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Dineva, Denitsa Petrova and Breitsohl, J. and Garrod, Brian (2017) Corporate conflict management on social media brand fan pages. *Journal of Marketing Management* . pp. 1-20. ISSN 0267-257X.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2017.1329225>

### Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/62075/>

### Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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## **Title**

Corporate conflict management on social media brand fan pages

**Authors' biographical notes:**

*Corresponding author:* Miss Denitsa Petrova Dineva

**Affiliation:** Aberystwyth University, UK

**Postal address:** 3.13 Rheidol Building  
Llanbadarn Fawr  
Aberystwyth  
SY23 3AL

**Phone:** +447534619888

**Email:** dpd5@aber.ac.uk

**Biographical note:** Miss Denitsa Dineva is a PhD candidate in Marketing at Aberystwyth Business School, Aberystwyth University (UK). Her research interests include online marketing, consumer-to-consumer communications and corporate conflict management.

*Second co-author:* Dr Jan Christian Breitsohl

**Affiliation:** Aberystwyth University, UK

**Postal address:** 3.37 Rheidol Building  
Llanbadarn Fawr  
Aberystwyth  
SY23 3AL

**Phone:** +44 (0)1970 62 2506

**Email:** [jab99@aber.ac.uk](mailto:jab99@aber.ac.uk)

**Biographical note:** Dr Jan Breitsohl is a Lecturer in Marketing Psychology at Aberystwyth Business School, Aberystwyth University (UK). His academic interests focus on online consumer behaviour, and in particular negative communication and corporate response strategies.

*Third co-author:* Professor Brian Garrod

**Affiliation:** Aberystwyth University, UK

**Postal address:** 2.44 Rheidol Building

Llanbadarn Fawr

Aberystwyth

SY233AL

**Phone:** +44 (0)1970 62 1638

**Email:** [bgg@aber.ac.uk](mailto:bgg@aber.ac.uk)

**Biographical note:** Professor Brian Garrod is Professor of Tourism Management at Aberystwyth Business School, Aberystwyth University (UK). His research interests span all aspects of tourism but focus particularly on sustainable tourism, ecotourism and heritage tourism. He has written widely in the area of tourism management, including seven text books, and he is Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Destination Marketing & Management.

**Abstract:** A recent development in the literature on social-media brand fan pages is the investigation of hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions. Existing research has thus far concentrated on the reasons why consumers engage in such online conflicts. In comparison, this study focuses on how online conflicts can be best managed. Based on direct observations of six brand fan pages on Facebook, we offer a first conceptualisation of corporate conflict management strategies. Our results reveal five main conflict-management strategies: non-engaging, censoring, bolstering, informing and pacifying. By drawing on existing suggestions from the marketing literature, we provide managerial implications and suggest avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** *conflict resolution, brand community, corporate governance, social media, consumer aggression*

**Summary statement of contribution:**

The paper contributes to the marketing literature by investigating how companies manage consumer-to-consumer conflicts on social-media brand fan pages. Our analysis reveals five different types of conflict management which we synthesise with suggestions from the marketing literature, offering a first conceptualisation of this neglected area of research. We thus provide social-media marketers with an overview of current managerial practice for this growing and harmful online phenomenon.

**Disclosure statement:** No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

## **Introduction**

The positive aspects of social-media brand fan pages are well researched. Consumers derive social as well as functional benefits, which increases their engagement (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman & Pihlström, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013) and stimulates the co-creation of value (Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Likewise, companies have the opportunity to gain insights on consumer behaviour and to release interactive promotional content (Kim, Choi, Qualls & Han, 2010; Quinton, 2013; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). The negative aspects of social-media brand fan pages are, however, considerably less well-known. Studies have so far focused mainly on conflicts between consumers and brands/businesses (C2B), including studies on consumers punishing brands for unethical conduct (Grappi, Romani & Bagozzi, 2013; Haberstroh, Orth, Hoffmann & Brunk, 2015), as well as consumer complaints about unsatisfactory service/product experiences (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). A more recent area of research interest in the social-media literature is the investigation of conflict between consumers, a phenomenon generally referred to as consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conflict (Gebauer, Füller & Pezzeri, 2013; Hickman & Ward, 2007; Husemann, Ladstaetter & Luedicke, 2015). This type of online conflict describes a scenario in which one consumer verbally attacks another consumer in relation to a brand. This is the key focus of this article.

We argue that companies hosting social-media brand fan pages need to consider how to manage these C2C conflicts, given recent findings on their destructive impact. Fisk et al. (2010), for instance, show that conflicts between consumers negatively impact upon an organisation's reputation and credibility. Likewise, Wang,

Yu and Wei (2012) demonstrate that C2C conflicts on social-media brand fan pages are likely to have a detrimental effect on consumers' purchase intentions.

Despite these findings, the marketing literature on the corporate management of C2C conflicts in online environments remains limited. The central focus of existing studies is not on corporate conflict management strategies and these were drawn upon in a conceptual manner or treated as an analytical sub-theme (Husemann et al., 2015; Sibai, de Valck, Farrell & Rudd, 2015). Indeed, Matzat and Rooks (2014) recently noted that empirically informed research is lacking. To help address this gap, we report the findings of direct observations of six companies' strategies for managing C2C conflicts on their social-media brand fan pages.

Our results serve to advance marketing theory by offering an empirically informed taxonomy comprising five corporate conflict management strategies. Through this paper, marketing managers can gain insight into current corporate practices in managing hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions on their social-media brand fan pages. This will enable them to adopt suitable conflict management strategies in their own organisations.

## **Literature Review**

### *Social Media Brand Fan Pages*

Companies create brand fan pages on social media in order to unite brand fans through enabling them to share their enthusiasm about the brand (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). Moreover, social-media brand fan pages (SMBFs) focus on a single brand and are hosted by a company on a social media channel (Breitsohl, Kunz & Dowell, 2015; Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014a). SMBFs are easily



accessible, open to the public and aim to facilitate communication with and among consumers (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zúniga, 2010). While Laroche et al. (2012) suggest that social-media brand fan pages are similar to other types of online consumption communities (OCCs) in that they facilitate a shared purpose, rituals and traditions, Habibi, Laroche and Richard (2014a, b) outline several differences. First, the structure of the traditional OCC is hierarchical, i.e. based on member status and ranking (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). SMBFs are, in contrast, more 'flat', because of the absence of such ranking or status systems. Second, because SMBFs are larger in size and easily accessible by anyone, social relations between consumers are likely to be weaker. Third, consumer content in brand fan pages tends to be more succinct as opposed to long textual narratives in other types of OCCs (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). In comparison to consumer-hosted OCCs, Zaglia (2013) emphasises that SMBFs embody a weaker form of social bonding due to a lack of ideological depth and homogeneous consumers. Breitsohl et al. (2015) further suggest that SMBFs are more commercially-oriented when compared to consumer-hosted OCCs, which are often driven by non-monetary, egalitarian values.

#### *Consumer-to-Consumer Conflicts in the Social Media*

Consumer-to-consumer conflicts in the social media can be defined as aggressive and deliberate act(s) of communication conducted by an individual or a group of individuals using electronic forms of contact (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). Such conflicts may occur between supporters of rival brands due to oppositional loyalty (Ewing, Wigstaff & Powell, 2013; Popp, Germelmann & Jung, 2016), as well as between supporters of the same brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005) due to different consumer perceptions of a brand and its values. Ewing et al. (2013) emphasise that C2C conflicts are likely to cause emotional distress to those actively

involved in the conflict as well as those who merely observe it. Negative emotional experiences in SMBFs are detrimental to consumers' social bonding and may prevent them from returning to a brand fan page (Adjei, Nowlin & Ang, 2016).

Importantly, C2C conflicts differ from C2B (consumer-to-business) conflicts in several aspects. C2B conflicts usually relate to some form of corporate misconduct or product/service failure, due to which a consumer complains, spreads negative word-of-mouth or initiates an online protest (Grappi et al., 2013; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Here, the consumers' main goal is to harm the company, warn other consumers, receive reimbursement or bring irresponsible corporate practice to an end (Breitsohl et al., 2014, Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2013). In contrast, C2C conflicts involve the intention of one consumer to harm another by means of verbal provocation, harassment or threat (Ewing et al., 2013). Moreover, the source of the C2C conflict is not necessarily corporate misconduct or product/service failure, so consumers have no intention to engage in a dialogue with the company.

### *Corporate Conflict Management in the Marketing Literature*

Following Ensari, Camden-Anders and Schlaerth (2016), corporate conflict management can be defined as practices that companies use to intervene in C2C conflicts. In what follows, we review studies from the marketing literature on corporate conflict management strategies in online environments. Since the literature on SMBFs in this context is limited, we further include studies from other types of online consumption communities, because these may also be applied in social-media brand fan pages.

One of the first studies on corporate management in the social media was a study by Godes et al. (2005), which suggested that a company needs to manage C2C interactions along a continuum of passive observation to active participation. According to the authors, a company should carefully choose between different degrees of involvement depending on the context and content of an interaction episode. While the authors did not explicitly refer to C2C conflicts, their call for more research encouraged later studies on C2C conflict management.

Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) were among the first to propose that those hosting online communities need to develop forms of governance to manage consumer conflicts. The authors conducted a netnography of nine consumer-hosted online brand communities and concluded that the most common governing approach comprised of articulating expectations for acceptable behaviour. An alternative conceptual suggestion was made in an earlier study by de Valck (2007). While this netnography focused on consumer conflicts in a company-hosted OCC, the author recommended to split conflicting parties into sub-communities in order to manage the conflicts identified during her observations.

In one of the first empirical studies to specifically focus on the management aspects of C2C conflicts, Wiertz, Mathwick, de Ruyter and Dellaert (2010) investigated how consumers solve conflicts among themselves in a consumer-hosted online community. Conducting two surveys with community members, they identified two forms of conflict management, which they called normative and meritocratic governance. Normative governance refers to norms that emerge through social interactions and are enforced through peer pressure. These norms take the form of explicit and implicit guidelines of appropriate behaviour, similar to those suggested by Schau et al. (2009). Meritocratic governance, in contrast, involves rewarding

community members who help solve conflicts by giving them special status within an OCC.

A later conceptual paper by Sibai et al. (2015), which focused on governance strategies for companies that host online consumption communities, further expands these suggestions. The authors argue that the heterogeneity of OCCs requires managers to exercise control through governance structures and moderation practices, and proposing two strategies. First, interaction maintenance involves explicating roles, formalising rules, monitoring interactions, rewarding positive behaviours and sanctioning negative behaviours. For instance, explicating roles refers to a company providing consumers with positions that have the explicit responsibility to manage C2C conflicts. Similarly, formalising rules specifies rights consumers may exercise in future incidents. Monitoring refers to keeping records of behaviour in order to understand the causes of the conflict, while rewarding or sanctioning behaviour represents a set of actions that incentivise positive behaviour or disincentivise negative behaviour. The second main strategy, interaction termination, represents a last resort approach where companies seeks to end interactions that have become dysfunctional either by ignoring members or by permanently excluding them from the OCC.

The most extensive study on C2C conflicts to date has been conducted by Husemann et al. (2015), consisting of a four-year netnography on a non-for-profit, consumer-hosted OCC. Mirroring propositions made in Wiertz et al. (2010) and Sibai et al. (2015), their findings empirically verify the managerial use of exclusion and social norms to address conflicts among consumers. According to Husemann et al. (2015), excluding consumers from the OCC was rarely used since it was incongruent with the democratic, open-minded character of the OCC in question. More

commonly, the community moderator would highlight that a conflict violated the community's social norms, while giving those involved the opportunity to justify their conduct and potentially further elaborate the existing community rules.

To sum up, the scarce marketing literature on managing C2C conflicts in online environments suggests strategies that fall into a reactive-proactive conflict management paradigm. Some scholars report reactive approaches to conflict management where managerial action involved changing status rankings or member exclusion after a conflict had occurred (Husemann et al., 2015; Wiertz et al., 2010). Others report a more proactive approach consisting of monitoring consumer interactions, splitting up communities into sub-groups, and explicating norms and community rules in order to manage C2C conflicts (de Valck, 2007; Schau et al., 2009). Importantly, these studies were mostly conceptual in nature or merely reflected upon corporate management strategies as a sub-theme rather than it being at the centre of their investigation. Moreover, most of the reported strategies are based on observations from consumer-hosted OCCs, which, as mentioned before, differ to company-hosted social-media brand fan pages. Therefore, the present study concentrates on an empirical investigation of SMBFs, as will be outlined in detail in the next section.

## **Method**

To explore the strategies that companies use in managing C2C conflicts on their social-media brand fan pages, this paper followed Phillips and Broderick (2014) in employing direct observations. The method represents systematic recording of online data in natural settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). In comparison to interviews and focus groups, direct observations allow for more naturalistic and

unobtrusive research (Patton, 2004), which was considered critical for the present conduct. Indeed, past studies have shown that participants tend to alter or constrain socially undesirable behaviour as a result of being observed (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Marquis & Filiatrault, 2002). Following others (Cova & White, 2010; Phillips & Broderick, 2014), the first author therefore assumed the role of a non-participating observer in order to prevent influencing either C2C conflict behaviour or the strategies used by the companies involved to manage this behaviour when it took place.

The data were collected using a non-probability sampling approach, in which six SMBFs were selected according to the following criteria: (1) the brand fan page had a high frequency of consumer communication activity; (2) there was an ongoing content contribution from the brand fan page's moderators; and (3) the author was personally familiar with the brands and their context (Kozinets, 2002). For the purposes of homogeneity (see Breitsohl et al., 2015), all brand fan pages were hosted on Facebook and consisted of company-owned and actively moderated official brand fan pages. To increase the relevance for marketing managers, brands from five different industries were chosen: retailing, sports clothing, fast food, beverages, and telecommunications. Brief descriptions of each brand fan page are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1** Sample brand fan pages and descriptions

<b>Brand fan page</b>	<b>Description</b>
Tesco	<p>Retail and consumer merchandise</p> <p>A brand fan page on which the consumers discuss cooking recipes, and Tesco's products and promotions.</p> <p><a href="https://www.facebook.com/tesco/">https://www.facebook.com/tesco/</a></p> <p><i>2,124,543 members</i></p>
Nike	<p>Sports apparel</p> <p>A brand fan page on which consumer content focuses on Nike's celebrity endorsers and sports apparel.</p> <p><a href="https://www.facebook.com/nike/">https://www.facebook.com/nike/</a></p> <p><i>25,169,280 members</i></p>
Adidas	<p>Sports apparel</p> <p>A brand fan page on which consumers discuss Adidas' advertisements and sports apparel.</p> <p><a href="https://www.facebook.com/adidasUK/">https://www.facebook.com/adidasUK/</a></p> <p><i>24,641,672 members</i></p>
Burger King	<p>Fast food</p> <p>A brand fan page on which consumer content is based</p>

on discussing Burger King's meal deals and new products, and comparing these with its competitors.

<https://www.facebook.com/burgerkinguk/>

*240,211 members*

Costa Coffee

Beverages

A brand fan page on which consumers discuss Costa's drinks and food variety and their preparation.

<https://www.facebook.com/CostaCoffee/>

*1,466,305 members*

Vodafone

Telecommunication

A brand fan page on which consumer content focuses on discussing service issues and product failures.

<https://www.facebook.com/vodafoneUK/>

*937,136 members*

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Observations took place between January 2016 and July 2016, and C2C conflict episodes were recorded manually. A total of 271 such conflict episodes were identified. Names of all conflict parties were changed to ensure full anonymity. To analyse the data, we followed the hybrid approach in thematic analysis as suggested by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). The first author developed a coding manual to include broad code categories derived from the reviewed literature, and subsequently from the data set after several rounds of reading and re-reading the recorded conflict episodes. The codes were then compared in terms of applicability and reliability. The final step was connecting the codes to build themes, reflecting the identified conflict management strategies. In developing the themes, the authors undertook a semantic approach, whereby the themes were identified at a strictly explicit level (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2014). As such, this approach to theme development focuses on surface meanings of the data, rather than engaging in an exploration of the underlying, implicit aspects of social phenomena. To ensure consistency in data interpretation and to enhance the study's validity (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008), we further used investigator triangulation. In doing so, the second author independently analysed the data in the same fashion as the first author. Afterwards, areas of disagreement were re-introduced to the analytical process and subsequently discussed. After the exclusion of 14 conflict episodes, the final dataset comprised 257 recorded episodes.

## **Results**

The analysis yielded five corporate conflict management strategies: non-engaging, censoring, bolstering, informing and pacifying. For the majority of conflict episodes

(n=233), companies chose the non-engagement strategy. Censoring was used for four conflict episodes by two companies. The remaining strategies were used in 20 episodes by one company. Bolstering was used during 12, informing during six and pacifying during two conflict episodes. Detailed findings for each conflict management strategy are outlined below.

### *Non-engaging*

We define non-engaging as a conflict management strategy where the company does not take any action to moderate a conflict. In other words, the strategy involves disregarding C2C conflicts and remaining silent. In doing so, the company avoids resolving the conflict. A typical conflict episode where a company chose a non-engagement strategy is highlighted in the following example taken from Tesco's brand fan page. In this example, two consumers engage in a tense interaction regarding their differing preferences of retailers:

Rachel: I hate Tesco's Sophie, try online Ocado, Morrisons, Asda! Brilliant! X

Darren: If you hate tesco what are you doing on their facebook page

Rachel: Giving my opinion! Your Problem?

In total, we identified 132 consumer-to-consumer conflict episodes on Tesco's brand fan page. The company chose the non-engaging strategy in all instances, irrespective of the level of aggressiveness, the length of the conflict episode and the number of consumers involved.

Similarly, we found that Adidas followed a non-engaging strategy for all identified conflict episodes (n=9). In the following example, a consumer (Rob) disagrees with

Nike's football apparel promotional video and another consumer (Carl) replies with a provocative comment, leading to an intensification of the conflict:

Rob: Back to slavery? Smfh!!!!!! Dislike!!!!!! I would have never agreed to do this.

Carl: Lol dislike, what a joker.

Rob: Carl go suck your mum fucktard.

Adidas' non-engagement strategy seems somewhat surprising considering their publicly stated 'house rules', which request consumers not to post any content that may be threatening, harassing, abusive or otherwise inflammatory to others. Moreover, the company proclaims that such content will be deleted. Arguably, the example above violates these house rules.

Nike also exclusively managed C2C conflict episodes (n= 58) via a non-engaging strategy. In the excerpt below, two consumers engage in a conflict following Nike's dismissal of the celebrity endorser Manny Pacquiao:

Melinda: No many no Nike for me! Freedom of speech has been forgotten! Shame on you, money over values smdh regardless personal business shouldn't mix, stupid move Nike

Jamie: And shut up about freedom of speech. No one arrested him. Uneducated moron.

Melinda: Jamie lol with that mouth even I want to apologize to your mother! (face with tears of joy emoji)

Jamie: Aww the psychopath made a funny. Careful now, your bible says not to talk back to men.

A final example of a non-engaging approach to conflict management is Burger King, choosing this strategy during all C2C conflict episodes on their brand fan page (n=24). In the following example, a consumer expresses his perceptions of Burger King's current company positioning, which is met by aggressive comments from two other consumers:

Oliver: Burger King used to be cool 10 years ago... Now it sucks worse than a lady Gaga's fashion sense.

Alfie: Then why are you here (face with tears of joy emoji)

Oliver: Because it popped up on my news feed from a friend of mine sharing the post (neutral face emoji)

Amelia: Yet you felt the need to waste everyone else's time. Who cares about being cool anyway it's about taste.

Despite the fact that the conflict evolved around Burger King's company image, the company remained silent and did not take any action to manage the C2C conflict.

### *Censoring*

Censoring is defined in this study as a conflict management strategy where the company permanently removes content. In the following example, a consumer (Mark) posts a comment containing bad language which was aimed at an employee from a specific Costa Coffee store. In reply, another consumer (Lydia) disagrees with Mark's comment, causing further aggressive remarks:

Mark: Costa coffee is now hiring at Aberdeen central! Are you an Eastern European bitch with no personality and no concern for the customer? Are you sultry and stupid? Are you slow in everything? Then we have plenty of jobs for you!!!

Lydia: What a sad life you must have (frowning face emoji)

Mark: You obviously have no idea about what good service is! Stupid cow!

The whole conflict episode was later removed by Costa. No consumers, including those involved in the conflict, appeared to notice or request the deletion of any of these comments.

In the following example, Costa removed a comment without making reference to their conduct. Here, a consumer (Paulina) uses strong language possibly to attract the attention of other consumers. Two other consumers remark on Paulina's first and hostile comment. A second comment by Paulina, however, was deleted by Costa:

Paulina: Fuck you Costa. CAFE NERO FTW. Costa staff are so rude

Costa: Sorry we have upset you Paulina. What happened? - Adrian

*[deleted comment from Paulina]*

Costa: Not good. Where and when did this happen? - Adrian

Lois: She's so rude

Marta: Wow.

In Vodafone's Facebook brand fan page, we found two episodes during which censoring was used. Slightly different to Costa Coffee, Vodafone provided an explanation to the consumers regarding the removal of their comments:

Hi Jonathan,

We removed your previous posts due to your language.

Continuing to break the House rules (Found here: <http://vdfn.co/ZCgO40>) will result in your posts being restricted.

If there is anything we can help with, email our team here: [vdfn.co/1MEeijn](mailto:vdfn.co/1MEeijn).

Thanks,

Lisa

Further to removing comments, Vodafone made reference to their house rules, gave a warning and made the offer to move the communication to a non-public company channel.

### *Bolstering*

Bolstering is a conflict management strategy where the company posts a comment that affirms a brand defender. Following Colliander and Wien (2013), a brand defender is a customer who defends a company/ brand against a brand aggressor who attacks the company/brand. Of the three verbal conflict management strategies, bolstering represented the most frequently implemented. The essence of the strategy is the positive reinforcement of comments made by the brand defenders. In the following examples, a brand aggressor (Lee) posts an aggressive comment

concerning Costa Coffee, which is followed by three separate comments defending the brand:

Lee: Pay u tax u greedy basterds

Martin: That's Starbucks

Vivien: Costa are a British company and do pay their taxes.

Luke: Yep Starbucks are the tax dodgers not Costa

Costa: Haha thanks guys! They've pretty much said what I was going to say Lee  
(grimacing face emoji) ^Alex

In this example, Costa's employee affirms the brand defenders by thanking them for their comments. The brand aggressor is further addressed directly by name. This strategy was also found in a second conflict episode where a brand aggressor uses strong language to comment about a supposedly unfair company practice. Again, a brand defender responds, and Costa uses a bolstering strategy:

Alison: Its the principle of the matter you absolute idiots! It does not matter if its 30p or 1p its a rip off and we shouldnt stand for it, costa are a massive company that surly doesnt need to con honest punters out of a cup of coffee ffs! All these idiots claiming its only 30p are the sort of idiots that pay cowboy builders three times the rate, absolute roasters how can you ever accept being ripped off? Regardless of by how much? Mental cases! !

Jordan: 3 shots.. With less milk in the large. 2 shots with milk in the regular.. Get it?  
(smiling face with open mouth and cold sweat emoji)

Costa: \*\*\*High 5\*\*\* Jordan!

Here, Costa praises the brand defender's involvement and understanding of the company products. In contrast to the previous instance, here the company does not directly engage with the brand aggressor and limits the response to simply acknowledging the brand defender through a verbalised hand gesture. On other occasions, Costa's employees also used a heart emoji to further complement their support for the brand defender.

It must also be noted that Costa occasionally chose bolstering in episodes where brand defenders' comments used bad language and swearwords, as illustrated below:

Edward: Costa Coffee it is rubbish coffee

Nick: Fuck Costa

Nick: Scamming bastards

Lily: Idiots, when they made the latte, or Capp, or flat white it would have filled/nearly over filled the cup,..... Guess what, foam does not last forever! Get a grip

Costa: I didn't even want to throw the issue of aerated milk losing its volume, but yes this is exactly correct! People seem to struggle with the fact a drink now filled to the brim suddenly fits in a smaller cup right to the lip! Haha (smiley emoji) ^Alex

Here, Costa's employee not only agrees with the brand defender but makes an additional comment about 'people', which is arguably a critical opinion aimed at brand aggressors on their brand fan page.

### *Informing*

We define informing as a conflict management strategy where the company posts corporate/product information to rectify an allegedly incorrect consumer comment.



The strategy was observed in instances where a consumer posts supposedly incorrect information which led to the development of a C2C conflict episode. The following excerpt shows a comment about the ingredients of a product from Costa Coffee, and an aggressive reply, leading the company to rectify the supposedly incorrect information about the ingredient:

Gemma: I bet it contains about 20 spoons of sugar!

Gemma: I won't be drinking them because it's far too much sugar for me, I'm sure they are very nice but people should just be aware of what they are drinking it's not fair to mislead people into thinking it's just fruit and ice really

Tom: Gemma people moan too much about being a diabetic with about being too much sugar in the items how can workers help it its just there job to do what they have to do if you don't like it tough.

Costa: There is no added sugar Gemma. It's just fruit blended with ice... The fruit pot is blended with ice and apple/banana pureé. I can assure you we are not misleading anyone! ^Alex

The same strategy was also chosen in relation to a consumer's comment about Costa Coffee's product prices, which led another consumer to post a provocative remark:

Sian: I love how you're proud £10 can buy two toasties on your premises... £10 for a grilled bit of bread and a little bit of filling. Can get an entire loaf for 50p, with £10 you could feed a lot of people! Two toasties for £10 what an absolute joke...

Joe: What do you expect?? It's a cafe!!!!!!!!!!!!!!( not a supermarket

Sian: Other cafes do just fine not charging such extortionate amounts. What just coz it says Costa on the sign, ridiculous prices are ok??? Shame some people are so

conditioned to branding when I guarantee there's at least 5 family run cafes in your town, with better tasting food, better sourced food, freshly made not pre-packaged, for a much better value for money...

Costa: You'd get more than 2 toasties for £10 Sian... It was just a round number so 2 of you can enjoy with a bit extra (smiley emoji)

Again, Costa aimed to provide information in order to resolve the conflict. As noted before, an emoji (in the form of a smiley) is added to complement the message and possibly to indicate the friendly intent of the comment.

### *Pacifying*

Pacifying refers to a company posting a comment that asks one or more consumers to adjust their communication behaviour or style. Pacifying thereby involves the company displaying an element of authority which may also contain the underlying possibility that the company takes further action if compliance is not achieved. In the present context, pacifying is demonstrated by asking consumers to adjust their communication style, as found on Costa's brand fan page. In the following extract, a consumer (Liam) responds to another (Jane) by using strong language and attacking the company as well as Jane, leading to an authoritative response from Costa's employee:

Jane: Very impressed with Costa's responses to all these messages. Anyone else would have given up after the first reply but Alex has answered every question. This has had the opposite effect for me....so impressed, I am changing to Costa. Well done Alex. If these people that complain would rather have an overflowing cup of boiling coffee to burn themselves with, let them have it!

Liam: First of all Alex is not Alex, he is sitting in Pakistan call centre, answering Facebook post between being a totally useless cunt for some mobile phone companies customer services, secondly what the fuck would anyone want to buy shit tasting coffee from a rip of company that pays its staff minimum wage, avoids paying taxes, and quite frankly are the scourge of this country.

Easiest thing, vote with your feet and never entry their premises or purchase their shit.

If you really need to visit one of those establishments, please please use a Pret a Manger, who were the ONLY company of this sort that gave away food and drink in London during 7/7 bombings.

Costa: Happy to take the comments Liam but can we watch the language please. I can assure you I'm sitting in our head office in Dunstable, Bedfordshire. You also seem to be misinformed regarding tax, we're a British company (part of the Whitbread family) so we pay our tax like we should, you might be getting us confused with some other coffee shop brands. We've also been paying all of our staff (not just those 25+) the living wage since Oct last year. Hope this all helps (smiley emoji)

^Alex

The pacifying strategy is exemplified in the first sentence, where the company requests compliance from the brand aggressor. This is then followed by rectifying supposedly false information (i.e. informing strategy) and an emoji, possibly to move the interaction in a more rational direction and to appease the brand aggressor.

We further observed an incident where Costa asked several parties to comply with their request. The conflict episode started with a comment about a product and a rival brand, which led to an aggressive reply by another consumer:

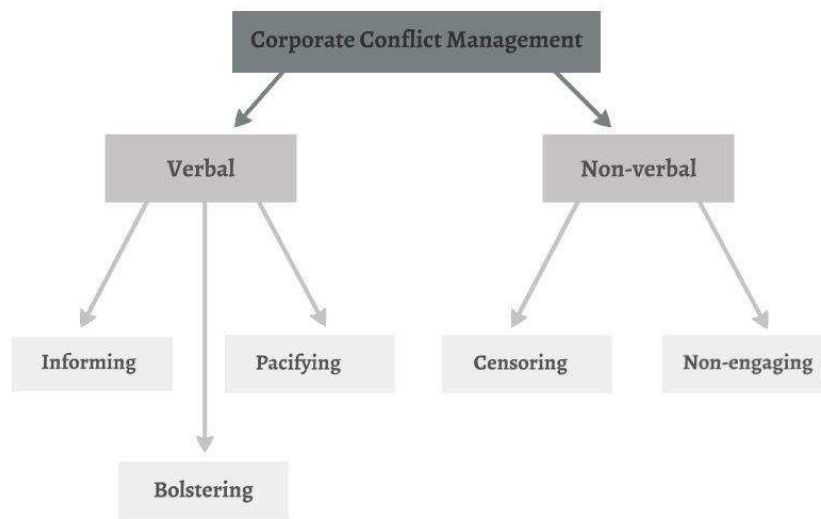
Collin: The worst thing is when you ask for a large cappuccino and they fill it up with about 4-5 sips of coffee and the rest of the cup is froth. You cannot drink froth. You tight money grabbing company. If there was a Starbucks near by I would go there instead! Why are you this way

Joanne: I think you should get a life Collin instead of complaining about bloody froth!!!!!!!!!!!! He's just doing his job. Pathetic!!!!!!

Costa: Now let's try to be nice to each other (smiley emoji) I've passed your feedback onto our Ops Excellence team. If you ever have any further issues or specific feedback do let us know on [talkcosta@whitbread.com](mailto:talkcosta@whitbread.com) ^Alex

Here, Costa's employee asks both parties to change their communication behaviour. Consistent with the previous example, an emoji was added to the message. Rather than rectifying information, the employee chose to refer the conflict parties to a different communication channel in case there was a need for further interaction. Figure 1 summarises the observed strategies, which are further categorised in verbal and non-verbal forms.

**Figure 1** Corporate conflict management strategies on social-media brand fan pages



## **Discussion**

In this study, we aimed to explore corporate conflict management strategies on social-media brand fan pages. To date, this has been an under-researched topic in the marketing literature (Husemann et al., 2015; Sibai et al., 2015; Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013). The importance of investigating this topic is based on past work, which suggests that C2C conflicts on SMBFs can harm a company's reputation as well as consumers' purchase intentions (Fisk et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Our findings offer a first insight of current management practice. We reveal five conflict management strategies that help advance current theory and guide marketing managers.

### *Theoretical contribution*

Our findings contribute to marketing research in a number of ways. We extend the emerging body of work on managing consumers' online conflicts (Husemann et al., 2015; Sibai et al., 2015) by observing corporate practice in six Facebook brand fan pages. In contrast with prior research suggesting that consumers manage conflicts between themselves, we demonstrate that firms are also engaging in conflict management behaviours. As a consequence, we offer the marketing literature a first empirically-informed taxonomy of corporate conflict management strategies in the social media. Furthermore, our research contributes to the literature on consumer behaviour by providing a clearer understanding of an unfavourable type of consumer behaviour in the social media that requires the firm's involvement (Heinonen, 2011). In relation to this, we further outline several specific contributions.

First, we found that the most frequently used communication strategy in response to C2C conflicts was 'non-engaging'. This is surprising, as it contradicts suggestions in the marketing literature, which seem to predominantly suggest the necessity of active interference with C2C conflicts (Godes et al., 2005; Sibai et al., 2015; Wiertz et al., 2010). The non-engaging strategy does however find support in other research disciplines. Work in sociology by Lee (2005), for instance, discusses 'avoidance' as comprising of activities that aim to ignore the conflict, including making jokes, being silent, bringing in third parties or withdrawing. Likewise, management studies (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 2002) suggest that avoiding conflict management is a common strategy to respond to conflicts. However, the effectiveness of managing conflicts in this fashion is put in question in organisational behaviour studies. For instance, Gray and Williams (2012) demonstrate that non-engagement can have a detrimental impact on organisations in terms of inefficient decision-making and resistance to change.

Second, our findings revealed that the second most-often-implemented strategy to manage C2C conflicts was 'bolstering', a concept novel to the marketing literature. Bolstering aims to affirm brand defenders in a conflict situation, and can relate to concepts of consumer empowerment and advocacy (Pires, Stanton & Rita, 2006; Cova & Pace, 2006). This may further link to Sibai et al.'s (2015) concept of interaction maintenance, describing a strategy where consumers are assigned with roles and responsibilities to resolve a conflict. An interesting observation in this regard was that companies' utilised bolstering even when brand defenders used strong or inappropriate language. This may imply that the company strives for relationship development with key consumers who defend and advocate for the brand regardless of their communication tone and/or content (Ang, 2011).

A third contribution of our study was the observation of the so-far unexplored concept of 'informing'. This involves rectifying incorrect customer information and may relate to consumers' expectation of companies to provide credible information as part of their service provision in online environments (Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, & Algesheimer, 2009). Our findings show that companies choose informing as a reactive strategy in SMBFs. Studies on computer-mediated conflicts from the organisational psychology literature may further corroborate our identified strategy. Zornoza, Ripoll and Peiró (2002), for instance, demonstrate that emphasis on logical arguments and providing accurate information is associated with constructively managing conflicts. Likewise, Tjosvold, Wong and Cheng (2014) suggest that conflict management strategies should be based on information-sharing and the facilitation of 'open-minded' discussions, which consist of inviting different opinions.

Fourth, we found two further strategies that companies use to manage C2C conflicts on social-media brand fan pages: 'censoring' and 'pacifying'. Censoring is a strategy that involves removing consumers' content and has already been identified in marketing studies by Husemann et al. (2015) and Sibai et al. (2015). Both studies put forward the sanctioning of unacceptable behaviour through member exclusion as a conflict management strategy. Censorship has also been highlighted in political research on government-run online forums (Wright, 2006) and studies in the IT literature on online health communities (Matzat & Rooks, 2014). The infrequent use of this strategy during our observations may possibly be due to companies' concern of repercussions when violating consumers' perceived right for freedom of expression in online environments (Cohen-Almagor, 2012; Mosteller & Mathwick, 2014).



While censorship may be a strategy which goes unnoticed by consumers, 'pacifying' is a more overt strategy, since it involves directly addressing the aggressor and often demands a change in behaviour. A similar strategy has been identified in sociology, where Lee's (2005) competitive-dominating strategy describes requesting compliance as a means to manage conflicts between users of an online news forum. Other streams of literature have also identified pacifying as a conflict management strategy, referring to bureaucratic control mechanisms (Bijlsma-Frankema & Koopman, 2004), distributive (Munduate & Dorado, 1998) obliging (Rahim, 2002) and forcing (Blake & Mouton, 1964) conflict management. Some scholars, however, warn that this strategy may be damaging to the social interactions between consumers (Mele, 2011). Interesting in this regard is our observation that companies' tend to use 'smiley' emoticons to accompany pacifying posts. It can be speculated that emoticons are used as a complementary linguistic tool to somewhat lessen the authoritative tone (Lo, 2008).

### *Managerial Implications*

Successful brand fan pages on social media depend on actively contributing consumers who deliberately create online content (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). However, certain consumer behaviours, e.g. consumer-to-consumer conflicts, may have negative implications for the company. In particular, when online conflicts occur, consumers tend to blame the corporate host (Johnson & Lowe, 2015). It is therefore vital for companies to decide upon which managerial approach is best to use in different circumstances. Our study highlights five strategies that are currently used on social-media brand fan pages. In contrast to consumer-hosted brand fan pages, where consumers manage conflicts between themselves, the strategies we put forward represent hierarchical interventions made by a corporate host. Hence,

managers of SMBFs are expected to use their superior position in order to resolve C2C conflicts, which are seen as detrimental to the brand fan page.

The most common conflict management strategy implemented across the here investigated industries was non-engaging. Companies used this strategy independently of the length of the conflict or the members' requests for intervention. While this can be cost-effective in the short run, research has shown that conflicts lead to less consumer discussions (Rahim, 2002), consumer exit (Lee, 2005) and decrease in brand trust (Laroche et al., 2012). Not managing C2C conflicts in SMBFs may be perceived by consumers as lack of corporate social responsibility, which negatively impacts consumer attitudes and behaviours towards the company (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006).

A more pro-active strategy companies may consider was bolstering. By verbally reinforcing their brand defenders, company-consumer relationships are manifested and increase the likelihood of future brand defending behaviour (Miller, Fabian & Lin, 2009). In fact, online community members prefer rewarding desirable behaviour over authoritative methods of conflict management (Matzat & Rooks, 2014). Moreover, encouraging brand defence is likely to help companies protect their brand during corporate scandals on social media. Bolstering brand defenders in SMBFs increases these consumers' attachment to the brand, which translates into consumers' defending behaviours to insulate the brand image from other consumers' negative opinions (Hassan & Ariño, 2016).

To maintain and enhance corporate credibility, online practitioners may further like to choose informing as conflict management strategy. Providing reliable information can help to avoid customer misunderstandings or misinterpretations of corporate or

product information. Similar to bolstering, an informing strategy may be appropriate when managing consumer conflicts that result from negative corporate events. During corporate scandals, consumers appreciate corporate efforts to provide rectifying information (Chung, 2015). At the same time, informing as conflict management strategy provides managers with the positive side effect of being able to enhance customer knowledge and promote positive product/ service aspects. This is particularly important in the social media context, where consumers deliberately seek and join firm-hosted brand fan pages to gain product or service-related information (Carlson, Suter & Brown, 2008).

Our findings further propose that sometimes companies are best off by using their authority to censor or pacify C2C conflicts. Asserting authority through censoring content or pacifying the discussion may be most appropriate when conflicts escalate. However, in case of censoring, managers need to be careful not to violate consumers sense of free expression, which can backfire and cause community exit if consumers notice it (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh & Kim, 2008). This is especially pronounced on Facebook brand fan pages, where community exit involves a simple action of un-clicking the 'Like' button. Similarly, pacifying can be perceived as violating the cooperative nature of co-creating communities (Gebauer et al., 2013). We recommend managers to consider complementing pacifying with smiley emoticons, as was sometimes found in our observations, to help minimise the authoritative tone of this particular strategy.

In sum, until research provides further empirical evidence for these strategies, managers should closely monitor their social-media brand fan pages before deciding on an appropriate strategy. This is important since the selected strategy not only

affects the parties actively involved in the conflict, but also bystanders, i.e. those 'observing' the conflict as well as any corporate response.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study set out to explore corporate conflict management on social-media brand fan pages, and several limitations need to be noted. First, the duration of our observations (seven months) does not match the online ethnographic depths of some studies conducted over the period of several years (e.g. Croft, 2013; Husemann et al., 2015). Second, our data was exclusively based on Facebook. Investigations of other social media channels (e.g. Twitter, YouTube) and in different cultural contexts may reveal different managerial approaches to manage C2C conflicts. For instance, future research may investigate whether, considering the volume of Tweets, more automated and centralised approaches to conflict management may be used in such environments. Third, some censoring might have gone unnoticed during our observations. Although the authors engaged in back-tracking brand fan page content, recordings were not done on a permanent, 24-hour basis, and some content might have been removed without being noticed (Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu & MacFadden, 2011).

We further recommend several avenues for future research. The literature would benefit from research to test the effectiveness of the conflict management strategies identified here. While the purpose of this study was to observe current corporate practice, there is a need for (quasi-) experimental studies that compare how each strategy affects consumer outcome variables such as community re-visiting intentions and attitudes towards a company.

Furthermore, investigating whether managerial strategies should be adopted to the varying levels of conflict severity seems a worthwhile research undertaking. For instance, Husemann et al. (2015) demonstrate that some forms of conflict can be beneficial to the development of social norms in an online community, a process the authors describe as 'routinized conflicts'. Their study suggests that a long-term investigation, perhaps using interpretative phenomenology, may offer cultural nuances of conflicts on social-media brand fan pages which our analytical approach was not able to capture.

Finally, this study calls for more research that focuses on the consumer perspective on C2C conflicts on social-media brand fan pages. So far, little is known about the different types of aggressive communication consumers use, and whether some may be perceived as friendly teasing (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009), while others may be regarded as purposeful embarrassment (Wooten, 2006). Similarly, research is needed on the different roles that consumers may take on during a C2C conflict, since the marketing literature seems to be limited so far to those of brand aggressors and defenders (Colliander & Wien, 2013). Conclusions drawn from these investigations may allow companies to make a better judgement on whether a conflict occurs in good or ill humour, and whether consumers are likely to occupy roles (e.g. as impartial mediators) that help resolve a conflict.

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**Total word count:** 7,047 words