously described research object of contributing a coherent framework and providing an overview of the literature on empathy and emotional complaint handling.

### 2.1. PURCHASE EVALUATION

*“No reputation means ‘you don’t exist’ in the eyes of consumers”*

(Gandini, 2020, p. 18).

Section 2.1. Purchase Evaluation presents the theories of purchase evaluation as a central part of the classic consumer-behaviour process. eWoM is an exceptional concept of purchase evaluations, influencing pre- and post-purchase evaluation. Therefore, eWoM is focused on these two evaluation phases.

#### 2.1.1. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM)

The term electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) has been defined by numerous scientists (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). Because of the variety of definitions, some reputable definitions are presented:

- a) *“eWoM can be defined as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers”* (Westbrook, 1987) cited by (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 461).
- b) *“Internet customer communication occurs when customers report / interact about consumption-relevant circumstances on the Internet”* (Stauss, 2000, p. 243).

- c) “Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39).
- d) “eWoM is defined as the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, which is available to a multitude of individuals and institutions via the Internet” (Ismagilova et al., 2017, p. 18).

For this doctoral thesis, the definition from Ismagilova et al. (2017) is applied according to the accessibility focus and the exchange process (between employee and customer). Although WoM can be positive or negative (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), this thesis has a higher profile on negative eWoM than positive eWoM because of the complaint-focused approach.

Word-of-mouth (WoM) is the precursor of eWoM, which was first described in the early 1950s (Arndt, 1967; Westbrook, 1987). Subsequently, with the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s, the initial concept of WoM was expanded and applied to Internet-based communications (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This internet-based communication is the main difference between eWoM and the more traditional concept of WoM (Floyd et al., 2014). The electronic extension of WoM makes eWoM communication online restorable, retrievable (compared to face-to-face and memory-to-recall communication), and accessible for a larger audience and written communication (Eisingerich et al., 2015; Forouhandeh, 2017).

eWoM provides product evaluations by customers who have already purchased a product, and it can help customers validate purchase decisions (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). Seeking eWoM simplifies access to information and mitigates uncertainty in customers’ purchasing decisions (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020; S. Wang et al., 2015). Current marketing literature also extends the concept of eWoM to social WoM, which represents a particular form of eWoM communication on social-network platforms (Eisingerich et al., 2015).

eWoM is also powerful because of its multifunctional usability in the marketing field: eWoM can act as both a marketing tool and a marketing outcome (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Marketing outcome represents the influence on

product evaluation, purchase intentions, or attitudes towards products (Leung et al., 2015; Litvin et al., 2008). A modern company has jobs, such as social-media content creators or social-media managers, that are responsible for the company's positive digital reputation on social-media sites or rating platforms. These roles include the management of customers' eWoM. WoM marketing is a specific type of marketing that specialises in using WoM as a customer-acquisition and influencing technique (Kozinets et al., 2010; Yuan & Peluso, 2021). This technique has grown steadily over the last several decades and is also known as social-media marketing. Such marketing is immensely valuable, with a budget of millions of euros. According to the German market-research institution Statista (2024), the 2024 forecast for the social-media budget of the German market alone is 3.8 billion EUR. The social-media marketing budget forecast for 2028 is even higher: it is expected to grow by 4.6 billion EUR (Statista Market Insights, 2024).

The literature distinguishes two main groups of WoM mediator variables: (1) mediating variables with influence on eWoM seekers and (2) mediating variables with influence on eWoM providers (Litvin et al., 2008). Section [2.1.2. Pre-Purchase Evaluation and Seeker of eWoM](#) broaches the standpoint of the eWoM seeker, and section [2.1.3. Post-Purchase Evaluation and the Providers of eWoM](#) broaches the perspective of the eWoM provider.

### **2.1.2. Pre-Purchase Evaluation and Seeker of eWoM**

After a consumer purchases a product, they can review the consumption experience. As such, "online customer reviews can be defined as peer-generated product evaluations posted on company or third party websites" (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010, p. 186). The reviewing process usually involves a five-star rating system (5 stars being the most excellent), where consumers can provide pictures or comments about the product or service (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The after-sales purchase review can then be used as a marketing instrument for new customers in the pre-purchase phase.

Reading an online evaluation is part of the early consumer-behaviour process, when consumers search for purchase information or evaluate alternatives to make a purchase decision (Kirchgeorg, 2018). This step is described as the pre-purchase evaluation. King et al. (2014) define pre-purchase evaluations as the

seeking of information to maximise economic and social utility during a purchase process as well as in the first stage of the consumer process, when the consumer has not yet recognised their need for a product.

On average, consumers read seven online reviews before making a final purchase decision online, as noted by Liu and Karahanna (2015). Nevertheless, interpersonal factors also affect consumer seeking tendencies. According to Flynn et al. (1996) consumers with strong opinion-seeking behaviours are more likely to seek information and advice about purchases from previous customers. Instead of including all available evaluations, consumers seek specific information (they attempt to avoid information overload) that could help them evaluate their needs (Mafael & Gottschalk, 2020). The meaning of the term review helpfulness must be understood to answer these questions. A “helpful customer review [is] [...] a peer-generated product evaluation that facilitates the consumer’s purchase decision process” (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010, p. 186). Moreover, a review’s emotion (positive versus negative) as a textual aspect significantly affects the review’s credibility (H. Sharma & Aggarwal, 2020). Extensive research has identified that a review’s helpfulness and the reviewer’s credibility are crucial antecedents for eWoM review adoption (H. Liu et al., 2020; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020), as presented in table 1.

However, there is no consistent evidence of whether negative or positive reviews are more helpful for potential new customers (Mafael, 2019). Table 1 extracts the research findings that describe the helpfulness of reviews.

*Table 1. Review Helpfulness Distinguished by Positivity or Negativity*

<b>Evidence for what makes an evaluation helpful (evaluation adoption)</b>	<b>Author</b>
Negative reviews have a stronger impact on sales: one-star reviews are more powerful than five-star reviews; consumers prefer to read review text rather than rely on summary statistics	(Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006)
Extreme-opinion evaluations are more helpful	(Cao et al., 2011)
Negative evaluations (for credence products)	(Lim & Chung, 2011)
Positive evaluations are likelier to be voted as helpful	(Pan & Zhang, 2011)
Scepticism toward eWoM makes consumers believe negative reviews more than positive reviews	(Qiu et al., 2012)
Strongest impact on consumers' attitudes toward the review, followed by the neutral (negative/positive) review and negative-only review	(S. Wang et al., 2015)
eWoM effectiveness is stronger when eWoM receivers can assess their similarity to eWoM senders; eWoM volume had greater impact on sales than eWoM valence	(Rosario et al., 2016)
Evaluation valence and gratitude towards the reviewer	(Mafael, 2019)
Argument quality, valence, trust in message, eWoM credibility, attitude towards website, source credibility are predictors of the intention to buy	(Ismagilova et al., 2020)
Individual reviews are more important than aggregated ratings	(H. Liu et al., 2020)
eWoM quantity, credibility, attitudes toward eWoM	(Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020)
Evaluations with swear words are more helpful	(Lafreniere et al., 2022)

Positive online reviews are perceived by consumers as related to higher expectations of product quality, which creates a positive attitude towards a product. On the other hand, bad reviews are perceived as complaints or denigration of a product, which leads to a negative attitude towards the product (Alzate Barricarte, 2021; Floyd et al., 2014; Y. Liu & Whitman, 2006).

On some evaluation websites, consumers can individually vote on the helpfulness of an evaluation. This helpful vote was the research object of Chen et al. (2008), who demonstrate that evaluations which were voted as highly helpful enhanced consumers' review adoption and impacted customers' intention to pay more than low-rated evaluations.

However, evaluation effectiveness also depends on the art of the product (search, experience, credence classification) (Lim & Chung, 2011). For unfamiliar brands, negative WoM can more effectively change the evaluation of credence attributes than search attributes (Lim & Chung, 2011). The tendency that negative evaluations are more helpful can be linked to the psychological effect of negativity bias, which suggests that negative emotions are more powerful and behaviour activating than positive emotions as stated by Brandebo et al. (2016), Kanouse (1984).

The effect of swear words on evaluation helpfulness was recently analysed by Lafreniere et al. (2022), and increasing helpfulness was observed. If the swear word described desirable circumstances, attitudes towards a product increased, and a reciprocal effect was found for undesirable swear words, which decreased the readers' attitudes toward the product (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Hence, swear words help to strengthen a review's meaning. However, Lafreniere et al. (2022) observed that the effect of swear words is moderated by the number of words and the word style (uncensored versus censored): too many swear words in an evaluation harm the helpfulness effect.

In addition to the evaluation valence, an even more essential fact about eWoM has been identified. Previous research has indicated that the amount of eWoM received by a consumer seeking purchase information enhanced sales more than the eWoM content, such as valence. This finding highlights the importance of eWoM volume as an established draw for potential customers (Beck et al., 2023; Rosario et al., 2016).

According to Floyd et al. (2014), online evaluations may increase sales elasticity. Specifically, when an evaluation is provided by a critic, appears on a website not owned by the seller, and incorporates value information, the impact on sales elasticities significantly increases. Floyd et al. (2014) also reveal that online reviews enhance sales elasticities for high-involvement products. Sales elasticity is also higher if the evaluation is provided by an expert and not other customers (Floyd et al., 2014). In addition to the high helpfulness of expert evaluation, Cao et al. (2011) suggest that reviews with extreme opinions receive more helpful votes than those with mixed or neutral opinions.

However, in addition to the dependence of review helpfulness on sentiment (negative or positive), other specifications influence review credibility, which in turn impacts consumer review adoption. These factors include trustworthiness, the expertise of a reviewer (demonstrated by variables such as the number of reviews, age of the reviewer, duration of membership), readability, and review length (Lee & Hong, 2019; Sharma & Aggarwal, 2020).

Individual profile characteristics of eWoM givers, such as a personal picture, could reinforce the development of trust between the eWoM receiver and the unknown eWoM provider, which in turn increases review credibility (Xu, 2014; J. M. Kim et al., 2020). However, eWoM givers do not play an essential role in review helpfulness: for instance, the existence of a reviewer profile picture does not increase a review's perceived helpfulness (J. M. Kim et al., 2020). eWoM providers are likelier to add a profile picture to improve their review credibility (J. M. Kim et al., 2020). Ultimately, the eWoM giver's profile picture fosters the trust of the review receiver. However, the profile picture does not contribute to the review's helpfulness (J. M. Kim et al., 2020).

In addition to the effects on review adoption, the kind of product impacts whether a consumer adopts to a review. A general classification of goods and services is the search, experience, and credence (SEC) framework (Girard & Dion, 2010).

Search products are goods that can be evaluated through prior purchasers or users, and most products are search products. Characteristics for evaluations are quality, price, size, and safety (Girard & Dion, 2010), and examples for search products are furniture, clothes, or electronic devices.

Experience products are goods that must be tested to be evaluated: the attribute information cannot be provided in advance, and the exact experience can only be discovered for future customers through a trial. For consumers, it is challenging to evaluate characteristics in advance (Girard & Dion, 2010; Nelson, 1970). Typical experience goods are restaurants, hairdressers, massages, and holidays. The difference between search and experience goods is based on Nelson's (1970) research.

Credence products are goods that are impossible to evaluate before use due to previous users. Credence goods can only be assessed thoroughly after a certain period (M. R. Darby & Karni, 1973; Dranove, 2011; Girard & Dion, 2010), such as nutritional supplements, beauty products, and medical treatments (Gottschalk, 2018).

Product involvement is the importance of an enduring and cross-situational product category based on consumers' inherent needs, values, and interests (Bloch & Richins, 1983; Floyd et al., 2014; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Product involvement is related to the amount of money required because high-involvement purchases often entail a large financial investment, more significant pain of paying, and greater concerns about purchase decisions (Floyd et al., 2014; Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998). Consumer purchases induce an immediate pain of paying, which can, in turn, diminish consumption pleasure (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998).

Product involvement also plays a vital role in review adoption and consumer purchase intention (D. H. Park et al., 2007). Customers with a high level of product involvement are more engaged in information seeking; for instance, they spend more time and energy researching the purchase than purchases with a low level of involvement (Clarke & Belk, 1978). This dynamic can be illustrated by an example: purchasing kitchen paper versus an electronic kitchen device. The customer is willing to invest less effort in the information search, which may affect the review adoption. The search will not be conducted as intensively and with as much effort as for highly involved products, and excellent product knowledge corresponds with a significant consumer product involvement (Liang, 2012). Floyd et al.'s (2014) research suggests that the influence of consumer reviews on sales elasticities is much greater when the consumer seeks information about a highly involved product. These research results are supported by *Involvement Theory*, which was

first proposed by Sherif and Cantril (1947) before being adapted to the marketing context by Krugman (1966).

According to Floyd et al. (2014), who analyse the influence of online product reviews on retail sales elasticities, reviews are most impactful “when they are delivered by a critic, appear on a non-seller website, and include valence information in the evaluation” (p. 227).

The beneficial influences of positive online reviews may induce companies to pay for fake positive reviews and pretend to be reputable businesses with high-quality products (Firnkes, 2015; Román et al., 2023). This phenomenon reinforces scepticism toward consumer reviews. Generally, consumers’ scepticism towards eWoM is a mitigating effect of eWoM adoption (Qiu et al., 2012). Qiu et al. (2012) demonstrate that scepticism toward eWoM makes consumers believe negative reviews more than positive reviews. However, consumers have been sceptical for many years. According to Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), consumers learned to be sceptical without being cynical in general due to their experiences with advertisements, which is also formed by their individual socialisation. The untrustworthiness of online ratings and reviews breeds consumer mistrust and risks a damaging flame war (Moyer, 2010).

### **2.1.3. Post-Purchase Evaluation and Provider of eWoM**

In most cases (60 %), consumers share their consumption experience on the day a situation first occurred; this first-day sharing applies to cases of negative and positive emotions (Gable & Reis, 2010). However, disgruntled customers have a greater probability of sharing their negative consumption experience by leaving a negative review than satisfied customers (Hossain & Rahman, 2022). This disparity may be due to the psychological effect of negativity bias, for instance, see Brandebo et al. (2016), Kanouse (1984).

Providing a post-purchase evaluation means sharing an experience about a previous purchase. Experience sharing is a procedure that reduces and avoids pain because sharing an experience ensures people feel better and helps them handle the negative experience (Zaki, 2014). Jha and Shah (2019) describe eWoM as an emotional-regulation mechanism based on one’s own experience. Especially in a complaining situation, the relevance of emotions increases because negative

emotions are an antecedent of overall customer satisfaction (Varela-Neira, Vázquez-Casielles, & Iglesias-Argüelles, 2008). For instance, Wuenschmann (2007) elucidated that the likelihood of eWoM-giving intention increases with dissatisfaction. Additionally, previous empirical investigations have illustrated the negative-bias effect, explaining that negative emotions are more impactful than neutral or positive ones (e.g., Kanouse, 1984).

According to the current state of research, the main elements leading to eWoM behaviour are consumers' need for social contact, desire for financial incentives, care for other customers, and potential to increase self-worth (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In the late 1990s, marketing literature investigated the motives for customers' WoM-willingness. Specifically, Sundaram et al. (1998) researched the motive of negative mouth-to-mouth propaganda. They elucidate the most relevant motives: protecting others from the same experience, seeking revenge, harming the company, or sharing advice on the product with others. Table 2 presents the motives for (e)WoM communication behaviour based on traditional research.

Table 2. Literature-based Motives for (e)WoM Communication Behaviour

<b>Motive</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Author</b>
Altruism (positive WoM)	Act of providing support to others without expecting anything in return	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Altruism (negative WoM)	Preventing others from encountering the same experience without expecting anything in return	
Self-enhancement	Recommendations may draw attention, demonstrate expertise, increase status and prestige, and assert superiority; improving their images among other consumers by presenting themselves as savvy buyers	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Helping the company	Want to help and support the firm	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Vengeance	To take revenge on the firm that has caused the negative consumption experience	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Advice seeking	Obtaining some advice on how to solve a problem	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Dissonance reduction	Decreases cognitive dissonance (doubt) after an important purchase decision	(Engel et al., 1993)
Product involvement	Interest in the product on a personal level; enthusiasm from product ownership and usage	(Sundaram et al., 1998)
Focus-related utility (adding value)	Concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, exerting power	(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)

*Note. This table is based and adapted on an extract from "Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet?" by Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18, (1), p. 41 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073>), Sage Publications Inc. Journals. Reprinted with permission.*

Over time, some individual motives identified in the research were summarised into a superordinate theory. Hence, an overall theory that supports specific motives for participation is the *Focus-Related Utility Theory*, which describes a customer's motivation to add value to the community by sharing their experiences (Balasubramanian, 2001). The Focus-Related Utility Theory is divided into four main motives: helping the company, gaining social benefits, exerting power, and demonstrating concern for other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

However, no customer can be clearly assigned to a singular motive, as these motives are also over-synchronised. For this reason, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) conducted a factor analysis and developed four distinct motive segments for eWoM providers: (1) self-interested helpers, (2) multiple-motives consumers, (3) consumer advocates, (4) true altruists.

Based on the four distinct eWoM consumer segments, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) suggest that companies have different approaches to engaging consumers with eWoM. For example, self-interested helpers and multiple-motive consumers are more likely to engage in eWoM when companies describe them and how they will personally benefit from engaging. True altruists, however, are more likely to engage in eWoM when they receive an explanation of how the eWoM will help other consumers and the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Recently, Gvili and Levy (2018) conducted a study to reveal the latest findings on consumer eWoM engagement on social-media platforms. According to them, social capital and credibility are the central motives for engaging in eWoM. Based on the *Expectancy-Value Theory*, the general consumer's attitude toward eWoM enhances eWoM engagement, which, according to Gvili and Levy (2018) includes sending and receiving eWoM. Consumers expect value from eWoM as receivers, which in turn motivates them to send eWoM.

Another prominent part of complaint research is the *Justice Theory*, which considers three dimensions of complaint justice (Roschk, 2011). The customer evaluates the complaining approach in each justice dimension, which is impacted by different factors, such as personality. This theory is crucial for post-purchase research because the correct handling of a dissatisfied customer affects the level of satisfaction and, in turn, indicates the likelihood of a repurchase (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003; Smith et al., 1999). The three dimensions are as follows:

(1) Distributive justice is based on *Social Exchange Theory*, which expresses the notion that people evaluate the equity or fairness of an exchange by comparing input to outcomes (Deutsch, 1985; Greenberg, 1990). In the complaint context, the exchange is the modification of charges, refunds, repairs, replacements, or any other options of compensation. In other words, it is the content of a recovery approach (S. W. Kelley et al., 1993; S. G. Park et al., 2014; Roschk, 2011).

(2) Procedural justice describes the perceived justice of service-recovery procedures, such as timeliness, individuality, and refund policies (decision-making process) (Roschk, 2011).

(3) Interactional justice represents the interpersonal aspect of interactions, such as the honesty, respect, courtesy, and adequacy of language and how the customer is treated during the recovery procedures (S. G. Park et al., 2014; Roschk, 2011).

In each dimension, the customer evaluates the failure situation (Roschk, 2011), and the sum of the dimensions represents the perceived justice of the failure (S. G. Park et al., 2014). The distinct justice dimensions are important for complaint recovery because recovery effectiveness varies depending on the harmed justice dimension, and different approaches are needed (Davidow, 2003; Jung & Seock, 2017). For instance, Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) analysed the mediation effect of emotions in the relationship of customers' perceived justice on loyalty intention in service-recovery situations. They demonstrate the predominant relevance of the interactional-justice dimension (e.g., courtesy) due to effects on both positive and negative emotions and exit-loyalty behaviour.

Kim et al. (2009) demonstrate the importance of trust in the context of Justice Theory. Their model clarifies that trust significantly influences WoM and revisit intention, which implies the mediating role of trust in the relationship between recovery satisfaction, WoM, and revisit intention (Kumra & Sharma, 2022).

*Guilty and Fairness Theory* are essential theories that explain post-purchase behaviour (Ismagilova et al., 2020; McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). When fairness is lacking in a company's attempt to redress a service failure, consumers often experience negative emotions (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). According to Schoefer and Diamantopoulos (2008), emotions

regulate the relationship between perceived fairness and post-complaint behaviour.

Trust also plays an essential role in the relationship between eWoM and social-media platforms. Due to social-media and evaluation platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Pinterest, Trustpilot and many more, the influence of eWoM has become increasingly significant. These platforms are one of the most frequently used channels for eWoM seekers and providers (Chu & Kim, 2011; Beck et al., 2023). This emergence may have arisen because customers spend several hours on social media daily. Depending on age, consumers spend up to three to five hours on social-media platforms (Kolhar et al., 2021; Orji et al., 2022). Hence, social-media platforms provide alternative ways for businesses to attract their customers with social-media shopping features (e.g., Facebook shops), which simultaneously facilitate conversion funnel and shorten the customer journey (Beck et al., 2023). Trust in social-media platforms within eWoM is significant because of the emergence of unreliable reviews that have been, for example, paid for by unserious companies (Román et al., 2023).

Consequently, Beck et al. (2023) recently conducted a study to test the importance of trust in the retailer before consumers are willing to purchase on social-media platforms. Under consideration of the social-media-trust decision tree, Beck et al. (2023) found that a trust transfer between social-media platforms and providers of eWoM occurs. If a platform is predictable and reliable, the eWoM must also be trustworthy. Additionally, trust in the platform is mandatory to participate in seeking and providing eWoM (Beck et al., 2023). As a theoretical foundation, the authors refer to the *Tie Strength Theory*, which describes tie strength as the depth of the relationship between individuals, such as a close relationship with only a few family members or friends (Mattie et al., 2018). Adapted to the eWoM context, tie strength means the depth of the relationship between the eWoM seeker and provider (Cheng & Zhou, 2010).

eWoM, provided with strong ties as recommendations and referrals, social-media communities have a different level of trust when eWoM is provided by weak ties, such as reviews and ratings (Beck et al., 2023). The difference between reviews and ratings is that the latter mainly comprise only star ratings of 1–5 (1 being the worst and 5 being the best rating), and a review provides additional text where consumers offer reasons for the star ratings (S. W. Lee et al., 2021).

Providers of anonymous reviews and ratings lack the personal interaction of more personal recommendations and referrals from known influencers or users whom consumers have contacted (Filiari, 2015; Beck et al., 2023). Research by Beck et al. (2023) suggests that consumers prefer eWoM from sharers whom they view as familiar and trustworthy (strong ties), which include close friends, family, or digital friends. Ratings and reviews (weak ties) may be less critical when other sources of eWoM are available (Beck et al., 2023).

eWoM also has biases that must be considered. Moyer (2010) published an interview that he held with Eric K. Clemons, a professor of operations and systems management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Purchase ratings have numerous inherent biases (Moyer, 2010). First, consumers who write a product review have already bought the product: the purchase decision was already made, which makes them like the product (Moyer, 2010). Moyer (2010) provided an example: “I happen to love Larry Niven novels [...] so whenever Larry Niven has a novel out, I buy it”. Many fans of Larry Niven do the same, thus many fans write high-rating consumer reviews. Numerous positive ratings, in turn, draw people to buy the book without ever having considered reading such a science-fiction novel. Rather, they were attracted and paid attention because of the numerous positive reviews. However, because they do not really like science-fiction novels, they are dissatisfied with the product and write negative reviews. The ratings thus experience an overcorrection, and many one-star reviews are provided. The overall rating now consists of five- or one-star reviews of the same product. Additionally, (another bias) a customer reviewing something that they found only adequate is not common: customers propagate what they love and criticize what they dislike (Moyer, 2010).

## 2.2. CUSTOMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR

*“We don’t do business with companies. We do business with people. Business is always human” (Sinek, 2022).*

This section provides a theoretical framework of customer complaint behaviour. First, the emergence of complaint behaviour is discussed, and its most relevant predictors and structures are presented. Second, different personal influences on complaint behaviour are explored. Finally, an introduction to service

failures and complaint recovery is outlined. This section shows the general classification of complaint behaviour as a part of the consumer-behaviour model.

### **2.2.1. Complaint Behaviour**

#### **2.2.1.1. *Process of Complaint Behaviour***

As Kowalski (1996) notes “Complaints are [...] expressions of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both” (p. 179). According to Kumar and Kaur (2020) clear expressions of dissatisfaction may challenge companies. Complaint behaviour is usually a negative incident-triggered process. Such behaviour may arise because of a firm’s inability to meet a consumer’s acceptance zone during a purchase experience or the customer’s evaluator phase, leading to a service failure (Tronvoll, 2007; Choraria, 2013). It is essential to focus on the entire consumer-purchase process to understand the complete picture of customer complaint behaviour. The foundation of complaint behaviour in the context of consumer behaviour can be explained with the classic model of consumer behaviour (Kotler & Bliemel, 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2012):

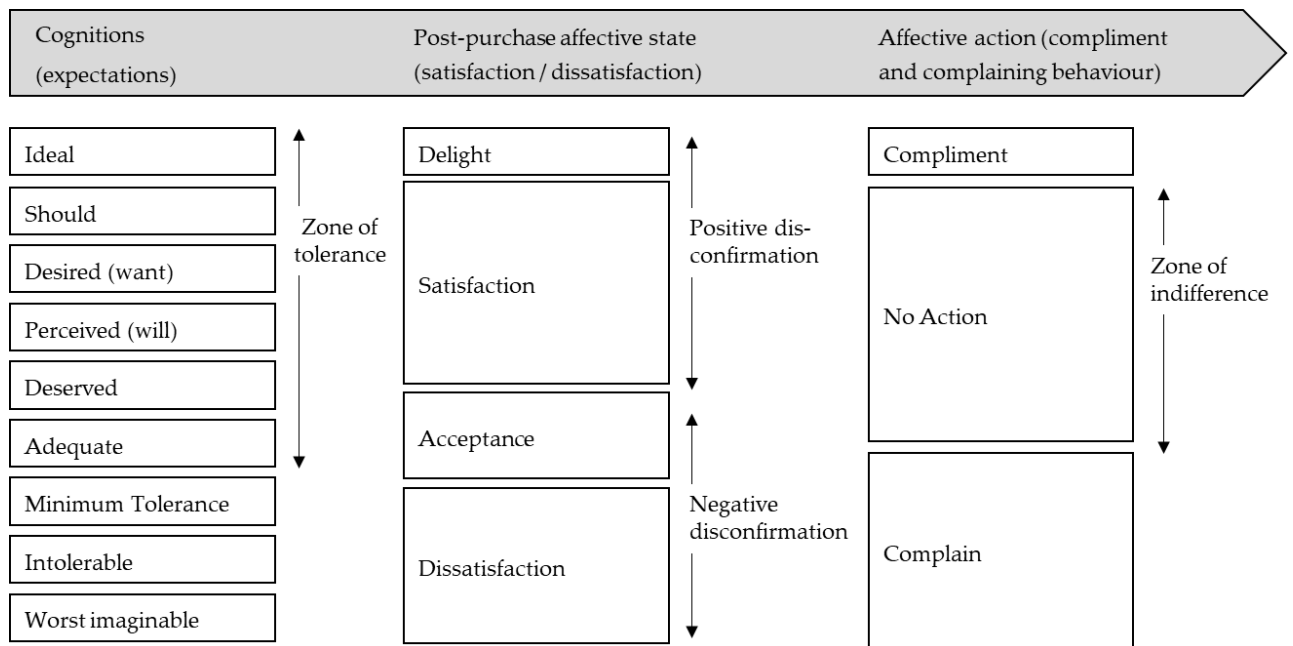
1. Problem recognition
2. Information search
3. Evaluation of alternatives
4. Purchase decision
5. Post-purchase behaviour (including evaluation of purchase)

According to the author, the model consists of five or six steps because (4) purchase decision comprises both the purchase decision and the act of purchasing (Kirchgeorg, 2018). The first phase is (1) problem recognition, which means the customer must feel an unmet need. When the customer understands that they require the product or service to satisfy that need, the customer commences an (2) information search. Then, the customer (3) evaluates the different buying alternatives before they (4) make the purchase decision and, in conclusion, the purchase. During the last step (5), post-purchase behaviour, cognitive processes determine customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and the customer evaluates the

purchase (Kirchgeorg, 2018). The consumer-behaviour process is the basis of complaint behaviour, which is a reaction to the last phase, (5) purchase evaluation.

Before focusing on complaint behaviour and its theoretical foundations, it is pivotal to understand what leads customers to complain and how to develop customer dissatisfaction or satisfaction. The most common model that explains customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction is the confirmation and disconfirmation model by Oliver (1977, 1980). Figure 3 illustrates the development of customer satisfaction based on the research of Elkhani and Bakri (2012) and Santos and Boote (2003).

Figure 3. Development of Customer Satisfaction



Note. This graphical model of the confirmation-disconfirmation paradigm of satisfaction was produced by Santos and Boote (2003), and it was subsequently advanced by Elkhani and Bakri (2012). Figure 3 is adapted from "A theoretical exploration and model of consumer expectations, post-purchase affective states and affective behaviour" by Santos and Boote, 2003, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 3 (2), p. 144 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.129>). Copyright by John Wiley and Sons – Books. Reprinted with permission.

The model demonstrates that customers’ purchase cognitions (expectations) must achieve a minimum tolerance zone to gain a consumer experience that is acceptable, satisfactory, or delightful (positive disconfirmation) (Santos & Boote,

2003). Customers are dissatisfied if this minimum tolerance zone is not achieved, which is defined as negative disconfirmation (Santos & Boote, 2003). One exception is the adequate level of consumer experience, which does not create customer satisfaction because it occurs exactly as the customer expects (Elkhani & Bakri, 2012; Santos & Boote, 2003). However, the customer is dissatisfied when the expectation exceeds the experience (Santos & Boote, 2003). The more the customers' expectations are satisfied, the higher the post-purchase affective state, which then influences the affective action: the customer takes no action (because expectations are in the zone of indifference), or the customer is delighted and provides a compliment (Santos & Boote, 2003). This theory, the confirmation–disconfirmation paradigm of satisfaction, is essential for complaint research.

However, customer satisfaction not only expresses the customer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a specific interaction, but it also determines the level of customer loyalty (Kotler & Bliemel, 1999). This loyalty is essential for customer value, which is measured, for instance, by metrics such as customer lifetime value. Customer loyalty significantly contributes to a company's economic and sustainable success, which explains the business relevance of purchase evaluation (Bednarek, 2013).

One of the first complaint models was suggested by Hirschman (1970) to explain the customer's response towards service failure. Hirschman's (1970) model suggests that under the circumstances of service failure, customers either raise their voices in the form of complaints or exit the relationship. Moreover, there are numerous failures a company can make to disappoint its customers. The types of failures and the failure structure are elaborated in section [2.2.2. Service Failure](#).

Not every dissatisfied customer complains about a negative experience (Hirschman, 1970). To complain about the purchase experience is an active reaction. A considerable number of customers experience a negative purchase and do not complain or articulate it loudly: instead, they churn (Hirschman, 1970). In addition to interpersonal processes that prevent people from complaining, there are external reasons that restrain customers from engaging in complaints, including lack of time, inability to contact a suitable person, and lack of access to an appropriate complaint channel (Tronvoll, 2007).

Figure 4 shows the different options for post-purchase behaviour and the behavioural reactions of satisfied and dissatisfied customers. This information is

based on Hirschman's (1970) *Theory of Exit* and complaining-type differentiation derived from the research of Singh (1988). This framework is the foundation of consumer complaint behaviour. Hirschman's (1970) Theory of Exit (1970) was one of the first complaint models to provide dissatisfied customers with behavioural options: voice a complaint, exit the relationship, and take no action (Hirschman, 1970; Tronvoll, 2007).

Figure 4. Behavioural Reaction differentiated by Customers' (Dis)satisfaction

Dissatisfied Customer				
No Reaction	Action			
Repression, correction of expectation	Public		Private	
	Negative word of mouth		Negative word of mouth	Change of provider
	Towards the company	Towards third institution		
Satisfied Customer				
No Reaction	Action			
	Public		Private	
	word of mouth		Positive word of mouth	Repurchase
	Towards the company	Towards third institution		

Note. Graphic is based on the research of Hirschman (1970); and Singh (1988). The figure is adapted from "Consumer Complaint Intentions and Behavior: Definitional and Taxonomical Issues" by Singh, 1988, *Journal of Marketing*, 52 (1), p. 95 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/1251688>). Copyright by SAGE. Reprinted with permission.

The level of satisfaction determines the behavioural reaction. A satisfied customer can react to a positive purchase with private or public action (Hirschman, 1970; J. Singh, 1988) depending on their interpersonal processes, as shown in figure 4. For example, a public action can be a positive recommendation on a review webpage or an interaction with the provider on social media.

Researchers have elucidated that even if a consumer is dissatisfied, they will not necessarily articulate dissatisfaction through a complaint (Hirschman, 1970). There are inner processes that determine complaint intention. This behaviour is based on *Assimilation-Contrast Theory* by Sherif et al. (1958). Assimilation-Contrast Theory describes the belated change of judgment a consumer experiences. In this case, because the discrepancy between the consumer's expectations and experience is not highly discrepant from the anchor, the experience is thus "within the individuals 'latitude of acceptance'" (Elsevier Science, 2006, p. 39). Therefore, confirmation is reduced in the consumer satisfaction and the confirmation-disconfirmation paradigm (Homburg & Stock-Homburg, 2012). Assimilation-Contrast Theory is just one example of coping strategies consumers often use to unconsciously regulate their emotions and expectations (for coping strategies, seee.g., Kim et al., 2010).

For dissatisfied customers who take action, the literature currently distinguishes between three types of complainants: vocal, private, and third party (J. Singh, 1988; V. Singh et al., 2016). If dissatisfied customers decide to act, their behaviour can be public or private. Public action may involve leaving a negative evaluation on a review webpage or a negative comment on social media to the provider (which could end up in a flame war). This type of complaint describes the voice complainant. The other form of public complaint is a third-party complaint to formal agencies. Private action may entail negative word-of-mouth propaganda or a private complaint. In the following, the three complaining types are described in detail:

(1) Third-party complaints: A third-party complaint means the dissatisfied customer complains about the company or the company's product or service to formal agencies that are not directly involved in the exchange relationship (J. Singh, 1988, 1989). The recipients of third-party complaints include, for example, lawyers, newspapers, review webpages, and institutions for consumer protection. Consumers decide about a third-party complaint because they seek redress,

warning others to help them avoid experiencing the same or to “get it off their chest” (J. Singh, 1988; V. Singh et al., 2016). Third-party complaints can harm the company’s reputation (V. Singh et al., 2016). Research has indicated third-party complaints often emerge from unsuccessful voice complaints towards a firm (Halstead, 2002).

(2) Voice complaints: Some customers intentionally complain directly to the company, expecting better service in the future (O. J. Park et al., 2008). Today, there is a smooth transition between third-party and voice complaints because of social media.

(3) Private complaints: These complaints are the worst type of complaint from a company perspective because the customers do not complain directly to the company but share their negative experiences with others (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Customers commit to not purchasing again; hence, the customer–company relationship cannot recover from failures (Umasuthan et al., 2017).

For the purpose of this doctoral thesis, voice complaints and third-party complaints are the focus of study 1, where eWoM-giving intention is analysed. Private complaints are not the main objective.

#### 2.2.1.2. *Characteristics of Complaint Behaviour*

In addition to the described complaint-behaviour process and complaint types, there are generally different groups of complainants from a personal perspective: every human complains differently (Kowalski et al., 2014). Some people find fault with everything, while others seldom complain and rarely demonstrate satisfaction (Kowalski et al., 2014). The research defines three kinds of complainants: first, instrumental complainants, who aim to find a concrete solution to an existing problem; second, notorious faultfinders, who are never satisfied; and third, expressive complainants, who are not concerned with solving a problem but rather blowing off steam and gaining recognition, sympathy, attention, and appreciation (Kowalski et al., 2014; Wilhelm, 2022).

People who frequently complain are in a downward spiral. Neuroscience research has demonstrated that continuous complaining mitigates serotonin levels, which is a basis for subsequent complaints because people are more dissatisfied (Wilhelm, 2022).

Several years before Kowalski et al. (2014) distinguished between three types of complaints, Wuenschmann (2007) identified four types of complainants: (1) the convinced complainant, (2) the inconspicuous complainant, (3) the helpful complainant, and (4) the aggressive complainant.

First, with the convinced complainant, traits of aggressiveness and complaint experience are strong, and the trait of learned helplessness is weak. These circumstances enhance the likelihood of a complaint, as stated by Wuenschmann (2007). Second, inconspicuous complainants are relatively unremarkable because they do not have any outstanding characteristics. They have a higher tendency for learned helplessness and sense the complaint as quite costly, in comparison to the other complainant types (Wuenschmann, 2007). Helpful complainants are highly beneficial and have a strong altruistic motive to help the company improve and assist other customers: additionally, they have low aggressive tendencies (Wuenschmann, 2007).

Wuenschmann (2007) notes that helpful complainants occur less often than the other groups because only a few companies are interested in the information they provide. As the last type, the aggressive complainant is less altruistic and mostly complains to reduce frustration as an impulsive reaction (Wuenschmann, 2007). According to Wuenschmann (2007) the cost of the complaint does not play any role for the aggressive complainant.

Numerous researchers have aimed to understand the main factors that influence dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour and discover the central predictors of complaint behaviour. For instance, Antonioni (1998) reveals a variance explanation between 11 % and 25 % for the impact of the *Five-Factor Theory of Personality*<sup>2</sup> (big-five personality traits) on individual conflict behaviour. A structure of the influence factors for complaint behaviour are (1) sociodemographic characteristics, for instance, age, gender, and income (Kolodinsky, 1995; Morganosky & Buckley, 1987); (2) situation, such as the importance of the problem

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<sup>2</sup> The *Big Five Personality Theory* is an approach that explains personality within five traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. The theory is based on research of Costa and McCrae (1996) and McCrae and Costa (1999).

or product and change barriers (Lentz, 2007); and (3) psychographic characteristics, for example, self-confidence or neuroticism (Wuenschmann, 2007; Phau & Baird, 2008; Bodey & Grace, 2006). In table 3, an overview of some of these factors is presented.

*Table 3. Overview of Influences of Complaint Behaviour*

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Author</b>	
<b>Socio-demographic</b>	Gender	(Heung & Lam, 2003; Keng et al., 1995)
	Age	(Keng et al., 1995; Nimako et al., 2012; Phau & Baird, 2008)
	Education	(Keng et al., 1995)
	Social status	(Nimako et al., 2012)
	Culture	(Heung & Lam, 2003; Yuksel et al., 2006)
<b>Situation</b>	Importance of product	(Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998)
	Product attributes	(Hien et al., 2022)
	Dissatisfaction	(Jung & Seock, 2017)
	Importance of problem	(Weun et al., 2004)
	Locus of control	(Elmastaş & Candan, 2017; J.-H. Huang & Chang, 2008)
	Barriers to change	(Brock, 2009; Ping, 1993)
	Emotions	(Kuo & Wu, 2012; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Serra-Cantalops et al., 2018; Umasuthan et al., 2017; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991)
<b>Psychological</b>	Attitude toward complaints	(Bodey & Grace, 2006; Phau & Baird, 2008; Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004; Richins, 1982)
	Self-monitors	(Bodey & Grace, 2006)
	Subjective complaint cost	(Day et al., 1981; Wuenschmann, 2007)
	Risk-taking	(Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004)
	Complaints experience	(Richins, 1982)

	Self-esteem	(Phau & Baird, 2008; Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021)
	Consumer alienation	(Wuenschmann, 2007)
	Involvement	(Lentz, 2007)
	Impulsiveness	(P. Sharma et al., 2010)
	Self-monitoring	(P. Sharma et al., 2010)
	Perceived behavioural control	(East, 2000)
	Aggressiveness	(Roger, 1997)
	Complaint leadership	(Wuenschmann, 2007)
	Self-confidence	(Keng et al., 1995; Phau & Baird, 2008)
	Sense of justice	(Phau & Baird, 2008)
	Assertiveness	(Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004)
	Machiavellianism	(Hancock et al., 2023)
<b>Personality (Five Factors)</b>	Neuroticism	(Kowalski, 1996; Mooradian & Olver, 1997)
	Extraversion	(Harris & Mowen, 2001; Kowalski, 1996)
	Agreeableness	(Kowalski, 1996)
	Conscientiousness	(Harris & Mowen, 2001)
	Openness	(Ekinici et al., 2016)

*Note. This table is adapted from "Beschwerdeverhalten und Kundenwert" (p. 90), by Wuenschmann, 2007, Deutscher Universitaets-Verlag (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-8350-9557-1>). Copyright by Springer Nature BV. Reprinted with Permission.*

Numerous research studies have provided typical personality traits or skills to characterise a complaining customer (Bodey & Grace, 2006; G. M. Kim et al., 2010; Kolodinsky, 1995). The five-factor personality model is predominantly used for investigation, of (post-) purchase behaviour predictors (e.g., Harris & Mowen, 2001; Mooradian & Olver, 1997). Further studies have confirmed that other personality traits, such as assertiveness or self-confidence, are predictors of consumer and post-purchase behaviour (Phau & Puspita Sari, 2004). Specifically, complainers have high self-esteem, take more risks, and generally have a positive attitude towards complaints compared to non-complainers (Phau & Baird, 2008).

Sharma et al. (2010) reveal that consumers' impulsiveness facilitates complaint behaviour, and self-monitoring mitigates complaint behaviour.

Rosenberg (1979) characterises an individual with great self-esteem as someone who has self-respect, considers themselves a person of worth, appreciates their own merits, and, simultaneously, recognises their faults (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). According to Rosenberg (1979), humans with weak self-esteem have no self-respect and consider themselves unworthy, inadequate, or seriously deficient (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). According to (Davis, 1983a), self-esteem is negatively related to personal distress and perspective taking (as a subscale of empathy) based on the mediating effect of interpersonal functioning on self-esteem (Davis, 1983a). Hence, self-esteem significantly affects perspective-taking and plays a role in empathy characteristics.

#### *Self-Enhancement Theory*

Complaint research has also identified self-esteem as a predictor of complaint behaviour, as presented in this section. High self-esteem enhances complaint behaviour because the person has the self-confidence to voice their complaint and defend their interests (e.g., Phau & Baird, 2008). Psychological needs (self-esteem, sense of belonging, need for control, fairness, and security) are highly related to human well-being; failure to gratify psychological needs can provoke negative emotions and vengeful behaviours (Patterson et al., 2009). Complaining causes psychological effort for the customer due to the confrontation with potentially unfriendly employees (e.g., Bolting, 1989; Roschk et al., 2008). However, as complaint articulation is a self-esteem-related activity, it is difficult for companies with a high potential to harm the self-esteem of their customers (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Nonetheless, complaint articulation can increase self-esteem needs and provoke positive customer behaviours (Y. Huang et al., 2020; Schneider & Bowen, 1999). The relevance of self-esteem in complaint behaviour is based on the findings of the Self-Enhancement Theory (Dauenheimer et al., 2002). This theory states that every person is motivated to increase or protect their self-esteem, which also means that people tend to explain their failures by external circumstances and successes by their own competencies (Dauenheimer et al., 2002).

Additionally, complainers have an exceptionally high sense of justice and are less conservative than their non-complaining counterparts (Phau & Baird, 2008).

This high sense of justice is linked to an essential underlying theory of complaining behaviour: the *Justice Theory* (Blodgett et al., 1997; Jung & Seock, 2017; T. (Terry) Kim et al., 2009). Furthermore, Phau and Baird (2008) suggest that gender, income, and education do not affect complaint behaviour when comparing complainers and non-complainers.

The psychological characteristic of self-monitoring elucidates the inhibiting influence of complaint intention, as Bodey and Grace (2006) found. Consumers with high self-monitoring tendencies seem reluctant to complain in a service situation where other customers are present because other consumers may view them negatively (Bodey & Grace, 2006). Perceived behavioural control is also a differential factor between complainers and non-complainers (e.g., East, 2000). According to Bodey and Grace (2006), complainers have great personal control, especially when they complain for instrumental reasons, such as a high perceived complaint utility.

Bodey and Grace (2006) conducted a study on the differences between complainers and non-complainers. For this purpose, they observed five items: Machiavellianism,<sup>3</sup> self-monitoring, attitude to complaining, perceived control, and self-efficacy. Three items significantly confined the bounds: self-monitoring, attitude to complaining, and perceived control.

The research field of consumer behaviour endeavours to understand behavioural intentions, and consumer attitude is an essential part (e.g., Blodgett et al., 1993). The literature ultimately suggests that attitudes are used to predict acts of behaviour (East, 2000), such as the attitude towards complaints in complaining behaviour. Customers with an attitude favourable to complaints are more likely to complain than those with an aversion to complaints (Bearden & Crockett, 1981; Bodey & Grace, 2006; J. Singh & Wilkes, 1996). Moreover, customers' attitude toward complaints acts may inhibit the complaining process: "a negative attitude

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<sup>3</sup> Machiavellianism describes personalities with a strong association to manipulation tendencies who are more resistant to social pressure and have a low commitment to conventional moral value (Drory & Gluskinos, 1980).

toward complaining may well impede [a] non-complainer from taking complaint action” (Bodey & Grace, 2006, p. 184). One reason that a dissatisfied customer does not complain may be that they have a generally negative attitude toward complaints, or they evaluate the effort of complaining as too high, as in a negative cost-benefit ratio (e.g., Wuenschmann, 2007). Complainers had a higher attitude towards complaints and were less embarrassed by providing a complaint; they also disagreed that complaining is done by people with little else to do (Phau & Baird, 2008).

For completeness, a demarcation of the constructs of customer satisfaction and (perceived) service quality must be mentioned because they hold a high apparent resemblance. For instance, both constructs result from disconfirming expectations (Plein, 2016). In addition to resemblances, (perceived) service quality is based on a utility expectation in general and not on specific expectations towards a particular provider (Plein, 2016; F. Wimmer & Roleff, 2001), and customer satisfaction is mainly based on a specific customer–provider transaction (Bitner, 1990; Plein, 2016).

### **2.2.2. Service Failure**

The phenomenon of service failure has been part of marketing literature for many decades (Callan & Moore, 1998; Fouroudi et al., 2020; Hess et al., 2003; Johnston, 1995). A service failure is a service-related problem or mishap that occurs during a consumer experience or interaction with a company, and the problem can be real or only perceived by the customer (Maxham, 2001). A service failure is the moment when a negative critical incident occurs: “A negative critical incident is defined [...] as an incident that has the potential to have an adverse effect on the customer’s attitude or behaviour towards the company” (Tronvoll, 2007, p. 289).

Failure research has defined two general types of failure: outcome failure and process failure (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Process failures are deficiencies in the delivery of a core service, slow services processes, impolite employees, or inattentiveness (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Process failure “threatens customers’ social and self- esteem needs”, such as an impolite front-desk employee (Y. Huang et al., 2020, p. 2435). Conversely, outcome failures are related to the core product, or what the customer pays for, such as a bug in food or the overbooking of a hotel room

(Umar & Saleem, 2022). For instance, Bitner et al. (1990) structured service failure by dividing it into three groups: (1) service-delivery failures, (2) failures related to customer needs and requests, and (3) failures due to unprompted and unsolicited employee actions.

The provided definition of service failures is general and applicable to both brick-and-mortar retail stores and online shops. However, online businesses have more specific service-failures concerns than traditional businesses. For instance, delivery-process problems, payment-security issues, insufficient information, customer service, packaging error, website design, and privacy topics are problems that mainly occur in the online environment and may cause service failures (Forbes et al., 2005; Holloway & Beatty, 2003). Therefore, Holloway and Beatty (2003) provide a service-failures overview for the online-retail context:

- a) delivery problems, for instance, a purchase arriving later than promised, the wrong item being delivered, the purchase being damaged during delivery
- b) web-site-design problems, such as insufficient or incorrect information being provided, navigational issues on the website
- c) customer-service problems, for example, poor customer-service support, unfair or unclear return policies
- d) payment problems, for instance, credit-card overcharges, consumer dissatisfaction with product quality
- e) security problems, such as credit-card fraud, e-mail addresses being released to e-marketers
- f) miscellaneous/others, for example, lack of personalised information on the website, the retailer charging some customers more than others (Holloway & Beatty, 2003)

The consequence of service failure is customer dissatisfaction and a collapsing relationship between customers and the company. The probability of service failure is more significant in an online environment than during offline consumption, and consumers can also switch online service providers with a few clicks (Jung & Seock, 2017; Shankar et al., 2003). Service-recovery strategies attempt to win dissatisfied customers back and reduce customer churn rates by providing methods to allow the customer relationship to recover from negative consumption

experiences (Jung & Seock, 2017; Maxham, 2001). In the next section, the foundations of the service-recovery literature are presented.

### 2.2.3. Complaint Recovery

Failures are unavoidable in every sector, whether the service or manufacturing industry. Companies cannot eliminate failures, but they can minimise their occurrence probability and learn to embrace failures effectively. The proficiency is to handle the loss fairly and reasonably and to consider it as a chance to implement customers' feedback and improve services or products (Fornell, 1976; Robertson, 2012). It is important to ensure high post-purchase satisfaction to maintain customer loyalty despite a failure having occurred. The theoretical term for handling service failure fairly and reasonably or repairing a failure is service or complaint recovery (Grewal et al., 2008). Service or complaint recovery is defined as the service provider's approach to service failures that lead to consumer satisfaction (Johnston, 1995; S. G. Park et al., 2014; Weun et al., 2004).

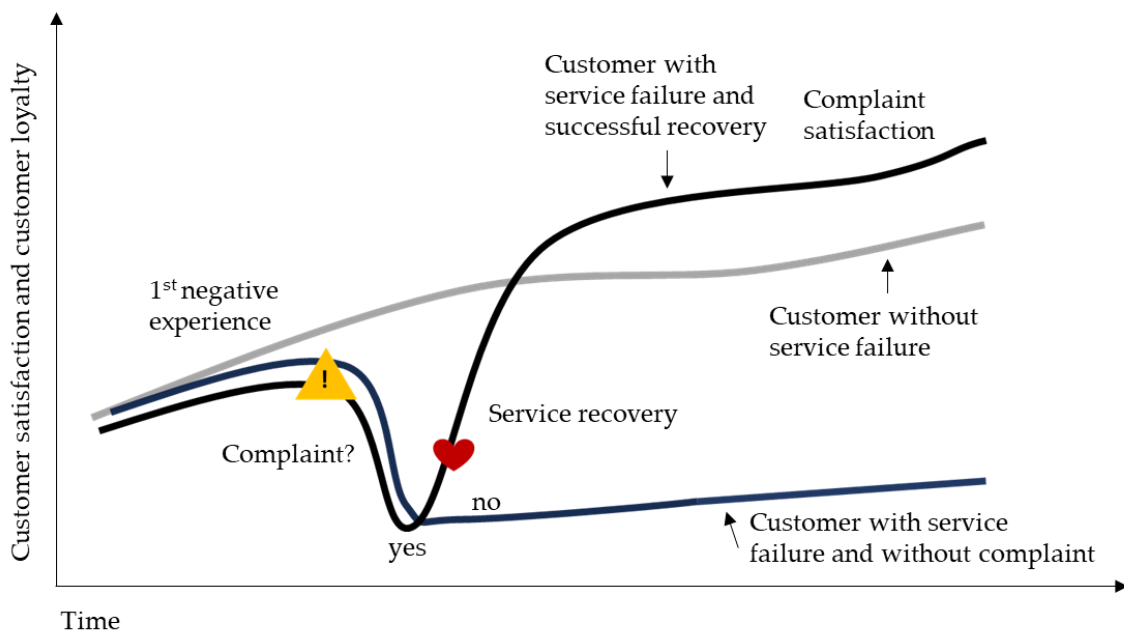
A complaint recovery, including an apology, signals to the customer that the company has confessed its wrongdoings, regrets the failure, and will take responsibility (Xie & Peng, 2009). An apology can lead to a positive impression of complaint handling and is problem-solving orientated (Xie & Peng, 2009).

However, scientific evidence has shown that an appropriate service recovery leads to ongoing customer relationships, even if the customer was dissatisfied by the initial encounter (Maxham, 2001; Weun et al., 2004). Successful service-recovery strategies can, for instance, support customer stickiness intention, maintain a long-term customer relationship, and regain the customer's satisfaction (Jung & Seock, 2017; Kuo & Wu, 2012; McCollough et al., 2000). Giving the customer a chance to address dissatisfaction and react appropriately to the recovery request increases customer satisfaction significantly (Wuenschmann, 2007).

Studies have suggested that customers should be able to report dissatisfaction through a single point of contact or a toll-free call centre and service guarantees (Callan & Moore, 1998; Davidow, 2003; Johnston & Mehra, 2002; Karatepe, 2006). While having a complaint channel does not guarantee customer satisfaction, handling complaints appropriately is a chance to hear customers' feedback (Karatepe, 2006). Taking complaints properly can increase satisfaction

tremendously, a marketing-literature phenomenon called complaint satisfaction and the service-recovery paradox (Foscht & Swoboda, 2011). It is considered a paradox because post-recovery satisfaction can increase above the level of customer satisfaction prior to a service failure. Service recovery paradox was initially introduced by McCollough and Bharadwaj (1992), where they characterised the circumstance, that the consumers' post-failure satisfaction exceeded their previous pre-failure satisfaction. Figure 5 illustrates the model of the service-recovery paradox, wherein appropriate handling is crucial for future customer relationships after a customer experiences a negative experience or a service failure.

Figure 5. Service-Recovery Paradox



Note. The graphic is adapted from "where service recovery meets its paradox: implications for avoiding overcompensation", by Edström et al., 2022, *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 32 (7), p. 3 (<https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-06-2021-0120>), CC BY 4.0.

The service-recovery paradox describes the increase of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty after a highly effective recovery strategy. During this process, satisfaction reaches a higher level than if no failure had occurred, a phenomenon supported by several investigations (Magnini, 2007; De Matos et al., 2007; Soares et al., 2014). The service-recovery paradox is most likely to occur when the customer

does not consider the failure to be serious, the customer has never experienced a failure with the company before, the cause of the failure was viewed as unstable, or the customer perceived little company control over the cause of the failure (Magnini et al., 2007). The service-recovery paradox does not seem universally applicable (Boshoff, 1997; Hocutt et al., 2006). Boshoff (1997) found that in the airline industry, the service-recovery paradox only exists in failure situations where a service representative immediately offers a full refund and a free airline ticket for a future flight. In other scenarios, the existence of the service-recovery paradox cannot be supported (Boshoff, 1997). For example, Hocutt et al. (2006) conducted a scenario-based investigation and only found evidence for the service-recovery paradox within the best recovery scenario. This finding indicates that the quality of the recovery process strongly influences the emergence of the service-recovery paradox.

Researchers have reported inconsistent results regarding the service-recovery paradox (Halstead & Page, 1992; McCollough et al., 2000). For instance, the investigation of McCollough et al. (2000) reveals that consumers would rather companies avoid service failures altogether than respond to failures with superior recovery. Similarly, the results from Zeithami et al. (1996) show that when no service failure occurs, customer satisfaction is higher than post-recovery satisfaction, which does not support the existence of the recovery paradox. Lin et al. (2011) investigated the consumer response to online-retailer service-recovery remedies after a service failure to elucidate whether the service-recovery paradox exists. The authors considered the justice dimensions of service-recovery remedies (distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice) Lin et al. (2011). Justice Theory is explained in chapter [2.1.1. Electronic Word-of-Mouth](#). Ultimately, Lin et al. (2011) could not support any justice dimension; thus, their results indicate the nonexistence of the service-recovery paradox in the online-retailing context. However, Soares et al. (2014) proved the service-recovery paradox in a call-centre context. They showed that customers who experienced service failures and afterwards an appropriate service recovery had enhanced purchase intentions compared to customers who had never experienced harmful service failures (Soares et al., 2014). Soares et al. (2014) underlined the importance of rapid failure resolution and compensation, even though they can potentially prevent customer switching behaviour through effective service-recovery processes. Nonetheless, it

is first necessary to specify what an effective service recovery must consider. Wuenschmann (2007) defines success factors for a complaint recovery: (1) compensation or reparation, (2) concession and cooperation, (3) explanation, acceptance of guilt and commitment, (4) apology, and (5) duration of complaint handling.

The service literature has typically structured service recovery into tangible and psychological recovery (Miller et al., 2000). A tangible service recovery minimises the customer damages offered in the complaint response, and it can be obtained by providing refunds, gifts such as free services or products, discounts, and coupons for future purchases (Kuo & Wu, 2012). Psychological recovery strategies are "typically applied to rectify the problem caused by the service failure and improve customer satisfaction" (Jung & Seock, 2017, p. 24), such as apologies, empathy, and explanations (Jung & Seock, 2017; Kuo & Wu, 2012). Jung and Seock (2017) conducted a scenario-based study investigating the influence of different recovery strategies. They combined compensation and apology in their strategy because these actions are often grouped in business settings (Jung & Seock, 2017). Thus, the authors suggested a combined recovery approach, including monetary compensation and apology. Moreover, a recovery approach offering monetary compensation without any explanation amounts to an admission of guilt and generates more negative customer reviews (Bitner, 1990). Therefore, the firm's explanation must also be part of the recovery approach (Bitner, 1990; Grewal et al., 2008) to increase recovery effectiveness (Grewal et al., 2008).

Scientists have elucidated a nonlinear recovery effect of tangible compensation on satisfaction (Davidow, 2003; Boshoff, 2012; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). The appropriate recovery extent is crucial for post-recovery satisfaction. Davidow (2003) classified the levels of compensation into partial, complete, and over-compensation. Research results have reported that the psychological component of the remedy is more critical than the tangible recovery (Davidow, 2003). Specifically, "respondents receiving less than a full redress (discount of 50 %, 15 %) but who were treated with courtesy and respect were more likely to repurchase and less likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth activity than subjects who received a full exchange but were treated rudely" (Davidow, 2003, p. 239). Some investigations have also revealed that partial compensation has a more significant effect on customer satisfaction than over-compensation (Boshoff, 2012;

Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011), which is why a nonlinear progression is suggested. The law of diminishing return (e.g., Shephard, 1970) supports this finding on a theoretical basis: a point will be reached at which additions of the input yield progressively smaller, or diminishing, increases in output. Adapting to the service recovery means more compensation effort, which could decrease satisfaction. Some investigations have suggested that losses from service failure weighed more heavily than possible gains received during a service remedy (Smith et al., 1999; Thaler, 1985). Because of this effect, it is pivotal for firms to understand what their customers see as an appropriate remedy for service failure.

Weun et al. (2004) investigated the role of service-failure severity in the service-recovery process and “found that the severity of the service failure has a significant main effect on satisfaction with the service recovery [...]” (p. 138). The severity of the service failure also strongly influenced customer commitment and trust as well as their likelihood of engaging in negative word-of-mouth after the failure (Weun et al., 2004). In addition to the positive impact of an efficient recovery process on customer satisfaction, there remained a negative impact on customer satisfaction by a more severe service failure (Weun et al., 2004). In cases where the initial failure was severe, customers can remain dissatisfied even when an excellent recovery was provided. Consequently, customers may still engage in negative word-of-mouth and are less likely to develop trust and commitment (Weun et al., 2004). Hence, there is a level of service failure severity at which even a superior recovery approach cannot mitigate the negative consequences of service failures (Weun et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, depending on the severity and type of service failure, customers expect different remedies: failure severity determines the recovery expectation (Y. Huang et al., 2020). The customer’s effort, such as time invested and other resources used during the interaction, increases their recovery expectations (Bagherzadeh et al., 2020). According to the work of Zeithaml et al. (1993), customer service-recovery expectations comprise customers’ prospects and beliefs about the compensation a company will provide after a failure. Recent research on recovery expectation, has added the recovery expectation as an additional factor for creation of post-recovery satisfaction (Zhu et al., 2021).

According to Social- Exchange Theory (see [2.4.3. Customer Empathy and Complaints](#)), both parties involved in the complaint are faced with costs (time,

effort, money) and rewards (receiving service, status, money) (Emerson, 1976; Gelbrich et al., 2016). Depending on the investment and failure type, consumers need different redress approaches (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Adapted to the consumer context, this finding means that the recovery strategy must consider failure type: for instance, another compensation than toothpaste is required for a cancelled flight.

Hess et al. (2003) observed that customers with a high willingness to continue the relationship with the company have lower recovery expectations than those with no desire for relationship continuity. In such cases, Hess et al. (2003) find more tolerance towards the recovery strategy and lower demand for immediate compensation. Customer relationship quality is a moderating effect of customers' compensation amount and their recovery satisfaction (Gelbrich et al., 2016). For instance, a customer who has a strong relationship with a company is more favourable to high compensation than a customer with a weak relationship (Gelbrich et al., 2016).

Y. Huang et al. (2020) tested how employee warmth and competence influence customer service-recovery cooperation by considering the different service, process, and outcome failures. Their results indicate that employees' high competence and low warmth in outcome failures are the most effective strategies for increasing customers' service-recovery cooperation (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Additionally, they discovered that during process failures, high warmth and low competence are the most effective (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Hence, customers' recovery cooperation is influenced by employees' warmth and competence, whereby the type of service failure is also crucial to customer service-recovery cooperation (Y. Huang et al., 2020).

Umar and Saleem (2022) conducted another study highlighting employee competencies in complaint-recovery approaches. They tested the roles of employee emotional competence, consumer forgiveness, and recovery satisfaction, finding evidence for a mediation effect of consumer forgiveness in this relationship. Employee emotional competence involves perceiving, understanding, and regulating customers' emotions; here, the influence of regulating customers' emotions is the most substantial part of employee emotional competence (Umar & Saleem, 2022).

The effectiveness of service-recovery strategies also depends on interpersonal effects, such as individual forgiveness competencies, thus customer forgiveness is a component of customer recovery behaviour. Enright et al. (1992) researched forgiveness and defined it as a process where negative emotions, thoughts, or behaviour towards the transgressor decrease, and simultaneously, positive emotions, thoughts, or behaviour towards the transgressor increase (Dorn et al., 2014; Fincham et al., 2005; Fincham & Beach, 2001). Forgiveness is a change in motivation towards the transgressor, including positive and negative dimensions (Fincham et al., 2005) [...] on a "continuum that ranges from malevolence to benevolence" (Forster et al., 2020, p. 49). Forgiveness is the victim's willingness to overcome the negative effects of a transgression and judgement of the person that hurt them as well as the intention of being kind and benevolent (Enright et al., 1992; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Customer forgiveness describes the psychological change when the customer becomes more tolerant and willing to overcome negative emotions after failures, and revenge-seeking decreases (Huang & Chang, 2020; J. Wei et al., 2022; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002).

In committed relationships, the likelihood of forgiveness is greater, and the same is true for transgressors, who are more likely to apologise for their failures or behaviour than in uncommitted relationships or with apologetic transgressors (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). A close relationship with a transgressor increases the victim's likelihood of developing empathy with the transgressor, which could influence forgiveness and decrease revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). Enright et al. (1992) find evidence that forgiving another person can also increase the relationship quality. Adapted to customer recovery behaviour, this finding indicates an increase in customer forgiveness in cases where the customer and employee have a close relationship and can empathise with their counterpart.

C. Wei et al. (2020) conducted a study investigating the effects of emotional and economic recovery strategies. They determined that emotional recovery strategies are more effective at engendering consumer forgiveness than economic recovery strategies (C. Wei et al., 2020). They also note that an emotional recovery creates empathy towards a company. Conversely, economic recovery strategies do not support empathy creation towards the company from the customer

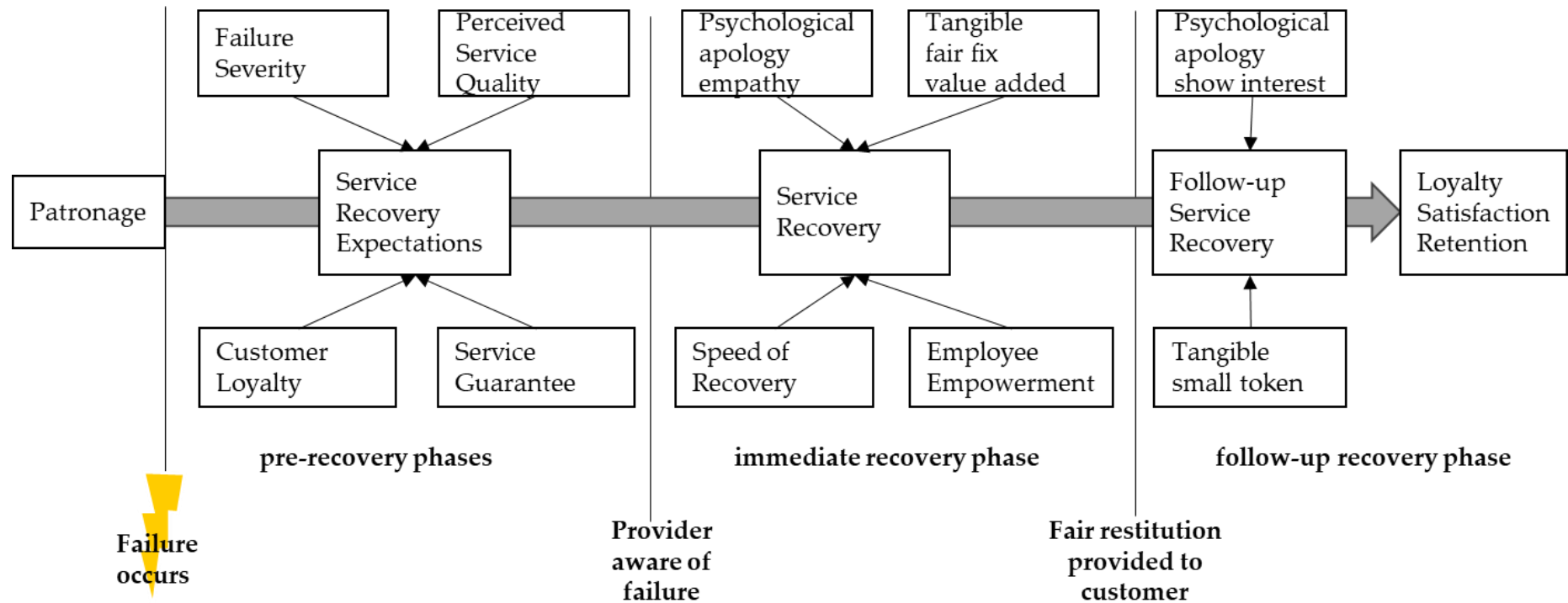
perspective, regardless of whether the economic recovery is high or low (C. Wei et al., 2020).

External factors also impact the effectiveness of consumer forgiveness on the repurchase intention of consumers. Therefore, J. Wei et al. (2022) confirm a positive moderating effect of the online-shop reputation on the effect of consumer forgiveness on repurchase intention.

Another essential difference in complaint recovery is whether the failure hurt the customer's self-esteem. Service failures that threaten customers' self-esteem need a different recovery approach (Patterson et al., 2009). A process failure is more threatening to self-esteem than an outcome failure, so process-failure recovery requires a more interactional quality that includes sincerity, respect, care, and empathy (Y. Huang et al., 2020). According to Y. Huang et al. (2020), these competencies increase customers' perception of employee warmth.

Miller et al. (2000) condense the relations and influence factors of the pre-recovery, immediate-recovery, and follow-up-recovery phases in their service-recovery framework. Figure 6 presents the framework and illustrates the influences on these phases.

Figure 6. Service-Recovery Framework



Note. This figure is adapted from "Service recovery: a framework and empirical investigation", by Miller et al., 2000, *Journal of Operations Management*, 18,(2000), p. 388 ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-6963\(00\)00032-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-6963(00)00032-2)). Copyright by John Wiley and Sons – Books. Reprinted with permission.

### 2.3. EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

*“Emotion would not be emotion without some evaluation at its heart”*  
(Parkinson, 1997, p. 62).

This section provides an overview of emotion theories and underpins the meaning of emotions within customer complaint behaviour. Additionally, it presents what motivates consumers to share their emotional consumer experiences.

#### 2.3.1. Theories of Emotion

A current definition of emotion that aligns with most research understands emotions as a reaction of the entire organism. As such, emotions are a mixture of (1) physiological arousal (racing heart), (2) expressive behaviour (quicken pace), and (3) conscious experience consisting of thoughts and feelings (panic, fear, joy) (Myers, 2014). Emotions are inner, psychic processes with characteristic core effects because humans can feel emotions: emotions are not just thoughts, and most emotions clearly distinguish between positive and negative valence and arousal (high versus low) (Frenzel et al., 2020). According to present understanding, emotions consist of five components (Frenzel et al., 2020) (see table 4).

Table 4. Emotions Components

<b>Emotions Components</b>	
Affective	Pleasant experience
	Unpleasant experience
Cognitive	Positive: thoughts about success, harmonisation
	Negative: thoughts about failure, escape
Expressive	Verbal expression
	Non-verbal expression (gesture and facial)
Physiological	Central processes (cortical, sub-cortical arousal)
	Peripheral processes (tonicity, breathing, heartbeat)
Motivational	Positive: behaviour of exploration
	Negative: behaviour of avoidance, escape, attack

*Note.* Table is adapted from *Emotionen in Paedagogische Psychologie* (p. 213), by Frenzel et al., 2020, Springer Nature BV, Wild and Moeller (Eds.), ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-61403-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-61403-7_9)), Copyright by Springer Nature BV. Reprinted with permission.

Research on emotions has existed for many decades, thus many emotion theories already exist. These theories are structured into three categories:

1. Physiological (neuroscientific) theories
  - a. James–Lange Theory
  - b. Schachter and Singer’s Two- Factors Theory
2. Behaviourist Theories
3. Appraisal Theories

#### *James–Lange Theory of Emotions*

One of the earliest attempts to define a theory of emotions was developed by James and Lange, who proposed the James–Lange Theory of Emotions (James, 1884/1969). The Danish physiologist Lange also supported the theory, which is why the approach is today known as the James–Lange Theory of Emotions. This theory is based on the notion that a stimulus creates a physical reaction, which in turn creates emotion. Hence, the experience of emotion arises from becoming aware of physiological reactions to emotionally arousing stimuli (Myers, 2014). However, the stimulus produces general excitement and a specific emotion. The most famous

example Lange and James provided for that emotion is “we meet a bear, are frightened and run” or “we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike” (James, 1884/1969, pp. 247-248). However, this theory has been highly criticised. For example, some scientists make fun of the idea of bears eliciting specific physiological responses (Ellsworth, 1994). Ellsworth explained the scientifically damaging consequences of the James–Lange Theory of Emotions, wherein most scientists exclusively focus on the bodily process. Specifically, the idea that “the sensation of bodily changes is a necessary condition of emotion was simplified and quickly crystallised into the idea that emotions are nothing but the sensation of bodily changes” (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 222).

#### *Two-Factor Theory*

Another less historical approach to explaining emotions is based on Schachter and Singer's (1962) Two-Factor Theory. This theory is based on an experimental approach where probands received adrenalin injections to observe their label and explain the state of physiological arousal (Schachter & Singer, 1962). The Two-Factor Theory states that to experience emotions, there must be both physiological arousal (factor one) and a cognitive label of this arousal (factor two) (Schachter & Singer, 1962). First, the physiological arousal is noticed (symptoms such as sweating or trembling), then the individual attempts to determine the reason for the physiological arousal (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Emotion is created from this arousal interpretation, but the label also depends on the cognitive aspects of the specific situation (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Criticism of this model is based on two questions. First, does every emotion require physiological arousal? Second, must every emotion have a cognitive interpretation? For instance, the *Zajonc -Thesis* (Adelmann & Zajonc, 1989; Zajonc, 1980) suggests that an emotional reaction may be elicited without conscious interpretation of a situation or may have already occurred before a cognitive interpretation of arousal.

Nevertheless, numerous scientists have replicated the Schachter and Singer experiments to discover that physiological arousal can elicit different emotions depending on the situational components of the cognitive label (e.g., Reisenzein, 1983; Sinclair et al., 1994). As such, the Two-Factor Theory has contributed considerably to emotion psychology, even if it cannot be maintained today.

Through the theory, science has been oriented towards cognitive psychological approaches.

From the behavioural perspective, there is also a behaviour-orientated emotional theory based on classic conditioning. For instance, Watson and Rayner (1920) conducted an experiment known as the Little-Albert experiment, where they instilled a new fear of rats with classic conditioning. Through this experiment, Watson and Rayner demonstrated that emotions are also learnable (J. B. Watson & Rayner, 1920).

#### *Appraisal Theory*

Appraisal Theory reflects the turn from behaviourism to cognitivism in the 1960s. This theory (also known as Cognitive-Appraisal Theory) is based on research by Lazarus (1966), which discovered that cognitive appraisals precede physiological responses (thus inverting previous emotion theories). In this case, the same situation elicits different emotions, thus it seems humans vary in the interindividual appearance of their emotions (Frenzel et al., 2020). These differences are caused, on the one hand, by individual genetic predispositions and, on the other hand, by individual appraisals. Appraisals are the process of cognitively evaluating a stimulus (situations, persons, or even tasks) (Frenzel et al., 2020). The individual appraisal of emotions is the principal notion of the well-known Appraisal Theory founded by Lazarus (1966). Lazarus (1966) differentiated between primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisal is the evaluation of the outcome of an encounter that has an individual stake; without a stake, there is no potential for an emotion, which is why the appraisal is primary (Lazarus, 1991). Primary appraisal consists of three further appraisal types: (1) goal relevance, which is the importance or strength of the goal (without a stake, there is no potential for an emotion); (2) goal congruence (or incongruence), where the encounter is appraised as harmful or beneficial (crucial for deciding whether the emotion is negative or positive); and (3) goal content, which involves ego-involvement, specifically the preservation or enhancement of one's ego identity, and has a moral value (essential to distinguish among several emotions, such as anger, guilt, and shame) (Lazarus, 1991).

Secondary appraisals relate to options and prospects for coping (Lazarus, 1991). These appraisals concern the evaluation of how a situation arose. For

example, was it external or self-inflicted, and does the individual have complete control of their damaging or beneficial actions? Do they have appropriate resources to cope with the situation, and future expectations of whether they can positively influence the person–environment relationship? (Lazarus, 1991). These two cognitive appraisals (primary and secondary) elicit physiological responses in form of emotions. In addition to the Appraisal Theory of Lazarus (1966, 1991), there are other appraisal theories which do not distinguish between primary and secondary appraisals but focus more on occurrence probability (Frenzel et al., 2020).

Generally, there is no consistent understanding of how many dimensions or criteria appraisals consist of (Scherer, 1999). However, all appraisal theories have a similar conclusion (Frenzel et al., 2020): emotions are elicited and differentiated based on a person's subjective evaluation or appraisal of the personal significance of a situation, object, or event through several criteria (Scherer, 1999).

Emotional gratitude arises from situations that are personally relevant, positive, and caused by others. Conversely, fear arises from situations that are personally relevant, negative, and likely to occur, and the individual has few resources to cope with it (Frenzel et al., 2020). Anger can occur in personally relevant and negative situations that could have been avoided (Frenzel et al., 2020).

#### *Basis Emotion Theory*

Nevertheless, according to more recent literature and current knowledge, emotions provide specific direction to behaviour, but the kind of behaviour depends on the goal related to the emotion (Wetzer et al., 2007). For instance, anger relates to the goal of willingness to hurt someone (Wetzer et al., 2007). The Basis Emotion Theory (Ekman, 1977) thus suggests that various emotions elicit different behavioural actions (Keltner et al., 2019). For decades, this theory has also been established in emotion research (Keltner et al., 2019). Ekman's (1977) early research developed Basis Emotion Theory, which states that emotions consist of six basic emotions: anger, fear, disgust, surprise, happiness, and sadness (Ekman, 1977). These six emotions seem universal and constant no matter which culture a human is from, and they are specific reactions to particular experiences or situations (Ekman, 1977).

*Attribution Theory and Cognitive-Dissonance Theory*

Heider's (1958) Attribution Theory is an essential psychological theory that acts as the theoretical basis of consumer-behaviour research, which explores the different behavioural reactions of customers. Heider's theory is the foundation of all attribution theories. According to Festinger's *Cognitive-Dissonance Theory* (Festinger, 1957), humans endeavour to reduce and avoid cognitive dissonance, instead striving to create an inner balance of cognitive consonance. Cognitive consonance means that knowledge, opinions, values, or attitudes are consistent (Festinger, 1957).

*Assimilation-Contrast Theory*

Assimilation-Contrast Theory (Sherif et al., 1958) provides an additional approach to Cognitive-Dissonance Theory. According to Assimilation-Contrast Theory, the level of cognitive inconsistency determines whether a human strives for consonance or dissonance. If their cognitive inconsistency is weak, humans strive for cognitive balance (cognitive consistency), and if their cognitive inconsistency is more significant, humans strive for inner imbalance (Sherif et al., 1958). Assimilation-Contrast Theory complements Festinger's Cognitive-Dissonance Theory and states that humans do not necessarily strive for cognitive inner balance. Contrast Theory supposes humans seek to intensify cognitive discrepancies by exaggerating the differences positively or negatively (Sherif et al., 1958).

The application of previous emotion theories to consumer experiences is presented in the [next section](#). Commonly applied theories in consumer research include, for instance, Self-Monitoring Theory (Collier et al., 2017); Social-Exchange Theory (Karatepe et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2021); Attribution Theory (Bitner, 1990; Gelbrich, 2009; B. Lee & Cranage, 2018); Appraisal Theory (Bagozzi et al., 1999); and, most relevant for this doctoral thesis, the Theory of Social Sharing (Duprez et al., 2015; H. Liu et al., 2021; López-López et al., 2014; Siddiqui et al., 2021).

### 2.3.2. Emotions in Consumer Experiences

The previous section, [2.3.1. Theories of Emotions](#), discussed general emotional theories. Section 2.3.2. now presents the emotion theories of consumer experience that have been applied in consumer research.

The meaning of emotions in consumer experience (pre- and post-purchase behaviour) is pivotal and has been a research objective for many decades (Kuo & Wu, 2012; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Serra-Cantalops et al., 2018; Umasuthan et al., 2017; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Every human decision is based on the influence of emotions; hence, the intention to complain is based on prevailing emotions (Choraria, 2013; Damasio, 1999). The emotional intensity of the consumer experience influences customer satisfaction and satisfaction after service or purchase failures (post-recovery satisfaction) (Mano & Oliver, 1993). In this context, research has also elucidated the influence of specific emotions in consumer behaviour (Choraria, 2013; Hossain & Rahman, 2022; Nyer, 1997; Wetzer et al., 2007). For instance, anger predicts negative WoM, unlike sadness (Nyer, 1997). The research has also analysed general emotional influence in the context of consumption experiences (Calvo-Porralla et al., 2018).

People are constantly striving to achieve goals (goal-reaching activities) (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2001). If they do not achieve these goals or are hindered, negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, shame, or fear, could occur (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2001). Failed service encounters present a non-goal-reaching activity and could result in negative emotions (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). A lack of fairness in recovery processes strengthens this effect (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005).

In consumer behaviour, favourable emotions positively impact return visits and referrals, and negative emotions negatively impact post-purchase behaviour, such as willingness to complain (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Emotions are related to temporal perspectives and depend on a sense of past, present, and future; with different time frames, there is a contrast between emotions, for instance, anger, fright, and hope (Lazarus, 1999). Anger, for example, is orientated towards the past and what an offending person has done previously (Lazarus, 1999).

Additionally, customers' emotions are also highly significant during the service-recovery process (the situation where the company attempts to fix their

failures) (Kuo & Wu, 2012). Recovery satisfaction could decrease if negative emotions are evoked during service recovery (Kuo & Wu, 2012). Hence, Kuo and Wu (2012) propose that service providers closely observe their customer's emotional responses (phrasing or tones) during service recoveries. As such, they can react proactively with specific approaches when, for instance, anger or other negative emotions occur. Customer satisfaction and positive post-purchase intentions could be enhanced by inducing more favourable emotions (and mitigating negative emotions) when handling a service failure (Kuo & Wu, 2012).

Tuzovic (2010) analysed the dysfunctional online behaviour of negative consumer emotions, including customers' frustration. The research revealed four frustration sensations and defections for the companies, the strongest form being manipulation of others and revenge intentions. Tuzovic's (2010) research is essential because previous studies have demonstrated that the emotions most likely to be caused by critical adverse incidence are anger and frustration, which vary in their focus. Angry humans focus on blameworthiness, and frustrated humans focus on negative outcomes (Tuzovic, 2010; Wetzler et al., 2007). Thus, angry customers may be more rational, objective, and problem-focused than frustrated customers (Tuzovic, 2010). This distinction is essential for understanding how to handle complaint recovery.

Applying Cognitive-Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Assimilation-Contrast Theory (Sherif et al., 1958) to consumer behaviour suggests that consumers attempt to avoid cognitive post-purchase dissonance. Generally, five ways to mitigate cognitive dissonances exist: addition of consonant cognitions, subtraction of dissonant cognitions, substitution of dissonant cognitions with consonant cognitions, and increase or decrease in the importance of consonant cognitions (Fischer et al., 2018; Frey & Gaska, 2009).

Hence, consumers search for consistent information about their purchase and often ignore information that could create cognitive dissonance. For instance, consumers who are insecure about a purchased product seek information that confirms their purchase decision to reduce their cognitive dissonance (addition of consonant cognitions). This process is often referred to in the literature as post-purchase regret (George & Yaoyuneyong, 2010). Consumers do not pay attention to weak failures or inconsistencies when they are mostly happy with a purchase because of consumers' individually defined threshold for dissonance (George &

Yaoyuneyong, 2010; Sweeney et al., 2000). However, if the purchase does upset the consumer strongly, they are more willing to exaggerate the quality as bad or worse and are already more willing to engage in negative eWoM behaviour. This exaggeration of product evaluation in a negative direction is based on Assimilation-Contrast Theory (see [2.3.1. Theories of Emotion](#)).

A phenomenon called *Vicarious Dissonance* was found by Norton et al. (2003), which reveals that humans can also vicariously reduce cognitive dissonances for others, especially when the other is from a close group and is engaging in inconsistent behaviour in an induced forced-compliance paradigm.<sup>4</sup>

Previous research has also investigated the role of emotions related to different products (Calvo-Porralla et al., 2018; Dubé et al., 2003). Calvo-Porralla et al. (2018) analysed the effect of emotions in the context of different product types (low-versus high-involvement products). The authors found positive emotions exert a higher impact on satisfaction with low-involvement products than high-involvement products. Their results underline the importance of situational factors, such as the consumption occasion, as qualifiers of favourable emotions.

### 2.3.3. Theory of the Social Sharing of Emotions in Consumer Experiences

#### *Theory of the Social Sharing of Emotions*

The Social-Sharing-of-Emotions Theory, initially found through Festinger's notion of social comparison (1954), contrasts a primary foundation of consumers sharing their consumption experiences (Festinger, 1954). The idea of social comparison suggests that human compares themselves with others to develop their opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954), and the social sharing of emotions is built on this assumption (Liu et al., 2021). Humans socially share their emotions to achieve superiority, building their social reality as well as seeking to follow others (H. Liu et al., 2021; Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1992). Scientists have observed the (mainly) immediate human need to share (discuss) an emotional event or situation

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<sup>4</sup> Forced compliance is an instrument from Dissonance Theory where individuals are forced to “comply publicly, while holding an opposite and unchanging private opinion” (Sweeney et al., 2000, p. 370).

one has experienced (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1992). This effect applies to negative and positive emotions, stimulating social interaction (Rimé, 2009).

Duprez et al. (2015) find that communication with members of an individual's entourage (emotional disclosure) increases mental and physical health. Previous research has also indicated that a written emotional disclosure affects individual well-being (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). The prevailing emotional intensity determines the level of the felt emotions and the frequency of social sharing (Rimé, 2009). Additionally, eWoM is a type of social sharing of emotions because consumers share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions about their consumption experience (H. Liu et al., 2020, 2021; López-López et al., 2014; Previte et al., 2019; Wetzer et al., 2007).

The Social-Sharing-of-Emotions Theory proposes two primary dimensional emotions: emotional valence and emotional intensity (H. Liu et al., 2021). Valence means the emotional evaluation, such as negative or positive, and emotional intensity relates to the strength of the emotion, such as high or low, regarding the object, event, or situation (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; H. Liu et al., 2021). Negative emotions produce unpleasant feelings, while positive emotions elicit pleasant feelings (Wierzbicka, 1992). López-López et al. (2014) propose that the dual-dimensionality of emotional intensity also applies to consumption emotions.

Sharing an emotional experience strongly influences humans. Research has suggested that sharing something about a positive event can lead to even more positive effects than the event itself (Langston, 1994). The positive effects of social sharing are intraindividual effects, such as an increase in well-being and interindividual benefits (Gable et al., 2004). Gable et al. (2004) show that sharing a positive event can also strengthen the relationship bond between humans if the listener reacts empathically to the shared experience. Venting, as an exchange of emotions, therefore, serves to strengthen the social bond through empathy (Kowalski et al., 2014). An individual reveals their emotions so that the other person can create a better picture of them (Kowalski et al., 2014). This finding highlights the importance of companies interacting empathically with their customers on the Internet when they share their consumption experiences (even though it may be a positive experience). However, when providing a digital evaluation online, the customer does not receive a reply to their evaluation in every case.

## 2.4. CUSTOMER EMPATHY

*“Empathy is one of the most complex forms of attention we have - and also the most valuable” (Hari, 2022, p. 96).<sup>5</sup>*

Section 2.4 Customer Empathy provides the theoretical foundations of empathy, including the phenomenon of motivated empathy. Subsequently, empathy from the customer and employee perspectives is explained to highlight its role in customer complaint behaviour and complaint recovery.

### 2.4.1. Empathy

Generally, there is no consistency in understanding whether empathy is a human trait (Arli & Anandya, 2018; McBane, 1995; Weißhaar & Huber, 2016) or a human ability (Zaki, 2014). Depending on their perspective, researchers define empathy as one or the other. However, the main consensus can be found in the following definition: “empathic [response] is subject to trait, individual-difference factors [...] and supports the importance of situational, ‘state’ factors” (Cuff et al., 2016, p. 149). The literature consists of many definitions of empathy (Lima & Osório, 2021; Zaki, 2014). However, most definitions share essential characteristics: empathy involves the ability to understand, anticipate, experience, or predict how others feel as well as their related behaviours or reactions (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003; Karlstetter, 2017; Wieseke et al., 2012). According to Zaki (2014), people experience empathy as something automatically and unavoidable, and it is strongly dependent on the context of personal and situational factors.

Empathy is a crucial success factor for social interaction because it enhances supportive behaviours and attitudes (e.g., Redmond, 1989; Wieseke et al., 2012). In contrast to high empathic abilities, the consequences of low empathic abilities can include self-centeredness, alienation of others, resentment, and conflicts (Eslinger et al., 2002). However, a successful social interaction needs an appropriate counterpart to align with reciprocity (Ngo et al., 2020). Reciprocity with another

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from German „Empathie ist eine der komplexesten Formen der Aufmerksamkeit die wir haben – und auch die wertvollste“ (Hari, 2022).

person's emotions indicates that empathy is a process rather than an emotional state (Lazarus, 1991).

It is crucial to distinguish between empathy and compassion because these two constructs are often mixed. A central difference between empathy and compassion is the outcome: empathy can create negative emotions for the observer, such as empathic distress (Preckel et al., 2018). In contrast to compassion, which mainly creates positive affect towards others, such as feelings of warmth and concern for others: compassion is often linked with altruistic interactions, such as the motivation to help (Preckel et al., 2018). Empathy outcomes can be positive, as in the case of pro-sociality, or harmful, as with empathic distress (Preckel et al., 2018). From a neuroscientific perspective, empathy and compassion are two different brain networks based on distinct biological systems that do not overlap (Singer & Bolz, 2013).

Empathic distress is a negative outcome of empathy that causes personal suffering or even asocial effects, such as aggressive verbal behaviour (Klimecki et al., 2016). Pain empathy relates to the same brain area activated in first-hand pain experiences (Hartmann, 2022; Rütgen et al., 2015) and entails the capacity to share another's pain as a vital part of the human experience (Zhou et al., 2020).

An essential aspect of human empathy is the differentiation between empathic responses to others' versus one's own distress: the imagination of the self and other or actor and observer by the occurrence of empathy (Jackson et al., 2006). According to the research of Jackson et al. (2006), who conducted pain-processing experiments, humans can distinguish between self and other-pain representation. However, their experiments elucidated that one's own perspective is more closely related to the pain experience than a stranger's perspective, implying that empathy does not involve a complete self-other merging (Jackson et al., 2006). Neuroscience describes a mechanism called mirroring, where actions, intentions, or feelings of others are mapped onto the own mechanism to ensure a shared representation of actions (Gerdes et al., 2011; Kaplan & Iacoboni, 2006). According to Iacoboni (2008), mirroring seems to be an innate and crucial aspect of human lives (see also Gerdes et al., 2011).

Empathy is a multidimensional construct, and there is no consistent understanding of how many dimensions it consists of. Some researchers explain empathy as a two-dimensional construct comprised of cognitive and emotional

dimensions (Spreng et al., 2009). On the other hand, there are researchers (McBane, 1995) who explain empathy as a multidimensional construct of three dimensions: (1) perspective taking, (2) empathic concern, and (3) emotional contagion. Much empathy research is based on the studies of Davis (1980, 1983b, 1983a), who evaluates empathy through four dimensions: perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. The fourth dimension describes a person's imagination tendencies, such as the ability to imagine fictive characters in books, plays, or movies (Davis, 1983a).

Table 5 provides an overview of the multidimensional approach to empathy and how the dimensions intersect. The main difference in empathy approaches lies in the emotional dimension, which is divided into two additional dimensions in the multidimensional approach. The three- and two-dimensional empathy approaches are widespread (Lima & Osório, 2021) and are therefore considered more in the following sections. For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that approaches also describe empathy with four or up to six dimensions (Lima & Osório, 2021).

Table 5. *Empathy as a Multidimensional Construct*

Dimensions		Explanation
3	2	
Perspective taking	Cognitive dimension	This dimension describes the ability to understand the perspective, attitude, or role of another individual: adopting the viewpoint of another, for example, understanding another's specific situation and needs separate from one's own (De Waal, 2008; Davis, 1983a). Perspective taking also enables one to anticipate another's behaviour, motives, or needs (Devoldre et al., 2010; Wieseke et al., 2012). Perspective taking is related to higher interpersonal functions, such as high self-esteem and relatively little emotionality (Davis, 1983a).
Empathic concern	Emotional dimension	Empathic concern describes a person's responding to another person's emotions without experiencing these emotions themselves (Davis, 1983b; Wieseke et al., 2012). The concern for other individuals may trigger altruistic behaviours, such as helping others (Davis, 1983b; McBane, 1995; Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathic concern exhibits no consistent association with social competence or self-esteem (Davis, 1983a).
Emotional contagion	Emotional dimension	Emotional contagion enables individuals to re-feel the emotions of another at the exact moment the emotions occur (Duan, 1996; Gladstein, 1983). Emotional contagion appears, for example when a person sees another suffer or experience joy then feels suffering or joy themselves (McBane, 1995).

*Note. Emotional dimension is known as affective dimension (Davis, 1983a).*

Previous psychological research has shown a link between high scores of cognitive empathic understanding (perspective taking) and a high level of emotional response (empathic concern) (Kaplan & Iacoboni, 2006; Umasuthan et al., 2017). Numerous research has indicated a relationship between empathy, altruism, and prosocial behaviour (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hartmann, 2022; Morelli et al., 2014; Tusche et al., 2016). Prompting factors for altruistic decision making in a charitable brain mainly comprise three psychological mechanisms: empathy, perspective taking, and attentional reorienting with variance in altruistic choices based on socio-cognitive routes (Tusche et al., 2016).

Empathy is a central aspect of the *Theory of Mind*. The Theory of Mind “provides cognitive understanding of someone else’s thoughts or intentions” (Preckel et al., 2018, p. 1). This theory describes the ability to predict human behaviours through information on intentions or aims, convictions and beliefs, opinions, and expectations by considering these mental states (mind-reading) (e.g., Premack & Woodruff, 1978). The self–other distinction is an essential process for Theory of Mind and empathy because it is the foundation for differentiation between one’s own emotional or mental states and those of others (Preckel et al., 2018). The most common study of the Theory of Mind, “Maxi and the Chocolate”, is from Wimmer and Perner (1983). The authors use a false-belief task to show that children can (from the age of approximately four years) “constrain their interpretation of this person’s stated intentions to the person’s beliefs” (H. Wimmer & Perner, 1983, p. 104). Errors within the self–other distinction could lead to egocentricity bias, which means projecting one’s own emotional state onto others (Silani et al., 2013).

Insufficient or a lack of empathy seriously impacts the everyday lives of individuals who experience it. Extraordinarily empathic people are uncommon due to interference with the ability to act on one’s feelings and thoughts, which may occur due to constant sensitivity to others (Hodges & Klein, 2001). Conversely, humans who never demonstrate empathy or are incapable of approaching it are rare, but they experience severe difficulties in everyday social interactions (Hodges & Klein, 2001). Therefore, non-pathologic, healthy humans have a capacity for empathy that can be regulated to ensure it is experienced properly (Hodges & Klein, 2001).

To examine the widespread stereotypical belief that women score higher on empathy tendencies than men, Loeffler and Greitemeyer (2021) conducted a study and revealed evidence that gender biases for empathy are highly dependent on contextual factors. Self-perceived empathy is significantly related to gender-role orientation and is more salient when the measurement of empathy is known by participants (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021). Gender differences are weaker (or become undetectable) if the study setting is more neutral and a more objective measurement (emotion recognition instead of empathy) is used (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021). Hence, Loeffler and Greitemeyer (2021) show a “female tendency to report a stronger empathic response rather than an actual difference in male and female ability” (p. 9).

According to the empathy’s complexity many scientists have developed empathy scales to measure the construct, such as Davis (1983); McBane (1995); Spreng et al. (2009); and Totan et al. (2012). Lima and Osório (2021) collected and evaluated 23 empathy instruments in an extensive meta-analysis. The empathy scales used in this doctoral thesis are discussed in studies sections [IV](#), [V](#), and [VI](#).

#### **2.4.2. Motivated Empathy**

Motivation is a fundamental part of human behaviour, and involvement with other’s emotions is a motivational phenomenon (Zaki, 2014). Cuff et al. (2016) discuss whether empathy necessarily determines behavioural outcomes or other context-dependent factors are more likely to serve as motivation.

Empathy varies between contexts and has numerous situational features: empathy can occur automatically, but this does not mean empathy will always automatically arise (Zaki, 2014). The tension between automaticity and context dependence is a central element in the occurrence of empathy (Zaki, 2014). Empathy can occur automatically, but besides automatic occurrence, empathy is shaped by context effects (Zaki, 2014). The observer’s situations, experiences, and relationships influence the empathy experience, known as the motivated account of empathy (Zaki, 2014). The motivated account of empathy has been studied by Zaki (2014), who provides phenomena that motivate or demotivate empathy. The following components are identified as empathy-avoidance motivators: (1)

suffering (avoid pain), (2) material cost (avoid cost), and (3) interference with competition (Zaki, 2014).

According to the *Avoid-Pain Theory*, empathic people avoid psychological pain. This avoidance strategy is more robust and active in empathic people than in non-empathic or less empathic people (Zaki, 2014). Pain avoidance occurs because the other's negative emotion will place a psychological burden on the observer if they share this emotion (Pancer et al., 1979; Zaki, 2014). Another avoidance motivator is material costs: empathy can produce material costs through, for instance, charitable donations, that are made due to the felt empathy (Zaki, 2014). The third avoidance motivator is interference with competition. To maintain competitive advantages and not be emotionally affected by a competitor's harm or misfortune, the observer is motivated to avoid interference with the competitor. This motivation is even stronger if the competitor must be harmed or has already been harmed (Zaki, 2014). For example, Zaki (2014) describes a football game where a linebacker could not perform well when he shared the harm of the competitor. Competition interference is especially concerning in negotiation situations and could strongly influence the negotiation's success (Galinsky et al., 2008).

Galinsky et al. (2008) conducted three studies that tested the differential effects of empathy and perspective-taking on negotiations. Their results show that perspective-taking, defined as "the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual's viewpoint" (p. 378), can be beneficial in negotiations, such as discovering hidden agreements (Galinsky et al., 2008). Their findings indicate that empathy is not as helpful as perspective-taking, whereby they define empathy as the emotional ability to connect with another individual (Galinsky et al., 2008). Their research is based on the knowledge that empathy and perspective-taking are two distinct social competencies, even if research often names the two concepts as interchangeable or describes perspective-taking as a subcomponent of empathy (De Waal, 2008; Devoldre et al., 2010; Wieseke et al., 2012). Nevertheless, Galinsky et al.'s (2008) findings indicate that, considering a mixed-motive interaction in negotiations, "it is better to 'think for' than to 'feel for' one's adversaries—more beneficial to get inside their heads than to have them inside one's own heart" (Galinsky et al., 2008, p. 383).

As explained above, observers avoid situations where empathy is perceived as costly (pain, material cost, interference). According to Zaki (2014), these

avoidance strategies are obtained through emotional-regulation strategies to down-regulate empathic responses: (1) situation selection, (2) attention modulation, and (3) appraisal.

Emotional-regulation theories refer to regulating an emotion before the emotion occurs: to make the occurrence of emotions more manageable, the observer alters the situation, shifts their attention, or modulates the appraisal before empathic responses can arise (Zaki, 2014). For example, someone may distance themselves from a donation booth or cross the street after observing a human in need. This concept of emotional regulation can be adapted to the field of complaint management. For example, a customer may down-regulate their empathy for a stressed employee because they empathise with them (in a customer-handling situation). Such empathy may be costly for the customer themselves because the compensation may be lower. Therefore, the customer regulates their emotions to prevent empathising with the employee.

As discussed recently, there are certain situations in which observers attempt to regulate their empathic responses to prevent empathy from emerging. Therefore, Zaki (2014) has also provided phenomena to approach empathy: (1) positive affect, (2) affiliation, (3) and social desirability.

In some situations, empathy is desirable (approaching desirability) even though it may generate negative emotions. This may be the case because empathy is generally seen as a positive trait (Schumann et al., 2014). If someone can count themselves among those with high empathy, this positive perception of empathy may help them identify with the trait to improve their self-esteem (Epley & Dunning, 2000). As Zaki (2014) notes, “observers should relish opportunities to confirm their identity as high-empathy individuals, especially under contexts that highlight empathy’s desirability”. (p. 1630)

### **2.4.3. Customer Empathy and Complaints**

Customers' general empathy tendencies are described using the term customer empathy. In this thesis, customer empathy represents customers' tendencies to empathise with companies or employees.

Empathy is an integral aspect of personality and a human ability which influences customers' consumer behaviour, especially CCB behaviour. The other

factors that affect customers complaint behaviour have already been discussed in part [2.2.1.2. Characteristics of Complaint Behaviour](#). Numerous scientists have investigated the role of empathy in the service and marketing disciplines (Simon, 2013; Weißhaar & Huber, 2016; Wieseke et al., 2012). The Weißhaar and Huber (2016) meta-analysis provides a coherent overview of empathy's role in academic-service marketing.

In 2012, Wieseke et al. investigated the impact of empathy on customer and employee perspectives during a customer–employee interaction. The authors prove the impact of empathy on customer loyalty and satisfaction. They also elucidate increased customer satisfaction and employee empathy strengthened by customer empathy, which are explained by the symbiotic interactions between customer and employee (Wieseke et al., 2012). Furthermore, their findings imply that customers' forgiveness is influenced by customer empathy, in that "customer empathy is able to mitigate negative effects of customer dissatisfaction on customer loyalty" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 316). This theoretical finding can be explained by the vital link between empathy and altruism (Tusche et al., 2016).

Further academic findings that support the impact of empathy on forgiveness are Forster et al. (2019), Harrison-Walker (2019) and C. Wei et al. (2020). These authors identify various advantages, such as a decreasing intention to provide negative WoM, lower patronage willingness, a higher probability for reconciliation, and increasing probability of a more robust social relationship. These effects are reinforced by the early findings of Mehrabian and Epstein (1972), who describe an aggression-reducing or mitigating effect of empathy.

Wieseke et al. (2012) conducted a study in the German tourism sector where forgiveness was measured through customer loyalty and satisfaction. The findings postulate that empathy influences the bond "between customers' evaluation of service encounters" and customer forgiveness because more significant levels of empathy coincide with stronger customer forgiveness of dissatisfactory service encounters (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 319). More specifically, the authors reveal that customers' forgiveness of a dissatisfying encounter corresponds with their empathic ability "to sense and share another person's emotions rather than to embrace the other person's perspective" (pp. 324-325). This dynamic elucidates the dominant effect of the empathy dimensions of emotional contagion and empathic concern (Wieseke et al., 2012). Moreover, these findings emphasise the managerial

contribution to understanding the relevance of "matching customers and employees on the basis of their psychological profiles to create smooth and satisfying service interactions" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 326). This information also raises the question of how to affect the empathy of employees and customers or whether to consider hiring empathic people directly (Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathy could be added, for instance, as a relevant personality trait in the recruiting process. As such, these findings contribute to the importance of empathy-based approaches in customer–employee interactions, more specifically, the influence of customer empathy on the link between satisfaction and loyalty (Wieseke et al., 2012).

Ngo et al. (2020) investigated the interplay of employee empathy and customer satisfaction based on Social-Exchange Theory. This theory is grounded in a combination of self-interest and interdependence: on the one hand, participants of a social exchange attempt to achieve their interests and aims, and on the other, the expected outcome of the social exchange is a result of the individual efforts (Cropanzano, 2005; Lawler, 1999; Ngo et al., 2020).

Social-Exchange Theory explains behaviour in social relationships and is derived from the idea of cost and award in social interactions (Ngo et al., 2020). The theory is based on a reciprocal relationship and how one person perceives the contribution of the other. Contribution will be returned if perception is high, and vice versa (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social-Exchange Theory also applies to intangible sources, such as positive or negative emotions or knowledge (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Ngo et al., 2020). Knowledge sharing could increase social prestige and recognition; hence, humans tend to proactively share knowledge (J. Park et al., 2017). For instance, Ngo et al. (2020) applied Social-Exchange Theory to customer–employee service interaction in their research. Due to the theory, the scientists explain an empathy–satisfaction relationship elicited by customer-oriented behaviour that is, in turn, elicited by employee empathy: the model of employee–customer empathy, as Ngo et al. (2020) noted. The fundamental study is based on a dyadic survey of frontline employees and their customers from service companies, specifically securities companies, in Asia. The investigation conveys empirical evidence "that customers play an important role in translating employee empathy to customer satisfaction via customer-oriented behaviour by being

empathetic as well as providing emotional and cognitive support for the frontline employees" (Ngo et al., 2020, p. 1).

Altruism is a personality trait strongly correlated to empathy (Aragon, 2016; Zaki, 2014). Moreover, empathy increases conciliation tendencies, but a sufferer cannot forgive a transgressor before empathising with the transgressor's distress and guilt (Aragon, 2016). Adapting this dynamic to the context of service and purchase failures, the research of Aragon (2016) suggests that a suffering customer must understand a company's reasons for causing a failure before the customer can conciliate.

In 1995, McCullough and Worthington suggested that individuals react in varied ways to interpersonal hurt: people with greater empathy respond less angrily than those with less empathy (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Wieseke et al., 2012).

Prior research has analysed the influence factor of consumer forgiveness (C. Wei et al., 2020; Umar & Saleem, 2022; C. Wei et al., 2020). For example, C. Wei et al. (2020) show that perceived fairness and empathy towards a firm significantly increases consumer forgiveness. The authors distinguish between emotional and economic recoveries, and importantly, they determine that high monetary compensation (35 %) does not significantly differ from low monetary compensation (10 %). This distinction indicates that a greater economic recovery does not result in higher customer forgiveness (C. Wei et al., 2020). As such, these results highlight the importance of emotional-recovery strategies and customer empathy towards a firm (C. Wei et al., 2020).

Table 6 provides an overview of empathy in customer complaint behaviour, complaint-recovery research, and employee–customer interaction. Research focused on customer empathy was presented in the section above. In the following section, [2.4.4. Employee Empathy](#), research with a focus on employee empathy is discussed. Generally, empathy research focuses on empathy as a predictor of customer complaint behaviour or as an outcome of complaint recovery. For instance, C. Wei et al. (2020) analysed customer empathy as an outcome of emotional complaint recovery.

Table 6. Empathy Research within CCB Research, including Complaint-Recovery Research

<b>Empathy Provider</b>	<b>Characteristics influence</b>	<b>Author, Year</b>
Employee empathy	Customer-need knowledge	(Homburg et al., 2009)
Customer, and employee empathy	Customer satisfaction and loyalty	(Wieseke et al., 2012)
Employee empathy	Gratitude, transactional satisfaction, loyalty, consumers' trust, and commitment	(Simon, 2013)
Employee empathy	Effectiveness of customer service (call-centre interactions)	(Clark et al., 2013)
Manager empathy	Consumer preferences	(Hattula et al., 2015)
Employee empathy	Customers' perceived ethicality, commitment, quality, customer loyalty, positive WoM	(Markovic et al., 2015)
Employee empathy	Trust, commitment, relationship age	(Weißhaar & Huber, 2016)
Customer empathy	Emotional service experience	(Umasuthan et al., 2017)
Employee empathy	Customer satisfaction, loyalty, customer affective commitment, service quality	(Bahadur et al., 2018)
Customer empathy (and compassion)	Influence of personality (empathy and Machiavellianism) on consumer ethics	(Arli & Anandya, 2018)
Customer empathy	Emotional and economic recovery elicit consumer empathy and forgiveness toward the firm	(C. Wei et al., 2020)
Customer and employee empathy	Improve the efficacy of frontline-employee empathy	(Ngo et al., 2020)

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Employee empathy	Service-recovery satisfaction, consumer forgiveness, failure types	(Umar & Saleem, 2022)
Customer empathy	Customers' reviews as a predictor of customer empathy behaviour (as a reaction to reviews)	(Hossain & Rahman, 2022)
Artificial empathy	Human-AI gap in social customer experience	(Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022)
Customer empathy	Service recovery of online shopping: empathy and consumer forgiveness on consumer repurchase intention	(J. Wei et al., 2022)
Customer empathy	Purchase intention towards eco-friendly goods	(Bae et al., 2023)

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*Note. This table does not include all research, only the most recent and relevant for the thesis.*

Recently, studies have investigated customer empathy as an outcome of pre-purchase evaluations. Therefore, in the context of the stimuli, organism, and response (SOR) model, consumers receive reviews as the stimuli, and the observed response is empathy behaviour (Hossain & Rahman, 2022). Therefore, different emotional reviews were conducted (positive, neutral, negative) and elicited varied emotional experiences in customers (Hossain & Rahman, 2022). Additionally, Hossain and Rahman (2022) revealed that reviews contain more words when customers experience negative emotions.

Another current development is the increasing interest in eco-friendly products. Therefore, Bae et al. (2023) analysed customer empathy in the context of eco-friendly goods. The authors provide evidence that customers' purchase behaviour towards eco-friendly products is favourably influenced by consumer empathy towards a company's environmental orientation (Bae et al., 2023).

#### 2.4.4. Employee Empathy

Employee empathy is the ability to understand the customer's perspective and emotions during a customer–employee interaction (Hwang & Kim, 2016; Markovic et al., 2015) and to create positive emotions towards the company in customers (Bahadur et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2011). According to Winsted (2000), employee empathy involves paying attention to the customer and demonstrating interest. Empathy in customer–employee interactions can significantly improve the relationship (Umar & Saleem, 2022).

Employees who score high on emotional empathy seem more motivated to display interpersonal concern, mutual support, and welfare when interacting with customers (McBane, 1995; Murray et al., 2019). The cognitive empathy of employees also leads to a better understanding of customers' needs (Homburg et al., 2009).

Umar and Saleem (2022) conducted a study to assess the role of employees' emotional competence in consumer forgiveness. Using a critical-incident technique, their findings indicate that employees' emotional competence can facilitate customer satisfaction and customer forgiveness after service failures (Umar & Saleem, 2022). The authors define employees' emotional competence as the ability to regulate, understand, and perceive customers' emotions (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Hence, employees' emotional competence dimensions are like the empathy dimensions (perspective taking, empathic concern, and emotional contagion (McBane, 1995). The researchers suggest implementing employees' emotional competence within recruitment processes and training these competencies in employee-development programs (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Regarding the meaning of failure types, Umar and Saleem (2022) elicit the failure type moderation effect in the relationship between employees' emotional competence and recovery satisfaction. Employees' emotional competence is a further instrument companies can use to mitigate negative service experiences.

Clark et al. (2013) discussed the effectiveness of customer service by providing employee empathy towards consumers' inquiries. The authors reveal that "by offering genuine emotional support, the enactment of affective empathy did ameliorate tensions that some customers brought to calls" (Clark et al., 2013, p. 148). However, in contrast, they also discovered that other consumers did not want

genuine emotional support: they preferred objectivity, even though they experienced personal loss (Clark et al., 2013). Thus, balanced employee empathy is recommended.

Clark et al. (2013) propose a definition of empathic employees and empathic customer communication, which can be found in table 7. The general three-dimensional structure of empathy, as presented in table 5, is adapted to employee empathy. Three types of empathy are suggested for effective customer interactions based on employee empathy (Clark et al., 2013). The first empathy type is active listening, which is expressed by asking questions or summarising customer needs (Clark et al., 2013). The second empathy type, affective empathy, entails identifying the customers' experiences and the employees' concerns about the failure (Axtell et al., 2007; Clark et al., 2013). The third type of employee empathy is cognitive empathy, which describes the ability to state customers' perspectives by using appropriate language and providing suggestions of what other customers did in similar situations (Clark et al., 2013).

*Table 7. Employee Empathy in Customer Interactions*

<b>Employee Empathy Type</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Expressions</b>
Attentive	Actively listening and appreciating customers	Acknowledging, repeating, paraphrasing, elaborating on the customers' ideas, summarising, asking questions
Affective	Identifying with customers feelings	Stating understanding, offering apology, referring to the experiences of others
Cognitive	Assuming customers' perspective to provide help	Appropriate language, stating what other customers did, proposing solutions

*Note. The table is adapted from "Is Empathy Effective for Customer Service? Evidence From Call Center Interactions" by Clark et al., 2013, Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 27 (2), p. 135 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651912468887>). Copyright by SAGE. Reprinted with permission.*

However, the difficulty from an employee perspective is to find the appropriate balance between empathic and non-empathic behaviour. Not all customers want a bonding relationship, which can develop due to empathy: they may not appreciate empathy behaviour, instead preferring more objective and distant answers (Clark et al., 2013). An empathic employee “detects and honors customers' differing needs for empathy and tailors responses to meet those needs expeditiously” (Clark et al., 2013, p. 143). The art of employee empathy also moderates the level of deployed empathy in accordance with the customer's needs.

Recently, studies have investigated the importance of employee empathy for customer satisfaction (Bahadur et al., 2018). This research elucidates the mediating effects of customer affective commitment and perceived service quality on the relationship between employee empathy and customer satisfaction. Moreover, Bahadur et al. (2018) confirm the impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and, consequently, on customers' positive WoM-giving intention. Previous research has confirmed the mediating effects of empathy in customer interactions, focusing on increasing customer orientation (Roediger, 2016).

## 2.5. DERIVED CONSTRUCTS - DEDUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HYPOTHESES

In the following section, the hypotheses for studies 1, 2, and 3 are derived deductively from the current literature. [Section II](#) presents the theoretical foundations, theoretical framework, and recent research from which the hypotheses are developed. A summary of all hypotheses is provided at the end of their derivation.

### 2.5.1. Hypotheses Development Study 1

Research has shown that people with a positive attitude towards complaints are likelier to complain (Richins, 1982). This finding has existed for many years in consumer-complaint research. A positive attitude towards complaints is learnable, which means the more positive complaint experiences a consumer has, the higher the likelihood of complaints in future purchase situations (Richins, 1982). Neuroscientific research indicates that people who complain often have lower serotonin levels (Kowalski et al., 2014). Low serotonin makes people unhappy,

which is the basis for subsequent complaints, after which the complaint behaviour is repeatedly perpetuated (Kowalski et al., 2014; Wilhelm, 2022). Thus, an impact of complaint experience on negative eWoM-giving intention is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Customers' previous complaint experience influences negative eWoM-giving intention.

Attitude toward complaints describes a general attitude without focusing on a specific complaint situation: it expresses a positive attitude to articulating complaints (Roschk, 2011). Research agrees that customers with a positive attitude toward complaints are likelier to complain than consumers with a negative attitude towards complaints (Bearden & Crockett, 1981; Bodey & Grace, 2006; J. Singh & Wilkes, 1996). Furthermore, complainers have high self-esteem, are more risk-taking, and generally have a positive attitude towards complaints compared to "non-complainers" (Phau & Baird, 2008). Thus, a moderating impact of attitude towards complaints on eWoM-giving intention is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** Attitude towards complaints influences negative eWoM-giving intention.

Weun et al. (2004) investigate the role of service-failure severity in the service-recovery process. They find that "the severity of the service failure has a significant main effect on satisfaction with the service recovery [...]" (Weun et al., 2004, p. 138). The severity of a service failure also strongly influences customer commitment and trust as well as the likelihood of engaging in negative word-of-mouth after the failure (Weun et al., 2004). Additionally, the likelihood of eWoM-giving intention increases with an increase in dissatisfaction (Jung & Seock, 2017; Wuenschmann, 2007).

Consumer reviews consisting of swear words, such as "d\*mn", could increase review helpfulness and influence the reader of reviews (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Swear words convey meaning about the reviewer and the product, but the influence of swear words is limited by number and style (Lafreniere et al., 2022). The question of whether a swear word qualifies as desirable or undesirable must also be considered: a desirable swear word increases readers' attitudes toward the product and vice versa (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Hence, an undesirable swear word

affects the attitude negatively and, consequently, the perceived negative emotional intensity during the post-purchase complaint situation. This negative emotional intensity, in turn, affects dissatisfaction and eWoM-giving intention. A conducted scenario of study 1 contains negative and angry swear words (such as “idiot” or “the last \*\*\*”), which may affect perceived dissatisfaction. Thus, the impact of perceived dissatisfaction on eWoM-giving intention is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3:** Perceived dissatisfaction increases negative eWoM-giving intention.

A customer’s recovery expectation of a company’s effort to amend a service failure (Hess et al., 2003; Zeithaml et al., 1993) strongly depends on individual customer experiences. Customer expectations regarding a company’s effort to facilitate recovery from a service failure is influenced by the customer’s experiences in the service-failure situation. If the service failure is perceived as severe, the subsequent customer recovery expectation is affected. Although an efficient recovery process increases customer satisfaction, a negative impact remains in more severe service-failure situations (Weun et al., 2004). Customers may still be upset even with a strong recovery if the original problem was severe. Consequently, the customer may still engage in negative word-of-mouth and may be less likely to develop trust and commitment (Weun et al., 2004). However, if the employee is more empathic in a customer–employee interaction, the customer’s positive emotions towards a firm can increase (Bahadur et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2011). Moreover, employee empathy in customer–employee interactions can significantly increase their relationship (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Bahadur et al. (2018) confirmed the effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and, consequently, on customers’ positive WoM-willing intention. Adapting this argument and reversing the meaning to apply to negative WoM-giving intention, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4:** Employee empathy mitigates recovery expectations, and eWoM-giving intention mediates this relationship.

Empathic humans can imagine what another person is feeling, and they can place themselves in someone else's position. Therefore, empathic customers can also feel the situation of employees. The same rules apply in the reverse perspective, which means employees share, for example, customers' dissatisfaction. Therefore, reciprocity between customer empathy and employee empathy is proposed. Wieseke et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of matching customers and employees based on their psychological profiles to create an appropriate customer–employee interaction. The researchers reveal a symbiotic interaction between customer and employee, showing that customer satisfaction is strengthened by employee empathy and customer empathy (Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathy strengthens bonding behaviour (Conway & Swift, 2000; Weißhaar & Huber, 2016). Additionally, customer–employee relationship reciprocity is even higher if the employee is customer-oriented, which an empathic customer is more sensitive to (Ngo et al., 2020). This reciprocity influences customer satisfaction in the way that supportive customer behaviour enhances the likelihood of positive employee behaviour, which in turn yields customer satisfaction (Ngo et al., 2020). Empathy generally creates a confirming and supportive atmosphere wherein a person reflects on what has been perceived (Redmond, 1989). Empathy is an important interaction-competence (Wieseke et al., 2012). Thus, hypothesis 5 is proposed:

**Hypothesis 5:** The reciprocity between customer and employee empathy mitigates negative eWoM-giving intention.

Failure type and severity determine customers' recovery expectations (Y. Huang et al., 2020). The customers' effort, such as the time and other resources invested in an interaction, also increases these expectations (Bagherzadeh et al., 2020). Customer empathy enables customers to understand companies' perspectives and why failures may occur (Wieseke et al., 2012). Hence, the hypothesis that customer empathy positively influences recovery expectations is proposed: an empathic customer expects different recovery approaches than a less empathic customer. This relationship is also mediated by the perceived satisfaction of a failed service interaction because the satisfaction level affects the recovery expectation. Zhu et al. (2021) observe that recovery expectation is an additional influence factor when creating post-recovery satisfaction.

Recovery expectations are also related to customer forgiveness. Customers are more likely to forgive a service failure and exhibit increased perspective-taking ability (an element of empathy) because they may better sense, share, and understand the other perspective (Wieseke et al., 2012). Therefore, hypothesis 6 is proposed:

**Hypothesis 6:** Perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectation.

Articulating an emotional experience and sharing this experience with others reduces negative consequences and helps one manage the negative experience; this effect is even more substantial when one shares the experience with people in a similar situation (H. Liu et al., 2021). People always share emotional experiences with family, friends, or others (Duprez et al., 2015; Rimé, 2009b; Rimé Bernard et al., 2011). However, the specific direction of the shared emotions depends on the goal related to the emotions (Wetzer et al., 2007). For instance, positive emotions can increase the likelihood of recommending a purchase, or negative emotions may reinforce complaint intention (Umasuthan et al., 2017; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991).

Additionally, according to Avoid-Pain Theory, empathic people tend to avoid (psychological) pain (Zaki, 2014). As such, sharing another's negative emotion will burden the observer psychologically (Pancer et al., 1979; Zaki, 2014). This theory is used as a framework to analyse whether there is a difference regarding the intensity of negative emotions in post-purchase behaviour. Empathy allows humans to perceive and re-feel the emotions of others (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003; Karlstetter, 2017; Wieseke et al., 2012). Hence, it is advisable to assess emotions in the context of complaint behaviour and understanding negative eWoM-giving intention (Hossain & Rahman, 2022; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Wetzer et al., 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis with a mediation effect of emotional intensity on the impact of customer empathy on negative eWoM-giving intention is proposed:

**Hypothesis 7:** Customer empathy influences emotional intensity, which in turn affects eWoM-giving intention.

Attitude toward complaints is a general positive attitude towards articulating complaints (Roschk, 2011). As described for hypothesis number two, people who

complain tend to have positive self-esteem and are more self-confident (Phau & Baird, 2008). Complainers take more risks, and generally have a more positive attitude towards complaints than non-complainers (Phau & Baird, 2008). As empathy and risk propensity are characteristics that do not relate to each other (Santesso & Segalowitz, 2009), the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 8:** Customer empathy (McBane) is negatively related to the customer's attitude towards complaints.

After hypothesis development, table 8 presents an overview of the study 1 hypotheses.

*Table 8. Overview of Study 1's Hypotheses*

No.	Hypotheses
H1	Customers' previous complaint experience influences negative eWoM-giving intention.
H2	Attitude towards complaints influences negative eWoM-giving intention.
H3	Perceived dissatisfaction influences negative eWoM-giving intention.
H4	Employee empathy mitigates recovery expectations, and this relationship is mediated by eWoM-giving intention.
H5	Reciprocity between customer empathy and employee empathy mitigates negative eWoM-giving intention.
H6	Perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectation.
H7	Customer empathy influences emotional intensity, which in turn affects eWoM-giving intention.
H8	Customer empathy is negatively related to the customer's attitude towards complaints.

*Note. For simplicity, null hypotheses are not presented.*

### 2.5.2. Hypotheses Development Study 2

McCullough et al. (1998) show that humans driven by empathy are more likely to forgive and that empathy mitigates the need for revenge. Additionally, their study reveals that closer relationships between transgressors and victims enhance the likelihood that the transgressor will offer an apology for their actions (McCullough et al., 1998), which can enhance forgiveness. The findings of Wieseke et al. (2012) also imply that customer empathy can reduce the negative effects of customer dissatisfaction on customer forgiveness and loyalty (Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathy-driven consumers will reinforce positive motives, such as kindness and tolerance, and help repair a damaged relationship (McCullough et al., 1998; J. Wei et al., 2022). Current research has also analysed this phenomenon in an online-shopping context (J. Wei et al., 2022). J. Wei et al. (2022) contextualise empathy findings and observe that consumers can empathise with online-shops and, therefore, understand the service failures, which enhances forgiveness to a certain extent (J. Wei et al., 2022). In service recovery, consumer empathy promotes repurchase intention, which is mediated by consumer forgiveness: the more empathic the consumer is, the greater their forgiveness (J. Wei et al., 2022). Empathy generally enables humans to re-feel emotions and anticipate others emotional state (Karlstetter, 2017). According to Bitner et al. (1990) and Wieseke et al. (2012), empathic customers are more likely to empathise with the difficulties of customer-service agents and their working conditions. Thus, the emotional arousal and emotional intensity of these customers are lower than those of unemphatic/less empathic customers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Customer empathy mitigates the perceived emotional intensity of service-failure-redress situations, which in turn enhances customer forgiveness.

A company's effort to allow a customer to recover from a service failure has a crucial impact on the customer's willingness to forgive the failure and their intention to remain a customer (customer stickiness intention). Cambra-Fierro et al. (2016) demonstrate that perceived effort and justice enhance complaint-handling satisfaction. Hypothesis 2 is grounded on the Service-Recovery-Paradox Theory, which elucidates the importance of a company's reaction after a complaint (Foscht & Swoboda, 2011; Wuenschmann, 2007). The reaction after a complaint leads to

greater dissatisfaction, which is only caused by the failure. Scientists have found that appropriate complaint handling and recovery can enhance a customer's willingness to forgive (e.g., Harrison-Walker, 2019). A customer who has forgiven a firm's failure is more willing to stay with a firm than a customer without recovery experience. As such, recovery performance is a mediator that presupposes customer forgiveness. Depending on the customer's forgiveness, post-recovery satisfaction is lower or higher, predicting the customer's repurchase intention (stickiness intention). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** The perceived effort of a company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, which in turn enhances stickiness intention.

High employee empathy is a crucial success factor for customer satisfaction within service-recovery approaches (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Customer and employee relationships can significantly improve when consumers and employees are driven by empathy (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Moreover, customer-oriented behaviour is even stronger when customer empathy is high (Ngo et al., 2020). Hence, hypothesis three is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3:** Customer and employee empathy influence recovery expectations.

Empathy and self-esteem are constructs with strong interdependencies (Davis, 1983a; Guasp Coll et al., 2020; L. Huang et al., 2019). According to Guasp Coll et al. (2020), cognitive empathy, emotional clarity, and emotional repair are the main predictors of self-esteem. Promoting empathy and emotional intelligence results in high self-esteem and life satisfaction (Guasp Coll et al., 2020). These emotional skills are significantly related to prosocial behaviour and positive beliefs about the self (Guasp Coll et al., 2020). Adapting these findings to CCB and customer scenario experiments, the fourth hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4:** Self-esteem is positively related to customer empathy.

Kuo and Wu (2012) conducted research that elucidates the function of emotions in the relationship between perceived justice, post-recovery satisfaction, and post-purchase intention. The role of negative and positive emotions was analysed, and the authors found that "both positive and negative emotions significantly affect post-recovery satisfaction, indicating that positive emotions

increase post-recovery satisfaction and negative emotions lower post-recovery satisfaction” (Kuo & Wu, 2012, p. 135). Hence, creating a positive atmosphere and activating positive emotions during customer-failure handling can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and positive post-purchase intention (Kuo & Wu, 2012).

Additionally, customer reviews that include swear words, such as “d\*mn”, could affect the readership of reviews and perceptions of the reviews’ helpfulness (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Swear words provide meaning about the product and the reviewer, but the influence of swear words is limited by swear-word style and number (Lafreniere et al., 2022). It must also be considered whether the swear word qualifies as desirable or undesirable because an undesirable swear word decreases readers’ attitudes toward the product and vice versa (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Hence, the undesirable swear word affects the reader’s attitude negatively and, consequently, their negative perceived emotional intensity. The scenarios conducted in study 2 contain swear words (such as “idiot” or “the last \*\*\*\*”). Therefore, hypothesis five is proposed:

**Hypothesis 5:** Emotional intensity is related to post-recovery satisfaction.

Consumer failure evaluation depends on the failure type: personal (personality disposition) versus situational. A lack of employee empathy is perceived differently than, for instance, the technical failure of a machine (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Wieseke et al., 2012). Previous research has indicated that emotional recovery strategies enhance forgiveness and consumer empathy towards a firm more than economic approaches (C. Wei et al., 2020). This research supports the hypothesis that emotional recovery approaches are more effective than economic strategies. Empathic employees are thus part of a firm’s emotional recovery strategy. Hence, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 6:** Employee empathy positively influences recovery performance.

**Hypothesis 7:** Perceived employee empathy enhances a customer’s stickiness intention.

Empathic customers react differently after they experience a dissatisfying service encounter. Self-esteem also influences the way an individual reacts after experiencing a service failure. People with low self-esteem are less likely to articulate their complaints directly to a firm than those with high self-esteem (Phau & Baird, 2008). High-self-esteem individuals are more likely to communicate their complaints directly to a firm (voice complaint) because they have the self-confidence and resilience to handle complaint rejection. Expressing a complaint always has a complaint cost, and those with high self-esteem estimate the chance of complaint success to be greater than those with low self-esteem. An articulation may be rejected, and self-esteem impacts an individual's competence to handle rejection, based on the findings of Self-Enhancement Theory (Dauenheimer et al., 2002). Self-Enhancement Theory states that every person is motivated to increase or protect their self-esteem (Dauenheimer et al., 2002). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 8a, 8b:** Dissatisfied customers' reactions vary depending on empathy (a) and self-esteem (b).

As already described for the hypothesis development of study 1, human who complain tend to have positive self-esteem and are more self-confident (Phau & Baird, 2008). In particular, consumers who complain more often have a favourable attitude towards complaints and take more risks (Phau & Baird, 2008). As empathy is not related to risk propensity (Santesso & Segalowitz, 2009), the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 9:** Customer empathy (McBane) mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints.

Table 9 provides an overview of the hypotheses of study 2.

Table 9. Overview of Study 2's Hypotheses

No.	Hypotheses
H1	Customer empathy mitigates the perceived emotional intensity of service-failure-redress situations, which in turn enhances customer forgiveness.
H2	The perceived effort of a company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, which in turn enhances stickiness intention.
H3	Customer and employee empathy influence recovery expectations.
H4	Self-esteem is positively related to customer empathy.
H5	Emotional intensity is related to customer satisfaction.
H6	Employee empathy positively influences recovery performance.
H7	Perceived employee empathy enhances a customer's stickiness intention.
H8a, 8b	Dissatisfied customers' reaction types vary depending on empathy (a) and self-esteem (b).
H9	Customer empathy (McBane) mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints.

*Note: For simplicity, null hypotheses are not presented.*

### 2.5.3. Hypotheses Development Study 3

Consumers with higher empathy tendencies reinforce positive motives, such as kindness and tolerance, and help repair a damaged relationship (McCullough et al., 1998; J. Wei et al., 2022). Moreover, customer empathy within the service-recovery process can increase beneficial behaviour, including decreasing intention to provide negative WoM, influencing patronage willingness, increasing the probability of reconciliation, and enhancing the likelihood of a more robust social relationship (e.g., Forster et al., 2020; Harrison-Walker, 2019; C. Wei et al., 2020). Hence, it is proposed that customer empathy increases the likelihood for customer forgiveness. Forgiveness also decreases individual revenge-seeking intentions and increases benevolence (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Additionally, consumer forgiveness is the basis for a long-term customer relationship (Xie & Peng, 2009). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1.** Customer empathy towards a firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention.

Empathic people tend to place themselves in the position of others (Rucker et al., 2012). It is thus possible to deduce that empathic customers tend to place themselves in the position of the failure-causing firm. However, a victim cannot forgive a transgressor before empathising with the transgressor's distress and guilt (Aragon, 2016). Therefore, when a customer understands the firm (after a failure), this enhances their likelihood of forgiving a failure because understanding and empathising with a transgressor is a crucial requirement of forgiveness (Aragon, 2016). Additionally, empathic customers are more sensitive to perceptions of justice and fairness (Page & Nowak, 2002; Van Lange et al., 2008), and empathic individuals are generally more sensitive to others' emotional states (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003; Karlstetter, 2017; Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathy may increase customers sensitivity for acknowledging service employees' working conditions and effort; consequently, avoid them to churn by mitigating their unsatisfactory outcome (Bitner et al., 1990; Wieseke et al., 2012). Additionally, high employee empathy is a crucial success factor for customer satisfaction within service-recovery approaches (Umar & Saleem, 2022). These findings also apply to the perceived complaint-recovery effort, so the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** Customer empathy towards a firm positively influences employees' empathy perception, which positively enhances customers' perceived effort.

Previous research has suggested an influence of empathy while consumers read online reviews (Allard et al., 2020). For instance, when consumers adopt a reviewer's perspective, evaluating an unfair negative review reduces the positive consumer response to a firm, whereas conditions that enhance the ability to experience empathy are given (Allard et al., 2020). Additionally, when consumers recognise that a firm is being treated unfairly, consumers empathise more with the firm and are likelier to engage in behaviours that can help the firm (Allard et al., 2020; C. Wei et al., 2020). Empathy is also more probable if identification with the other person is possible (De Waal, 2008; Kirmani et al., 2017).

Adapting these findings to the context of perceived fairness during a service recovery, empathic consumers seem to be more sensitive to perceived fairness;

Empathic customers also have a strong sense of fairness and justice (Page & Nowak, 2002; Van Lange et al., 2008). Moreover, being handled fairly is a sign of favourable customer-relationship management, which leads to satisfied customers and loyalty (e.g., Adeiza et al., 2022). Hence, customer stickiness intention is affected by customers' perceived fairness in customer-employee interactions. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3:** Customer empathy towards a firm promotes perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention.

Favourable consumer emotions positively impact return visits and referrals (Umasuthan et al., 2017), and customers' emotions are important during service recovery (Kuo & Wu, 2012). According to previous research (Bitner et al., 1990; Y. Huang et al., 2020; Smith et al., 1999), consumers' emotional involvement in service failures and recovery processes is stronger than the service or product delivery itself. Because of the intensive emotional involvement, it is proposed that the perceived emotional intensity of complaint-recovery situations influences post-recovery satisfaction. Hence, the fourth hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4:** Positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction.

Partial compensation after a failure has a more significant effect on customer satisfaction than over-compensation (Boshoff, 2012; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011), which is why a nonlinear progression is suggested. The law of diminishing return is a theoretical framework that supports this notion: a point will be reached at which input additions yield progressively smaller, or diminishing, output increases (Shephard, 1970). Adapted to complaint recovery, this law means more effort in compensation, may decrease satisfaction. Consumers are more likely to empathise with a company they perceive as moral than one they perceive as competent (Kirmani et al., 2017). Adapting these results to the complaint and recovery context, it has been suggested that emotional recovery with moral components provides the consumer with more options to empathise with the firm. Consequently, higher customer forgiveness is assumed (C. Wei et al., 2020). Emotional recovery strategies are more effective at engendering consumer forgiveness than economic recovery strategies (C. Wei et al., 2020). However, financial compensation can mitigate the consumer's loss, which is essential for their

complaint satisfaction (e.g., Kuo & Wu, 2012). Providing compensation helps failed companies to be perceived as favourable, benevolent, and problem-solving (Y. Xie & Peng, 2009), which can strengthen customer forgiveness. Benevolence and empathy are two strongly correlating concepts (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). As customer forgiveness is assumed to be highly related with empathy (Wieseke et al., 2012), it is indicated that the effect of compensation type on customer forgiveness is mediated by customers' empathy. The following hypothesis is thus proposed:

**Hypothesis 5:** Compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness, and this effect depends on customer empathy towards the firm.

According to Davis (1983); Guasp Coll et al. (2020); L. Huang et al. (2019) empathy and self-esteem are constructs with strong interdependencies. As derived for study 2 (H4), in study 3, a strong interdependency between customer empathy and customers' self-esteem is proposed:

**Hypothesis 6:** Customer empathy positively affects customers' self-esteem.

Table 10 presents an overview of the study 3 hypotheses.

*Table 10. Overview of Study 3's Hypotheses*

No.	Hypotheses
H1	Customer empathy towards a firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention.
H2	Customer empathy towards a firm positively influences employees' empathy perception, which positively enhances customers' perceived effort.
H3	Customer empathy towards a firm promotes perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention.
H4	Positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction.
H5	Compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness; this effect depends on customer empathy towards the firm.
H6	Customer empathy (McBane) is positively related to customers' self-esteem.

*Note. For simplicity, null hypotheses are not presented.*

# **III – OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

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### III - OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

An experimental quantitative research design is the core methodology of this doctoral thesis. A quantitative design is appropriate if previous research has already analysed a phenomena, which is the case for the underlying research objective. Current behaviour-research literature already uncovered specific influences for customer-complaint-behaviour in the context of customers' emotions and empathy. With experimental quantitative research, this thesis aims to extend the existing literature.

An experimental approach is used to deeply understand an investigated phenomena's causes, effects, and relationships (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). Additionally, it is challenging to allocate dissatisfied customers with comparable failure experiences in complaint research, thus an experimental design seems appropriate for comparing failure situations. Customers' recall abilities may lack validity because of response bias due to memory lapses or rationalisation (Smith et al., 1999). Using experimental designs allows for a cost-effective analysis of complex phenomena and facilitates operationalisation (Hess et al., 2003). Hence, the experimental approach enables the presentation of emotional intensity differences, which may be challenging to create in another research design.

Scenario-based approaches are a common standard research methodology employed in negative-consumer-experience research, as well as in the service industry (Blodgett et al., 1997; J. H. Kim & Jang, 2014; Liao, 2007; H. Liu et al., 2020; McCollough et al., 2000; Roschk & Kaiser, 2013; Song et al., 2023; Y. Xie & Peng, 2009). The research objective consists of three studies employing an experimental scenario-based approach. According to Mir et al. (2023), experimental design has increased in recent years, and it is one of the most used methods within service-recovery research. Numerous studies have investigated customer complaint behaviour and recovery approaches (Bearden & Crockett, 1981; Beck et al., 2023; Bodey & Grace, 2006; Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017; Donoghue, 2007; Francken, 1983).

All studies are cross-sectional and involve a one-time observation of variables with a random assignment through the German consumer population. The target group was people with online buying experiences aged 18 years and older.

Table 11 shows the purposes of the studies and the effect they strive to uncover. The number of scenarios is also presented, and each study has a different number of scenarios. The scenarios are randomised, and participants only see one scenario (randomised assignment). The scenarios describe a customer–employee interaction based on an online-retail printer purchase. Each scenario commences with the exact opening text to reduce distraction caused by different settings (*ceteris paribus* rule). The main aim of the scenario approach is to elicit different emotional intensities by the proband in the complaint situation.

Table 11. Studies' Purposes

<b>Study</b>	<b>Number of Scenarios</b>	<b>Purpose: Uncover the influence of:</b>
1 Complaint	3	CE, EE, and EI on complaint behaviour
2 Recovery I	3	CE, EE, and EI on recovery behaviour
3 Recovery II	5	CE, EE, and EI on recovery compensation types

Note. CE = customer empathy, EE = employee empathy, EI = emotional intensity.

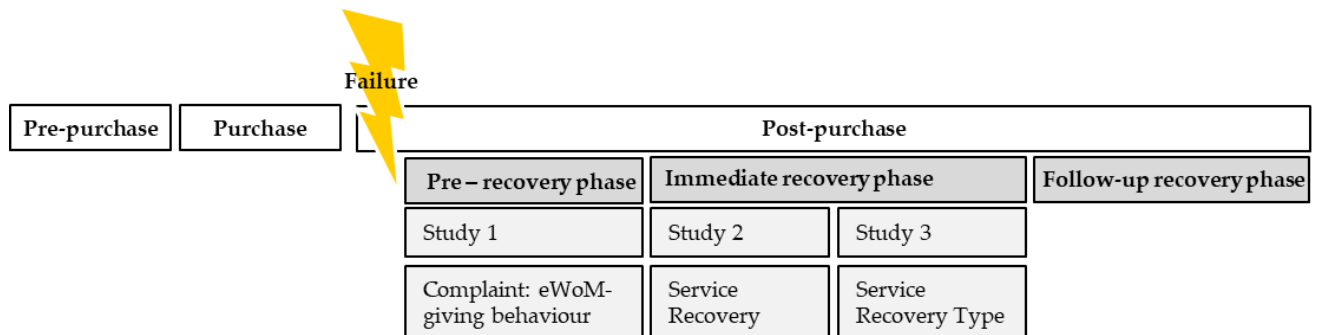
Different customer empathy measurements are used in the studies to verify the internal-consistency validity of customer empathy. Table 12 provides an overview of the four customer empathy scales used. Each customer empathy instrument has different advantages that justify its use. The scales are presented in detail in the study where they are used. Detailed scenario settings and the customer empathy scales of each study are presented in sections [4.1.3.](#), [5.1.3.](#), and [6.1.3. Sample and Procedure.](#)

Table 12. Studies and Scenarios

Study	Number of Scenarios	Customer Empathy Measurement
1 Complaint	3	McBane (1995); Totan et al. (2012)
2 Recovery I	3	McBane (1995); Totan et al. (2012)
3 Recovery II	5	C. Wei et al. (2020) and J. Wei et al. (2022)

Figure 7 presents the temporal sequence of the studies in the context of the purchase process. Study 1 investigates customers' willingness to complain after a negative critical incident. Study 2 examines the situation after a customer experiences a negative critical incident, and the company attempts to recover the failure. In Study 3, the positive recovery scenario of Study 2 is focused on different compensation types (20.00 EUR plus voucher, 5.00 EUR plus voucher, 0.00 EUR no voucher, 20.00 EUR no voucher, and 5.00 EUR no voucher).

Figure 7. Studies' Temporal Sequences



Note. Own illustration.



**IV – STUDY 1: EFFECT OF  
CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE  
EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL  
INTENSITY ON POST-  
PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR,  
CONSIDERING NEGATIVE  
EWOM**

---



## IV -STUDY 1: EFFECT OF CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY ON POST-PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR, CONSIDERING NEGATIVE EWOM

Section IV presents the first study of this doctoral thesis, including the methodology, results, and discussion. Part of study 1 has been published as an article by the author (Abend et al., 2023). Therefore, some sections will be cited to indicate that they have been published before.

### 4.1. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY 1

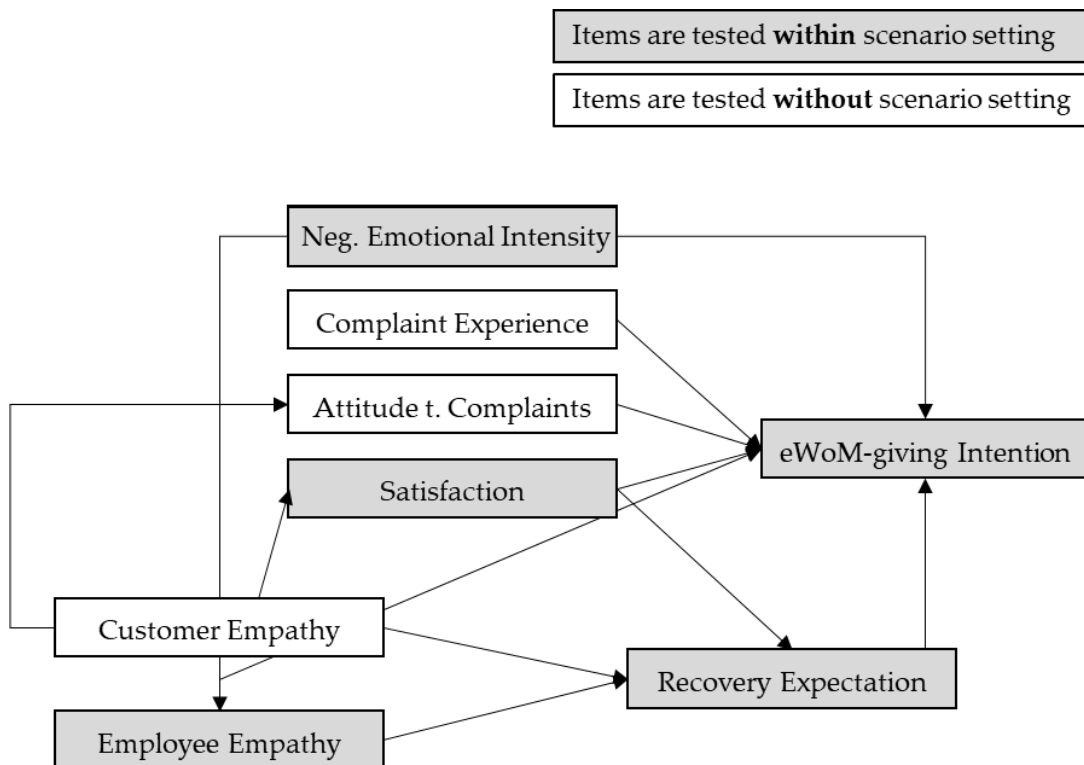
#### 4.1.1. Research Design

Study 1 is conducted with an experimental approach using a scenario-based online questionnaire. This experimental approach aims to reveal the influence of customer empathy, employee empathy, and emotional intensity on negative eWoM-giving intention and recovery expectations after service failures. As such, the aim of this study is to answer the main **RQ1**: Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity affect negative eWoM-giving intention and the expectation of complaint recovery? (Study 1; for all research questions, see [1.2. Objectives and Research Questions](#)).

Further variables of consumer complaint behaviour are analysed through the relationship between customer empathy and emotional intensity: attitude towards complaints, complaint experience, and perceived dissatisfaction. Study 1's research object, including all variables, is presented in figure 8. The variables are either tested within or without scenario settings. For instance, complaint experience is tested without a scenario setting (in general), such as how often a customer generally complains. Conversely, the grey variables are tested in relation to a specific complaint scenario. The variables coloured in white are directly tested, and those coloured in grey refer to the manipulated variables in the experimental research. The scenario settings include the following: (1) positive and customer-

oriented employee, (2) neutral and objective employee, and (3) rude and non-empathic employee (scenarios are presented in detail in section [4.1.3. Sample and Procedure](#)).

Figure 8. Study 1 eWoM-giving Intention



Note. Derived from the author's elaboration. The model is based on the research models discussed in section [2.5.1. Hypotheses Development Study 1](#), such as Avoid-Pain Theory, Social-Sharing-of-Emotions Theory, or Social-Exchange Theory.

#### 4.1.2. Research Material and Scales

The following section describes the measurements and the constructs used to justify why the instruments were selected. Each instrument is taken from the existing literature and adapted to the specific complaint context. The [appendix](#) contains an overview of all the constructs with measurements, the item text, and Cronbach's-alpha values from the original authors.

The general quality standards of quantitative research are assessed (objectivity, reliability, and validity). These criteria are also essential for experimental research (Mattila et al., 2021). Reliability can be assessed because the original scales correspond to the quality reliability requirements for all scales (Cronbach's alpha value is  $>.70$ ). As such, the reliability requirement can be assessed as met. Validity can also be evaluated as satisfied because all scales were part of the research before and have already been empirically tested and validated. Objectivity can be assured by avoiding any influence of the researcher on the participants. The online questionnaire tool restricted any change to the data while the experiment was live, and the questionnaire was anonymous. Hence, it was not possible for the researcher to have any contact with the participants. Consequently, all quality criteria can be ensured in the first study. The different measuring instruments, used in study 1 are discussed in the following sections.

*Customer empathy* is based on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009), which is established in empathy research (Lima & Osório, 2021). The TEQ was designed to measure empathy and will be adapted to measure customer empathy. The questionnaire is a brief, valid, reliable instrument for assessing empathy (Spreng et al., 2009) and is a self-rated empathy-measurement tool (Lima & Osório, 2021). The original version of the TEQ (Spreng et al., 2009) has 16 items. However, this study uses the validated and shortened version (Totan et al., 2012), which consists of 13 items and has (like the extended version) appropriate validity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha is  $.79-.85$  (Totan et al., 2012). Examples of item text include "It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully" or "I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness". Customer empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *occasionally*, 4 = *sometimes*, 5 = *frequently*, 6 = *usually*, and 7 = *every time* (Totan et al., 2012).

As a second instrument to measure *customer empathy*, the McBane scale of empathy was used. This scale was initially conducted by Davis (1980) before being adapted by McBane (1995) and later Wieseke et al. (2012), who used the scale in the context of customer and employee empathy. The instrument measures empathy within a three-factor structure: perspective-taking, empathic concern, and emotional contagion. According to Wieseke et al. (2012), the scale has sufficient

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted, suggesting reliability and convergent validity. The scale was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree* (Wieseke et al., 2012). An example of the item text is "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 327).

*Employee empathy* (EE) is measured by an established scale (Parasuraman et al., 1994), which was validated and adapted from Markovic et al. (2015), who shortened the scale to four items. Customers' perception of employee empathy is used to assess employee empathy. The scale is highly reliable (.91). Item text included, for example, "the brand employees give customers individual attention". Employee empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *completely agree* (Markovic et al., 2015).

The *emotional intensity* (EI) measurement is based on the method of Wetzer et al. (2007) and measures the emotions felt after a negative consumption experience. López-López et al. (2014) first adapted the scale to measure positive and negative emotions separately as two opposite valences of emotions as it is broad knowledge in the research of emotions (Umasuthan et al., 2017). The measurement of positive versus negative emotions, using this two dimensional framework, is an approved evaluation of emotional service experiences. Using this measurement gain insights into customers' overall experiences and the influence of these experiences on behavioural intention can be obtained (López-López et al., 2014; Umasuthan et al., 2017). Wierzbicka (1992, p. 577) demonstrates that the concept of emotions, including the basic emotions, "such as anger or sadness, can be 'defined in terms of universal semantic primitives such as 'good', 'bad', 'do', 'happen', 'know', and 'want', in terms of which all areas of meaning, in all languages, can be rigorously and revealingly portrayed". Employing this two-dimensional frame (positive versus negative emotional intensity) to evaluate a customer's emotional consumption experience is widespread in consumer research (Umasuthan et al., 2017). This process helps facilitate an understanding of customers' overall experiences and the impact of these experiences on behavioural intention (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Emotional intensity was reported on a seven-point Likert

scale ranging from 1 = *very easy*, 2 = *easy*, 3 = *somewhat easy*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *somewhat hard*, 6 = *hard*, to 7 = *very hard*.

*Attitude toward complaints* is based on Roschk (2011), who adapted the scale from Blodgett et al. (1997) and Richins (1983). Attitude toward complaints consists of three items: a low score indicates a person who does not like to complain, a high score indicates a person who likes to complain, and the items are reverse coded. An example of item text is “If a defective product was inexpensive, I am more likely to keep it than ask for a replacement or exchange”. The original Cronbach’s alpha value is .78, which makes the item reliable. Attitude toward complaints was reported on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree* (Roschk, 2011).

*Complaint experience* is measured by an adapted item from Wuenschmann (2007) consisting of two items. He conducted an item of complaint experience and tested it in a different setting. Therefore, the item was modified to a more general background that describes previous experiences with complaints in the last six months, differentiated by low- and high-price products. Cronbach’s alpha indicates a high reliability (.89). Complaint experience was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

*Dissatisfaction reaction* describes a person’s response after experiencing dissatisfaction with a company. This scale was developed by Singh (1988), who distinguishes between the three behavioural responses to dissatisfaction, as explained in section [2.2.1.1. Process of Complaint Behaviour](#). However, dissatisfaction reaction is not understood as a latent construct; therefore, the dissatisfaction reaction item is based on a non-metric scale, specifically a categorical variable. Probands are asked to select three reaction types by finishing the following sentence: “If I am dissatisfied after the service has been provided, I...”

1. directly contact the responsible company.
2. contact friends and acquaintances and report my dissatisfaction.
3. usually keep my displeasure to myself.

*Recovery expectation* describes the customer's perspective on a recovery after a service failure; for example, the item considers the expectation of compensation. The item was developed by McCollough et al. (2000) and consists of four items. McCollough et al. (2000) used the construct in the context of the flight industry to explain why the context is adapted to the eCommerce purchase context. McCollough et al. (2000) also used a scenario-based experiment, which is why the recovery-expectation scale seems to be a good fit. Recovery expectation was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree* (McCollough et al., 2000).

The willingness to complain is measured with the item of negative *eWoM-giving intention* based on Leung et al. (2015). For this purpose, the item was adapted to specific purchase situations of online-retail purchases. An example of item text is "The probability that I would consider writing a review about this consumption experience is very high". This scale has a high internal reliability (Leung et al., 2015). *eWoM-giving intention* was measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The customer's *perceived dissatisfaction* with the complaint situation is measured with three items by McCollough et al. (2000), who used the scale to measure the final/post-recovery satisfaction after service failures and recovery. An example of the item text is "How well did this service experience meet your needs?" (McCollough et al., 2000). The customer's *perceived dissatisfaction* was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 2 = *dissatisfied*, 3 = *slightly dissatisfied*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *slightly satisfied*, 6 = *satisfied*, to 7 = *very satisfied*.

In the absence of German-translated scales, multilingual people applied a double-iterative back-translation process to translate them from English into German to ensure equivalency in meaning (Brislin, 1970). The forward-backwards-translation approach ensures linguistic equivalence between the English and German versions of the instruments. Therefore, a bilingual person translated each English item into German, then another bilingual person translated the suggested version back into English. This process was repeated to increase translation validity (P. S. Jones et al., 2001). Using this back-translation method, the following scales

were translated from English into German: eWoM, emotional intensity, employee empathy, customer satisfaction, recovery expectation, and customer empathy.

At the end of the study, socio-demographical characteristics were measured: age, family status, gender identity, income, education, and work. The income variable was a typical status variable, such as education and occupation (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2016).

In the used questionnaire participants evaluated themselves (self-assessment approach). The evaluation is only built on their personal assessments, not external ones. Collani and Herzberg (2003) show that education does not affect the ability to self-assess. Therefore, this approach seems valid and is widespread in research on consumer behaviour (Sahaf & Fazili, 2023).

#### **4.1.3. Sample and Procedure**

Data collection with the questionnaire occurred at a German university of applied sciences during August, September, and October 2022. Subjects were recruited online using a student-recruitment platform in compensation for course credit. The online questionnaire was conducted using the SoSci Survey tool (Leiner, 2019). The questionnaire consists of an introduction, where notes regarding anonymity, acceptance for research use, and voluntariness are explained. Additionally, the questionnaire includes a distraction question, “Were you able to complete the questionnaire without any distraction?”, to filter out probands who did not focus on the survey in detail. The exact procedure of data quality is described in section [4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics](#), where the sample size is shown. The questionnaire is approximately 10–15 minutes long and can be completed on a laptop or smartphone. The minimum participation age is 18 years. Finally, the target group is anyone who has made online purchases and is willing to place themselves in the position of the fictive customer of the scenario.

The scenarios describe a service interaction between a customer and a customer-service agent during which a service failure occurs. Specifically, the customer called because they had a question regarding handling a printer. Overall, three scenarios were presented to analyse the influence of empathy (customer and employee empathy) and emotional intensity within a service interaction. Each

scenario demonstrates a different customer's emotional intensity. Table 13 presents the emotional states of the three scenarios.

Table 13. Emotional States of Scenarios Study 1

Scenario	Emotional State of Employee	Emotional Intensity	Scenario Description
S1	Positive	Positive	Positive and customer-oriented employee
S2	Negative Neutral	Negative	Neutral and objective employee
S3	Negative Angry	Negative	Rude and non-empathic employee

Each scenario commences with a similar introductory paragraph to ensure an equal comparison (*ceteris paribus* rule), and the same introduction paragraph appears for each proband:

*“You purchased a new printer and already used it rudimentarily for several months. Before the purchase, you spent several weeks researching and comparing prices and functions and finally decided on a printer from a leading manufacturer. Although the printer was a little more expensive, you were convinced that you purchased a high-quality product - also because there was always talk of excellent customer service during the selection process. You already experienced this personally, as you used other products from the manufacturer. However, since the last time you used the printer, it no longer works properly, which you cannot explain. You, therefore, pick up the phone to ask for support from customer service”.* (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)

After the introduction scenario, the main scenario text is shown. This main scenario text and the supposed emotional states are displayed in table 14.

Table 14. Overview of Study 1 Scenarios

Scenario	Text
S1 Positive	You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee is very friendly and helpful. He asks you to wait on the line so that he can look for the answer to your question. After some waiting time, he gets back to you without any solution. He checks more details to narrow down the error, but this does not bring a solution either. The customer service employee creates a ticket and forwards your request to the specialist department. Someone from there will contact you personally within the next 48h. Even though the employee was engaged to help you, your problem has unfortunately not been solved yet. You are now waiting for the callback.
S2 Negative and neutral	“You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee puts you on hold to inquire about possible solutions. After some time on hold, he gets back to you but does not have an answer to your solution. The customer service employee tells you to read the instructions again. Finally, you say goodbye, and the phone call is ended without an answer or solution of your problem. For the very high price, you would have hoped for more. Unfortunately, you are not satisfied with the printer you bought and the customer service. Your problem has not been solved!” (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)
S3 Negative and angry	“You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee seems very annoyed right from the start. He is unfriendly and snippy in his language, for example, he says, “ <i>what do I know what you’ve done to your printer?</i> ”. Instead of providing help, he refers to the “idiot-proof” manual, which “should even help you”. After some back and forth, the customer service employee recommends that you visit a local copy shop and then hangs up. At the last moment, you hear a rude “ <i>idiot</i> ”. Your problem is not solved – instead, you wasted a lot of time being treated rudely!” (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)

Note. S indicates “scenario”.

The experimental scenario-based approach required an extensive pretest,  $N = 178$ , involving all scenarios. Therefore, a pretest was conducted with postgraduate students to verify the questionnaire wording, accuracy of the experimental design, and duration. The main complexity of scenario creation is the variation of perceived emotional intensity in each scenario by the similar circumstances of the service-failure situation. To achieve circumstances that are as similar as possible, the scenarios have the same description length and identical introductory paragraphs, which attenuates manipulations of further influence factors. This consideration is also why a printer purchase is part of the service failure: a printer purchase is expected to be less emotionally involved than a more emotionally loaded commitment purchase, such as a car or a music concert. Printers are technical, functional-based goods, and many households own one. However, the service failure in these scenarios is not the printer purchase but the customer-service interaction between the customer and the employee. One crucial objective to mitigate the failure manipulation was to ensure the failure severity was as similar as possible in all scenarios; the difference consists of personal perceived differences in failure severity but not real differences in failure. The pretest of  $N = 178$  confirmed the significant difference in emotional intensities between the used scenarios. The level of the customer's negative emotional intensity (negative EI) differed statistically significantly for the various scenarios,  $F(3, 20) = 6.80, p = .002$ , as well as the level of the customer's positive emotional intensity (positive EI),  $F(3, 44) = 7.91, p < .001$ . Thus, the desired manipulation of emotional intensity can be assumed for the scenarios used.

Method bias is the potential influence of abstractions during method execution, which can manipulate research results (Podsakoff et al., 2012). For example, abstractions can be caused by the response format of the measurement instrument, instruction for the probands, characteristics of the examiner, and general setting of the execution (Fiske, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2012). Therefore, remedies to control method bias in the current research are employed. To reduce method bias caused by different general moods of the probands (Podsakoff et al., 2012), emotional intensity is measured twice in the study. The first measure point was at the beginning of the questionnaire, and the second was after the proband read the scenario. This approach reduces manipulations from probands who already did not feel good. With this two-timing approach, the results of emotional

intensity are more robust, and the influence of the consumer's general emotional state on the experimental situation can be assessed.

## 4.2. RESULTS OF STUDY 1

### 4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

In total, 468 students participated in the study. Because of data clearance, 79 probands were removed from the sample because they were distracted,<sup>6</sup> rushed through the questionnaire, did not agree with the scientific use of their data, or did not reach the last page of the questionnaire. After data clearance, 389 objects were retained as valid and acted as probands in the first study ( $N = 389$ ). The participants were assigned to the different scenarios in equal proportions, as presented in table 15.

*Table 15. Participant Distribution Between the Scenarios*

<b>Entire sample</b>	<b>S1 positive</b>	<b>S2 Neutral</b>	<b>S3 Negative</b>
$N = 389$	129	131	129

To verify whether the study's sample size is sufficient, the program G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009) was used to assess a minimum of  $N = 107$  to reach a statistical power of .95, which is the standard power in scientific research. This minimum value is exceeded in the entire sample, and each scenario exceeds  $> 107$ ; hence, usage for the described research objective is sufficient. Table 16 shows the demographical profile of the probands.

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<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire includes a distraction question: "Were you able to complete the questionnaire without any distraction?".

Table 16. Demographic Profile of Respondents

<b>Entire Sample</b>			
<b>Description</b>			
Male	23.40 %	<b>Income group in €</b>	
Female	75.80 %	250–500	1.30 %
Others	0.50 %	501–1000	6.40 %
Age (Mean)	26.74	1001–1500	20.60 %
<b>Occupation</b>		1501–2000	21.60 %
Student	21.10 %	2001–3000	36.20 %
Employee	71.20 %	3001–4000	8.50 %
Civil servant	1.50 %	4001–5000	1.80 %
Self-employee	2.10 %	≥ 5001	1.80 %
Seeking work	0.30 %	no answer	1.30 %
Others	3.90 %		

Note. N = 389

The questionnaire measured emotional intensity (EI) at two different times. For the first time, the probands were asked about their current emotional state before they saw the scenario. For the second time, they were asked about their current emotional state directly after they saw the scenario. This double-questioned approach allows the corrected influences of the scenarios to be verified. Table 17 presents the comparison of the two measured emotional-state intensities. The mean values from EI positive before are continuously above the mean values from EI positive after. A reverse effect is observed with the EI negative before and EI negative after, where the before values are continuously weaker than the EI negative after.

Table 17. Comparison of Emotional Intensities

<b>Mean</b>	<b>Emotional Intensity Before</b>			<b>Emotional Intensity After</b>		
	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Total</b>
Entire sample	3.54	1.91	2.73	1.69	4.34	3.00
S1	3.48	1.97	2.72	1.98	3.19	2.58
S2	3.60	1.90	2.75	1.59	4.59	3.09
S3	3.55	1.87	2.71	1.44	5.24	3.34

Table 18 displays the variables' means, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alphas. These values are separately presented for each scenario and the entire sample.

Reliability analyses were conducted to verify Cronbach's alpha values, and these indicate that the internal consistency of study 1 was predominantly satisfactory. Table 18 presents the Cronbach's alpha values. Most scales were appropriate and reached the minimum reliability level defined by most literature of  $\alpha = .70$  (Schmitt, 1996). The Cronbach's alpha values ranged between  $\alpha = .62$  (complaint experience) and  $\alpha = .97$  (employee empathy). One scale did not reach this minimum requirement: complaint experience ( $\alpha = .62$ ). The scale complaint experience consists of two items, and  $\alpha$  varied between scenarios: S1  $\alpha = .58$ , S2  $\alpha = .66$ , and S3  $\alpha = .64$ .

However, there are researchers who verify that Cronbach's alpha values in the range of  $\alpha = .60$ – $.70$  indicate an acceptable level of reliability when there are reasons regarding content or functionality, as well as complexity or measurement meaningfulness (Schecker, 2014; Schmitt, 1996). As (Schmitt, 1996, p. 352) notes “when a measure has other desirable properties, such as meaningful content coverage of some domain and reasonable unidimensionality, this low reliability may not be a major impediment to its use”. The example that Schmitt (1996) references is  $\alpha = .49$ . Because of the reasons mentioned, these scales are retained as the primary scales of essential meaningfulness in the study. However, for “further interpretations of these relationships [...] caveats about low reliability and the potential for underestimating any relationships between the measured variable and other variables of interest” will be considered, as suggested by Schmitt (1996, p. 352).

Table 18. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	S1		S2		S3		Entire Sample		$\alpha$
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Customer empathy (McBane)	4.58	0.78	4.53	0.78	4.65	0.64	4.58	0.74	.73
Customer empathy (TEQ)	4.59	0.76	4.56	0.75	4.65	0.61	5.81	0.62	.77
Employee empathy	4.90	1.42	2.87	1.36	1.34	0.63	3.04	1.88	.97
eWoM	3.13	1.71	4.28	1.82	5.37	1.56	4.26	1.93	.94
EI (positive) before	3.48	1.28	3.60	1.14	3.55	1.22	2.73	1.22	.90
EI (negative) before	1.97	1.12	1.90	1.15	1.87	0.94	1.91	1.10	.90
EI (positive) after	1.98	0.83	1.59	0.72	1.44	0.64	1.67	0.77	.82
EI (negative) after	3.19	1.28	4.59	1.08	5.24	0.97	4.34	1.41	.88
Recovery expectation	4.72	1.28	5.26	1.16	5.46	0.97	5.15	1.18	.75
Attitude t. complaints	4.35	1.60	4.00	1.38	3.90	1.47	4.13	1.45	.71
Complaint experience	2.42	1.61	2.21	1.52	2.45	1.61	2.36	1.58	.62
Perceived dissatisfaction	3.50	1.12	2.08	0.96	1.61	0.87	2.40	1.27	.83

Before the research hypotheses are tested in the next section, the correlation matrix of study 1 is monitored. Table 19 provides Pearson's correlation coefficients. The correlation coefficient between eWoM-giving intention and employee empathy indicates that higher levels of employee empathy are related to lower eWoM-giving intention ( $r = -.48, p < .01$ ). Additionally, the results suggest a correlation between negative emotional intensity and eWoM-giving intention ( $r = -.59, p < .01$ ) and between recovery expectation and negative emotional intensity ( $r = .44, p > .01$ ).

Table 19. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study 1 Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Customer empathy (MB)											
Customer empathy (TEQ)	.49**										
Employee empathy	.01	-.09									
eWoM	.04	.10	-.48**								
EI (positive) before	.08	.07	.07	.05							
EI (negative) before	.14**	-.01	-.03	.08	-.05						
EI (positive) after	.02	-.16**	.34**	-.18**	.28**	.17**					
EI (negative) after	.17**	.15**	-.59**	.53**	.12*	.15**	-.33**				
Recovery expectation	.15**	.19**	-.27**	.33**	.05	.01	-.15**	.44**			
Attitude t. complaints	-.23**	-.05	.00	.16**	.00	-.11*	.05	-.07	.11*		
Complaint experience	-.02	-.06	.04	.02	.12*	-.04	.05	.12*	.07	.20**	
Perceived dissatisfaction	.01	-.12*	.67**	-.39**	.04	.00	.42**	-.58**	-.29**	.02	.00

Note. \*\*The correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-sided). \*The correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-sided).

#### 4.2.2. Inferential Statistics

This section assesses the statistical analysis to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. Therefore, regression, mediation analyses, and CFA are applied.

Before beginning the statistical analysis, a CFA was applied to test the measurement of customer empathy (TEQ) based on Totan et al. (2012). CFA assesses discriminant validity and confirms the used models' factor structure (Farrell, 2010). All CFA were calculated using bootstrapping (5000 samples), and the confidence interval does not include 0.

CFA analysis of customer empathy (TEQ) reports significant  $\chi^2$  ( $p = < .001$ ), indicating the model does not fit the data perfectly. However, according to Buehner (2011), this is a common issue for CFA, which is why the fit indices were observed. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), the CFA model has a proper fit if the comparative fit index (CFI)  $> .90$ , the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)  $< .06$ , and the standardised root mean squared residual (SRMR)  $< .08$ . The goodness of fit indices is presented in table 20. CFI value did not reach the minimum threshold value, but the rest of the threshold values were reached.

Table 20. CFA Goodness of Fit Indices Study 1

Scale	$\chi^2$	$p$	$df$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Customer empathy (TEQ)	190.64	.001	65	.89	.06	.05

According to Brown (2006), modifications can be applied to improve model fit; hence, error covariance was added between items 2 and 13. Both items have a high meaning similarity (disrespectful behaviour towards others and protective behaviour is activated). Hence, there is a strong content-based relationship. Adding this modification to the model means the CFI threshold value was reached ( $> .90$ ), and salient goodness of the fit indices was observed.

The unidimensional factor structure of customer empathy (TEQ) was supported, and factor loadings are presented in table 21, indicating that the scale items effectively measured customers' empathy with one factor. Most applied research accepts and interprets factor loadings greater or equal to .30 or .40 as salient, but there is no exact threshold value: it depends on the context (Brown, 2006). Therefore, the scale used in this study has a salient validity.

Table 21. CFA for Customer Empathy (Totan et al., 2012)

No.	Item	$\lambda$ Loadings	$z, p$ value
1	Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal	.55	12.12***
2	It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully	.49	10.53***
3	I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy	.44	9.58***
4	I enjoy making other people feel better	.48	10.55***
5	When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else	.38	8.03***
6	I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything	.27	5.71***
7	I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses	.41	8.83***
8	I become irritated when someone cries	.57	12.83***
9	I am not really interested in how other people feel	.24	4.96***
10	I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset	.70	16.42***
11	When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them	.55	12.26***
12	I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness	.44	9.49***
13	When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her	.53	11.65***

Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . The reported factor loadings are standardised and include the model modification (covariances of the error term) between items 13 and 2 were added.

The first regression analysis to test H1 was conducted. With a regression coefficient of  $\beta = .02$  and  $R^2 = .00$  ( $p = .701$ ), the study fails to find evidence to support hypothesis 1 that the consumer's previous complaint experience influences their eWoM-giving intention. Table 22 reports the regression-analysis results. Thus, H1, "Customers' previous complaint experience influences negative eWoM-giving intention" is rejected.

Table 22. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable eWoM-giving Intention and Independent Complaint Experience

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	4.20	.18	3.86	4.55	<.001
Complaint experience	.02	.07	-.10	.15	.701

Note.  $N = 389$ .  $R^2 = .00$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted =  $-.00$ ;  $F(1,387) = .15$ ,  $p = .701$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

Second, to examine the association between attitude towards complaints and eWoM-giving intention, a regression analysis was employed to test H2 in the entire sample (table 23). Since eWoM-giving intention was approximately not normally distributed, as assessed by the Shapiro–Wilk test ( $p < .05$ ), the following regression analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. Bootstrapping is an instrument that elicits reliable results even if the variables are not normally distributed (Berkovits et al., 2000; Kelley, 2005). A multicollinearity test was performed, and a variance inflation factor (VIF) of  $< 1.1$  was observed, indicating no multicollinearity in the data (Daoud, 2018). With a regression coefficient of  $\beta = .16$  and  $R^2 = .03$  ( $p < .01$ ), results support H2 that attitude towards complaints is associated with eWoM-giving intention. The effect is significant since the bootstrapped confidence interval (95.0 % CI) did not include zero. Thus, a favourable attitude towards complaints<sup>7</sup> corresponds with higher eWoM-giving intention.

<sup>7</sup> People with a high attitude towards complaints have a favourable attitude.

Table 23. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable eWoM-giving Intention

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	3.40	.29	2.79	3.97	<.001
Attitude towards complaints	.21	.07	.08	.35	<.01

Note.  $N = 389$ .  $R^2 = .04$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .03;  $F(1,387) = 9.79$ ,  $p < .01$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

To examine the influence of perceived dissatisfaction on eWoM-giving intention, a regression analysis was employed to test H3 (table 24). This effect was tested in all three scenarios. A VIF < 1.1 was observed and indicated no multicollinearity in the data (Daoud, 2018). With regression coefficient of  $\beta = -.39$  and  $R^2 = .15$  ( $p < .001$ ) in the entire sample, the results support hypothesis 3 that perceived dissatisfaction is associated with eWoM-giving intention. Thus, higher satisfaction corresponds with lower eWoM-giving intention. A high value indicates satisfaction, and a low value indicates dissatisfaction. The analysis only finds a significant effect in scenario S3 (negative and angry scenario).

Table 24. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable eWoM-giving Intention

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
<b>Perceived Dissatisfaction</b>					
Intercept	-5.81	.19	5.25	6.03	<.001
Entire sample	-.58	.07	-.73	-.43	<.001
Intercept	3.83	.49	2.73	4.98	<.001
S1	-.20	.13	-.51	.10	.201
Intercept	4.61	.38	3.84	5.39	<.001
S2	-.16	.17	-.49	.16	.332
Intercept	6.04	.28	5.45	6.66	<.001
S3	-.42	.15	-.81	-.08	<.01

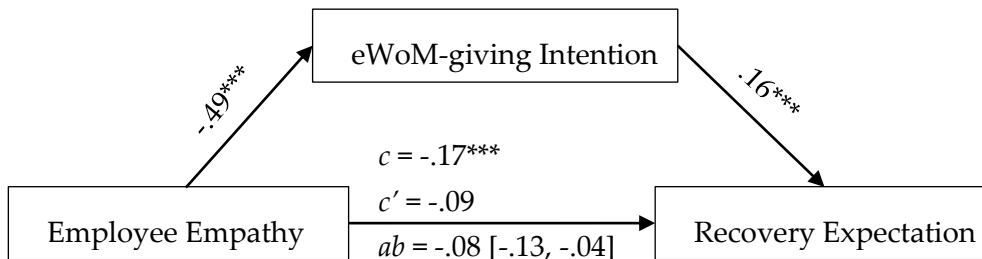
Note. Entire sample:  $N = 389$ ,  $R^2 = .15$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .15;  $F(1,387) = 67.19$ ,  $p < .001$ . S1:  $n = 128$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .01;  $F(1,127) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .139$ . S2:  $n = 130$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .00;  $F(1,129) = .95$ ,  $p = .332$ . S3:  $n = 128$ ,  $R^2 = .05$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .05;  $F(1,127) = 7.28$ ,  $p < .01$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

To examine mediation effects in the sample in H4–H7, mediation analysis with the SPSS PROCESS (Hayes 4.1) with model 4 (Hayes, 2022) was assessed. Additionally, a heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error (HCSE) was used in the mediation analysis, as Hayes and Cai (2007) suggest. A multicollinearity test was performed, and VIFs of  $< 1.1$  (H5, H6, H7) and  $< 1.3$  (H4) were observed, indicating no multicollinearity in the data (Daoud, 2018). All mediation analyses used ordinary least-squares regression and yielded non-standard path coefficients for indirect, total, and direct effects. The analyses were bootstrapped with 5000 samples, and all mediation analyses were conducted using heteroscedasticity-consistent inferences. Standard errors were conducted to achieve the confidence intervals and inferential statistics. A confidence interval (95.0 % CI) including zero does not provide a significant effect.

To analyse the mediating effect of eWoM-giving intention on the relationship between employee empathy and recovery expectations (H4), a mediation analysis using Hayes (2022) model 4 was conducted. Before starting the test, linearity for

the variable relationship within the data was detected, and visual monitoring showed approximate linearity in the data (scatterplot). An effect of employee empathy on recovery expectations was observed ( $B^s = -.17, p < .001$ ). After entering the mediator into the model, employee empathy predicted the mediator significantly ( $B = -.49, p < .001$ ), which predicted recovery expectations significantly ( $B = .16, p < .001$ ). The relationship between employee empathy and recovery expectations is fully mediated by eWoM-giving intention, with an indirect effect of  $ab = -.08, 95\%$ , CI  $[-.13, -.04]$ . Figure 9 presents the mediation analysis.

Figure 9. Mediation Analysis of H4



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $.001 \leq p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .05$ .

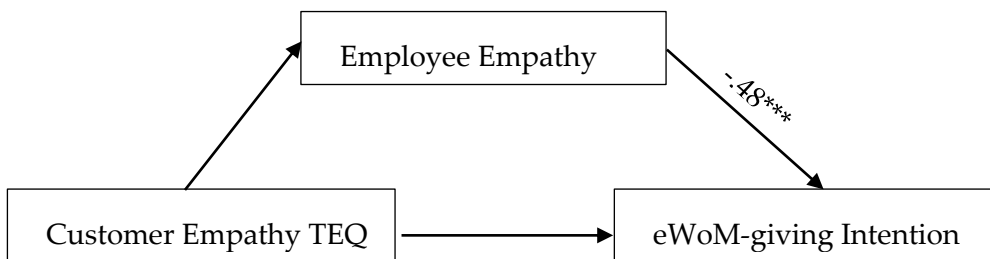
To detect the mediation effect of customer empathy on the impact of employee empathy on eWoM-giving intention in post-purchase evaluation (H5), Hayes (2022) model 4 mediation was conducted. As visual observation of the scatterplot after the LOESS smooth approach showed, the variables' relationship (customer empathy, employee empathy, and eWoM-giving intention) was approximately linear.

The mediation analysis showed no mediating effect of employee empathy on the relationship of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention. Similarly, no significant effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention was found in the entire sample. Reciprocity between customer and employee empathy does not

<sup>8</sup> PROCESS generates regression/path coefficients in an unstandardised format ( $B$ ), therefore  $B$  is reported here. In simple and multiple regression analysis, standardised  $\beta$  is reported (in addition to unstandardised estimates).

exist. An effect of employee empathy on eWoM-giving intention was observed ( $\beta = -.48$ ;  $p < .001$  with  $R^2 = .22$ ;  $F [1,387] = 114.65$  [ $p < .001$ ]). However, there was no effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention. Therefore, a simple regression model is presented in figure 10, and H5 cannot be supported.

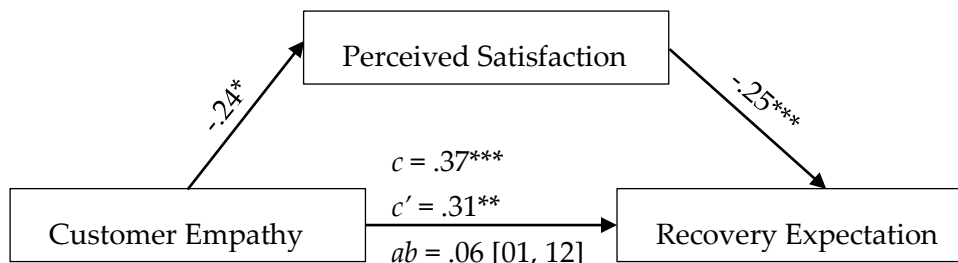
Figure 10. Effect of Employee Empathy on eWoM-giving Intention (H5)



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

To test H6, “Perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectation”, another mediation analysis was conducted with the entire sample. In the analysis, a check for linearity in the variable’s relationship was performed with the LOESS smooth-visualization approach, and approximate linearity was found. A total effect of customer empathy on recovery expectations was observed ( $B = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). After entering the mediator into the model, customer empathy predicted the mediator significantly ( $B = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which in turn predicted recovery expectations significantly ( $B = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The relationship between customer empathy and recovery expectations is partially mediated by perceived satisfaction (indirect effect  $ab = .06$ , 95 %, CI [.01, .12], with  $R^2 = .01$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 11 presents the mediation analysis.

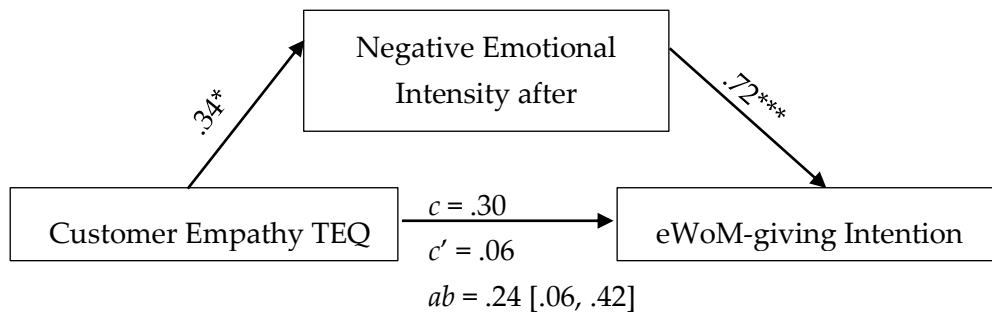
Figure 11. Mediation Analysis of H6



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $.001 \leq p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .05$ .

As customer empathy (TEQ), perceived satisfaction, and recovery expectation were approximately not normally distributed, as assessed by the Shapiro–Wilk test ( $p < .05$ ), the following regression analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. Mediation analyses were conducted for the entire sample to test the mediating effect of emotional intensity on the relationship between customer empathy and eWoM-giving intention. H7 has already been published in the author's previous article (Abend et al., 2023). No total ( $B = .30$ ;  $p = .063$ ) nor direct ( $B = .06$ ;  $p = .684$ ) effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention was found. However, after adding the mediator negative emotional intensity (after) into the model, customer empathy predicted this mediator significantly ( $B = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which in turn predicted eWoM-giving intention significantly ( $B = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It was observed that the effect of customer empathy and eWoM-giving intention was fully mediated by the negative emotional intensity (indirect effect  $ab = .24$ , 95 %, CI [.06, .42]), with  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, H7 “Customer empathy influences emotional intensity, which in turn affects eWoM-giving intention” is supported due to full mediation of emotional intensity, as shown in figure 12.

Figure 12. Mediation Analysis of H7



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $.001 \leq p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .05$ .

To examine the association between customer empathy (McBane, 1995) and customers' attitudes towards complaints, a regression analysis was employed in testing H8. With regression coefficient of  $\beta = -.30$  and  $R^2 = .09$  ( $p < .001$ ), the results support hypothesis 8 that customer empathy is negatively associated with customers' attitudes towards complaints. Thus, higher levels of empathy correspond with weaker attitudes towards complaints, as presented in table 25.

Customer empathy, therefore, predicts a slight decrease in customers' attitudes towards complaints.

Table 25. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Attitude Towards Complaints

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	7.02	.78	5.69	8.55	<.001
Customer empathy (McBane)	-.63	.17	-.95	-.35	<.001

Note.  $N = 389$ .  $R^2 = .09$ ;  $R^2_{adjusted} = .09$ ;  $F(1,138) = 14.03$ ,  $p < .001$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

The relationship between emotional intensities before and after the study was also analysed. There is a significant influence from emotional intensity before to emotional intensity after the scenario  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ; (before),  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(1,387) = 65.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [-.13, -.04].

Table 26 provides an overview of the hypotheses testing and the supported results of study 1. These results answer RQ1, research question “Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity affect negative eWoM-giving intention and the expectation of complaint recovery?”.

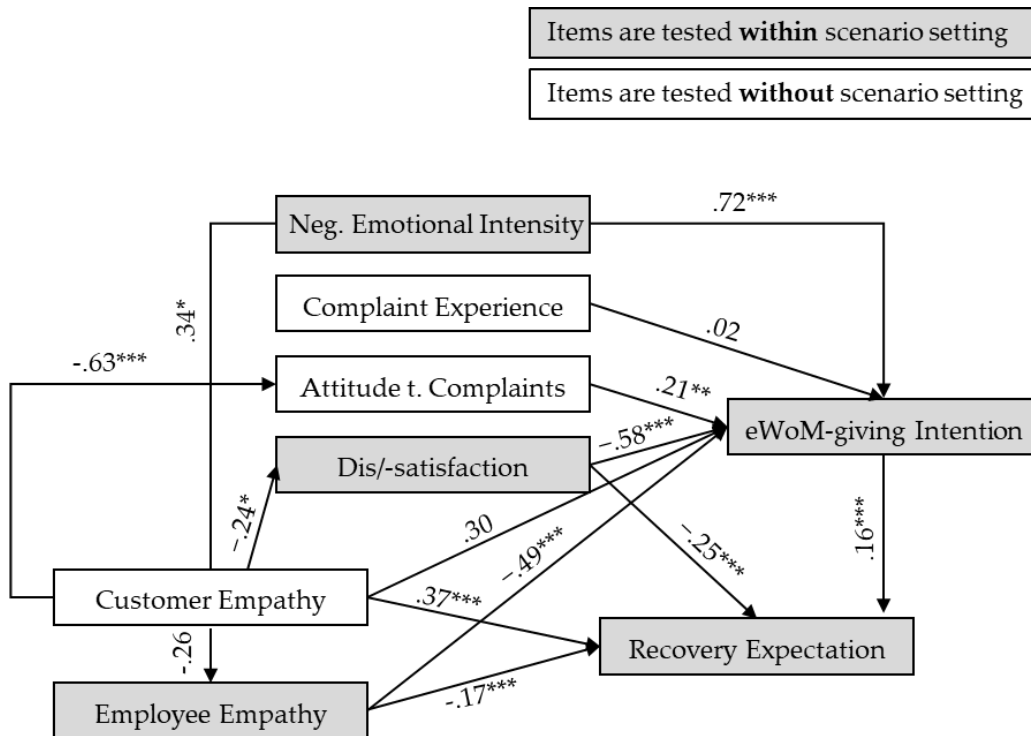
Table 26. Results of Study 1

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Entire sample</b>
<b>H1:</b> Customers’ previous complaint experience influences negative eWoM-giving intention.	not supported
<b>H2:</b> Attitude towards complaints influences negative eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H3:</b> Perceived dissatisfaction increases negative eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H4:</b> Employee empathy mitigates recovery expectations, and this relationship is mediated by eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H5:</b> Reciprocity between customer empathy (TEQ) and employee empathy mitigates negative eWoM-giving intention.	not supported
<b>H6:</b> Perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy (TEQ) on recovery expectation.	✓
<b>H7:</b> Customer empathy (TEQ) influences emotional intensity, which in turn affects eWoM-giving intention.	✓ fully mediated
<b>H8:</b> Customer empathy (McBane) is negatively related with the customer’s attitude towards complaints.	✓

Note. “✓” indicates the hypothesis is supported.

Figure 13 presents the study’s results in a graphical overview. All relations are shown.

Figure 13. Study 1’s Effects in Overview



Note. Based on the author’s elaboration. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\*indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .05$ . The analyses were conducted separately and not as one connected coherent analysis. Paths shown in the figure are non-standardised regression weights.

### 4.3. DISCUSSION OF STUDY 1

In this section, the results of Study 1 are interpreted within the context of the current state of research. The results serve as the foundation to answer the research questions. Afterwards, the study’s strengths and limitations are focused, and as a conclusion, future research and practical limitations are discussed.

#### 4.3.1. Interpretation within the Current State of Research

Testing H1, whether customers' previous complaint experience influences future eWoM-giving intentions, fails to produce evidence, and H1 was rejected (H1, answer of RQ1.1). The independent variable (complaint experience) of H1 testing had a low Cronbach's alpha value: minimum threshold value was not reached ( $\alpha = .62$ ). The test of removing individual items from the analysis to achieve higher reliability also did not achieve a sufficient Cronbach's alpha. This low reliability may have caused poor analysis. Nevertheless, previous research has revealed that customers' previous complaint experiences influence their complaint-giving intention (Richins, 1982). This finding contradicts the finding of study 1. For further analysis, it is recommended to repeat the analysis by using another scale to measure consumers previous complaint experience, as this instrument does not elicit sufficient reliability. For instance, the scale used by Kim et al. (2003) seems suitable for measuring complaint experience.

However, attitude towards complaints as an influence for eWoM-giving willingness was found to be significant (H2, answer of RQ1.2). People with a favourable attitude towards complaints (which could be based on previous positive complaint experiences) are more willing to provide eWoM after a negative service interaction. This result is consistent with previous research, such as Bearden and Crockett (1981), Bodey and Grace (2006), Singh and Wilkes (1996). Customers who have already had positive experiences with complaints may generally have a more positive attitude towards complaints. However, other factors, such as high self-esteem (Phau & Baird, 2008) can also lead to customers having a favourable attitude towards complaints. Attitude towards complaints as an amplifier effect of eWoM is aligned with the research of Roschk (2011).

Hypothesis 3 tested whether customer's dissatisfaction with a service failure influences their eWoM-giving willingness. It was found that dissatisfaction level significantly predicts eWoM-giving intention (answer of RQ1.3) by considering the entire sample. This result confirms the work of Jung and Seock (2017), who found evidence of a significant influence of satisfaction level on customers' WoM intention.

However, when considering this effect in the context of the three conducted scenarios, the effect was only found in scenario 3, (negative and aggressive; the felt customer emotion is the most negative). Perceived dissatisfaction varied between the scenarios: S1 = positive, S2 = negative neutral, and S3 = negative and angry. The different satisfaction levels and various emotional intensities within the scenarios caused this effect. The third scenario provides the most reasons for why customers feel upset and angry about a company's reaction. This result indicates that for customers' eWoM-giving intention, dissatisfaction is essential only in a tremendously negative service failure. Another reason that could have produced this effect is that in scenarios 1 and 2, the dissatisfaction was not strong enough to cause the customer to complain. As the Theory of Dissatisfaction Creation explains, a certain level must be reached for a customer to engage in complaint behaviour, as stated by Santos and Boote (2003). It could be that this level of dissatisfaction was not strong enough for eWoM-giving behaviour.

Additionally, the data indicated that employee empathy can mitigate customers' recovery expectations after a failed service interaction. This relationship, in turn, is mediated by the customer's willingness to provide eWoM (H4, answer of RQ1.4). Therefore, employee empathy positively affects customer recovery processes and should be incorporated into the service process to obtain high customer satisfaction. Generally, employee empathy mitigated the customer's expectation of recovery, which resulted from hypothesis testing. This finding aligns with the previous work of Umar and Saleem (2022). Therefore, an empathic employee is essential for a successful complaint-recovery approach for an emotional attempt to remedy a failure. However, employee empathy also negatively influenced eWoM-giving intentions. Hence, the greater the employee empathy, the more unlikely the customer's intent to provide a negative eWoM after a failed service interaction. The mediation analysis suggests a partial mediation of eWoM on the relationship between employee empathy and recovery expectation.

The results of hypothesis testing H5 do not indicate any reciprocity between customer empathy and employee empathy. Surprisingly, no reciprocity between customer and employee empathy could be found in the entire sample; this result contradicts previous research (Ngo et al., 2020). However, a reducing effect of employee empathy on eWoM-giving was detected (as already discussed for H4).

Hence, H5, “The reciprocity between customer empathy and employee empathy does not mitigate the negative eWoM-giving intention”, was rejected (H5, answer of RQ1.5). The scenario-based approach may have caused this inconsistency because customers and employees cannot feel the same emotional contagion as in a real customer–employee interaction. Creating reciprocity between customers and employees in a scenario-based approach is more challenging than in real interactions. However, an effect of employee empathy on eWoM was found for H5. This result confirms the findings of Clark et al. (2013); Wieseke et al. (2012), which indicate a favourable effect of employee empathy on customer–employee interactions.

In this context, the results of H6, “perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectation”, play an essential role because customer satisfaction was also able to mediate the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectations (H6, answer of RQ1.6 and RQ1.7). As such, customer empathy reduced perceived dissatisfaction, and empathic customers were less dissatisfied with the service interaction. This effect could have been caused by the increased sensitivity for employees' work conditions and effort in empathic customers (Bitner et al., 1990; Wieseke et al., 2012). However, the perceived satisfaction of the service interaction (in the context of study 1, where a service failure occurred) affected the customer's expectations for the company's redress. Specifically, satisfied customers had lower recovery expectations towards the firm, and more dissatisfied customers had higher recovery expectations towards the firm. This finding supports the results from Kim (2012), which show that consumers' expectations (from the pre-purchase stage) influence their satisfaction (in the post-purchase stage), albeit without a complaint context. Thus, this analysis expands the model of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction of confirmation and disconfirmation to the complaint context, meaning expectations about a company's recovery approach influence consumers' complaint satisfaction.

The hypothesis testing of H7 cannot be adequately supported because customer empathy did not directly influence eWoM-giving intention. This effect was fully mediated by the customer's perceived emotional intensity (H7, answer of RQ1.8, RQ1.9, and RQ1.10). The finding that emotional intensity is an influencing factor for eWoM aligns with the research of Decrop (1999) and Umasuthan et al. (2017), which provides evidence that consumers' emotional and cognitional

experiences influence the decision-making process and future behavioural intentions of consumer behaviour, such as the willingness to revisit or WoM (of a service or product purchase). However, there was no direct effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention. This relationship may have been caused by the fact that empathy is aroused if a consumer perceives that someone is in need and values the welfare of their counterpart (Batson et al., 2007). In the service–employee interaction, the consumer did not perceive that the employee was in need; thus, no empathising was aroused between them.

Another result of this study is that customer empathy negatively relates to customers' attitude towards complaints (H8, answer of RQ1.11). This effect was found in the entire sample (no focus on the specific scenarios) because both variables (customer empathy and attitude towards complaints) were generally measured. This effect may be explained by the fact that empathic people are often sensitive and have a less strong sense of self, which means that they do not have the same assertiveness and power needed to articulate a complaint (complaint cost; see Wuenschmann (2007)). Hence, the more empathic the customer is, the more unfavourable their attitude towards complaints is. Thus, empathic customers do not like complaints.

The customer's emotion before the complaint scenario was observed as a side effect. This observation compares the perceived emotion before and after the service failure. As expected, the customer's emotional intensity before the scenario significantly predicted the perceived emotion during the service failure. This result seems realistic because customers' general emotions may impact their perceived emotional intensity of complaint behaviour. Additionally, the reciprocity between emotions increases the external validity of the results.

#### **4.3.2. Limitations and Implications**

A critical point for study 1 could be the weak Cronbach's alpha value from the variable complaint experience ( $\alpha = .62$ ). This value is below the minimum threshold of .70, which is classified as acceptable (Schmitt, 1996). However, the Cronbach's alpha value of complaint experience is too low and unacceptable. The scale complaint experience ( $\alpha = .62$ ) has only two items, and the Cronbach's alpha values vary between scenarios: S1  $\alpha = .58$ , S2  $\alpha = .66$ , and S3  $\alpha = .64$ . Because of a

lack of internal consistency, the complaint-experience scale should be critically observed by any further interpretations.

The representativeness of study 1 was not ensured due to limited sample recruitment. The sample is not representative, especially concerning gender, income, and profession. Most probands were part- or full-time students because the survey was distributed via a student-recruitment platform in compensation for course credits. Although the sample recruitment form is not valid for representativeness, the form was used because of the cost-value ratio.

The average age of the sample participants was 26.74 years. According to Phau and Baird (2008), age affects the intention to complain because older consumers do not pay much attention to social expectations or perceptions. Additionally, according to their research, consumers older than 40 have higher product-quality expectations. Thus, the relatively young sample age may have influenced the failure to find this effect because of unbalanced age.

Due to the scenario-based approach, the research object was limited to a printer-purchase situation and, consequently, to a particular target group purchasing printers online. Therefore, this situation is not valid for every online-purchase situation. Regarding current complaint research, scenario-based approaches are widespread in the sciences (Blodgett et al., 1997; Hess et al., 2003; H. Liu et al., 2020; McCollough et al., 2000). Nevertheless, a customer–employee interaction with an agent on a phone call is more widespread because most people have experienced customer-service interactions before, and the phone channel is still the most preferred form of contact for customers (37 %) (Deloitte, 2022).

Concerning the mediation analysis conducted in the studies, it is essential to note that current research does not assume that such analysis should be stopped if the direct or total effect is insignificant. Based on the classic assumption from Baron & Kenny (1986), a significant direct or total effect is an inevitable requirement of mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Recent research disagrees with this requirement because the indirect effect describes the mediation's overall effect, which is the crucial criterion for many statisticians to speak of mediation (Gelfand et al., 2009; MacKinnon et al., 2008; Rucker et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2010).

*Future research* could use the same variables within another scenario approach, for instance, another product or service failure. In the scenario used here,

a process failure occurred (impolite employee), but an outcome failure could occur in future research. An outcome failure is related to a company's core product (Umar & Saleem, 2022); for instance, in this study setting, the printer could not work at all.

More extensive research could be conducted on other personality traits or skills in the context of complaint influence factors. The influence of self-esteem could also be assessed in more detail.

Another approach could be to extend the study culturally. The current study was conducted in the German eCommerce market, but future research could extend to different cultural contexts to prove whether similar effects are found in other countries.

Generally, previous research has found that empathy can be costly if, for instance, the observer is too compassionate with a donations institute (Zaki, 2014). The question thus arises of whether empathy cost also plays a role in the context of complaint recovery. When empathising with a service employee, are consumers willing to waive recovery goodwill (maybe through a financial voucher)? The phenomena of empathy cost must be considered in future research. Previous research by Zaki (2014), demonstrated an avoidance strategy for empathy cost. Hence, it is suggested that scenarios be conducted comparing costly and non-costly empathy within the context of customer complaint behaviour and eWoM-giving behaviour. Do customers down-regulate their empathic responses, knowing their empathy behaviour will mitigate their compensation?

Another future research option is to conduct research in the same setting but measure customer empathy on another empathy scale. The empathy scale consists of more than 10 items; therefore, it is suggested that a brief version be used, as done in study 3.

Customer empathy mitigates perceived satisfaction significantly, indicating that empathic customers have a higher expectation towards complaint recovery. Increased recovery expectations were found in the data, meaning that companies must consider empathic customers' needs in particular because they are more sensible and challenging to convince than non- or less empathic customers. Thus, companies can add emotional and empathy recovery approaches when empathic customers attempt to reach out to them. However, empathic customers are not only more sensitive to recovery expectations but also to emotions during service

failures. Hence, from a practical perspective, it is important to pay attention to the customer's emotions (which can be detected through the employee or, in the case of digital customer-contact points, through AI tools) and to react accordingly in the case of high negative emotions.

**V – STUDY 2: EFFECT OF  
CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE  
EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL  
INTENSITY ON POST-  
RECOVERY SATISFACTION**

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## V - STUDY 2: EFFECT OF CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY ON POST-RECOVERY SATISFACTION

Section V presents the second study. The following sections provide the methodology; results; and discussion, including interpretation and limitations.

### 5.1. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY 2

#### 5.1.1. Research Design

Study 2 is conducted with an experimental approach using a scenario-based online questionnaire. A quantitative approach is employed because CCB has already been researched for many decades (Bearden & Crockett, 1981; Beck et al., 2023; Bodey & Grace, 2006; Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017; Donoghue, 2007; Francken, 1983). The existing research allows the current state of research to be analysed and developed based on established empirical theories (see section [2.5.2. Hypotheses Development Study 2](#)).

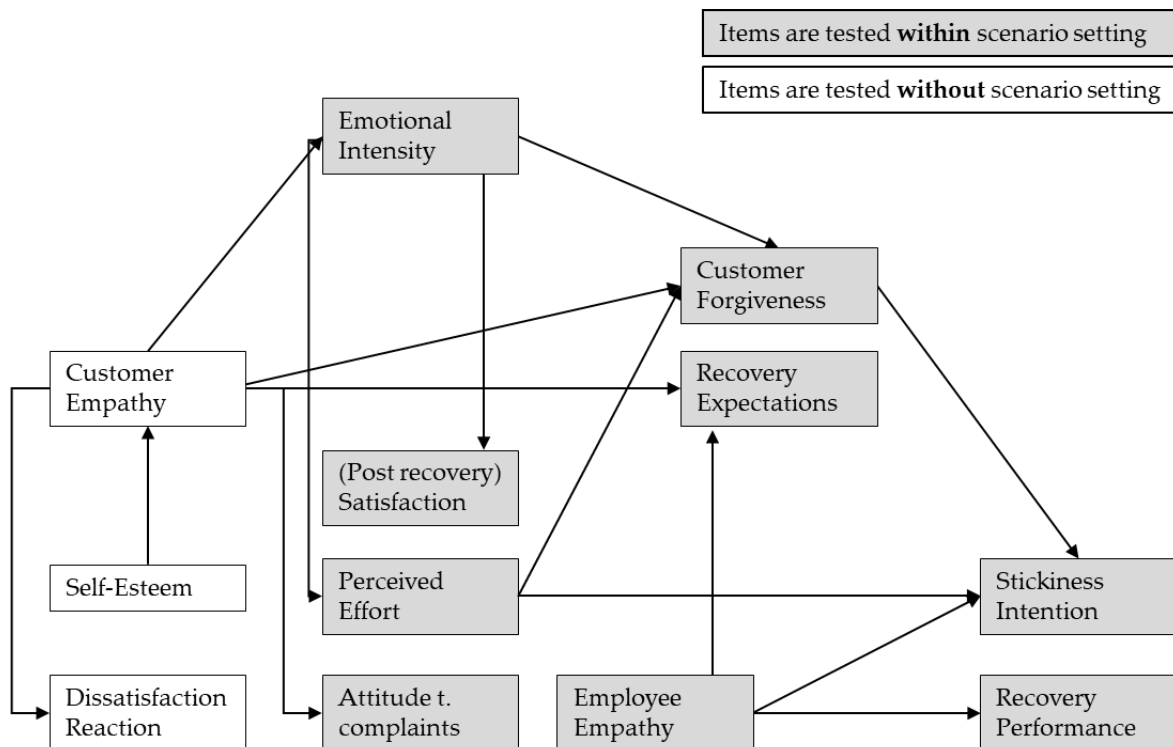
This experimental study aims to investigate the impact of customer and employee empathy on customer forgiveness, post-recovery satisfaction, and stickiness intention. These factors are considered as part of the recovery process after a service failure (post-purchase) influenced by different emotional intensities. The main research question of study 2 strives to answer whether customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity influence customer forgiveness and post-recovery satisfaction. For all the research questions of study 2, see [1.2. Objectives and Research Questions](#).

Further variables of consumer complaint behaviour are analysed in the relationship between customer empathy, emotional intensity, and customer forgiveness: perceived effort, employee empathy, recovery expectation, recovery performance, self-esteem, and attitude towards complaints. Study 2's research object, including all variables, is presented in figure 14. The expected relations

between the variables are linked with lines, which represent the derived hypotheses, as described in section [2.5.2. Hypotheses Development Study 2](#).

The variables are tested either within or without scenario settings. For instance, customer empathy is tested without scenario settings (in general), such as how empathic a customer is in general, and is coloured in white. The grey variables are tested in relation to the specific complaint scenario. The variables coloured in white are directly tested and those coloured in grey boxes refer to the manipulated variables in the experimental research. The scenario settings are as follows: (1) empathic and positive recovery-approach experience, (2) neutral recovery-approach experience, and (3) negative recovery-approach experience (scenarios are presented in detail in section [5.1.3 Sample and Procedure](#)).

Figure 14. Study 2 Recovery Process



Note. Based on the author's elaboration. Model is derived from research models as discussed in section [2.5.2. Hypotheses Development Study 2](#), such as the Service-Recovery-Paradox Theory or Self-Enhancement Theory.

### 5.1.2. Research Material and Scales

This section will evaluate reliability, objectivity, and validity as quality criteria of quantitative research. According to Mattila et al. (2021), the general standard quality criteria are also crucial for experimental research approaches. Reliability is realised because the original scales satisfied the quality reliability requirements for all scales (Cronbach's alpha value is  $>.70$ ), which are presented in the [appendix](#). In addition to reliability, objectivity also met the quality criteria because any effect of the researcher on the participants was prohibited. The online-questionnaire tool blocked the possibility of changing any data during the ongoing survey, which was conducted anonymously. Therefore, the researcher could not contact the participants. The quality criteria of validity also met the requirements because the scales are part of established consumer research and have already been evaluated and tested in previous scientific studies. Thus, all quality criteria of quantitative research can be ensured for study 2.

Hereafter, the measurement instruments are justified. Some variables of study 1 are also part of study 2. To provide a coherent overview, the previously justified variables used in the study 1 are listed and justified here again:

- Customer empathy
- Employee empathy
- Emotional intensity
- Attitude toward complaints
- Complaint experience
- Dissatisfaction reaction
- Recovery expectation

*Customer empathy* is based on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009), which is established in empathy research (Lima & Osório, 2021). The TEQ was designed to measure empathy and will be adapted to measure customer empathy. TEQ is a brief, valid, reliable instrument for assessing empathy (Spreng et al., 2009) and is a self-rated empathy measurement tool (Lima & Osório, 2021). The original version (Spreng et al., 2009) has 16 items. This study uses the validated and shortened version of TEQ (Totan et al., 2012), which consists of 13 items and has (like the extended version) appropriate validity and reliability

(Cronbach's alpha is .79–.85; (Totan et al., 2012). Examples of item text are "It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully" and "I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness". Customer empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *occasionally*, 4 = *sometimes*, 5 = *frequently*, 6 = *usually*, and 7 = *every time* (Totan et al., 2012).

As a second instrument to measure *customer empathy*, the McBane scale of empathy was used. The scale was initially developed by Davis (1980) before being adapted by McBane (1995) and later Wieseke et al. (2012), who used the scale in the context of customer and employee empathy. The instrument measures empathy within a three-factor structure: perspective-taking, empathic concern, and emotional contagion. According to Wieseke et al. (2012), the scale has sufficient Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted, suggesting reliability and convergent validity. The scale was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree* (Wieseke et al., 2012). An example of item text is "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 327).

*Employee empathy* (EE) is measured by an established scale (Parasuraman et al., 1994) that was validated and adapted from Markovic et al. (2015), who shortened the scale to four items. Customers' perception of employee empathy assesses employee empathy. The scale was highly reliable (.91). An example of item text is "the brand employees give customers individual attention". Employee empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *completely agree* (Markovic et al., 2015).

The *emotional intensity* (EI) measurement is based on the method of Wetzer et al. (2007), which measures the emotions felt after a negative consumption experience. López-López et al. (2014) first adapted the scale to measure positive and negative emotions separately as two opposite valences of emotions as it is broad knowledge in the research of emotions (Umasuthan et al., 2017). The measurement of positive versus negative emotions, using this two dimensional framework, is an approved evaluation of emotional service experiences. Using this measurement gain insights into customers' overall experiences and the influence of these experiences on behavioural intention can be obtained (López-López et al.,

2014; Umasuthan et al., 2017). Wierzbicka (1992, p. 577) demonstrates that the concept of emotions, including the basic emotions, “such as anger or sadness, can be ‘defined in terms of universal semantic primitives such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘do’, ‘happen’, ‘know’, and ‘want’, in terms of which all areas of meaning, in all languages, can be rigorously and revealingly portrayed”. Using this two-dimensional framework (positive versus negative emotional intensity) to evaluate customers’ emotional consumption experience is widespread in consumer research (Umasuthan et al., 2017). This approach facilitates an understand of customers’ overall experiences and the impact of those experiences on behavioural intention (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Emotional intensity was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very easy*, 2 = *easy*, 3 = *somewhat easy*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *somewhat hard*, 6 = *hard*, to 7 = *very hard*.

*Attitude toward complaints* is based on Roschk (2011), who adapted the scale from Blodgett et al. (1997) and Richins (1983). Attitude toward complaints consists of three items: a low score indicates a person who does not like to complain, a high score indicates a person who likes to complain, and the items are reverse coded. An example of item text is “If a defective product was inexpensive, I am more likely to keep it than ask for a replacement or exchange”. The original Cronbach’s alpha value is .78, so the item is considered reliable. Attitude toward complaints was reported on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree* (Roschk, 2011).

*Complaint experience* is measured by an adapted item from Wuenschmann (2007) that consists of two items. He conducted an item of complaint experience and tested it in a different setting. Therefore, the item was modified to a more general background that describes previous experiences with complaints in the last six months differentiated by low- and high-price products. Cronbach’s alpha indicates a high reliability (.89). Complaint experience was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

*Dissatisfaction reaction* describes a person’s response after experiencing dissatisfaction with a company. This scale was developed by Singh (1988), who distinguishes between the three behavioural responses to dissatisfaction, as

explained in section [2.2.1.1. Process of Complaint Behaviour](#). However, the dissatisfaction reaction is not understood as a latent construct. Therefore, the dissatisfaction-reaction item is based on a non-metric scale, specifically a categorical variable. Probands are asked to select three reaction types by finishing the following sentence: "If I am dissatisfied after the service has been provided, I..."

- a) directly contact the responsible company.
- b) contact friends and acquaintances and report my dissatisfaction.
- c) usually keep my displeasure to myself.

*Recovery expectation* describes the customer's perspective on a recovery after a service failure; for example, the item considers the expectation of compensation. The item was developed by McCollough et al. (2000) and consists of four items. McCollough et al. (2000) used the construct in the context of the flight industry to explain why the context is adapted to the eCommerce purchase context. McCollough et al. (2000) also used a scenario-based experiment, which is why the recovery-expectation scale seems to be a fit. Recovery expectation was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree* (McCollough et al., 2000).

The following scales are justified for the first time, because they were not included in Study 1. Each instrument is taken from the existing literature and adapted to the specific complaint situation. [Appendices 3 and 4](#) contain an overview of all used constructs including measurements with item text and the Cronbach's-alpha values of the original authors.

The *self-esteem* measurement is based on Rosenberg (1965), but the revised German version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale by Collani and Herzberg (2003) is used here. Self-esteem is measured with 10 items, and the participant must self-evaluate themselves. The measurement distinguishes between positive and negative self-esteem, measuring five items each (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). Item texts include, for example, "I am able to do things as well as most other people". Cronbach's reliability is high (.84) (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). Self-esteem was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*,

3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The construct of *perceived effort* is based on Cambra-Fierro and Melero-Polo (2017), who adapted the scale from Karatepe (2006). The scale explains an employee's effort to resolve a customer's inquiry. Its Cronbach's alpha is .93, indicating good internal reliability (Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017). One item text is, for instance, "Staff did everything in their power to resolve the problem" (Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017). Perceived effort was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

*Customer forgiveness* builds a forgiveness index from Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021), based on the work of Dorn et al. (2014) and Worthington et al. (2007). The scale was adapted to the specific complaint context because the original authors used the scale in the context of restaurant and airline failures. An example of original item text is "The way the waitress handled the delay made me feel that I no longer feel upset when I think of her" (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021, p. 349). Customer forgiveness was reported with three items on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree*.

*Post-recovery satisfaction* describes a customer's satisfaction after they experience a company's recovery attempt. The effectiveness of a recovery approach can be measured from this item. The original scale was developed by McCollough et al. (2000). Post-recovery satisfaction was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 2 = *dissatisfied*, 3 = *slightly dissatisfied*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *slightly satisfied*, 6 = *satisfied*, to 7 = *very satisfied*.

The *stickiness intention* measurement is based on research from Li et al. (2006) and describes the future use of an already purchased product or past service. It consists of three items, such as "I expect my use of this product to continue in the future", and demonstrated high reliability (.99). The item were also adapted from the product context to the service context. Stickiness intention was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The measurement of *recovery performance* is based on McCollough et al. (2000) work, which conducted five items to measure recovery performance with good internal reliability (.73). For this purpose, the context was adapted to service failures instead of product failures. Examples of item text include “For the situation described, I had very high expectations concerning actions the company would take to deal with a non-satisfying service” and “After receiving a non-satisfying service, I expected the company to do whatever it took to guarantee my satisfaction”. Recovery performance was reported on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree*.

At the end of the questionnaire, socio-demographic characteristics were requested: age, family status, gender identity, income, education, and work. The income variable was a typical status variable, such as education and occupation (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2016).

The questionnaire used a self-assessment approach, meaning the probands had to evaluate themselves, with no external evaluation of the assessment; this approach is widespread in research (Sahaf & Fazili, 2023). However, Collani and Herzberg (2003) discuss that the human ability to self-asses is not related to level of education. Consequently, this approach seems to be a valid method to test the described variables.

In the absence of German-translated scales, multilingual people applied a double-iterative back-translation process to translate them from English into German to ensure equivalency in meaning (Brislin, 1970; P. S. Jones et al., 2001). Thus, this translation process was applied to the following scales: emotional intensity, employee empathy, post-recovery satisfaction, recovery expectation, customer empathy, perceived effort, customer forgiveness, stickiness intention, and recovery performance.

### 5.1.3. Sample and Procedure

Study 2 data collection occurred at a German university of applied sciences during February, March, and April 2023. The subjects were recruited online using a student-recruitment platform in reward for course credits. Leiner, (2019) provides an online-questionnaire tool for scientific reasons, the SoSci Survey, which was

used for study 2. Before the proband can start the survey, a general page is shown. This page presents an introduction to the research consisting of an explanation of anonymity and a request for agreement to scientific-data use. Furthermore, a distraction question (“Were you able to complete the questionnaire without any distraction?”) is incorporated into the questionnaire to filter out probands who did not pay sufficient attention. Section [5.2.1. Descriptive Statistics](#) describes the exact data-quality procedure and shows the sample size. The questionnaire takes 10–15 minutes to complete and can be done on a smartphone or a laptop. The target group is anyone older than 18 years (minimum participation age is 18 years) who have made online purchases and intend to place themselves in the position of the fictive dissatisfied customer of the scenario.

The experimental scenarios of study 2 describe a company’s recovery approach. After a complaint, the company attempts to recover the customer relationship from the service failure. Three scenarios are conducted to analyse the recovery situation. These scenarios describe three recovery attempts with three different emotional intensities where a company replies to online customer evaluations after a service failure. The emotional intensities are described in table 27. Overall, three scenarios are conducted to analyse the influence of customer empathy and emotional intensity on a service recovery.

*Table 27. Emotional States of Scenarios Study 2*

<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Emotional State of Employee</b>	<b>Emotional Intensity</b>	<b>Scenario Description</b>
S1	Positive	Positive	Empathic and positive recovery-approach experience
S2	Neutral	Negative	Neutral recovery-approach experience
S3	Negative	Negative	Negative recovery-approach experience

Every proband is presented with the same online customer review before the company's recovery attempt. Subsequently, the main scenario text with the company's recovery attempt is shown:

*I called customer service because I had a question about my printer. From the beginning, the employee seems pretty annoyed and unfriendly; for example, he said, "What do I know what you did to your printer?" Instead of providing help, he suggested to read the "foolproof" user manual and recommended that I visit the local copy shop. After that, he hung up. At the last moment, he called me an "idiot". What a rude behaviour. The last \*\*\*. Do not buy there!!!.* (Abend et al., 2023)

After the probands saw the main introduction text (identical in all scenarios), they were presented with the main scenario text (the company's recovery attempt to the online customer review), as presented in table 28. The scenario was automatically randomly assigned to the probands.

Table 28. Overview of Study 2 Scenarios

Scenario	Text - Reply from the Provider:
S1 Positive	Dear Kai Schmitz, I am very sorry that you were dissatisfied with our customer service. I would like to apologise for the inconvenience caused. I can well imagine how frustrating and annoying the situation was for you. Please be assured that your experience was not our standard, and we have taken appropriate actions. To alleviate your anger, you have received a credit note of EUR 20.00 by email and a parcel with new printer cartridges will be delivered in the next few days. Has your question been resolved in the meantime? If not, may I contact you by telephone? Alternatively, you can watch the online tutorials. Thank you for your valuable feedback; I am happy to help you personally!
S2 Negative Neutral	Dear Kai Schmitz, I'm sorry that our customer service employee could not help you in a friendly manner - of course, that's not how it should be. As a rule, we train our staff to help our customers! We regret that this was not the case. We will try to deal with your enquiries in a competent and friendly manner in the future. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact our customer service by telephone. Alternatively, please make use of our call-back service. Thank you for your feedback on your experience with our customer service!
S3 Negative Angry	Dear customer, it seems that the customer service employee on the phone was unable to help you. We experience handling difficulties with our printer from time to time. To prevent questions, we have included a comprehensive manual with every printer shipped from our online-shop, which can be read if you have any questions. It explains how to operate the printer correctly. If you have any further questions, you will find solutions and contact options on our homepage.

Note. S indicates the "scenario".

The introduction and main text were presented like in a realistic customer-experience setting. Figure 15 shows an example of the evaluation style. A complete overview of all scenarios including the customer reviews can be found in the [appendix \(2\)](#).

Figure 15. Example of Company's Reply to Customer Review



**Kai Schmitz**  
 ★★★★★ **NICHT KAUFEN!!**  
 Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2022

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!

**Antwort des Anbieters:**  
 Lieber Kunde,

anscheinend konnten Ihnen die Mitarbeiter des telefonischen Kundenservices nicht helfen. Wir beobachten immer mal wieder Handlings-Schwierigkeiten bei unserem Drucker. Um Fragen vor zu beugen haben wir jedem Drucker bei Versand aus unserem Online Shop ein umfassendes Handbuch beigelegt, in dem bei Fragen nachgelesen werden kann. Dort ist eine sachgerechte Bedienung der Drucker erklärt.

Falls Sie weitere Fragen haben, finden Sie auf unsere Homepage Lösungen und Kontaktmöglichkeiten.

The experimental scenario-based approach required an extensive pretest ( $N = 104$ ) where all scenarios were tested. As in study 1, the main complexity of scenario creation is the variation of perceived emotional intensity in each scenario by the similar circumstances of the service-failure situation. To achieve similar circumstances to mitigate the failure manipulation, the scenarios present identical

online reviews and the same fictional customer name (Kai Schmitz), which is a typical German name. Additionally, the reply from the companies has the same description length to attenuate manipulations of length. The pretest showed proof of different emotional intensities between the scenarios and the probands. Specifically, differences in the level of customers' negative emotional intensity (negative EI) were statistically significant for the various scenarios ( $F[2, 101] = 37.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The same was true for the level of customers' positive emotional intensity (positive EI;  $F[2, 101] = 17.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the desired manipulation of emotional intensity can be assumed for the scenarios used.

The scenarios are based on a printer purchased on the Internet that has been evaluated poorly by a previously dissatisfied customer. A printer purchase was decided upon because printer purchases are less emotionally involved than a more emotionally loaded purchase, such as a car or a luxury-brand handbag. Printers are technical, functional goods. Moreover, many households have a printer, which is a typical product where consumers can read online reviews pre-purchase. However, the failure on which the scenario focused was the customer-service experience. Hence, the service failure was a poor customer-service interaction and not poor technical function.

Remedies to control method bias in the current research were employed. To reduce method bias caused by different general moods of the probands (Podsakoff et al., 2012), the emotional intensity was measured twice in the study (first at the beginning of questionnaire and second after the scenario). This two-timing measurement of emotional state reduces manipulations from probands' emotional state before the questionnaire and ensures more robust emotional intensity results. Results can be found in section [5.2.2. Inferential Statics](#).

## 5.2. RESULTS OF STUDY 2

### 5.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

The questionnaire occurred at a German university of applied sciences. Subjects were recruited online using a student-recruitment platform in compensation for course credit. After data cleaning, a total of 654 probands participated in the questionnaire ( $N = 654$ ) and were divided into the different

scenarios as follows: S1:  $n = 220$  (33.6 %); S2:  $n = 224$  (34.2 %); and S3:  $n = 211$  (32.2 %). The sample size is sufficient, according to the G\*Power program, with a minimum of  $N = 107$  needed to attain a statistical power of .95 (Faul et al., 2009). Furthermore, the scenarios exceed beyond this need, indicating that the research objective is sufficient.

Table 29 presents the demographic characteristics of the probands. The most represented gender was female (68,5 %), and the mean age was 26 years. Additionally, 67 % were employees, and the most prominent net-income group was between 2001 EUR and 3000 EUR.

Table 29. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Entire Sample Description	Net Income Group in €		
Male	31.50 %	< 250	1
Female	68.50 %	250–500	6
Age (Mean)	25.97	501–1000	40
<b>Occupation</b>		1001–1500	134
Student	177	1501–2000	115
Employee	439	2001–3000	262
Civil servant	4	3001–4000	63
Self-employee	9	4001–5000	14
Seeking work	1	≥ 5001	7
Others	24	no answer	12

Note.  $N = 654$

Descriptive statistics of study's 2 variables are presented in table 30. For reliability analysis, Cronbach's-alpha values were calculated to rate the internal consistency of the deployed scales. Most internal consistencies of the questionnaire had acceptable Cronbach's-alpha values (greater than  $>.70$  (Schmitt, 1996)). Three scales had low Cronbach's-alpha values: complaint experience (.60), recovery performance (.62), and customer forgiveness (.62). Although these values are low and research demands reliability values of  $>.70$  (Schmitt, 1996), scientists have provided strategies for using low-reliability items when there are reasons regarding content or functionality, as well as complexity or measurement meaningfulness (Schecker, 2014; Schmitt, 1996). Thus, the scales are retained as the

primary scales of essential meaningfulness in the study, and low reliability is considered in interpretation, as recommended by Schmitt (1996).

Table 30. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Cronbach's Alpha for Study 2

Variables	S1		S2		S3		Entire Sample			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$\alpha$	
C. empathy (TEQ)	5.78	0.64	5.81	0.64	5.71	0.67	5.76	0.65	.78	
C. empathy (McB)	4.62	0.77	4.57	0.68	4.5	0.78	4.57	0.74	.74	
Employee empathy	4.85	1.66	3.29	1.73	1.89	1.18	3.36	1.96	.95	
C. forgiveness	4.86	1.48	4.01	1.34	3.29	1.26	4.06	1.51	.62	
before	Total EI	2.85	0.77	2.77	0.79	2.82	0.73	2.81	0.76	.81
	Negative EI	2.00	1.12	1.96	1.10	1.90	1.03	1.96	1.09	.80
	Positive EI	3.70	1.24	3.59	1.29	3.73	1.17	3.67	1.23	.90
after	Total EI	2.76	0.83	2.75	0.84	3.05	0.75	2.85	0.82	.72
	Negative EI	2.36	1.35	3.35	1.53	4.36	1.35	3.34	1.63	.92
	Positive EI	3.17	1.25	2.16	1.04	1.74	0.91	2.36	1.23	.88
Self-esteem	4.22	0.55	4.14	0.49	4.09	0.48	4.15	0.51	x	
Neg. self-esteem	2.87	1.44	2.81	1.34	2.57	1.28	2.76	1.36	.89	
Positive self-esteem	5.56	0.90	5.47	0.99	5.60	0.90	5.54	0.93	.82	
Recov. expectation	4.54	1.28	4.92	1.16	5.03	1.12	4.83	1.20	.74	
Recov. performance	3.91	1.54	2.57	1.24	2.32	1.14	2.94	1.49	.62	
Attitude complaints	4.03	1.48	4.32	1.48	4.26	1.50	3.79	1.49	.71	
Compl. experience	2.33	1.59	2.23	1.48	2.44	1.48	2.33	1.52	.60	
Stickiness intention	4.47	1.53	2.93	1.48	2.66	1.45	3.36	1.69	.97	
Perceived effort	4.78	1.70	2.56	1.54	1.58	0.91	2.99	1.95	.96	
Post-recov. satisfact.	4.51	1.57	2.90	1.31	1.95	1.05	3.13	1.69	.91	

Note. x indicates that Cronbach's alpha for self-esteem (positive and negative) was not conducted because the scale cannot be used as an overall self-esteem scale.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the linear relationship between the deployed variables. Table 31 presents the correlation matrix for the study 2 variables of the entire sample. There was a weak positive correlation between the two variables customer empathy (McBane) and attitude towards complaints ( $r = .18, p < .01$  level). Customer empathy also correlated weakly and positively with customer self-esteem ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ) and customer forgiveness ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ). The correlation table assessed the linear relationship between customer forgiveness and stickiness intention ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ). Stickiness intention had a moderate positive correlation with employee empathy ( $r = .56, p < .01$ ). Finally, employee empathy had a strong positive correlation with customer post-recovery satisfaction ( $r = .73, p < .01$ ).

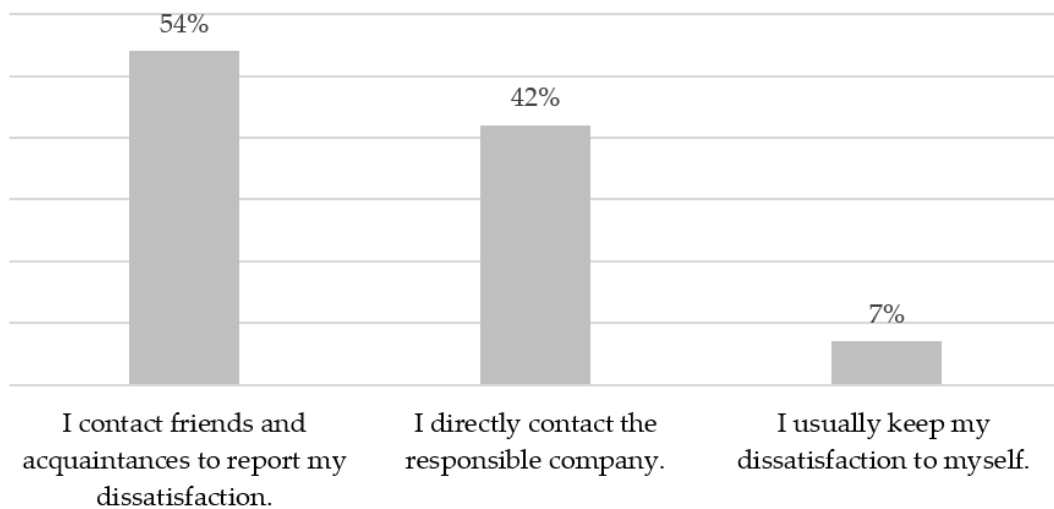
Table 31. Correlation Table for Study 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Empathy (McBane)	-													
2. Empathy (TEQ)	.46**	-												
3. Forgiveness	.11**	.06	-											
4. Stickiness intention	.04	.02	.48**	-										
5. Reco. expectation	.05	.13**	-.18**	-.20**	-									
6. Employ. empathy	.05	.02	.60**	.56**	-.17**	-								
7. Reco. performance	.02	-.06	.43**	.46**	-.20**	.51**	-							
8. Reco. satisfaction	.03	-.01	.62**	.59**	-.23**	.73**	.55**	-						
9. Overall EI (after)	.07	-.14**	-.14**	-.04	.09*	-.14**	.12**	-.09*	-					
10. Pos. EI (after)	.05	-.11**	.46**	.48**	-.23**	.57**	.50**	.62**	.38**	-				
11. Neg EI (after)	.04	-.06	-.49**	-.40**	.26**	-.57**	-.26**	-.57**	.72**	-.37**	-			
12. Perceived effort	.03	.01	.54**	.55**	-.16**	.82**	.58**	.77**	-.10*	.55**	-.52**	-		
13. Self-esteem	.30**	.11**	.10*	.14**	.04	.08*	.03	.05	.11**	.10**	.04	.07	-	
14. Compl. attitude	.18**	.08*	.11**	.07	-.12**	.09*	.08*	.07	.02	.04	-.00	.08*	.11**	-
15. Compl. experience	-.03	-.11**	-.08*	.00	.06	-.02	.07	-.01	.20**	.07	.14**	.01	-.02	-.20**

Note. \*\*The correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-sided). \*The correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-sided).

The different dissatisfaction reactions were measured in the entire sample without specification to a scenario. Figure 16 presents the total results. Most participants (54 %) contact friends and acquaintances and report their dissatisfaction after they experience a dissatisfying service, while 42 % directly contact the responsible company, and the minority (7 %) keep the displeasure to themselves.

Figure 16. Different Dissatisfaction Reactions "If I am dissatisfied after the service has been provided, I...".



### 5.2.2. Inferential Statistics

This section assesses the statistical analysis to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. Therefore, regression, ANOVA, t-test, and mediation analyses are applied.

However, before conducting the hypothesis testing, a confirmation factor analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the variables' measurement of scales with four or more item texts. The self-esteem-measurement instrument was not tested because a German-validated version was used in the study. Measurement of employee empathy is tested in study 3, and customer empathy based on Totan et al. (2012) was tested in the inferential statistics of study 1. Hence, customer

empathy based on McBane (1995) is tested here. CFA assesses discriminant validity and confirms the used models' factor structure (Farrell, 2010). All CFA were calculated using bootstrapping (5000 samples), and the confidence interval did not include 0.

CFA analysis of customer empathy (McBane, 1995) reported significant  $\chi^2$  ( $p = < .001$ ), indicating the model does not fit perfectly to the data. However, according to Buehner (2011), this is a common issue for CFA, thus the fit indices were observed. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), the CFA model has a proper fit if the comparative fit index (CFI)  $> .90$ , the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)  $< .06$ , and the standardised root mean squared residual (SRMR)  $< .08$ . The defined threshold values for an acceptable model fit were reached for customer empathy (McBane, 1995), as presented in table 32.

Table 32. The CFA Goodness of Fit Indices Study 2

Scale	$\chi^2$	$p$	$df$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Customer empathy (McBane, 1995)	120.65	.001	41	.96	.06	.05

Subsequently, the factor structure of customer empathy (McBane, 1995) was supported with primarily high loadings, as presented in table 33. Most applied research accepts and interprets factor loadings greater or equal to .30 or .40 as salient (Brown, 2006), for instance, see Husain et al. (2024); and Marsh et al. (2020). However, according to Brown (2006), an explicit guideline for salient or non-salient loadings does not exist, and it widely depends on the empirical context. Hence, the three-factorial structure of empathy measured with the scale from McBane (1995) was considered satisfactory. Thus, the factors' structure was confirmed, and inferential statistics were continued.

Table 33. CFA for Customer Empathy (McBane, 1995)

No.	Item	$\lambda$ Loadings			$z, p$ - value
		F1	F2	F3	
1	I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	.72			18.05***
2	When I am upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes".	.65			16.33***
3	I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	.81			20.36***
4	I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.		.55		12.71***
5	If someone is unhappy, I quickly realize this, even if I do not know the person well.		.41		9.14***
6	Other people's misfortunes usually disturb me a great deal.		.62		14.30***
7	I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.		.67		15.48***
8	I become nervous if others around me are nervous.			.80	22.90***
9	I cannot remain cool if others around me are excited.			.66	17.41***
10	I get easily infected by the mood of others.			.75	20.51***
11	If I see unhappy people, I feel unhappy myself.			.59	15.10***

Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . F indicates the following factors: F1 = perspective taking, F2 = empathic concern, and F3 = emotional contagion. Standardised loadings are reported.

The mediation effects, represented by hypotheses H1 and H2, are conducted using SPSS PROCESS (Hayes 4.1) with model 4 (Hayes, 2022), that used ordinary least-squares regression for all mediation analyses and yields non-standard path coefficients for indirect, total, and direct effects. Before executing these analyses, a multicollinearity test was performed, and a variance inflation factor  $< 1.02$  (H1) and  $< 1.40$  (H2) was monitored. Hence, there is no multicollinearity issue in the data

(Daoud, 2018). Both mediation analyses were bootstrapped with 5000 samples, and heteroscedasticity-consistent inference standard errors were conducted to achieve the confidence intervals and inferential statistics. The effect is significant if zero is not included in the confidence interval (95.0 %). All mediation analyses were conducted using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error, as suggested by Hayes and Cai (2007).

A regression analysis was used to test whether customer empathy significantly predicted the sample's emotional intensity after experiencing service failure (table 34). The regression analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. A multicollinearity test was performed, and a variance inflation factor (VIF) < 1.1 was observed, indicating no multicollinearity in the data (Daoud, 2018). The regression analysis (total emotional intensity) indicated that this predictor explained 2 % of the variance ( $R^2 = .02$ ,  $F [1, 653] = 13.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It was found that customer empathy negatively and significantly predicted the perception of total emotional intensity ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The  $R^2$  for the overall model was .02, indicating a low goodness-of-fit according to Cohen (1988).

Table 34. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Total Emotional Intensity (After).

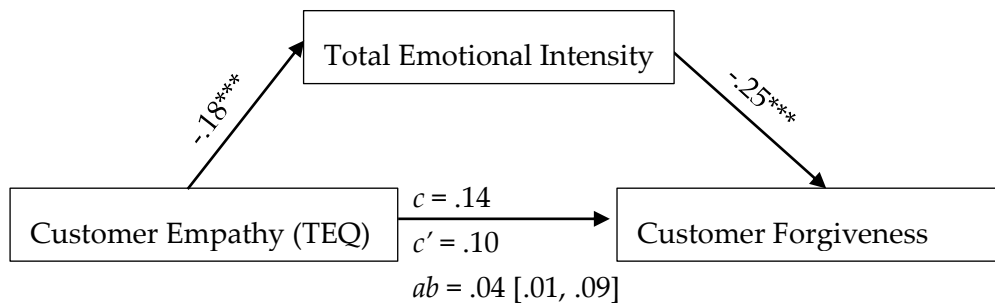
Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	3.87	.28	3.22	4.54	<.001
Customer empathy (TEQ)	-.18	.05	-.29	-.07	<.001

Note.  $N = 654$ .  $R^2 = .02$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .02;  $F (1,653) = 13.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error.

These results suggest that the customer's empathy influences the perception of emotional intensity, which requires conducting the mediation analysis to test the following hypotheses in the entire sample: "Customer empathy mitigates the perceived emotional intensity of service-failure-redress situations, which in turn enhances customer forgiveness" (H1).

Before conducting the mediation analysis, the linearity between the variables was monitored by visual observation with LOESS scatterplot, and approximate linearity was detected. A mediation analysis using the bootstrapping approach with 5000 samples (model 4, Hayes, 2022) was conducted, with customer empathy as the independent variable, emotional intensity as the mediator, and customers' forgiveness intention as the dependent variable (H1). Results showed that the 95 % confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero ( $ab = .04$ , 95 % CI: [.01, .09]), providing support for the fully mediating role of emotional intensity in the relationship between customer empathy and forgiveness (H1). Figure 17 presents the effects.

Figure 17. Mediating Effect of Emotional Intensity on Customer Empathy on Forgiveness (H1)



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

Another regression analysis was employed to test whether there is an influence of perceived recovery effort on customer forgiveness. The perceived recovery effort explained a significant amount of the variance in customer forgiveness ( $F [1,653] = 264.94$   $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $R^2$  adjusted = .29), indicating a moderate goodness-of-fit according to Cohen (1988). The regression coefficient ( $\beta = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that an increase in perceived recovery effort corresponded, on average, with an increase in customer forgiveness by .41 points. The regression analysis is presented in table 35.

Table 35. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Customer Forgiveness

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	2.83	.09	2.65	3.01	<.001
Perceived recovery effort	.41	.03	.36	.46	<.001

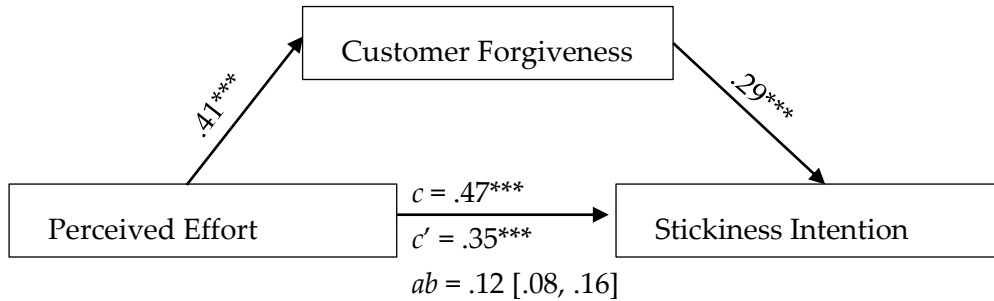
Note. N = 654. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error.

These results indicate that the perceived effort of the company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness. Therefore, the mediation analysis to test H2, "The perceived effort of the company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, which in turn enhances stickiness intention", is employed. To analyse the mediating effect of customer forgiveness on the relationship between perceived effort and stickiness intention, a mediation analysis using Hayes (2022) model 4 was conducted. Visual monitoring with a smooth LOESS approach scatterplot found approximate linearity between the variable relationships. An effect of perceived effort on stickiness intention was observed ( $B^9 = .47, p < .001$ ). After entering the mediator customer forgiveness into the model, perceived effort predicted the mediator significantly ( $B = .41, p < .001$ ), which predicted stickiness intention significantly ( $B = .29, p = .001$ ). The relationship between perceived effort and stickiness intention is partially mediated by customer forgiveness (indirect effect  $ab = .12, 95 \%, CI [.08, .16]$ ), as presented in figure 18.

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<sup>9</sup> PROCESS generates regression/path coefficients in an unstandardised format ( $B$ ), therefore  $B$  is reported here. In simple and multiple regression analysis, standardised  $\beta$  is reported (in addition to unstandardised estimates).

Figure 18. Mediation Analysis H2: Recovery Effort, Customer Forgiveness, Stickiness Intention



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

Hypothesis three, “Customer and employee empathy influence recovery expectations” (H3), is tested by employing a multiple regression analysis. It was found that customer empathy ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and employee empathy ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predicted recovery expectation ( $R^2 = .05$ ,  $F [1, 652] = 16.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the third alternative hypothesis. Considering the scenarios, this significant effect can only be found in the negative neutral scenario 2 ( $R^2 = .07$ ,  $F (1, 221) = 8.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negative angry scenario 3 ( $R^2 = .07$ ,  $F (1, 208) = 7.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 36 presents the regression analysis.

Table 36. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Recovery Expectation

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		<i>p</i>
			LL	UL	
Intercept	3.73	.42	2.89	4.55	<.001
Employee empathy	-.11	.02	-.15	-.06	<.001
Customer empathy (TEQ)	.25	.07	.11	.40	<.001

Note.  $N = 654$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error.

A multiple regression analysis tested whether self-esteem significantly predicted customer empathy (H4) (McBane, 1995). The results of the regression analysis indicated that the predictor explained 9.1 % of the variance ( $R^2 = .09$ ,  $F (1, 652) = 32.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It was found that positive and negative self-esteem

significantly predicted customer empathy (negative self-esteem:  $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$  and positive self-esteem:  $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the fourth alternative hypothesis.

Another regression was conducted to test whether emotional intensity positively relates to post-recovery satisfaction (H5). A multicollinearity test was completed, and VIF  $< 1.2$  was monitored, indicating no multicollinearity (Daoud, 2018). This test was conducted for the entire sample then for each scenario. Table 37 presents the results, which support the fifth hypothesis: all coefficients of correlation R indicate of a strong goodness-of-fit according to Cohen (1988).

Table 37. Regression Analysis for the Dependent Variable Post-Recovery Satisfaction

Scenario	Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
				LL	UL	
Intercept		2.92	.18	2.56	3.28	<.001
Entire sample	Negative EI	-.40	.03	-.46	-.34	<.001
	Positive EI	.66	.04	.58	.74	<.001
Intercept		3.38	3.2	2.73	4.05	<.001
S1	Negative EI	-.27	.07	-.42	-.15	<.001
	Positive EI	.56	.07	.42	.70	<.001
Intercept		3.00	2.5	2.50	3.51	<.001
S2	Negative EI	-.33	.05	-.43	-.23	<.001
	Positive EI	.46	.07	.31	.61	<.001
Intercept		2.18	.25	1.55	2.83	<.001
S3	Negative EI	-.25	.05	-.36	-.15	<.001
	Positive EI	.50	.07	.35	.66	<.001

Note. N = 654. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error. Entire sample:  $R^2 = .52$ ,  $F [1, 652] = 350.42$ ,  $p < .01$ . S1: ( $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F [1, 217] = 45.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). S2:  $R^2 = .33$ ,  $F [1, 221] = 54.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . S3:  $R^2 = .34$ ,  $F [1, 208] = 54.59$ ,  $p < .01$ . Analysis used 5000 sample bootstraps.

When controlling for emotional differences by perception of recovery effort, a linear regression analysis was conducted: “The recovery effort influences the customer’s perceived emotional intensity of the recovery situation”, as presented

in table 38. This analysis was applied to the different scenarios (S1, S2, and S3).<sup>10</sup> The results for S1, the empathic and positive recovery-approach experience, were as follows:  $F(1,218) = 21.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .16$ ,  $R^2$  adjusted = .16. The results for S2, the neutral recovery-approach experience, were as follows:  $F(1,221) = 25.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .19$ ,  $R^2$  adjusted = .18. Finally, the results for S3, the negative recovery-approach experience, were as follows:  $F(1,208) = 25.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .20$ ,  $R^2$  adjusted = .19.

Table 38. Regression Analysis for the Dependent Variable Perceived Recovery Effort

Scenario	Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
				LL	UL	
S1	Intercept	3.92	.37	3.13	4.67	<.001
	Negative EI	-.23	.08	-.38	-.08	<.001
	Positive EI	.45	.09	.28	.62	<.001
S2	Intercept	2.64	.36	1.93	3.35	<.001
	Negative EI	-.29	.06	-.41	-.15	<.001
	Positive EI	.41	.09	.23	.59	<.001
S3	Intercept	1.81	.34	1.18	2.50	<.001
	Negative EI	-.18	.06	-.30	-.06	<.001
	Positive EI	.31	.09	.15	.49	<.001

Note.  $N = 654$ , S1:  $n = 220$ , S2:  $n = 224$ , and S3:  $n = 211$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error. EI = emotional intensity.

A regression analysis was employed to examine the sixth hypothesis, "Employee empathy positively influences recovery performance" (H6), as presented in table 39. Recovery performance was the dependent variable, and employee empathy was the independent variable. Results indicate that employee empathy is positively related to recovery performance: an increase in employee empathy increases recovery performance (entire sample:  $R^2 = .26$ ,  $F[1, 653] = 225.04$ ,

<sup>10</sup> S1: empathic and positive recovery-approach experience, S2: neutral recovery-approach experience, and S3: negative recovery-approach experience.

$p < .001$ ,  $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This effect size varies between the scenarios. In the first scenario (positive), this effect describes 27 % of the variance, and in the two negative scenarios, the variance explanations decrease: S1: ( $R^2 = .27$ ,  $F [1, 218] = 78.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ); S2: ( $R^2 = .05$ ,  $F [1, 221] = 11.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and S3: ( $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F [1, 209] = 8.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 39. Regression Analysis Dependent Variable Recovery Performance

Sample	Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
				LL	UL	
Entire sample	Intercept	1.64	.10	1.45	1.84	<.001
	Employee Empathy	.39	.03	.34	.44	<.001
S1	Intercept	1.59	.28	.92	2.26	<.001
	Employee Empathy	.48	.05	.35	.61	<.001
S2	Intercept	2.05	.18	1.69	2.39	<.001
	Employee Empathy	.16	.05	.07	.25	<.001
S3	Intercept	1.95	.15	1.67	2.24	<.001
	Employee Empathy	.20	.07	.07	.31	<.001

Note.  $N = 654$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

A simple regression was assessed to test H7, “Perceived employee empathy enhances the customer's stickiness intention”. The independent variable was employee empathy, and the customer's stickiness intention was the dependent variable. With standardised regression coefficient of  $\beta = .55$  and  $R^2 = .32$  ( $p < .001$ ), results demonstrate support for hypothesis 7. Thus, higher levels of perceived employee empathy enhance customers stickiness intentions, as presented in table 40. When controlling for gender as a control variable, gender also became a significant predictor, indicating that customer stickiness intention is influenced by gender.

Table 40. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Employee Empathy

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	2.08	.20	1.70	2.47	<.001
Stickiness intention	.48	.03	.42	.53	<.001
Gender	-.25	.12	-.48	-.02	.032

Note.  $N = 654$ .  $R^2 = .32$ ;  $R^2_{adjusted} = .31$ ;  $F(1,652) = 148.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error. Analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples.

One-way ANOVA was conducted to analyse the effect of customer empathy on dissatisfaction reaction (different reactions after a customer experiences a dissatisfying service encounter; H8). This analysis was conducted with the entire sample. Dissatisfaction reaction was divided into one of three categories according to the following statements: "If I am dissatisfied after the service has been provided, I..."

- a) directly contact the responsible company.
- b) contact friends and family and report my dissatisfaction.
- c) usually keep my displeasure to myself.

There were no extreme outliers: according to inspection with a boxplot, only a few low outliers were included. A Shapiro–Wilk test ( $p > .05$ ) showed normally distributed data for each group, and homogeneity of variances was proven by Levene's test, which showed that equal variances could be assumed ( $p > .05$ ). The level of customer empathy (as measured by the McBane (1995) scale) varied between the behavioural reactions: (1) contact the provider ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), (2) contact friends and family ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), and (3) keep displeasure to myself ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). The dissatisfaction reaction differed statistically significantly for the different levels of customer empathy ( $F[2, 652] = 4.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results support the alternative hypothesis H8a, "Dissatisfied customer's reaction types vary depending on customer empathy".

Another one-way ANOVA was conducted to analyse H8b, which concerns whether the customer's reaction type is influenced not only by empathy level but

also by self-esteem. Before the analysis was conducted, a boxplot was performed, and no extreme outliers were detected: only a few low outliers were included. The analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. Homogeneity of variances was proven by a Levene's test, which showed that equal variances could be assumed ( $p > .05$ ). The level of negative self-esteem varied between the behavioural reactions: (1) contact the provider ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = .1.35$ ), (2) contact friends and family ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), and (3) keep displeasure to myself ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ). The dissatisfaction reaction differed statistically significantly for the different levels of negative self-esteem ( $F(2, 652) = 3.210$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results support hypothesis H8b, "Dissatisfied customer's reaction types vary depending on negative self-esteem".

Another regression analysis was employed to test whether customer empathy influences attitude towards complaints in the sample (H9). The level of empathy (customer empathy; McBane (1995)) explained a significant amount of the variance in attitude towards complaints ( $F(1,653) = 21.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $R^2$  adjusted = .03), indicating a low to moderate goodness-of-fit according to Cohen (1988). The regression coefficient ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that an increase in customer empathy corresponded, on average, with a decrease in the attitude towards complaints by -.35 points. The regression analysis is presented in table 41. These results support H9, "Customer empathy (McBane) mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints".

Table 41. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Attitude Towards Complaints (H9)

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	5.86	.38	5.08	6.54	<.001
Customer empathy (McBane, 1995)	-.35	.08	-.51	-.20	<.001

Note.  $N = 654$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; and SE = standard error.

When controlling for gender differences by customer forgiveness, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to analyse the effect of gender on customer forgiveness. Gender was divided into two categories: male and female.<sup>11</sup> In the questionnaire, the probands could select additional gender identities, but according to data reduction and clearance, no gender identity other than male and female was included in the final samples. There was a statistically significant difference between gender and customer forgiveness ( $t [654] = .69.08, p < .001, d = 5.40$ ). Therefore, customer forgiveness does differ for gender identities.

Additionally, gender differences between empathy tendencies (TEQ) were analysed, and a significant influence of gender on customer empathy was found. This result indicates that females score higher on customer empathy ( $t [654] = 227.22, p < .001$ ).

The relationship between emotional intensities before and after the study were also analysed. The customer's emotion before experiencing the recovery attempt significant influence the customer's emotion after experiencing the recovery attempt ( $\beta = .38, p = < .001$ ; (before),  $R^2 = .15, F (1,653) = 112.47, p < .001, CI [.33, .48]$ ).

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<sup>11</sup> The categorisation in this highly simplified representation is made for reasons of simplicity, knowing that these two categories do not represent the entire diversity of gender identities.

Table 42 provides an overview of the results of study 2. These results serve to answer the research question RQ2, “Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity influence customer forgiveness and post-recovery satisfaction?”.

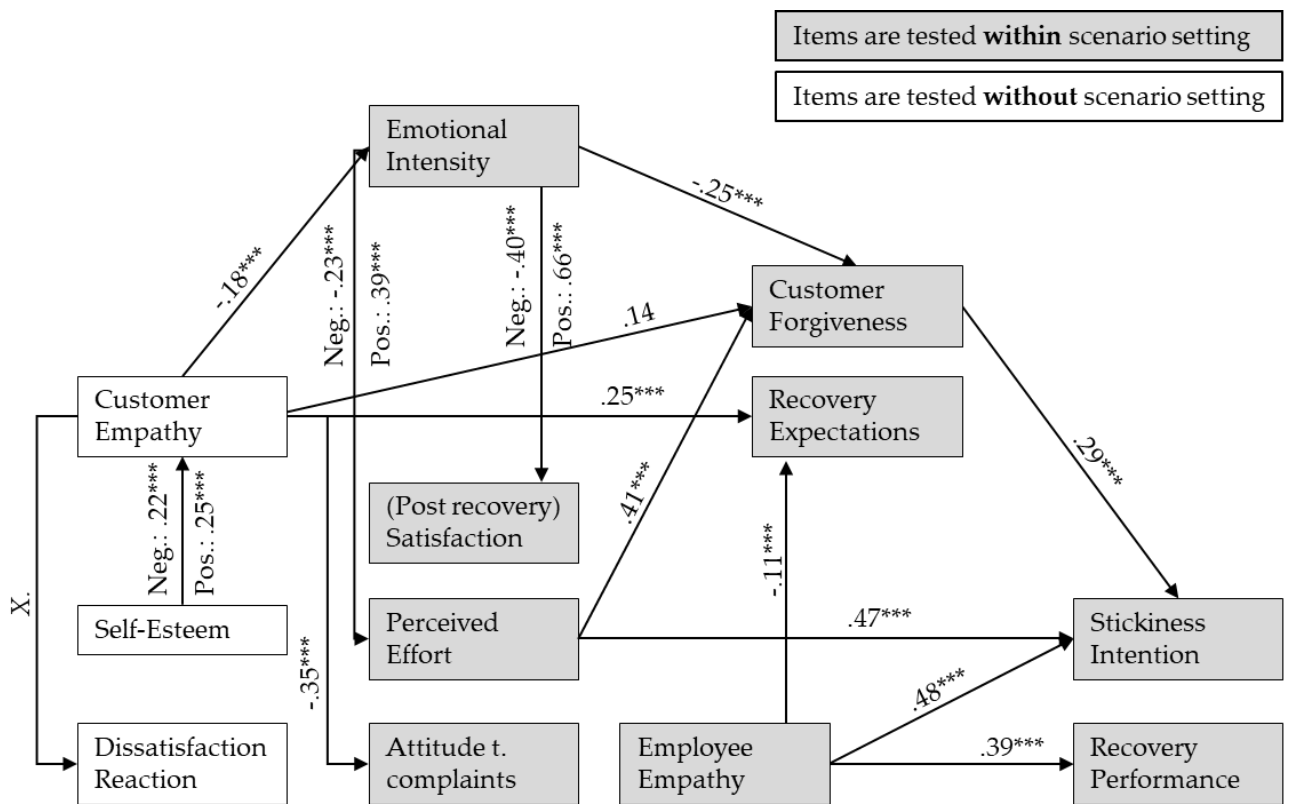
Table 42. Results of Study 2

Hypotheses	Hypotheses Testing			
	S1	S2	S3	Entire Sample
<b>H1:</b> Customer empathy (TEQ) mitigates the perceived emotional intensity of service-failure-redress situations, which in turn enhances customer forgiveness.				✓ fully mediated
<b>H2:</b> The perceived effort of a company’s recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, which in turn enhances stickiness intention.				✓
<b>H3:</b> Customer (TEQ) and employee empathy influence recovery expectations.		✓	✓	✓
<b>H4:</b> Self-esteem is positively related to customer empathy.				✓
<b>H5:</b> Emotional intensity is related to post recovery satisfaction.	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>H6:</b> Employee empathy positively influences recovery performance.	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>H7:</b> Perceived employee empathy enhances the customer’s stickiness intention.				✓
<b>H8a, 8b:</b> Dissatisfied customers’ reaction types vary depending on empathy (McBane) and self-esteem.				✓
<b>H9:</b> Customer empathy (McBane) mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints.				✓

Note. S1= scenario 1 (positive), S2 = scenario 2 (neutral), and S3 = scenario 3 (negative). “✓” indicates the hypothesis is supported.

Figure 19 presents the study 2 results in a graphical overview, and all relations are shown. The variables coloured in grey were tested in the scenario setting, and those coloured in white were tested in general. The scenario settings included (1) an empathic and positive recovery-approach experience, (2) a neutral recovery approach-experience, and (3) a negative recovery approach-experience (presented in detail in section 5.1.3. Sample and Procedure).

Figure 19. Graphical Presentation of Research Results of Study 2



Note. Based on the author's elaboration. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\*indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $.01 \leq p < .05$ . The analyses were conducted separately and not as one connected coherent analysis. Paths shown in the figure are non-standardised regression weights. X = an ANOVA was conducted, thus no regression weight can be provided. The effect from emotional intensity on perceived effort reports the mean regression weights of the scenarios, thus the analysis was not conducted for the entire sample.

### 5.3. DISCUSSION

The findings of study 2 are evaluated in this section concerning the current state of research. Subsequently, the study's advantages and disadvantages are highlighted, along with the need for further research and applicability.

#### 5.3.1. Interpretation within the Current State of Research

The results of study 2 indicate that customer empathy mitigates perceived emotional intensity, which in turn positively affects customer forgiveness. The mediating analysis conducted for H1 supports the fully mediating effect of emotional intensity in the relationship between customer empathy and forgiveness. Neither a direct or total impact of customer empathy on customer forgiveness was found (H1, answer of RQ2.1).

Thus, the results indicate that empathic consumers are more likely to empathise with the difficulties of customer-service employees, so their emotional arousal and thus their emotional intensity is lower than that of unempathetic/less empathetic customers. This finding aligns with Bitner et al. (1990) and Wieseke et al. (2012), who state that empathic customers are more likely to empathise and are aware of the difficulties of customer-service agents and their working conditions. People with greater empathy respond less angrily than people with less empathy (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Wieseke et al., 2012). Hence, empathic humans are more sensitive to anticipating emotions, and empathy influences awareness of emotions. This finding confirms previous scientific work (e.g., Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003; Karlstetter, 2017; Wieseke et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, no direct effect of customer empathy (TEQ) on customers' forgiveness was observed. The effect was fully mediated by the customers' perceived emotional intensity. This result contradicts the findings of C. Wei et al. (2020), which demonstrated that customers empathy towards a firm significantly increased consumer forgiveness. However, the researchers used a shortened version of the empathy scale and measure it more as a motivational empathy towards the firm. It need to be mentioned, that the in study 2 used customer empathy scale focus on stable customer empathy, without the motivational relation to the scenario. Hence, it is suggested to re-run the experimental setting from study

2 using a brief and motivational empathy measurement, for instance, with the scale from J. Wei et al. (2022). According to current research, customer forgiveness is an essential factor that enhances positive and mitigates negative customer-service evaluation (Umar & Saleem, 2022).

As an additional effect in this relationship, it is essential to mention the influence of the before emotions on the after emotions (meaning that customers' emotions before experiencing the service failure affect those after experiencing the service failure). This effect is a realistic representation of emotions affecting overall human behaviour: emotions can form general well-being, cognitive processes, attention, and behaviour (Izard, 2010; Zou et al., 2021).

The analysis indicates that the perceived effort of a company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, improving stickiness intention (H2, answer of RQ2.2). Thus, the perception of greater effort being put into complaint-handling processes to resolve the problem or failure will increase customer forgiveness after a negative interaction. For example, a company may spend money on training employees in complaint-handling approaches or opening communication channels for customers where they can communicate their problems or inquiries. Consequently, customer forgiveness will increase the customer's intention to stick (customer loyalty). Thus, a customer who forgave a service failure is likelier to stick with the company. This insight is, from a financial perspective, essential, because, for most companies, it is more expensive to attract new customers than revitalise existing customer relationships (Ahn et al., 2020). Thus, investing in approaches that enhance customer forgiveness is recommended. These findings align with the research of Harrison-Walker (2019), which finds that customer forgiveness increases reconciliation. Specifically, customer forgiveness mediates the effects of recovery strategies, such as apology, the possibility opportunity to voice a complaint, and compensation, on favourable and desirable recovery outcomes (diminished negative WoM-giving intention, reconciliation, and patronage intention (Harrison-Walker, 2019).

Data analysis suggests that customer and employee empathy influenced recovery expectations in the entire sample (H3, answer of RQ2.3). This analysis was also conducted for each scenario. As a reminder, the emotional intensities are presented again: (1) positive, (2) negative neutral, (3) negative and angry. This

significant effect was only found in the negative-neutral S2 and the negative-angry S3, which indicates that no recovery expectation was needed in S1 because an appropriate solution was provided for the customer. The results suggest that higher employee empathy mitigates recovery expectations, and customer empathy increases recovery expectations. Hence, an empathic human has higher expectations towards a company regarding their recovery efforts. This finding indicates that empathic customers are more sensitive to recovery approaches because the complaint pain seems stronger for them. The decrease in recovery expectations when the employee is empathic aligns with the study of Umar and Saleem (2022), who elucidates that employee empathy has favourable effects on complaint handling.

Hypotheses testing of H4 reveals that self-esteem is positively related to customer empathy (answer of RQ2.4). This finding is based on the idea that self-esteem and empathy are two close constructs with similar main characteristics (Davis, 1983a; Guasp Coll et al., 2020; L. Huang et al., 2019). The relationship between these two constructs was also found in this research, indicating that high empathy scores highly interact with negative self-esteem scores. It was found that self-esteem significantly predicted customer empathy.

Recent studies have analysed the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship of recovery strategies (gratitude versus empathic apology) to post-recovery loyalty. This research reveals that the impact of gratitude on self-esteem is stronger than the impact of empathic apologies (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021). Specifically, the “shift of focus in the service provider–consumer interaction, from emphasizing service providers’ fault and accountability (apology) to spotlighting consumers’ merits and contributions (appreciation)” (You et al., 2019, p. 1) can increase customers self-esteem and their post-recovery satisfaction and loyalty (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021; You et al., 2019). As such, it is important to include gratitude in recovery approaches, especially in failures, which harm the customer’s self-esteem. Generally, a process failure is more threatening to self-esteem than an outcome failure (Y. Huang et al., 2020).

Hypotheses testing of H5 found that emotional intensity is related to post-recovery satisfaction (answer of RQ2.5). Negative emotional intensities negatively influence post-recovery satisfaction, and in the case of positive emotional intensity,

the emotional intensity increases post-recovery satisfaction. This is a central finding in complaint research and is supported by previous research, such as Roger (1997). The reduction in negative emotions and increase in positive feelings towards the service provider enhances customers satisfaction based on the *catharsis effect*<sup>12</sup> (Roger, 1997).

According to Hess et al. (2003), service-failure severity increases customers' service-recovery expectations. Adapting this finding to emotional intensity, a strong failure severity can be equated with negative emotional intensities, and higher recovery expectations mean greater post-recovery dissatisfaction. Emotional intensity was influential in the entire sample and the specific scenarios: this effect was found in every scenario, and all levels of emotional intensity influenced post-recovery satisfaction.

Additionally, study 2 indicates that employee empathy positively influences recovery performance (H6, answer of RQ2.6). Employee empathy is crucial for successful customer-service agents (e.g., Clark et al., 2013). For instance, Pugh (2001) states that employees displaying positive emotions can increase customers' perception of service encounters positively and enhance their evaluation of service quality due to emotional contagion. In critical interactions, it is even more important that the employee can share the customers' emotions: only by providing these competency skills can the employee decide which recovery solutions suit the customer (Clark et al., 2013). Some customers need more individual attention or apologies than others; hence, an empathic work approach is recommended to detect appropriate empathy levels (Clark et al., 2013). Nevertheless, employees cannot spread empathy for every customer because, in general, there is a maximum empathy capacity that normal humans can demonstrate towards others (Hodges & Klein, 2001).

As explained previously, employee empathy is essential in successful customer–employee interaction and specifically in successful recovery performance. Additionally, the study revealed that perceived employee empathy enhances stickiness intention (H7, answer of RQ2.7). A successful recovery

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<sup>12</sup> Catharsis effect was first introduced by Sigmund Freud and explains a relief-process of personal anger and inner conflicts (Roger, 1997).

performance produces a high customer stickiness intention (customer loyalty). Hence, the logical consequence of high employee empathy in the complaint-handling strategy is achieving customer stickiness in cases of successful complaint recovery. Xie and Peng (2009) also indicate that employee empathy is essential for customer forgiveness. The authors analyse recovery processes and customer forgiveness and suggest that service employees act empathically to mitigate negative service experiences and create interpersonal customer forgiveness. The research of Roschk and Kaiser (2013) differentiates employee empathy behaviour in more detail, finding that empathic employee apologies have a greater influence on recovery satisfaction when the failures are process and not outcome failures.

The current study also found that a dissatisfied customer's reaction ("If I am dissatisfied after the service has been provided, I... (a) directly contact the responsible company, (b) contact friends and family and report my dissatisfaction, or (c) usually keep my displeasure to myself") depends on customer empathy and self-esteem. The results suggest that dissatisfied customers' reaction types vary depending on empathy (H8a, 8b, answer of RQ2.8). Empathic customers tend to keep their displeasure to themselves, like low self-esteem customers. The second most common behavioural reaction was to contact friends and family and report dissatisfaction, and the most unlikely behavioural response was direct contact with the responsible company. This result aligns with most research, where self-esteem has been identified as an essential characteristic for complaint behaviour (e.g., Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021; Y. Huang et al., 2020; Phau & Baird, 2008). Previous research has distinguished between failures in terms of which harm customers' self-esteem more strongly than others, and process failure seems to threaten customers' self-esteem and social needs (Y. Huang et al., 2020). Behaviour, that satisfies customers' self-esteem can create positive consumer behaviour and vice versa (Schneider & Bowen, 1999).

Hypothesis testing of H9 indicates that customer empathy (McBane, 1995) mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints, which aligns with the findings of H8 that reveal empathic customers are more likely to keep their displeasure to themselves. Accordingly, when humans do not complain frequently or have previous complaint experiences, they have a lower attitude towards complaints

(Halim & Christian, 2013). Thus, results indicate that empathic customers do not have a favourable attitude towards complaints in general.

Finally, gender differences were analysed, and the results indicate that gender significantly affects customer forgiveness, and customer empathy varies according to gender. Gender-based differences in empathy have been acknowledged in research for some time (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). The difference has been explained as a systematic bias elicited by gender roles and stereotypical beliefs (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021). However, the influence of gender on customer forgiveness in the current study contrasts with previous research, where no influence of gender on customer forgiveness was found (Toussaint & Webb, 2005).

### 5.3.2. Limitations and Implications

The instrument that measured customer forgiveness has a Cronbach's-alpha value of  $< .70$ , which, in most research, is considered inappropriate for further analysis. This result is surprising because the internal consistency of the original scale was appropriate, with a Cronbach's alpha value of  $> .70$  (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021). However, some scientists recommend using measurements with this result or not directly removing them from the analysis when the measure has other properties, such as meaningful content (Schecker, 2014). However, it is necessary to mention that weak internal consistency is critical. The discussion above and any further interpretations must consider this caveat of low  $\alpha$  values because results could potentially underestimate any relationships between the variables (Schmitt, 1996).

Another cause for this surprising value could be an inappropriate back-and-forward translation of the item text. Although the items were pre-tested before the main study, and the variables worked, it is highly recommended that the translation be adapted before re-using the customer-forgiveness measurement. Therefore, for study 3, customer forgiveness will also be measured with another customer-forgiveness measurement based on J. Wei et al. (2022) (see [6.1.2. Research Material and Scales](#)).

Concerning the mediation analysis conducted in the studies, it is essential to note that current research does not demonstrate that mediation analysis should be stopped if the direct or total effect is insignificant. Based on the classic assumption from Baron and Kenny (1986), a significant direct or total effect is an inevitable requirement of mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Recent research disagrees with this requirement because the indirect effect describes the mediation's overall effect, which is the crucial criterion for many statisticians to speak of mediation (Gelfand et al., 2009; MacKinnon et al., 2008; Rucker et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2010).

The previously mentioned caveat of a low  $\alpha$ -value for customer forgiveness indicates the need for future research. It is suggested that, for future research, the effect of customer forgiveness be analysed with other customer-forgiveness scales, as will be done in study 3.

In contrast to the weak Cronbach's-alpha value just discussed, the  $\alpha$ -value of the stickiness-intention measurement using a scale from Li et al. (2006) is high. The original scale already elicits a high  $\alpha$  value of .99. The value from study 2 is a somewhat lower  $\alpha$  value of .97, but this number is still high, indicating the item content may be formulated too closely and similarly.

Study 2 strived to reveal influences on recovery in general but not on recovery types in detail, such as differences of various financial reimbursements or apologies. Therefore, in study 3 the same scenario setting of study 2 is adopted to analyse differences of distinct recovery types, which will satisfy this research need.

Accordingly, it is essential to conduct a scenario setting where customer empathy can be costly for the customer, such as increased or decreased compensation when empathising with an employee.

A practical implication of study 2 indicated that it is worth investing in the training of employees on how to approach a suitable complaint recovery because employee empathy increases recovery performance. Additionally, the results show that customers' emotions significantly affect customer forgiveness. Hence, in customer-employee interactions, it is recommended to create a pleasant atmosphere to reduce any negative customer emotions.



**VI – STUDY 3: EFFECT OF  
CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE  
EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL  
INTENSITY ON CUSTOMER  
FORGIVENESS AND  
STICKINESS INTENTION**

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## VI -STUDY 3: EFFECT OF CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY ON CUSTOMER FORGIVENESS AND STICKINESS INTENTION

This section presents the third study's methodology, including the research design, material, scales, and sample. The procedure used in this study is described, followed by the results and the discussion, where future research is considered.

### 6.1. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY 3

#### 6.1.1. Research Design

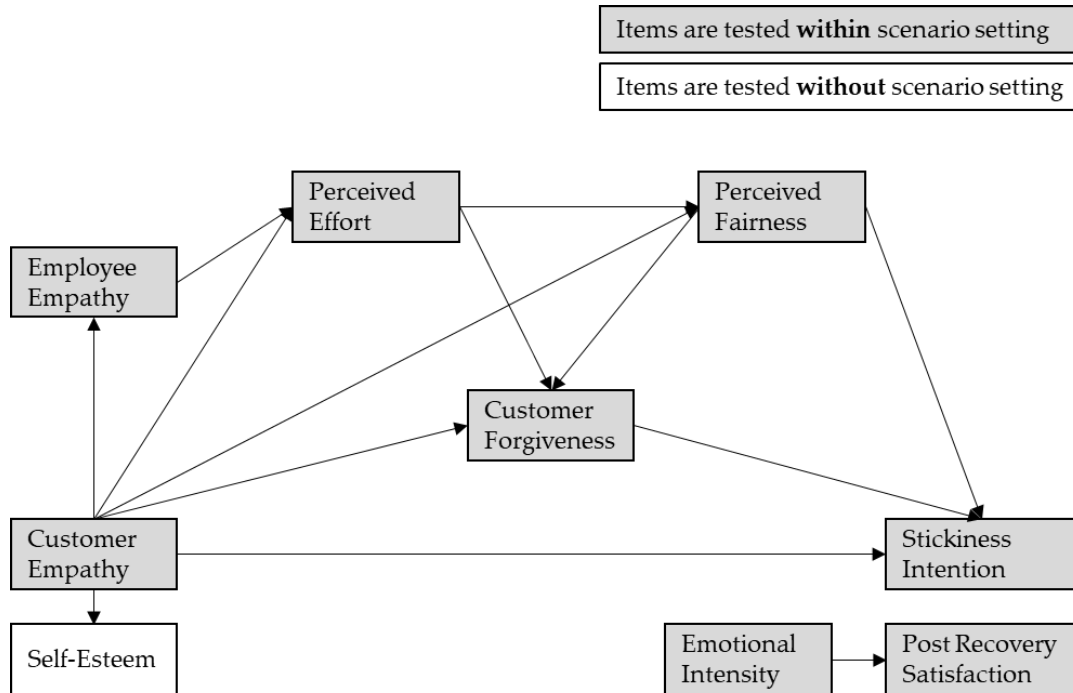
Study 3 applies an experimental scenario approach based on an online study with the purpose of revealing recovery-success differences. Recovery success means to create high customer forgiveness and stickiness intention after customers experience service failures and the company has attempted to fix the failure. Recovery-success differences caused by customer empathy, customer self-esteem, emotional intensity, and employee empathy are analysed.

The main RQ3 is as follows: "Do customer empathy and emotional intensity create recovery-success differences?". For all the research questions of Study 3, see [1.2. Objectives and Research Questions](#). Perceived effort is analysed as a further variable of the recovery situation. A quantitative approach is used because recovery effectiveness has been researched for decades (Mir et al., 2023). Established theoretical theories about recovery approaches allow the development of hypotheses from existing research (see section [2.5.3. Hypotheses Development Study 3](#)). The research object is presented in figure 20.

Study 3 variables are tested either within or without scenario settings. For instance, customer empathy is tested without a scenario setting (in general), such as how empathic a customer is in general, and is coloured in white. The grey variables are tested in relation to the specific complaint scenario. The variables coloured in white are directly tested and those coloured in grey boxes refer to the manipulated variables in the experimental research. The scenario setting is an

empathic and positive recovery-approach experience, with five different compensation types (different scenarios are presented in detail in section [6.1.3. Sample and Procedure](#)).

Figure 20. Research Objectives of Study 3



Note. Based on the author's elaboration. Derived from research models discussed in section [2.5.3. Hypotheses Development Study 3](#), such as Social-Exchange Theory and Forgiveness Theory.

### 6.1.2. Research Material and Scales

This section presents the constructs and measurements of study 3 followed by a justification of why these scales are used and valid. The measurements are taken from existing research and adapted to the specific recovery context. An overview of all scales and item texts used can be found in the [appendix](#).

The general standard quality criteria, objectivity, reliability, and validity, of quantitative research are also essential for experimental research (Mattila et al., 2021). Quality criteria reliability can be granted because all measurement instruments obtain Cronbach's-alpha values of  $> .70$  (see individual scale

description below), which indicates high reliability. Validity can also be considered satisfied because all scales were part of prior research and have already been empirically tested and validated. The survey tool blocked any changes to the data while the questionnaire was live. Additionally, the data was collected anonymously, so it was not possible for the researcher to have any contact with the participants. Objectivity can be ensured by preventing the researcher from having any influence on the participants. Ultimately, all quality criteria are ensured for the third study.

Hereafter, the measurement instruments of study 3 are justified. Some variables of study 3 have already been part of studies 1 and 2. To provide a coherent overview, the justified variables used in studies 1 and 2 are listed and justified again here:

- a) Customer empathy (McBane, 1995; and TEQ from Totan et al., 2012) (Studies 1 + 2)
- b) Employee empathy (Studies 1 + 2)
- c) Emotional intensity (Studies 1 + 2)
- d) Stickiness intention (Studies 2)
- e) Perceived effort (Study 2)
- f) Self-esteem (Study 2)

*Customer empathy* is based on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009), which is established in empathy research (Lima & Osório, 2021). The TEQ was designed to measure empathy and will be adapted to measure customer empathy. TEQ is a brief, valid, and reliable instrument for assessing empathy (Spreng et al., 2009) and is a self-rated empathy measurement tool (Lima & Osório, 2021). The original version (Spreng et al., 2009) has 16 items. However, this study uses the validated and shortened version of the TEQ (Totan et al., 2012), which consists of 13 items and has (like the extended version) appropriate validity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha .79–.85 (Totan et al., 2012). Examples of item text include "It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully" or "I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness". Customer empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *occasionally*, 4 = *sometimes*, 5 = *frequently*, 6 = *usually*, and 7 = *every time* (Totan et al., 2012).

As a second instrument to measure *customer empathy*, the McBane scale of empathy was used. This scale was initially developed by Davis (1980) before being adapted by McBane (1995) and later Wieseke et al. (2012), who used the scale in the context of customer and employee empathy. The instrument measures empathy within a three-factor structure: perspective-taking, empathic concern and emotional contagion. According to Wieseke et al. (2012), the scale has sufficient Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted, suggesting reliability and convergent validity. The scale was reported on a seven-point Likert scale, with the verbal scale description of 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree* (Wieseke et al., 2012). An example of item text is "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both" (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 327).

*Employee empathy* (EE) is measured with an established scale (Parasuraman et al., 1994) that was validated and adapted from Markovic et al. (2015), who shortened the scale to four items. Customers' perception of employee empathy assesses employee empathy. The scale was highly reliable (.91). An example of item text is "the brand employees give customers individual attention". Employee empathy was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *completely agree* (Markovic et al., 2015).

The *emotional intensity* (EI) measurement is based on the method of Wetzer et al. (2007), which measures the emotions felt after a negative consumption experience. López-López et al. (2014) first adapted this scale to measure positive and negative emotions separately as two opposite valences of emotions as it is broad knowledge in the research of emotions (Umasuthan et al., 2017). The measurement of positive versus negative emotions, using this two dimensional framework, is an approved evaluation of emotional service experiences. Using this measurement gain insights into customers' overall experiences and the influence of these experiences on behavioural intention can be obtained (López-López et al., 2014; Umasuthan et al., 2017). Wierzbicka (1992, p. 577) demonstrates that the concept of emotions, including the basic emotions, "such as anger or sadness, can be 'defined in terms of universal semantic primitives such as 'good', 'bad', 'do', 'happen', 'know', and 'want', in terms of which all areas of meaning, in all languages, can be rigorously and revealingly portrayed". Employing this two-dimensional framework (positive versus negative emotional intensity) to evaluate

customers' emotional consumption experience is widespread in consumer research (Umasuthan et al., 2017). This process facilitates an understanding of customers' overall experiences and the impact of these experiences on behavioural intention (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Emotional intensity was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very easy*, 2 = *easy*, 3 = *somewhat easy*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *somewhat hard*, 6 = *hard*, to 7 = *very hard*.

The *stickiness intention* measurement is based on research from Li et al. (2006) and describes the future use of a purchased product or past service. This measurement consists of three items, such as "I expect my use of this product to continue in the future", and has a high reliability (.99). The items were also adapted from the product context to the service context. Stickiness intention was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The *self-esteem* measurement is based initially on Rosenberg (1965), but the revised German version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale by Collani and Herzberg (2003) is used here. Self-esteem is measured with 10 items, and the participant must self-evaluate themselves. The measurement distinguishes between positive and negative self-esteem, measuring five items each (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). An example of item text is "I am able to do things as well as most other people". Cronbach's reliability is also high (.84) (Collani & Herzberg, 2003). Self-esteem was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The construct of *perceived effort* is based on Cambra-Fierro and Melero-Polo (2017), who adapted the scale from Karatepe (2006). The scale explains an employee's effort to resolve a customer's inquiry. Its Cronbach's alpha is .93, indicating good internal reliability (Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017). An example of item text includes, for instance, "Staff did everything in their power to resolve the problem" (Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017). Perceived effort was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Customer empathy (C. Wei et al., 2020; J. Wei et al., 2022), customer empathy towards the firm, customer forgiveness (a different scale than study 2), and perceived fairness are used for the first time. All instruments are taken from the existing literature and adapted to the specific recovery situation. An overview of all instruments in study 3, as well as item text and the Cronbach's alpha values of the original authors, can be found in [appendix](#) (6).

Two further measurements of empathy are considered to measure *customer empathy* in the third study. First, customer empathy is measured with items based on the work of J. Wei et al. (2022), with item text such as "I can understand the difficulties of online stores" (J. Wei et al., 2022). The scale was adapted to the context of customer services instead of online stores. The results were reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha value in the original work of J. Wei et al. (2022) is > .81, thus good internal reliability is indicated.

As a second customer empathy measurement, the following is considered: *customer empathy towards the firm* describes how much empathy a customer feels and shows towards a firm (C. Wei et al., 2020). It is measured using a scale adapted from C. Wei et al. (2020), although the scale was first provided by Wieseke et al. (2012). The scale has three items with item text such as "I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person, and I can understand the trouble of the company". Customer empathy towards the firm was reported on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree*. Its Cronbach's alpha is > .83, indicating good internal reliability (C. Wei et al., 2020).

In contrast to study 2, in study 3, *customer forgiveness* is measured with an instrument based on research by J. Wei et al. (2022). Its Cronbach's alpha is .73, indicating good internal reliability. An example of item text is "I agree with the material compensation of the online store" or "I forgive the mistakes of the online store" (J. Wei et al., 2022, p. 5). Customer forgiveness was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

*Perceived fairness* describes how fair customers find the complaint-recovery approach. The scale is taken from existing research by (C. Wei et al., 2020), where it exhibits good internal reliability by providing a Cronbach's alpha value > .86.

Originally, C. Wei et al. (2020) adapted the scale from (Mattila & Patterson, 2004). An example of item text is “The company’s resolution is acceptable” (C. Wei et al., 2020). Perceived fairness was reported on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

In the absence of German-translated scales, a double-iterative back-translation process was applied to translate the scales from English into German (Brislin, 1970; P. S. Jones et al., 2001). Hence, the following scales were translated using this process: customer empathy, customer forgiveness, emotional intensity, employee empathy, post-recovery satisfaction, stickiness intention, perceived effort, and perceived fairness.

The questionnaire ends with questions about socio-demographic characteristics: age, family status, gender identity, income, education, and work. The income variable includes indicators of status, such as education and occupation (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2016), which is a common approach.

The questionnaire used a self-assessment approach, which means the participants evaluated themselves and the evaluation is built on their personal assessments, not external ones. Education has no impact on one’s capacity to self-assess, as demonstrated by Collani and Herzberg (2003). As a result, this approach seems valid and is frequently employed in research on consumer behaviour (Sahaf & Fazili, 2023).

### 6.1.3. Sample and Procedure

Study 3’s procedure was similar to those of studies 1 and 2. The online questionnaire was designed using the scientific survey tool SoSci Survey, developed by Leiner (2019). The survey can be completed on either a laptop or a smartphone with a web browser. Before commencing the questionnaire, permission for scientific data use is requested and notes for anonymity are provided. Remedies to mitigate method bias were also applied: anonymous, confidential, and voluntary participation. A general introduction explained that no wrong answers were possible and spontaneous answers were desired. These actions minimised method bias and encouraged respondents to complete the questionnaire (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Questionnaire duration is approximately 10 minutes.

To identify probands, that were distracted many times, a distraction question was part of the questionnaire: “Were you able to complete the questionnaire without any distraction?”. Probands, that were distracted more than once, were removed from the sample. A complete description of the collected data-quality validation can be found in section [6.2.1. Descriptive Statistics](#), where the sample size is shown.

The target group is people of all genders who are older than 18, have made purchases online, and intend to place themselves in the position of the fictive dissatisfied customer of the scenario. The scenario of study 3 is a company’s recovery approach with five different recovery compensations. After a complaint, the company attempted to recover the customer relationship from the service failure. Therefore, the company replied to online customer evaluations after the service failure and provided different compensations. The employee’s emotional state is an empathic, positive recovery-approach experience (the same as used in study 2 for the positive scenario). Only the compensations vary between the scenarios. Five scenarios are conducted to analyse the influence of customer empathy and emotional intensity within different service-recovery compensation approaches, as presented in table 41.

The scenario, like in studies 1 and 2, is based on an online printer purchase that has been evaluated poorly by a dissatisfied customer. The exact reasons for the choice of a printer purchase are the same as in the previous studies (less emotional; technical, functional good; many households; typical search good). As in studies 1 and 2, the failure is due to a poor customer-service interaction and not poor technical functionality. Each proband sees the same online customer review about a poor customer-service interaction:

*I called customer service because I had a question about my printer. From the beginning, the employee seems pretty annoyed and unfriendly; for example, he said, “What do I know what you did to your printer?” Instead of providing help, he suggested to read the “foolproof” user manual and recommended that I visit the local copy shop. After that, he hung up. At the last moment, he called me an “idiot”. What a rude behaviour. The last \*\*\* Do not buy there!!! (Abend et al., 2023)*

After the probands saw the customer-review text (identical in all scenarios), they saw the compensation types, as presented in table 43. The recovery texts are generally similar, and only the compensation varies (bold text):

*Response from the supplier:*

*Dear Kai Schmitz, I am very sorry that you were dissatisfied with our customer service. I would like to apologise for the inconvenience caused. I can well imagine how frustrating and annoying the situation was for you. Please be assured that your experience was not our standard, and we have taken appropriate actions. To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of **EUR 20.00 to your bank account**, and you will receive a parcel with **new printer ink cartridges**. Has your question been resolved in the meantime? If not, may I contact you by telephone? Alternatively, you can watch the online tutorials. Thank you for your valuable feedback; I am happy to help you personally!*


Table 43. Overview of Study 3 Scenarios


<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Compensation</b>
S1	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of <b>EUR 20.00 to your bank account</b> , and you will receive a parcel with <b>new printer ink cartridges</b> .
S2	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of <b>EUR 5.00 to your bank account</b> , and you will receive a parcel with <b>new printer ink cartridges</b> .
S3	To mitigate your anger, will receive a parcel with <b>new printer ink cartridges</b> .
S4	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of <b>EUR 20.00 to your bank account</b> .
S5	To mitigate your anger, I would like to apologise to you once again.

Note. S indicates "scenario".

In the questionnaire, the scenario is presented as a realistic customer-experience setting. Figure 21 shows an example of the review and recovery setting. A complete overview of all scenarios can be found in [appendix \(3\)](#).

Figure 21. Example of Study 3 Customer-Recovery Setting

 Kai Schmitz

 **Unverschämter Kundenservice Mitarbeiter**

Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2023

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!

**Antwort des Anbieters:**

Lieber Kai Schmitz,  
es tut mir sehr leid, dass Sie mit unserem Service unzufrieden waren. Ich möchte mich für die Ihnen entstandenen Unannehmlichkeiten entschuldigen. Ich kann mir gut vorstellen, wie frustrierend und ärgerlich die Situation für Sie war. Bitte seien Sie versichert, dass Ihre Erfahrung nicht dem Standard entspricht und wir entsprechende Maßnahmen ergriffen haben. Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, habe ich soeben eine Entschädigung i.H.v. **20,00 EUR auf Ihr Konto überwiesen.**

Hat sich Ihre Frage in der Zwischenzeit geklärt? Darf ich Sie ansonsten telefonisch kontaktieren? Alternativ können Sie [online die Tutorials](#) zu den Funktionen ansehen.

Danke für Ihr wertvolles Feedback; ich bin gerne persönlich für Sie da!

An experimental study must be validated extensively; thus, a pretest was conducted to verify the measurement instruments and the scenario setting. The pretest occurred in November with  $N = 25$ . Compared to the previous two studies, this pretest was smaller because the general scenario had already been tested (Study 2 positive scenario).

Therefore, a pretest was conducted with postgraduate students to verify the questionnaire's wording, readability, and duration.

## 6.2. RESULTS OF STUDY 3

### 6.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

Data collection for study 3 occurred from December 2023 until February 2024 at a German university of applied sciences. As in the previous studies (1 and 2), the participants were recruited online using the university's student-recruitment platform as a reward for course credits. Overall, 682 students participated in the study. However, to achieve high data quality, 102 probands were removed from the data sample because of insufficient quality: 9 probands were distracted<sup>13</sup> multiple times during the questionnaire, 29 probands rushed through the questionnaire (less than 400 seconds), 11 probands just wanted to take a look, and 53 probands did not reach the last page of the questionnaire.

After the data-clearance process, 580 objects were retained as valid and acted as probands of study 3 ( $N = 580$ ). The allocation between the scenarios is characterised as follows: S1:  $n = 115$  (19.8 %), S2:  $n = 119$  (20.5 %), S3:  $n = 115$  (19.8 %), S4:  $n = 116$  (20.0 %), and S5:  $n = 115$  (19.8 %).

According to the program G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009), the sample size is sufficient: a minimum of  $N = 107$  to reach a statistical power of .95 was achieved. Additionally, the scenarios exceed this minimum, so the research objective is sufficient.

Table 44 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. 99.7 % of participants were from Germany and were employees (69.3 %). The gender of the participants was 68.5 % female and 31.5 % male. Finally, the mean age was 25.9 years in the entire sample.

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<sup>13</sup> The questionnaire includes a distraction question, "Were you able to complete the questionnaire without any distraction?".

Table 44. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants Study 3

	Entire Sample	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Gender	580	115	119	115	116	115
Female	397	78	77	80	75	87
Male	183	37	42	35	41	28
Age	25.9	25.6	26.8	25.5	25.8	25.7
<b>Employment</b>						
Student	26.2 %	Self-employed		1.0 %		
Employee	69.3 %	Others		2.6 %		
Civil servant	.5 %					
<b>Income in EUR (Net monthly)</b>						
> 250	2.0 %	2001–3000		45.2 %		
251–500	5.0 %	3001–4000		7.4 %		
501–1000	4.8 %	4001–5000		2.2 %		
1001–1500	17.2 %	> 5001		1.0 %		
1501–2000	19.3 %	No answer		1.7 %		
Country	99.7 % from Germany					

Reliability analyses were applied to verify the internal consistency of study 3. Cronbach's alpha-values were predominantly satisfactory (table 45). All scales were appropriate and reached the minimum reliability level defined by most literature of  $\alpha = .70$  (Schmitt, 1996). Cronbach's alpha-values ranged between  $\alpha = .70$  (e.g., emotional intensity before and) and  $\alpha = .97$  (stickiness intention).

Table 45. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Cronbach's Alpha for Study 3

Variable	Entire sample			Mean					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	
C. empathy (TEQ)	5.66	0.66	.78	5.64	5.55	5.71	5.60	5.79	
C. empathy (McB)	4.65	0.75	.77	4.69	4.59	4.63	4.66	4.67	
Empathy tow. firm	4.65	1.27	.80	4.70	4.57	4.77	4.61	4.62	
Empathy (Wei)	3.95	1.21	.70	3.96	3.84	4.12	3.95	3.90	
Employee empathy	4.46	1.79	.95	4.75	4.38	4.77	4.21	4.19	
C. forgiveness (Wei)	5.00	1.50	.89	5.33	4.80	5.44	4.88	4.54	
before	Total EI	2.90	0.77	.70	2.96	2.91	3.00	2.83	2.80
	Negative EI	2.11	1.11	.92	2.20	2.06	2.09	2.12	2.07
	Positive EI	3.69	1.23	.89	3.72	3.76	3.91	3.53	3.53
after	Total EI	2.72	0.73	.81	2.71	2.77	2.75	2.78	2.61
	Negative EI	2.44	1.36	.90	2.14	2.66	2.22	2.49	2.66
	Positive EI	3.01	1.31	.91	3.27	2.88	3.28	3.07	2.55
Neg. self-esteem	2.86	1.30	.86	2.89	2.78	2.68	2.91	3.05	
Positive self-esteem	5.39	0.93	.84	5.32	5.40	5.60	5.30	5.35	
Stickiness intention	4.65	1.49	.97	5.00	4.55	4.86	4.44	4.39	
Perceived effort	4.41	1.88	.96	4.78	4.40	4.84	4.18	3.86	
Perceived fairness	5.03	1.41	.89	5.36	4.78	5.41	4.84	4.76	
Post-recovery satisfaction	4.22	1.44	.85	4.34	4.05	4.43	4.28	4.01	

A correlation matrix is used to prepare for the inferential statistics (see table 46). The Pearson correlation shows a significant high positive correlation between perceived fairness and customer forgiveness ( $r = .79; p < .001$ ) and a moderate correlation between the customer's empathy towards the firm and post-recovery satisfaction ( $r = .42; p < .001$ ). Another correlation was found between stickiness intention and customer forgiveness ( $r = .52; p < .001$ ).

Table 46. Correlation Table for Study 3

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
C. empathy (TEQ)													
C. empathy (McB.)	.50**												
Empathy tow. Firm	.22**	.40**											
Empathy (Wei)	.15**	.20**	.47**										
Employee empathy	.16**	.10*	.34**	.32**									
C. forgiveness (Wei)	.17**	.13**	.41**	.42**	.55**								
Total EI before	.00	.10	.00	.00	-.10	.00							
Total EI after	-.10	.09*	.00	.00	-.10	-.10	.38**						
Neg. s. esteem	.00	.20**	.00	.10	.00	.00	.10	.10					
Pos. s. esteem	.10	.00	.12**	.00	.10	.10	.00	.00	-.70				
Stickiness int.	.15**	.00	.35**	.33**	.40**	.52**	-.10	-.10	.00	.13**			
Perceived effort	.14**	.10	.32**	.35**	.68**	.67**	.00	-.10	.00	.10*	.42**		
Perceived fairness	.15**	.10*	.37**	.34**	.58**	.79**	-.10	-.10	.00	.10	.53**	.70**	
Post-recovery satis.	.10*	.11**	.42**	.40**	.55**	.70**	-.10	-.10	-.10	.11*	.50**	.60**	.65**

Note. \*\*The correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-sided). \*The correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-sided).

### 6.2.2. Inferential Statistics

This section applies the inferential statistics of study 3 to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. For this purpose, a path model is conducted. Inferential statistics for study 3 were performed using IBM SPSS and SPSS AMOS.

Before conducting the path model, a confirmation factor analysis (CFA) is performed to verify the measurement of the variables. CFA was calculated using bootstrapping (5000 samples). All CFA analyses reported significant  $\chi^2$  ( $p < .001$ ), indicating the models do not fit perfectly to the data. However, according to Buehner (2011), this is a common issue for CFA, thus the fit indices were observed. Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest that the CFA model has a proper fit if CFI  $> .90$ , RMSEA  $< .06$ , and SRMR  $< .08$ . There are also scientists who report threshold values for RMSEA  $< .08$  (Jahn, 2007).

CFA was assessed for customer empathy (J. Wei et al., 2022), customer forgiveness (J. Wei et al., 2022), and employee empathy. The CFA of this measurement model produced the following results: customer empathy (J. Wei et al., 2022) ( $\chi^2 = 42.61$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .93, RMSEA = .19, SRMR = .07), customer forgiveness ( $\chi^2 = 61.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .96, RMSEA = .23, SRMR = .03), and employee empathy ( $\chi^2 = 39.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .98, RMSEA = .18, SRMR = .01).

The defined threshold values for an acceptable model fit were reached in all fit indices except SRMR values, which did not reach the minimum requirement for all CFAs. However, all three models had a small degree of freedom ( $df = 2$ ) for customer empathy (J. Wei et al., 2022), customer forgiveness, and employee empathy. According to Kenny et al. (2015), reporting the RMSEA to assess the model fit with a small  $df$  is potentially misleading and problematic (p. 503). In such cases, it is recommended that RMSEA is not computed (Kenny et al., 2015). Therefore, the CFA's model fit is only assessed by interpreting CFI and SRMR, in which threshold values were reached, and a good fit of the model can be stated. Hence, the one factor's structure was confirmed, and inferential statistics can be continued.

Factor loading of the customer empathy scale based on J. Wei et al. (2022) did not reach high factor loading for items 4 and 5, as presented in table 47. Most applied research accepts and interprets factor loadings greater or equal to .30 or .40 as salient (Brown, 2006). However, according to Brown (2006), there is no explicit

guideline for salient or non-salient loadings, and loadings widely depends on the empirical context. Here, most explanations are based on items 1 and 2, with high standardised factor loadings  $> .80$ . The customer empathy (J. Wei et al. 2022) scale is satisfactory, the unidimensional factor's structure was confirmed, and inferential statistics can be continued.

Table 47. CFA for Customer Empathy (J. Wei et al., 2022)

Item No.	Item	$\lambda$ Loadings	$z, p$ -value
1	I understand the reasons for mistakes in customer service.	.83	19.03***
2	I can understand the difficulties of customer service.	.88	20.11***
4	The service failure of the customer service is just one case.	.26	5.88***
5	Customer services are thinking about consumers.	.43	10.03***

Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . Standardised loadings are reported.

The unidimensional factor structure of employee empathy was supported, with high loadings ranging from .86 to .92, indicating that the items effectively measured employee empathy, as presented in table 48.

Table 48. CFA for Employee Empathy

Item No.	Item	$\lambda$ Loadings	$z, p$ -value
1	The employees give customers individual attention.	.86	25.69***
2	The employees deal with customers in a caring fashion.	.92	28.94***
3	The employees have the customer's best interest at heart.	.91	28.46***
4	The employees understand the needs of their customers.	.91	28.20***

Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . Standardised loadings are reported.

The unidimensional factor structure of customer forgiveness was supported, with high loadings ranging from .70 to .90, indicating that the scale items effectively measured customers' forgiveness (table 49).

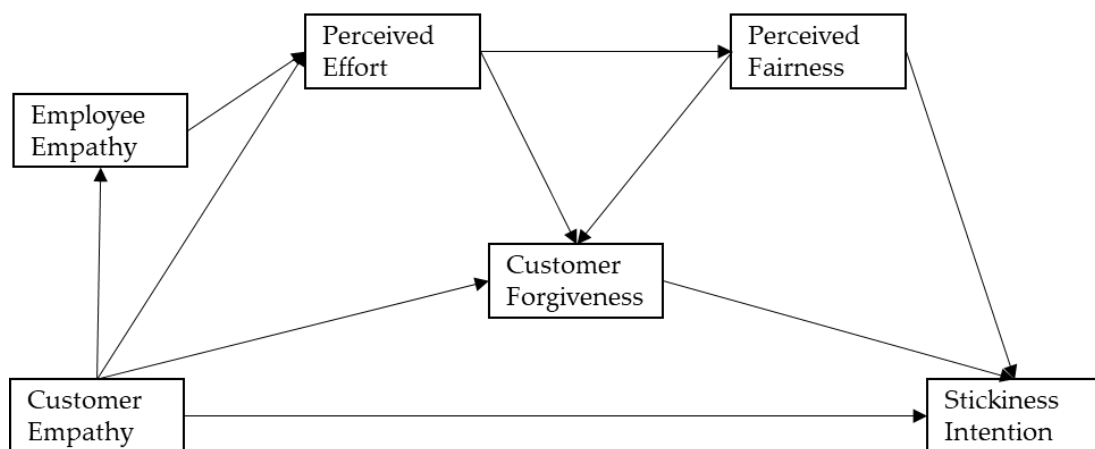
Table 49. CFA for Customer Forgiveness (J. Wei et al., 2022)

Item No.	Item	$\lambda$ Loadings	$z, p$ -value
1	I agree with the service recovery of the customer service.	.90	26.87***
2	I agree with the material compensation of the service agent.	.79	22.09***
3	I agree with the service agent's apology.	.89	23.33***
4	I forgive the mistakes of the service agent.	.70	18.72***

Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . Standardised loadings are reported.

H1–H3 path analysis with structural equation modelling (SEM) is applied to test study 3's hypotheses. The endogenous variables are customer forgiveness (J. Wei et al., 2022), stickiness intention, post-recovery satisfaction, perceived effort, perceived fairness, and emotional intensity. The exogenous variables are customer empathy and employee empathy. As all the variables are approximately not normally distributed, as assessed by the Shapiro–Wilk-Test ( $p < .05$ ), the analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. Bootstrapping is an instrument that reveals reliable results even if the variables are not normally distributed (Berkovits et al., 2000; Kelley, 2005). The linearity between the variables was monitored by visual observation with LOESS scatterplot, and approximate linearity was detected. Additionally, multicollinearity tests were performed, and a variance inflation factor (VIF)  $< 1.2$  was observed for hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. Hence, VIF indicates no multicollinearity in the data (O'Brien, 2007). Figure 22 shows the graphical path analysis performed for study 3.

Figure 22. Path Analysis of Study 3



Note. Own illustration.

The path analysis showed the following results for fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 22.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .03,  $df = 4$ . However, according to Kenny et al. (2015), RMSEA should not be considered within the interpretation because of low  $df$ , and the interpretation would be misleading and problematic. Hence, the model fit with the results just presented achieves threshold values, and the model fit is indicated to be good. Table 50 reports the results of the path analysis in detail.

Table 50. Results of Path Model for Study 3

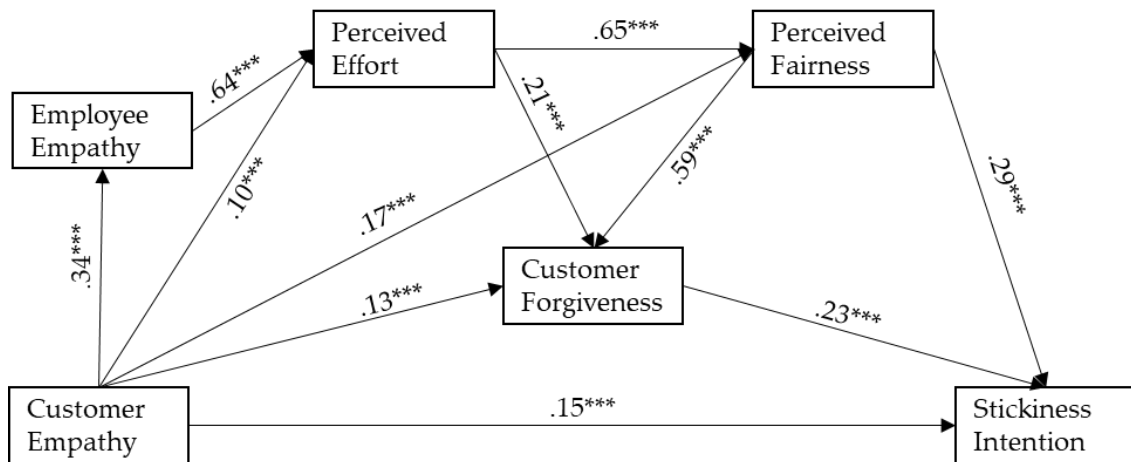
Path	Estimate	SE	CR	p	95 % CI	
					LL	UL
<i>Direct Effects</i>						
CE → EE	.34	.06	8.58	.001	.36	.59
CE → Effort	.10	.05	3.18	.002	.05	.25
EE → Effort	.64	.03	19.98	.001	.59	.75
CE → Fairness	.17	.03	5.44	.001	.11	.26
Effort → Fairness	.65	.02	21.41	.001	.43	.54
CE → FG	.13	.03	4.80	.001	.08	.22
Effort → FG	.21	.03	6.24	.001	.11	.23
Fairness → FG	.59	.04	16.73	.001	.55	.71
FG → Stickiness	.23	.06	4.05	.001	.09	.35
CE → Stickiness	.15	.04	4.00	.001	.07	.27
Fairness → Stickiness	.30	.06	5.34	.001	.18	.45
					95 % CI	
<i>Total Effects</i>			Estimate	LL	UL	
CE → Stickiness (H1+H3)			.35	.27	.43	
CE → Effort (H2)			.32	.24	.40	
<i>Indirect Effects</i>						
CE → Stickiness (H1+H3)			.20	.16	.26	
CE → Effort (H2)			.22	.16	.27	

Note. CE = customer empathy towards the firm, EE = employee empathy, and FG = customer forgiveness.

The analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples. Standardised regression weights are reported.

Figure 23 visualises the direct effect between the variables. The paths shown in the figure are standardised regression weights.

Figure 23. Path Analysis with SEM for Study 3

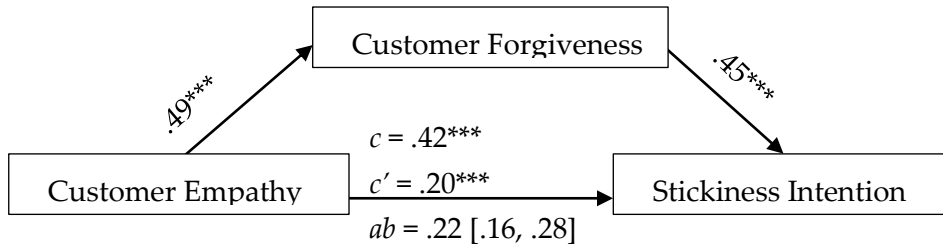


Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ . All variables are tested in specific recovery settings.

The SEM of H1, H2, and H3 revealed partial mediation effects for all analyses. Consequently, the hypotheses testing elicits the following results: customer empathy towards the firm positively influences stickiness intention, and this relationship is partially mediated by customer forgiveness (H1). Additionally, H2 was confirmed: “Customer empathy towards the firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention”. This effect is also partially mediated. Additionally, the SEM results indicated confirmation for H3: “Customer empathy towards the firm promotes perceived fairness, enhancing stickiness intention”.

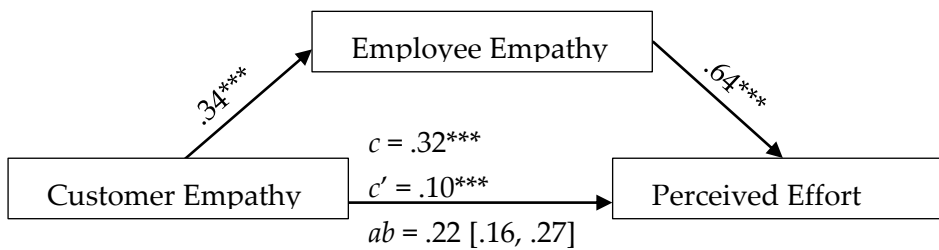
The SEM results of each hypothesis are visualised in the following pages (figures 24–26). H1 and H3 are also conducted by SPSS PROCESS (Hayes 4.1) with model 4 (Hayes, 2022) to analyse the exclusive mediating effect by the mediator variables customer empathy (for H1) and perceived fairness (for H3). The path analysis revealed the influences of all variables, including in the model (figure 24).

Figure 24. Visualisation of the Results for the Mediation Analysis H1



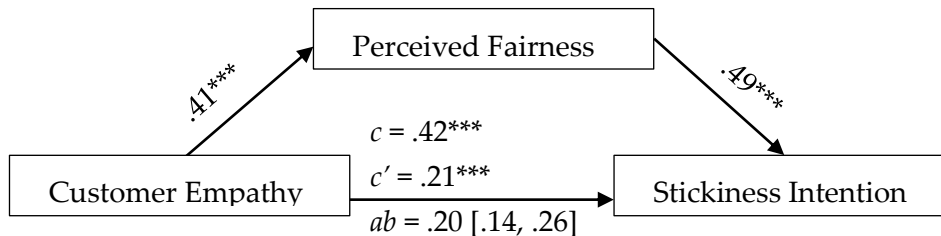
Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

Figure 25. Visualisation of the Results for the Mediation Analysis H2



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

Figure 26. Visualisation of the Results for the Mediation Analysis H3



Note. Indicators of significance level: \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

The influence of positive emotional intensity (after) and post-recovery satisfaction are tested by assessing a regression analysis (H4). This analysis was bootstrapped with 5000 samples, and the effect was tested in all five scenarios. VIF < 1.1 was observed and indicated no multicollinearity in the data (Daoud, 2018). With regression coefficient of  $\beta = .44$  and  $R^2 = .19$  ( $p < .001$ ) in the entire sample, the results support hypothesis 4 that post-recovery satisfaction is positively associated with positive emotional intensity (after). Thus, a more positive emotion corresponds with greater post-recovery satisfaction. This effect is significant in all scenarios. In scenario 4 (20 EUR + no Ink), the standardised regression coefficient of  $\beta$  is the strongest (.46). Therefore, as presented in table 51, H4 can be confirmed: "Positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction".

Table 51. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Post-Recovery Satisfaction

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
<b>Positive Emotional Intensity</b>					
Intercept	2.77	.14	2.50	3.04	<.001
Entire sample	.48	.04	.40	.56	<.001
Intercept	3.02	.29	2.45	3.58	<.001
S1 (20EUR + Ink)	.41	.08	.23	.57	<.001
Intercept	2.63	.35	1.95	3.34	<.001
S2 (5EUR + Ink)	.50	.10	.28	.69	<.001
Intercept	2.71	.37	2.00	3.45	<.001
S3 (0EUR + Ink)	.52	.10	.34	.71	<.001
Intercept	2.62	.36	1.96	3.35	<.001
S4 (20EUR + no Ink)	.54	.10	.35	.72	<.001
Intercept	2.82	.28	2.29	3.37	<.001
S5 (0EUR + no Ink + apology)	.47	.09	.30	.64	<.001

Note. Entire sample:  $N = 580$ ,  $R^2 = .19$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .19;  $F(1,578) = 136.26$   $p < .001$ . S1:  $R^2 = .19$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .18;  $F(1,113) = 26.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . S2:  $R^2 = .15$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .14;  $F(1,117) = 20.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . S3:  $R^2 = .22$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .21;  $F(1,113) = 31.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . S4:  $R^2 = .21$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .20;  $F(1,114) = 30.51$ ,  $p < .01$ . S5:  $R^2 = .17$ ;  $R^2$  adjusted = .16;  $F(1,113) = 22.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error.

To test H5, whether the compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness, and whether this effect depends on customer empathy, a MANOVA was conducted. The error variances for empathy towards the firm demonstrated homogeneity ( $p = .81$ ), but not for customer forgiveness ( $p > .05$ ) as assessed by a Levene's test. However, according to Ateş et al. (2019), SPSS calculates robust results with no homogenous error variances. Covariances were homogeneous, as assessed by a Box's test ( $p > .001$ ). A one-way MANOVA also showed a statistically significant difference between the scenarios on the combined dependent variables ( $F[8, 1148] = 4.004, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .027$ , Wilk's  $\Lambda = .946$ ). Post-hoc univariate ANOVAs were conducted for every dependent variable. Results show a statistically significant difference between the scenarios for consumer forgiveness ( $F[4, 575] = 7.604, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ), but not for customer empathy towards the firm ( $F[4, 575] = .50, p = .736$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ ). As MANOVA is an omnibus instrument, only revealing whether a difference is significant, a post-hoc test was conducted as a last step of hypothesis testing for H5. Games–Howell post-hoc analysis revealed a significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the customer forgiveness scores of all scenarios. The mean level of customer forgiveness increased from scenario one to five (.79, 95 %, CI [.26, 1.32]), while in scenario 3, customer forgiveness increased compared with scenarios 5 (.90, 95 %, CI [.39, 1.41]) and 2 (.64, 95 %, CI [.11, 1.17]). The mean level of customer forgiveness decreased from scenarios 4 to 3 (-.56, 95 %, CI [-1.07, -.05]). Hence, H5, cannot be fully supported: "Compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness, but this effect does not depend on customer empathy".

To test H6, "customer empathy is positively related to customers' self-esteem", a multiple regression analysis (table 52) is performed. With a regression coefficient of negative self-esteem ( $\beta = .33$ ), positive self-esteem ( $\beta = .23$ ), and  $R^2 = .11$  ( $p < .001$ ), results demonstrate support for H7 that customer empathy (McBane, 1995) is associated with customers' self-esteem. Negative and positive self-esteem were able to statistically significantly predict customer empathy ( $F[2, 576] = 23.09, p < .001$ ). Thus, more negative self-esteem and more positive self-esteem correspond with higher customer empathy. According to Cohen (1988),  $R^2$  for the overall model is .11 (adjusted  $R^2 = .10$ ), indicating a moderate goodness-of-fit. When controlling for gender as a control variable, gender also became a significant predictor, indicating that customer empathy is influenced by gender.

Table 52. Regression Analysis for Dependent Variable Customer Empathy (McBane, 1995)

Effect	Estimate	SE	95 % CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	3.51	.32	2.89	4.14	<.001
Negative self-esteem	.19	.03	.13	.25	<.001
Positive self-esteem	.18	.04	.10	.27	<.001
Gender	-.32	.06	-.45	-.20	<.001

Note.  $N = 580$ .  $R^2 = .11$ ;  $R^2_{adjusted} = .10$ ;  $F(2,576) = 23.09$ ,  $p < .001$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. SE = standard error.

Table 53 provides an overview of the hypotheses testing and the supported results of study 3. These results serve to answer the research question RQ3, “Do customer and employee empathy influence customer forgiveness and stickiness-intention?”.

Table 53. Results of Study 3

Hypotheses	Hypotheses Testing
	Entire Sample
<b>H1:</b> Customer empathy towards the firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention.	✓
<b>H2:</b> Customer empathy towards the firm positively influences the perception of employee empathy, which positively enhances the customer’s perceived effort.	✓
<b>H3:</b> Customer empathy towards the firm promotes perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention.	✓
<b>H4:</b> Positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction.	✓
<b>H5:</b> Compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness; this effect depends on customer empathy towards the firm.	(✓)
<b>H6:</b> Customer empathy (McBane) positively affects customers’ self-esteem.	✓

Note. “✓” indicates the hypothesis is supported.

### 6.3. DISCUSSION

#### 6.3.1. Interpretation within the Current State of Research

The first hypothesis indicates that customer empathy towards the firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention (H1, answer of RQ3.1). Previous research has revealed favourable effects of customer empathy within the service-recovery process (e.g., Forster et al., 2020; Harrison-Walker, 2019; C. Wei et al., 2020). Study 3 results confirm that higher customer empathy towards the firm can enhance customer forgiveness, which aligns with a previous study suggesting that empathy and forgiveness are positively related (Page & Nowak, 2002; Van Lange et al., 2008). To be empathic is to provide offers that oneself would be willing to receive (Page & Nowak, 2002).

Forgiveness, in turn, helps mitigate revenge-seeking willingness and enhances benevolence (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). The effect of customer forgiveness on customer stickiness intention was found, confirming the results of Xie and Peng (2009). Furthermore, in the context of couple research, Ripley and Worthington (2002) found that stable and long-lasting relations are based on forgiveness and prosocial behaviour (which is a component of forgiveness). It is thus suggested that these effects can be adapted into consumer recovery behaviour, because study 3 reports the increase of stickiness intention.

Additionally, study 3 finds evidence of the influence of customer empathy towards the firm on the perception of employee empathy, which positively enhances the perceived effort of complaint recovery (H2, answer of RQ3.2). In the relationship between customers' empathy towards the firm and perceived effort, the employee's empathy acts as a mediator. In contrast to the previous two studies, reciprocity between customers' and employees' empathy was found. Previous research has indicated that this bonding or reciprocity behaviour is based on empathy (e.g., Weißhaar & Huber, 2016). Cultural similarity also plays a role in affinity or empathy between two parties (Conway & Swift, 2000). As empathic humans are more sensitive to the emotional state of their counterpart (Rucker et al., 2012), as well as fairness and justice (Page & Nowak, 2002; Van Lange et al., 2008),

it is suggested that empathic customers are more likely to perceive a firm's effort to redress a service failure.

Hypothesis testing of H3 reveals that customer empathy towards the firm promotes perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention (H3, answer of RQ3.3). These results indicate that perceived fairness of compensation is highest when the company provides only product-related reimbursement, such as new printer ink cartridges (scenario 3). In this case, perceived fairness is even higher than that of scenario 1, where the customers receive a 20.00 EUR refund and new printer ink cartridges. The lowest perceived fairness results are found in scenario 5, where only an apology from the customer-service employee is provided (lowest effort to redress the failure).

The findings show that customers who scored higher on empathy-towards-the-firm tendencies evaluate perceived fairness higher than customers with low empathy-toward-the-firm tendencies. Additionally, these customers scored higher on stickiness intention. Hence, customers with great empathy towards the firm are likelier to stick with the company despite a service failure. This result is related to previous work, where an increase in customer loyalty based on employee empathy was found (Moguluwa et al., 2021). The effect of employees' empathy and customer loyalty seems adaptable to customer empathy. This dynamic has already been proven by Wieseke et al. (2012), where an influence of customer empathy on customer loyalty was found.

A recent study from Allard et al. (2020) analysed the effect of customers' empathy towards a firm and fair and unfair consumer reviews. Allard et al. (2020) show that negative consumer reviews, perceived as unfair, can facilitate a positive consumer reaction to a firm due to the injustice the firm experienced. Hence, customers are motivated to support the firm.

Recent research has shown that the communication style of firms when handling a complaint is also essential for service-recovery strategies (Wang et al., 2023). Wang et al. (2023) study suggests that the presence of an emoji in online complaint handling leads to enhanced perception of a firm's sincerity and, consequently, to improved perceived firm empathy and subsequently customer forgiveness (Wang et al., 2023).

Another result that corresponds to those of studies 1 and 2 is H4 testing. Hypothesis 4 proved that positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction (H4, answer of RQ3.4), which highlights the relevance of positive emotions in the recovery process. This result also supports the findings of Serra-Cantalops et al. (2018), where an effect of positive emotional experiences on customer satisfaction was reported.

When analysing the effect of compensation type, it was found that results show a statistically significant difference between compensation types for consumer forgiveness but not for customer empathy (H5, answer of RQ3.5). The compensation type with 0 EUR + ink (scenario 3) elicited greater customer forgiveness. Scenario 1 (20 EUR + ink) elicited the second-best customer forgiveness results, followed by scenario 4 (20 EUR + no ink) and scenario 2 (5 EUR + ink). The weakest customer forgiveness was reported in scenario 5 (0 EUR + no ink), where there was no financial reimbursement or ink and only an apology was provided. The list that follows is a ranking of the research findings about customer forgiveness and the scenarios that were conducted:

1. Scenario 3 (0 EUR + ink)
2. Scenario 1 (20 EUR + ink)
3. Scenario 4 (20 EUR + no ink)
4. Scenario 2 (5 EUR + ink)
5. Scenario 5 (0 EUR + no ink)

Thus, different recovery results are achieved from the different compensation types. This finding indicates that financial reimbursement is not highly important for the customer because the approach with no monetary reimbursement gains the highest customer forgiveness. Previous research has suggested that recovery effectiveness depends on justice dimensions (Karatepe, 2006; Liao, 2007; Lin et al., 2011; O. J. Park et al., 2008; Zhu et al., 2021). Customers evaluate a recovery as just on the distributive-justice dimension when provided with monetary compensation (e.g., discounts, coupons, refunds, free giveaways, or alternative goods as compensation) (Blodgett et al., 1997; Kuo & Wu, 2012). The importance of the distributive-justice dimension is confirmed in study 3. The product-related compensation (ink) seems to be higher rated by customers than the financial compensation (20 EUR, 5 EUR). The result that partial compensation is a more

effective instrument of complaint handling than full- or over-compensation aligns with previous research such as indicated by the results from Boshoff (2012) and Gelbrich and Roschk (2011). Thus, study 3 finds evidence for the nonlinear effect of financial compensations, based on the law of diminishing return (e.g., Shephard, 1970).

Customers' empathy does not elicit any differences depending on compensation type, which indicates compensation type is not essential for empathic customers: it does not vary because of customer empathy. The compensation-type differences are not based on customers' empathy tendencies but on other factors. Differences based on customer empathy were expected because of the research results from Page and Nowak (2002) or Van Lange et al. (2008), where general influences of empathy on fairness and justice were reported.

Additionally, study 3, like study 2, confirms that customer empathy positively affects customers' self-esteem (H6, answer of RQ3.6). According to Davis (1983); Guasp Coll et al. (2020); L. Huang et al. (2019), empathy and self-esteem are two constructs with solid interdependencies. In addition to customer empathy, incorporating a customer's self-esteem into complaint handling may be advisable. Different recovery approaches affect customers' self-esteem in various ways (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021). Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021) state that the gratitude recovery approach is more successful and self-esteem affecting than the empathic apology approach when maintaining customers' loyalty after service failures. Adding gratitude into the recovery approach shifts attention from the failure and accountabilities to customers' contributions and competencies, which in turn affects consumers' self-esteem (You et al., 2019). The relationship between customer empathy and self-esteem indicates the adoption of the effects.

### **6.3.2. Limitations and Implications**

Compared to the first and second studies, the third reports sufficient reliability level for all scales, which is a strength and allows the complete interpretation of all results. The customer-forgiveness scale based on Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021) elicited an insufficient Cronbach's-alpha value ( $\alpha = .62$ ) in study 2; therefore, the scale was changed to another measurement in study 3 (J. Wei et al., 2022), and the changed scale reported excellent values ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

Part of the questionnaire also had an open text field, where participants had the chance to address something they had considered regarding the questionnaire. Some participants asked about the printer's original cost to contextualise the financial-reimbursement amount (0.00 EUR, 5.00 EUR, and 20.00 EUR) so they could rank the compensation, such as 10 % or 20 % of the original cost.

In terms of the effects on eWoM-giving behaviour, the socio-demographic effects must also be mentioned. The gender balance of probands is insufficient: most of the probands were female, which may have distorted the results because some scientists have revealed gender differences in empathy (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021; Totan et al., 2012). However, Spreng et al. (2009) found inconsistent gender differences. As such, gender biases must be considered when interpreting results.

Future research must also consider the original price of the purchased product as customers may wish to compare compensation and the actual price. The need for knowledge of the original price resulted from participant feedback; there was a comment field where probands could add a note for the authors.

Additionally, these results are based on a German student sample. More cultural complaint specialities must thus be considered in future research, which could be repeated in another cultural background.

More companies' recovery-attempt approaches can be analysed in future research. For instance, a recovery based on AI could be tested considering AI development. Is AI-based recovery emotionally sufficient for the customer? Are there differences in customer forgiveness or recovery performance compared to human recovery? Regarding practical implications, AI-assistance deployment is a current top priority and strategic focus of customer-care leaders (McKinsey and Company, 2022). Companies strive to reduce customer-call volumes and costs and provide digital solutions, including advanced analytics ecosystems (McKinsey and Company, 2022), which justifies future research into the effectiveness of AI deployment in customer services.

Another practical implication of study 3 is that there is no need to overcompensate for failure. The scenario with the greatest financial compensation amount (20.00 EUR) did not reach the highest values for customer forgiveness, perceived effort, fairness, or post-recovery satisfaction. Hence, for practical

purposes, there is no need to overcompensate failures. This result confirms previous research on the diminishing effect of compensation, indicating that overcompensation has lower effects on post-complaint satisfaction than simple compensation (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). It is more important to add a product, specifically reimbursement. The probands who randomly experienced the scenario with product compensation also confirmed this effect in written feedback. The scenario without financial compensation was the compensation type with the highest values of customer forgiveness, perceived effort, fairness, and post-recovery satisfaction. Thus, it is suggested that small product-related features be provided in recovery processes.

# **VII – OVERALL DISCUSSION**

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## VII - OVERALL DISCUSSION

This section provides a general discussion of all three studies and presents a summary as well as implications for the literature and practical management. First, the research questions are answered. Afterwards, the strengths and weaknesses that determine the limitations of the doctoral thesis are discussed. The overall discussion closes by providing future research options in the field of customer complaint behaviour and empathy to demonstrate the research outlook.

### 7.1. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS

In the following section, the results of all three studies' hypotheses are summarised (table 54). Hypothesis testing was based on hypotheses derived from the literature.

Table 54. Summary Research Results for Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Result
<i>Study 1</i>	
<b>H1:</b> The customer's previous complaint experience influences negative eWoM-giving intention.	not supported
<b>H2:</b> Attitude towards complaints influences negative eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H3:</b> Perceived dissatisfaction increases negative eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H4:</b> Employee empathy mitigates recovery expectations, and this relationship is mediated by eWoM-giving intention.	✓
<b>H5:</b> Reciprocity between customer empathy and employee empathy mitigates negative eWoM-giving intention.	not supported
<b>H6:</b> Perceived satisfaction mediates the effect of customer empathy on recovery expectation.	✓
<b>H7:</b> Customer empathy influences emotional intensity, which in turn affects eWoM-giving intention.	✓ fully mediated

**H8:** Customer empathy is negatively related to the customer's attitude towards complaints. ✓

*Study 2*

**H1:** Customer empathy mitigates the perceived emotional intensity of service-failure-redress situations, which in turn enhances customer forgiveness. ✓ fully mediated

**H2:** The perceived effort of the company's recovery attempt enhances customer forgiveness, which in turn enhances stickiness intention. ✓

**H3:** Customer and employee empathy influence recovery expectations. ✓

**H4:** Self-esteem is positively related to customer empathy. ✓

**H5:** Emotional intensity is related to post-recovery satisfaction. ✓

**H6:** Employee empathy positively influences recovery performance. ✓

**H7:** Perceived employee empathy enhances the customer's stickiness intention. ✓

**H8a, 8b:** Dissatisfied customers' reaction types vary depending on empathy (a) and self-esteem (b). ✓

**H9:** Customer empathy mitigates a favourable attitude towards complaints. ✓

*Study 3*

**H1:** Customer empathy towards the firm is positively associated with customer forgiveness, which is positively associated with stickiness intention. ✓

**H2:** Customer empathy towards the firm positively influences the perception of employee empathy, which positively enhances the customer's perceived effort. ✓

**H3:** Customer empathy towards the firm promotes perceived fairness, which enhances stickiness intention. ✓

**H4:** Positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction. ✓

<b>H5:</b> Compensation type reinforces customer forgiveness; this effect depends on customer empathy towards the firm.	(✓)
<b>H6:</b> Customer empathy positively affects customers' self-esteem.	✓

*Note. Own research.*

The research questions are answered from the results of the hypothesis testing. The sub-research questions for every study are answered separately, and the main research question is then answered.

**Research question 1, study 1.** Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity affect negative eWoM-giving intention and the expectation of complaint recovery?

Study 1 reveals an effect from customer empathy on negative eWoM-giving behaviour, which is fully mediated by emotional intensity. As such, no total effect of customer empathy on eWoM-giving intention was observed within the study. This finding highlights the relevance of emotions in customers' complaint behaviour, as previous research has demonstrated. The importance of customers emotions in complaint behaviour has been suggested by previous research on negative eWoM-giving intentions, such as those of Hossain and Rahman (2022); Mano and Oliver (1993); and Wetzer et al. (2007).

Surprisingly, no total effect was found, which was initially proposed because an influence of customer empathy has been indicated in previous research. In this instance, the absence of a direct relationship may have been caused by the fact that empathy is aroused if a consumer perceives that someone is in need and values the welfare of their counterpart (Batson et al., 2007). In the service-employee interaction, the consumer does not perceive that the employee is in need; thus, no empathising between them is aroused.

However, a direct effect of employee empathy was found, demonstrating that customers' eWoM-giving intention decreased with a higher level of employee empathy. Furthermore, employee empathy also affects recovery expectations, indicating that a higher empathy-level score mitigates recovery expectations. These results demonstrate the importance of employees' emotional competencies (here empathy) within complaint situations. This significance is consistent with previous

work, which has indicated that when an employee is more empathic in a customer–employee interaction, the customer’s positive emotions towards a firm can increase (Bahadur et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2011). Study 1 thus supports existing research on the relevance of employee empathy in service-failure handling.

However, customer empathy also affects recovery expectations directly, indicating that a higher empathy-level score enhances recovery expectations. This effect is also mediated by perceived satisfaction. This analysis was conducted based on the indication that customer empathy enables customers to understand companies’ perspectives and why failures may occur (Wieseke et al., 2012). Thus, the novel result was revealed.

**Research question 2, study 2.** Do customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity influence customer forgiveness and post-recovery satisfaction?

In study 2, customer empathy indirectly affected customer forgiveness through the mediator emotional intensity. No total effect of customer empathy on customer forgiveness was found. This result is surprising because it disagrees with previous research suggesting that empathy and forgiveness are positively related McCullough et al. (1998), Page and Nowak (2002), Van Lange et al. (2008) C. Wei et al. (2020). In study 2, only a mediated effect of customer empathy on customer forgiveness was found, which also disagrees with the results from study 3, where a total effect of customer empathy on customer forgiveness was found.

However, customers' empathy mitigates perceived emotional intensity, indicating that empathic customers have more understanding for failure difficulties and remain calm in failure-redress situations, wherein emotional intensity influences the customer's forgiveness. The effect of empathic customers having more understanding of failures and the difficulties faced by customer services has also been found in previous research, such as the work of Bitner et al. (1990) and Wieseke et al. (2012). Thus, the underlying results confirm previous research.

Additionally, study 2 indicates that employee empathy positively influences (1) recovery performance and (2) customer forgiveness. This finding aligns with previous research that identified employee empathy as essential for successful customer-service agents (e.g., Clark et al., 2013) and as a factor for enhanced perception of service quality, for example see Pugh (2001).

Post-recovery satisfaction is positively affected by positive emotions and negatively affected by negative emotions, demonstrating that the intensity of the perceived emotions predicts customers' post-recovery satisfaction. The influence of consumers' emotions on post-recovery satisfaction has been analysed, and the current results support previous findings, such as those of Kuo and Wu (2012), who also analysed the influence of consumers' perceived justice and emotions on post-recovery satisfaction and post-purchase intention.

**Research question 3, study 3.** Do customer and employee empathy influence customer forgiveness and stickiness intention?

Study 3 shows that customer empathy influences customer forgiveness (total effect): higher customer empathy towards the firm can enhance customer forgiveness. This result agrees with previous research by McCullough et al. (1998), which states that people driven by empathy are more likely to forgive and that empathy mitigates the need for revenge. The influence of empathy on forgiveness has previously been contextualised into post-purchase behaviour, where it was demonstrated that consumers can empathise with an online-shop and, therefore, understand service failures, which enhances forgiveness (J. Wei et al., 2022). Study 3 is therefore consistent with existing work that suggests empathy and forgiveness are positively related as stated by Page and Nowak (2002); and Van Lange et al., (2008).

Customer empathy positively influences the perceived fairness of recovery attempts, indicating that empathic consumers are more likely to evaluate complaint recovery as fair than less empathic consumers. This finding confirms previous research, which shows that empathic consumers seem more sensitive to perceived fairness and have a strong sense of fairness and justice, as noted by Page and Nowak (2002); and Van Lange et al., (2008).

Study 3 indicates that consumers' forgiveness after compensation is highest when the company only provides product-related reimbursement, such as new printer ink cartridges (scenario 3). The product-related compensation (ink) seemed to affect consumers' forgiveness more strongly than the financial compensation (20 EUR, 5 EUR).

Additionally, study 3 demonstrates that high employee empathy affects consumer recovery behaviour favourably, such as a high perceived recovery effort. Similar indications were found by Umar and Saleem (2022), who indicate high employee empathy is a crucial success factor for customer satisfaction within service-recovery approaches. Moguluwa et al. (2021) also demonstrate that customer loyalty is positively affected by employees' empathy. Furthermore, study 3 analysed the influence of customer empathy on customer loyalty and demonstrated that customer loyalty is determined by customer empathy, indicating that empathic consumers have higher customer loyalty. This result has not been analysed before and therefore is new in customer empathy consumer research.

Regarding emotional intensity, study 3 indicates that positive emotional intensity within the recovery process reinforces post-recovery satisfaction, which underscores the relevance of positive emotions in the recovery process. This result supports the research of Serra-Cantalops et al. (2018), where an effect of positive emotional experiences on customer satisfaction was reported.

**Main research question.** Do customer and employee empathy influence post-purchase behaviour (manifested by eWoM-giving intention and complaint recovery), considering the emotional intensity of dissatisfied online customers?

In post-purchase behaviour, customer empathy and employee empathy seem to influence post-purchase behaviour, including complaint recovery variables such as stickiness intention, forgiveness, and eWoM-giving intention. This finding supports, for instance, the research of Bahadur et al. (2018); Ngo et al. (2020); Umasuthan et al. (2017); C. Wei et al. (2020) and J. Wei et al. (2022). This influence, in particular, reveals the importance of customers' emotions because they often act as a mediator of the effects. Customers' emotions are influential due to the central relevance of emotions in consumer behaviour, as previous research has revealed (e.g., Choraria, 2013; Hossain & Rahman, 2022; Nyer, 1997; Wetzer et al., 2007). However, it must be mentioned that customer empathy did not fully explain complaint behaviour and post-purchase consumer behaviour, as indicated by weak explained variance. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates influences of customer empathy within post-purchase behaviour. This aggregated view of empathy within post-purchase behaviour (analysed with studies 1, 2, and 3) has not been previously

summarised, which is why this all-encompassing conclusion is novel to research. Considering the studies separately, earlier studies have shown similar effects (as discussed previously), but whether these have strong or weak variance explanations cannot be determined.

Recently, research by Pedersen (2021) has provided more profound insight into the importance of empathy-based marketing. Concentrating on an empathic core, encouraging cross-fertilisation, and highlighting the overall well-being of the field are the three main components of empathy-based marketing (Pedersen, 2021). The research recommends focusing on empathy towards customers to consider multiple perspectives in marketing. Table 55 summarises the main objectives supported by the associated research results, as previously discussed.

Table 55. Summary Main Objectives Research Results by Research Questions

Study	Research Question	Results indicate
1	Do CE, EE, and emotional intensity affect negative eWoM-giving intention and the expectation of complaint recovery?	No total effect of CE on eWoM-giving, but strong effect of emotions and mediating effect from emotions of relationship of CE on eWoM. High CE enhances and EE mitigates recovery expectations.
2	Do CE, EE, and emotional intensity influence customer forgiveness and post-recovery satisfaction?	CE indirectly affects customer forgiveness through emotional intensity. CE mitigates perceived emotional intensity (more failure understanding, remain calm). Emotional intensity influences customer's forgiveness and customer forgiveness affects post-recovery satisfaction.
3	Do CE and EE influence customer forgiveness and stickiness-intention?	CE influences customer forgiveness (total effect). High EE seems to show favourable effects on consumer recovery behaviour, such as a high perceived recovery effort. CE affects stickiness intention.
Main	Do CE and EE influence post-purchase behaviour, <sup>14</sup> considering the emotional intensity of dissatisfied online customers?	CE and EE seem to influence complaint-recovery variables (stickiness intention, forgiveness, eWoM-giving intention) associated with customers' emotions.

Note. CE = customer empathy and EE = employee empathy.

Based on these research results, theoretical and managerial implications are provided in the following sections. First, the theoretical implications are discussed, followed by the managerial implications.

<sup>14</sup> Manifested by eWoM-giving intention and complaint recovery.

## 7.2. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This section provides the theoretical contribution of the research results. Therefore, *Table 56. Theoretical Contribution of Research Results* presents an overview of the research findings in relation to the theoretical theories and models. Subsequently, the contributions are stated and discussed.

The results find evidence to support the Theory of Self-Enhancement, which describes how people tend to protect their self-esteem (Dauenheimer et al., 2002). Study 1 shows that consumers with negative self-esteem are more likely to keep their displeasure to themselves than consumers with more positive self-esteem, who are more likely to directly contact the responsible company or communicate their displeasure to friends and family. Self-esteem affects the CCB because communicating displeasure seems to risk harming self-esteem (when experiencing rejection in the complaint process). This result is consistent with the research of Phau and Baird (2008), which reveals that low self-esteem individuals are less likely to communicate their complaints directly towards a firm than those with high self-esteem. Thus, the existing Self-Enhancement Theory in CCB is confirmed by the current study.

The same effect was found with customer empathy. The results indicate that those with high empathy scores are more likely to keep their displeasure to themselves than to voice their complaint towards the firm or share the experience with friends and family. The strong reciprocity of self-esteem and empathy tendencies explains this finding (Davis, 1983a). Moreover, empathic humans tend to avoid pain (Zaki, 2014), and articulating a complaint can be painful when expecting resistance from the company receiving the complaint. Thus, the Avoid-Pain Theory was confirmed with the studies and expanded into the complaint-research field. These two results can also be structured by the theory of Exit (Hirschman, 1970), and the CCB framework (G. M. Kim et al., 2010), where consumers' behavioural reactions after failures are categorised into action or no action.

Furthermore, this doctoral thesis contributes evidence for the Social-Sharing-of-Emotion Theory (Festinger, 1954) in the context of customer complaint behaviour. This theory proposes two primary dimensional emotions: emotional valence and emotional intensity (H. Liu et al., 2021). Valence means the emotional

evaluation, such as negative or positive, and emotional intensity relates to the strength of the emotion that has occurred, such as high or low, toward the object, event, or situation (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; H. Liu et al., 2021). The current research reveals that a growth in emotional intensity increases the likelihood of sharing an experience, which supports the Social-Sharing-of-Emotion Theory.

Another theory applied in this field is Social-Exchange Theory (Cropanzano, 2005; Lawler, 1999; Ngo et al., 2020). This theory states that customers compare the input and output of the recovery process. Specifically, if the expected output exceeds the input, customers' willingness to complain increases, and they will accept the social exchange. This effect is also shown by study's 1 results, which demonstrate that customers are more willing to provide eWoM when their recovery expectations are high: the customer's empathy influences the expectation of recovery, as determined in study 1. Consumers who score high on empathy have a higher expectation that the company can redress the failure adequately.

Additionally, Social-Exchange Theory can be applied to employee empathy. Employee empathy positively impacts satisfaction variables, such as perceived effort (study 3), customer forgiveness (study 2), recovery performance (study 2), and mitigating recovery expectations (study 1), demonstrating that in exchange for employee empathy the customer-satisfaction variables increase. These results support Social-Exchange Theory by providing evidence for an empathy-satisfaction relationship elicited by customer-oriented behaviour (employee empathy). This model of employee-customer empathy was analysed by Ngo et al. (2020) and aligns with their results. This relationship is also relevant to the Expectancy-Value Theory, which explains why customers are more willing to provide eWoM when their recovery expectation is high (result of study 1). Therefore, the Expectancy-Value Theory is confirmed by current research results.

The Service-Recovery Framework by Miller et al. (2000), presented in figure 5 (section [2.2.3. Complaint Recovery](#)), can be distinguished into customer empathy and employee empathy, the psychological influence factors, in the immediate recovery phase. In the Service-Recovery Framework, the construct of empathy has not been detailed until now. However, this thesis revealed empathy's significance in recovery handling and the results suggest considering the differentiation in the Service-Recovery Framework.

Regarding Justice-and-Fairness Theory, the findings indicate that customer empathy affects perceived fairness. Specifically, high customer empathy scores increase perceptions of fairness. Therefore, it is demonstrated that empathic consumers are more sensitive to fairness and are more likely to evaluate a service interaction as fair than a less empathic customer. Additionally, customers evaluate a recovery as just on the distributive-justice dimension when provided with monetary compensation (e.g., discounts, coupons, refunds, free giveaways, or alternative goods as compensation) (Blodgett et al., 1997; Kuo & Wu, 2012). The results of study 3 indicate that compensation approaches with free giveaways and refunds are perceived as fairer than those without. This finding confirms Fairness-and-Justice Theory and extends it by adding the importance of empathy to this concept. In study 3, monetary compensation was differentiated into financial refunds and free giveaways (product-related compensation of ink cartridges), and the analysis showed that product-related compensation has a greater impact on customer forgiveness than a financial refund.

Research contributions to emotional theories are discussed in the following section. As demonstrated by study 1, customers' negative emotions increase the likelihood for eWoM-giving willingness, which is a reaction to bad service experiences. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the reaction, and the more likely eWoM-behaviour. This effect is based on the James–Lange Theory. Thus, this result contributes to theoretical understanding by confirming existing research.

Basis-Emotion Theory is also supported by the research because the results indicate that different emotional intensities elicit varied behavioural reactions, which has been indicated in a non-post-purchase context for Basis-Emotion Theory. Additionally, different behavioural reactions, which were constructed by experimental scenarios, elicited different emotions based on individual appraisals, confirming Appraisal Theory.

Table 56. Theoretical Contribution of Research Results

<b>Affected Theory</b>	<b>Contribution of Research Results</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Social Sharing of Emotions	Emotionally involved situations are more likely to be shared; thus, emotional valence and intensity affect complaint-giving behaviour	Confirming existing research and application in complaint context
Service-Recovery Framework	Extended framework by adding differentiation between customer and employee empathy within service recovery	Adding value to theory
Forgiveness research	Product-related reimbursement has greater impact on customer forgiveness than financial reimbursement	Confirming existing research
Self-Enhancement Theory	Negative self-esteem consumers are more likely to keep their displeasure to themselves; positive self-esteem consumers are more likely to contact the company directly or communicate their displeasure	Confirming existing research and application in complaint context
Social-Exchange Theory	Provided evidence for an empathy-satisfaction relationship elicited by customer-oriented behaviour	Confirming existing research
Expectancy-Value Theory	Customers are more willing to provide eWoM when their recovery expectations are high	Confirming existing research
Avoid- Pain Theory	Articulating a complaint can be painful when expecting resistance from the company receiving the complaint, thus empathic consumers are less likely to complaint directly	Confirming existing research and expanding application for complaint context

Justice-and-Fairness Theory	Extended Fairness theory (customer empathy affects perceived fairness); demonstrated that empathic consumers are more sensitive to fairness and are more likely to evaluate service interaction as fair	Adding value to theory and confirming existing research
James-Lange Theory	Negative emotions create reactions (eWoM); the stronger the emotion, the stronger the reaction	Confirming existing research
Basis-Emotion Theory	Different emotions elicit different behavioural reactions	Confirming existing research
Appraisal Theory	The same post-purchase situations (constructed with experimental scenarios) elicit different emotions based on individual appraisals	Confirming existing research and application in complaint context

*Note. The table is based on research results.*

The theoretical-implication section is completed by providing a conclusion on the different customer empathy scales considered in the studies. Four customer empathy scales were assessed to measure customer empathy, as presented in table 57. The reason for conducting the studies with different scales was to increase the internal and consistent validity of the research. The CFA analyses and internal consistency of the customer empathy scales TEQ (Spreng et al., 2009; Totan & Sapmaz, 2012), McBane (1995), and J. Wei et al. (2022) resulted in valid instrument measurements, suggesting no statistically based argument for or against using the different scales.

It is important to mention that the McBane (1995) and TEQ (Spreng et al., 2009; Totan & Sapmaz, 2012) empathy scales focus more on stable customer empathy. Additionally, these two scales measure customer empathy in general, without reference to the scenarios, in contrast to study 3, where the empathy scales were measured within relation to the scenarios. In studies 1 and 2, customer empathy was measured more as a core aspect of the customer without relation to the scenario, whereas in study 3, customer empathy was measured more as process and motivated empathy with a direct relationship to the recovery situation.

However, some probands mentioned that reverse-coded items made the TEQ and McBane (1995) scale challenging to understand. The two short empathy versions did not consist of reverse-code items, simplifying their contents. Nevertheless, measuring the customer's empathy in consumer-complaint research on a short scale is recommended to ensure test economy.

*Table 57. Customer Empathy Scales*

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Item Number</b>	<b>CE Dimension</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Used in Study</b>
<b>TEQ</b>	<b>13 (16)</b>	<b>1</b>	(Spreng et al., 2009; Totan & Sapmaz, 2012)	1, 2 and 3
<b>McBane</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>	(McBane, 1995)	1, 2 and 3
<b>Wei</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	(J. Wei et al., 2022)	3
<b>Towards</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	(C. Wei et al., 2020)	3

*Note. Based on own research.*

### 7.3. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Generally, this doctoral thesis strove to support companies in reducing the negative consequences of service failures by understanding customers' influences on complaint behaviour and complaint recovery. The relevance of customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity for post-purchase behaviour, as well as the recovery process, is demonstrated by this thesis. Companies should focus on customer needs and develop customer-oriented recovery processes because no industry can guarantee a completely error-free service (Miller et al., 2000), and customer retention is essential for business profitability (McCollough et al., 2000).

As shown by the model for customer-satisfaction development, performing as the customer expects can create customer satisfaction as stated by Elkhani and Bakri (2012). According to Elkhani and Bakri (2012) customer excitement (even more than customer satisfaction) can only be realized by overachieving the customer's needs (expectations). However, to perform as the customer expects, the company must know what a customer needs and how they want the company to react to customer-complaint situations. This knowledge, based on customer empathy tendencies, is provided by this doctoral thesis. By understanding the meaning of customer empathy in post-purchase behaviour, companies can incorporate this knowledge into their complaint processes.

This doctoral thesis elicits findings that are relevant to specific sectors. The eCommerce sector, which includes customer services, could benefit managerially from the results. This thesis specifically focused on eCommerce online retail with customer service. However, the results could also provide indications for other companies regarding their customer-service teams, which most companies have.

Second, as mentioned above, the results are relevant for customer service. The results provide detailed support for call customer services. However, it is also recommended that the findings be adapted to more channels and communication methods, including written communication; e-mail; or AI-based customer communication, such as chatbots.

In addition to the relevant sector channel, the appropriate business relation must be considered. The studies of this thesis were conducted in B2C (business-to-customer) interactions. However, the findings may also be helpful for B2B

(business-to-business) relations because, in B2B relationships, people are involved in purchase processes and act as individuals with different personalities and needs. Nevertheless, the focus was on B2C relations.

By presenting the specific business implications, table 58 provides an overview of the affected business units from internal and external perspectives. Additionally, the customers, as an external affected unit, are added. The affected business units are discussed in the following section.

*Table 58. Practical Implications of Research*

<b>Affected Business Unit</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Where to Incorporate</b>
<i>Internal:</i>		
Management	Investment in customer service	Business decisions, business-model strategy, profit and loss
Service employee	Impacts customer experience, reacts to consumer reviews	Everyday work
Team lead of service employee	Monitor team members	Recruiting and training
Law	General data-protection regulation	Process design, legal approvals, certificates (such as DIN norms), valid DPAs, customer terms of service, data storage
<i>External:</i>		
Customer	Improve customer experience	Customer contact points, websites, interaction with the company

*Note. The table is based on doctoral thesis results.*

*Management*

The most successful companies differentiate themselves on multiple levels from their competitors. In the past, it was sufficient to operate more efficiently or have better products than competitors. Today, many companies are replaceable, and customer behaviour has changed in manifold ways (e.g., Miller et al., 2000; Wind et al., 2001). To succeed in this competitive and dynamic landscape, management (C-level) is challenged to provide a clear strategy for the future while making profits in the meantime. The current research offers new insights for market leaders on how to differentiate themselves from competitors and optimize operational expenditure.

Understanding employees as a critical part of success is no longer new. By deepening the understanding of how customer-service roles contribute to eWoM, customer satisfaction, and loyalty, efficient service teams have become crucial for a company's growth strategy. When customer service teams have the right tools, are well-trained, and love what they do, they can establish a remarkable customer experience.

Customer-service teams usually have a fixed budget, which can be used to re-create customer satisfaction, make goodwill payments, or relieve customer escalations. From the C-level perspective, reducing cashflow is a net-negative factor for profitability, which leads to questions regarding how extensively companies should invest in complaint recovery. For example, how much should a company invest in the recovery process? Can the customer be refrained from churning by providing an appropriate recovery process? How high should the compensation be? Study 3 answers this question with relevance to practical management. The results indicate that providing product-related compensation, such as ink cartridges, is advisable. Simultaneously, overcompensating for failure can be expensive and without additional impact, as a meta-analysis by Gelbrich and Roschk (2011) also found. The results indicate that the most recovery fairness and consumer forgiveness is elicited when providing only product-related compensation and no financial reimbursement. Additionally, it is not recommended to offer only an apology after a service failure, without any additional compensation (such as scenario 5 in study 3). The results of only providing an apology elicited the weakest consumer forgiveness and perceived

recovery effort. Management must consider these operational implications as part of their strategy.

#### *Service Employee*

The research also emphasised how vital employee empathy is. According to study 3, the perception of staff empathy is favourably influenced by customer empathy, which, in turn, has a beneficial impact on the customer's opinion of the company's recovery attempt. More specifically, data indicates that employee empathy positively affects how recovery attempts are perceived. To provide consumers with a positive experience, it is thus strongly recommended that businesses ensure their customer-service employees exhibit high empathy. Previous research on traditional service interactions has revealed that customers are more satisfied when the employee is empathic (Markovic et al., 2015).

Additionally, this doctoral thesis found that positive emotions during complaint recovery can increase post-recovery satisfaction. The service employee highly influences the perceived customer emotions, highlighting the employee's importance in the interaction. However, while impacting the operative tasks of customer-service teams, the actual responsibility for driving change falls to the management team and customer-service leader, which is further outlined in the corresponding paragraphs. It is worth noting that the results of this research indicate new requirements for customer-service agents, such as training (with a focus on empathy) and a high degree of resilience and (social)-media competence. The task of a customer-service agent has become increasingly demanding, and fundamental changes are expected in this job sector.

Today, many customer-service departments are simply cost centres, focusing on keeping costs as low as possible. Typically, call-centre service agents have strict rules about time spent with a customer and limited flexibility of goodwill. However, unresolved complaints encourage dissatisfied consumers to vent their dissatisfaction by posting unfavourable reviews. Thus, arranging customer services with instructions to redress products and service failures is advisable. Knowledge about customers' profiles (personality-profile analysis) can help companies better understand their customers and why some consumers post negative reviews and others do not, or why some consumers forgive failures more likely than others.

Additionally, it is essential to consider that customers, particularly adolescents and young adults, with excessive smartphone use have a higher probability of suffering from severe health issues (Wacks & Weinstein, 2021). This potential risk must be considered when conducting customer profiles. Every customer has specific requirements for redress, so ensuring they receive a suitable method is crucial, as Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021) suggest. Radu et al. (2019) also found that an incorrect recovery type may trigger more unfavourable outcomes, such as adverse reactions. In such cases, the entire compensation process would have been pointless or ineffective. Conversely, Wieseke et al. (2012) reveal that an appropriate recovery type could also improve how the customer perceives the employee who redresses the service failure (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021).

However, one particularity to consider is that empathy has a marginal benefit, which means that an infinite amount of empathy does not always lead to better customer experiences: “not all customers seek, need, or appreciate empathy. Some want to avoid it completely, preferring an objective answer, even if their circumstances are grim” (Clark et al., 2013, p. 142). This finding illustrates how crucial it is to customise the recovery process and evaluate, based on customer profiles, how much empathy is provided within the recovery process. A concept of incorporating empathy work into business (Clark et al., 2013) describes this process as follows: listen attentively to determine whether someone needs empathy, then communicate in a way that meets that need.

Recent studies analysing empathy within pharmacy retail have indicated that empathy, rather than responsiveness, is more critical in high-service delivery and increases consumers’ perception of service quality (Murray et al., 2019).

However, empathy is not just essential in the context of service employees (the person attempting to redress the failure): it is also crucial in AI recovery. More recent studies, with the increase of artificial intelligence such as chatbots in customer service and customer-recovery service, have investigated customer recovery expectations concerning AI failures, as Song et al. (2023) noted. Yun and Park (2022) examined the effect of chatbot service recovery on positive WoM, customer repurchase intention, and customer satisfaction. They compared two chatbot service recoveries, one with emotional words and the other without. Their findings indicate that empathy and interactivity affect customer satisfaction only

in the group for chatbots with emotional words. Chatbot responsiveness did not significantly impact customer satisfaction in either group (Yun & Park, 2022).

The economic situation also influences the quality of relationships between employees and customers. According to Monferrer-Tirado et al. (2016) and Ngo et al. (2020), a down-turning economic situation diminishes the bonding effect, mutual trust, and perceived service quality. This dynamic could also affect the empathising options from customer to employee.

#### *Team Lead of Service Employee*

A recent analysis by McKinsey and Company (2022) provides reasons that an employee may change their employer. Most employees leave because they were poached by competitors or experienced employee burnout, dissatisfaction, lack of advancement opportunities, or insufficient work-life balance. While many businesses struggle to hire employees, the talent strategy of a business can become a strategic differentiator. Creating an appreciative work environment is crucial to not losing productive employees to competitors, considering the cost of hiring and training new employees. Customer-service agents, who face negative, angry, or emotionally loaded customer interactions every day while representing the face of the company, are especially affected and often feel overwhelmed, challenged, and stressed (e.g., Alarcon, 2011; Bromuri et al., 2020; Sinaga & Nurjanah, 2022).

Based on the findings from Bromuri et al. (2020), a customer-service leader can allocate resources to prevent employees from being exposed to too many negative customer interactions and to monitor employee stress levels. Implementing an AI-based system within the customer database that proactively ranks incoming customer inquiries could help evenly distribute challenging interactions across a team. Bromuri et al. (2020) achieved this outcome through speech and consumer-emotions analysis. Employees with higher resilience training or who are more senior can solve increasingly complex cases. By allocating inquiries based on an effective match with the customer-service agent, the given resources can be used efficiently while ensuring the customer perceives a positive interaction. Such data-driven systems have the power to revolutionize the customer-service industry. In addition to a positive impact on productivity and cost reduction, having such a system in place would lead to higher employee satisfaction, which in turn may lead to fewer fluctuations and a positive employer

brand. Subsequently, a well-recognized employer brand makes it easier and cheaper for companies to hire new employees.

During the recruiting process, customer-service managers should consider the applicant's personality traits to meet the requirements of the vacant position. Emotional competencies should already be part of the recruitment process or training programs (Umar & Saleem, 2022). Hiring a good candidate for the wrong task means fostering an unproductive workforce. While employees should be employed based on their strengths, the service manager must know the team's profiles. When replacing a productive employee with strengths in specific areas, looking for similar characteristics in a potential employee may be logical. Having the right people in place will positively influence the team's productivity and improve business outcomes. However, the study's results also indicate the importance of continuous training and development, especially in customer interaction. By guiding employees on how to solve customer inquiries efficiently, service agents can do a better job. The feeling of contributing in a meaningful and successful way also promotes higher employee job satisfaction and less fluctuation (e.g., Clausen & Borg, 2011; Ni Made Dwi Puspitawati et al., 2024).

Customer interaction not only occurs in person or over the phone: website development can incorporate scientific insights from consumer behaviour to improve customers' online experience. Some customers seek to subsequently validate their purchases because of post-purchase uncertainty. To stimulate their uncertainty, they want to validate their purchases by reading existing online reviews or evaluations to find confirmation (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). Therefore, it is, from a company perspective, essential to have an excellent digital reputation, including previous consumer reviews (Gandini, 2020). Otherwise, consumers may be tempted to return their purchases (with eCommerce, consumers in Germany, for example, have the right to return all online purchases because of the "Distance Selling Act") or to not purchase at all. Hence, a bad eWoM presentation could increase returns because it must give consumers the security they seek. However, according to J. Wei et al. (2022) regarding service recovery, online-shops should make consumers aware of the difficulty of service work and the inevitability of service failures.

According to current research (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Lim & Chung, 2011), many consumers prefer to read negative reviews. Thus, companies should focus on reacting to these negative reviews accordingly to show consumers that they respond correctly in cases of product or service failures. Reacting suitably includes, for instance, offering compensation, providing vouchers, or commenting on the review.

Additionally, consumers must have an option to address their dissatisfaction because, according to the Social-Sharing-of-Emotion Theory, people tend to share their experiences. When customers are not enabled to do so, they do not have the chance to vent their negative emotions, and companies will not have the option to identify and redress the dissatisfaction and maintain the customer relationship (López-López et al., 2014).

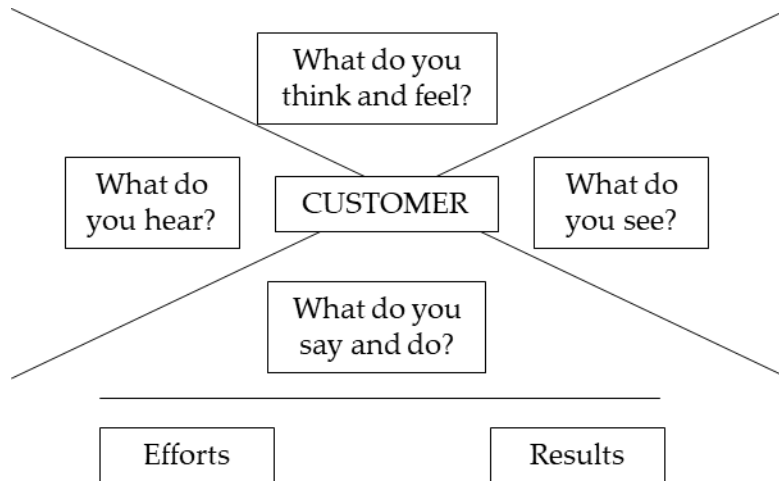
In addition to customer-service agents, recovery-process approaches significantly influence customers' post-purchase intentions (Kuo & Wu, 2012). For instance, sufficient information about the failure compensation, proactive information about the current recovery progress (especially when the compensation is a repair or the repair needs time), or reaction to customers' questions increase their satisfaction with the recovery effort and outcome. Consequently, customers' post-purchase intentions are affected (Kuo & Wu, 2012). Thus, the department responsible for customer-service processes should incorporate these approaches.

Customer empathy mapping is a commonly used practical tool to understand customers or consider customers' perspectives. Numerous websites focus on empathy mapping and provide instrument toolboxes to incorporate into corporate structures. Figure 27 shows an example of how a customer empathy map<sup>15</sup> might look.

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<sup>15</sup> Perspective taking of customers fears, frustrations, and obstacles (Illescas-Manzano et al., 2021), with questions such as "What moves you?", "What is the most important thing for the customer?", "Who is the person who influences you the most?", and "What is your attitude?".

Figure 27. Example of a Customer Empathy Map



Note. The figure is adapted from "Implementation of chatbot in online commerce, and open innovation" by Illescas-Manzano et al., 2021, *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 7(2), p. 9 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/joitmc7020125>). CC BY.

#### Law

Regarding the General Data Protection Regulation (often known by the abbreviation GDPR), it is urged that organizations consider legal advice by integrating customer personality and characteristics insights into their complaint and recovery procedures. Protecting individual data is a significant right in the German market. Storing sensitive customer data and analysing patterns, such as empathy or eWoM-behaviour, requires a thoughtful approach. The legal team must consider how this data is stored and used. The Data Processing Agreement (DPA) builds contractual agreements regarding the corresponding terms between a company and their customer. Furthermore, the agreement protects the company as well as the customer from data abuse and is required by the European Parliament (2016). Especially in the European Union, data security is a fast-changing topic, as demonstrated by recent verdicts around the data-privacy framework. Companies can be condemned for any issues with these laws based on revenue. Combined with the risk of data leaks or hacking attacks, storing and analysing sensitive customer data equals an economic risk for businesses. Companies using the results from this research must work closely with the legal team to understand the implications and boundaries of the current jurisprudence.

*Customer*

Incorporating customer expectations into complaint-handling situations is even more critical than in the initial service or product delivery because of the intensive emotional customer involvement of service-failure and recovery processes, as previous research has suggested (Bitner et al., 1990; Y. Huang et al., 2020; Smith et al., 1999). As Kuo and Wu (2012) noted note, “understanding customers’ emotions is helpful for service providers in increasing post-recovery satisfaction of customers and recovery from service failures” (p. 135).

Considering customer empathy as one CCB component can improve customers’ experience. However, according to Hodges and Klein (2001) “normal people have some capacity for being empathic and define how that capacity is demonstrated” (p. 437). Thus, the authors describe highly empathic humans as rare, as with extremely un-empathic humans. High empathy tendencies “interfere with the ability to act on one’s own thoughts and feelings” (Hodges & Klein, 2001, p. 437). Thus, companies must provide customers with empathising opportunities to improve their interaction experience. When no empathising probabilities are provided, customer empathy towards the firm will decrease, and the positive effects of customer empathy will be lost.

Empathic customers have a higher likelihood of both understanding a company’s failure and customer forgiveness than weak empathic customers. Theory of Mind and empathy enable customers to comprehend the emotional and cognitive states of the employees they interact with, which is the foundation for flexible, interactive behaviour and social decision-making (Preckel et al., 2018). Harrison-Walker (2019) recommend considering customer forgiveness in all future models of service recovery.

Because empathy is often described as unavoidable, automatic, and highly context-dependent (Zaki, 2014), companies can foster customer empathy by providing opportunities for customers to motivate their willingness to empathise with service employees.

Additionally, the following recommendations for integrating customers’ self-esteem are given. As study 2 revealed, the customer-complaint reaction varies based on their self-esteem. Thus, considering customers’ self-esteem in complaint handling is suggested. Furthermore, according to Ahmadi and Fakhimi (2021),

research has recommended applying gratitude expressions to recovery approaches because doing so improves consumers' self-esteem compared to empathic apologies and encourages satisfactory marketing consequences, such as loyalty. Consequently, high-self-esteem consumers are more likely to voice their complaints towards the responsible firm directly.

However, in addition to these approaches and strategies, no course of action will completely prevent customers from churning or acting aggressively or unfavourably after service failures: generally, there is no security for customers' continued patronage (Radu et al., 2019). Companies can only endeavour to mitigate the negative consequences of service failures. Accordance to existing research, it is advisable that the complaint recovery should not end with a resolution of the failure but should also entail appropriate follow-up outreaches that are linked to specific customer incidents and tailored to customers' needs (Harrison-Walker, 2019).

#### 7.4. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like every research approach, the current doctorate thesis has several limitations. Some scales, such as complaint experience in study 1 or customer forgiveness in study 2, elicited insufficient reliability. However, these scales were not removed from the analysis because of their central meanings. According to Schecker (2014), meaningful content can proceed as a scale when weak internal consistency is mentioned as an aspect of critical interpretation. Nevertheless, because of low reliability in study 2, the customer-forgiveness scale was altered for study 3 in response to these insufficient results. After an intensive pretest, the third study employed a new scale to gauge consumer forgiveness. The scale change was successful as the scale then reported sufficient internal consistency.

The studies were conducted as cross-sectional studies rather than longitudinal section studies, where data is collected over a longer timeline at specific intervals. A cross-sectional study is a one-time data collection, which presents limitations. For example, no development or longer-term effects of recovery efforts could be analysed. However, cross-sectional studies are a valid one-time research tool with clear advantages, such as, easy conduction, time-

efficiency, and the data collection is simpler than those of longitudinal section studies.

According to a current meta-analysis by Mir et al. (2023), scenario-based experimental designs are a typical and widespread approach in complaint research (e.g., Blodgett et al., 1997; J. H. Kim & Jang, 2014; Liao, 2007; H. Liu et al., 2020; McCollough et al., 2000; Roschk & Kaiser, 2013; Song et al., 2023; Y. Xie & Peng, 2009). The central advantages of scenario-based experiments are efficacy, controllability, and standardised stimuli (e.g., Rungtusanatham et al., 2011; Wason et al., 2002). However, this approach has limitations. Results are limited to the described scenario content, and representativeness cannot be ensured. Often, such research approaches are based on student samples, eliciting a lack of representativeness (Mattila et al., 2021). The thesis sample was also a student sample, which was relatively young, the average age being under 30 years, and gender was also unbalanced, with 70 % being female and only 30 % male. This is an unbalanced sample. Thus, for future research, it is recommended that the effects be analysed in older samples and mainly gender-balanced samples.

A central part of the research methodology used in this doctoral thesis was the probands' ability to self-assess in the service scenarios (self-assessment approach). Therefore, it was pivotal that the probands did not have systematically different skills for doing so. It is suggested that probands have similar self-assessment abilities (normal distribution according to Gauss) because previous studies have found no indication that the ability to self-assess is related to respondents' level of education (e.g., Collani & Herzberg, 2003; Eichhorn, 2019).

Analysing emotional intensity (positive versus negative valence and strong versus weak intensity) is a simple way to consider emotions within post-purchase behaviour. Like Watson and Tellegen (1985), who also report emotions on these two valences, it is not indicated that all emotional experiences can be reduced to only two variables. The two-dimensional emotion framework is a simple way to report emotional valence in test-economic ways. Emotions cannot be reported on their multifactorial structures (D. Watson & Tellegen, 1985). However, it was sufficient to do so for the purpose of this doctoral thesis. Nevertheless, complexity reduction was achieved by using the two-dimensional emotions scale. Thus, future research can analyse customers' empathy by considering specific emotions. For

example, Kaur et al. (2021) used eight aspects of emotional experience: anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, trust, negative, and positive.

A last limitation is gender biases based on empathy and emotional intensity. Previous research has indicated that women score higher on emotional reactivity than men and are less intense on the scale which measures perspective-taking ability (Davis, 1980). As such, gender-based differences must be considered when interpreting the findings. Research has also assessed gender-related differences in empathy (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021; Spreng et al., 2009; Totan et al., 2012). Table 59 provides an overview of the limitations discussed for each study separately and those that affected all three studies.

Table 59. Limitations Overview

Study	Limitation
1	Variable complaint experience elicits insufficient reliability
2	Variable customer forgiveness elicits insufficient reliability
3	Missing context of financial reimbursement amount to rank the compensation, such as 10 % or 20 % of the original cost
All studies	Potential gender biases based on empathy, cross-sectional study, low average age of probands

Note. Summary of previously discussed limitations.

#### *Future research*

A possible future research outlook is to combine the same research objectives with another methodological approach, where actual customer data and real purchases could be analysed. Additionally, the same scenarios could be tested using different empathy scales, for instance, the short empathy scales from study 3 for studies 1 or 2. Additionally, customers' emotions could be analysed in more detail, such as the core emotions, anger, fear, disgust, surprise, happiness, and sadness, based on Ekman (1977).

Furthermore, for future research, it is suggested to analyse customer empathy's effect in other complaint situations, such as customer–employee situations with a higher bonding potential. In such cases, an employee and

customer would have a closer relationship than in a customer-service interaction on the phone or online through reviews. Thus, it is suggested to re-conduct the study in a different setting within the context of, for example, a hair appointment or spa treatment, where there is more human interaction.

The work of Watson & Tellegen (1985) revealed a relationship between personality traits and negative effects. For instance, negative affect and neuroticism are strongly correlated, like extraversion and positive affect. Hence, it may be promising to analyse the relation between personality and emotional influences depending on post-purchase behaviour.

In this doctoral thesis, customers' stickiness intention was not distinguished by further loyalty dimensions. According to Brock (2009), it is suggested that the influence of customer empathy be deeply analysed according to loyalty dimensions to elicit a deeper understanding of empathy's influence on post-purchase behaviour.

Articulation of a complaint requires the ability to regulate negative emotions; thus, the emotional-regulation ability is essential for eWoM-behaviour (H. Liu et al., 2021). Emotional regulation strategies depend on age and gender (Haga et al., 2009); thus, it can be demonstrated that this effect also impacts eWoM-giving behaviour. It is therefore suggested to analyse the effect of empathy on consumers' emotional-regulation abilities to examine its influence on post-purchase behaviour.

Yun and Park (2022) examined the effect of chatbot service recovery on positive WoM, customer repurchase intention, and customer satisfaction. They compared two chatbot service recoveries, one with emotional words and the other without, and their findings indicate that empathy and interactivity affect customer satisfaction only in the group for chatbots with emotion words (Yun & Park, 2022). Chatbot responsiveness did not reveal a significant effect on customer satisfaction for both groups (Yun & Park, 2022).

Regarding current AI development, it is future-orientated to consider customers' emotivity analysis (in customer calls) with AI. The service employee can react according to customers' emotions. Current research, such as that of Mauchand and Pell (2022, 2023), has already started to analyse emotivity in voices.

These AI trends can improve customer experiences when communicating with AI instead of human service employees. Communicating with a chatbot is

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preferred when the chatbot understands the customer's needs, which indicates empathy (Chung et al., 2020). Current research, such as Liu-Thompkins et al.'s (2022) has analysed artificial empathy by bridging the AI-human gap.



## **VIII – CONCLUSION**

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## VIII - CONCLUSION

The variety of consumer behaviour was the research focus of this thesis. The main target was to deepen the understanding of consumer behaviour and reveal the role of customer and employee empathy considering emotions of service failure. To illuminate complaint research, the main research question was asked: “Do customer and employee empathy influence post-purchase behaviour (manifested by eWoM-giving intention and complaint recovery), considering the emotional intensity of dissatisfied online customers?”. The study focused on the German eCommerce sector to analyse the effects in online customer–employee service interactions (purchase went well but the service experience post-purchase failed). The trade-offs between emotional and economic recovery strategies and various emotional intensities were analysed by considering customer and employee empathy.

The relevance of this study is to ensure that companies comprehend customer behaviour: only by fully understanding post-purchase behaviour can companies efficiently satisfy customers, devise strategies to rebuild customer relationships following service failures, and influence or respond to disgruntled customers. According to a recent study from McKinsey and Company (2022), customer-experience improvement is the fastest-growing priority area for customer-care leaders, with an increase of 20 % from 2019 to 2022. The financial profitability of companies is greatly impacted by the successful resolution of customer-complaint recovery (Tronvoll, 2007).

Based on theoretical approaches, such as Social-Sharing-of-Emotion Theory, Social-Exchange Theory, and Avoid-Pain Theory, the current doctoral thesis conducted experimental scenario-based quantitative research along the customer journey, with a focus on the post-purchase phase. Using data from three studies, complaint-giving behaviour and recovery behaviour were analysed. Derived from the current literature and theoretical models, each study developed hypotheses (study 1, H1–H8; study 2, H1–H9; study 3, H1–H6). With complex statistical models, such as mediation analysis, confirmational factor analysis, and structural equation modelling, the research revealed crucial results for complaint research

and diminished the underlying research gap. Given the high managerial relevance for both the observed eCommerce segment and other industries, the findings may be adaptable for business improvements, such as customer–employee interactions in person in offline retail stores.

The research determined and specified multiple influences on consumer behaviour, with a focus on post-purchase behaviour, specifically complaint behaviour. The influence of customer empathy, employee empathy, and emotional intensity within customer complaint behaviour can be clarified through the research. Nevertheless, the influence of customer empathy on customer complaint behaviour cannot be generalised because this effect was shaped by too many side effects. However, the effect can be determined by a central influence of emotions. Additionally, the central importance of empathy in customers' forgiveness process can be identified, and the theoretical basis of complaint research is, on the one hand, confirmed, such as Self-Enhancement Theory or the Social-Sharing-of-Emotions theory, and, on the other hand, expanded, such as the Service-Recovery Framework.

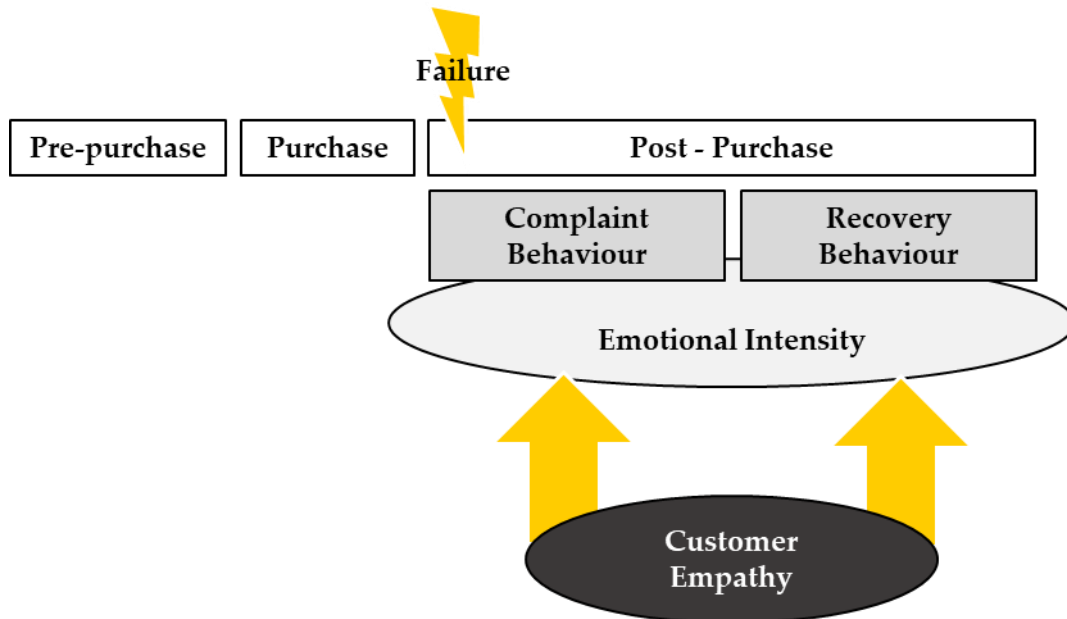
Study 1 indicates that emotional intensity decisively affects customers' e-WoM-giving intention: when emotional intensity increases, e-WoM-giving intention also rises. Here, the meaning of emotional intensity as it relates to customer empathy is revealed because emotional intensity seems to mediate the full effect of customer empathy on eWoM (study 1) and customer forgiveness (study 2). As such, a customer with high empathy is more likely to write a review about a bad service experience when the perceived emotion is negative, and negative emotion seem to act as a condition for empathic customers to provide an eWoM.

The same applies to study 2. Results indicate an indirect effect of customer empathy on recovery behaviour mediated through emotional intensity, meaning a customer with high empathy is more likely to forgive a service failure when the perceived emotion is negative.

The suggested framework of the role of customer empathy in post-purchase behaviour is presented in figure 28. The conducted studies indicate an influence of customer empathy on eWoM behaviour and recovery behaviour only when mediated through the customer's emotions, as marked with the yellow arrow.

Hence, no direct effect of customer empathy on complaint-giving behaviour and recovery behaviour was revealed in studies 1 and 2.

Figure 28. Framework of Customer Empathy within Post-Purchase Behaviour for Studies 1 and 2



Note. Own illustration. Research results are classified using the consumer-behaviour process based on Kotler and Bliemel (1999) and Kotler and Keller (2012).

Conversely, study 3 found a direct effect of customer empathy on customer forgiveness, meaning a customer with high empathy is more likely to forgive a service failure. Study's 3 customer empathy scale is more focusing on the situational and motivational context compared to studies 1 and 2 empathy scales, which do more focus on a stable customer empathy, which may cause this difference. However, study 3 reveals the central relevance of customers' emotions within recovery behaviour because of an influence on customers' post-recovery satisfaction. Additionally, study 3 demonstrates that product-related compensation is more powerful for customer forgiveness than financial compensation.

The result suggest that more economic recovery strategies (such as greater financial reimbursement) do not always produce the strongest recovery success. This finding helps companies to design their redress processes and decide how high financial reimbursements should be.

The research demonstrates that, in post-purchase behaviour, customer empathy and employee empathy seem to influence complaint-recovery variables, such as stickiness intention, forgiveness, and eWoM-giving intention. Customers' emotions affect the influence due to the central relevance of emotions in consumer behaviour, as previous research has revealed (e.g., Choraria, 2013; Hossain & Rahman, 2022; Nyer, 1997; Wetzer et al., 2007). Therefore, this research shows the general relevance of empathy for consumers' post-purchase behaviour and how the appropriate consideration of empathy can leverage businesses success.

Thus, the research illuminates the influence of customer and employee empathy and emotional intensity on the post-purchase behaviour in the context of failed service interactions, combined with the recovery of such failed service interactions.

As with all research, limitations must be mentioned. The sample was relatively young, with an average age younger than 30, and gender was unbalanced, with most probands being female (70 %). Considering empathy differences based on gender (Loeffler & Greitemeyer, 2021; Spreng et al., 2009; Totan et al., 2012), the results must be interpreted regarding potential gender-based differences.

Nevertheless, the research is more relevant than ever because of AI trends in customer services and consumer experiences. According to recent research, communicating with a chatbot is preferred when the chatbot understands the customer's needs, which indicates empathy (Chung et al., 2020). Current research has analysed artificial empathy by bridging the AI-human gap (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022).

Ultimately, this research expands the understanding of customer and employee empathy as indicators of post-purchase behaviour by considering emotional intensity for complaint behaviour and recovery. Thus, the managerial relevance of empathy as an indicator of successful complaint recovery was revealed and should be considered in service interactions.

Service failures will inevitably occur in circumstances where individuals communicate. Companies are thus well advised to embrace failures as an opportunity to improve and win customers' loyalty.

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# **X – APPENDIXES**

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## X - APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1. Scenarios of Study 1

#### **Introduction (similar introduction text for all scenarios)**

“You purchased a new printer and already used basic functions for several months. Before the purchase you spent several weeks researching, comparing prices and functions, and finally decided on a printer from a leading manufacturer. Although the printer was a little more expensive, you were convinced that you purchased a high-quality product—also because there was always talk of excellent customer service during the selection process. You already experienced this personally, as you used other products from the manufacturer. However, since the last time you used the printer, it no longer works properly, which you cannot explain. You, therefore, pick up the phone to ask for support from customer service”. (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)

#### **Scenario 1 positive**

You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee is very friendly and helpful. He asks you to wait on the line so that he can look for the answer to your question. After some waiting time, he gets back to you without any solution. He checks more details to narrow down the error, but this does not bring a solution either. The customer service employee creates a ticket and forwards your request to the specialist department. Someone from there will contact you personally within the next 48h. Even though the employee was engaged to help you, your problem has unfortunately not been solved yet. You are now waiting for the callback.

**Scenario 2 negative and neutral**

“You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee puts you on hold to find out about possible solutions. After some time on hold, he gets back to you but does not have a solution to your problem. The customer service employee tells you to read the instructions again. Finally, you say goodbye, and the phone call is ended without an answer or solution to your problem. For the very high price, you would have hoped for more. Unfortunately, you are not satisfied with the printer you bought and the customer service. Your problem has not been solved!”. (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)

**Scenario 3 negative and angry**

“You describe your situation and expect a competent solution to your problem. The customer service employee seems very annoyed right from the start. He is unfriendly and snippy in his language, for example, he says “what do I know what you’ve done to your printer?”. Instead of providing help, he refers to the “idiot-proof” manual, which “should even help you”. After some back and forth, the customer service employee recommends that you visit a local copy shop and then hangs up. At the last moment, you hear a rude “idiot”. Your problem is not solved—instead, you wasted a lot of time being treated rudely!”. (Abend et al., 2023, p. 16)

## APPENDIX 2. Scenarios of Study 2

### Introduction Study 2 in English and Online Customer Review

Please try to see the situation from the customer's (Kai Schmitz's) perspective:

You bought a printer and are dissatisfied with the purchase. A few days ago, you wrote an online review about it on the platform where you bought the printer. Below you can see your online review and the provider's reaction to your review:

"I called the customer service because I had a question about my printer. From the beginning, the employee seems pretty annoyed and unfriendly; for example, he said, "What do I know what you did to your printer?" Instead of providing help, he suggested to read the "foolproof" user manual and recommended that I visit the local copy shop. After that, he hung up. At the last moment, he called me an "idiot". What a rude behaviour. The last \*\*\*. Do not buy there!!!". (Abend et al., 2023)

### Introduction Study 2 in German and Online Customer Review



Bitte versuchen Sie sich in die Rolle von Kai Schmitz hineinzusetzen:

Sie haben einen Drucker gekauft und sind mit dem Kauf unzufrieden. Vor einigen Tagen haben Sie dazu eine Onlinebewertung auf der Plattform, auf der Sie den Drucker gekauft haben, geschrieben. Im Folgenden sehen Sie Ihre Onlinebewertung sowie die Reaktion des Anbieters auf Ihre Bewertung.

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, zum Beispiel sagt er: "Was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?" Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das "idiotensichere" Handbuch und empfiehlt mir, den örtlichen Copy-Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als "Idioten" beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!

## German Text Plus Review Picture of Scenarios

### 1. Positive

 Kai Schmitz  
 **Unverschämter Kundenservice Mitarbeiter**  
Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2022

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!

**Antwort des Anbieters:**

Lieber Kai Schmitz,  
es tut mir sehr leid, dass Sie mit unserem Service unzufrieden waren. Ich möchte mich für die Ihnen Unannehmlichkeiten entschuldigen. Ich kann mir gut vorstellen, wie frustrierend und ärgerlich die Situation für Sie war. Bitte seien Sie versichert, dass Ihre Erfahrung nicht dem Standard entspricht und wir entsprechende Maßnahmen ergriffen haben.  
Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, haben Sie per Email eine Gutschrift i.H.v. **20,00 EUR** erhalten sowie in den nächsten Tagen eine Paketsendung mit **neuen Druckerpatronen**.

Hat sich Ihre Frage in der Zwischenzeit geklärt? Darf ich Sie ansonsten telefonisch kontaktieren? Alternativ können Sie [online die Tutorials](#) zu den Funktionen ansehen.

Danke für Ihr wertvolles Feedback; ich bin gerne persönlich für Sie da!

**English version of scenario, Text 1:**

Reply from the provider:

Dear Kai Schmitz,

I am very sorry that you were dissatisfied with our customer service. I would like to apologise for the inconvenience caused. I can well imagine how frustrating and annoying the situation was for you. Please be assured that your experience was not our standard, and we have taken appropriate actions. To alleviate your anger, you have received a credit note of EUR 20.00 by email and a parcel with new printer cartridges will be delivered in the next few days. Has your question been resolved in the meantime? If not, may I contact you by telephone? Alternatively, you can watch the online tutorials. Thank you for your valuable feedback; I am happy to help you personally!

## 2. Neutral Negative

 Kai Schmitz

 **NICHT KAUFEN!!**

Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2022

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!



### Antwort des Anbieters:

Lieber Kai Schmitz,  
es tut mir leid, dass unsere Kollegen des telefonischen Kundenservices Ihnen nicht freundlich weiterhelfen konnten – so soll es natürlich nicht sein. Wir schulen unser Personal in der Regel so, dass sie die Fähigkeit haben unseren Kunden zu helfen! Dass dies bei Ihnen nicht der Fall war, bedauern wir. Wir werden uns in Zukunft bemühen Ihre Anfragen kompetent und freundlich zu lösen.

Falls Sie weitere Fragen haben, steht Ihnen der telefonische Kundenservice zur Verfügung. Alternativ machen Sie von unserem Rückruf-Service Gebrauch.

Danke für Ihr Feedback zu Ihrer Erfahrung mit unserem Kundenservice!

**English version of scenario, Text 2:**

Reply from the provider:

Dear Kai Schmitz,

I'm sorry that our customer service employee could not help you in a friendly manner - of course, that's not how it should be. As a rule, we train our staff to help our customers! We regret that this was not the case. We will try to deal with your enquiries in a competent and friendly manner in the future. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact our customer service by telephone. Alternatively, please make use of our call-back service. Thank you for your feedback on your experience with our customer service!

### 3. Negative Angry



Kai Schmitz



**NICHT KAUFEN!!**

Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2022

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!



**Antwort des Anbieters:**

Lieber Kunde,

anscheinend konnten Ihnen die Mitarbeiter des telefonischen Kundenservices nicht helfen. Wir beobachten immer mal wieder Handlings-Schwierigkeiten bei unserem Drucker. Um Fragen vor zu beugen haben wir jedem Drucker bei Versand aus unserem Online Shop ein umfassendes Handbuch beigelegt, in dem bei Fragen nachgelesen werden kann. Dort ist eine sachgerechte Bedienung der Drucker erklärt.

Falls Sie weitere Fragen haben, finden Sie auf unsere Homepage Lösungen und Kontaktmöglichkeiten.

**English version of scenario, Text 3:**

Reply from the provider:

Dear customer,

It seems that the customer service employee on the phone were unable to help you. We experience handling difficulties with our printer from time to time. To prevent questions, we have included a comprehensive manual with every printer shipped from our online-shop, which can be read if you have any questions. It explains how to operate the printer correctly. If you have any further questions, you will find solutions and contact options on our homepage.

## APPENDIX 3. Scenarios of Study 3

<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Compensation in English</b>	<b>Compensation in German</b>
S1	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of EUR 20.00 to your bank account, and you will receive a parcel with new printer ink cartridges.	Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, habe ich soeben eine Entschädigung i.H.v. 20,00 EUR auf Ihr Konto überwiesen und Sie erhalten eine Paketsendung mit neuen Druckerpatronen.
S2	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of EUR 5.00 to your bank account, and you will receive a parcel with new printer ink cartridges.	Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, habe ich soeben eine Entschädigung i.H.v. 5,00 EUR auf Ihr Konto überwiesen und Sie erhalten eine Paketsendung mit neuen Druckerpatronen.
S3	To mitigate your anger, will receive a parcel with new printer ink cartridges.	Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, erhalten Sie eine Paketsendung mit neuen Druckerpatronen.
S4	To mitigate your anger, I just transferred a reimbursement of EUR 20.00 to your bank account.	Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, habe ich soeben eine Entschädigung i.H.v. 20,00 EUR auf Ihr Konto überwiesen.
S5	To mitigate your anger, I would like to apologise to you once again.	Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, möchte ich mich noch einmal ganz herzlich bei Ihnen entschuldigen.

*Note. S indicates "scenario".*



Kai Schmitz

**Unverschämter Kundenservice Mitarbeiter**

Verifizierter Kauf Rezension vom 25. November 2023

Ich rief den Kundenservice an, da ich eine Frage zu meinem Drucker hatte. Der Mitarbeiter wirkt von Beginn an stark genervt und ist unfreundlich, z.B. sagt er: „was weiß ich denn, was Sie mit Ihrem Drucker angestellt haben?“ Anstatt Hilfe zu leisten, verweist er mich auf das „idiotensichere“ Handbuch und empfiehlt mir den örtlichen Copy Shop aufzusuchen. Danach legt er einfach auf. Im letzten Moment höre ich noch, wie er mich als „Idiot“ beschimpft. Was für ein unverschämtes Verhalten. Der letzte \*\*\*. Kauft dort auf keinen Fall!!

**Antwort des Anbieters:**

Lieber Kai Schmitz,  
es tut mir sehr leid, dass Sie mit unserem Service unzufrieden waren. Ich möchte mich für die Ihnen entstandenen Unannehmlichkeiten entschuldigen. Ich kann mir gut vorstellen, wie frustrierend und ärgerlich die Situation für Sie war. Bitte seien Sie versichert, dass Ihre Erfahrung nicht dem Standard entspricht und wir entsprechende Maßnahmen ergriffen haben. Um Ihren Ärger zu mildern, möchte ich mich noch einmal ganz herzlich bei Ihnen entschuldigen.

Hat sich Ihre Frage in der Zwischenzeit geklärt? Darf ich Sie ansonsten telefonisch kontaktieren? Alternativ können Sie [online die Tutorials](#) zu den Funktionen ansehen.

Danke für Ihr wertvolles Feedback; ich bin gerne persönlich für Sie da!

APPENDIX 4. Scales of Study 1 with Item Text and Cronbach's Alpha<sup>16</sup>

Construct / Scale	Item text	$\alpha$			
<b>Customer Forgiveness</b> (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021)	The way the vendor handled the failure made me feel that I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her.	.96			
	I don't seek revenge upon him or her.				
	If I see him or her once more, I'll act friendly.				
<b>Emotional Intensity</b> (López-López et al., 2014) adapted from (Wetzer et al., 2007)	Positive	Enjoyment	Entertainment	.96	
		Pleasantness	Happiness		
		Euphoria	Enthusiasm		
		Fun	Fascination		
	Negative	Anger	Frustration		.96
		Sadness	Resentment		
		Irritation	Indignation		
		Disappointment	Disgust		
<b>Recovery Performance</b> (McCollough et al., 2000)	I would rate the performance of the company in dealing with the failure as exceptional.	.83			
	For the situation described, I would rate the efforts of the company to deal with my problem as superior.				
<b>Post-Recovery Satisfaction</b> (McCollough et al., 2000)	Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied did this experience leave you feeling?	.90			
	How well did this service experience meet your needs?				
	Overall, I am very satisfied with this experience.				
<b>Stickiness Intention</b> (Li et al., 2006)	I plan to keep using this product in the future.	.99			
	I intend to continue using this product in the future.				
	I expect my use of this product to continue in the future.				
	Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.				

<sup>16</sup> The scale is presented in the study, where it is used for the first time.

		It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.	
		I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.	
		I enjoy making other people feel better.	
		When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else.	
		I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.	
<b>Customer Empathy</b>		I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.	
(Totan et al., 2012)		I become irritated when someone cries.	.85
		I am not really interested in how other people feel.	
		I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.	
		When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.	
		I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.	
		When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her.	
<hr/>			
		I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	
	Perspective Taking	When I am upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes".	.57
<b>Customer Empathy<sup>17</sup></b>		I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	
(McBane, 1995)			
	Empathic Concern	I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.	
		If someone is unhappy, I quickly realize this, even if I do not know the person well.	.59

<sup>17</sup> As the Cronbach's alpha value is low, the empathy scale is only applied without using the subscales. The overall empathy scale based on McBane (1995) elicits  $\alpha = .73$ . See section [4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics](#) for details.

		Other people's misfortunes usually disturb me a great deal.	
		I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.	
		I become nervous if others around me are nervous.	
	Emotional Contagion	I cannot remain cool if others around me are excited.	.86
		I get easily infected by the mood of others.	
		If I see unhappy people, I feel unhappy myself.	
<b>Self-Esteem</b> (Rosenberg, 1979) German version: Collani and Herzberg (2003). Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 for negative self-esteem	1	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	
	2	At times I think I am no good at all.	
	3	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	
	4	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	
	5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	
	6	I certainly feel useless at times.	.84
	7	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	
	8	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	
	9	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	
		10	I take a positive attitude toward myself.

*Note.* Cronbach's alpha values reported in this table are the original values. Results of the conducted study are in section [4.2. Results of Study 1](#).

## APPENDIX 5. Scales of Study 2 with Item Text and Cronbach's Alpha

Construct / Scale	Item text	$\alpha$		
<b>Customer Forgiveness</b> (Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021)	The way the vendor handled the failure made me feel that I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her.	.96		
	I don't seek revenge upon him or her.			
	If I see him or her once more, I'll act friendly.			
<b>Emotional Intensity</b> (López-López et al., 2014) adapted from (Wetzer et al., 2007)	Positive	Enjoyment Entertainment	.96	
		Pleasantness Happiness		
		Euphoria Enthusiasm		
		Fun Fascination		
	Negative	Anger Frustration		.96
		Sadness Resentment		
		Irritation Indignation		
		Disappointment Disgust		
<b>Recovery Performance</b> (McCollough et al., 2000)	I would rate the performance of the company in dealing with the failure as exceptional.	.83		
	For the situation described, I would rate the efforts of the company to deal with my problem as superior.			
<b>Post-Recovery Satisfaction</b> (McCollough et al., 2000)	Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied did this experience leave you feeling?	.90		
	How well did this service experience meet your needs?			
	Overall, I am very satisfied with this experience.			
<b>Stickiness Intention</b> (Li et al., 2006)	I plan to keep using this product in the future.	.99		
	I intend to continue using this product in the future.			
	I expect my use of this product to continue in the future.			
<b>Customer Empathy</b> (Totan et al., 2012)	Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.	.85		
	It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.			
	I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.			
	I enjoy making other people feel better.			

		When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else.	
		I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.	
		I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.	
		I become irritated when someone cries.	
		I am not really interested in how other people feel.	
		I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.	
		When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.	
		I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.	
		When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her.	
<b>Customer Empathy</b> <sup>18</sup> (McBane, 1995)	Perspective Taking	I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	
		When I am upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes".	.57
		I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	
	Empathic Concern	I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.	
	If someone is unhappy, I quickly realize this, even if I do not know the person well.	.59	
	Other people's misfortunes usually disturb me a great deal.		

<sup>18</sup> As the Cronbach's alpha value is low, the empathy scale is only applied without using the subscales. The overall empathy scale based on McBane (1995) elicits  $\alpha = .73$ . See section [4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics](#) for details.

		I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.	
	Emotional Contagion	I become nervous if others around me are nervous.	
		I cannot remain cool if others around me are excited.	
		I get easily infected by the mood of others.	.86
		If I see unhappy people, I feel unhappy myself.	
<b>Self-Esteem</b> (Rosenberg, 1979) German version: Collani and Herzberg (2003). Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 for negative self-esteem	1	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	
	2	At times I think I am no good at all.	
	3	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	
	4	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	
	5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	
	6	I certainly feel useless at times.	.84
	7	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	
	8	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	
	9	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	
	10	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	

*Note.* Cronbach's alpha values reported in this table are the original values. Results of the conducted study are in section [5.2. Results of Study 2](#).

## APPENDIX 6. Scales of Study 3 with Item Text and Cronbach's Alpha

Construct / Scale	Item text	$\alpha$
<b>Consumer Forgiveness</b> adapted from (J. Wei et al., 2022)	I agree with the service recovery of the customer service.	.72
	I agree with the material compensation of the service agent.	
	I agree with the service agent's apology.	
	I forgive the mistakes of the service agent.	
<b>Customer Empathy</b> (J. Wei et al., 2022)	I understand the reasons for mistakes in customer services.	.81
	I can understand the difficulties of customer services.	
	I would imagine what would happen if it were a customer service.	
	The service failure of the customer service is just one case. Customer services are thinking about consumers.	
<b>Customer empathy towards the firm</b> (C. Wei et al., 2020)	Though I am upset at the company, I still try to understand the company's point of view.	.83
	I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person and I can understand the trouble of the company.	
	I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	
<b>Perceived Fairness</b> (C. Wei et al., 2020)	The company's resolution is fair.	.81
	The company's resolution is ethical.	
	The company's resolution is acceptable.	

*Note. Cronbach's alpha values reported in this table are the original values. Results of the conducted study are in section [6.2. Results of Study 3](#).*

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