Consumer Incivility in Virtual Spaces: Implications for Interactive Marketing Research and Practice

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1   Introduction

The evolution of interactive marketing has been fueled by the introduction and participative nature of Web 2.0 (Barwise & Farley, 2005). Its bi-directional nature has contributed to the proliferation of consumer engagement, participation, and interactive behaviors on social media networks (SMNs) (Wang, 2021). The positive consequences of these behaviors such as the co-creation of value are well researched (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the global and interactive nature of SMNs has brought about a dark side that is less well understood, which is referred to here as "consumer incivility". Consumer incivility represents a set of undesirable behaviors and hostile interpersonal interactions between consumers on SMNs who use profanity, disagree with, provoke, mock, and harass one another as well as direct this incivility towards brands (Breitsohl et al., 2018; Dineva et al., 2017), with the former exemplified in Fig. 1. In the current virtual environment where a continuously increasing number of consumers visit and interact on SMNs (Statista, 2022), these uncivil behaviors have become a commonplace with the majority of Internet users having seen or experienced some form of incivility (Pew Research Center, 2021). Moreover, with interactive marketing encouraging multi-user communications, consumers have become more actively involved in SMNs leading to more opportunities for incivility (Anderson et al., 2014;

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Su et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to provide a holistic account of this phenomenon by drawing on existing multidisciplinary research in order to advance interactive marketing research and practice. This represents the focus of the present chapter.

This chapter begins by providing a historical overview of conventionally researched uncivil online behaviors including a discussion on the mechanisms that contribute to the occurrence of such behaviors. Then, the chapter moves onto its focal point of reviewing research on emerging forms of incivility in a consumerism context and outlining their distinguishing characteristics and features. The causes and impact of consumer incivility are then discussed, followed by reviewing research into the strategies and actors put forward as suited to managing incivility. The chapter concludes with addressing the

Gary Ruyter Repost: So Tiger Woods cheats on his wife and Nike keeps him. PacMan shares his beliefs and Nike drops him. Yeah, good one Nike, the company that outsourced their jobs to Asian countries where they only pay their workers $10 a week and charge $100 for shows. well done Nike.
50 minutes ago · Like · 👍 5

Lee Freeman #Boycottnike
45 minutes ago · Like · 👍 2

Helen Roberts what an irrelevant comparison! Even Burberry sacked Kate Moss for cocaine pictures. cheating on someone as horrible as it is, is NOT hate speech or does not reflect upon any particular race or sexual orientation.
39 minutes ago · Like · 👍 3

Sean Leonard Glad someone else on here sees their hypocrisy. Child slavery (action) is 10000000x worse than a bit of bigotry from the ignorant (words).
30 minutes ago · Like · 👍 1

Rose Hernandez love Pacquiao and what he stands for #freespeech
21 minutes ago · Like

Jamie Edwards Nike did very well , THESE intolerant patients , false moralists , homophobic have to pay a rotten tongue Having,.. ;~]
15 minutes ago · Like

Andrea Ramos I am A Filipino I will not buy any Nike From Now on.....
Boycott Nike.
8 minutes ago · Like

Michael Jones F*ck your self @Rose!
5 minutes ago · Like

Fig. 1   Incivility excerpt

implications of the reviewed research for interactive marketing scholars and practitioners.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INCIVILITY RESEARCH

Consumer incivility and its forms have originally been researched in offline, in-person service contexts whereby consumers intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly, disrupt otherwise functional service encounters (Harris & Reynolds, 2003, 2004). Examples of prominent in-person uncivil consumer behaviors investigated in past research refer to shoplifting, verbal abuse, and vandalism among others (Fombelle et al., 2020). Such misbehaviors are suggested to originate in elements pertinent to the service environment (e.g., impulse versus planned), are directed at other consumers or frontline employees, and are motivated by situational inhibitors in the service provision, personality traits, and (non-)/economic factors (*for a review see* Fisk et al., 2010).

The proliferation of interactive marketing and its bi-directional nature, however, have caused uncivil behaviors traditionally associated with offline settings to transcend to SMNs, whereby hyper-interactivity and multi-user dialog are a commonplace (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020; Su et al., 2018). In turn, this has provided grounds for an increased occurrence of online incivility, which attracted the attention of scholars who put forward two main mechanisms that contribute to the formation of online incivility: *the online disinhibition effect* and *deindividuation*. First, Suler (2004, 2016) proposed that individuals say and do things online that they would not typically say and do in-person, which he coined the online disinhibition effect. The author argued that this effect is largely due to dissociative anonymity, which enables individuals to separate their online actions from their in-person lifestyle and identity. In this process of dissociation, the online self becomes a compartmentalized self, and this is especially pronounced in the case of toxic disinhibition (e.g., online incivility). When misbehaving on SMNs, individuals can avert responsibility for their uncivil behaviors or hostile expressions, because of a temporary suspension of morality that is inherent to in-person interactions. Suler (2004) further adds that invisibility and asynchronicity can further contribute to toxic disinhibition. Invisibility encourages individuals to interact or behave in ways they would not normally do in real-world encounters (Yun et al., 2020), while asynchronicity, which refers to non-real time interaction, means that individuals who disinhibit do not have to cope with others' reactions immediately like they would in face-to-face settings.

Deindividuation is a secondary contributor to one's engagement in uncivil behaviors as a result of losing one's sense of personal responsibility and individuality on SMNs (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In virtual spaces, partial anonymity may cause individuals to lose their self-awareness from personal to the group (Silke, 2003), which in turn results in individuals abandoning

their sense of personal responsibility and detaching oneself from their actions or communications online (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004; Harris & Dumas, 2009). Moreover, deindividuation can amplify the influence of group behaviors and norms on SMNs, which can in turn reinforce the learning and replication of uncivil behaviors (DeHue et al., 2008).

Aside the mechanisms that drive online incivility, research differentiated between three groups of uncivil behaviors and conceptualized these as *flaming*, *trolling*, and *cyber-bullying/harassment*. Flaming is a deviant online behavior that involves the expression of strong emotions such as swearing, insults, and name-calling in a hostile manner and has been widely researched (e.g., Lee, 2005). Moreover, flaming represents offensive communications whereby the sender's intent is to violate norms, while both the receiver and any third-party observers perceive the message as a violation, which can range from mildly to highly inappropriate (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). According to scholars, flaming is a commonly used linguistic tactic that individuals employ to provoke emotional arousal and a sense of offensiveness in others (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Kwon & Cho, 2017). Thus, flaming can be categorized as intentional with the purpose to disinhibit, insult and/or provoke other individuals in online spaces. Flaming is a misbehavior typical to online gaming communities and football forums and is reinforced by the largely anonymous nature of these virtual spaces (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004).

Trolling has received significant attention in interdisciplinary research and is characterized as a deliberate behavior aimed at aggravating and disrupting others, but with no instrumental purpose (Buckels et al., 2014; Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Hardaker, 2010). The distinctive characteristic of this intentional uncivil behavior is the element of deception i.e., apparent outward sincerity by the sender of the message, the message is designed to attract flames and waste the other users' time by provoking futile arguments (Herring et al., 2002). More specifically, Hardaker (2010) identified four fundamental characteristics central to trolling behavior: deception (i.e., falsely portraying themselves), aggression (i.e., annoy and emotionally provoke others), disruption (i.e., meaningless distraction aimed at attention-seeking), and success (i.e., success in deceiving, aggravating, and disrupting the people they troll). While trolling is prevalent across all digital media, in recent years SMNs have encouraged the amplification of this uncivil behavior that can be targeted at anyone and produces harmful consequences for those who are its targets (Forbes, 2020).

Cyber-bullying consists of repetition and power imbalance between the victim and the cyber-bully (Langos, 2012). Cyber-bullying often involves a pre-existing relationship between the cyber-bully and the victim, and this form of incivility is targeted and intentional (Steffgen et al., 2011). Studies on cyber-bullying consistently demonstrate that individuals are more likely to engage in it online than in-person, which makes it a specialized online misbehavior (Slonje et al., 2013). According to Lowry et al. (2016), cyber-bullying consists of two other sub-forms i.e., cyber-stalking and harassment, but these are not

always clearly distinguished. Compared with cyber-stalking, online harassment has received more attention in research and is said to range from mild to severe including sustained, aggressive abuse, name-calling and belittling, derisive comments, and is especially prevalent in the political realm (Pew Research Center, 2021).

While some of these conventional uncivil behaviors remain a commonplace on SMNs, in recent years they have evolved into new forms and begun to take place in relation to consumption topics, brands and their practices, and corresponding consumerism discourse (e.g., Dineva et al., 2017). This is a direct result of brands and businesses establishing their presence on SMNs in order to take advantage of the benefits of interactive marketing (Gensler et al., 2013). These benefits, however, have simultaneously brought about challenges relating to the causes and consequences of emerging consumers' online misbehaviors and their appropriate management, research on which is reviewed in the next part of this chapter.

3   Consumer Incivility on SMNs

Research into key areas pertinent to consumer incivility on SMNs is discussed here and summarized in Fig. 2.

3.1   Forms of Consumer Incivility

Several prominent forms of consumer incivility have been identified by interactive marketing researchers in recent years, as summarized in Table 1 with real-world examples provided alongside. These are: *consumer conflicts* (Breitsohl et al., 2018; Dineva et al., 2017), *malicious word-of-mouth* (WOM) (Hornik et al., 2019), *firestorms* (Hauser et al., 2017; Herhausen et al., 2019), *anti-brand communities* (Romani et al., 2015), *fake news sharing* (Talwar et al., 2019), and *brand trolling* (Dineva & Breitsohl, 2022; Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017).

Fig. 2   A Framework of Consumer Incivility on SMNs

Table 1 Uncivil consumer behaviors and examples

Form of uncivil behavior	Description and purpose	Example
Consumer conflict	A two-way exchange aimed at expressing divergent opinions between multiple consumers often in a hostile manner	Consumer 1: *"Thank you for continuing to run services through out the pandemic and help key workers to work. Great work by the whole team!"* [sic] Consumer 2: *"I'd prefer to thank the individuals working than a company who wouldn't give a damn. (thumbs up emoji)"*
Malicious nWOM	The spreading of undesirable but often unjustified/unsupported information about a brand on SMNs	*"How is this essential? Non essential should mean vital to life? Stay home, stay safe and make pizzas from home!!! Shame on you"* [sic]
Firestorms	The accumulation of incivility in response to brand misconduct/practice that transforms into a social media scandal	Costa Coffee renaming its cup sizes after a video showing large hot drinks fitting into regular-sized cups Tesco's Tweet *"it's sleepy time so we're off to hit the hay! See you at 8am for more #TescoTweets"* released automatically amid a horsemeat scandal
Anti-brand communities	Consumer-hosted anti-brand groups on SMNs to express mutual hate or discontent towards a brand	"I HATE Man Utd" Facebook community 409,087 followers https://www.facebook.com/ihatemanutd "Apple Sucks". Reddit community 10.7 members https://www.reddit.com/r/applesucks/
Fake news sharing	The deliberate sharing of disingenuous information about a brand/business on SMNs	The Pizza Gate conspiracy theory Misinformation about COVID-19 origin and vaccines

(continued)

Consumer conflict. Consumer conflict is an emerging consumer-to-consumer (C2C) phenomenon that has recently received attention by researchers (*for review see* Chandrasapth et al., 2021) and has been conceptualized as one consumer verbally attacking another who reciprocates the hostility (Breitsohl et al., 2018; Dineva et al., 2017). A distinguishing feature of this

Table 1 (continued)

Form of uncivil behavior	Description and purpose	Example
Brand trolling	Aggravating or disturbing other consumers or brands with no apparent purpose	Consumer: "*Why can't people just leave animals alone and let them live their lives in peace Every animal has a purpose for being on Earth; we do not own them. Why can't we all live together in peace and respect each other.*" [sic] Troll: "*Can't leave them alone because they taste so good!! And most animals are owned…*" [sic]

form of consumer incivility entails a two-way exchange and represents the outcome of different SMN users harassing one another in relation to a brand or a consumption activity/topic. The stream of research into consumer conflict broadly divides consumer conflict based on the type of online consumption community (e.g., Facebook fan page) in which it occurs: brand- versus consumer-hosted. While the majority of scholars have focused on examining consumer conflict in business-/brand-hosted social media communities and the impact it has on commercial outcomes such as brand perceptions and consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Dineva et al., 2017, 2019; Luedicke et al., 2017), others have also investigated conflict in consumer-hosted communities (e.g., forums) (e.g., Matzat & Rooks, 2014; Sibai et al., 2014) and the consequences of it for the community's practices, continuation, and well-being (Dessart et al., 2015).

Motivations behind engaging in this form of online incivility range from hostile to non-hostile ones (Breitsohl et al., 2018). While the former refers to strong language, high emotional intensity, and adverse consequences for the brand such as loss of credibility, the latter largely involves humor and constructive criticism. Research findings further suggest that consumer conflicts can revolve around disagreements related to others (i.e., the consequences of consumption on the environment) or related to the self (i.e., consuming to benefit the self solely) (Dineva et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that consumer conflicts can be the byproduct of consumer complaining behaviors on SMNs and can thus be damaging to the brand's service recovery provision (Bacile et al., 2018).

Malicious nWOM. In contrast to consumer conflicts, negative word-of-mouth (nWOM) is a consumer-to-brand behavior (C2B) that involves the spreading of undesirable information about a brand on SMNs (Bi et al., 2019) and has been well researched by customer engagement scholars across

disciplines. NWOM can be genuine, for example, as a result of consumer dissatisfaction with a product or brand misconduct (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2021), or more malicious in nature where it is largely unjustified or unsupported (Hornik et al., 2019). In the context of consumer incivility, the latter applies and nWOM often involves trash-talking (Hickman & Ward, 2007) and badmouthing (Ilhan et al., 2018) brands on social media. Hickman and Ward (2007) were among the first to show that the strength of one's identification with a preferred brand leads to a sense of outrage and thus the spreading of malicious nWOM towards oppositional or rival brands. Consequently, Ilhan et al. (2018) demonstrated that brand supporters navigate across SMNs, attack rival brands through badmouthing them, while rival brand supporters defend their preferred brand. Colliander and Wien (2013) further identified six distinct defensive behaviors that consumers adopt in order to counter negative information about a brand they support that range from milder to more severe including advocating, justifying, trivializing, stalling, vouching, and doubting.

Firestorms. Some authors propose that firestorms represent the accumulation of social conflict in SMNs (Hauser et al., 2017), while others consider this negative online phenomenon to be the amalgamation of nWOM (Hansen et al., 2018; Herhausen et al., 2019). Despite these different interpretations of the "firestorm" phenomenon, this aggregate hostile behavior has been first defined in academic work as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118). Extant research into social media firestorms has focused on investigating the individual-level motivations of consumers for contributing to firestorms e.g., brand sabotage (Kähr et al., 2016), as well as collaborative brand attacks (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), how to effectively detect and manage these (Hauser et al., 2017; Herhausen et al., 2019) and their consequences (Hansen et al., 2018). Research agrees that online firestorms are a highly undesirable social media phenomenon that should be managed. On the one hand, Hansen et al. (2018) found that 58% of brands suffer from a decrease in short-term brand perceptions, and 40% experience long-term negative effects as a consequence of firestorms. Using agent-based modeling, Hauser et al. (2017) put forward that the effectiveness of collaborating and accommodating strategies, as well as competitive and assertive conflict management styles, depend on various contingencies (e.g., community members' characteristics and credibility, openness towards others' opinions) and these should be taken into account when managing online firestorms. On the other hand, through text mining, Herhausen et al. (2019) proposed that high- and low-arousal emotions, structural tie strength, and linguistic style match (between sender and brand community) all influence the emergence of a firestorm. The authors further argued that the brand's response to firestorms must be tailored to the intensity of the emotional arousal as well as accommodating distinct firm responses over time to limit the virality of potential online firestorms.

Anti-brand communities. The notion of anti-brand activism is not new. Researchers have long examined anti-brand activism, including boycotting, culture jamming, online activism, and several other forms of active resistance (Romani et al., 2015). Engagement in anti-brand activities revolves around individuals' disapproval of brands, and symbolizes negative perceptions associated with corporations (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). In more recent years, however, anti-brand activism has started to take the form of anti-brand communities based on SMNs (Popp et al., 2016). In their conceptual framework of customer deviance, Fombelle et al. (2020) identified online anti-brand communities as a prominent uncivil online behavior increasingly adopted by consumers as a consequence of the interactive and empowering nature of social media. In other words, consumers who feel empowered establish anti-brand collectives that criticize, parody, and expose the actions and intentions of brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Importantly, as these communities are embedded in the wider anti-branding activism movement (Holt, 2002), anti-brand communities are ultimately groups of consumers who hold negative feelings toward a brand and join together to voice their disapproval of corporate actions with top global corporate brands being frequent targets (Osuna-Ramírez et al., 2019). Such communities can be characterized by brand hate and passionate negative emotions (Zarantonello et al., 2016), displaying an increased refusal of brand hegemony (Cromie & Ewing, 2009) and market domination (Holt, 2002).

Fake news sharing. The origin of fake news sharing lies in gossiping as a deviant in-person behavior. Specifically in evolutionary psychology, gossiping has been described as behaviors people adopt to influence others (Guerin, 2003). The sharing of misinformation has acquired more attention in the interactive age of Web 2.0 (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014). According to Talwar et al. (2019), online gossiping and sharing of fake news have a lot in common since both involve the sharing of misinformation. In turn, others showed that there has been a rise in instances of sharing malicious fake news on SMNs, which represents a key challenge for the society, particularly as 62% of individuals rely on social media for obtaining news (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Fake news sharing is often associated with economic and political issues—for instance, a large percentage of people recalled believing the fake news they saw during the US Presidential election in 2016 (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Tacchini et al. (2017) further added that the volume and speed of information being shared on SMNs make it virtually impossible to detect its credibility quickly, thereby providing a thriving environment for fake news and misinformation. Regarding the mechanisms that facilitate fake news on SMNs, Talwar et al. (2019) suggested that online trust, self-disclosure, fear of missing out, and social media fatigue contribute to the intentional sharing of fake news. The study's findings also indicated that online trust has a negative association with authenticating news before sharing.

Brand trolling. Lastly, brand trolling represents a specialized form of Internet trolling associated with aggravating or disturbing other consumers'

and brands' online communications (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017). In SMNs, two notable studies provide an account of the main characteristics and behavioral types of such trolling. Cruz et al. (2018) suggested that trolling represents the intersection of three social practices: learning (i.e., it starts with gaining knowledge about the community's ethos and context), assimilation (i.e., continues with acquiring skills to appear as a genuine community member) and ends with transgression (i.e., identifying an opportunity to troll and crafting a message that generates the desired adverse reaction). In addition, Sanfilippo et al. (2018) differentiated between four distinct types of trolling (i.e., serious trolling, serious non-trolling, humorous trolling and humorous non-trolling) based on several dimensions including provocation, intentionality, pseudo-sincerity and repetition, among others. Importantly, studies have shown that this uncivil behavior can also be directed towards a brand and in consumption settings, and particularly towards brands that consumers are detached from or dislike (Dineva & Breitsohl, 2022). Brand trolling thus causes disturbance to effective customer-brand engagement on SMNs and can be particularly damaging to brands.

3.2   *Causes and Impact of Consumer Incivility*

Causes of uncivil consumer behaviors on SMNs can be differentiated based on whether these are directed towards the brand, towards other consumers who support the same brand or towards consumers of rival brands. Husemann and Luedicke (2013) conducted a conceptual synthesis of studies investigating incivility in a consumption context and distinguished between three sources of incivility: emancipatory, authenticity-protecting, and ideology-advocating. Emancipatory incivility refers to consumer resistance and anti-consumption practices and has been well studied in past research (e.g., Giesler, 2007; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). This source of incivility may include consumer discontent towards, activism against, and avoidance of the brand, which in turn impede hostility, because consumers who favor a certain brand refuse to accept negative information from another consumer expressing their discontent or complaining about their favored brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

Authenticity-protecting refers to incivility whereby consumers engage in hostile exchanges due to oppositional claims to ownership of the same consumption object, activity, or simply using different criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of a consumption process (Arsel & Thompson, 2010; Kozinets, 2001). This source of incivility may involve consumers contesting particular behaviors, practices, and expertise (de Valck, 2007) and/or challenging the approach (idealist or pragmatist) that should be adopted in the decision-making processes in a virtual space (Hemetsberger, 2006). For example, differences in opinions, value systems, and personal norms regarding a brand/consumption topic, which may relate to the symbolic (what a brand stands for) as well as functional aspects of a brand (what it enables a consumer to do) represent common sources of this form of incivility. Moreover, incivility

between consumers who support the same brand can occur and particularly between core (i.e., highly involved consumers) and peripheral (i.e., loosely connected) consumers due to their differing degrees of involvement with the brand (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013). Sources of authenticity-protecting incivility can further be both temporary events (e.g., a scandal related to a corporate brand owner or celebrity endorser) or constant conditions (e.g., a carefully nurtured, long-term brand image) (Ewing et al., 2013).

The final source of incivility, ideology-advocating, takes place when consumers defend their own personal consumption ideology against non-consumers of the brand. Such sources stem from brand rivalry and oppo-sitional loyalty (Ewing et al., 2013), or brand hate (Hegner et al., 2017), all of which are produced by consumer dissent towards the perceived moral superiority of their preferred brand over its rival. As a consequence, incivility occurs between consumers based on cultural and/or social meanings of the brand, opposing consumer ideologies, and their righteous/ridiculed consump-tion practices relating to the brand they support (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Furthermore, research found that the strength of social identification with a brand leads to a sense of outrage and feelings of pleasure at the misfor-tune (i.e., Schadenfreude) of its rival and those who support it (Hickman & Ward, 2007). Similarly, a number of studies demonstrate a strong relation-ship between a positively differentiated group identity and active engagement in trash-talking about rival brand community members (Beal et al., 2001). Colliander and Wien (2013) further confirmed that trash talk causes identity-related incivility between supporters of rival brands and represents a key driver of defensive behaviors that consumers adopt in order to counter negative information about their preferred brand.

While some uncivil consumer behaviors may have a humorous (Breitsohl et al., 2018) or constructive (Husemann et al., 2015) orientation, the majority of evidence points to largely negative consequences of these. Research has attributed this to the scope and nature of SMNs. The hyper-interactive nature of SMNs leads to an accelerated impact of consumer incivility due to the speed and extent at which hostility spreads. Consumer incivility on SMNs can spread with a rapid, broad scale that it is almost unstoppable (Huang & Chou, 2010), and therefore the consequences can be profound and directly or indirectly affect all community users and not just their victims or targets (Pew Research Center, 2021). Moreover, consumer incivility causes significant disruption on SMNs because it spreads faster than non-offensive communications and thus reaches more users (Song et al., 2020). As a byproduct, more users are likely to engage in hostile interactions due to a "contagiousness effect" (Kwon & Gruzd, 2017).

The consequences of consumer incivility online can be broadly categorized into social and commercial. On the one hand, uncivil consumer behaviors disrupt otherwise constructive engagement on social media and distracts users from engaging in meaningful interactions with like-minded supporters of a brand (Jiang et al., 2018; Phillips, 2011). Incivility can thus cause consumers

to temporarily disengage or permanently discontinue their use of social media after being harassed directly or witnessing others being harassed (Camacho et al., 2018). As a result, social media users disengage from interacting with other consumers as well as the brand (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013). Some forms of consumer incivility can be even more detrimental and cause the same emotional and psychological outcomes as face-to-face forms of harassment such as depression, social anxiety, and low levels of self-esteem (Nicol, 2012). Scholars have further recognized that due to the increased volume and scale as well as a number of bystanders on SMNs, consumer incivility can cause greater emotional and psychological damage compared with conventional in-person uncivil behaviors (Gillespie, 2006).

On the other hand, brands can suffer significantly in the presence of consumer incivility by experiencing a loss in credibility if they fail to effectively deal with it. Consumers' incivility towards brands motivated by anger or hatred can be particularly damaging to consumer-brand relationships (Kähr et al., 2016), which in turn weaken the brand image strength (Cova & D'Antone, 2016) and impact profits (Koku et al., 1997). Scholars have demonstrated that individuals respond negatively to hostile interactions directed at them, their views and brands they support (Phillips & Smith, 2004), which can increase the volume of consumer incivility. Importantly, when consumer incivility targets an individual's ideological beliefs, it may influence the formation of negative attitudes about the topic/brand at hand. For brands, this is especially detrimental since they are unable to effectively communicate promotional messages that facilitate constructive interactions between the members of their social media communities. Moreover, research has confirmed that if unmanaged some forms of consumer incivility (e.g., nWOM) accumulate and can be harmful to the brand's reputation and result in financial losses (Hauser et al., 2017; Pfeffer et al., 2014). When incivility occurs in response to consumer complaining behaviors, it can adversely influence brands' service recovery efforts and further impact the perceptions of observing consumers towards the brand (Bacile et al., 2018). In sum, empirical research shows that consumer incivility can negatively impact consumers' attitudes towards the consumption and adoption of products, which in turn harms brands (Hansen et al., 2018).

3.3   *Consumer Incivility Management*

There are three governance mechanisms/actors identified in past research as suitable to moderating consumer incivility on SMNs: *individual users, brands,* and *platforms* (Dineva, 2022; Dineva & Breitsohl, 2022).

First, a stream of research into social media communities created and governed by individual users recommended that the management of online incivility is done at the micro-level whereby individual instances of incivility are independently addressed by community users when they occur (e.g., Husemann et al., 2015). This perspective on incivility management scholars deem

is suited to smaller, close-knit communities whereby moderation depends on volunteer moderators, regular users who are familiar with one another as well as a history of interactions that provide the familiarity and trust necessary for a moderator to arbitrate between aggrieved parties (Gillespie, 2017). Within this incivility management perspective, two main actions have been put forward when incivility occurs: a democratic versus autocratic approach (Husemann et al., 2015). A democratic approach to incivility management highlights that an incivility incident has violated the social norms, gives those involved the opportunity to justify their misconduct and further elaborates on the existing rules of community engagement. In contrast, an autocratic approach is utilized when the uncivil act becomes highly dysfunctional and ultimately leads to the exclusion or removal of community members.

A second approach to incivility management is adopted by the businesses/brands who host communities on SMNs since they are perceived as having the main responsibility over ensuring civil engagement on their pages (Dineva et al., 2017, 2020). This, in turn, has encouraged the development of a second (middle-level) perspective on incivility management and several studies discuss a range of moderation practices that are used by brands to manage incivility (e.g., Hauser et al., 2017; Homburg et al., 2015; Dineva et al., 2017). These practices range in their style and orientation from passive to active and from cooperative to authoritative. Passive incivility management generally refers to avoiding the uncivil interactions (Hauser et al., 2017) and observing without participating (Homburg et al., 2015). In contrast, active management consists of a range of verbalized moderator practices that address the incivility incident, which can be grouped into cooperative versus authoritative approaches. More cooperative strategies involve a degree of positive reinforcement and are aimed at encouraging desirable community behaviors and interactions, whereas authoritative management tends to be more assertive and is used to address more severe and harmful uncivil behaviors (Matzat & Rooks, 2014). Examples of cooperative strategies involve bolstering (i.e., affirming a brand supporter), informing/educating, while more authoritative strategies include asserting (i.e., disagreeing with the aggressor), pacifying (i.e., requesting a change in behavior), and censoring content (Dineva et al., 2020).

Third, researchers have put forward social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) as a necessary factor in moderating incivility due to the increased prevalence of large-scale, multimillion follower social media communities and new content and users added at an unstoppable pace (Lampe et al., 2014). This macro-level approach to consumer incivility management involves social media platforms (as opposed to brands or individual users) adopting more proactive moderation mechanisms to limit, minimize, or eliminate the factors and circumstances that facilitate uncivil behaviors (e.g., reporting incivility, filtering offensive comments) (Gov.uk, 2020). A recent example of such moderation approach was adopted by Spotify introducing new guidelines on automatic and proactive management that prevents the spread of misinformation (The Guardian, 2022).

4   GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Three broad theoretical implications can be drawn from existing research into consumer incivility on SMNs discussed here that inform future avenues for interactive marketing research and practice. First, the topic of consumer incivility has thus far received some attention by several research disciplines that have focused on conceptualizing the wide range of uncivil behaviors taking place on SMNs together with tentatively understanding their antecedents and consequences (e.g., Chandrasapth et al., 2021; Fombelle et al., 2020). Notwithstanding these contributions, marketing research into uncivil consumer interactions and behaviors remains incomplete and disjointed. While multidisciplinary scholars have utilized a range of terms to investigate different adverse phenomena on SMNs (e.g., Su et al., 2018), a consistent approach to studying and conceptualizing these is required to be adopted by interactive marketing researchers, given that interactivity is at the heart of such misbehaviors. It is thus recommended that a more holistic approach to studying online misbehaviors is necessary, for example, through conducting systematic literature reviews or meta-analyses, to better understand how these interactive misbehaviors relate to one another (e.g., one uncivil behavior produces or is the outcome of another), and where they overlap and diverge. This will in turn inform both researchers and practitioners about more effective overarching approaches to the management of online incivility.

Second and relatedly, due to the disjointed nature of research into the different forms of consumer incivility, findings relating to their direct consequences remain extant and inconsistent. Generally, few marketing studies are concerned with the commercial outcomes of online incivility such as brand equity and reputation (e.g., Kähr et al., 2016), while even fewer focus on examining their social consequences such as the well-being of social media users and their engagement on SMNs (e.g., Camacho et al., 2018). As such, research into policy, legislation, and governance implications encompassing online incivility and its management is important, but currently lacking. Future interdisciplinary research is needed, for example by the interactive marketing and CSR disciplines, given that this is where misbehaviors and governance topics naturally intersect. In a similar vein, because some uncivil behaviors transcend the boundaries of SMNs and have significant adverse consequences for individuals' real lives, a multidisciplinary approach to studying these is recommended. For example, combining interactive marketing and sociology lenses can help to better understand how the consequences of such undesirable online human behaviors can be minimized and tackled by the introduction of appropriate policies.

Third, current knowledge into the management of incivility on SMNs focuses on three actors: individual users, brands, and platforms. While some actors appear to be more appropriate for dealing with certain forms of incivility (e.g., individual users to report incivility; brands to manage brand trolling; platforms to tackle misinformation), understanding the combined efforts of

platforms, brands, and individual users to manage online incivility is needed from an interactive marketing perspective. This is because the hyper-interactive nature of SMNs means that not only active users, but also observers can get involved in incivility incidents and help moderate these. Future research should thus systematically investigate the instances in which individual users versus brands versus platforms are better suited to managing incivility.

The research discussed in this chapter also raises important implications for marketing and brand managers practicing on SMNs. Incivility can occur in multiple forms and has been shown to have diverse social and commercial outcomes. From a social perspective, consumer incivility can increase hostility, decrease consumer well-being, cause mental distress, and contribute to feelings of social isolation. Commercially, the outcomes of consumer incivility undermine consumer-brand identification and relationships, thus impacting consumers' passive and active engagement on SMNs, which can further lead to brands' diminishing reputation and financial gains. It is therefore an imperative for social media brand and marketing managers to adopt corporate digital responsibility (CDR) principles that represent a set of shared values and norms guiding a brand's operations and communications with respect to digital technology and data (Lobschat et al., 2021). Such CDR is no longer a desirable condition for brands, but a core principle that should be inclusive of guidelines that ensure the constructive and civil engagement on SMNs.

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