

Not radical enough? A netnographic study on corporate conflict management strategies in online communities

ABSTRACT

A recent development in the online consumer community literature is the investigation of community conflicts, i.e. hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions within the same community. While existing research has so far concentrated on the antecedents and outcomes of internal conflicts, this study focuses on the question of how such conflicts can be managed. Based on a netnography of 14 firm-hosted communities, we offer a first conceptualisation of corporate conflict management strategies in online consumption communities. In particular, our results reveal five main styles of conflict management strategies: censorship, counter-argument, initiation, laissez-faire, and deferral. By drawing on theories from the management, psychology and communications literature, we compare scholarly recommendations with current practice and provide respective implications for future research.

Keywords: *conflict management; online community; consumer-to-consumer communication*

Track: *E-marketing & Digital Marketing*

INTRODUCTION

Online consumption communities refer to groups of consumers who express mutual sentiments and commitment to a particular brand or consumption activity within a virtual setting (Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). The positive aspects of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions in online communities are well researched. Consumers derive social (e.g. making friends) as well as functional (e.g. gaining product information) benefits, which in turn increases their engagement and stimulates the co-creation of value (Brodie et al., 2013). However, the impact of negative C2C interactions in these communities has been largely neglected in the literature.

For the purpose of this paper, hostile C2C interactions in online consumption communities will be referred to as 'C2C conflicts'. It has been suggested that C2C conflicts constitute of aggressive and deliberate acts of communication conducted by an individual or a group of individuals using electronic forms of contact (Menesini and Nocentini, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2008). A report by the PEW institute of online research further shows that the amount of aggressive online interactions experienced by adults, such as name-calling, embarrassment, physical threats and long-term harassment, has grown steadily in the past years (PEW, 2014). Extensive psychological research on schoolchildren and, to a lesser degree, adolescents demonstrates the negative effect of interpersonal conflicts on social well-being, life satisfaction, performance and emotional security (Kowalski et al., 2014; Privitera, 2009). In the online consumer community literature, both Rivers & Noret (2010) and Ewing et al. (2013) confirm that an increasing proportion of conflicts are associated with people's (branded) possessions and consumption practices. While studies have shown that C2C conflicts negatively impact organisations' reputation and credibility (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013), little is known about how such conflicts can be managed. Matzat and Rooks (2014) for instance note that empirically-informed strategies on how to manage conflicts in online communities remain a research gap. Indeed, existing studies in the online marketing literature are largely limited to anecdotal evidence or conceptual recommendations (Godes et al., 2005; Lee, 2005; Sibai et al., 2015). Consequently, the present article offers a first insight into conflict management strategies by conducting a six-month observation of current corporate practice in online communities. We synthesise these findings with conflict management strategies suggested in the management, psychology and communications literature, and outline avenues for future research.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

1. Consumer Conflicts in Online Communities

McGrath (1993) defines consumer conflicts as disagreements between individuals based on systematically different inclination structures in relation to their preferences and positions. In the context of conflicts in online communities, authors have introduced a range of terms to define the topic. Hickman and Ward (2007) for instance coined the term 'trash talk', while others used 'flaming' to describe the expression of negative feelings in online interactions (Castella et al., 2000). Lee (2005) suggests that the blurring of geographic boundaries in online forums produce the foundations for new forms of flaming which have an adverse impact on interpersonal relationships.

Most authors propose consumer conflicts to originate in oppositional loyalty and brand rivalry where brand community members adopt a negative perspective of brand competitors (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Importantly, C2C conflicts are different to consumers' negative word-of-mouth and complaints, which - unlike C2C conflicts - originate in a product or service failure and result in consumers

warning others against purchasing these products/services and being compensated for them (Breitsohl et al., 2014).

Previous studies have found that conflicts in online communities may occur between supporters of the same brand in the form of normative pressure and related resistance among community members (Algesheimer et al., 2005) as well as between supporters of oppositional brands (Ewing et al., 2013). The former involves sources of conflict whereby members of the community contest particular behaviours, practices and expertise (de Vlack, 2007) and/or challenge the approach (idealist or pragmatist) that should be adopted in decision-making processes within the community (Hemetsberger, 2006). The latter relates to conflicts with members from rival communities based on cultural and social meanings of the brand and their righteous/ridiculed consumption practices (Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke, 2006; Luedicke et al., 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, conflicts may relate to the *symbolic* (i.e. what the brand stands for) as well as *functional aspects* (e.g. what it enables a consumer to do) of a brand. Sources of conflicts can be both *temporary events* (e.g. a scandal related to a corporate brand owner or celebrity endorser) and *constant conditions* (e.g. a carefully nurtured, long-term brand image) (Ewing et al., 2013). Husemann et al. (2015) found that consumer conflicts can be divided into two groups: *routinized* and *transgressive*. The findings reveal that the former positively contributes to the collective mission, whereas the latter tend to have an effect on the community's well-being and are counterproductive.

Hickman and Ward (2007) found that the strength of social identification with the brand against rival brands leads to a sense of outrage, negative WOM about oppositional brands and feelings of pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users (Schadenfreude). Similarly, a number of studies demonstrate a correlation between a positively differentiated group identity and active engagement in trash-talking about rival brand community members (Beal et al., 2001; Ruscher and Hammer, 1996; Schnake and Ruscher, 1998). Colliander and Wien (2013) found that 'trash talk' causes identity-related conflicts between brand communities and represents a key driver of defensive behaviours that consumers adopt in order to counter negative information about the company, which could also reinforce existing conflicts and act as a source of new conflicts.

To sum up, the examined studies have predominantly focused on understanding the essence of conflicts, the sources of consumer conflicts and their evolvement over time and their impact on community members and their loyalty to the brand and/or the brand community. However, the question that remains is in what ways companies can manage C2C conflicts in online communities.

2. Conflict Management Theories

2.1. Theories from the Management literature

A seminal study in the conflict management literature is Rahim's model (1983) who differentiates between intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup conflicts which are dependent on the levels at which the conflict occurs. Out of these research on interpersonal conflict and various corresponding management styles was emphasised in the management literature, and re-occurring strategies of conflict handling behaviour are observed – integrating, compromising, obliging, dominating and avoiding (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Thomas, 1976, 1992; Van de Vliert & Hordijk, 1989). In relation to this, a cross-cultural study by Munduate et al. (1997) on interpersonal conflicts found that *dominating* is the least used conflict management style in two individualistic cultures – America and Spain. Other studies, however, propose that conflict management is dependent on hierarchical positions and the relationship(s) between the conflicting parties (Lee, 1990; Philips and

Cheston, 1979). For instance, conflict handling in organisational behaviour is subject to whether the conflict is with a superior, a subordinate or a peer. Nonetheless, existing management literature on conflict moderation has mainly focused on explaining practical accounts of moderation in online consumption communities such as dos and don'ts (Fournier & Lee, 2009; McWilliam, 2000; Williams, 1999; Williams & Cothrel, 2000).

2.2. Theories from the Psychology literature

Sibai et al. (2015) initiate a robust conceptualisation of social control in online consumption communities. The study takes the view that online consumption communities are characterised by heterogeneous and diverse groups of consumers which require social control in the forms of governance structures and moderation practices. Furthermore, Sibai et al. (2015) investigate the moderation strategies such as interaction initiation, interaction maintenance, and interaction termination in accordance with three governance structures – market, hierarchy and clan. However, the necessity to further examine and conceptualise conflict management theories has been demonstrated by Ndubisi (2011). The research findings reveal that pre-emptive conflict management and care and information reliability in the Malaysian healthcare sector display a positive relationship with customer satisfaction, which indirectly contributes to customer loyalty. In other words, the study argues that proactive and mindful management of a number of sources of conflicts improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, other studies have also found support for the strong association between organisational reliability (care and information reliability) characterised by transforming sources of conflict into grounds for improvement and the reduction of the likelihood of larger future conflicts (Butler and Gray, 2006; Weick et al., 1999).

2.3. Theories from the Communications literature

Past research focused on conflict behaviour intervention styles and identified three categories: integrative/supportive, avoidance/passive and distributive/confrontational (Munduate & Dorado, 1998; Thomas, 1976). Moreover, Bottger and Yetton (1988) divided conflict management theories into negative and positive conflict management. Negative conflict management is defined as opinion differences resolution by coin-tossing and/or voting. In contrast, positive conflict management emphasises logical argument evaluation, investigation of alternatives and knowledge examination. Likewise, Zornoza et al. (2002) investigate conflict management styles (negative vs positive) in face-to-face and computer-mediated communications. Their findings reveal that positive conflict management is strongly associated with Face-to-face, whereas Computer-mediated communication produces high levels of negative conflict management. Another approach to understanding moderation styles in online communities is reward and punishment. Matzat and Rooks (2014) draw a comparison between the acceptance and effectiveness of positive (reward) and negative (punishment) conflict management behaviours. The results demonstrate that incentives which represent direct forms of control are perceived by participants as ineffective and unacceptable, whereas indirect conflict management is seen as both acceptable and effective due to normative obligations. Moreover, the authors found a direct relationship between negative moderation and unacceptable behaviour.

2.4. Theories from other disciplines

Godes (2005) identifies four generic social interactions management strategies: (1) Observer – the firm engages in observations to obtain information and insights about its customers; (2) Moderator – the company fosters social and consumer interactions to allow information exchanges; (3) Mediator – the firm takes ownership of the information and its dissemination;

and (4) Participant – direct involvement in consumer-to-consumer interactions through the establishment of word-of-mouth. Moreover, moderators were found to have a crucial role in mitigating problems, improving the quality of discussion and intervening in the debates (Smith and Wales, 2000). From a political perspective, Wright (2006) differentiates between content moderation and interactive moderation in online policy-making forums. On the one hand, human-based content moderation represents a prominent model of moderation which is characterised by absence of feedback to both the institution and the individuals who engage in discussions. On the other hand, (inter)active moderation involves interventions and two-way communication. In addition, the moderator encourages responses and involvement, moderates the content of the discussions and maintains civility. In the most extensive study on managing social online conflicts to date, Lee (2005) puts forward three main categories of conflict management – competitive-dominating (e.g. flaming), avoiding (i.e. withdrawal) and cooperative-integrating (e.g. apologising, mediating, joking). Additionally, the study found similarities between the cooperative-integrating style (e.g. apologising, joking, normalising) and conflict management strategies explained in social and psychological literature. As a consequence, the study emphasises the importance for online forum moderators to devise mechanisms for managing conflicts in online communities.

RESEARCH METHOD AND RESULTS

To address the lack of literature on conflict management in online communities, netnography was implemented in order to find out to what extent existing theories from other research disciplines fit to an online consumption community context. Netnography, which represents ethnography adapted to suit studying online communities, is used due to (1) demand for research in conflict management in online consumption communities as well as (2) its ability to provide the grounds for more naturalistic and unobtrusive research compared to interviews and focus groups (Kozinets, 2002). In relation, 14 online consumption communities were observed for a period of 6 months. Furthermore, because participants tend to alter/constrain certain socially undesirable behaviour as a result of being observed (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), a non-participatory approach is selected. To conceptualise online consumption communities, Breitsohl's et al. (2015) taxonomy was adopted to include communities hosted by companies which focus on a single brand (e.g. Facebook fanpage for Nike shoes) as well as those focusing on a consumption activity in general (e.g. sponsored running forums). The study focused on three main communication platforms - Facebook, YouTube and independent public forums.

The first round of data analysis included the identification of 82 independent conflict episodes and a subsequent independent categorisation by three researchers based on the three aforementioned research themes. The categorisation was then triangulated so that the researchers independently analysed all conflicts, subsequently discussed their interpretations and excluded areas of disagreement, leading to a final set of 76 observed conflict episodes and 3,912 independent comments made. A corporate conflict management activity was identified in 28 of these episodes. In particular, 5 main management strategies were observed, as illustrated in Table 1.

<i>Style</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Sample comment</i>
Censorship	Moderators removed content	<i>"This comment has been removed due to bad language used"</i>
Counter-argument	Moderators respond to brand aggressor	Original comment: <i>"No-one cares about the Pro12 [Rugby] league"</i> Moderator: <i>"Apart from players, coaches, fans, employees, and, you know, the respective Unions..."</i>
Initiation	Moderators initiate conflict	<i>"So, the new I-phone bends then does it...? Anyone wanting to get something off their chest?"</i>
Laissez-faire	No action taken by moderator	/
Deferral	Moderators post non-engaging comments aiming to move the conflict to a non-public channel	<i>"Thanks for your feedback. Would you like our customer service team to address your concerns?"</i>

Table 1. Conflict management strategies

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study contributes to the marketing literature by proposing five online conflict management strategies to handle C2C conflicts, as illustrated in Figure 1. Previous authors have already called for more research on this topic (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006), and our findings offer a first insight by using a netnographic analysis of current management practice. By synthesising our findings with existing conflict management theories from various fields of research, we advance the existing online marketing literature in several aspects.

First, we extend research from Matzat & Rooks (2014) who have proposed to emphasise normative obligations and relational interests as forms of conflict moderation. The study recommends that future research focuses on more precise differentiation between conflict management strategies, their effectiveness and underlying mechanisms. In turn, we offer the conflict management strategies of deferral, laissez-faire and initiation that expand Matzat & Rook's (2014) investigation of negative and positive conflict moderation styles.

Second, we identified censorship as one of the five conflict management strategies which is characterised by content removal. This style is relatable to Wright's content moderation (2006) which suggests lack of accountability and/or feedback when human-based content moderation and alternations are conducted. However, while Coleman (2001) argues that failure to provide explanations about the removal of comments exacerbates the situation, Matzat and Rooks (2014) demonstrate the ineffectiveness of similar forms of direct control. Empirical investigations in the form of experimental designs for instance would be a fruitful future undertaking.

Third, consumers attribute social responsibility to companies and blame (negative) events to the community moderator (Johnson and Lowe, 2015), which hints towards the possibility of laissez-faire being the least effective conflict management strategy. In support of this rationale, Gray and Williams (2012) link laissez-faire management strategy with conflict avoidance, which leads to inefficacy and community member withdrawal. The latter is

discussed in Lee's typology of conflict management behaviours (2005) and involves temporary or permanent withdrawal from the online forum. Future research should verify whether this is the case in consumer-hosted communities as well, where social ties are supposed to be stronger and less commerce-oriented (Breitsohl et al., 2015).

Finally, we encourage future research to investigate the conflict management strategies of counter-argument and initiation due to the lack of research in previous literature. Yet, relatively reliable findings are offered by Sibai et al. (2015) who suggest that moderation strategies can be purposefully implemented by social control systems in online consumption communities in the forms of interaction initiation (called *initiation* in our study) and interaction maintenance (*counter-argument*). In a similar vein, the strategy of deferral has not received substantial attention in previous academic discussions. Various studies, however, discuss the conflict resolution concept/negative conflict management (Kottler, 1994; de Vlack 2007; and Zoranza et al., 2002), which takes the view that conflicts are destructive and negative and so emphasise the termination of the conflict. Therefore, we suggest that a deeper study on the conflict management strategy of deferral.

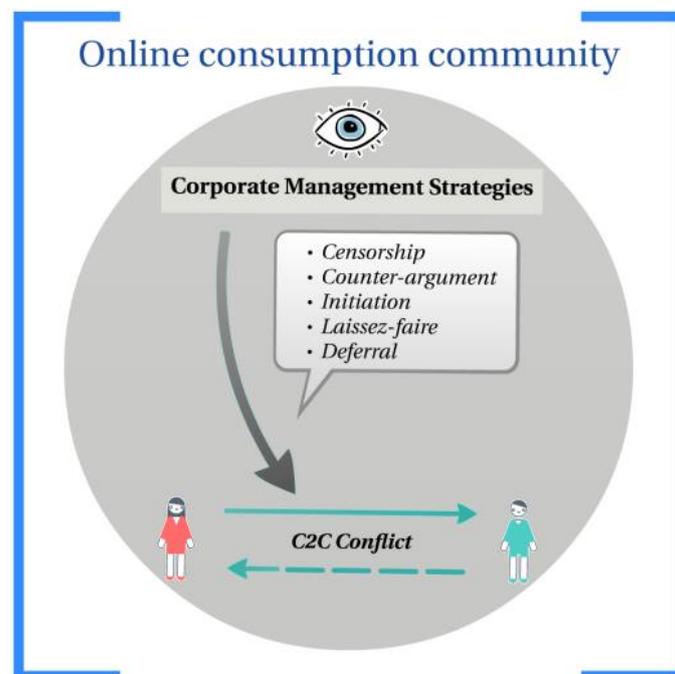


Figure 1. Corporate Conflict Management Strategies

From a managerial perspective, it is revealed that managing C2C conflicts online is essential since consumers expect companies to intervene with conflicts. Moreover, we suggest that managing C2C conflicts may be part of a corporation's social responsibility when considering the negative effects of conflicts on social well-being. In addition, conflict management allows online practitioners to control information dissemination, enhance social and consumption interactions and stimulate consumers' electronic word-of-mouth. In accord with this, managers will be offered the opportunity to increase member engagement, create enduring online consumption communities and foster loyalty to the community.

Two limitations need to be mentioned as well. First, the duration of observation provided here (6 month) does not match the ethnographic depths of studies conducted over the period of several years (e.g. Husemann et al., 2015). Moreover, the observed communities mostly resolved around high involvement, identity-central product categories (mobile phones, fashion, sports) and may not be generalisable to communities for low-involvement, commodity-type products.

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