



The Effects of Online Incivility and Consumer-to-Consumer Interactional Justice on Complainants, Observers, and Service Providers During Social Media Service Recovery ☆

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Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, the current research examines online incivility in relation to service recovery on social media. First, findings from a netnographic investigation suggest consumer-to-consumer (C2C) incivility results in some consumers holding the firm accountable to address uncivil exchanges on a firm-managed communication channel. Based on the netnographic findings, fairness theory, and justice theory, a follow-up experimental study assesses how online incivility negatively affects service recovery outcomes (firm–consumer justice) when a firm chooses (not) to respond to the incivility. Through these two studies, the current paper proposes a new form of justice (C2C interactional justice) and posits that online service recovery extends beyond direct victims of the incivility (first-party justice) to also include observers (third-party justice). This more nuanced view of justice associated with a service recovery is especially significant when considering the traditional relationships of justice with satisfaction, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and other desirable firm outcomes. For practitioners, this research suggests that firms must manage C2C interactional justice on corporate social media channels for both complainants and observers to avoid reputational damage and a loss of customers.

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Introduction

There are two recent online phenomena whose impact on one another is both unexplored by researchers and problematic for organizations. The first is online incivility, which occurs when rude or offensive comments are made toward an individual via Internet communications (Anderson et al.

2014). According to recent polls, online incivility is on the rise with the majority of Internet users having seen or experienced uncivil online communications (Clay 2013; Pew Research Center 2014). The second phenomenon is the increasing number of complaints made by consumers on corporate social media (CSM) channels (e.g., a firm's Facebook page or official Twitter account) to seek assistance from a company (Baer 2016; Causon 2015). The convergence of rising online incivility and complaining on CSM channels is creating new challenges for firms utilizing these online customer service touchpoints. Namely, the ability of an online audience to view and participate in the complaint handling process (Schaefer and Schamari 2016) also creates an opportunity for uncivil communication from one consumer to another (Suler 2004, 2016).

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Past research considers *other-consumers* in service settings (e.g., Grove and Fisk 1997), such as how one consumer is affected by another's actions. Such examinations focus on general service consumption situations rather than when a service representative is working with a complainant in a service recovery context. Service recovery, synonymous with customer complaint handling, is an integral part of a successful customer service strategy and traditionally framed as a complainant–service provider encounter absent from the participation of other-consumers (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1989). The effectiveness of a service recovery is often assessed via the perceptions of justice framework (Blodgett, Granbois, and Walters 1993), where a complainant's perceptions of a service provider's interactional, procedural, and distributive justice are key mediators between a firm's recovery actions and a customer's satisfaction, loyalty, and word of mouth intent (Gelbrich and Roschk 2011; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). To date, other-consumers' impact on justice perceptions has not been considered, yet we posit it is now relevant due to the increased propensity for online incivility, along with the proliferation of CSM channels that allow a complainant's – and others' – public comments.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the burgeoning phenomena of other-consumers directing online incivility at complainants during CSM service recovery. The following research question guides our investigation:

How are service recovery perceptions of both complainants and observers impacted when a consumer complains to a firm on its CSM channel and is then met with uncivil responses from other-consumers?

To answer this question, we first consider perceptions of incivility from the perspective of complainants in Study 1, and then from the perspectives of third-party observers and complainants on CSM channels in Study 2. Study 1 uses a qualitative netnographic approach to develop an initial understanding of online incivility during service recovery encounters on CSM channels and the nature of firm involvement in these exchanges. Key findings in Study 1 – the notable unfair interactions between some consumers and the subsequent lack of firm involvement to manage such uncivil exchanges – provide the impetus for Study 2. Specifically, Study 2 suggests the firm is held accountable for not addressing an uncivil perpetrator in the face of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactional injustice, which ultimately leads both complainants and third-party observers to form justice perceptions of the provider. In combination, Studies 1 and 2 identify a critical chasm between theory and practice, as companies' unwillingness to address C2C incivility negatively impacts first-party and third-party accounts of service recovery.

For academics and practitioners, the present research extends service recovery theory by highlighting the impact of uncivil other-consumers. The authors introduce C2C interactional justice as an additional fairness consideration to build upon the extant justice framework. Relatedly, we consider the

degree of firm involvement in such exchanges, which significantly impacts perceptions of justice of a service provider's recovery effort. Thus, our research broadens the current consumer–firm measures of justice to include a consumer–consumer measure. In addition, we also account for different perspectives of service recovery via CSM (i.e., third-party perspectives and participants) and suggest that uncivil interactions are problematic for observers. Lastly, our results suggest that service providers must manage these virtual service environments similarly to offline service settings, where consumers have expectations of fair treatment from service providers and other-consumers.

Literature Review

Online Incivility

Information systems research examines online incivility, such as offensive communications, social shaming, cyberbullying, flaming (i.e., expressing hate or hostility), trolling (i.e., purposely posting derogatory messages to generate a response), and other harassing exchanges via the Internet (Ransbotham et al. 2016). Whereas flaming is practiced by a smaller portion of online users (Aiken and Waller 2000; Moor, Heuvelman, and Verleur 2010), trolling is practiced by the majority at some point in time due to situational and personal factors (Maher 2016). This aligns with recent findings that incivility is seen or experienced by most online users (Clay 2013; Pew Research Center 2014). Outcomes of incivility may increase anger, hostilities, social isolation, mental distress, and reduce participation in online communities for both the victims and observers of uncivil communications (Anderson et al. 2014; Bauman, Toomey, and Walker 2013; Moor, Heuvelman, and Verleur 2010; Ransbotham et al. 2016).

Regarding the cause of online civility, one theoretical perspective posits the relaxing of socially normative expectations and inhibitions typically found within face-to-face interactions (Suler 2004, 2016). This online disinhibition effect postulates that a person directing online incivility toward others may temporarily suspend recognition of what is right versus wrong, which enables him or her to freely communicate uncivilly. Relatedly, people are often fully or partially anonymous when interacting with others online, a phenomenon known as dissociative anonymity (Suler 2004). Resulting from a lack of available social cues and social presence, dissociative anonymity increases the tendency of uncivil, anti-social behavior because of the perceived difficulty of being held accountable for misbehavior (Suler and Phillips 1998). These cyber-psychology conceptualizations are rooted in offline psychology's deindividuation theory (Zimbardo 1969, 2007), which proposes that unaccountability and partial anonymity diminish one's awareness of right versus wrong during in-person face-to-face social interactions and, as a result, increase anti-normative behavior such as incivility (Reicher and Levine 1994; White and Zimbardo 1980).

An additional impetus of online incivility is the very nature of consumers' online complaint posts, as consumers who like a

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