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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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REPUTATION AS RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: TOWARD A NORMATIVE ETHICS OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Paweł Piotrowski, PhD

University of the National Education Commission, Kraków, Poland

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*Corresponding author:

Paweł Piotrowski, PhD

ABSTRACT

This article reconceptualizes reputation as a moral infrastructure of digital communication rather than merely a legal asset or individual attribute. It argues that reputational harm should be understood as a disruption of relational accountability within communicative communities, generating ethical obligations of response, repair, and restoration. Drawing on early modern traditions of relational justice, particularly the framework developed by Ludovicus Babenstuber, the study reconstructs a normative model of communicative responsibility grounded in principles of restitution and social trust. It demonstrates how this relational logic continues to inform contemporary understandings of personal rights, professional accountability, and reputation management in digitally mediated environments. Through engagement with phenomena such as online harassment, misinformation, and cancel culture, the article shows that digital communication amplifies longstanding ethical tensions surrounding reputation rather than creating entirely new moral conditions. Integrating insights from moral philosophy, legal theory, and communication ethics, the study advances a relational model of reputational accountability centered on restorative practices and trust reconstruction. By reframing reputation as a shared moral resource rather than a purely strategic or individual concern, the article offers a normative framework for addressing reputational conflict in digital communication.

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INTRODUCTION

The protection of reputation has long occupied a central position in legal, moral, and social reflection. From classical theological discussions on justice and restitution to contemporary debates on digital communication, the violation of good name has been perceived not merely as an individual injury but as a disturbance of relational order within a community. Modern phenomena such as online harassment, misinformation, and cancel culture appear to introduce new dynamics to this problem, yet they may also be interpreted as intensified expressions of historically persistent mechanisms of reputational harm. This article examines the continuity between early modern moral theology and contemporary communication ethics, arguing that reputation functions as a relational good whose protection reflects enduring principles of social justice. In historical moral theology, reputation was treated as an element of justice requiring restitution when violated. The tradition of Catholic moral manuals and systematic treatises regarded the injury to another's right as generating an obligation of repair, thereby situating

communicative harm within the framework of moral responsibility. This logic is evident in the works of early modern moralists, including Ludovicus Babenstuber, whose analysis of relational rights and obligations framed social interaction as inherently limited by the rights of others (Babenstuber, 1718, pp. 594-597). Such reasoning parallels classical theological reflections on justice and defamation found in scholastic thought, particularly in the analysis of injury to reputation as a moral offense (Aquinas, 1947, II-II, qq. 72-73). Modern legal systems, although secularized in their conceptual language, preserve this relational understanding. Contemporary civil law frameworks treat reputation as part of the catalogue of personal rights whose violation entitles the injured party to restorative remedies (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 65-72; Aula and Mantere, 2008, pp. 1-15). Legal scholarship emphasizes that the dissemination of false information may constitute an infringement upon protected personal interests, thus linking communicative conduct with accountability and restitution (Tylec, 2017, pp. 109-128). This continuity suggests that the protection of reputation remains grounded in a shared normative structure, despite shifts in institutional form and

philosophical justification. This observation also resonates with contemporary communication management scholarship, which conceptualised reputation as a strategic relational asset shaped by stakeholder trust, legitimacy perceptions and governance structures (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 65-72; Aula and Mantere, 2008, pp. 1-15). The emergence of digital communication has transformed the scale and velocity of reputational harm. Studies on online interaction demonstrate that anonymity and networked dissemination amplify aggressive behaviour and diminish perceived responsibility (Suler, 2004, pp. 321-326), while theories of image restoration show that rebuilding trust requires recognition of responsibility, compensation, and behavioural change (Benoit, 1995, pp. 70-78). These insights reveal the persistence of relational dynamics that had already been recognised in earlier moral discourse, albeit within vastly different communicative environments. Despite extensive scholarship on reputation management and digital communication, little attention has been paid to the historical continuity between early modern normative theories of restitution and contemporary models of reputational accountability. This conceptual gap limits our understanding of reputation as a historically grounded relational phenomenon rather than merely a strategic communicative resource. This article therefore aims to bridge historical and contemporary perspectives by analysing the concept of relational reputation across temporal contexts. To achieve this objective, the article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How was reputation conceptualised within early modern moral theology as a relational good requiring restitution and moral accountability?

RQ2: To what extent do these normative frameworks illuminate contemporary understandings of reputational accountability in digital communication?

Employing historical-comparative, conceptual, and normative analysis, the study investigates moral-theological sources, legal theory, and communication studies to demonstrate the structural continuity of reputational responsibility. By situating modern phenomena within a *longue durée* framework, the study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between intellectual history, legal theory, and communication ethics. Within communication management scholarship, reputation is increasingly analysed as a strategic asset shaped by stakeholder perceptions, trust dynamics and accountability mechanisms. However, contemporary debates often focus on instrumental or organisational dimensions without sufficiently examining the deeper normative structures that historically governed reputational responsibility. The present study extends an earlier reconstruction of justice as a relational and communicative practice by applying this normative framework to the ethics of reputation and digital communication (Piotrowski, 2026). By situating reputation within a *longue durée* framework that integrates moral theology, legal doctrine and communication theory, this article expands the conceptual foundations of reputation management. It argues that contemporary digital reputational crises can be more adequately understood when interpreted through the lens of relational governance and restorative accountability rather than solely through reactive crisis communication strategies.

Relational Reputation in Early Modern Moral Theology: Early modern historical normative frameworks developed a

sophisticated understanding of reputation within the broader framework of justice, social order, and restitution. Far from being treated as a purely subjective or emotional matter, reputation was conceptualised as a relational good whose preservation contributed to the stability of communal life. The moral manuals and systematic treatises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries framed injury to reputation as a violation of justice, thereby placing communicative conduct within the sphere of moral obligation rather than mere etiquette. Scholastic normative reflection had already established the foundations for such an approach. Thomas Aquinas analysed defamation and detraction as violations of justice because they deprived another person of honour and social standing, goods that properly belonged to them within the moral order (Aquinas, 1947, II-II, qq. 72-73). This conceptualisation provided the groundwork for later moral theologians, who systematised these insights in pastoral and casuistic literature designed to guide confessional and social practice. In this tradition, reputation was not merely symbolic; it functioned as a condition for participation in communal and economic life, thereby acquiring quasi-juridical significance.

Manualist theology of the early modern period continued this line of thought by integrating the concept of reputational injury into broader discussions of rights and obligations. Hermann Busenbaum's widely disseminated *Medulla theologiae moralis* exemplifies the centrality of justice and restitution in Catholic moral pedagogy, and its influence on later authors, including Alphonsus Liguori, demonstrates the continuity of this tradition (Busenbaum, 1650; Vidal, 2005, pp. 112-130). These works positioned communicative wrongdoing within a structured moral taxonomy, ensuring that offences such as calumny or detraction were addressed within the same analytical framework as material injustice. Within this intellectual milieu, the writings of Ludovicus Babenstuber offer a particularly useful perspective for understanding relational responsibility. In *Ethica supernaturalis Salisburgensis sive cursus theologiae moralis*, the analysis of dominion and relational obligation articulates a moral vision in which the exercise of one's rights is limited by the rights of others and oriented toward social equilibrium (Babenstuber, 1718, pp. 594-597). Although his discussion centres on the juridical and moral dimensions of possession and obligation, its implications extend beyond material goods. The underlying principle, that harm inflicted upon another's legitimate sphere generates an obligation of restitution, provides a conceptual bridge for interpreting reputational injury as a disturbance of relational balance requiring corrective action.

Recent historiography of early modern normative traditions confirms that such reasoning reflected a broader intellectual pattern rather than an isolated doctrinal stance. Studies of Catholic casuistry and social ethics emphasise the integration of moral reasoning with social regulation, particularly in areas concerning honour, credibility, and communal trust (Tutino, 2007, pp. 45-63). Reputation functioned as a form of social capital embedded in networks of recognition, and its defence formed part of a wider effort to maintain stability within Christian society. Consequently, early modern moral theology offers more than historical background; it provides a conceptual vocabulary for analysing reputational harm as a relational phenomenon governed by justice and obligation. Twentieth-century reinterpretations of moral theology further emphasised the relational and social dimensions of responsibility, reinforcing earlier restitutional logics (Vidal,

2005, pp. 112-130). By situating communicative wrongdoing within a normative structure, this tradition anticipates contemporary theoretical approaches that interpret reputation as socially constructed yet normatively protected. The continuity between these perspectives demonstrates that the relational dimension of reputation constitutes a durable element of moral thought rather than a contingent feature of modern communication theory.

Communicative Injury and Legal Tradition: The conceptualisation of reputational harm as a form of communicative injury did not develop exclusively within theological discourse. Parallel reflections emerged within legal traditions that sought to regulate the social consequences of speech and representation. From Roman jurisprudence through canon law and into the development of common law defamation doctrine, legal systems treated injury to honour and reputation as an actionable disturbance of social order. These frameworks complemented moral-theological reasoning by providing procedural mechanisms for adjudication and restitution. Roman law articulated one of the earliest systematic treatments of reputational harm within the category of *iniuria*, a concept encompassing offences against dignity and honour. Roman legal doctrine conceptualised *iniuria* not merely as physical affront but as symbolic and verbal injury affecting social dignity (Frier and McGinn, 2004). Classical conceptions of honour and social standing were deeply embedded in civic and religious structures, reinforcing the idea that reputation functioned as a publicly recognised relational asset (Beard, North and Price, 1998; Frier and McGinn, 2004). Juristic sources and later scholarship demonstrate that the notion extended beyond physical affront to include verbal and symbolic acts capable of degrading social standing (Watson, 1985, Digest 47.10; Frier and McGinn, 2004, pp. 123-125). The edictal prohibition against actions undertaken *infamandi causa* reveals an awareness of communication as a potential instrument of injury, while the concept of *calumnia* addressed false accusations capable of producing legal and reputational damage (Harries, 2007, pp. 82-86). Modern legal historians have emphasised that these doctrines reflect an early recognition of reputation as a socially embedded good whose impairment required legal redress.

Canon law adopted and transformed Roman categories by embedding them within a moral framework concerned with communal harmony and spiritual accountability. Ecclesiastical courts frequently adjudicated cases of slander and defamation, particularly where reputational injury affected sacramental or communal participation. Historical studies show that the Church's jurisdiction over verbal offences persisted well into the early modern period, demonstrating the centrality of reputational order in maintaining ecclesiastical discipline and social cohesion (Helmholz, 2004, pp. 164-168). This juridical practice reinforced the integration of moral and legal reasoning already visible in theological literature. Early modern Catholic moral regulation operated at the intersection of legal and confessional accountability, embedding communicative responsibility within broader structures of conscience and governance (Tutino, 2007, pp. 45-63). In the secular sphere, medieval and early modern statutory developments further institutionalised the protection of reputation. English statutes such as *De Scandalis Magnatum* illustrate the political and social importance attributed to communicative stability, penalising the spread of false reports capable of disturbing relations among elites (Statutes of the Realm, 1810, pp. 216-

217). Subsequent evolution within common law distinguished between slander and libel, establishing doctrinal foundations for modern defamation law. Legal historians note that these distinctions reflected an increasing sensitivity to the medium and permanence of communicative injury, anticipating later concerns about the amplification of harm through technological reproduction (Baker, 2002, pp. 474-476). Taken together, these legal traditions demonstrate that the regulation of reputational harm has consistently been regarded as a matter of social governance rather than purely individual grievance. By embedding communicative conduct within normative and procedural structures, law and moral theology converged in their recognition of reputation as a relational asset requiring protection. This convergence underscores the historical depth of contemporary debates surrounding digital communication, suggesting that modern legal responses to misinformation and harassment represent adaptations of long-standing juridical principles rather than novel inventions.

Modern Legal Protection of Reputation: The modern legal protection of reputation reflects a transformation of earlier moral and juridical reasoning into institutionalised frameworks of civil liability and personal rights. While secular legal systems no longer ground their reasoning in theological anthropology, they continue to treat reputation as a socially embedded interest whose violation justifies restorative remedies. Contemporary legal theory emphasises that personal rights such as honour, dignity, and good name constitute non-material values essential to the functioning of individuals within social and professional networks. Their protection thus serves not only private interests but also broader societal stability. In European civil law traditions, including those influenced by continental jurisprudence, personal rights are protected through mechanisms designed to restore relational equilibrium following communicative injury. Legal scholars highlight that the dissemination of false information or defamatory statements may constitute an infringement upon legally protected interests and generate obligations of redress, including apology, retraction, or compensation (Tylec, 2017, pp. 109-128). These remedies reflect an enduring structural logic; harm to relational standing demands corrective action capable of repairing social trust.

This structural continuity becomes clearer when juxtaposed with early modern normative reasoning. In *Ethica supernaturalis* Salisburgensis sive cursus theologiae moralis, Ludovicus Babenstuber situates human action within a network of reciprocal rights and obligations, asserting that the exercise of one's rights must remain bounded by the legitimate sphere of others. His discussion of dominion articulates a normative framework in which the violation of another's rightful sphere generates a moral obligation of restitution (Babenstuber, 1718, pp. 594-597). Although expressed within the context of property and obligation, this reasoning extends conceptually to reputational harm by framing social interaction as governed by relational justice. Moreover, Babenstuber's analysis emphasises that responsibility arises from injury inflicted upon another's legitimate entitlement, thereby reinforcing the idea that wrongdoing cannot be reduced to subjective intention alone but must be assessed in light of its social consequences. Twentieth-century moral theology further developed the concept of restitutorial obligation within a relational framework (Vidal, 2005, pp. 76-79). Modern legal systems similarly evaluate defamation not solely by reference to

intention but through the measurable impact on reputation and social perception. The convergence of these perspectives suggests that contemporary doctrines preserve the structural core of earlier moral reasoning while translating it into procedural and evidentiary frameworks. Contemporary jurisprudence and legal philosophy further underline that reputation functions as a communicative asset whose protection contributes to the maintenance of public trust (Lange, Lee and Dai, 2011, pp. 153-160). The recognition of personal rights within modern legal codes illustrates how institutional mechanisms have replaced confessional or moral obligations without abandoning their relational orientation. Thus, modern legal protection of reputation can be interpreted as the secular continuation of earlier normative traditions, demonstrating continuity between theological, legal, and communicative approaches to social responsibility.

Digital Communication, Harassment, and Cancel Culture:

The emergence of digitally mediated communication has significantly altered the conditions under which reputational harm occurs, yet it has not fundamentally transformed the underlying normative structure governing such harm. Online harassment, misinformation, and cancel culture represent intensified forms of communicative injury, amplified by the scale, permanence, and immediacy of networked communication. These phenomena illustrate how technological infrastructures reshape the modalities of reputational damage while preserving its relational character. These transformations intensify reputational risk within stakeholder environments, where trust erosion may occur rapidly and at scale. Digital reputational volatility thus represents not merely communicative disruption but a governance challenge requiring structured accountability mechanisms. Research on online behaviour demonstrates that anonymity and reduced social accountability contribute to disinhibited communication, increasing the likelihood of hostile or aggressive interaction (Suler, 2004, pp. 321-326). Such dynamics enable reputational harm to be produced rapidly and disseminated widely, often without clear attribution of responsibility. Empirical studies of networked publics further suggest that social media environments significantly influence trust formation and relational perception within digitally mediated communities, reinforcing the volatility of reputational dynamics (Hampton et al., 2011, pp. 3-12). From a normative perspective, this diffusion of agency complicates the identification of moral or legal accountability, thereby weakening mechanisms of restitution that historically relied on identifiable actors and localised communities. When analysed through a stakeholder lens, the amplification of hostile communication undermines relational trust and increases reputational fragility within interconnected publics. Governance structures capable of monitoring and responding to such dynamics become essential components of contemporary communication management.

The dissemination of misinformation further complicates reputational protection. Studies in communication theory and media research indicate that false or misleading information can persist within digital ecosystems even after correction, undermining trust and shaping public perception in enduring ways (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010, pp. 303-330). This persistence parallels earlier concerns surrounding calumny and slander, though magnified by algorithmic amplification and global reach. Contemporary legal scholarship therefore increasingly addresses misinformation within the framework of personal rights and reputational harm, demonstrating the continuing

relevance of juridical remedies for communicative injury. Cancel culture represents an additional transformation of reputational sanction, characterised by collective withdrawal of recognition or cooperation toward individuals perceived to have violated normative expectations. Normative analyses interpret this phenomenon as a form of social sanctioning in which public call-outs and ostracism can prompt third parties with oversight to impose professional or institutional consequences (Saint-Louis, 2021). While differing in scale and speed, this mechanism echoes earlier practices of communal exclusion and reputational discipline, revealing a continuity in the social function of honour and credibility as regulatory tools. Theoretical models of reputation restoration further highlight the persistence of relational logic across historical contexts. Image restoration theory proposes that rebuilding trust requires acknowledgment of responsibility, corrective action, and demonstrable behavioural change (Benoit, 1995, pp. 70-78). These principles resonate with earlier moral-theological formulations concerning restitutive obligation, where restitution was interpreted not merely as moral repair but as a credibility-restoring communicative act embedded in relational order (Piotrowski, 2025, pp. 142-144). In early modern moral thought, the violation of another's legitimate sphere generated a duty to repair relational equilibrium, a concept articulated in Babenstuber's analysis of reciprocal obligation within social interaction (Babenstuber, 1718, *Tractatus VII, Disputatio III*, pp. 594-597). The structural similarity between these frameworks underscores the durability of relational justice as a guiding principle across normative traditions. Taken together, contemporary communicative phenomena illustrate not the emergence of entirely new ethical dilemmas but the reconfiguration of longstanding tensions between expression, responsibility, and social order. Digital environments intensify the stakes of reputational harm while simultaneously challenging traditional mechanisms of accountability and restoration. By situating these developments within a *longue durée* perspective, it becomes evident that modern communication ethics continues to grapple with issues already recognised in theological and legal traditions, confirming the enduring relevance of relational approaches to reputation. Consequently, digital reputational crises may be more productively understood as governance phenomena embedded in stakeholder trust networks rather than as isolated communication breakdowns. The analysis developed above carries several implications for communication management practice. First, reputational harm should not be framed exclusively as a crisis event requiring reactive response, but as a disruption of relational equilibrium within stakeholder networks. This shift encourages organisations to move beyond short-term image repair strategies toward sustained accountability practices that acknowledge harm and prioritise trust reconstruction.

Second, the historical logic of restitution provides a normative template for contemporary restorative communication. This structural parallel between restitution and corrective communication has been analysed in detail in recent comparative research on *Tractatus VII* of Ludovicus Babenstuber (Piotrowski, 2025, pp. 143-145). In digitally mediated environments where misinformation and reputational attacks circulate rapidly, organisations benefit from proactive transparency, explicit assumption of responsibility where appropriate, and demonstrable corrective action. Reputation governance thus requires structures that institutionalise ethical communication rather than relying solely on reputational risk

management. Third, the concept of relational justice suggests that communicative accountability must extend beyond legal compliance. In environments shaped by cancel culture and networked publics, reputational legitimacy increasingly depends on perceived moral coherence between declared values and communicative conduct (Wæraas and Ihlen, 2009, pp. 300-304). Communication managers should therefore integrate ethical reflexivity into strategic planning, recognising that reputational resilience is rooted in trust-producing relationships rather than purely reputational branding techniques.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to argue that the protection of reputation is neither an exclusively modern concern nor merely a legal construct emerging from contemporary communication environments. Rather, it represents a historically persistent normative problem situated at the intersection of moral theology, legal regulation, and social communication. By tracing conceptual continuities between early modern moral reasoning and present-day communicative dynamics, the analysis has shown that reputation functions as a relational good whose preservation contributes to the maintenance of social order. Early modern normative frameworks framed reputational harm within the logic of justice and restitution, embedding communicative responsibility in a broader moral structure governing relations between persons. The work of authors such as Ludovicus Babenstuber illustrates how injury to another's legitimate sphere generated obligations of repair grounded in relational equilibrium (Babenstuber, 1718, Tractatus VII, Disputatio III, pp. 594-597). This framework was paralleled by legal traditions that developed procedural mechanisms for addressing defamation and communicative injury, thereby institutionalising principles already articulated within moral discourse. Modern legal systems continue to reflect this relational orientation, albeit in secularised form. The recognition of personal rights and the availability of restorative remedies indicate that reputational harm remains understood as socially consequential rather than purely subjective. Contemporary communication research further confirms that reputational dynamics operate through networks of perception and trust, reinforcing the idea that relational evaluation constitutes a central dimension of social interaction (Suler, 2004, pp. 321-326).

Digital communication has intensified these dynamics by increasing the speed, scale, and persistence of reputational harm. Online harassment, misinformation, and cancel culture demonstrate how technological mediation amplifies long-standing tensions between expressive freedom and social responsibility. Yet the structural continuity of these tensions suggests that contemporary challenges do not represent an epistemic rupture but rather a transformation of enduring ethical concerns. Theories of reputation restoration and accountability illustrate that the obligation to repair relational damage remains a core normative expectation across historical contexts (Benoit, 1995, pp. 70-78). The article's principal contribution lies in articulating a *longue durée* interpretation of reputation as a relational good, bridging historical moral theology with contemporary communication ethics. By integrating theological, legal, and media-theoretical perspectives, the study highlights the durability of relational justice as an analytical framework for understanding

reputational conflict. Future research may build upon this interdisciplinary foundation by exploring empirical dimensions of digital reputational harm or by further examining the interaction between moral traditions and modern governance structures in shaping communicative accountability. In the field of communication management, this perspective invites a reconsideration of reputational crises not merely as media events but as governance challenges embedded in relational systems. By recovering the historical grammar of restitution and accountability, the study provides a conceptual resource for understanding reputational management as an ethical practice oriented toward relational repair rather than symbolic containment. For practitioners and scholars alike, the *longue durée* approach proposed here underscores that digital reputational volatility does not eliminate normative expectations of responsibility. Instead, it intensifies the need for structured accountability, transparent communicative processes and restorative engagement. Future research may further explore how organisations operationalise relational justice within crisis communication protocols and stakeholder management strategies.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Biography

Paweł Piotrowski, PhD, is a researcher working at the intersection of communication ethics, reputation studies and normative theories of accountability. His work explores how trust, credibility and reputational responsibility are shaped within digitally mediated communication environments. Drawing on ethical theory, legal traditions and the history of normative thought, he develops relational approaches to accountability and restorative responses to reputational harm in contemporary communication systems.

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