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**Conflict in online consumption communities:**

**A systematic literature review and directions for future research**

**Structured Abstract**

**Purpose**: this study sets out to examine: (1) how have conflicts been conceptualized and operationalized within the context of online consumption communities? (2) what are the main conflict management, resolution strategies, and frameworks that have been identified? and (3) what are the gaps in the relevant body of work in terms of theoretical and methodological dimensions, and what implications do they have for future research.

**Design/methodology/approach**: our study adopts a systematic and multidisciplinary literature review of online conflicts. Following a descriptive and thematic content analysis, it examines seventy-nine peer-reviewed scholarly articles of the last 20 years within six scientific databases.

**Findings**: We propose a literature-based conceptualization of online conflicts and a multi-level conflict resolution matrix based on the different governance structures and social control mechanisms investigated in extant research.

**Originality**: The originality of this study lies in the integrative and interdisciplinary view of online conflict in global consumption communities.

**Keywords**

Online conflict, online consumption communities, online conflict management, online conflict resolution.

**1. Introduction**

Online consumer communities transcend geography (Muiz and O’Guinn, 2001) and increasingly motivate people with shared brand consciousness to join them (Al Khasawneh et al., 2021). On one hand, their global reach and multicultural membership allows for rich brand related information, meanings and practices to be exchanged or even originated (Hakala et al., 2017; Närvänen et al., 2018; Schau et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz, 2015). On the other hand, such plurality of nationalities and cultural backgrounds is destined to invite conflict, which in turn impacts both consumers’ and brands’ lives (Cooper et al., 2019). Conflicts can emerge both at the interaction of consumers and brands (examples include the #Ihateryanair community or the #PullUpOrShutUp Instagram movement that provides consumers with a platform to make brands accountable for their actions) and between groups of consumers. An example of the latter includes the recent polarized international consumer response to Gillette’s campaign “The Best a Men Can Be”, which caused large division in public opinion around representation of toxic masculinity (Abitbol, 2019), and resulted in 1.6m dislikes on Youtube (compared to 800k likes) and a public apology by the brand.

While some of these conflicts could inspire creativity, offer solutions (e.g. Nike sales jumped by 31% despite #boycottNike response to Kaepernick ad) or trigger consumers’ supportive anger and desire to cooperate with the company (Antonetti et al., 2020), they could as well damage the coherence of the community and global positioning of the brand, trigger consumers’ vindictive anger against the brand (Antonetti et al., 2020), or even put its survival at risk (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Essamri, Heinonen, 2018, McKechnie, & Winklhofer, 2019). Thus, understanding online conflicts and being able to effectively resolve them in today’s globalized communicative landscape becomes of high importance to marketers and beyond.

Online conflicts have become a widely studied topic under the area of consumption communities (Husemann et al., 2015; Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz, 2015). A number of such studies looks into managing conflict in business or brand-organized communities (Dineva et al., 2019; Hakala et al., 2017; Luedicke et al., 2017), while others focus on consumer-organized communities (Coulson & Shaw, 2013; Graham, 2007; Matzat & Rooks, 2014; Sibai et al., 2014). Their attention lies on how conflicts could affect the community’s resources, and how to operate so that most benefits could be drawn from the survival of the online community (Dessart et al., 2015). Existing studies, however, tend to focus on mono-dimensional types of online conflicts, such as cyberbullying (Ranney et al., 2020) and online hate (Bliuc et al., 2018), and seem to approach conflict resolution with theoretical disparity. Although Husemann & Luedicke (2013) attempt to group and conceptualize a broader range of consumption conflicts, their study is limited in considering only one discipline (i.e. consumer culture). Notwithstanding their contribution, limiting a literature review to specific disciplines might hinder the ability to generate new knowledge and create barriers in broadening research horizons.

In order to facilitate production of new knowledge in this area of research and the development of future conceptual and empirical studies, a coherent conceptual foundation of conflicts in online consumer communities is called for (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013; Sibai, de Valck, et al., 2015). Our study, therefore, adopts a multidisciplinary perspective to conduct a systematic literature review of conflicts in online consumer communities, aiming to answer the following research questions: (1) How have conflicts been conceptualized and operationalized within the context of online consumption communities? (2) What are the main conflict management, resolution strategies, and frameworks that have been identified? and (3) What are the gaps in the relevant body of work in terms of theoretical and methodological dimensions, and what implications do they have for future research.

Our contribution lies in the development of an interdisciplinary conceptualization of conflicts in online consumption communities, and the proposition of a conflict resolution matrix. This answers Närvänen et al.'s (2018) call for research on conflict management strategies in diverse forms of consumption communities that operate under different governance structures (Sibai, de Valck, et al., 2015) and require appropriate types of social control. This can advance the conceptual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation from a multi-disciplinary perspective that transcends national boundaries. It can assist administrators and community managers in fostering constructive communication and building strong brand-consumer bonds by overseeing conflicts with the use of well-designed structures and rules, and enable practitioners to identify conflicts worthwhile following and attempting to resolve, against those which should be viewed as unhealthy and have to be strategically avoided.

The paper begins by presenting the review design and structure. Our findings are then discussed, reporting on a descriptive content analysis, followed by a thorough thematic analysis organized around the three research questions. We conclude by highlighting future research avenues and proposing specific research questions that could shape the research agenda going forward.

**2. Review design and structure**

To answer our research questions, we adopt a narrative systematic review approach, which enables us to locate and synthesize the existing research in a systematic and well-defined structure, following established standards and procedures that allow replication (Marabelli & Newell, 2014). In doing this, we locate knowledge gaps in the extant literature, propose comprehensive directions for future research and build a conflict resolution matrix. We follow the review process of Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart (2003) and Thorpe, Holt, Macpherson, and Pittaway (2005) that is widely applied in similar studies in the field (Alves et al., 2016). This approach offers us a detailed, step by step research design that accounts for a holistic and replicable examination of the relevant academic literature.

***2.1. Data collection and screening criteria for retrieving the articles under review***

Six online academic databases were used to gather the relevant articles for examination: Business Source Premier (EBSCO), SCOPUS, ProQuest Social Science Premier Collection, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Science Direct, which provide a comprehensive coverage of studies in business, management, marketing, and social science discipline. The publication type was limited to peer-reviewed journals only, and the document type was limited to scholarly articles, in order to identify rigorous research which had followed a double-blind review process and is likely to have the highest impact on the discipline (Li, He, & Sousa, 2017; Malinen, 2015; Nadkarni, 2016). The language was limited to English. No limitations on specific dates of publication were applied, in order to comprehensively capture how the study of the phenomenon has evolved throughout time. Two databases – EBSCO and Science Direct – limited the search to papers published after 1990 and 2000, respectively. The discipline was not limited to social sciences, as the aim of the systematic review was to collect both evidence-based studies and conceptual studies on the topic of online conflicts in consumption communities from different research perspectives and to discern how different research disciplines conceptualized it. As showcased in Table 1, a refined list of search strings was developed in consultation with subject experts and an experienced librarian, based on the review questions and objective of this study. We grouped the keywords and search terms together into three themes informed by our research objectives: 1) Types of conflict, 2) Managing conflict, and 3) Context of conflict.

(Insert Table 1)

This study applied four search rounds to capture the most relevant studies. First, each of the three groups of keywords in Table 1 was entered into each database separately (using Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT with the advanced search option). After that, the three themes of keywords were included in one single search to only identify works at the intersection of the three keyword themes. However, two databases - JSTOR and Science Direct - did not allow a search of the full keyword strings, due to a limitation on maximum number of keywords permitted in a single search. Consequently, a modified keyword string version was used for these databases, retaining only the most powerful keywords that allowed maximum coverage of the literature (Appendix A includes full and modified keyword strings). The keywords were used to search in the whole article.

The search was conducted in the beginning of January 2020 resulting in 1,565 publications in total. The authors adapted the screening and selection process from Li, He, & Sousa (2017), Siebels & Zu Knyphausen-Aufseß (2012) and Thorpe et al. (2005). First, duplicate publications across different databases were excluded to minimize bias in sample results. Second, the title, abstract and keywords were reviewed in light of two inclusion criteria: (1) the conflicts needed to emerge within an online consumption community context; and (2) the focus of the community or the topics discussed need to be related to consumption, production, or a combination of these i.e., prosumption (Tian, Shen, & Chen, 2017; Xie, Bagozzi, & Troye, 2008). Following this process, 70 candidate papers were selected for a further full-text read. Among these, 20 unclear manuscripts were discussed among the authors to ensure that they were not purposely excluded as a result of self-selection bias. The full-text read and co-authors discussion resulted in the exclusion of 30 papers, with a final sample of 40 relevant manuscripts to be included in the review.

Due to the manageable sample size, each selected paper was subject to cross-referencing. We conducted a backward search of each reference list to identify relevant articles that were neglected in the applied string search on selected databases (in line with Kubacki et al., 2015). This strategy broadened the search scope and allowed us to track the original reasoning and theory behind each study. Using the same systematic review stages as before, a further 27 articles were identified at this stage. Lastly, we decided to purposefully include twelve conference papers and academic book chapters in the analysis (Adams et al., 2017), which helped us understand the current state of literature on conflicts in online consumption communities. These works cover, for example, the typology of different types of online conflict, and conflict management strategies that sit at the core of our proposed matrix (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013; Sibai et al., 2014). Consequently, 79 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were included in the final sample for the systematic review.

(Insert Table 2)

An NVivo 11 software word frequency query was used to recheck the validity and reliability of the search result based on the identified keywords. First, a word cloud was generated to represent the most frequently occurring words contained in the 79 documents (Appendix B1 and B2). Cluster diagrams were also produced to showcase the keywords that co-occur together in the same group (Appendix B3 and B4). Results helped confirm the validity of the applied search strings and the reliability of the search procedure, as they showcase similar keywords to those used to generate related articles in both the full and modified search strings (i.e. “community”, “online”, “conflict”, “social”).

**3. Data Analysis**

The current analysis is carried out in two phases. The first phase offers a descriptive analysis to provide an extensive overview of extant literature within the review’s topic of interest. It reveals all pertinent information, including the years the articles were published, the specific journals and discipline, the geographic contexts of each study and the methodological approaches. The second phase applies thematic analysis to identify central research themes that previous studies have used to conceptualize conflicts in online consumption communities, obtain conflict resolution strategies, and finally reveal gaps in the existing body of knowledge to recommend directions for future research.This is done through a data synthesis process of compiling, combining, and cumulating the literature on the basis of pre-defined review questions or specific topics of interest (Tranfield et al., 2003), with the aim to not only describe or summarize the existing literature but also to extract new knowledge and identify new dimensions emerging from the review findings.

**3.1 Descriptive analysis**

***3.1.1. When and where was research published?***

Table 2 shows that 51% of the publications came from electronic searches in the six main databases (Business Source Complete, Scopus, ProQuest, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Science Direct). The other related articles (34%) came from cross-referencing, with the reminder 15% of articles purposefully added by the authors. In total, 79 publications were selected for this review, published between 2001 and January 2020. The majority of the articles (77%) were published within the past ten years (2011– early January 2020). The maximum number of articles (ten) appeared in 2019 (see Appendix C).

Manuscripts on conflicts in online consumption communities have been published in 47 academic journals, four conference proceedings and two book volumes, within four main academic disciplines, including Marketing (most popular, with 27 articles accounting for 38% of the total); Information Systems and Technology (31%); Business Management and Organization Study (13%); and Media, Cultural, and Linguistic Studies (7%). Among these, 79% were research articles with empirical analyses, 4% conceptual or literature reviews, 14% were conference papers and 3% book chapters. *Computers in Human Behavior* and *Psychology & Marketing* had the highest number of published articles, with four research articles related to conflict management in online consumption communities each. In terms of conference proceedings, the *Association for Consumer Research* and the *Association for Computer Machinery* generated the highest number of papers (please see Appendix D).

***3.1.2. Geographies and methodologies***

The geographic context of each study was identified depending on the region from which a sample or a case study was taken. Interestingly enough, the majority of the articles (48%) did not indicate a geographic location highlighting its truly global significance. However, 24% chose European countries as their study context, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Austria, Russia, Netherland, Sweden, Italy, and Finland. North America is ranked second with 11% of articles. Asian contexts could be found in 8% of the studies, with sample and case studies drawn from China, Taiwan, India, and Syria, followed by multinational research (7%), South America (1%) and Australia (1%).

Although previous research on online conflict management identifies culture as playing a key role in conflict management, and different cultural contexts of the online consumption communities are shown to lead to the adoption of different moderation practices (Husemann et al., 2015; Sibai, De Valck, et al., 2015), our descriptive analysis identifies limited investigation of collectivistic and hierarchical structured managed conflicts (e.g. Asian, South East Asian, and Islamic cultural context). In fact, most of the research is conducted in Western cultures and uses democratization and clan-based policies (Närvänen et al., 2018; Sibai, de Valck, et al., 2015) to manage conflict. It is worth noting that both individualistic and collectivistic cultures seem to share a variety of governance structures, as it will be observed in a following section and in Table 3.

(Insert Table 3)

With regards to methodological approaches used, it is noticeable that the majority of the reviewed publications employ and report more than one method and/or study, adhering to either a single or multiple paradigmatic approach. Thus, 49 studies (62%) adopt qualitative data collection and analysis methods, 22% pure quantitative methods, while the remaining 16% adopt a mixed-method approach. The main qualitative methods employed include online observation (both participant and non-participant, 28 studies), interviews (26 studies) and netnography (20 studies), analyzed through qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, thematic and pattern analysis, and visual narrative analysis (discussed in next section). Other less prevalent methods include action research by designing online platforms to help resolve conflict (e.g. Halabi, Zimmermann, & Courant, 2017), virtual observation and analysis of archival data (e.g. Ferguson & Taminiau, 2014). Six studies employed literature review of previous empirical studies.

Pure quantitative methodological approaches of mainly surveys (online and offline), conversation threads, and a history log of data from online communities is used in eighteen articles (23%). Most of the quantitative attempts were done by using automated text analysis models such as a machine learning technique, while other applied surveys or experiments to analyze and test hypotheses, conceptual frameworks, and models. Lastly, 12 articles (15%) apply a mixed-methods approach, starting with online observations, interviews, or qualitative content analyses to reveal insights, followed by statistical and econometric techniques to test proposed frameworks. Overall, qualitative methodologies are used to understand how online consumption communities which possess different goals, norms of governing behavior, regulations, and policies manage their communities. Quantitative methodologies are mainly used in examinations of topics on the growth and density of the conflict, effectiveness of various resolution mechanism, and community members’ engagement and participation.

Next, we categorized the review articles into two groups depending on the mode of data analysis and the approach they applied to assess conflicts in online consumption communities: (1) Studies that relied solely on text-based analysis and (2) Those that included visual dimensions (e.g., emoticons) and graphical files in their analyses (Please see Appendix E). Although most studies adopted an online/offline ethnography (Halabi et al., 2017; Torres, 2017) or online observation and netnography (Kozinets, 2015) as a data collection approach, only one study adopted a visual narrative to conduct the analysis (Tiidenberg, 2016).

Limited research in online consumption communities has included visual media into analyses. As this review shows, the majority of studies (76%) relied on text-based analysis. Two studies (3%) tested how people in online communities use emoticons to express feelings (Hakala et al., 2017; Tiidenberg, 2016), and one study revealed that this non-verbal communication is an important part of online interactions (Dineva et al., 2017). Nine studies (11%) mentioned including multiple forms of data, such as textual and graphical files (Gebauer et al., 2013); video, photos, and chats (Seraj, 2012); photographs and screen captures (Torres, 2017); photo galleries from the community (Polukhina & Strelnikova, 2015); voice and video files (Halabi et al., 2017); and pictorial and video footage posted by members (Agrawal & Ramachandran, 2017); however, these studies do not give an explanation of or clearly state how to incorporate both text and visuals into an analysis. Therefore, we propose that to analyze consumer narratives in an online context with as complete a picture as possible, researchers need to examine other types of communication to delineate how meaning develops, and adopt more novel methodological approaches that could allow the capturing of all types of consumer responses and behaviors in real time (Voorveld, 2019).

**4.** **Thematic analysis**

***4.1 A multi-disciplinary conceptualization of online conflicts and main theoretical approaches***

We categorized the concept of online conflicts from the theoretical descriptions proposed in the reviewed studies to identify how each research discipline that studied the topic has conceptualized online conflicts. As seen in Appendix F, each discipline draws on a wide variety of theoretical streams to conceptualize online conflicts. The marketing discipline views conflict as a consumption-oriented construct, where heterogeneous stakeholders and actors have contradictory needs and goals in shared-consumption experiences (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 2019; Husemann & Luedicke, 2013). The emergence of conflicts usually leads to several negative aspect and spill-over effect towards consumer-brand relationships and consumers’ decision making. The main theoretical streams drawn upon to conceptualize conflicts include actor-network theory (Law 1992, 381), Governance theory (Heide, 1994), Social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002), social comparison, conformity (Asch, 1953), social influence (Kelman, 1974), among others.

Within the disciplines of business management, information systems, and organization studies, conflict refers to the disagreement between groups of people that are working together to achieve a common purpose. With this mindset, the conflict is more relational in nature, and triggered by differing group interests, knowledge collaborations and information exchange (Faraj et al., 2011; Kane et al., 2014; Matzat, 2009b), where the disagreement or misunderstanding between the members of the organization eventually limits their ability to achieve common tasks and goals. We can observe an overlap with marketing discipline in terms of theories used (e.g. actor-network theory, governance theories), as well as Group diversity (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007), Structuration theory (Giddens,1979) or Theory of relational signaling (Lindenberg,1997; Matzat, 2009), which are more aligned with the conceptualizations seen.

Humanities and other social sciences frame conflict as a moral issue with divergence in ideology and belief (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). This research discipline usually conceptualizes conflict as the dissent of group ideology which affects relationships in groups, and the sustainability of the community. As a result, theories drawn upon in this discipline include Theory of governmentality (Foucault,1994; 1978) or Theory of conflict & impoliteness (Dobs and Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2013).

We can see that there are however certain overlaps between disciplines, especially when the different types of conflicts are discussed. For example, the theoretical description of an *ideology-advocating conflict* (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013) in the marketing discipline and the moral conflict (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014) from the humanities and political disciplines appear quite similar because they reflect the conflicts of value and belief which lead to the emergence of arguments and discordance between people. Similarly, Task and Process conflict (Arazy et al., 2013) conceptualized in information systems are a subset explained by authenticity-protecting conflict in the marketing discipline (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013). However, the main distinction between these conceptualizations of conflicts is that authenticity-protecting conflict focuses on how people in a community consume and share resources together (Rinallo & Pitardi, 2019), while task and process conflict focuses on the end results of how group members co-produce something together (Lerner & Lomi, 2019; Olaniran, 2010).

*Relationship conflict* (Kittur & Kraut, 2010), also called interpersonal or affective conflict (Arazy et al., 2013), is another type of online conflict that is apparent and mentioned in both the Business Management, and Information studies. This type of conflict has been conceptualized as the ill feeling that is grounded in disagreements between community members which occurs at the emotional or individual level. The dark side of this type of conflict is that when the production conflict (e.g. Task and Process conflict) escalates and transforms into relationship conflict, members may also decide to adopt destructive actions to tackle conflicts (Kittur and Kraut, 2010). The negative actions that members adopt can be defined as either behavior offensive (actual actions) or behavior complaints (verbal harassing) (Castle et al., 2014). Arazy et al. (2013) confirmed that when task or process conflict gradually transforms into affective conflict, it damages the community in terms of the group performance, and the quality and quantity of the Wikipedia content creation.

*Anti-social conflict* (e.g. trolling, denouncing, and vandalizing) seems to be consistent in terms of the conceptualization across research discipline. Anti-social was identified as another type of conflict related to trolling, using nasty language to attack individual members or groups, using sarcasm, spreading fake information, making inflammatory remarks, and creating an unpleasant environment in the community (Cruz et al., 2018; Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Herring et al., 2002). Anti-social conflicts usually start from people or members who do not share the same consumption lifestyle and ideology. However, what makes anti-social conflict different from relationship conflict is that the intention of Anti-social behavior conflict is to manipulate, irritate, and provoke debate and tension among individual members or groups. The overlap of the definitions and conceptualizations of conflict found in each discipline calls, however, for an integrative and interdisciplinary view of online conflict in consumption communities. Doing so aids in the development of a richer understanding of the concept through different academic perspectives, and learning of how each research discipline engages with online conflict management.

***4.2 The typology of online consumption communities***

Previous research identified that different types of online consumption communities require different approaches and control mechanisms to effectively manage conflicts (Olaniran, 2010; Sibai et al., 2015). In order to propose a framework of conflict resolution strategies, we need to first understand the complexity and the overlap of the current types of online consumption communities. Thus, we scrutinized the sample articles and classified online consumption communities based on: (1) The online supporting platforms that each online consumption community operated on (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001), (2) The agency that organized the community (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Jang et al., 2008), and (3) The governance structures that each community adopted (Sibai et al., 2015). In doing so, we bring a holistic perspective to help understand the interactions between research that considered online consumption community through technological aspects (e.g. the types of online supporting platforms), and research that adopted a socio-cultural lens (e.g. the agencies and governance structures).

In terms of online supporting platforms (see Appendix G1), we observe an equitable distribution between three main typologies: Communities developed within social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram, Weibo); Discussion communities (blogs, forums, and other relational communities); and Task- and goal-oriented communities (Wikipedia, online transactions, design and learning communities). The type of platform is extremely important as it enables and constrains what behaviors can be monitored in case of conflict. However, as several studies confirmed, although some communities operate on identical online platforms, this does not mean that they are related and organized in the same way since different communities require different control mechanisms (Kittur et al., 2007; Sibai et al., 2015).

Looking at the agency that created and managed the consumption community (see Appendix G2), the reviewed studies highlight that online communities are typically hosted, organized, and administered by a) consumers/members; b) company/brand, e.g. Apple Newton, BMW Mini, Tesco, Nike, Adidas; or c) a sponsored third party, e.g. ﻿www.veggieboards.com, ﻿the North American distance running community, an LGBT association. Sixteen percent of the studies included in this review did not disclose the community organizer. This might limit the planning and effective design of resolution strategies, since different types of community organizers require different forms of control and conflict resolution strategies e.g. brand-organized community versus self-organized/managed community (Matzat, 2009a; Sibai et al., 2015).

Finally, the classification of online consumption communities by governance structure (see Appendix G3) reveals three main categories: a) market; b) hierarchy; and c) clan-based structure. These could also be observed in a hybrid format, such as gift (market + clan) and reputation governance structures (hierarchy + clan). The governance structure is conceptualized from the previous studies as the management framework, mechanism, or regulatory power that is enacted to rule the community (Humphreys, 2015; Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Närvänen et al., 2018; Sibai et al., 2015). In our sample, only two studies (3%) analyzed online communities with *market governance structure* (Matzat, 2009a, 2009b), which is commonly adopted in transactional, commercial communities and online auction groups which engage in transactions where one member gives another a product or service in return for something of economic value (Sibai et al., 2015). Eight studies (10%) investigated communities with *hierarchy governance structure* (e.g. Bullard & Howison, 2015; Dineva et al., 2019; Hauser et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2019), where formal house rules are clearly stated by a high-power agency, such as the community moderator or brand page manager. Moderator interventions and sanctions are examples of authority exercised by a high-power agency. The majority of the articles (43%), however, analyzed communities with *clan governance structure*, where the community adheres to a logic of sharing, with communal interaction and understanding among members, through a democratic and self-directing mechanism (Sibai et al., 2015).

Moving on to hybrid structures, three studies had a focus on *gift governance* (4%) which characterizes communities that emerge from a synergy between the market and clan structures and are operated under the logic of sharing and exchanging (Sibai et al., 2015) and twenty-three studies analyzed a *reputation governance structure* (31%), usually adopted by communities that are absent of formal authority, hierarchies and direct mechanisms to control member behaviors. This type of communities relies on a social hierarchy mechanism based on popularity, consensus, and/or expertise (Forte et al., 2009; Sibai et al., 2015).

***4.3 Managing online conflict: a matrix of conflict resolution strategies***

Our review suggests that social control is the main form of conflict resolution mechanisms used to regulate online consumption communities. The literature highlights two main types of social control*: direct versus indirect control mechanisms* (Matzat, 2009a). Direct social control mechanisms, such as rules, regulations, and the community’s system design and infrastructure, straightforwardly shape and affect members’ behavior. Therefore, we further categorize direct social control into *Social Construction* Mechanisms (rules, regulations), and *System and Design aspects.* By contrast, indirect control mechanisms do not directly change members’ decisions and behaviors; instead, they signify whether members’ actions deviate from the acceptable purposes or norms of the community (Boon et al., 2015; Burnett & Bonnici, 2003; Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012; Sibai et al., 2014). The indirect social controls were identified as: *Social practices* (activities that each community develops and adopts to manage internal conflicts)*,* and *Social norms* (dissimilar from formal rules and regulations because they lack the enforcement mechanisms and formal agencies to enforce authorization) (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003).

However, previous research indicates that consumption communities under different governance structures require different types of social control to successfully manage them (Sibai et al., 2015). To that end, in this section we discuss the main conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies prevalent in the extant cross-disciplinary literature on the basis of both 1) the governance structure and 2) the type of social control. These are further synthesized in the conflict-resolution matrix included in Table 4.

(Insert Table 4)

Communities with a *market structure* rely on formal and *direct* forms of social control (Matzat, 2009b; Sibai, de Valck, et al., 2015). Clear rules and regulations are implemented to avoid conflicts of interest, as the logic of this type of community relies on direct reciprocation (Sibai, de Valck, et al., 2015). In terms of community design and structure, in this type of online community the reputation score and online feedback serve as formal mechanisms to govern members’ behavior and ensure fair distribution of rewards and incentives (Matzat, 2009b, 2009a).

*Hierarchy governance communities* tend to rely on formal house rules stated by a higher-power agency to address conflicts. Although they were also found todevelop their own social practices to tackle with the internal conflicts such as an open-censorship strategy (Bullard & Howison, 2015; Dineva et al., 2017), and Cooperative conflict management styles (Dineva et al., 2019; Hauser et al., 2017), people who hold power eventually have the authorization to establish and enforce both community rules and norms. Previous research agrees that when it comes to tackling conflicts that occur in the hierarchy governance community (e.g. brand-managed social media community), positive conflict management style (e.g. open-censorship; cooperative; non-engaging; pacifying; informing strategy) tends to be more effective than negative style (e.g. punishing, censoring, bolstering, sanctioning, and interaction termination) (Dineva et al., 2017; Sibai, de Valck, Farrell, et al., 2015). On that note, a recent research from Shi et al. (2019) has identified that brand-consumer conflicts could be proactively prevented if the brand page manager and moderator proactively promote consumers cognitive and affective commitment through daily interactions, organizing activities, building a shared understanding and disseminating the corporate culture. For the system and design aspects, one research found that increasing the number of moderators helps mitigate conflicts in hierarchical structures only in cases when there is one high-credibility aggressor and many low-credibility members (Hauser et al., 2017).

Moving on to *clan governance*, of the thirty-four articles analyzing this type of structure, only 22 papers proposed a framework or a conflict resolution strategy. In clan governance, the community tends to rely on *indirect social control mechanisms* such as social practices and social norms to deal with internal conflict and define the acceptable behavior within the community (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003). Social norms identified in the clan governance structure rely on a culture of voluntarism, norm of reciprocity (Gebauer et al., 2013; Mathwick et al., 2008; Pai & Tsai, 2016; Seraj, 2012), cooperative, open discussion, and negotiation (Graham, 2007; Yen et al., 2011), and celebrate a culture of free-censorship by avoiding heavy-handed moderation (De Almeida et al., 2014). Social practices are developed mainly around open-negotiation (Keeling et al., 2015; Luedicke et al., 2017; Närvänen et al., 2013), open-dialogue (Gebauer et al., 2013), mutual engagement from both members and moderators in terms of nurturing, tolerating, jurisdiction, ignoring, banning, warning etc. (Coulson & Shaw, 2013; Fuller et al., 2011; Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010; Seraj, 2012). Specific models and frameworks to tackle conflict were proposed such as a model of response options to impoliteness (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014), a cooperative and competitive design system (Renard & Davis, 2019), three frame alignment practices operating as ﻿ stabilizing mechanism for the community – language, structural and role (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012, p.1011), three styles of conflict management (Competitive-Dominating strategies, Avoiding strategies, and Cooperative-Integrative strategies) (Lee, 2005), and the positive versus negative control strategies (Matzat & Rooks, 2014).

Previous research stated that the *Clan governance* usually operated without formal authority to enforce or authorize the adoption of roles (Graham, 2007; Närvänen et al., 2013; Seraj, 2012). We found, however, that some communities that identified themselves with the clan governance still relied on direct social control which included but was not limited to the role of moderators and community manager in resolving conflict (Husemann et al., 2015; Keeling et al., 2015), and the community’s core foundation, clear rules, and sites policies (De Almeida et al., 2014; Fuller et al., 2011; Herring et al., 2002; Närvänen et al., 2018). Some research highlights the importance of moderators (characteristics and number) to help effectively resolve internal conflict in clan governance structure (Coulson & Shaw, 2013; Husemann et al., 2015; Tony et al., 2019). Use of technological systems and design to help reduced conflict were also identified. For example, using community list and the operating system (Husemann et al., 2015), developing system to reduce salience of social identification between members (De Almeida et al., 2014), and using of filters to block the harasser's messages (killfile) (Herring et al., 2002).

In *gift governance*, the direct forms of social control such as formal rules and regulations serve as a guideline to help prevent malice and alienation practices related to sharing and exchanging resources in a community. The formal rules represent rules for attribution and individual property rights (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017), lists of dos and don’ts for vendors (Boon et al., 2015) and moderators’ execution of formal rules through blacklist (Polukhina & Strelnikova, 2015). There is an attempt to use technological infrastructure and design to overcome the conflict that is emerged from misbalancing in reciprocity. For example, designing systems to distribute rewards and incentives (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017), requiring acceptance of the terms of use before entering the community, requiring confirmation to commit to the values and practices of the community (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017), and developing a system of reputation and member rating (Boon et al., 2015; Polukhina & Strelnikova, 2015). However, the norms of exchanging are still based on subjective and individual preferences (e.g. the first come, first serve logic, and based on individual and situation), and the nature of the clan governance structure entails self-enforcement, norm of reciprocity, and generosity. Thus, the lack of formal authority and mechanisms to enforce direct reciprocity between members creates free-riding and agency issues (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017).

Previous research conceptualized *reputation governance structure* communities primarily as absent of formal authority, hierarchies and direct mechanisms (Forte et al., 2009; Sibai, De Valck, et al., 2015). By contrast, our review indicates that this type of communities were not truly without bureaucratic functions but employed a combination of both *direct and indirect social control*. Direct social controls include formal rules, policies, and formal positions to tackle conflicts related to both content- and behavior-related issues (Bryant et al., 2005; Butler et al., 2008; Cooper & Harrison, 2001; Ferguson & Taminiau, 2014; Forte et al., 2009; Humphreys, 2015; Kane et al., 2014; Kittur & Kraut, 2010;). Community rules and regulations were enforced by assigned members (e.g. Admins, Senior member, community member who holds an Operator status and Customer service status) to help resolve conflict. Customer service intervention (Humphreys, 2015), external intervention of a course leader (Xie et al., 2013), and sanctions implemented by people who hold an operator status (Cooper & Harrison, 2001) are examples of direct social control. Formal reputation systems (Kriplean et al., 2007) and a system to deviate between high- and low-status members (Dinhopl et al., 2015) were developed through several mechanisms, such as milestones and badging practices (Schau et al., 2009), and online system feedback (Wiertz, 2010). It should be noted that technological and community design management is another factor contributing to the success of conflict management in *reputation governance structure*. The use of channel bots to monitor and protect people/resources (Cooper & Harrison, 2001), the use of spyware (Humphreys, 2015), the use of watchlists to help catching vandalism quickly (Bryant et al., 2005; Viégas et al., 2004), the active design to help members detect conflicts, and the coordination systems are all effective mechanisms to help mitigate conflict (Bryant et al., 2005; Kittur et al., 2007; Kittur & Kraut, 2010; Kriplean et al., 2007; Viégas et al., 2004; Wu et al., 2013).

Social norms identified in a *reputation governance structure* include responsiveness and fairness (Adjei et al., 2016; Jiang & Wagner, 2015), celebration of diversity among members and balancing composition between different types of members (Arazy et al., 2011, 2013; Ferguson & Taminiau, 2014), a strong value of consensus and negotiation (Bryant et al., 2005; Ferguson & Taminiau, 2014; Forte et al., 2009; Kane et al., 2014; Viégas et al., 2004), and peer-sanctioning such as public shaming have all been found to resolve conflict in different situations (Cooper & Harrison, 2001; Humphreys, 2015). Examples of proposed social practices are the three patterns of generative responses - ﻿roles, shifting production focus, and identifiable patterns of interaction – proposed by Kane et al. (2014), communication and concentration practices (Kittur & Kraut, 2010), twelve common practices to assist members in forming values and handling discord in communities (Schau et al., 2009), four labelled strategies - ﻿construction, reconstruction, conversion, and invalidation - and two negotiation strategies proposed by Dinhopl et al., (2015), and the development of the culture of niceness and the using of normalization strategies, suggested by Xie et al. (2013).

**5. Discussion and suggestions for future research**

Online conflicts and their management are expected to remain rich topics of interest for theoreticians, practitioners and policy makers in international marketing and beyond (Al Khasawneh et al., 2021). In today’s heavily digitally mediated world, issues of international interest attract both consumers’ and brands’ attention and initiate online conflicts, before they even become evident in offline conversations. Therefore, further examinations of online conflicts on specific topics, especially around culturally intensive issues that motivate international audiences’ participation in online debates could advance our understanding on this area, as well as, on global phenomena such as ethnocentrism (Han & Hyojin, 2020; Stottnger & Penz, 2019) and cultural appropriation. Additional avenues for future research are also offered through the study of the dark side of online conflicts and how it can be best managed and governed. The anticipated intensification of online conflicts by the use of filter bubbles and echo chambers by marketers that either accidently or intentionally block out balanced views leading to confirmation bias and polarization call for more enquiries. Based on our data analysis and synthesis, the following sections discuss a number of critical gaps in knowledge that warrant additional research attention, in relation to conceptualizing, managing and researching online conflicts. Further, we provide a list of compelling research questions in Table 5, directly drawn from our inter-disciplinary conceptualization of online conflicts and the proposed matrix of conflict resolution strategies discussed previously, while adapting Vrontis and Christofi’s (2019) approach towards identification of avenues for future research.

(Insert Table 5)

***5.1 Gaps regarding the conceptualization of online conflicts***

Most of the reviewed papers tend to approach online conflict as a static and invariable force (Curcija et al., 2019; Dineva et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2011; Husemann et al., 2015). However, conflict in general and online conflicts in specific are multi-dimensional and transformable. For example, an online conflict might start because of differences in consumption styles amongst online consumption community members but then transform into another type of conflict (e.g. the relationship conflict or anti-social conflicts) that could cause other seriously actions against individual members and/or threaten the survival of the community itself. Thus, future research is essential to better understand the dynamic nature of online conflicts—specifically, when and how they emerge, evolve, and transform from one type into another type. Such insights, in turn, may help to clarify if the various phases of online conflicts require the same or different control mechanisms to produce an effective resolution. This review of the existing literature also revealed another type of online conflict—namely, prosumption conflict—that is currently not well discussed or conceptualized (Fuller et al., 2011; Husemann et al., 2015; Luedicke et al., 2017; Renard & Davis, 2019).

Lastly, prior work (e.g. Husemann et al., 2015) points towards a bright side regarding online conflict and, in this context, identify healthy conflicts’ potential to facilitate a higher level of participation of community members as well as the creation of a "we-feeling" which engenders greater engagement and the community long-term sustainability. Future research is needed here to identify and describe the main characteristics of such healthy conflicts, and to show how they can be nurtured to benefit the online community.

***5.2 Gaps in managing online conflicts under different types of governance and agency structures***

In this review we examined the available body of knowledge concerning online consumption communities in terms of *socio-cultural* (the agency who organizes the community, and the governance structures that each community adopt)and *technological dimensions* (the type of online supporting platforms on which each community operates, and the design structures behind the community technological system). This allowed us to grasp all aspects of the different dimensions of online consumption communities as well as of the associated implications for their functioning and regulation (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Jang et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019; Sibai, De Valck, et al., 2015; Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001).

With regard to the *technological dimension*, it is interesting to note that in the last five years (2015–2020), technological advances have allowed online communities to now serve multiple purposes such as a channel for selling, distributing information, and social gathering. This, in turn, causes challenges to communities specifically with regards to how to handle internal conflict. Therefore, future research should explore the type of control mechanisms and governance structure that could be applied to handle conflicts that occur within this modern type of consumption communities. With regards to *the socio-cultural dimension* in terms of the agency who organizes the online community (consumer versus brand-organized), literature that illustrates how conflict should be managed within a business-organized community structure was limited to studies of complaining practices (Cooper et al., 2019; Dineva et al., 2017; Dolan et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2019; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2019). Echoing Alves et al. (2016) and Närvänen et al. (2018), we call for future research to go beyond complaining practices and to extend the investigative scope to an exploration of complaint handling and of negative sentiments within the consumer-organized brand community, instead of relying on the online brand community as the last resort to restore justice in their relationship with the brand (Li, Modi, Wu, Chen, & Nguyen, 2019).

With regard to governance structures, our review reveals a lack of research on the *hierarchy governance mechanism*, which limits our understanding of how an autocratic online consumption community governs and resolves internal conflicts. Moreover, the available studies examining an autocratic governance structure used a Western context, in which conflict moderators and members tried to end conflicts in a democratic way (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Dineva et al., 2019; Fuller et al., 2011; Husemann et al., 2010; Schau et al., 2009; Seraj, 2012). Future research should be conducted in non-Western contexts because country-depended variation in cultural, technological, political, and societal factors directly influence the way community members decide to resolve conflicts (Närvänen et al., 2018; Sibai, De Valck, et al., 2015). Investigating hierarchy governance representing different cultural and political environments will aid in a theoretical description of hierarchy governance structure and inform policy makers on how to identify effective strategies to manage conflict from an authoritative governance structure.

Further research should include all three dimensions—that is, social, cultural, and technical—into the analysis of online community conflict, as each of them directly influences the way a community adopts conflict resolution strategies. Neglecting any one of these factors or relying solely onto one might weaken the effectiveness of a conflict resolution strategy that has been adopted to tackle a particular conflict. Recent research, for instance, found that sociotechnical systems facilitate productive environments and turn destructive conflicts into constructive competition within a crowdsourcing community (Renard & Davis, 2019).

***5.3 Gaps in the relevant body of work in terms of methodological aspects***

Prior research has highlighted the importance of analyzing non-textual modes of communication, such as a visual and audio, because meaning is nowadays transmitted online in a multi-modal fashion including both text and visuals (Belk et al., 2018; Kelsey, 2015; Kress & Leeuwen, 2004; Scott, 1994). Therefore, the scope of analyses of shared narratives in online consumption communities should not be limited to “text-based” communication but also reflect users’ perceptions, emotions, and their underlying ideologies through both (non) representational forms and modes of online social exchanges.

Therefore, finding the right methodological tools to assist in uncovering the true purpose of the communicators is crucial. To analyze consumer narratives on the modern online platforms with as complete a picture as possible, future studies should develop methods to include multiple modes of data into their analyses because posting behaviors (e.g., creating and sharing pictures in an online consumption community) also represent discursive practices (Närvänen et al., 2013). Research efforts should also be directed towards the development of a native digital model that is suitable to analyze non-linear conflicts in an extensive and multi-participant setting on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. as the currently available methodological approaches do not fully capture or explain such extensive, recurring, multi-participant, and non-linear nature of online conflicts (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). More specifically, the way people communicate and interact online is no longer limited to text-based communication; rather, people now have the ability to construct their own meaning through numerous modes of communication.

**6. Conclusion and Limitations**

Our systematic literature review on the topic of online conflicts in global consumption communities synthesized the current body of literature to provide a life-course overview on online conflicts and identify the appropriate strategies to inform decision making. Our aim is to provide the first interdisciplinary literature-based conceptualization of online conflicts in international marketing and to propose a matrix of conflict resolution strategies based on two types of social control mechanisms and a five-folded Governance Structure, from a socio-cultural and technological perspective. By incorporating the body of literature on online conflicts in consumption communities, this study identifies critical research gaps in the theoretical understanding of prosumption conflict, and missing methodological contributions from multi-modal examinations, where especially visual data is considered. This study restricted the types of review documents to only peer-reviewed academic articles and conference proceedings in the English language. Future studies could overcome this limitation and include unpublished data or industry-funded data to validate and complement the study findings to provide a more complete picture of conflict management in online consumption communities. Finally, as with any other review manuscript, we do not claim to comprehensively encompass all publications within each of the disciplines we aimed to cover. However, we are confident that our systematic and thorough assessment of the selected manuscripts provides a more nuanced understanding of the field of conflict in online communities.

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