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Fall 10-17-2022

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#### Recommended Citation

Bhutto, Maqsood H.; Shaikh, Aijaz A.; and Karjaluo, Heikki, "Would you mind your language, please? Consumer incivility on social media platforms" (2022). *ICEB 2022 Proceedings (Bangkok, Thailand)*. 57. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/iceb2022/57>

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## Would you mind your language, please? Consumer incivility on social media platforms

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### ABSTRACT

Consumer incivility on social media platforms has recently gained the attention of academic researchers. However, few studies have presented the role that consumer incivility plays in forming social media perspectives (e.g. experiencing uncivil comments or rude replies on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Using the stimulus-organism-response theory, this study investigated the impacts of consumer incivility on social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with it, social media brand community participation and social media brand trust. The study also investigated the influence of social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility on social media brand community participation and examined the relationships of these two factors with social media brand trust. Two hundred and forty social media consumers who had witnessed the effect of consumer incivility on social media community platforms completed the study questionnaires. SPSS 23 and SmartPLS-SEM (v. 3.3.7) were used to analyse the data obtained and to test the hypotheses. The results revealed that consumer incivility was significantly inversely associated with the causal constructs. The present study provided novel insights for high-tech social media industries, including digital marketers and community developers.

*Keywords:* Consumer incivility, social media brand community participation, social media brand representatives' efforts, social media brand trust.

### INTRODUCTION

Should social media brands (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) control consumer incivility on their social media platforms? A large majority of Americans and other Westerners view consumer incivility as a problem and believe that social media must be blamed for it. This finding is supported by many other surveys (e.g. Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Shandwick, 2019) that documented a perception of rising consumer incivility because many consumers had experienced incivility on social media platforms. Thus, social media is considered the root of incivility. Sometimes, consumer incivility takes place on a brand's social media page, which means that social media brands are faced with a new question: Should they police the rising incivility taking place on their brand's social media pages? While social media brand communities foster global connectivity, they also foster cyber-conflict cases. To illustrate, around 7.9 million hate words were deleted from Facebook in the first quarter of 2021. Consequently, 36% of US adults have minimised their social media use due to their experiences of online harassment (Johnson, 2021).

Recent studies (e.g. Algharabat *et al.*, 2020; Wolter *et al.*, 2022; Heinonen, 2017; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Obeidat *et al.*, 2020) have examined positive valence antecedents (including social, relational, hedonic and cognitive) of consumer engagement and participation. However, few studies have focused on the dark side of social media marketing (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021), and whether consumer incivility influences consumer engagement and participation is unknown (Wolter *et al.*, 2022). Because of uncivil consumer responses on social media forums, the question remains: How does customer incivility (i.e. reading aggressive or uncivil comments on social media platforms) affect social media brand trust and social media brand community participation?

We used the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model to understand consumer incivility by framing stimuli (S) that affect an organism's internal state (O), causing the organism to respond to the environment (R) on a social media platform. Therefore, the present study mainly focused on consumer incivility in the social media setting, which disrupts the service experiences of consumers who have witnessed the uncivil acts. Obeidat *et al.* (2018) conducted a study on such behaviours (e.g. extended consumer complaining, vindictive word of mouth). Therefore, we investigated the inverse impacts of consumer incivility on social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with it, social media brand community participation and social media brand trust. Thus, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Does consumer incivility inversely influence social media brand community participation, social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility and social media brand trust?

RQ.2 How do social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility affect social media brand community participation in social media platforms?

This study has two main contributions. Firstly, it provided new theoretical insights about the backgrounds and levels of trust of the members of social media brand communities in the social media brands. This was the first study to empirically scrutinise the impacts of consumer incivility on social media brand community participation, social media representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility and social media brand trust (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Secondly, by exploring uncivil consumer behaviours that affect social media brand trust, we were able to propose ways to convey more targeted messages to social media leaders, web designers and members of social media brand communities to encourage them to participate on social media platforms in a variety of social contexts.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. The relevant literature is reviewed, and the research model that was used, the hypothesis development and the research methods are discussed. Finally, the study results, their implications for theory and practice, the study limitations and directions for future research are presented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory

We used the S-O-R theory in the present study, which helps in understanding consumer behaviour (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) through the following holistic elements: stimulus, organism and response. We investigated how stimuli (S) affect an organism's internal state (O), causing the organism to respond to the environment (R) on a social media platform. Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) stated that stimuli in an environment help motivate individuals for frontline encounters and consist of 'contextual, physical and social elements' (p. 448). Singh *et al.* (2017) define encounters as 'the interactions and interfaces at the point of contact between an organization and its consumers that promote, facilitate or enable value creation and exchange' (p. 4). Social media environments are the events/episodes where positive or negative social media encounters occur within individual versus group settings. Organism (e.g. social media brand community participation) refers to transitional and progressive states of an individual's emotional and cognitive bonds associated with the stimulus and the response. Finally, social media brand trust is the response and thus the outcome or action of a social media participant.

### RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The research model shown in Figure 1 shows how consumer incivility may affect social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with it, social media brand community participation and social media brand trust. Previous studies on the social aspects of environmental cues in an offline setting have examined consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-employee interactions. To the best of our knowledge, the research model contributes to the literature exploring how consumers' uncivil behaviours can act as triggers (stimuli) of social media brand community participation (organism) and social media brand trust (response). Thus, we propose the following research model:

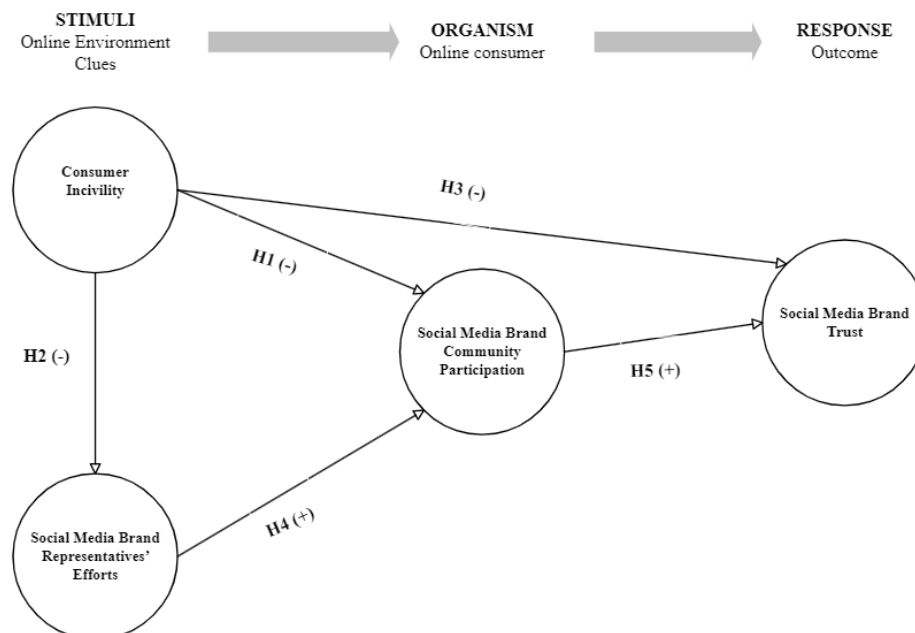


Figure 1: Research Model

### Consumer incivility and Social-media brand community participation

Consumer incivility in information system sciences shows that consumers' uncivil acts violate the sociocultural norms in social media (Maher, 2016). Thus, the notion pertains to consumers who are members of a social media brand community expressing hate and hostility (Wolter *et al.*, 2022; Moor *et al.*, 2010). Such uncivil acts can reduce social media brand community

participation that may increase community members' mental distress, social isolation, hostility, frustration and anger (Ransbotham *et al.*, 2016), and at an extreme level, may result in suicide, which has been reported in high school (Bauman *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, we conclude from the literature that uncivil consumer acts are negatively related to consumer brand community participation. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Consumer incivility inversely influences consumer participation in social media platforms.

#### **Consumer incivility, social media brand representatives' efforts and social media brand trust**

Social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility are affected by consumer incivility on social media platforms. Sweiss *et al.* (2021) found that the higher the level of efforts of a company's social media brand representatives to deal with consumer incivility, the lower the effect of uncivil consumer acts on the overall reactions of the consumers who are members of the company's social media brand community. In contrast, the lower the efforts of a company's social media brand representatives to deal with consumer misconduct, the higher the impact of such consumer misconduct on social media brand trust and evaluation. For instance, uncivil consumer behaviour negatively and significantly affects consumer evaluation and satisfaction (Huang, 2008), and the influence of consumer incivility is mediated by job satisfaction and professional identity (Huang *et al.*, 2022; Pu *et al.*, 2022). Simultaneously, Huang (2010) reported that uncivil consumer acts influence other consumers' negative word-of-mouth communication and repurchase intentions. Thus, this paper presents the likely consumer evaluation (e.g. social media brand trust) of social media brand communities influenced by consumer incivility and shows how the efforts of the company's representatives to deal with the resulting critical situation can address it. It was hypothesised that the higher the social media representatives' efforts to deal with the situation stemming from customer incivility, the lower the impact of the consumer incivility and the higher the participant trust in the social media brand, and vice versa. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Consumer incivility inversely influences social media brand representatives' efforts to contain its impact.

H3: Consumer incivility inversely influences social media brand trust.

#### **Social media brand representatives' efforts and social media brand community participation**

Social media representatives' efforts pertain to the degree of efforts of the company employees to win the trust of social media brand consumers and to contain the effects of a situation potentially detrimental to the company, such as consumer incivility during community interaction (Huang, 2010). In the social media context, how social media brand representatives' efforts to handle consumer incivility or misbehaviour (Sweiss *et al.*, 2021) regarding complaints and repurchases (De Matos *et al.*, 2009) influence customer loyalty (Karatepe, 2006) and satisfaction (Huang, 2008; 2010) has been seen. The moderating effect of company representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility on the relationship between attitude and brand community engagement has also been examined, and significant positive results have been obtained (Obeidat *et al.*, 2020). The present study sought to determine whether the direct effect of social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility on social media brand community participation still has to be established. To fill this research gap, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: Social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with customer incivility positively influence social media brand community participation.

#### **Social media brand community participation and social media brand trust**

Social media community platforms are technology-driven societies. Social media forums can act as antecedents or mediators of community participation (Hook *et al.*, 2018). From a social media perspective, Kim and Ahmad (2013) define social media brand trust as 'a subject's degree of belief in a content provider's task competence, based on the expectation that the content provider generally and consistently delivers satisfactory and high-quality content in [its] social-media pages [that] consumers are willing to take [the] consumer-generated content provided by the content provider even with the possibility of risk' (p. 440). They add that '[t]his action is accompanied by feelings of security and strong positive emotions' (p. 440). Regarding trust perception, Casalo *et al.* (2008) identified the trust impact on brand communities to establish a community's trust and its members in the community. A few studies have proposed investigating social media brand trust prior to participation (Chen & Ku, 2013; Hur *et al.*, 2011; Tsai *et al.*, 2012). Hook *et al.*'s (2018) proposal to identify how social media brand trust is established after social media brand community participation has yet to be fully implemented. The present study thus analysed how social media brand trust can be gained. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H5: Social media brand community participation increases social media brand trust.

## **METHODS**

### **Data Collection Procedure and Sample**

Social media consumers from social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) were the target sample of the present study, and data were collected through an online Google survey form. The survey respondents were experienced social media consumers from Pakistan and were able to respond to our survey questionnaires related to social media community activities. A hybrid of the convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used because these techniques are the ideal subject recruitment methods in social media settings, such as social media platforms, whose members are identifiable. They

include referrals, making the subject recruitment more time-efficient and making the data easy to access. The non-probability sampling technique is acceptable 'when the purpose of research is theory testing or generalizability' (Calder *et al.*, 1981).

Table 1 shows the social media consumer subjects' gender, education, age, marital status and profession, which were analysed using SPSS 23. Regarding gender, 58% (n = 139) of the subjects were male, and only 42% (n = 101) were female. Regarding education, most were master's degree holders (40%; n = 96), 33% (n = 80) were undergraduate degree holders, 10% (n = 24) were post-graduate degree holders and only 17% (n = 40) were from schools. With regard to age, 30% (n = 72) belonged to the 26–35 age group, 27% (n = 65) were younger than 25 years and 35% (n = 84) belonged to the 36–45 age group. Only 8% (n = 19) were older than 45 years. Regarding marital status, most were unmarried (55%; n = 132). Lastly, with regard to profession, 54% (n = 129) were employees, 23% (n = 56) were businesspeople, 18% (n = 44) were house husbands and 5% (n = 11) were retired.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
<b>Gender:</b>			<b>Age:</b>		
Male	139	57.9	Less than 25	65	27.1
Female	101	42.1	26 to 35	72	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>	36 to 45	84	35
<b>Education:</b>			More than 45	19	7.9
Matriculation	17	7.1	<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>
Intermediate	23	9.6	<b>Profession:</b>		
Under-Graduate	80	33.3	Employee	129	53.8
Masters	96	40	Businessperson	56	23.3
Post-graduate	24	10	Household	44	18.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>	Retired	11	4.6
<b>Marital Status:</b>			<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>
Single	132	55			
Married	108	45			
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>			

### Measurement Instrument

To measure the variables, the present study adopted questionnaire items from previous studies and modified them to make them fit the context of the social media environment. An eight-item scale for social media brand community participation developed by Dessart *et al.* (2016) was adopted. Social media representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility were measured using Huang's (2010) four-item scale. To measure social media brand trust, we adapted Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) four-item scale. Jung *et al.*'s (2017) six-item scale for consumer incivility was adopted and modified to fit the context of consumer incivility in the present study (social media). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree') was used to respond to the questionnaire items.

## RESULTS

We have followed two step-procedure of Structural Equation Modelling with measurement and structural model assessment.

### Measurement Model Assessment

#### Individual Item Reliability

As suggested, item reliability should be assessed through the analysis of the factor loadings (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Hulland, 1999). According to Field (2009), a factor loading below 0.5 is unacceptable. We dropped one item from the consumer incivility (CI6) and two-items from the social media brand community participation (e.g. SMCP5 & SMCP6). Following Field's (2009) recommendation, we retained the items with 0.5 minimum loadings. The item loadings are shown in Table 2.

#### Internal Consistency Reliability

The composite reliability value was measured to determine the items' internal consistency. According to Hair *et al.* (2011), a threshold value of 0.7 or above is recommended, and we found composite reliability within the 0.807–0.957 range for each variable. The values obtained met the criteria recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), thus establishing the internal consistency of each construct in the model.

Table 2: Measurement model

Construct	Item	Standardised loading
<b>Consumer incivility</b> ( $\alpha = 0.783$ ; CR = 0.894; AVE = 0.539)		
CI1	'The other consumer behaved in a way I do not agree with.'	0.738
CI2	'The other consumer conducted themselves in a manner I do not find	0.727

	appropriate.'	
CI3	'The other consumer behaved in a way I was not expecting.'	0.705
CI4	'Other consumers complain and give the company and its employees a hard time.'	0.701
CI5	'Other consumers complain to be unpleasant with the company's employees and representatives.'	0.698
CI6	'Other consumers complain to make someone from the company pay for its poor service.'	Removed
<b>Social media brand trust</b> ( $\alpha = 0.807$ ; CR = 0.897; AVE = 0.633)		
PT1	'I trust the social media brand.'	0.808
PT2	'I rely on the social media brand community.'	0.803
PT3	'The social media brand has an honest product/service page.'	0.798
PT4	'The social media brand page is safe to use.'	0.772
<b>Social media brand community participation</b> ( $\alpha = 0.815$ ; CR = 0.892; AVE = 0.591)		
SMCP1	'I feel enthusiastic, interested and happy when I interact with the company's social media pages.'	0.658
SMCP2	'I get pleasure from interacting with the company's social media pages.'	0.637
SMCP3	'I share my ideas and interesting content in the company's social media brand pages.'	0.635
SMCP4	'I help other consumers in the company's social media pages.'	0.708
SMCP5	'I ask questions at the company's social media pages.'	Removed
SMCP6	'I seek ideas and information from the company's social media pages.'	Removed
SMCP7	'I promote and defend the company's social media pages.'	0.725
SMCP8	'I say positive things about the company's social media pages to other people.'	0.649
<b>Social media brand representatives' efforts</b> ( $\alpha = 0.821$ ; CR = 0.834; AVE = 0.604)		
SMRE1	'The company's social media brand representatives exert a lot of energy to deal with consumer incivility situations.'	0.821
SMRE2	'The company's social media brand representatives exert much effort to resolve consumer incivility situations.'	0.807

CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

### Convergent Validity

The convergent validity test evaluates the constructs with average variance extracted (AVE) values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE values should be 0.50 or higher (Chin, 1998). Table 2 indicates AVE scores from 0.689 to 0.851, thus establishing adequate convergent validity.

### Discriminant Validity

Due to the recent criticisms of Fornell and Larckers' (1981) criterion, we determined the discriminant validity in the present study through the heterotrait-monotrait method. The multitrait-multimethod matrix was followed, where a threshold value of less than 0.85 indicates adequacy (Kline, 2011). We found discriminant validity values within the threshold, indicating that discriminant validity had been established for all the constructs (see Table 3).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

Latent Constructs	Consumer Incivility	Social Media Brand Trust	Social Media Brand Community Participation	Social Media Brand Representatives' Efforts
Consumer Incivility	-			
Social Media Brand Trust	.744			
Social Media Brand Community Participation	.669	.831		
Social Media Brand Representatives' Efforts	.396	.378	.354	-

### Structural Model

Structural model assessment was used to examine our proposed hypotheses, following Hair *et al.*'s (2014) and Henseler *et al.*'s (2009) recommendations. Table 4 shows the results of the structural model assessment.

### R<sup>2</sup> Assessment

According to Hair *et al.* (2011) and Henseler *et al.* (2009), 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25 R-square values report substantial, moderate and weak levels of accuracy, respectively. The R-square value obtained in this study was 0.338 for social media brand community participation, indicating that the exogenous variables of consumer incivility and social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility combined explained 33.8% of the variance in social media brand community participation. However, the R-square value for social media brand trust was 0.532, indicating that the research model explained 53.2% of the variance in such a variable. The R-square values found in this study are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Structural Model Assessment

Hypotheses	Relationship	$\beta$	T Value	P Value	Decision
H1	Consumer Incivility -> Social Media Brand Community Participation	-0.342	3.217	0.000	Supported
H2	Consumer Incivility -> Social Media Brand Representatives' Efforts	-0.450	7.976	0.000	Supported
H3	Consumer Incivility -> Social Media Brand Trust	-0.543	9.165	0.000	Supported
H4	Social Media Brand Representatives' Efforts -> Social Media Brand Community Participation	0.197	3.703	0.000	Supported
H5	Social Media Brand Community Participation -> Social Media Brand Trust	0.509	8.213	0.000	Supported

**R<sup>2</sup> Adjusted:** Social Media Brand Community Participation 33.8%, Social Media Brand Trust 53.2%

#### Assessment of the effect size of the model

As per Chin (2010), researchers should determine the effect size ( $f^2$ ), which is complementary to R-square ( $R^2$ ). Cohen's (1988)  $f^2$  values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 were interpreted as small, medium and large, respectively. Table 5 shows that the effect size for the path from consumer incivility to social media brand community participation (0.237) and consumer incivility to social media brand brand trust (0.152) was moderate as per Cohen's (1988) criteria, whereas the effect size for the path from social media representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility to social media brand community participation (0.048) was small. The effect size for the path from social media brand community participation to social media brand trust (0.393) was large.

Table 5: Effect Sizes of Latent Variables

Latent Constructs	Social Media Brand Community Participation	Social Media Brand Trust
Consumer Incivility	0.237	0.152
Social Media Brand Representatives' Efforts	0.048	
Social Media Brand Community Participation		0.393

## DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to the growth of consumer incivility cases on social media platforms, the present study was motivated to contribute to the literature on the science of consumer incivility in the digital/social media context.

### Theoretical Implications

The present study examined an unexplored research topic concerning consumer incivility in the social media context. To contribute to the body of literature, the results of the research hypotheses driven from conceptual models (H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5) are presented herein.

Firstly, the study findings support H1, suggesting that the higher the level of consumer incivility, the lower the level of social media brand community participation. To the best of our knowledge, the present study was the first to explore the impact of consumer incivility on social media brand community participation. Previous researchers have examined constructs/variables that are possible antecedents of consumer participation or engagement in an online context (Algharabat *et al.*, 2020). The findings of the present study show that in the social media context, uncivil consumer behaviour has inverse impacts on social media community participation, social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility (H2) and social media brand trust (H3). Thus, H1, H2 and H3 are supported.

Secondly, the study findings show that social media personnel's efforts to deal with consumer incivility influence social media community participation (H4), and social media community participation develops social media brand trust (H5). Thus, H4 and H5 are supported.

Finally, the present study was extended to the SOR theory, enhancing the influence of consumer incivility and social media brand representatives' efforts to deal with it on social media brand community participation, which produces positive or negative social media brand trust.

### Managerial Implications

Content/ service providers should communicate dyadic approaches in terms of focal uncivil consumer-to-consumer and consumer–firm interactions based on interactive practices. For instance, service providers should monitor consumer complaint activity separately from other consumer–firm interactions in social media. These separate social media forums co-create information exchanges between consumers and firms (Skálén *et al.*, 2015). However, Bacile *et al.* (2018) recommended that standard operating procedures (SOPs) be set for complainant consumer handling via social media. It is suggested that firms develop complaint cells to address consumer incivility in accordance with the SOPs. Uncivil consumers affect other consumers and the service providers in the social media environment. Company personnel who are tasked with dealing with uncivil consumers should be trained in business and communication tactics, such as consumer-to-consumer and employee conflict resolution, and in identifying potential uncivil clashes.

Service providers should invest in consumer database software to use consumer relationship management to identify consumer activities on social media. Technological advancements should be employed, such as artificial intelligence algorithms, sentiment analysis and the use of automated software and human talent to monitor consumer–firm interactions on social media channels. This can be a more manageable strategy for dealing with consumer incivility. Firms can trace potentially problematic consumers participating in offensive behaviours on social media platforms. Potential consumer incivility can be assumed to record and capture potentially problematic consumers; these consumers can be engaged and tracked for the purpose of managing uncivil consumers in the modern age of social media activities.

### Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In today's digital era, consumer acceptance of community participation may result in negative exposure for firms. Thus, it is important to understand consumer behaviour and develop positive engagements using intermediate digital communications (Obeidat *et al.*, 2020). The present study examined the negative impact of consumer incivility on social media brand community participation and social media brand trust and the impact of the company representatives' efforts to deal with it. Based on the study results, it is concluded that social media brand community participation is important for generating social media brand trust, which can be gained by increasing the company representatives' efforts to deal with consumer incivility on social media platforms and to reduce its negative impacts.

This study had some limitations. Firstly, it was limited to developing countries; it could thus be replicated in a developed country context with a large sample. Secondly, the study did not examine the gender (male vs female) differences in community participation in social media forums. Thirdly, the study did not explore the effects of social media brand community participation on consumer intention to engage in consumer incivility for the purpose of minimising consumer incivility intention rather than just dealing with uncivil behaviours when they have already occurred.

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