

Ethical Consequences of Consumer Incivility During Online Service Recovery: A Conceptual Framework Using a Multi-Theoretical Ethics Synthesis

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This conceptual paper examines the ethical responsibilities of brands in moderating consumer-to-consumer incivility during online service recovery. Drawing on a theory synthesis of Kantian deontological ethics, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and care ethics, we propose a framework linking brand intervention to moral duty, moral courage, community nurturance, and ethical legitimacy. We argue that intervening -- particularly when the target of incivility is vulnerable -- signals principled obligation and character-based strength, fostering a respectful, safe digital environment. Conversely, brand silence represents an abdication of ethical responsibility, undermining stakeholder trust. Our model positions community nurturance as the mechanism translating ethical motives into legitimacy, reframing service recovery as relational stewardship rather than transactional resolution. This approach advances service recovery theory and offers guidance for managers to embed ethical frameworks into social media moderation practices.

Introduction

A company-hosted social media community, hereafter referred to as a brand's digital space, enables consumer interactions with firms that are valuable opportunities for brands (Appel et al. 2020). Yet, one negative aspect of a brand's digital space is a growing trend of incivility. As evidence, Microsoft's digital civility study shows various forms of online uncivil behavior have increased over the last few years worldwide (Microsoft 2024). Indeed, online incivility is rampant due to relaxing social norms of appropriate behavior that are present in face-to-face discussions (Shmargad et al. 2022; Suler 2004). For marketers, online incivility affects several aspects of business (Dineva 2023). Our work uses a specific context relevant to services marketing: Consumers responding rudely to others who post complaints to brands when seeking a service recovery online.

Recent work notes that this context represents a metaphorical perfect storm for incivility and the question of how or if brands should address it (Bacile et al. 2025; Dineva et al. 2025; Huang and Ha 2024). For clarity, this perfect storm includes 'Consumer A' (the complainant) suffering a service failure, who may be upset, stressed, and in a vulnerable (i.e., weakened) state when asking a brand for help via social media; and 'Consumer B' (an uncivil attacker), who responds to this weakened state by targeting 'Consumer A' with mockery, insults, aggression, or bullying messages. Collectively, such remarks fall under the umbrella term of incivility. Due to this occurring in a brand's digital space, the brand is watching/responding in the message thread because the initial complaint started a service recovery opportunity. In addition, due to the visibility of the social media posts, observers (i.e., other consumers who are not 'Consumer A' or 'Consumer B') can watch and evaluate the dialogue.

To date, research of consumer online incivility in this service recovery context examines exchange-based perceived justice, experiential value, amusement, engagement, purchase intent, and how firms address incivility (Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2020; Béal et al. 2023; Dineva et al. 2025; Huang and Ha 2024; Labrecque et al. 2022; Wolter et al. 2023). In addition, one recent work introduced the moral emotion of sympathy using a consumer incivility lens (Bacile et al. 2025), however it did not dive deeply into theoretical perspectives of morality or ethics. Yet, the study of a morality-related construct illustrates how an ethical theoretical perspective may be relevant to this research area, despite no prior works using a central focus of ethics and related ethical theories as frameworks to help explain the effects of consumer online incivility. The application of ethical theories to explain

these relationships answers prior calls to study negative events in multi-actor recovery situations (Grégoire and Mattila, 2021; Khamitov et al., 2020) and online consumer incivility (Lages et al., 2023). Thus, the ethical nature of a brand's responsibility in moderating uncivil behavior among consumers during online service recovery has not been studied, yet is warranted.

The purpose of this research is to employ several ethical theories to explain how and why brands, though not the source of incivility, may be morally implicated regarding the manner in which they moderate interactions within their digital spaces. The authors use the theory synthesis approach (Jaakkola 2020) to conceptualize how three ethical theories support a morality viewpoint. From a Kantian deontological perspective, a brand has a moral duty within its digital space to protect customers' dignity and maintain their respectful treatment, regardless of potential business consequences. From a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics perspective, brands require moral courage to act ethically despite the possibility of reputational risk, customer backlash, or perceived bias. From a care ethics perspective, brands are called to demonstrate community nurturance to sustain a safe, respectful, and supportive online environment for all stakeholders. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually reinforcing. Our conceptualized framework posits that a brand's intervention in an instance of consumer online incivility within its digital space is a display of moral duty and moral courage motivations, each of which becomes more important based on the perceived vulnerability of the customer targeted by incivility. The motivation of a principle-bound obligation via moral duty and a character-based strength via moral courage contributes to a relationship-centered evaluation of community nurturance. When these ethical drivers and behaviors align, they contribute to stakeholders' perceptions of ethical legitimacy.

The remainder of our work begins with a literature review that notes a lack of an ethical perspective in offline and online service recovery in our context of consumer online incivility. The conceptual model is then developed with propositions based on support from our theory synthesis. Our work concludes with implications, limitations, and future research opportunities.

Literature Review

An overarching theory in many service recovery works is justice theory. The word 'justice' on its face may convey a sense of morality and ethics. However, justice theory has two broad perspectives that vary in the application of a morality worldview. To clarify these two different types of justice, Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) focuses on the establishment of a just society based on equal basic liberties, equal opportunity, and benefits for the most vulnerable by adhering to societal moral obligations. This moral obligation outlook of justice contrasts with an equity theory perspective (Adams 1965) within behavioral and social psychology, involving equality in a fair exchange. The latter of these two theories is where justice is used to explain service recovery as an exchange-based fairness evaluation framework, which underrepresents its ethical origins.

'Justice' as it applies to service recovery focuses on the reciprocal nature of customer-firm interactions and the fairness of an equitable balance of inputs and outcomes. This exchange-based focus on customers' perceptions of fairness in outcomes, processes, and interpersonal interactions following service failures differs from ethical and moral principles underlying justice. Yet, seminal works began a long-standing incorporation of justice with equity theory's exchanged-based view (Blodgett et al. 1993; Blodgett et al. 1997; Mattila 2001; Tax et al. 1998). Hence, service recovery research's reliance on this exchange-oriented application of justice theory highlights a gap where an ethical perspective of justice/fairness is underexplored.

Another aspect that is relevant to the current work is dyadic versus polyadic service recovery (i.e., involving more than two individuals). Most prior service recovery research examines the consequences of service failures and complaint handling through a dyadic lens (Grégoire et al. 2025). To elaborate, traditional dyadic service encounters involve a complaining customer and a service rep without other consumers participating. This dyadic perspective focuses on the subsequent "sequence of events in which a procedure, beginning with communicating the complaint, generates a process of interaction through which a decision and outcome occurs," (Tax et al. 1998, p. 61). In such a scenario, a firm's service employees want to maintain the customer relationship and uphold the brand's reputation when attempting to correct a prior failure without recognizing other parties outside of the dyad (Miller et al. 2000; Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2019). Unfortunately, research "remains rooted in traditional paradigms, focusing on dyadic interactions between firms and complainers," (Grégoire et al. 2025, p. 1), which hinders newer challenges in modern day service recovery (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2019). For instance, brands typically focus on a dyadic response to an online complaint, but remain silent (i.e., passively ignore) consumer online incivility within the same message thread (Bacile et al. 2025).

We now see a shift to polyadic service recovery when consumers complain on a brand's digital space. This shift away from dyadic recovery encounters is due to virtually present others who can watch or participate via social media (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Schaefer and Schamari 2016). These virtually present others are additional

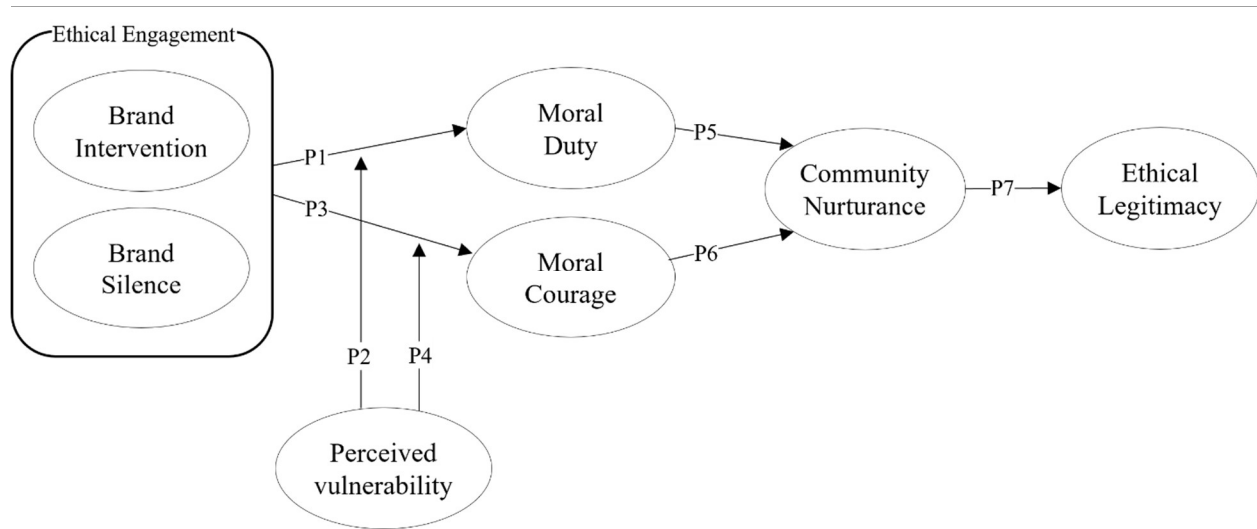
stakeholders (Hogreve et al. 2019) who have not been applicable or studied in most dyadic recovery works. This means that existing research and frameworks may not seamlessly explain complaint handling and social interactions by additional stakeholders on brands’ digital spaces. Recent works have taken notice and are studying many nuances of “a polyadic perspective of service recovery,” (Bacile et al. 2018, p. 76). For example, online complaints and recoveries introduce different types of consumer behavior and situational factors such as consumer online incivility (Bacile et al. 2020).

The presence of multiple consumers in a brand’s digital space introduces a social-servicescape dynamic where the brand is expected to act as a moderator of certain social interactions and behaviors between consumers (Dineva et al. 2025). Service research has investigated incivility during online service recovery from the aforementioned exchange-based perspective, yet not with a central focus of ethics. Rather, prior works examine exchange-based perceived justice, experiential value, engagement, purchase intent, and how firms address incivility (Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2020; Bacile et al. 2025; Béal et al. 2023; Dineva et al. 2025; Wolter et al. 2023). One exception is a study that incorporated the moral emotion of sympathy (Bacile et al. 2025), albeit in an exchange-based perspective without a central focus on morality or ethical theories. Taken altogether, these online incivility works that do not focus on ethics is surprising owing to incivility work in other fields like nursing and workplaces, or other marketing contexts such as employee incivility in front of consumers that have applied an ethical lens to incivility (e.g., Blackler et al. 2022; Dartey-Baah et al. 2024; Porath et al. 2011). Consequently, ethical theories and the ethical nature of a brand’s responsibility in moderating consumer online incivility has not been a central focus or addressed in depth in prior online service recovery investigations. The following conceptualizations address this ethics void by adapting deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics to the area of consumer online incivility.

Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Figure 1’s conceptual model adapts an integrative ethical framework for understanding how a brand addresses consumer online incivility. The framework draws from three distinct, yet complementary traditions in moral philosophy: Kantian deontology, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and care ethics. This multi-theoretical approach is what Jaakkola (2020) and others refer to as theory synthesis, which is a powerful approach to theory building. Each tradition contributes a unique lens for evaluating brand intervention to address uncivil remarks occurring on a brand’s social media channel during online service recovery encounters. Table 1 presents the definitions for each construct and clarifies their roles in Figure 1’s conceptual framework.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



The conceptual framework proposed here follows a clear theoretical chain. A brand’s decision to intervene in instances of consumer online incivility represents the initiating act that signals ethical engagement. This intervention can be interpreted through the motivation of two complementary ethical lenses: deontological ethics, emphasizing the brand’s moral duty to uphold universal moral principles; and virtue ethics, highlighting the moral courage required to

act despite potential risks or backlash. These ethical orientations, while distinct in foundation, converge in their influence on community nurturance, which we derive from care ethics. In turn, consistent community nurturance strengthens ethical legitimacy, whereby stakeholders perceive the brand as morally trustworthy, principled, and aligned with widely accepted moral norms. By articulating this sequential pathway, the framework connects theory to practice, illustrating how discrete ethical constructs interlock to produce meaningful stakeholder outcomes. The next sections apply each of the three theories to consumer online incivility during social media service recovery.

Table 1: Construct Definitions

Construct	Definition
Brand Intervention	A brand's deliberate decision to address customer-to-customer online incivility on its social media channel, such as by calling out uncivil remarks, asking for respectful behavior, or otherwise moderating the interaction.
Brand Silence	A brand's deliberate decision to not address consumer online incivility on its social media channel. This often occurs when a brand responds to an initial complaint, but passively ignores incivility in the same thread. As such, brand silence is a brand failing to intervene (i.e., a lack of intervention) in incivility.
Moral Duty	An obligation, grounded in deontological ethics, for a brand to act in accordance with universal moral principles (e.g., maintaining respect, dignity, etc.) regardless of the consequences. Moral duty reflects the <i>principle-bound requirement</i> to protect and uphold these standards, even in the absence of tangible rewards.
Moral Courage	A willingness, grounded in virtue ethics, for a brand to take ethically-right action in the face of risk, backlash, or loss. Moral courage reflects <i>character-based strength</i> to confront incivility despite uncertainty or possible harm to the brand.
Perceived Vulnerability	Extent to which a target of incivility is viewed as being in a weak/disadvantaged position, such as due to emotional distress, peer scrutiny, reputational risk, social exposure, or other situational factors, making them more susceptible to harm from uncivil remarks.
Community Nurturance	The brand's active effort, grounded in care ethics, to foster and maintain a respectful, safe, and supportive environment within its digital spaces. Community nurturance reflects the <i>relationship-centered commitment</i> to protect and strengthen the well-being of all community members, even when such efforts may require sustained attention and resources.
Ethical Legitimacy	Stakeholders' perception that the brand's actions are morally appropriate, consistent with widely accepted moral norms, and reflective of a trustworthy and principled organizational character.

Deontological Ethics: Moral Duty

Kantian deontology (Kant 1997), hereafter referred to as deontological ethics, is rooted in the work of Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher writing in the 18th Century. Kant's work exerts a significant impact on moral and political philosophy, applied ethics, and, more broadly, contemporary discussions of morality. Two fundamental ethical principles articulated by Kant are the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity (Kant 1997). While Kant argued that these principles are equivalent, they have different emphases (Nyholm 2015). The former highlights the importance of general or universalizable norms and the latter emphasizes the importance of respecting persons as autonomous individuals capable of making their own decisions.

It is well researched under an exchange-based perspective that brands have a duty to correct service failures by enacting proper employee-customer dyadic treatment, fair policies and rules, and providing equitable compensation during service recovery (e.g., Tax et al. 1998; Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018). In doing so, this duty to resolve a service failure is a means to an end because a brand benefits by increasing customer satisfaction, future purchase intent, loyalty, and other positive outcomes (Gelbrich and Roschk 2011). Yet, adapting the lens of deontological ethics suggests that organizations have a moral duty to uphold universal moral principles, such as ensuring the fair treatment of individuals with respect and dignity. Deontological ethics emphasizes that all rational beings possess inherent dignity and must be treated as ends in themselves, yet never as means to an end (Kant 1997). This foundation gives rise to a universal moral duty to safeguard another's dignity and respect. From the standpoint of deontological ethics, a brand's moral duty is not contingent upon a commercial exchange that benefits a firm (Kant 1997). Rather, a brand has a principle-bound requirement of moral duty to address consumer incivility regardless of whether an intervention is financially beneficial for a brand. Stakeholders, including both a target of incivility and observers of incivility, are likely to perceive the brand has a moral duty to, at minimum, intervene by addressing the comments, such as asking a rude commenter to refrain from such behavior or apologizing to the target for being mistreated.

However, brands often choose non-intervention by using the neutrality route (i.e., responding to the complainant's service failure issue, but not acknowledging the incivility; Bacile et al. 2025). We submit this is brand silence, rather than brand intervention. A key point here is a difference between non-action due to an unawareness of an event versus intended inaction by omitting a response to an event that a person or entity is aware of (Schwenkenbecher 2022). The context of a service recovery opportunity in a channel managed by a brand and often supported with human service reps or technology tools (i.e., algorithmic natural language processing tools that flag posts with specific content) is a situation where a brand is present and is perceived to be accountable to address the content of conversations (Bacile et al. 2018). Therefore, a lack of brand intervention is likely to be viewed as a brand failing to fulfill its moral duty by failing to address the incivility, which is a dereliction of moral duty.

P1: Brand intervention (silence) in response to consumer online incivility fulfills (neglects) a brand's principle-bound obligation of moral duty.

A brand's moral duty in the given context is likely to be heightened due to the need to protect a more vulnerable individual. Deontological ethics maintains that the more vulnerable an individual is, the stronger the moral duty to protect their dignity, autonomy, and well-being (Kant 1997). A customer who publicly complains about a service failure is in a heightened vulnerable state because they are likely to be upset, disappointed, and emotional due to the failure, which may make them more sensitive to interpersonal harm (Cénopht et al. 2024). They are also taking a risk of social invalidation of peer scrutiny by publicly posting their problem (Varnali and Çeşmeci 2022). Furthermore, a complainant is in a power-imbalanced position relative to the brand (which has authority to correct a problem) and other customers (who may criticize, belittle, insult, or shame them in public view) (Baker et al. 2005). Additionally, there are other possible factors that could increase vulnerability, including if one or more uncivil consumers continually attack a target (i.e., a spiral of increased aggressive behaviors; Andersson and Pearson 1999), if a target is perceived to suffer a large loss, if attacks involve comments regarding sensitive personal issues and beliefs such as sexual orientation, gender specific topics, political beliefs, lifestyle choices, or other polarizing issues. Taken altogether, the perceived vulnerability of the complainant due to a prior service failure, emotional strain, social exposure, and other vulnerability factors amplify the ethical stakes of moral duty.

P2: The positive (negative) effect of brand intervention (silence) on perceptions of moral duty fulfillment is stronger when a target of incivility is perceived to be highly vulnerable (e.g., more emotionally distressed or publicly exposed).

Virtue Ethics: Moral Courage

Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics (Foot 1985; McDowell 1979), hereafter referred to as virtue ethics, represents a second approach that complements insights drawn from deontological ethics when considering the problem of online incivility. Drawing inspiration from the work of Aristotle (2019), whose *Nicomachean Ethics*, which has for over 2,000 years been a central text in moral philosophy, virtue ethics focuses on identifying a range of virtues that are needed to live well or flourish. Virtues are character-based traits that dispose those who possess them to act well by exemplifying them in their actions. An honest person, for example, shows her honesty by acting in accordance with this virtue in situations that require it. Virtue ethics theory includes moral virtues such as honesty, benevolence, and courage to signify character-based strength (Solomon 1992).

Our application of virtue ethics theory enables the incorporation of the virtue moral courage for a brand in the context of consumer online incivility. Moral courage is a virtue focused on a willingness to take ethically-right action in the face of risk, backlash, loss, or uncertainty in order to accomplish good things (Putnam 1997). For service recovery situations that include consumer online incivility in a brand's digital space, the lens of moral courage shifts the focus beyond exchange-based fairness, rule-based actions, or outcome-based reasoning for why a brand should respond to incivility. Our theoretical implementation of moral courage enables a brand to exhibit what kind of character it enacts in its digital spaces. Yet, failing to intervene with brand silence (i.e., neutrality by failing to address online incivility) may be viewed as a lack of moral courage akin to a moral failure. The implication of applying a lens of moral courage for a brand becomes ethical risk-taking. The risks or dangers for a brand to address consumer online incivility during service recovery are: 1) the brand being seen as biased in dispute resolution; 2) the brand escalating a publicly viewable uncivil argument; or 3) a brand losing customers on either side of the conflict. Therefore, our virtue ethics application reframes brand intervention as a display of moral courage and reframes brand silence as a lack of moral courage rather than a service provider's neutral stance.

P3: Brand intervention (silence) in response to consumer online incivility is a display (lack) of a brand's character-based strength of visible moral courage.

In addition, the display or lack of moral courage is likely to be more pronounced for a target of incivility who is perceived as more vulnerable. When someone is more highly vulnerable, a brand intervening into that space increases potential reputational and relational risks, which underscores a deeper level of character-strength moral courage (Kristjánsson 2025). For instance, a thread that includes ten uncivil consumers versus a thread with one uncivil consumer increases a target's vulnerability and requires a brand to speak out against a larger number of viewpoints. Another example is an uncivil responder speaking about a sensitive issue, such as a political stance. A brand reprimanding such a commenter may be perceived by some stakeholders as a brand disagreeing with the political stance, which thereby increases a brand's reputational and relational risks with those who disagree with the brand. These examples illustrate that it may take more moral courage for a brand to speak out as a target's vulnerability increases.

P4: The positive (negative) effect of brand intervention (silence) on perceptions of moral courage is stronger when a target of incivility is perceived to be highly vulnerable (e.g., more emotionally distressed or publicly exposed).

Care Ethics: Community Nurturance

Care Ethics contrasts with deontological ethics and with virtue ethics by focusing on the central importance of a relational-centered commitment instead of universal moral principles (Gilligan 1993; Noddings 1984). Rather than prioritizing universal rules and duties (as in deontological ethics) or the cultivation of moral character traits (as in virtue ethics), care ethics emphasizes the moral significance of relational responsibility, empathy, attentiveness to others' needs, and the quality of relationships (Held 2006; Tronto 2020). At its foundation, the theory maintains that moral agents are embedded in webs of social relationships, and ethical action emerges from understanding, valuing, and sustaining these relationships (Hawk 2011; Pettersen 2011). It underscores moral worth is demonstrated not

merely by following abstract norms or developing virtuous traits, but by actively fostering the well-being of others in specific, often asymmetrical, social contexts.

Drawing from the tenets of care ethics, we conceptualize the construct of community nurturance in brands' digital spaces where consumer incivility occurs. While community nurturance is not an established, named construct in the care ethics literature, we introduce it here as a novel, theoretically grounded concept that extends care ethics into the context of online service recovery and incivility. Most applications of care ethics focus on interpersonal care at the dyadic or small-group level, yet scholars have increasingly examined how care can be institutionalized through organizational care with the design of systems, norms, and climates that enable caring relations to flourish across broader communities (Arnold and Ross 2023; Noddings 2015). We build on this institutional turn by conceptualizing community nurturance as a brand's active relationship-centered commitment to foster and maintain a respectful, safe, and supportive environment within its digital spaces. This conceptualization synthesizes care ethics' principles of attentiveness, empathy, and relational responsibility with recent research on organizationally embedded care. In doing so, community nurturance becomes a higher-order organizational practice that translates care ethics from interpersonal interactions into the governance of digital brand communities. Community nurturance operationalizes care ethics in the service of collective well-being: It shifts the brand's role from a passive platform provider to an active steward of the social climate.

We propose that moral duty serves as a principled-driver of community nurturance in brands' digital space (see Santori 2024). From a deontological perspective, moral duty obliges the brand to uphold universal moral principles such as respect and dignity, regardless of potential business risks. This principled obligation of duty is the reason or motivational basis for a brand to foster a safe, respectful digital space. Community nurturance is the practical expression or form that moral duty takes when implemented (i.e., it is how duty is made visible and sustained). In other words, moral duty is the 'why' for an ethical obligation and community nurturance is the 'how' of an organizational practice. A brand's principled obligation of moral duty is made tangible to stakeholders through a brand's ongoing cultivation of a safe, respectful community. This translates an abstract ethical commitment into concrete, visible practices that sustain respectful engagement as a non-negotiable norm for all stakeholders.

P5: A brand fulfilling its moral duty when addressing consumer online incivility will lead to stronger perceptions that the brand is actively engaging in community nurturance within its digital space.

We also propose that moral courage functions as a character-based driving force behind the development of community nurturance in brands' digital spaces (see Otteson 2024). From a virtue ethics perspective, moral courage involves taking action despite the presence of uncertainty or potential backlash. In the context of online incivility, this means more than addressing harmful interactions in the moment. It entails committing to the ongoing stewardship of a digital space, even when such actions may be unpopular or risky. Moral courage serves as the character-based motivational foundation that prompts the brand to act visibly and consistently in defense of respectful engagement, translating bravery in isolated moments into a sustained, relationship-centered environment. In this way, community nurturance becomes the practical manifestation of the brand's moral courage, making its ethical character visible to all stakeholders and reinforcing its long-term moral identity.

P6: A brand exhibiting moral courage when addressing consumer online incivility will lead to stronger perceptions that the brand is actively engaging in community nurturance within its digital space.

The final element of Figure 1's conceptual framework is ethical legitimacy, defined as stakeholders' perception that a brand's actions are morally appropriate, consistent with widely accepted moral norms, and reflective of a trustworthy and principled organizational character (Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen 2009; Suchman 1995). In our model, community nurturance and ethical legitimacy are related, but distinct. Community nurturance is an action-oriented organizational practice grounded in care ethics. Ethical legitimacy, by contrast, is a stakeholder perception. It is an evaluative judgment about the moral appropriateness and integrity of a brand's actions (Suchman 1995). Under a care ethics lens, ethical legitimacy emerges when sustained community nurturance practices demonstrate that the brand's commitment to well-being is authentic, consistent, and integral to its identity. When stakeholders observe a brand actively stewarding the social climate by promoting civility, they are more likely to view its actions as morally grounded and socially responsible. This perception reinforces ethical legitimacy, linking the practice of community nurturance to the perception of principled organizational character.

P7: A brand exhibiting community nurturance when addressing consumer online incivility will lead to stronger perceptions that the brand is ethically legitimate.

General Discussion

Online incivility is a problem for societies worldwide (Microsoft 2024) and for marketers who use social media as complaint channels for service recovery (Bacile et al. 2018; Béal et al. 2023; Dineva et al. 2025; Huang and Ha 2024; Wolter et al. 2023). Researchers are examining many new challenges of these public service recovery channels, where dyadic interactions and civil encounters seem like a remnant of the past, at times. Much of this research examines service recovery with an exchange-based perspective from offline service recovery theory and constructs (e.g., equity theory, justice theory, satisfaction). Our work goes in a different direction by using a moral obligation outlook to broaden the understanding of online service recovery and incivility. By synthesizing deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics, we put forth a conceptual framework that highlights how addressing online consumer incivility is not simply a matter of service recovery protocol. Rather, it is a means of affirming a brand's ethical character to bolster the moral fabric of its community. The implications not only extend ethical theory into the online service recovery domain, but also provide practical guidance for brand managers seeking to uphold ethical standards that protect their customers and maintain community relations.

By integrating a brand's ethical engagement of intervention or silence, moral duty, moral courage, perceived vulnerability, community nurturance, and ethical legitimacy into a single framework, this research advances a more holistic view of brand ethics in service recovery on social media. Moral duty provides the principled foundation for upholding universal respect and dignity, while moral courage ensures that these principles are acted upon even in the face of risk or opposition. Community nurturance translates these values into a sustained, relationally focused environment where respectful discourse is actively cultivated. Together, these constructs move the discussion beyond isolated interventions toward an understanding of ethical brand conduct as an ongoing, multi-dimensional commitment. This synthesis highlights that the interplay of principled obligation, moral bravery, and relational stewardship is essential for shaping stakeholder perceptions of a brand's moral character, ultimately setting the stage for ethical legitimacy to emerge. The following implications are derived from our conceptual framework.

Theoretical Implications

Expanding on multiple ethical theories for online service recovery. The first theoretical implication is the integration of deontological ethics (by incorporating moral duty), virtue ethics (by incorporating moral courage), and care ethics (by conceptualizing community nurturance) into a single conceptual model that explains brand intervention in the context of consumer online incivility during social media service recovery. The integration of multiple theories uses what Jaakkola (2020, p. 21) describes as “theory synthesis... to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams.” In doing so, our work moves beyond a single-lens ethical analysis to illustrate how duty-based, virtue-driven, and relational-care perspectives operate together.

Our synthesis advances each of the three ethics theories it draws upon. For deontological ethics, our work extends the application of moral duty beyond individual conduct to the brand level for service recovery, showing how duty can be institutionalized through the sustained cultivation of an ethical digital community climate. For virtue ethics, our work expands the construct of moral courage to include organizational willingness to incur reputational or relational risk in defense of vulnerable community members during service recovery, positioning courage as a driver of long-term community stewardship. For care ethics, our work introduces community nurturance as a novel, theoretically grounded construct that operationalizes relational responsibility in the governance of incivility in a brand's digital space used for service recovery. Together, these contributions illustrate how our multi-theory synthesis generates richer, more nuanced explanations of brand behavior in online service recovery contexts, advancing ethics theory within marketing while offering practical guidance for the management of online brand communities.

Linking moral motivation to a relational outcome. Another theoretical implication is that the conceptual framework extends theory by conceptualizing and positioning community nurturance as the mechanism through which moral duty and moral courage translate into perceptions of ethical legitimacy. Prior service recovery research has typically emphasized immediate resolution outcomes with an exchange-based focus. In contrast, this study reframes brand intervention as a relational stewardship act, with long-term consequences for community relations and brand reputation. By suggesting that ethical motives can lead to sustained improvements in the climate of a brand's digital space, our model connects moral reasoning with the cultivation of healthier digital service spaces. This link underscores the importance of sustained, visible care as a driver of ethical legitimacy in brand-consumer relationships.

By introducing our conceptualization of community nurturance as a distinct, theoretically grounded construct, this work expands the boundaries of care ethics in marketing and service recovery scholarship. In particular, it frames community nurturance as a strategic and ethical outcome that materializes when brands intentionally cultivate norms of civility, mutual support, and protection for vulnerable participants in their digital spaces. This reframing

emphasizes that brand intervention in the face of consumer online incivility is not only an operational decision but also a morally significant act that shapes the social fabric of brand communities. Positioning community nurturance as a bridge between ethical motivations (e.g., moral duty, moral courage) and broader perceptions of ethical legitimacy underscores its role as a pivotal mechanism for aligning service recovery practices with higher-order ethical commitments.

Reframing brand silence in ethical terms. Another implication is our work challenges the assumption that a brand's non-intervention in consumer online incivility represents neutrality. Through an integrated ethical lens, brand silence (i.e., a brand choosing not to address incivility) can be recast as an abdication of moral duty and moral courage, signaling a potential ethical failure that ultimately threatens community nurturing and ethical legitimacy. This reframing invites scholars to consider inaction as an active moral choice with tangible reputational and relational consequences in digital service environments. By positioning brand silence as ethically meaningful, the model opens avenues for research into the downstream effects of perceived moral omission in brand behavior.

Vulnerability as a contextual amplifier of moral reasoning. The inclusion of perceived vulnerability as a moderator highlights an important theoretical refinement in service recovery with an ethics viewpoint. Vulnerability is not presented merely as an attribute of certain customers (e.g., low income), but as a situational amplifier of ethical responsibility, which is especially salient in public online interactions. Customers who have suffered a service failure and are publicly seeking redress are in an emotionally and/or socially weakened position, making them more susceptible to harm from consumer online incivility. By framing vulnerability as a trigger that heightens the brand's ethical obligations, the model advances a contextualized understanding of moral decision-making in online service recovery.

Managerial Implications

Embedding ethical frameworks in social media service recovery policies. The first managerial implication is for brands to incorporate moral duty, moral courage, and care-based community nurturance principles into their official social media moderation and service recovery guidelines. This ensures consistency and transparency in decision-making when incivility arises. Embedding these ethical commitments into policies help ensure that intervention decisions are proactive, principled, and aligned with the brand's stated values. Such a policy will communicate to stakeholders that the brand's digital service recovery efforts are guided by a coherent moral framework.

Putting the policy into action with service scripts and training for duty-oriented and courageous intervention. A second managerial implication is for brands to ensure that their policies are operationalized by human service agents or A.I. chatbots. This means that brands need to prepare training and service scripts for humans and A.I. algorithms for situations where intervention for incivility is warranted. Training for humans or programming of A.I. chatbot responders need to go beyond technical response skills to include ethical reasoning and intervention courage. Such training should equip team members or A.I. algorithms to recognize when intervention is a moral necessity, even at the risk of reputational or commercial costs. Simulated scenarios can prepare moderators to handle emotionally-charged consumer disputes in ways that protect vulnerable customers while maintaining brand integrity. Such an operationalization will communicate to stakeholders that the brand's digital service recovery efforts are guided by a moral framework that ultimately is put into action rather than reactive impulses or boilerplate policies that are not carried out when incivility occurs.

Fostering community nurturance as a strategic asset. A third managerial implication is for managers to view community nurturance not as a reactive afterthought, but as an ongoing brand responsibility. By actively cultivating respectful and prosocial norms on their platforms, brands reinforce their role as protectors of digital space well-being. Over time, this culture of nurturance can differentiate a brand from competitors by positioning it as a trusted steward of online interactions. Such differentiation has tangible benefits for customer loyalty and advocacy in competitive markets.

Maximizing the visibility of ethical actions. Lastly, the visibility of ethical interventions is as important as the interventions themselves. When brands address incivility in public, respectful, and transparent ways, both complainants and observers witness the brand's ethical commitment. This visibility strengthens perceptions of ethical legitimacy and reinforces the brand's identity as a moral actor in the marketplace. Therefore, managers should ensure that ethical actions are visibly communicated to their online audiences. Direct messages that are out of sight from the masses have benefits in some situations. However, publicly visible messages that instill ethical legitimacy to a large audience must be considered as a viable alternative in a brand's digital space.

Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

While the proposed framework offers theoretical novelty by integrating deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics into the domain of consumer online incivility during online service recovery, it is not without limitations. First, as a conceptual paper, the model's propositions remain untested and require empirical validation to establish their robustness across contexts and populations. Second, the framework assumes stakeholders perceive and interpret brand actions in relatively consistent ways, yet individual differences such as prior brand attitudes, moral reasoning styles, or personal experiences with online incivility could moderate these effects. Third, the model is primarily grounded in a Western ethical perspective, and cross-cultural research is needed to examine whether the principles and constructs proposed translate effectively in societies with different moral norms or communication styles. Acknowledging these limitations provides important context for interpreting the framework's contributions and highlights key directions for future inquiry.

There are many other possibilities of future work stemming from the conceptual model. Community nurturance is a newly conceived construct, which could benefit from a formal study to determine measurable, manifest survey items that reflect the construct. Empirical studies could further examine how different forms of brand intervention vary the perceptions of moral duty, moral courage, and community nurturance. Future work could also investigate industry-specific or platform-based contingencies that may shape stakeholder responses to brand interventions. Experimental and longitudinal designs could help identify causal pathways between our ethical constructs and exchange-based outcomes such as loyalty, trust, and brand advocacy. Additionally, qualitative approaches may reveal nuanced stakeholder interpretations of moral duty, moral courage, and care-based practices, offering richer insights into the lived experiences of complainants, observers, and brand representatives in digital service recovery environments.

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