



Communication accommodation for de-escalating consumer tensions in online brand communities

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ABSTRACT

In online brand communities, uncivil consumer-to-consumer conflicts are not just common – they can quickly escalate, disrupting engagement and jeopardizing community goals if ignored. Across three experimental studies, we draw from the social servicescape and customer compatibility management frameworks to examine the effect of three principal conflict moderation approaches put forward by communication accommodation theory – convergence, divergence, and maintenance – on observing consumers' evaluations of online brand communities. Our findings suggest that divergent conflict moderation (i.e., increasing the social distance between the brand and the brand antagonist), particularly when removing the antagonist, effectively de-escalates conflicts and achieves community governance goals. For enhancing brand warmth perceptions, convergent conflict moderation (i.e., reducing the social distance between the brand and the brand supporter) is more effective, while maintenance conflict moderation (i.e., absence of intervention) should be avoided. This research contributes to the online brand community management literature and the study of online consumer-to-consumer incivility. For digital marketers and social media community managers, we offer recommendations on the mechanisms for the appropriate management of consumer tensions in their official social media brand pages, with a particular focus on brand advocates and brand antagonists.

1. Introduction

Consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conflicts are commonly defined as 'an interactive relationship between two or more (groups of) market participants that have mutually exclusive or incompatible goals regarding certain consumption resources and ideologies' (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013, p. 356). These conflicts constitute a form of consumer incivility (Lages et al., 2023) that brands increasingly face within their social media communities (Bacile et al., 2018). Often triggered by seemingly innocuous brand posts (Labrecque et al., 2022), such disputes typically arise when one consumer posts an offensive or abusive comment, prompting retaliatory hostility from others (Dineva et al., 2017).

In recent years, cross-cultural evidence demonstrates that these consumer tensions on social media have increased by approximately 42%–67% (Brandwatch, 2021; Walther, 2022). When C2C conflicts occur, they can negatively impact both participating and observing consumers as well as brands hosting official fan pages on social media (Dineva &

Daunt, 2023; Wolter et al., 2023). Specifically, research findings have shown that C2C conflicts can lead to consumers withdrawing from interacting with one another, or with brands, and exhibiting decreased community enjoyment (Dineva & Daunt, 2023; Dutot & Mosconi, 2016). This is problematic for brands because consumers who divest from engaging in their online communities may transfer their engagement and any subsequent desirable behavioral intentions to competitor brands (Brodie et al., 2013).

Brands may further experience a loss of credibility and an increased likelihood of exposure to negative word-of-mouth, if they fail to manage C2C conflicts appropriately (Dineva et al., 2020; Dineva & Daunt, 2023; Pfeffer et al., 2014). In extreme cases, the accumulation of C2C conflict can create social media firestorms that cause brands to experience long-term reputational damage (Hansen et al., 2018; Hauser et al., 2017). Ultimately, if left unaddressed, uncivil C2C commentary can create and escalate a toxic environment that deters participation and negatively impacts consumers' overall experience. This is because social media

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algorithms that drive online brand communities (OBC) engagement are designed to promote controversial and often negative content (Cinelli et al., 2021). In turn, incivility can spread quickly through social media, with brand audiences involuntarily and regularly exposed to C2C conflict, leading to disengagement and a decline in valuable consumer insights.

Given the negative implications of C2C conflicts and the increasing reliance of contemporary brands on their official social media fan pages for marketing and customer engagement purposes (Holt, 2016), the effective management of such conflicts has become a growing priority for both practitioners and scholars (Cusumano et al., 2021; Forbes, 2020). Brands can no longer afford to remain silent during C2C conflicts, because being inert risks escalating disputes, eroding trust, and damaging their reputation (Bacile et al., 2025). Inaction may be perceived as indifference, undermining credibility and alienating community members (Dineva et al., 2020). In contrast, proactive conflict moderation (CM) – the communication strategies and corresponding actions brands use to intervene in transgressive C2C disputes within their official online communities (Dineva et al., 2017) – signals accountability to participants and observers and helps maintain a safe, respectful environment that fosters constructive engagement (Marketing Week, 2018; Wolter et al., 2023).

Most research in this domain has primarily examined passive versus active moderation (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018; Sweiss et al., 2022; Wolter et al., 2023), often overlooking the roles of different conflict actors and failing to align CM approaches with these roles when assessing the impact of moderation. This limited scope leaves a significant gap in understanding the nuanced interplay between CM strategies and the different conflict actors involved (i.e., brand antagonist, brand advocate) in a conventional C2C incivility scenario. These conflict actors are critical to consider in successful CM because their roles, behaviors, and perceived legitimacy can significantly shape the dynamics and outcomes of tensions in an OBC (Wong et al., 2018). For instance, recent research highlights a potential downside of ‘Top Fan’ badge users on social media where high-engagement individuals can inadvertently escalate tensions, particularly in sensitive contexts such as service recovery (Bacile et al., 2025). Similarly, brand antagonists (e.g., anti-brand users, trolls) should be considered as part of effective CM because these actors can further fuel incivility within the OBC, thus undermining opportunities for constructive engagement or de-escalation of C2C incidents (Labrecque et al., 2022).

For this reason, tailoring CM to the different actors involved in C2C incivility is necessary. Certain strategies, such as establishing clear community guidelines, can set the tone for acceptable behavior in response to antagonists and can de-escalate tensions (Hauser et al., 2017). Conversely, other, more positively framed strategies towards advocates in particular, can help build trust and reinforce community cohesion (Matzat & Rooks, 2014). By employing a multifaceted approach to CM in their online communities, brands can not only mitigate the negative impacts of C2C conflicts but also transform potentially harmful interactions into opportunities for strengthening consumer relationships and enhancing brand outcomes (Hauser et al., 2017).

Accordingly, this paper seeks to enhance understanding of two critical factors for the success of OBCs: the conditions under which community management fosters positive interpersonal exchanges and how observing consumers evaluate a brand’s governance (Homburg et al., 2015; Wirtz et al., 2013). We outline three competing strategies traditionally used in offline conversational exchanges – convergence, divergence, and maintenance – which we argue are crucial for moderating consumer conflicts on social media. Our unique application of these offline strategies to online communication is accomplished across three experimental studies that draw from the conceptual and theoretical areas of social servicescapes, customer compatibility management,

and communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Pranter & Martin, 1991; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Adopting these principal strategies to CM in OBCs is particularly insightful because it highlights the brand’s varied moderation roles and role saliency in managing C2C tensions, while accounting for adaptations to brand advocates and antagonists – factors often overlooked together in prior research.

This study examines three core CM approaches, offering key insights into the governance of OBCs and the management of uncivil C2C interactions. We highlight the distinct effects of CM strategies on brand-related interpersonal and governance outcomes, introducing the previously unexplored role of converging with brand advocates versus diverging from brand antagonists. By integrating social servicescape and customer compatibility management with CAT, we provide a novel framework for CM in social media. Our findings reveal that divergence effectively de-escalates consumer tensions, while convergence largely enhances perceptions of brand warmth. These insights emphasize the need for digital marketers and social media community managers to adopt context-specific CM strategies, as a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for managing conflicts in OBCs.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social servicescape, customer compatibility management, and communication accommodation theory to address conflict

C2C conflict, in which consumers clash within OBCs (Bacile et al., 2018), represents a key form of consumer incivility on social media (Lages et al., 2023). Unlike one-directional behaviors such as complaints targeting brands or trolling aimed at individuals, C2C conflicts involve multi-participant interactions (von Janda et al., 2021; Fombelle et al., 2020). For this reason, conventional strategies for addressing incivility, such as apologies or compensation, may not effectively resolve C2C conflicts (Ali et al., 2023; Dineva, 2023; Dineva & Daunt, 2023), and establishing appropriate moderation mechanisms to address these conflicts is of paramount importance.

Offline service marketing frameworks offer valuable insights for managing conflict within brand environments. In situations where multiple consumers share service spaces (e.g., restaurants, events, airlines), brands must manage C2C interactions to enhance the customer experience. The social servicescape framework (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003) highlights organizationally controlled elements, such as ambient factors, spatial layout, and signage, which influence customers’ approach or avoidance decisions. Building on this, research identifies a social dimension, where favorable or unfavorable C2C interactions act as stimuli that brands must manage (Rosenbaum & Mas-siah, 2011). The social servicescape concept posits that one consumer’s actions (Customer 1) can influence another’s (Customer 2), particularly in the case of negative interactions. These incidents require a service provider’s response, as they impact Customer 2’s behavior and may also influence other consumers who observe the exchange and how the brand handles it (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003).

In addition, customer compatibility management is required in shared service spaces because the compatibility of some customers with others varies. In these shared spaces, some customers ‘may be negatively or positively influenced by the specific behaviors of fellow patrons, by verbal exchanges with them,’ (Martin & Pranter, 1989, p. 6). Managing customers in a service environment in this respect is consistent with the underlying tenets of the social servicescape framework, whereby one customer’s actions can be a stimulus that other customers react to in ways that may be detrimental to the firm (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). As per this argument, the customer compatibility management framework outlines how service providers can enact different operational roles to improve customer experiences in shared service

environments (Pranter & Martin, 1991). This is because brands are social actors with defined roles and, when faced with uncivil C2C interactions, they must adhere to a range of appropriate roles to resolve such tensions (Aggarwal, 2004). Specifically, managing C2C tensions entails ‘role conformity’, whereby the brand must adhere to responsible service provider’s expectations; ‘role identity’ refers to how a service provider interprets a negative C2C interaction and their role in addressing it; and ‘role salience’, which is the readiness and extent to which a service provider addresses C2C conflicts (Anglin et al., 2022; Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

In terms of ‘role salience’, the theoretical domain of CAT offers fitting insights into effective CM. CAT explains how in a more traditional setting, individuals can adjust their communication styles to manage social distance and, in turn, create distinctions between interactants (Giles & Ogay, 2007). CAT identifies three strategies: convergence, divergence, and maintenance (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Convergence typically involves adapting communicative behaviors to reduce social distance and gain approval from the other party. In CM, we argue that convergence is effective in engaging brand advocates during C2C conflicts, as reciprocating support reduces social distance between supporters and the brand in the face of incivility. In contrast, divergence focuses on emphasizing differences between parties to increase social distance. In CM, divergence may be useful for addressing brand antagonists during C2C incidents, allowing the brand to assert control and maintain authority. Maintenance, on the other hand, involves retaining one’s usual communication style without adjustment, which, in the context of moderating C2C incivility, reflects a lack of intervention to address the conflict.

Relatedly, we contend that the success of CM depends not only on the broad type of approach employed (i.e., convergence, divergence or maintenance), but also on the extent to which this approach aligns with the communicative behavior of the conflicting parties, as advocated by CAT (Giles & Ogay, 2007). In offline settings, CAT differentiates between symmetrical and asymmetrical convergence and divergence (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Symmetrical convergence ($A \rightarrow <B$) occurs when both parties make similar adjustments to foster alignment, while asymmetrical convergence ($A \rightarrow <B$) involves one party making a greater effort to adapt to the other. Symmetrical divergence ($<A B \rightarrow$), on the other hand, happens when both parties emphasize differences equally, increasing social distance, while asymmetrical divergence ($<A B \rightarrow$) involves one party deliberately highlighting differences to assert control or superiority. In the context of CM, brands can use symmetrical approaches to foster reciprocity in their interactions with both advocates and antagonists within OBCs. For advocates, symmetrical convergence involves reciprocating support by reinforcing positive actions, thereby aligning with the supporter. For antagonists, symmetrical divergence entails dismissing negativity or aggression, maintaining a balanced power dynamic. In contrast, asymmetrical convergence and divergence approaches involve more significant actions that allow the brand to assert control, creating a power imbalance to reinforce distinctions between the brand and/or the two conflict actors.

In summary, we argue that CAT’s emphasis on communication style, combined with the concepts of the social servicescape and customer compatibility management frameworks, offers strategies for brands through communication adjustments and additional actions to mitigate the negative social dynamics of C2C conflict. Specifically, the social servicescape framework enables the identification of antecedents and outcomes of C2C interactions within a brand’s digital space; customer compatibility management defines the roles needed to manage these shared spaces; and CAT provides targeted communication strategies for addressing brand advocates versus antagonists in C2C conflicts to reduce incivility.

2.2. Conflict moderation in online brand communities

In OBCs, conflicts arise due to unique dynamics, where members with diverse motivations – ranging from loyal supporters to critics –

clash over brand-related issues including product quality, marketing campaigns, or brand values (e.g., Sibai, Luedicke & De Valck, 2024). These conflicts often involve different actors, such as antagonists, who challenge the brand or its values, and advocates, who defend the brand’s identity, creating a complex environment (Colliander & Wien, 2013). In environments where communities are hosted by brands, the responsibility for moderating incivility primarily falls on the brand itself (Wirtz et al., 2013), in contrast to traditional online communities, where there is no central brand focal point, and community control and moderation are largely decentralized (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Indeed, research shows that brands (compared with other social media users e.g., ‘Top fan’) are consistently perceived by observing customers as more effective in conflict de-escalation (Dineva & Daut, 2023).

An emerging stream of studies has begun to investigate how C2C incivility can be best addressed, which we review in Table 1, focusing on the CM approach and conflict actor/s studied, and whether CM has been accommodated to these actors. Notwithstanding the contributions reviewed in Table 1, most studies have focused on the absence or presence of brand moderation (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018; Sweiss et al., 2022; Wolter et al., 2023), with scholars comparing binary CM strategies (e.g., cooperative versus assertive, Hauser et al., 2017; denouncing versus ignoring, Bacile et al., 2025), but failing to consider the role salience (i.e., different degrees) adopted in these strategies. For example, both cooperative and assertive CM can encompass a range of actions taken by a brand that vary in intensity from verbal agreements/warnings to concessions/censorship (Liao et al., 2024). With two exceptions (Hauser et al., 2017; Wolter et al., 2023), research does not explicitly consider and compare different conflict actors in shaping the effectiveness of the moderation strategies. This is important since addressing the specific behaviors and influence of these actors during uncivil C2C commentary can achieve a more constructive social media environment (Myers West, 2018). In summary, and as outlined in Table 1, a significant research gap persists in understanding differentiated CM approaches in synergy with the roles of various conflict actors (advocates vs. antagonists) involved in typical uncivil C2C incidents.

Building on social servicescape and CAT, which highlight how customer actions can trigger emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses from others, the different actors involved during such interactive scenarios, and the brand’s responsibility to manage these reactions when they turn uncivil (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003), we posit that convergence, divergence, and maintenance will each play distinct roles in the effectiveness of addressing C2C conflicts.

Convergence has been shown to enhance perceived attractiveness, warmth, and interpersonal involvement, thereby fostering rapport in offline interactions (Soliz & Giles, 2014). Consequently, we propose that a convergence approach in CM will result in favorable interpersonal outcomes for the brand. Specifically, affirming consumers who support the brand during a C2C conflict by reciprocating positivity through convergence can improve consumer evaluations of the brand’s interpersonal characteristics, especially when compared to divergence and maintenance strategies, which either involve corrective action to increase the social distance or no action at all (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Few studies have explored this dynamic in depth, but preliminary findings suggest its effectiveness. Matzat and Rooks (2014) found that positive CM strategies significantly boost community engagement compared to assertive or punitive methods in online healthcare communities, while Schamari and Schaefer (2015) showed that personalized webcare during complaints increases customer engagement. Additionally, Hauser et al. (2017) observed that cooperative CM strategies, which demonstrate a brand’s willingness to compromise, lead to more favorable brand evaluations during C2C firestorms.

Second, in line with customer compatibility management, brands as service providers in OBCs may not only enact different moderation roles but also choose to adjust the salience of these roles (Anglin et al., 2022) in response to the intensity of communication behavior from the conflict

Table 1
A review of the literature on online customer incivility management.

Author/s, year	Research focus	Type of community investigated	Moderation strategies studied	Moderation impact: Key findings	Conflict actors: Brand advocates AND/OR Brand antagonists studied	Moderation AND conflict actors studied together
Bacile et al. (2018)	The impact of online incivility and the firm's response during service recovery on social media.	Official Facebook brand communities	Active versus passive firm response	Active firm response (addressing both the complaint and the uncivil comment) improves justice perceptions of the complainant and observers.	No	No
Bacile et al. (2020)	The impact of uncivil user communication on a complainant's service recovery experience.	Firm online support forums	Active firm response – before versus after service complaint	Firm response promptness improves complainant's hedonic, pragmatic, and social experience during a service recovery that includes uncivil comments.	No	No
Bacile et al. (2025)	The influence of consumers' malicious joy (schadenfreude) comments on complainants and the effect of brand responses to such schadenfreude.	Official Facebook brand communities	Ignore versus agree versus denounce	Denouncing whereby the brand apologizes and asks for compliance is the most effective strategy.	No	No
Batista et al. (2022)	The effect of brand responses to consumers' uncivil comments in response to social activism and controversial issues.	Official Facebook brand communities	Assertive versus sarcastic brand response	Assertive (compared with sarcastic) brand responses are invariably perceived as more favorably by consumers.	No	No
Béal et al. (2023)	The effect of brand responses to consumers' uncivil complaining comments.	Official Twitter brand communities	Affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, absence of response	An accommodative response (i.e., apology) is more suited to civil comments, whereas an affiliative humor response is appropriate for uncivil ones.	No	No
Dineva et al. (2017)	An exploration into the different types of corporate responses employed by brands to manage uncivil consumer conflicts.	Official Facebook brand communities	Non-engaging, censoring, informing, bolstering, pacifying	Not tested – observational research	No	No
Dineva et al. (2020)	An exploration into different strategies to manage uncivil consumer conflicts and their effect on observing consumers.	Nonprofit Facebook brand community	Non-engaging, censoring, educating, bolstering, mobilizing, realignment	Realignment strategy generates favorable attitudes towards the brand and improved perceptions of the brand's social responsibility. Censoring is the most unfavorable strategy.	No	No
Dineva & Daunt (2023)	An investigation into different types of uncivil C2C exchanges and actors appropriate to moderating these.	Official Facebook brand communities	Active brand versus consumer responses	Brands perceived as more appropriate moderators compared with other consumers ('Top fans') in the community.	No	No
Dineva et al. (2023)	An exploration into brand moderation strategies during uncivil consumer comments in response to COVID-19 service failures.	Official Facebook brand communities	Passive, active, authoritative, and cooperative brand responses	Not tested – observational research	No	No
Fombelle et al. (2020)	A review of research into offline and online customer deviant behaviors and prevention strategies.	Social media and online spaces	Blocking, moderation, confrontation, proactive brand strategies	Not tested – conceptual research	No	No
Godes et al. (2005)	An exploration of firm's management roles regarding consumers' (positive and negative) social interactions online.	Online forum-based firm community	Observer, moderator, mediator, Participant	Not tested – conceptual research	No	No
Hauser et al. (2017)	The impact of conflict management styles on the accumulation of consumer conflicts (i.e., firestorms).	Social media brand communities	Cooperative versus assertive strategies	Collaborating conflict management strategy is most accepted.	Yes – antagonists	No
Homburg et al. (2015)	An investigation into firms' general management of C2C discussions in online communities.	Online forums	Passive versus active moderation	Active firm engagement undermines consumer sentiment.	No	No
Husemann et al. (2015)	An exploration into community conflict culture, types of conflicts, and their management.	User-hosted online community	Conflict cultivation for constructive conflicts, member exclusion for transgressive conflicts	Not tested – observational research	No	No
Lee (2005)	An investigation into conflict management styles for	User-hosted online forums	Competitive-dominating,	Not tested – observational research	No	No

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Table 1 (continued)

Author/s, year	Research focus	Type of community investigated	Moderation strategies studied	Moderation impact: Key findings	Conflict actors: Brand advocates AND/OR Brand antagonists studied	Moderation AND conflict actors studied together
Matzat & Rooks (2014)	managing flaming exchanges between consumers. The impact of styles of moderation in online support communities.	Healthcare support community	cooperative-integrating, avoiding Positive versus negative conflict moderation styles	Rewarding moderation more effective than punishing.	No	No
Sibai et al. (2015)	An exploration into social control and moderation practices in online communities.	User- and brand-hosted online communities	Interaction initiation, interaction maintenance, interaction termination	Not tested – conceptual research	No	No
Sweiss et al. (2022)	The impact of misbehaviors on observing consumers' engagement and the role of the firm's response.	Official Facebook brand community	Active brand response	Active brand involvement improves attitudes towards the brand.	No	No
Wolter et al. (2023)	The effects of online incivility on customer engagement on social media.	Official Facebook brand communities	Active brand moderation	Active brand response to incivility mitigates some of its negative effects on customer engagement.	Yes – brand advocates, trolls	No
Wu et al. (2021)	The detection and mitigation of customer misbehaviors (i.e., violations of community norms) online.	Online firm communities	Enforcing common community identity versus punishment	Enforcing common community identity is more effective than punishment.	No	No
Current research	The effectiveness of different conflict moderation strategies on brand community interpersonal and governance outcomes.	Official Facebook brand communities	Degrees of convergence and divergence, and maintenance	Divergent CM best suited to achieving community governance goals, convergent is better for brand interpersonal outcomes, while a maintenance CM approach should be avoided.	Yes – brand advocates, brand antagonists	Yes – CM tailored to different conflict actors

parties involved. Research shows that using rewards in online communications is effective and common for enhancing engagement (Wilson, 2003), particularly in decreasing any social distance during undesirable situations and thereby promoting cooperation (Balliet et al., 2011). These rewards are more effective when perceived as stemming from converging motives (e.g., Van Lange & Rusbult, 2012), as both symmetrical and asymmetrical convergence suggest in CAT. Specifically, given the positive associations between convergence and favorable interpersonal evaluations (Dragojevic et al., 2016), we expect that both symmetrical and asymmetrical convergence – where the brand converges with supporters in proportion to their support or exaggerates the convergence – will enhance brand community outcomes among observers during C2C conflict moderation. Thus, we predict the following:

H1a-c: Convergence in CM will generate the most favorable brand interpersonal outcomes (i.e., warmth, attitude, and community engagement) in comparison with both: (a) divergence, and (b) maintenance in CM; and (c) we expect this to be true when both symmetry and asymmetry are adopted in convergence.

By contrast, further drawing from social servicescape and compatibility management's operational roles, a brand using divergence communication aligns with a role whereby the brand disapproving of an antagonist signals that: a) rules exist that should be followed; and b) the brand will enforce rule violations. This is because social media users generally place the responsibility for managing transgressive C2C consumer interactions on brands (Bacile et al., 2018) and want brands to exert control when negative discourse takes place (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). In turn, a divergent approach to CM after a C2C stimulus, such as C2C incivility, should produce favorable responses in relation to the brand managing (i.e., governing) its online community. Existing research provides preliminary evidence that authoritative intervention in consumer incivility can enhance perceptions of brand credibility (Dineva et al., 2020) and competence (Habel et al., 2017). Moreover, given that consumers expect brands to intervene during uncivil

behaviors (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), such interventions may contribute to more effective conflict de-escalation (Bacile et al., 2018).

Finally, the effectiveness of divergence in CM may depend on the degree of punishment or sanctions applied, calibrated to the severity of antagonism to increase the social distance and thereby encourage compliance (Husemann et al., 2015; Seifried, 2008). When combined with divergent strategies, sanctions can range from subtle responses, such as expressing disagreement or requesting behavioral changes, to more severe measures like censorship or banning (Dineva et al., 2017; Dineva et al., 2020; Habel et al., 2017; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2012). Research confirms that such strategies help maintain social control in more generalized online communities (Matzat & Rooks, 2014). Additionally, CAT suggests that both symmetrical and asymmetrical divergence – where punishment aligns with the level of aggression or is exaggerated – can strengthen perceptions of brand authority (Dragojevic et al., 2016). In turn, we hypothesize the following:

H2a-c: Divergence in CM will generate the most favorable brand governance outcomes (i.e., competence, webcare credibility, distributive justice, and conflict de-escalation) in comparison with both: (a) convergence, and (b) maintenance in CM; and (c) we expect this to be true when both symmetry and asymmetry are used in divergence.

3. Study 1a: Fictitious brand

3.1. Method

The goal of Study 1a is to understand the effect of different CM strategies on observing consumer evaluations of brand interpersonal and governance outcomes. We conducted a randomized one-factor (convergent vs. divergent vs. maintenance CM strategy) between-subjects experimental survey for this purpose. Subjects were recruited via online panel (Prolific) and received a small monetary reward (USD

1.00) for their participation in the study. The final sample consisted of 119³ US residents ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.75$, age range 18–69, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.94$; Female = 59.7 %). On average, the participants visited brands' social media communities several times a month⁴ ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.93$). Respondents who stated that they had never visited OBCs or failed the attention checks ($n = 21$) were excluded from the final sample.

3.2. Procedure

First, the respondents were shown a brand post from the Facebook community of a fictitious e-commerce retailing brand called *Wearly*, followed by a conflict scenario (see Appendix B). We used a fictitious brand name generated using an AI-powered application (Looka) to control for any pre-existing brand perceptions or experiences and ensure internal validity (Eigenraam et al., 2021). The C2C conflict was based on real-life data and was pre-tested (e.g., Dineva et al., 2017; Labrecque et al., 2022). During the C2C conflict, the respondents saw an uncivil interaction between three social media users in response to an innocuous brand post, with each user representing either a brand antagonist (i.e., someone who attacks the brand) or a brand advocate (i.e., someone who defends the brand), followed by an arbitrary user comment. Next, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, each depicting a different CM strategy (convergence, $n = 40$; divergence, $n = 38$; or maintenance, $n = 41$), with experimental scenarios informed by field data on brand moderation practices on Facebook, as identified in observational studies (e.g., Dineva et al., 2017) (see Appendix C). In the convergent condition, the brand thanked its supporters; in the divergent condition, the brand asked brand antagonists to adjust their communication; and in the maintenance scenario, the brand continued to share content without intervening in the C2C conflict. All stimuli were pre-tested before the launch of the experimental survey to ensure that they were understood as intended. The respondents then progressed to complete the manipulation checks. Next, items related to the moderation scenario were answered. Brand interpersonal measures included: brand warmth (Kolbl et al., 2019), brand attitude (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019), and brand community engagement (Hansen et al., 2018). Brand governance measures were: brand competence (Kolbl et al., 2019), webcare credibility (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), distributive justice (Martínez-Tur et al., 2006), and conflict de-escalation (Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996). Table 2 reports the items, inter-item correlations, and Cronbach's alphas of the measures considered. The study concluded with demographic questions.

3.3. Results

As manipulation checks, the participants were asked to rate whether their assigned brand response (CM strategy) referred to one of the following: 'Thanking brand page followers', 'Cautioning brand page followers', or 'No comment was posted by the brand'. We employed a chi-square test to confirm that respondents correctly differentiated between different types of brand CM strategies ($\chi^2_{(4, 119)} = 161.32$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents also agreed ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.29$) that the C2C conflict was realistic (i.e., 'it could have happened on Facebook').

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with CM strategy as an independent variable and brand warmth, brand attitude, and brand community engagement as dependent variables was then performed to

³ Power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to estimate the sample size needed to achieve a statistical power of $(1 - \beta) = 0.80$. The effect size was set to $f = 0.30$ based on past research on conflict moderation in OBCs (Dineva & Daunt, 2023) with the significance level set to $\alpha = 0.05$. G*Power results suggested we would need 37 participants in each group.

⁴ 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely (i.e., about once a month), 3 = Occasionally (i.e., about 2–3 times a month), 4 = Frequently (i.e., about 2–3 times a week), 5 = Very frequently (i.e., daily).

test H1a-b. This was significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.63$, $F_{(6, 228)} = 9.73$, $p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.20$) except community engagement ($p > 0.05$). Table 3 summarizes the univariate results. Tukey's HSD post hoc tests (Table 5) revealed that for *brand warmth*, the participants rated convergent CM ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.97$) most favorably compared with divergent CM ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.35$) ($p = 0.04$) and maintenance ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.21$) ($p < 0.001$). No significant differences were found for brand attitude and community engagement ($ps > 0.05$). These findings allow us to confirm H1a-b since convergent CM generates the highest brand warmth evaluations compared with divergence and maintenance.

In a similar vein, to test H2a-b, a MANOVA was conducted with brand competence, distributive justice, webcare credibility, and conflict de-escalation as dependent variables. The results were significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.79$, $F_{(10, 224)} = 2.85$, $p = 0.00$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.11$), except for conflict de-escalation ($p > 0.05$) (see Table 3 for univariate results). We further conducted Tukey's HSD post hoc multiple comparison tests (see Appendix A.1) to understand where the significant differences lie. In terms of *brand competence*, respondents rated divergent CM ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.32$) more favorably than convergent CM ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.51$) ($p = 0.00$) and maintenance ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.59$) ($p = 0.04$). A similar pattern was observed for *distributive justice*, where divergent CM was rated more favorably ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.30$) than convergent CM ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.63$) ($p = 0.00$) and maintenance ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.45$) ($p = 0.01$). Lastly, for *webcare credibility*, the participants favored a divergent CM strategy ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.26$) compared with a maintenance strategy ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.21$) ($p = 0.04$). These results allow us to confirm H2a-b because divergent CM generates the most favorable brand competence, webcare credibility, and distributive justice perceptions compared with both convergent and maintenance CM.

3.4. Study 1a discussion

Our findings demonstrate that divergent CM, which increases social distance between the brand and brand antagonists to maintain authority, leads to positive brand governance evaluations. This is reflected in observing consumers' assessments of brand competence, distributive justice, and webcare credibility. While prior research has tentatively recommended this approach for managing dysfunctional customer behaviors – such as activist conflicts (Batista et al., 2022; Dineva et al., 2020) and service encounters (Habel et al., 2017) – we provide empirical confirmation within commercial OBCs, extending the literature by focusing on governance-related outcomes in brand-managed communities. Additionally, we find that convergent CM, which reduces social distance between the brand and brand supporters, fosters perceptions of brand warmth. This aligns with established links between convergence in offline communication and increased attractiveness of communicators (Soliz & Giles, 2014). Our findings advance this understanding by demonstrating how convergence enhances brand warmth specifically within CM and online interactions.

4. Study 1b: Real brands

4.1. Method and procedure

While Study 1a used a fictitious brand, Study 1b's purpose was to replicate this effect using real, participant self-reported brands, as per Eigenraam et al. (2021), thus also ensuring external validity. Akin to Study 1a, a randomized one-factor (convergent vs. divergent vs. maintenance CM strategy) between-subjects experimental survey was launched to further test H1a-b and H2a-b. We recruited subjects through Prolific who received USD 1.00 for their participation. To minimize participant bias, we did not permit participants who had already completed one of our studies to enter a subsequent study. The final

Table 2
Scale reliability and descriptive statistics for the research measures used in Studies 1a-b, and 2.

Construct	Items	Study 1a		Study 1b		Study 2	
		Inter-item correlations Minimum	Maximum	Inter-item correlations Minimum	Maximum	Inter-item correlations Minimum	Maximum
<i>Brand interpersonal measures</i>							
Brand warmth (Kolbl et al., 2019)	The way in which the brand responded/did not respond to the comments is...	0.81	0.92	0.71	0.81	0.78	0.87
	...friendly.	0.77	0.81	0.70	0.81	0.77	0.87
	...good-natured	0.81	0.92	0.78	0.80	0.82	0.85
	...kind	0.77	0.91	0.70	0.80	0.77	0.85
	...warm.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.96, M = 19.19, SD = 5.62, \text{Variance} = 31.62$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.93, M = 20.00, SD = 4.34, \text{Variance} = 18.80$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.95, M = 20.53, SD = 4.50, \text{Variance} = 20.27$	
Brand attitude (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019)	Having seen how the brand responds/does not respond to follower comments on its Facebook page, my attitude towards the brand is...	0.91	0.92	0.92	0.94	0.93	0.95
	...good.	0.91	0.92	0.93	0.94	0.95	0.95
	...positive.	0.91	0.92	0.92	0.93	0.93	0.95
	...favorable.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.97, M = 14.75, SD = 4.09, \text{Variance} = 16.70$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.98, M = 16.06, SD = 3.70, \text{Variance} = 13.70$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.98, M = 16.53, SD = 3.60, \text{Variance} = 12.94$	
		0.54	0.77	0.42	0.77	0.43	0.46
Brand community engagement (Hansen et al., 2018)	I would be willing to visit the brand's Facebook community.	0.54	0.61	0.37	0.42	0.12	0.46
	I would be willing to post comments on the brand's Facebook community.	0.61	0.77	0.37	0.74	0.12	0.43
	I would be willing to unfollow (item reversed) (Study 1a)/continue to follow the brand's Facebook community (Study 1b).	Scale: $\alpha = 0.84, M = 12.45, SD = 4.24, \text{Variance} = 17.94$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.76, M = 14.74, SD = 3.41, \text{Variance} = 11.65$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.60, M = 15.95, SD = 3.22, \text{Variance} = 10.40$	
		0.54	0.61	0.37	0.42	0.12	0.46
<i>Brand community governance measures</i>							
Brand competence (Kolbl et al., 2019)	The way in which the brand responded/did not respond to the comments is...	0.78	0.86	0.84	0.95	0.80	0.91
	...capable.	0.83	0.92	0.85	0.95	0.83	0.91
	...competent.	0.78	0.83	0.82	0.85	0.80	0.83
	...efficient.	0.81	0.92	0.82	0.89	0.80	0.86
	...intelligent.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.95, M = 19.71, SD = 6.17, \text{Variance} = 38.11$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.97, M = 19.18, SD = 6.41, \text{Variance} = 41.07$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.95, M = 20.47, SD = 5.34, \text{Variance} = 28.53$	
Distributive justice (Martinez-Tur et al., 2006)	The way in which the brand responded/did not respond to the comments...	0.61	0.90	0.58	0.85	0.59	0.78
	...is good, given the nature of the comments.	0.61	0.64	0.58	0.64	0.59	0.65
	...corresponds to the nature of the comments.	0.64	0.90	0.64	0.85	0.65	0.78
	...is appropriate, given the nature of the comments.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.88, M = 14.88, SD = 4.65, \text{Variance} = 21.65$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.87, M = 14.11, SD = 4.62, \text{Variance} = 21.35$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.86, M = 14.92, SD = 3.90, \text{Variance} = 15.20$	
		0.61	0.90	0.58	0.85	0.59	0.78
Webcare credibility (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012)	Having seen how the brand responds/does not respond to follower comments on its Facebook page, I think that the brand is...	0.70	0.84	0.79	0.89	0.77	0.90
	...trustworthy.	0.75	0.84	0.80	0.87	0.77	0.90
	...credible.	0.71	0.75	0.82	0.87	0.75	0.81
	...authentic.	0.71	0.79	0.79	0.82	0.75	0.77
	...responsible.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.93, M = 19.21, SD = 5.07, \text{Variance} = 25.71$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.95, M = 20.26, SD = 5.43, \text{Variance} = 29.49$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.94, M = 21.04, SD = 4.90, \text{Variance} = 24.00$	
Conflict de-escalation (Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996)	Having seen how the brand responded/did not respond to follower comments, how likely do you think it is that...	0.51	0.55	0.64	0.69	0.58	0.58
	...the seriousness of the discussion will subside.	0.51	0.67	0.64	0.66	0.58	0.72
	...the issue causing the discussion will be resolved.	0.55	0.67	0.66	0.69	0.58	0.72
	...the discussion will become less antagonistic.	Scale: $\alpha = 0.80, M = 13.00, SD = 4.30, \text{Variance} = 18.51$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.86, M = 12.91, SD = 4.55, \text{Variance} = 20.74$		Scale: $\alpha = 0.84, M = 13.60, SD = 4.18, \text{Variance} = 17.50$	
		0.51	0.55	0.64	0.69	0.58	0.58

Note. All were assessed on an ascending 7-point Likert scale.

sample consisted of 114⁵ US residents ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.55$, age range 18–72, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.67$; Female = 58.8 %) calculated in a similar fashion to Study 1a using GPower software (Faul et al., 2009). On average, the participants visited brand-managed social media communities regularly (2–3 times a month; $M = 2.88, SD = 0.84$).

Study 1b followed the same procedure as Study 1a, but the

⁵ Power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to estimate the sample size needed to achieve a statistical power of $(1 - b) = 0.80$. The effect size was set to $f = 0.30$ based on past research on conflict moderation in OBCs (Dineva & Daunt, 2023) with the significance level set to $\alpha = 0.05$. G*Power results suggested we would need 37 participants in each group.

participants were asked to name any brand they followed on social media. Respondents who failed to name a brand, had never visited their chosen brand's community, or failed the attention checks were excluded from the final sample ($n = 46$). Next, the respondents were allocated to one of three conditions, in the same manner as Study 1a, each portraying a different type of strategy (convergent CM, $n = 40$; divergent CM, $n = 39$; or maintenance, $n = 35$). Thereafter, we administered the same measures as in Study 1a (Table 2) before concluding the study with demographic questions.

4.2. Results

We asked the participants to rate their CM strategy as a manipulation

Table 3
Studies 1a-b, and 2 univariate results.

Dependent variable	Df	Error	Mean square	F	Partial-η ²	Sig.
<i>Study 1a: Conflict moderation (fictitious brand)</i>						
Brand warmth	2	116	35.32	25.21	0.30	< 0.001
Brand attitude	2	116	6.14	3.45	0.06	0.04
Community engagement	2	116	2.17	1.09	0.02	0.34
Brand competence	2	116	13.03	5.93	0.09	0.00
Distributive justice	2	116	16.37	7.56	0.12	< 0.001
Webcare credibility	2	116	5.25	3.40	0.06	0.04
Conflict de-escalation	2	116	0.93	0.45	0.01	0.64
Total	119					
<i>Study 1b: Conflict moderation (real brands)</i>						
Brand warmth	2	111	10.70	10.66	0.16	< 0.001
Brand attitude	2	111	5.13	3.52	0.06	0.03
Community engagement	2	111	6.72	5.62	0.09	0.01
Brand competence	2	111	36.75	18.84	0.25	< 0.001
Distributive justice	2	111	45.09	28.13	0.34	< 0.001
Webcare credibility	2	111	10.85	6.45	0.10	0.00
Conflict de-escalation	2	111	2.26	0.98	0.02	0.38
Total	114					
<i>Study 2: Conflict moderation: Reward vs. punishment</i>						
Brand warmth	4	235	13.41	12.51	0.18	< 0.001
Brand attitude	4	235	3.93	2.81	0.05	0.03
Community engagement	4	235	3.26	2.89	0.05	0.02
Brand competence	4	235	16.33	10.58	0.15	< 0.001
Distributive justice	4	235	17.58	12.33	0.17	< 0.001
Webcare credibility	4	235	7.53	5.39	0.08	< 0.001
Conflict de-escalation	4	235	8.11	4.40	0.07	0.00
Total	241					

check in the same manner as in Study 1a. A chi-squared test confirmed that the respondents correctly differentiated between the different types of CM strategies ($\chi^2(4, 114) = 156.85, p < 0.001$), and agreed that the scenario presented was realistic ($M = 5.60, SD = 1.28$).

To test H1a-b, we conducted a MANOVA with CM strategy as an independent variable and brand warmth, brand attitude, and brand community engagement as dependent variables, and the results were significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.72, F_{(6, 218)} = 6.55, p < 0.001, \text{partial-}\eta^2 = 0.15$) (see Table 3 for univariate results). Tukey's HSD post hoc multiple comparison tests (Appendix A.1) showed that *brand warmth* was rated higher when the brand adopted convergent CM ($M = 5.26, SD = 0.92$) ($p < 0.001$) compared with maintenance ($M = 4.35, SD = 1.23$), but also divergent CM ($M = 5.31, SD = 0.84$) compared with maintenance ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, divergent CM ($M = 5.77, SD = 1.18$) generated more positive *brand attitudes* than convergent CM ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.12$) ($p = 0.05$). Similarly, for *brand community engagement*, divergent CM ($M = 5.33, SD = 0.87$) was rated more positively than convergent CM ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.14$) ($p = 0.00$).

For H2a-b, we conducted a MANOVA with brand competence, distributive justice perceptions, webcare credibility, and conflict de-escalation as dependent variables, and the results were significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.59, F_{(10, 214)} = 6.39, p < 0.001, \text{partial-}\eta^2 = 0.23$) with the exception of conflict de-escalation ($p > 0.05$) (Table 3 for univariate

statistics). Tukey's HSD post hoc multiple comparison tests (Appendix A.1) revealed that for *brand competence*, divergent CM ($M = 5.85, SD = 0.84$) was evaluated more favorably than convergent CM ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.71$) ($p < 0.001$) and with maintenance ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.49$) ($p < 0.001$). For *webcare credibility*, divergent CM ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.03$) was perceived more favorably than convergent CM ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.36$) ($p = 0.00$) and maintenance ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.48$) ($p = 0.05$). Finally, *distributive justice* was rated higher when divergent CM ($M = 5.79, SD = 0.81$) was used compared with convergent CM ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.61$) ($p < 0.001$) and with maintenance ($M = 4.68, SD = 1.22$) ($p < 0.001$).

Based on these results, we can reject H1a, confirm H1b, and confirm H2a-b. To explain, divergent CM was rated more favorably across all variables (interpersonal and governance) than convergent and maintenance CM, including for brand warmth, where convergent CM has a comparably positive effect and is rated higher than maintenance.

4.3. Study 1b discussion

In this study, where participants selected their preferred brands, we predicted that divergent CM would be effective for brand governance perceptions but not for interpersonal outcomes. As expected, divergent CM was favored for governance-related evaluations, such as brand competence, webcare credibility, and distributive justice, aligning with prior research (Dineva et al., 2020; Habel et al., 2017). Conversely, we anticipated that convergent CM would enhance brand warmth, which our findings confirm. However, unexpectedly, divergent CM also generated favorable brand warmth evaluations. Despite this, convergence was generally perceived as less appropriate than divergence for moderating C2C conflicts. This challenges prior studies suggesting that positively framed CM strategies are better suited for consumer-brand relationship outcomes (Hauser et al., 2017; Matzat & Rooks, 2014; Soliz & Giles, 2014). Thus, in the context of C2C conflicts involving consumers' preferred brands, convergence does not always produce the most favorable interpersonal brand outcomes.

5. Study 2: Symmetry and asymmetry in convergent vs. divergent CM

5.1. Method

In Study 2, we investigated whether symmetry and asymmetry affect the perceived effectiveness of the adopted CM strategy. A one-factor (symmetrical convergence vs. asymmetrical convergence vs. symmetrical divergence vs. asymmetrical divergence vs. maintenance) between-subjects experimental survey was conducted. The participants were recruited through Prolific and received a USD 1.20 incentive for their participation. The final sample consisted of 241⁶ US residents ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.83, \text{age range } 18\text{--}74, SD_{\text{age}} = 12.00; \text{Female} = 52.7\%$), calculated in a similar fashion to Studies 1a-b using GPower software (Faul et al., 2007). On average, participants visited or read comments on brand-managed communities 2–3 times a month ($M = 3.09, SD = 0.88$).

5.2. Procedure and stimuli

Similar to the previous study, in Study 2, the participants were asked to name any brand they followed on social media. Respondents who failed to name a brand, had never visited a chosen brand's community, or failed the attention checks ($n = 73$) were excluded from the final

⁶ Power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to estimate the sample size needed to achieve a statistical power of $(1 - b) = 0.80$. The effect size was set to $f = 0.25$ based on past research on the effects of reward versus punishment in achieving compliance (Wells, 1980) with the significance level set to $\alpha = 0.05$. G*Power results suggested we would need 40 participants in each group.

sample. Next, the participants were shown a post made by the selected brand, which was followed by a C2C conflict. The respondents were then randomly assigned to one of five conditions (see Appendix D), each portraying a different type of strategy (symmetrical convergence, $n = 40$; asymmetrical convergence, $n = 40$; symmetrical divergence, $n = 38$), asymmetrical divergence, $n = 39$; maintenance, $n = 80$). Following Facebook best practice,⁷⁸ and field data from past research (Wolter et al., 2023), we operationalized the CM strategy by categorizing the brand: positively commenting on consumer posts as a symmetrical convergent, and awarding a ‘Top fan’ badge as an asymmetrical convergent CM; deleting consumer comments as symmetrical divergent, and blocking profiles as asymmetrical divergent CM. We pre-tested these stimuli to ensure that respondents understood the differences between reward and punishment in CM. The same measures as those used in previous studies (see Table 2) were administered, and the study concluded with demographics questions.

5.3. Results

We asked respondents for a manipulation check to confirm their correct understanding of the different types of CM strategies employed by the brand ($\chi^2_{(4, 241)} = 311.43, p < 0.001$). As an additional manipulation check, we asked participants to rate the brand response on an 8-point semantic differential scale (1 = Punitive, 8 = Rewarding), which were also identified correctly ($\chi^2_{(14, 241)} = 67.81, p < 0.001$). The respondents also agreed that the scenario assigned to them was realistic ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.49$).

To test H1c, we conducted a MANOVA with CM strategy as the independent variable and brand warmth, attitude, and community engagement as dependent variables. The results confirmed a significant effect of the CM strategy and its outcome on all variables (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.74, F_{(12, 611.46)} = 6.06, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.09$). From Tukey's HSD post hoc tests (Appendix A.2), we determined that for brand warmth, symmetrical convergent CM ($M = 5.42, SD = 1.13$) and asymmetrical convergent CM ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.15$) were evaluated highest and compared with maintenance ($ps < 0.001$), but symmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.32, SD = 1.17$) and asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.40, SD = 0.83$) were also evaluated favorably and preferred over maintenance ($M = 4.49, SD = 0.95$) ($ps < 0.001$). In terms of brand attitude, asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.96, SD = 0.88$) was rated more favorably compared with maintenance ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.14$) and symmetrical convergent CM ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.19$) ($ps < 0.05$). Lastly, asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 4.47, SD = 0.90$) further increased participants' community engagement intentions compared with maintenance ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.79$) ($p = 0.05$) as well as compared with symmetrical ($M = 3.87, SD = 0.82$) and asymmetrical ($M = 3.84, SD = 0.89$) convergent CM ($ps = 0.01$). Based on these results, we can partially accept H1c because convergent CM (symmetrical and asymmetrical) generates improved brand warmth perceptions compared with maintenance but not compared with divergent CM, which is evaluated more favorably for brand attitude and community engagement.

Similarly, a MANOVA was used to examine the effect of brand competence, distributive justice perceptions, perceived webcare credibility, and conflict de-escalation, and the results were significant for all variables (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.77, F_{(20, 767.09)} = 3.22, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.07$). Tukey's HSD post hoc multiple comparison tests showed that for brand competence, both symmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.75, SD = 0.97$) and asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.82, SD = 0.89$) were perceived more favorably than maintenance ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.16$) ($ps < 0.01$) and compared with symmetrical convergent CM ($M = 4.58, SD = 1.52$) and asymmetrical convergent CM ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.60$) ($ps < 0.001$). In a similar vein, the asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.73, SD = 0.83$)

generated higher distributive justice evaluations of the strategy employed in comparison with the maintenance ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.11$) ($p = 0.00$), symmetrical ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.46$), and asymmetrical ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.53$) convergent CM ($ps < 0.001$). In addition, for justice perceptions, symmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.68, SD = 1.01$) was also considered by respondents favorably compared with maintenance ($p = 0.00$) and symmetrical and asymmetrical convergent CM ($ps < 0.001$).

A similar pattern with asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.84, SD = 0.86$) followed with increasing respondents' perceptions of webcare credibility in contrast to maintenance ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.11$) ($p = 0.02$), and symmetrical ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.38$) and asymmetrical ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.55$) convergent CM ($ps = 0.01$). Lastly, we found that asymmetrical divergent CM ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.20$) was better suited to de-escalating the C2C conflict compared with symmetrical ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.30$) and asymmetrical ($M = 4.00, SD = 1.59$) convergent CM ($ps < 0.02$). These results allow us to accept H2c because, across all measures, the asymmetrical divergent CM and, in a few measures, the symmetrical divergent CM were considered most effective in comparison with the convergent CM and maintenance.

5.4. Study 2 discussion

Building on past research (Dineva et al., 2020; Habel et al., 2017), we expected divergent CM to enhance brand governance perceptions, and our findings strongly support its effectiveness: not just for governance but also for brand interpersonal outcomes. Among divergent CM strategies, asymmetrical divergence, where brand antagonists are removed from the OBC, emerges as the most effective approach. Symmetrical divergence, which involves removing transgressive comments rather than individuals, is also perceived as appropriate in certain contexts, particularly in reinforcing brand competence, warmth, and distributive justice.

Crucially, our study offers the first empirical insights into achieving compliance (i.e., conflict de-escalation) through asymmetrical divergent CM. While Matzat and Rooks (2014) suggested that punitive moderation can serve as a proactive deterrent against rule-breaking behaviors, we extend this by demonstrating its perceived legitimacy when applied post hoc. In terms of brand warmth, consistent with our previous studies and past research (e.g., Hauser et al., 2017), we confirm that warmth is best conveyed when brands adopt both symmetrical and asymmetrical convergent CM strategies. This reinforces the idea that while divergence is key to governance, convergence remains essential for fostering emotional connections with consumers.

6. Summary of results

Our research is the first to examine the impact of convergent, divergent, and maintenance CM on both brand interpersonal and governance goals across three studies. Drawing from the social servicescape framework, we highlight the necessity of managing transgressive C2C interactions, while customer compatibility management and CAT provide a foundation for structuring effective CM strategies. Our findings highlight that failing to manage these shared environments leads to suboptimal brand outcomes, reinforcing the critical role of CM.

First, convergent CM proves most effective in enhancing brand warmth, consistently outperforming other strategies in this dimension. Second, divergent CM emerges as the strongest driver of brand governance outcomes, significantly improving perceptions of brand competence, webcare credibility, and distributive justice. Notably, divergent CM also yields positive effects on brand interpersonal measures such as community engagement and brand attitudes, demonstrating its broader efficacy compared to convergent and maintenance CM. Finally, maintenance CM is generally the least effective strategy, further emphasizing the importance of active moderation. Table 4 summarizes our hypotheses across the three studies and their key implications.

⁷ Meta Business Help Centre: Manage top fan badges for your Facebook Page.

⁸ Meta Business Help Centre: Moderation

Table 4
Summary of hypotheses and implications.

Hypothesis	Study 1a	Implications	Study 1b	Implications	Study 2	Implications
H1a	Supported	When the brand is unfamiliar: convergent CM is best when the brand's goal is to generate warmth perceptions; and maintenance is undesirable.	Not supported	When the brand is familiar: convergent CM may still be useful in generating warmth perceptions, but is not the best approach – divergence is.	–	–
H1b	Supported		Supported		–	–
H1c	–		–		–	Partly supported
H2a	Supported	When the brand is unfamiliar, divergent CM achieves improved brand competence, webcare credibility, and distributive justice perceptions; however, a maintenance CM approach is undesirable.	Supported	When the brand is familiar divergent CM is best for both brand interpersonal and governance goals. A maintenance approach is not preferable.	–	–
H2b	Supported		Supported		–	–
H2c	–		–		–	Supported

7. General discussion

7.1. Theoretical implications

This study integrates three distinct conceptual areas to offer new insights into platform-based consumer transgressions and effective CM. We demonstrate how the social servicescape framework (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003) helps understand the negative impacts of user behavior and the crucial role that service providers, or moderators, play in managing C2C transgressions and fostering productive interactions. Drawing on customer compatibility literature (Pranter & Martin, 1991), we explore the roles and salience that a moderator assumes to mitigate conflicts and promote community functionality. Additionally, we apply CAT (Soliz & Giles, 2014) to examine the communication adjustments moderators to use in these roles. Together, these conceptual frameworks outline the contextual, role-based, and communicative mechanisms essential for effective CM and community governance, with implications that extend beyond their original (offline) contexts. In this respect, our research contributes to the broader OBC governance literature (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2013) and addresses the limited studies on managing C2C incivility on social media (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018; Dineva et al., 2017; Hauser et al., 2017). We also examine how previously unexplored CM elements – symmetrical and asymmetrical convergence, divergence, and maintenance – affect the achievement of brand interpersonal and community governance goals. Our findings, across three studies, provide compelling insights.

First, divergent CM produces the most favorable perceptions of community governance, enhancing a brand's webcare credibility, competence, and perceptions of distributive justice. This aligns with research suggesting that authoritative approaches work well in dysfunctional customer service encounters (Habel et al., 2017) and activist conflicts (Batista et al., 2022; Dineva et al., 2020), leading to improved community webcare quality (Ghosh & Mandal, 2020). Yet, our study extends these findings by showing that divergent CM, which increases the social distance between the brand moderator and the antagonist through punitive actions, improves community governance evaluations. Notably, our work is the first to show conflict de-escalation in OBCs requires asymmetrical divergent CM, where the antagonist is removed from the community, challenging previous studies that have deemed censorship undesirable (Dineva et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2024; Sibai et al., 2015).

Second, convergent CM – reducing social distance by affirming brand advocates – yields the highest brand warmth evaluations among observers when the brand is unfamiliar. For familiar brands, divergent CM also enhances other interpersonal goals, such as brand attitudes and community engagement. Different degrees of convergent CM (symmetrical and asymmetrical) lead to positive brand warmth evaluations when compared to a maintenance approach. These findings offer a novel interpretation of the effectiveness of convergence that deviates from its established success in offline settings (Soliz & Giles, 2014) – it could create a positive first impression for unfamiliar brands, but divergent CM remains preferred, arguably because it meets expectations from existing audiences (Bacile et al., 2018; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), in turn leading to enhanced interpersonal outcomes.

Finally, maintenance CM—where the brand chooses not to intervene—proves mostly undesirable compared to convergent and divergent approaches. Consistent with past research showing the ineffectiveness of passive communication to foster positive customer engagement (e.g., Hauser et al., 2017; Homburg et al., 2015; Wolter et al., 2023), we find that a maintenance approach fails to address consumer conflicts effectively in OBCs. This is a notable finding that is a stark contrast with the many brands which typically ignore C2C conflict in practice. Thus, this finding illustrates how the common tactic used by brands of passivity is a sub-optimal strategy to address C2C conflict.

7.2. Practical implications

Our research findings highlight important implications for brand managers, practitioners, and moderators in the social media space. Specifically, we demonstrate that in the CM domain, one size does not fit all, and the mechanisms for managing consumer conflicts in OBCs are nuanced. First, we offer brand managers a choice of three core CM strategies that lie on a spectrum from rewarding to punitive communications and generate diverse brand goals.

To improve the brand's perceived friendliness and good nature (warmth), a CM approach that brings the brand and brand supporters during a C2C incivility closer together is generally appropriate, especially when brands want to reach out to new target audiences. This strategy allows brands to intervene in C2C conflicts and get closer to their brand supporters involved in transgressive exchanges. For brand governance outcomes, a CM approach that highlights the brand's control over antagonists is well suited to enabling a brand to address brand

aggressors in C2C conflicts by asking them to adjust communication style. Divergent CM is appropriate in transgressive C2C incidents where a brand re-asserts its authority by addressing the antagonists. Brands should also consider other factors that may be present when moderating C2C conflicts. For example, our data indicate that divergent CM strategies are also suitable for improving observing consumers' brand attitude and community engagement when the brand is known to the consumers. Nonetheless, a maintenance approach to CM is generally undesirable, and taking action to intervene in the C2C conflict is recommended.

Effective CM in OBCs requires additional considerations, as generated from our research findings, that allow us to lend further prescriptions for social media and brand moderators. In situations where conflict de-escalation is required, our data show that strategies involving the removal of a brand antagonist from the community, or the removal of their comments are the most favored by consumers. Understandably, brands are often hesitant to remove social media users for fear of reprisal from the remaining group; however, our research demonstrates that removing the 'bad apple' from online communities can yield positive responses from the remaining users and incite positive judgments of distributive justice. To create functional and harmonious discourse and interactions in brand communities, CM managers should not be afraid to intervene in C2C conflicts by removing abusive consumers. They must also determine the implications for freedom of speech and expression and how this approach fits their community goals and governance.

8. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

Our research limitations provide opportunities for future studies. This study focused on CM strategies adopted by brands in their online communities to manage C2C conflicts within the context of Facebook. Future research could explore more decentralized approaches to conflict management, particularly as large corporations like Meta move away from traditional professional content moderation practices toward community-based governance (BBC, 2025). For instance, investigating how brands and community members collaborate (rather than compete; Dineva & Daunt, 2023) in moderating conflicts, and how this shift impacts the effectiveness and perception of CM strategies, could be a valuable avenue for research.

For analytical clarity, our study focuses on the separation of distinct CM approaches. However, we recognize that, in practice, these strategies may at times overlap and coexist in varying combinations. This dynamic reality presents a limitation to our study, because our data does not fully capture the simultaneous application of these strategies in CM and thus, a fruitful avenue for future research is to adopt a holistic approach to CM, combining various tactics to address adverse dynamics of OBCs. Another important avenue for future exploration might involve

examining how external factors, such as platform algorithms, bots and AI assistants (He, Hong & Raghu, 2024), interact with CM strategies and influence their effectiveness in managing C2C conflicts.

Relatedly, with the exception of brand warmth, we find that divergence – specifically, a punitive strategy that dismisses or removes antagonists from the OBC – emerges as the most effective approach for achieving favorable brand outcomes such as increased credibility, competence, and conflict de-escalation. While this holds true in our results, it is important to acknowledge that both subtle and overt forms of aggressive moderation can stifle important discussions, as critics of censorship have pointed out (Liao et al., 2024). Furthermore, this strategy may not be feasible for small, close-knit OBCs that depend on active member engagement.

We recommend that future research looks deeper into the dynamics of the divergence strategy and explore alternative methods for reducing social distance between the brand and antagonists during conflict. For example, different types of antagonists – such as trolls or anti-brand activists – are likely to require tailored divergence approaches to effectively manage the conflict while preserving community engagement. Building on the concept of conflict actors, future research could explore the role of conflict targets – whether the conflict is directed at the brand itself or at other consumers (Liao et al., 2024) – and examine how convergence, divergence, and maintenance strategies may vary in effectiveness depending on the target of the conflict.

Finally, while we did not directly compare the effect of CM on known versus unknown brands, we observed interesting insights into how social media users may evaluate brands differently depending on whether the brand is familiar or not. Researchers have extensively studied the effect of familiar versus unfamiliar brands on social media engagement outcomes (Barger et al., 2016), and we recommend that future studies compare the impact of these on CM more exclusively. Similarly, while our research employed direct effect experiments to ensure optimal clarity in interpreting the causality from CM to OBC outcomes (Lemmer & Gollwitzer, 2017), the potential role of mediators, such as brand personality and consumers' self-brand identification in influencing the effectiveness of the CM strategies are noteworthy and thus, we recommend future research investigates these dynamics.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Denitsa Dineva: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kate Daunt:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Todd J. Bacile:** Conceptualization.

Appendix A

Appendix A1

Studies 1a-b Tukey HSD multiple comparisons results.

Dependent Variable	Independent variable	Independent variable	Mean Difference	
			Study 1a	Study 1b
Brand warmth	Maintenance	Convergence	-1.85*	-.91*
		Divergence	-1.17*	-.96*
		Divergence	.68*	-.05
Brand attitude	Maintenance	Convergence	-.43	.05
		Divergence	-.79*	-.61
		Divergence	-.36	-.65*
Community engagement	Maintenance	Convergence	-.38	.40
		Divergence	-.42	-.43
		Divergence	-.04	-.83*

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Appendix A1 (continued)

Dependent Variable	Independent variable	Independent variable	Mean Difference	
			Study 1a	Study 1b
<i>Brand competence</i>	Maintenance	Convergence	-.30	.62
		Divergence	-1.12*	-1.28*
<i>Distributive justice perceptions</i>	Maintenance	Convergence	-.82*	-1.90*
		Divergence	.17	1.02*
<i>Webcare credibility</i>	Maintenance	Convergence	-1.03*	-1.12*
		Divergence	-1.20*	-2.14*
<i>Conflict de-escalation</i>	Maintenance	Convergence	-.12	.30
		Divergence	-.69*	-.73*
	Convergence	Convergence	-.57	-1.02*
		Divergence	-.17	.42
	Convergence	Convergence	.13	.01
		Divergence	.31	-.41

Appendix A2

Study 2 Tukey HSD multiple comparisons results.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Independent variable	Mean Difference	
<i>Brand warmth</i>	Maintenance	SC	-.93*	
		AC	-1.23*	
		SD	-.83*	
	SC	AD	-.91*	
		SD	.10	
		AD	.01	
	AC	SD	.38	
		AD	.30	
		SC	.11	
<i>Brand attitude</i>	Maintenance	AC	-.15	
		SD	-.43	
		AD	-.63	
	SC	SD	-.55	
		AD	-.74*	
		AC	-.29	
	<i>Community engagement</i>	Maintenance	AD	-.48
			SC	.07
			AC	-.00
SC		SD	-.44	
		AD	-.53	
		SD	-.51	
AC		AD	-.60	
		SD	-.43	
		AD	-.53	
<i>Brand competence</i>	Maintenance	SC	.35	
		AC	.33	
		SD	-.82*	
	SC	AD	-.92*	
		SD	-1.17*	
		AD	-1.27*	
	AC	SD	-1.14*	
		AD	-1.25*	
		SC	.37	
<i>Distributive justice perceptions</i>	Maintenance	AC	.46	
		SD	-.86*	
		AD	-.91*	
	SC	SD	-1.22*	
		AD	-1.28*	
		SD	-1.31*	
	AC	AD	-1.37*	
		SC	.19	
		AC	.18	
<i>Webcare credibility</i>	Maintenance	SD	-.49	
		AD	-.72*	
		SD	-.68	
	SC	AD	-.91*	
		Maintenance	-.18	
		SC	.01	
	AC	SD	-.67	
		AD	-.91*	
		AC	.67	
SD	AD	-.23		
	SC	.51		
	AC	.69		
<i>Conflict de-escalation</i>	Maintenance	SC	.51	
		AC	.69	
		AD	.69	

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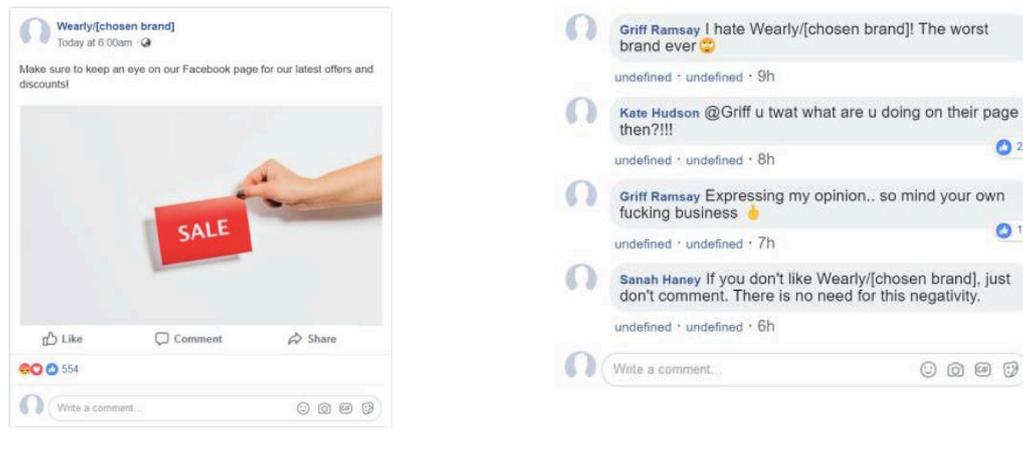
Appendix A2 (continued)

		SD	.12
		AD	-.41
	SC	SD	-.40
		AD	-.92*
	AC	SD	-.57
		AD	-1.09*

Notes. * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. SC/D=Symmetrical Convergence/Divergence, AC/D = Asymmetrical Convergence/Divergence.

Appendix B. Brand post and C2C conflict

Appendix B
Brand post and C2C conflict



Appendix C. Studies 1a-b stimuli

Appendix C
Studies 1a-b stimuli

Convergence	Divergence	Maintenance
Wearly/[chosen brand]	Wearly/[chosen brand]	Later, when you return to the Facebook page, you notice that Wearly/[chosen brand]
Thank you for your support. Positive comments like these are always welcome.	Please mind the language. Different views on this page are welcome, but offensive language will not be tolerated.	did not respond to the comments thread.

Appendix D. Study 2 stimuli

Appendix D
Study 2 stimuli

Symmetrical conditions		
Convergence	Divergence	Maintenance
[Chosen brand]	[Chosen brand]	Later, when you return to the Facebook page, you notice that [chosen brand]

(continued on next page)

Appendix D (continued)

Symmetrical conditions		
Convergence	Divergence	Maintenance
We welcome positive comments on this page and thank you for your support. As a result, the comments have been promoted.	We welcome different views on this page, but offensive language will not be tolerated. As a result, the comments have been removed.	 did not respond to the comments thread.
Asymmetrical conditions		
[Chosen brand]	[Chosen brand]	
		Later, when you return to the Facebook page, you notice that [chosen brand] 
We welcome positive comments on this page and thank you for your support. As a result, users have been awarded top fan badges.	We welcome different views on this page, but offensive language will not be tolerated. As a result, users have been banned from this page.	did not respond to the comments thread.

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