



ANTAGONISM WITHIN ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Perceived benefits of brand community participation, engagement and value co-creation have been underlined in past marketing researches. However, recent research papers have directed focus to outbreak of tensions within these communities. This study illuminates the characteristics of antagonistic consumers who incite communal conflicts and their interactions with the rest of the community. Netnographic methods were employed in conducting the research and the drama that happens within an online game brand community was chosen as the research context. Three groups of antagonistic consumers were identified, including trolls, hostile purists and crusaders. As a response to antagonists' transgression, the community engages in a continuous learning process, develop new interpretations of brand meanings, habitualise deviant behaviours, as well as devise a resistance mechanism. The study suggests implications on value co-creation process and the role that antagonistic consumption has in the continuation of brand community. It also offers insights to marketers to leverage brand relationship that can help them handle antagonism.

Keywords online brand community, antagonism, co-creation, netnography

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1. Introduction

Since the success of Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), brand communities have attracted great interest from the research community and marketing practitioners alike (Jr, Muniz. & Schau, 2005; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schembri & Latimer, 2016a, 2016b; Susan & Lara, 2009). Traditionally, researches have placed emphasis on the homogeneity and unity of brand communities yet shied away from the complexities and implications of its negative side. Only in recent years, researchers have dug deeper into tensions among brand communities (Blackshaw, 2010; Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2012; Luedicke & Giester, 2006). However, while presenting a picture of conflicts that occur between two brand communities or between brand and consumers, they have not emphasised on the hostility that exists within consumer-consumer relationship and the dysfunctional consumers who partake in the rivalry. My research aims to attenuate this research gap in literature by studying antagonism in brand communities from a cultural perspective.

The purposes of this research are twofold. My first is to illuminate the characteristics of antagonistic consumers within an online brand community. My second objective is to explore the communities’ experience and responses in facing antagonists’ transgressive behaviours. After presenting the findings, I propose managerial actions that can help marketers to leverage the community relationship to curb antagonism. In order to achieve these objectives, I studied League of Legends (referred to as LoL in the rest of this paper) and its community members, which have gained much traction and publicity for the toxic gaming culture. Characterised by discordance, animosity, as well as fans’ fanatical devotion, the online brand community of LoL presents a great context to examine how antagonism manifests when there are multiple collisions in terms of ideologies, beliefs, and values.

Based on the research findings, I argue that antagonistic consumers’ behaviours exhibit characteristics of highly engaged consumers, but their actions cause substantial damage to the brand values. In response, the community both opposes and accepts the presence of antagonism in their communal ethos. Therefore, despite positive benefits that can be derived from the value co-creation process, marketers need to proceed with caution and selectively endorse activities that balance anti- and pro-social behaviours. The focus should

be placed on facilitating pro-social interactions, rather than on constricting and regulating antagonists' expressions.

The paper will be structured as follow: the literature review will present an overview of research bodies into brand communities and characteristics of deviant consumers in previous researches. The research gap and research questions are then outlined. After elaborating the research background and methodologies, I present the findings in regards of the research questions. Next, the discussion section details theoretical contributions and provides managerial suggestions to handle antagonism. Finally, I contemplate the limitations of the study and avenues for future researches.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand communities

Consumers come to brand communities for many reasons: socialisation, social identification, a sense of belonging, legitimisation, and intimacy (Susan & Lara, 2009; Thompson, 2004). Their relationship with the community in turn rewards the brand with loyalty, commitment, retention of old members and integration of new ones. Therefore, understanding brand community relationship and its members' behaviours allows marketers to take an active role in fostering community socialisation and harvest benefits from consumer engagement.

The concept of brand communities, defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), is "a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand". Though some past researches have used the term interchangeably with other concepts of communal consumptions, such as subculture and consumer tribe, brand community refers to consumption communities in which dialogues, members' activities and ethos evolve around a commercial trademark (Canniford, 2015; Bernard Cova & Cova, 2002; Susan & Lara, 2009). Within brand communities, consumers connect and seek personal relationships with fellow community members, the product, the brand, and marketers (Mcalexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

Brand communities under studies have been found to possess the following defining characteristics:

- *Consciousness of kind*: an intrinsic feeling of connection between members and another, and a sense of difference from people coming from outer-groups. This element of community, which transcends geographical boundaries, has been found to be a driving force behind the community unity (e.g. Jr, Muniz. & Schau, 2005; Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).
- *Evidence of rituals and traditions*: Communities develop rituals and traditions that contribute to its culture and vitality (Guinn & Muniz, 2005). Examples include story-telling, sharing knowledge about the brand, ritualistic greetings, and communal appropriation of brand-provided advertising materials (ibid., 481). Rituals and traditions often function as community builders, giving its members a sense of affinity and affiliation with the brand (Schau and Muniz, in Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007).
- *A sense of responsibility towards the community*: Community members share a loose moral code of right and wrong and a soft sense of duty to assist like-minded people who also express appreciation for the brand. This sense of obligation is reflected through the act of governing communities from inappropriate behaviours, sharing knowledge, recruiting as well as supporting new members. However, it is interesting that community only extend the help to as far as members within their group, and will be morally offended by members' deviation (e.g. using products of the oppositional brand) (Guinn & Muniz, 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)

“A strong brand community increases customer loyalty, lowers marketing costs, authenticates brand meanings, and yields an influx of ideas to grow the business. Through commitment, engagement, and support, companies can cultivate brand communities that deliver powerful returns. When you get the community right, the benefits are irrefutable.” (Susan & Lara, 2009). Prior literature has illustrated the values that brand communities create and how marketers can profit from them (e.g. Kuo & Feng, 2013; Schau et al., 2009; Seraj, 2012). As a strong communal tie exists, members are willing to express commitment to develop the community.

2.2. Brand community relationship and value co-creation

Brand community relationships have also been closely linked to the value co-creation process, in which both consumers and the brand participate in creating values (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Schau et al.,

2009; Seraj, 2012). Modern marketing logic has departed from the traditional view that marketers and consumers strictly play the separate roles of producing and consuming values respectively. With the advance of digital platform, consumers do not play a passive role, but gain enormous power to construct, manage and organise communities that generate values through their participation. In other words, “consumers are perceived less as targets and increasingly as partners for a company” (Bernard Cova & Paraque, 2012).

By allowing consumers to co-construct the brand, marketers receive valuable feedback, enjoy community growth and ample publicity (Brogi, 2014; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). As asserted in Veloutso and Moutinhou (2009) (cited in Bernard Cova & Paraque, 2012), the many different brand community practices (Schau et al., 2009) vastly contribute to the brand success. Reciprocity also play a central role in brand relationship and value co-creation theories (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012; Chan & Li, 2010).

However, recent researches have urged marketers to look at value co-creation through a more critical lens (Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzeri, 2013; Weijo, Bean, & Rintamäki, 2017). Relationship ruptures between brand-consumers, in which marketers’ decisions break the consumers’ trust, can prompt the offended party to actively seek anti-brand actions. In response to brand transgressions, consumers may boycott the brand (Kozinets, Robert V. and Handelman, 1998), complain (Lee-Wingate & Corfman, 2010) or start counter-brands and alternative brands (Hewer, Gannon, & Cordina, 2017). Hence, value co-creation can pose considerable risks to the brand growth. In the event of failed value co-creation, which may even result in value destruction (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011), dissatisfied consumers yield paramount power to damage the brand (Skålén, Stefano, & Bernard, 2013).

2.3. Unrest within brand communities

Since the value co-creation process often takes place within a highly engaged brand community, researchers have ventured out to search for elements that contribute to brand communities’ unity and cohesion. It is well accepted that a brand community tends to exhibit a strong communal relationship when qualities of oppositional brand loyalty or marginalisation exists (e.g. Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013; Fuller, 2006). Common struggles unite.

This brings us to ponder upon the cohesiveness found within mainstream, non-marginalised, non-stigmatised brand communities. Schau and Muniz (2007) examined TPATH – a fan community that dedicates to the rock star Tom Petty and were able to find

the same characteristics that serve to build a strong community relationship among its members. They concluded that oppositional brand loyalty, stigmatisation or marginalisation can enhance, but are not prerequisites for brand community strength nor endurance. However, with the lack of a common struggle, these communities also witness rising tension and conflicts *among* its own members: hardcore fans versus those who violate the normative narrative.

It should be noted that brand communities are not a monolithic group; each socialising member varies in their degree of participation, brand attachment, and brand knowledge. At closer look, the brand community is made up of a multitude of sub-groups whose lifestyles, personal identities and strategies of interpreting social rules exist along a continuum (Felix, 2012; Kozinets, 1999). These sub-groups often adopt disparaging views about the community ethos that give ways to emerging tensions, ensued by fractured relationships, chaos and rebellions from its participants.

Therefore, an overly emphasised focus on the positive values that are generated from brand community involvement, coupled with a lack of addressing community's inherent conflicts, has painted only the rosy side the picture. Brand communities have its dark side. In making decisions while neglecting such nuances and complexities, marketers run the risk of alienating hardcore fans and diluting the community culture (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Past researches have given a glimpse into brand communities' rivalries. Harley-Davidson consumers compete on their community status, and in turn disregard the perceived "poseurs". Apple users show distaste for brand defectors. Hardcore fans scrutinise and discredit discussions that go against the norms of TPATH. To legitimise members, each of these communities have its own test, which is driven by an "us-versus-them" mentality— a community aspect fuelled by consciousness of kind. In other words, heretics are opposed and vilified.

While legitimisation plays a role in maintaining the desired marginalisation of the community, it also entails the obliged compliance to act in certain ways. Many members express resistance to brand participation upon having their behaviours strictly regulated (Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005). Disengagement may leads to the states of "dormancy" or "termination", ending the consumers' engagement with the brand community (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013).

In the context of online brand communities, in which members are not restricted by geographical boundaries, the entry and exit doors are rather wide open. Everyone can join or leave the communities at their own will, whenever they feel that their sense of belonging has come to an end. However, captured by a fear of cost switching (e.g. familiarising with new rules, investing in new resources, etc.), many would choose to stay in the community, despite their differences and discontentment (Valck, in Cova et al., 2007). “The result: tensions, and sometimes warfare.” (Ibid, 262). In addition, online anonymity gives a fertile breeding ground to idiosyncratic antisocial behaviours. Antisocial individuals also have more opportunities to connect with like-minded people on the internet (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

In terms of consumer-consumer relationship, Valck (2007), Susan & Lara (2009), Luedicke et al. (2009), and Sibai et al. (2014) identified the problem of communal conflicts, as well as the effect they have on the community. However, they have not concentrated on antagonistic consumers who are unsatisfied with what is normally accepted and thus, intentionally transgress the normative rules.

In other words, antagonism has been understudied in consumer research. To fill in this gap, my study will address consumers who undertake antagonism, especially in response to community schisms.

2.4. Antagonists – community members who cause troubles

There has not been a body of theories that refines the definition of antagonistic consumers. In researches that study deviant behaviours and social conflicts (Amine & Gicquel, 2011; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009; Schachaf & Hara, 2010), antagonists are those who become deviant from the norms, do not contribute to the community development, and may seek opportunities to attack the brand and its community. Following the same vein of thinking and based on prior theories, I suggest that antagonistic consumers could be divided into the three following groups: trolls, social warriors and angered members. Other researchers who approach the research fields with a fresh outlook may adopt a different way of categorising antagonists.

a) Trolls

Trolls make up one of the most quintessential groups of anti-social participants in online communities. By definition, trolls thrive on mischievous deception. In many occasions,

trolls can be considered harmless, seeking attention and entertainment from mischievousness. On the other hand, trolls can be malicious and harmful. Consider, for example, trolls and their act of vandalism on Wikipedia (Schachaf & Hara, 2010). Trolling have been lumped together with flaming or griefing (Sibai, Valck, Farrell, & Rudd, 2014), as their manifestation can very much blend in together, depending on the contexts.

Trolls have also been linked to negative personality traits, such as sadism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Buckels et al., 2014). However, since this research focuses on consumer culture, it will not emphasise on psychological aspects.

b) Social warriors

Facing threats and attacks from outsider groups, community members tend to bind together and engage in the brand narrative to reify the values of the community. For example, researchers such as Jr, Muniz. & Schau (2005) observed a sense of intense in-group unity among Apple Newton fans. These highly engaged consumers co-create and believe in a shared set of brand meanings, from which emerge an intense “us versus them” mentality and resistance against outer-group members (Ewing et al., 2013; Yngfalk, 2013). Their inter-group identity has an enormous influence on their socialising behaviours, such as indoctrinating and pressuring other community members into the same set of ideas and values (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). A typical example of social warriors is the core member group within the culinary forum (www.smulweb.nl) (Valck, in Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007), where tensions frequently occur between this core member group and community members whose behaviours are deviant from the norms.

In the context of online game communities, the antagonists who represent “social warriors” are characterised by a distinct notion of “true gamers”. Hence, I will name this group as “hostile purists” in the rest of the paper.

c) Angered members

In the previous section, we have briefly touched on the examples of consumers’ reactions in response to brand transgression and ideological conflicts within the community (e.g. brand boycotting (Kozinets, Robert V. and Handelman, 1998), complaints and venting (Lee-Wingate & Corfman, 2010). These so-called “angry fans” demonstrate a great sense of dissatisfaction with the brand and its community ethos. Their negative behaviours are driven by a sense of “perceived unfairness”, which results in intense negative emotions,

such as irritation, frustration and anger (Gebauer et al., 2013). In Weijo et al., (2017), angry fans' reactions are emphasised as a collective process that furthers the dynamics and complications of a brand community.

In this research paper, I decided to call this group as "crusaders". Crusaders are active in seeking revenge, rather than avoiding tensions through passive participation (e.g. lurking) or relationship disclosure (Brodie et al., 2013).

It should be noted that these groups of antagonists, however, are not strictly divided. The categories that classify an antagonist consumer may vary, depending on perspectives. For example, when being confronted with questions about ethics, Hummer enthusiasts see themselves as "heroic moral protagonists (i.e. true American), who are defending sacrosanct national values, beliefs and ideals from hostile and potentially destructive attacks" (Luedicke et al., 2009).

Like any other members of the brand community, antagonistic consumers have full access to the community resources and platforms that allow them to appropriate brand meanings and indoctrinate new members. The influences they exert will certainly prompt marketers to re-evaluate brand relationships, as well as the value co-creation process.

2.5. Summary and research questions

In the literature review section, I have presented an overview of brand communities' communal characteristics. I also delved into the challenges of heterogeneity within the community and the aspect of conflicts, which is giving way to inter-group antagonism - an under-researched topic in consumer behaviour literature. In order to explore these antagonistic consumption groups, I presented the following research questions:

- What are the behaviours of each antagonistic consumption group?
- How do brand community members experience and respond to antagonism?

In the next section, I will elaborate the research context and methods. The study focuses on antagonists in a popular, non-marginalised, experiential-based brand community: League of Legends.

3. Methodologies

- a) Research context

League of Legends (LoL) is a multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) developed and published by Riot Games. Till this date, LoL is still recognised as one of the world's largest online multiplayer game, with number of monthly active players surpassing 100 million (Kollar, 2016). The game incorporates elements of role-play and real-time strategy. In a single match, two teams of 5 players are pitted against one another. Each player takes the role of a “summoner” who controls a champion, each of which has a distinctive role and skillset. The goal of the game is to dominate the enemy team, infiltrate the opposite base and destroy their nexus. In order to claim victory, team members are required to communicate frequently with each other. Players either join a pre-made team or are randomly matched through a matchmaking system; therefore, a mutual understanding of “meta” or “metagame” enables them to promptly form team compositions without extensive strategising (Donaldson, 2017).

In order to grasp the game mechanics and strategies, players go through a huge learning curve. Many players labour thousands of hours in ranked games, where they compete to gain rewards and climb to higher ranks. Besides the basic game rules and guidelines, Riot Games scantily provides training materials; hence, players are bound to engage, observe and learn through in-game interactions, as well as participate in forum discussions. This dynamic setting creates an assemblage of highly interconnected activities within the players' community, meaning that no player can truly operate in isolation (Seo & Jung, 2016).

Community interactions necessitate cooperation, collaboration, knowledge dissemination through storytelling, and governance among the fan base. Similar to communities of massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPGs) (V. A. Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2010; Park & Chung, 2011), LoL also displays characteristics of a traditional brand community, including consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of responsibility towards the community (V. Badrinarayanan & Sierra, 2018; Järleby, 2017; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)

Due to its nature of competitiveness, LoL has gained notoriety for being a hotbed of toxicity. A collateral of toxic behaviours includes assisting the enemy team (i.e. intentional feeding), disrupting other players' gaming experience (i.e. griefing and trolling), and verbal harassment (i.e. flaming). Arguably, toxicity in LoL has been attributed to the game design and mechanics (Yannick, 2015). The manifestations of toxicity within the LoL community

have been well documented in a number of recent studies (Donaldson, 2017; Kou & Gui, 2014; Kou, Gui, Zhang, & Nardi, 2017; Nardi, 2016). Therefore, the presence of toxicity in LoL provides a rich context to study antagonism in an online brand community.

To battle players' dysfunctional behaviours, Riot Games introduced the Tribunal system, which promoted co-creation between the game developers and players to govern the community (Kou & Nardi, 2014). The punitive system allows players to see defendants' records, as well reporters' comments and vote to either pardon or punish cases. While receiving praises and support from the player base, the Tribunal System was not free from criticism. It had a large backlog of pending reports, meaning that players might be punished months after their act of violation had been reported. More notably, contentious debates often burst out, surrounding the topic of whether an offence is punishable. Donaldson (2017) and Kou & Nardi (2014) argued that the deliberate ambiguity in LoL's "Summoners' Code – a guide for ideal players – plays a great role in players' discordant interpretations of the rules. In 2014, the Tribunal system was taken down for upgrades and has not come back as of today.

b) Methods

Traditionally, ethnography has been employed by researchers to understand the culture and behaviours of consumption groups. "Netnography" is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities" (Kozinets, 2002). Given the nature of the research context of this study, netnography is the suitable research method. LoL consumers are deeply immersed in the mass-media computed-communication and interactions. They connect with players on LoL game servers, browse Riot's website, contribute posts to forum member-to-member discussion boards, and spectate League Championship on Youtube from the comfort of their home. It is a truism that their consumption behaviours are deeply entrenched in their online presence. Hence, the online communities have a large influence on consumers' actions and decisions. Netnography allows me as a researcher to access LoL consumers' behaviours and discussions that naturally occur in online environment.

The benefits of using netnography are manifold. In regards of search costs and accessibility to informants, netnography is less expensive and faster to carry out than traditional ethnography. In addition, data are fully available to the public and easy to obtain (Kozinets, 2002). The online discussions of LoL forum members that have spanned over

the course of 5 years are all available and can be accessed in a much shorter period of time compared to ethnography. It is also possible to observe commonalities or changes in opinions among community members across the time. Another benefit of netnography is its unobtrusive nature, compared to other qualitative methods (Kozinets 2002). Because the research focuses on a specific culture of LoL gamers, particularly antagonist consumers, a method that allows contextualisation is highly advantageous. Therefore, interviews and focused groups were not selected due to their obtrusiveness, even though pilot interviews were conducted during the entrée stage to explore community insights.

Some researchers raised the concern that the lack of informant identifiers may be a limitation of netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2006). However, in regards of the sensitivity of the research topic, the online environment provides anonymity to users, which emboldens them to freely talk about their own transgression without fear of repercussions. Langer & Beckman (2005) presented the advantages and advocated for the use of covert research on sensitive research topics. Puri (2018) also listed researcher's invisibility as one of the benefits of netnography (i.e. it is possible adopt a lurker approach).

The chosen netnography research sites are LoL forum discussion boards, Reddit LoL subforum and Youtube LoL-related fanmade channels. These three sites satisfied the conditions prescribed by Kozinets (2002): (1) "high traffic of visits and postings, (2) large numbers of participants, (3) availability of rich and descriptive data, and (4) member discussions on topics of toxicity, which are appropriate to the research questions. As of March 2019, Reddit LoL sub-forum attracted 2.7 million users. On LoL forum discussion board, the posts date back to 2009, when LoL was first released, with each thread followed by dozens to hundreds of comments. As with other online game communities (Caudill, 2015; Bernard Cova & Marseille, 2010; Kou, Gui, & Kow, 2016; Weijo et al., 2017), the forums provide an enormous social hub for community members to discuss in-game knowledge, debate current events, retell personal stories and define community rules. They are also the places where Riot Games employees gather feedbacks from its fan base.

I followed the netnographic procedures that include entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation that have been adopted and modified from Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley (2014) and Langer and Beckman (2005). Before making an entrance into these research sites, I conducted 13 pilot interviews with LoL players who were recruited via Reddit subforum, attended one local area network (LAN) event and scouted information on forums to

gain as much preliminary understanding as possible. The preparation step before entrée proved to be of crucial importance, as it endowed me with capabilities to follow forum member conversations and circumvent difficulties in understanding consumers' patterns of behaviours. The challenge is evident in Taylor's (2012) description to understand the events that were happening in eSports matches (cited in Seo & Jung, 2016).

I spent in total three months to immerse in the community forums and collect onsite data. Textual and graphical data, including forum posts, comments, and video transcripts, are downloaded and collected to a list of word documents. During the analysis stage, I adopted "open coding" by categorising data and grouping them into more abstract themes (Kozinets, 2013; Kozinets et al., 2014). This analytical process also included continuous resorting the textual data to identify similar and distinct patterns, phrases, sequences and relationships (Kozinets, 2010). After the abstracting process, two major themes that adhere to the research questions emerged: antagonists' behaviours and community's experience of antagonism, which was subsequently broken down to four sub-themes. The finding section presents the thematic analysis, providing corroborating evidences with forum discussion excerpts.

4. Findings

Antagonists have always shadowed, lurked around and risen in community tribal conflicts. This section aims to shed light on the behaviours the antagonistic consumers and their dynamic interactions with the rest of the LoL brand community. It is then followed by an attempt to explore the community responses to communal transgression, which encompass both acquiescence and outright resistance.

4.1. Antagonists and their behaviours

I first focus on the three groups of antagonistic consumers: (a) trolls, (b) hostile purists, (c) crusaders and their characteristics, contextual triggers of antagonism, collective activities, and the friction they induce on the community.

4.1.1. Trolls

Trolls' actions are characterised by repetitiveness, destruction, intention and they aim to inflict misery onto their targets. Their behaviours also indicate that they possess a certain

level of in-game knowledge and competencies to carry out trolling performances. They interact with the rest of the community through learning, assimilation and socialisation.

a) Trolling as dark play

Many forum participants who admit themselves to be trolls openly express their dissatisfaction and boredom with the normal gameplays. Hence, they seek pleasure by causing disruption to other gamers' experience. Online-game trolls are often driven by entertainment, boredom, and revenge (Thacker & Griffiths, 2013). The theme "fun" is repeated and echoed throughout the trolls' narrative. A troll illustrated his malicious intention as follow:

(DaMightyBeyonce): *"Your suffering is my gain. True, I do troll harder after I lose a game I was actually trying at but personally, the best and sweetest games to troll are games where I see that one of my team mates is in promos or is about to enter promos. [...] Watching them ping like madmen and curse at you is just a really unique thrill in and of itself."*

Some trolls can be completely innocuous, gaining a few chuckles and even awe from their spectators. However, trolls in LoL have become destructive and wrapped in-game interactions in absurdity. Flame bait becomes a common troll's behaviour that LoL players often encounter. A forum participant nicknamed "Look I Suck OK" described his experience as below:

(Look I Suck OK): *"The MHOT (em-hawt) will harass, abuse, and insult someone for trying something new or unconventional... in a bot game."*

- *MHOT: "Sion bot..? Rly?"*
- *You: "Meh. Called top. So did two others. Decided, why not, I'll try Sion out as a little support-type dude."*
- *MHOT: "OMFG we're gonna lose."*
- *You: "Guy, sorry, it's beginner bots, we're not gonna lose."*
- *MHOT: "****ing idiots don't know **** about the meta, gonna **** everyone in ranked."*

In this instance, the troll "MHOT" used inflammatory language to bait the other player into a flame war. Some trolls admit that they get thrilled upon seeing their team members being demoralised and getting apoplectic with rage. Persistent trolls continuously provoke their

own teammates to enter into conflicts, despite receiving warnings of punishments. These characteristics of repetitiveness and destruction resonate with the findings of Schachaf and Hara (2010) who studied Wikipedia trolls.

Trolls' vocabulary is often laden with sexism, racism, and profanity. Their trolling performances employ both textual elements and in-game actions, such as intentional feeding, standing idle, or griefing. These in-game actions refer to the act and intention of giving an advantage to the enemy team. Even though their goal of defeating opponents may still align with the rest of the team, their strategies are vastly deviant from what is established as appropriate.

To trolls, personal victory equates someone else's loss of emotional equilibrium. The prospect of enjoyment, produced at the cost of another player's ludic experience, is similar to "dark play" (Schechner 1993, cited in Seregina & Weijo, 2017). Carter (2015) also addressed "dark play" by exploring treachery in EVE Online, in which the transgressors enjoy the prospect of risk-taking and perceive "unethical" acts that do not conform with normal expectations as evidence of social skills, rather than anti-social behaviour. This perception of malicious enjoyment distinguishes trolls from crusaders, whom we will encounter in later section.

b) Trolling as adroit performances

Trolls' behaviours and strategies imply that they possess an understanding of the communal ethos, contexts, and game mechanics to perform. One of the themes that emerges out of trolls' behaviour is creativity. For example, they identify keywords that can trigger automatic punishment and deliberately avoid them to circumvent bans while still manage to taunt their opponents. Another example is troll's re-purposing the Smart Ping system, which is intended to convey messages with little to no chat communication. The original message meant "enemy missing (MIA)", but it has been altered to be implicitly understood as "You idiot made an absurd mistake". They can repeatedly send the (?) ping to publicly shame another player.

Many trolls refer to their shenanigans as a form of "art". The reference has connotations of subtlety and finesse, yet only added to exasperate other players. With sufficient knowledge of the game and its players, trolls accumulate success through their mischievous acts (Cruz, Seo, & Rex, 2018).

They also retell stories about mischievous feats and creative tactics. Under an unusual title “Fun and interesting ways to troll in LoL”, forum participants contributed to the discussion thread by sharing their unconventional ways to troll. The original poster was beaming with joy while declaring his intention: *“I like making people rage through creative and inventive ways but I just started playing LoL so I don't know alot of tricks. I like doing funny and interesting trolls, not just intentionally feeding to get my team bad.”* (xHaterade). Similar discussion threads may be dwarfed by the number of threads that complain about trolls, but they still resurface, providing trolls a platform to spread knowledge and celebrate mischievousness.

The act of cultivating knowledge and carrying out trolling performance skilfully can be viewed as adroit performance (Holt, 1995; Schau et al., 2009). Leveraging opportunities to demonstrate various competencies, trolls gain cultural capital that differentiates themselves from other consumers. In addition, sharing and celebrating stories of mischief also serve as builder of affiliation among trolls’ sympathetic network.

c) Undermining the concept of hierarchical status

Trolls also utilise their creativity and knowledge to assimilate with new players, camouflaging themselves as unskilled players to avoid punishment. In many instances, trolls purport to rally for the team’s victory. As soon as the team is about to engage in team fight, they will immediately wreck the effort. Their acts sabotage the status gains and lead to a serious breach of trust among other players, making them to grow detached from in-game collaboration. They exhibit consistent behaviours such as assimilation (Cruz et al., 2018), intentional fallacies (Thacker & Griffiths, 2013) and faking under the mask of genuineness (Schachaf & Hara, 2010).

A forum participant named DaMightyBeyonce who identified as troll emphasised that punishments did not concern him, since he acknowledged that the punitive system cannot detect intentional deception. By posing as an unskilled player, the troll cloaked his true status.

DaMightyBeyonce: *“This is why permanbans don't really work [...] Instead of outright trolling we are forced to troll in more subtle ways i.e. not warding, not pinging Mia, going away or off to farming as a team fight ensues, not healing teammates, standing behind the entire team and purposely missing all abilities, etc. [...] The absolute best way for a troll to avoid being banned is simply say as*

little as possible in game and ask yourself throughout the game what would be the worst idea right now?/ what would a baddie do? Remember riot cannot punish a player simply for lack of skill ;)”

Other forum participants also circulate stories to demonstrate the travails that subtle trolls have created.

Rainbow Slayer: *“[The troll] Flashing for no reason, running into the enemies and dying like it was an accident, pretending to have dc'd. [...] He didn't have an abnormal amount of deaths. He was still farming from time to time, he just wasn't playing like any normal player would have been in the same situation. In better words, intentionally throwing the game without breaking the rules.”*

d) Beyond isolated trolls

In many cases, trolls do not perform alone in isolation but in a highly coordinated pre-made group, taking concerted actions to bully single players. A player recounted his story of being trolled in a pre-made game: *“I was matched with 4 other pre-made players. At the last minute of the game, when we were so close to victory, suddenly one of them asked: “Hey, wanna see sth cool?”. Then they surrender the match. I was so mad because that was my promo game and they completely wasted one hour of my time.”* In another discussion thread on LoL Players’ Behavior board, a troll answered the question “What made the best troll?”: *“Those 4-man premade games where you flame the random guy and get the enemy team to report him are pretty fun. (Lajneen)”*.

The excerpts showed a contrasted picture with the idiosyncratic behaviours found among Wikipedia trolls, who operate alone in a non-cooperative manner (Schachaf & Hara, 2010). Trolls, like any participant of the community, do socialise with members who share the same interest. Their characteristics have been shaped by the medium, where players are allowed to connect and coordinate with each other.

Unsurprisingly, trolls also harbour an “us vs. them” mentality. The attitude is reflected through this self-proclaimed troll’s words: *“When you are dummies, then it’s natural that you got trash talked. [...] Bronze is lowest among people who don’t know how to push a button (noobs). Platinum is the lowest among those who know a bit about the game”* (Leaf-Runner). Another forum participant added: *“[...] Besides, all in all if you cannot overcome the troll, you do not deserve to win in the first place.”* Both trolls demonstrated that they disassociated themselves from the titles “bronze” and “noobs”, confirming that

their skills are above these levels. Trolling is akin to a test to qualify legitimate members (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), based on performance and competence.

4.1.2. Hostile purists

Many community members feel that they participate in co-creating the brand narrative and culture, and hence, own the brand (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Any member who is deviant from the designated communal identity will be seen as a direct threat to the community from this group's perspective.

a) The outspoken elitists

Through the lens of LoL community, hostile purists are players who show zero tolerance towards minuscule mistakes. They seek for faults to blame others. The most frequently used manoeuvre of hostile purists is to unload limitless verbal barrages on their targets with inflammatory, accusatory and provocative languages. The intensity, profanity and frequency often escalate quickly as the match proceeds.

To hostile purists, calibre is sacred, which stresses the idea that only the most resilient, competitive and competent players should be allowed to join the game. In the quest to find legitimate members, "noobs" become the targets of hostile purists' attacks. Tensions arise out of participation and performance (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012), between those who think that the game is competitive, and those whose purpose is to casually have fun. The notion of viewing oneself as one "true gamer" is akin to how Hell's Angel bikers perceive themselves as authentic Harley-Davidson riders (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

One of the forum posts illustrated the argument: *"Plz stop putting noobs is my game. I'm silver 4 and I keep getting bronze 5 players in my games and feeding so im going to stop playing league untill u fix your match making and putting people that don't belong in the league there in into the league they belong in. (xSpicex)".* "Noobs" refers to unskilled players, those who "suck at this game", "need someone else to carry their assess", and "inexperienced". The term has been so widely used that it developed into an insulting word among community members. Many other forum threads echoed the same sentiment of eminence, asking "why noobs play ranks" and demanding Riot Games to "punish noobs" or "ban noobs", especially from ranked games. Ranked games are regarded as a specialised territory that is reserved for "elitists" - highly skilled and competitive players.

“Flaming is actually worth doing and it’s great. There is one simple reason to flame: tell the mofo that he are so bad he shouldn’t do ranked ... If you are bad as fuck gtfo of ranked queue and yes, we will keep on flaming those epic bads. P.S. you’re welcome for my help purifying the rift. (Kudrov)”. “Purifying” refers to barring unskilled players from intermingling with skilled players in ranked games. Hostile purists deride whoever denounces their behaviours as “thin skin” and “cry baby”. The degrading remarks classify players who do not conform with their ideologies as “the other side”. In addition, by reinforcing these intragroup stereotypes, hostile purists reify the notion that they are the righteous.

In previous researches, enmity also underlined the clashes between hard-core fans and oppositional groups. Tensions often arose around the differences in lifestyles and morality, such as the friction between Hummer brand supporters and critics (Luedicke & Giester, 2006), or the core group of culinary website and “low cultural” consumers (de Valck 2007). Their rivalry manifested itself in forms of humour, ridicule, even outright hostility and malice (Ewing et al., 2013). In a task-driven milieu such as LoL, the prejudices are held against those who are perceived as unskilled players and those who do not adhere to the elitists’ idea of competitiveness. It is noteworthy that the lifestyles and activities of hostile purists and other groups bear much resemblance; hence the boundaries of differences become blurry. According to Van Rijswijk, Haslam, & Ellemers (2006), ingroup distinctiveness and stereotyping are enhanced when there is not much distinction between in-group and out-group members.

b) The inquisitors

Hostile purists find values and benefits from their flame war. First, it is a test to filter out unqualified players. Second, they perceive flaming as the necessary evil to incentivise teammates to sweat for victory. The dialogue below demonstrates how hostile purists vindicate insulting remarks, claiming potential advantages of their unduly harsh actions.

(Periscope): *“I mean, flaming someone else isn't really "trying your best" either right? It's not helping the team in the slightest.”*

(KittyKatarana): *“How is it not helping? You flame them, then they feel bad and try not to be bad, so they don’t get flamed.”*

(Periscope): *“No, because insulting your teammates provides no benefit and has plenty of potential downside; thus, it is not trying your best.”*

(TheKingOfBiches): *“It provides benefit sometimes. And it only has a downside if the person your flaming is sensitive. I can motivate you to try hard, as shown in Korea.”*

Similar dialogues and reasonings are found common across LoL discussion threads. These self-righteous purists argue that they are doing a great service by calling out “bad players”. Therefore, their actions, though transgress the general rules, are believed to be justifiable. From their perspective, they are contributing to the community vitality by reinforcing the cultural codes that protect the community against lacklustre members. Such behaviours are tantamount to the defence of brand warrior against dispassionate fans in TIA community (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

Notably, while ranked games are notorious for toxicity, such behaviour does not confine to players who position at Diamond or Challenger ranks (i.e. players who earn their ranks for being exceptionally competitive and skilful). Many community members have complained about how Bronze or Silver players are hungry to mount verbal onslaughts on their teammates. As mentioned in Schau et al. (2009), the accumulation of knowledge and competencies enables community members to compete and differentiate themselves in terms of social status. However, due to varying level of understanding, ideas and beliefs, status within the LoL community is open for interpretation and undefined. Therefore, low-rank players do not necessarily humble themselves in front of other players.

Though displaying similarities in terms of outward behaviours, hostile purists consider trolls as foes rather than friends, as the latter group also drift from the competitiveness and seriousness of the game. The conflict inflames the community friction and furthers its fragmentation. While the rivalry against oppositional groups is believed to be the driving force behind community cohesiveness and solidarity (Ewing et al., 2013; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), it is the factor that deeply divides the LoL community.

4.1.3. Crusaders

a) Playing as vengeance

When conflicts arise within the community, there will be offending parties. While trolls spoil other players’ gaming experience and hostile purists instigate wars with perceived deviant players, enraged consumers at the other end of the attack engage in revenge consumptions to redress the situations. The crusaders emerge as a defensive stance against

their aggressors. Angered by bombardments of harassment, these infuriated players attempt to retaliate. A forum participant verbalised his aggravation in a thread titled “I’m done playing League of Legends”.

(Superweenyhut) *“This game made me into an asshole because being mean was more fun than playing the game. (...) I would rather talk about the community as a whole, and what kind of people are playing this game. You probably already know who I'm talking about: the toxic flamespraying asshole that is gonna cost you some LP.*

I wasn't always like this. When I started playing, I would commend every half decent play someone made, even if it was someone on the other team. I was so wowed by the mechanics of a new game that I didn't care that I was losing. But lately, more and more, I just have to say something. Something to let this fucking idiot know exactly how stupid he is for doing whatever he did wrong. We all know this doesn't help anything, but it doesn't stop me from relentlessly vomiting out generic, shitty, childish insults.”

Their profanity communicates a great degree of frustration. With a primary goal of shaming and revenging teammates who spoil the games, crusaders are crude in their wordings and actions. Since the crusade of vengeance is motivated by intense negative emotions such as resentment and rage, they do not show any caution against punishments. Such thoughtlessness and abusiveness resemble characteristics of “jay customers”, a term coined by Christopher Lovelock (cited in Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzeri (2013)).

Though crusaders are fully aware that the revenge will impede the team’s chances of victory, they still proceed to seek satisfaction through other players’ suffering. It is an intense desire to get even, even at the expense of one own’s advantages. As Nada Nasr Bechwati & Maureen Morrin (2003) explained, consumers’ vengeance is a conscious act. Psychologists have described this experience as Schadenfreude, or the pleasure at the misfortune of others (Blackshaw, 2010; Ewing et al., 2013). *“I don’t care if I get banned, as long as these assholes suffered”* – declared player “Shaclone” in one of his defeated matches. Allegations that trolls and flammers have initiated unjust attacks were given as justifications for retaliations. Similar sentiments are palpable on discussion boards: *“screw riot! Shit game and Im going to troll people just because I can! Ban me riot!”* (DarianEX). The post is supported by another follow-up comment: *“If you can't beat em, join em!”*

Nothing will happen to your account either way. You will have much more fun than what Riot has to offer with this crappy game” (CodyBear).

b) The outraged dissenters

Due to this sense of self-righteousness, crusaders see themselves as victims rather than transgressors. Therefore, the bans targeted at their vulgarity and aggression are far from just. Furious members also reframe the act of flaming as “defending oneself” and “expressing one’s own opinions”. The argument is evident in the following rant: *“What you are doing is fascist, preventing freedom of speech and you make people blind to this fact, instead, we (flamers) are perceived as toxic. There has never been a game where players were forbidden to express what they think” (bitPhantom).*

Among a plethora of venting posts, many vehemently accuse Riot Games of blind compliance and ignorance towards negative behaviours. “It’s official - The Trolls have won” – read one fuming post. Another poster insisted that Riot Games had diverted its interests in the battle against toxicity: *“They only care about triggered kids that feed and then are offended when someone tells them what to do and stop dying. The current mentality of riot is that you can feed as much as you want and you wont get puinished because "its a bad day". But if anyone dares to say something, that person is getting banned instantly because thsoe kids are too sensitive to take consturctive critisim or MAN THE FK UP and actually play normally instead of going 1v5 every time they respawn” (T4Underbolt).* In the context of LoL, though Riot Games does not play the role of a direct transgressor (e.g. Gebauer et al., 2013; Weijo, Bean, & Rintamäki, 2017), players still identify them as a key figure behind the communal problem. Reiterating that flaming is necessary to defend against toxic players, crusaders dispute that the punitive system devised by Riot Games is unfair. As Gebauer et al., (2013) asserted, “perceived unfairness” often drives consumers to direct their anger towards the brand.

Enraged by perceived injustice, crusaders bring their grievance to the forum boards. They vent off frustration, hoping to gain sympathies from fellow members and alleviate the pain. Their behaviours bear similarities to “cathartic venting”, which has been documented in research papers done by Lee-Wingate & Corfman (2010) and Weijo et al. (2017). However, their emotional outlets are met with fierce confrontation. Their actions are strongly condemned as “childish”, “immature” and they “should get their act together”. Having

personal grievances deepened, crusaders respond from spite, regarding the oppositional group as “true antagonists” who fail to grasp the problem.

Crusaders are also the most vocal group on forum boards. Not only do they disrupt other members’ gaming experience, they also spread negative word of mouth (WoM) about the brand. These emotional responses and persistent demands to restore justice are found common among consumers who feel that they have been treated unfairly by marketers’ and brand managers’ decisions (Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 2003; Seiders & Berry, 2011). The negative narrative pulsates through the community interactions, propelling the fragile community to constant wars with itself.

4.2. How the community experience and respond to antagonism

The previous section explored the characteristics and behaviours of each antagonistic groups. Their interactions have a great influence on shaping the brand-related discourse. Following up, this section will dissect the community’s reactions: learning, re-negotiating brand meanings, transforming the communal ethos, and defying antagonism.

4.2.1. Antagonism and learning

When it comes to communal learning, there are two sides of the process: part of the community learns to become antagonistic, while they simultaneously learn the socially expected norms and rules from experiencing antagonism.

On the one hand, antagonism can be viewed as an apprenticeship (Schau et al., 2009). Players learn tactics they can employ to guarantee their own team’s demise. Through interactions with other antagonists, they get to know the type of actions that can provoke intense emotions from opponents. They also cultivate in-game knowledge to identify tricks that allow punishments to be circumvented.

Learning becomes a continuous process for antagonistic players. This implies that the strategies, vocabularies and behaviours of antagonists are not static but continue evolving. As observed in Seo & Jung (2016), gamers’ learning process permeates through a large network of activities, including in-game interactions, forum discussions, spectating, observation, strategising and analysing. The example of trolls’ sharing their best practices shows that antagonistic consumers not only disseminate, but also document and archive information for future references. They gain knowledge from their peers while increasingly master a certain set of skills. Learning allows antagonistic community members to

cultivate cultural capital that enables their cultural codes to perpetuate (Schau et al., 2009; Seraj, 2012).

On the other hand, interactions with antagonistic consumers provides opportunities for the community to discuss, communicate and understand the social “norms”. Vocabularies entangled with malevolent intent are widely recognised. For example, players fathom jargons such as “gg noobs” (i.e. good game, noobs) or “gg ez” (i.e. good game, easy), which both bear the connotations of scorn and ridicule. Even though Riot Games does not publish a statement announcing that these remarks violate their rules, it is implicitly understood as an intentional insult, and hence, labelled as toxic (Kou & Nardi, 2014). Likewise, there are no comprehensive guidelines detailing how trolls and feeders behave, but community members can identify their behaviours. They accrue knowledge through storytelling, recounting the incidents of encountering trolls and describe their reactions. During the learning process, community members discuss what is acceptable and what is not. Inappropriate behaviours are often shamed and ridiculed. While repercussions deter members from repeating the offences, positive reactions show accepted norms that members are encouraged to emulate. In one instance, a forum poster demonstrated his triumphant effort to preclude trolls from “winning”. The comment section lauded his action and shared anecdotes on how they felt related to the story in discussion.

Past researches have emphasised the perceived benefits of the learning process within brand communities. Seraj (2012) asserted that the community co-creates and offers its members a rich collection of intellectual values. Kuo & Feng (2013) later suggested learning, which generates information, cognitive and functional benefits, is also one of the key drivers in consumers’ brand community engagement. More recently, de Almeida et al. (2018) reaffirmed that the route to seriously engaged consumers are knowledge development. Learning has been believed to be the key component in consumer’s value creation and community engagement process.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive benefits that have been documented in previous researches, the two sides of the learning process produce much more nuanced, even problematic influences to the communal values. Boundaries of appropriateness may become blurry at times. The convolutions add a layer of complications to the challenges of managing a diverse, heterogeneous customer base (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000).

4.2.2. Renegotiation of brand meanings

Contention surrounding the topics of “competitiveness” versus “appropriate behaviours” occur commonly on LoL forum discussion board. One of the most peculiar discussion topics was “*A player openly admitted that he was drunk while playing in ranked game. Was his offence reportable?*”. Perhaps the question was anomalous, but related discussions are nothing out of the ordinary. Members are frequently confronted with in-game circumstances that may not violate the Summoners’ Codes but contradict the community’s competitive spirit.

On the thread that discussed “was the drunk player’s offence reportable”, one side argued that it was not worth being reported, because LoL, after all, is just a casual game; most players join in to have a good time with friends. On the other hand, opponents ferociously insisted that the incident was punishable, because ranked games are highly competitive; hence, the player was irresponsible for putting himself in a state that may ruin the rest of the teams’ victory. Nowhere in the Summoners’ Code prescribes the punishable offences, but community members still construct their judgements based on a loose code of competitiveness.

The Summoner’s Codes are highly contentious. For instance, “being positive and supportive to your teammates” usually suggests open-mindedness and collaborative teamwork. However, the observation that the punitive system only detects flammers but overlooks trolls leads to misleading interpretations, such as the following: “*What you should have realized, that quote from Riot support means that ANY NEGATIVITY can be punished. It's either shut up or be unmistakably positive. Basically, you aren't allowed to be a human being. (AwfMeta)*”. The example indicates that community members rely not only on official policies but also look at the company’s responses to validate interpretations (Weijo et al., 2017).

It is not a coincidence that the rules are left ambiguous. According to the explanations of Tribunal’s designers (Donaldson, 2017; Kou & Nardi, 2014), the openness allows community members to negotiate rules, norms, and creative gameplay strategies.

Due to such ambiguity, community members have multiple contested interpretations of the rules. It is not uncommon that members are unaware of the rules that they have violated (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). Questions such as “Why I’m toxic?” mushroom on forum discussion boards. Many forum participants admitted that they understood their

behaviours were unacceptable only after receiving explanations from other community members.

The frenzy whirl of meaning interpretation inflames widespread negative narratives. Community members circulate stories about unjustified bans, condescending attitude of Riot employees, and Riot Games' impotence to deal with the situation.

Discussion boards are flooded with topic threads such as "League has been compromised by trolls", "Remember folks: reports do nothing", or "China Riot doesn't care". The claim "China Riot doesn't care" implied that Riot Games have been completely sold out to TenCent; hence, its focus has been detached from the community's problems. Hearsay and rumours spring up. For example, dozens of replies followed the topic thread "League has been compromised by trolls", including this one: "*Riot doesnt care to reform the system. When more people get banned they make more money. They recognize that people become addicted to their game and eventually make a new account and spend more money. They dont want a working or just system. (AliceVzCt)*". Even though the comment was immediately corrected by another forum participant, such fallacious narrative is still prevalent within the community. Riot Games' failure to redress the problem and its mechanism targeting frustrated fans are regarded as signs of ignorance. The company represents "a big corporation who only cares about money".

The process of renegotiating brand meanings resembles active forms of consumer resistance (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). By engaging in brand-related discourses, community members "negotiate the meanings to expose alleged corporate agenda", and "view a brand's position and strategy as heavily weighted towards internal interests (e.g. profit-driven) rather than external interests (e.g. the wants and needs of the consumers)" (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010).

This line of thinking bolsters the notion that the brand has violated community's trust. In the event of perceived transgressions, a lot of meaning-making activities take place, including validating the transgression framing based on curated information (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Weijs et al., 2017). Angered community members concentrate on assigning the blame on the transgressors. Previous researches have noted that the blame derives from the feeling of betrayal, which motivate the consumers to "frame" the personal grievances as injustices (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Motivated by these senses of violation, betrayal and injustices, the community further

disseminate negative word-of-mouth (WoM) and devise actions to retaliate against the brand.

4.2.3. Antagonism and communal ethos

As demonstrated in the previous sections, consumers are active in participating in co-constructing and co-owning the brand narrative. Through community interactions, members help create resources and appropriate meanings, which then transcend across borders. Among antagonistic consumers, LoL community undoubtedly also sees similar co-creation process that builds the community identity.

Community members often share posts asking for the funniest trolls or the best flames that players have encountered. Thousands of memes' variations emanate from antagonists' shenanigans. There is a mixture of responses, but many replies express awe and admiration for the entertainment and creativeness. The example demonstrates that deviant behaviours such as flaming have gone from something deeply vilified to something worth rewarding and celebration. By extending support to toxic members, community members reinforce and perpetuate the narrative and linguistic use of antagonists.

Community members also assign stereotypes to certain ranks, character builds and players' roles. For example, Bronze players are often referred to as "immature", "uncooperative", "abusive", and "always seek others to blame" (Kou et al., 2016). Likewise, a fraction of the community widely considers "Teemo" and "Yasuo" as typical champion selection of trolls. The community, through their experience and exchanges, assign to imaginary objects certain meanings and emotions that drift from the intended meanings created by game developers. Amplifying these stereotypes, the community have common responses when they recognise signs of antagonists, such as instantly locking "Teemo" and "Yasuo" to prevent trolls from selecting them. The reaction repeats and disseminates the meanings attached to these objects among the community.

These activities are normalised and become an inseparable part of the communal expressions. Many community members express their pessimism and capitulation in face of antagonism: "There is nothing we could do about it (trolls)". "This community is so toxic that I do not want to play anymore". Following one of the latest Youtube promotion videos of Riot Games, LoL was promoted with the message of "Play and Win together", most of the comments sarcastically accused LoL of deceptive marketing, claiming that it is impossible to play this game without being toxic. The public laments revealed not only the

community's exasperations but also their contextualised understandings about the brand community identity. The understandings are co-opted into the brand-related dialogues, giving the wider audience an impression that the meanings originate from the brand (Black, Iain, Veloutsou, 2016; Felix, 2012; Schembri & Latimer, 2016b).

The interactions between antagonists and the rest of the community also coalesce deviant, aggressive, anti-social behaviours and norms. Calling someone an idiot or "stfu" becomes habitualised to the point that many community members no longer find them unusual during in-game interactions. This transformation is consistent with the findings of Donaldson (2017) and Kou & Nardi (2014), in which they observed how part of the community normalised toxic behaviours.

When antagonism fuses into the communal identity, the rest of community members are confronted with a dilemma: to become part of the antagonistic narrative or to abscond from the battle field. Many choose to adopt the communal identity that antagonists have developed. On the other hand, many seek relationship disclosure, once the brand cult can no longer reconcile the chasm between their personal values and the communal identity (Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005).

4.2.4. Communal endeavor to curb antagonism

Upon being challenged with antagonism, the community devises its own resistance mechanism. The "protagonists" design strategies to leverage positive brand materials to reinterpret protests in positive lights, circumvent anti-social behaviours, or find creative ways of triumphing over trolls.

At individual level, players internalise the meanings of brand virtues and incorporate it into their play style. They stress the importance of staying positive and govern one's own reactions when being taunted. In the research done by Kou & Gui (2014), the reaction is referred to as "self-discipline". One of the interviewees expressed his belief as follow:

Foxxx: "You must be a sportsmanlike player and focus on your own game, that's the only way [to cross the gold rank]. Otherwise you will always stay lower, silver for example."

During in-game interactions, they express positivity, give guidance to new players and encourage teammates to ignore trolls' provocation. Across forum boards, flaming and intentional feeding are strongly condemned, as community members hold a strong view

that action and emotion fall under the individual's responsibility to control. The desire to self-govern emerges from altruism and responsibility – a sense of obligation towards the community and sustain its ties (Muniz et al., 2001; Shau et al, 2009).

At communal level, while many members oppose and vehemently attack antagonists, others extend a great degree of sympathy towards these antagonistic members. They reason with the posters' pains, while reminding these players that acting out against other community members would only exacerbate suffering. Besides sympathising, they create a more positive image of the brand to navigate around the gloomy picture of betrayal that oppositional groups have assigned to the brand (Jr, Muniz. & Schau, 2005).

Community members also chose to ignore toxic players and report them. They showed enjoyment when participating in the Tribunal system, because they felt empowered to contribute to the community (Kou et al., 2017). Interestingly, when Riot Games decided to automate part of the punitive system, committed community members were disappointed by the decision, as they perceived that their contribution were diminishing (Kou & Gui, 2017).

To address antagonism, many “protagonists” even engage in vigilante consumption. When being asked how they would deal with trolls and flammers, several interviewees and forum participants answered that they would use the exact same tactic that trolls have (i.e. “to troll them back”). From their perspective, this action does not intend to revenge the transgressors, but to redress the balance of the game and grant confidence to players who are being targeted. Their valiant efforts were reflected in the case study done by Karhulahti (2016), in which the community lent support to the troll who assisted his enemy in order to reclaim the balance of the match and uphold the virtue of sportsmanship. The meaning of “trolling” does not stay unchanged, but gets revitalised, negotiated and contested to fit in with the community's desires.

The mixed responses of community members show that the battle between antagonism and protagonism to reclaim ownership of the community identity constantly takes place. They shred down old meanings, rebuild new ones, contest and retain the meanings and values that survive, contributing to the ever-growing dynamic of the community.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contribution

a) Antagonism is a form of brand community engagement

My analysis shows that antagonistic consumption groups exhibit the traditional characteristics of a community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001): consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of responsibilities to their community (albeit the third characteristic may be controversial). An "us vs. them" attitude is prevalent among all three types of antagonists, though it is most evident in the behaviours of hostile purists. However, unlike other brand communities (e.g. Jr, Muniz. & Schau, 2005) where rivalry often occurs between users of competing brands, LoL community witnesses its antagonists direct hostility towards any oppositional groups who are deviant from their standards. Ritualistic behaviours found among antagonists include sharing stories about their transgressions and frequently using language vernaculars that are context-specific. Their interactions in forum discussions contribute to the diversity of the communal ethos. They also create their own set of norms and force compliance on other consumers, even though these normative rules deviate from what the brand has established. Antagonists, in other words, are not a few discrete uncoordinated individuals. Their existence is an inherent part of online brand community.

Given that these communal characteristics signify a certain level of commitment to the community, I suggest that antagonists are, in fact, highly-engaged consumers. The behaviours described above fit in with Brodie et al.'s (2013) engagement process of online brand consumers. This finding is in line with the recent research that studied anti-social practices (i.e. trolls): "trolling practice is one out of a wider spectrum of practices in which "normal" users can potentially engage", along with lurking and contributing (Cruz et al., 2018).

I identified three main groups of antagonistic consumers, namely as trolls, hostile purists, and crusaders, each of which displays similar outward behaviours but possess distinguishable characteristics. In response to communal transgression, a fraction of the community accepts and co-opts antagonism into the communal ethos, while the other fraction mobilises resources to shield the community identity from corruption. The figure

below gives a brief summary of the communal response mechanism:

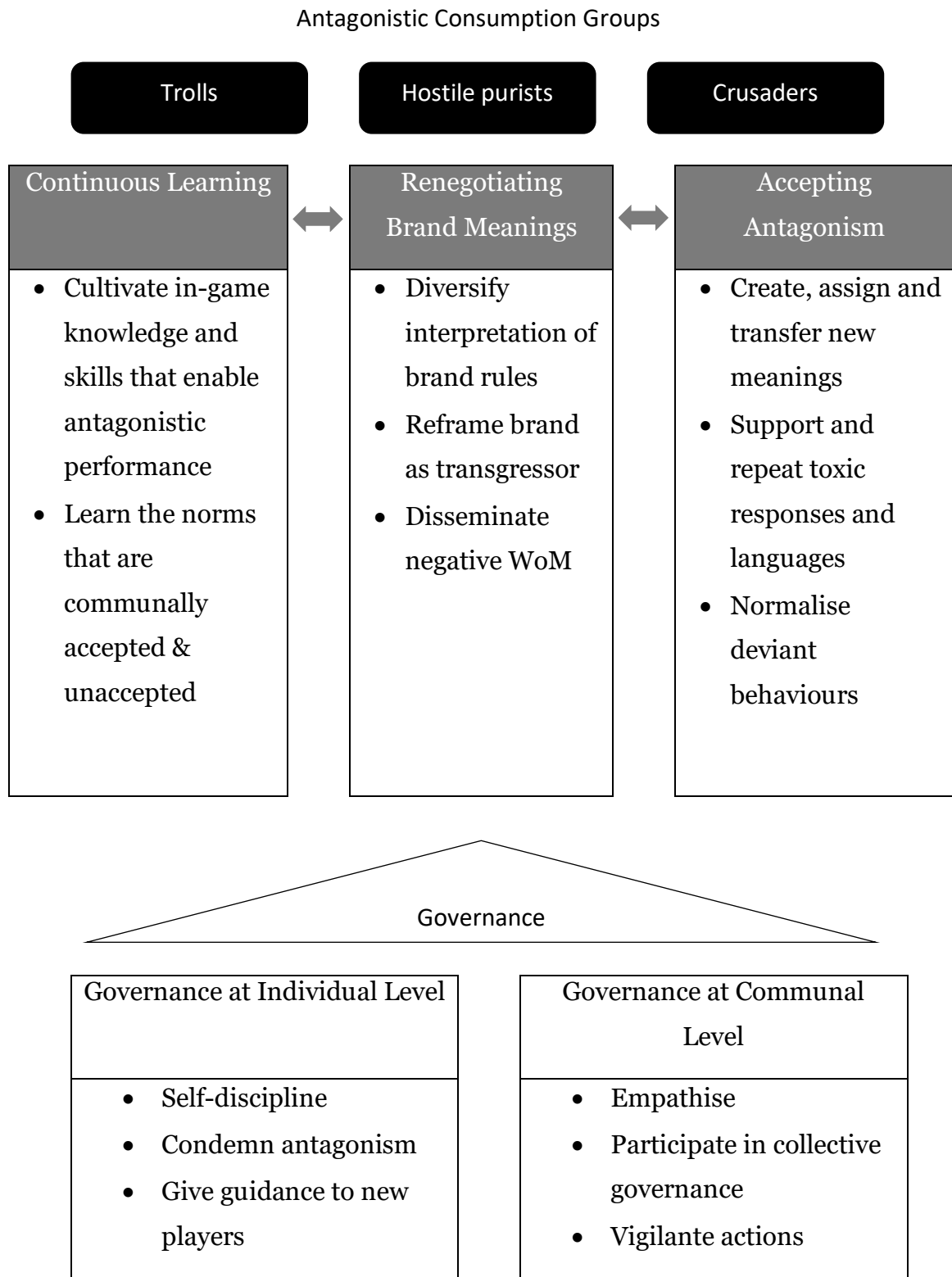


Figure 1. Antagonistic Consumption Groups and Community Interactions

Previous researches have asserted that online brand community interaction and engagement are associated with positive values: loyalty, customer empowerment, camaraderie, and social bonding (Brodie et al., 2013; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). But online brand community is not one single merry unit. Contrary to previous researches' findings, antagonists' engagement behaviours have been shown to be destructive to their community's wellbeing.

In the same vein of research into consumer interactions in online community, consumer engagement and participation prompt consumers to reciprocate. The process is dependent on the exchange of social capital, as well as a sense of positive emotions such as delight and enjoyment when participating in the community (Chan & Li, 2010; Mathwick, Wiertz, & de Ruyter, 2008). However, these elements of reciprocity and voluntarism are not present among antagonist consumers, even though antagonists are highly engaged, emotionally invested, even show enjoyment and delight during participation.

Perhaps the key difference that explains the phenomenon lies in marginalisation, which promotes a deep sense of belonging in highly engaged brand communities. Meanwhile, in heterogeneous brand communities inflicted with tensions, aggression and destabilisation, consumers compete against one another due to disparaging levels of knowledge, competencies, social identities, values and beliefs. Such aggressive competition inhibits the communal process of uniting through social and economic resources, which reinforce reciprocity (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012). In addition, conflicts impair the social linking values that brand community offers, thus tribalise the brand community and fragment its relationships. The finding contributes to the implications of heterogeneity and its impact on consumption communities (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012; Fournier, Sele, & Schögel, 2005).

This study posits that brand community relationship and engagement are not always linked with positive community aspects. Antagonism, along with the conflicts they aggravate, can dissolve the community culture, resources and social capital (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012, Sibai et al., 2014, de Valck, 2007). Their transgression drives many consumers to closure from community relationship. This excerpt from a forum poster illustrated the dilemma: *"The toxicity of this community is killing it for me. I would abandon the game even though I love the community and have been investing in the game 6 years of my time. That is ridiculous. (Roktan)"*

The findings, therefore, lead to important implications for the value co-creation process. Under the influence of antagonism, the social ties are destroyed, diminishing the networking values. In addition, antagonism drives consumers' dissatisfaction, motivates them to spread negative WoM and enforces the damaging impact on the brand. More importantly, the community normalises the negative narrative, coerces members to comply, destabilises governing efforts and discourages new entries into the community, while forcing existing members to exit.

b) The role of antagonism in community development

The afore-mentioned analysis may imply that antagonism is the anathema to community continuation. On the other hand, antagonism does serve as a meaningful element that contributes to the community vitality.

First, antagonism uncovers how the brand community shares, tolerates or disputes communal ethos (de Valck, 2007). The findings also extend the argument of Bernard et al (2010) who asserted that within a brand community, a wide spectrum of brand meanings exists across geographical borders. The pluralism of meanings and interpretation gives rise to the vibrancy and dynamics of brand communities.

Second, antagonism disrupts the normative community ethos, introducing new norms that present a threat to the commonly accepted beliefs. The rest of the community are forced to defend and reinforce the norms in response to these attacks. "Protagonists" perceive antagonism as threat and will actively try to disassociate themselves, as well as discourage other members from such inappropriate behaviours. It is not a surprise that the threat triggers a sense of belonging and responsibilities among "protagonists" whose desire is to perpetuate community vitality.

Antagonism, along with conflicts, can be both damaging and palliative to the community development. It's a double-edge sword. As Luedicke and Giesler (2007) noted, "a less hostile social environments can inspire and leverage the distinctiveness of a brand and its communities in a productive way, if and as long as the negotiated distinctions resonate strongly enough somewhere in the societal matrix."

5.2. Managerial implications

Riot Games' managers have been persistent in their "hands-off" governance approach to facilitate players' co-creation, engagement, interactions and creativity (Donaldson, 2017;

Kou & Nardi, 2014). Given the benefits and consumers' active roles in the value co-creation process, brand managers may embrace similar approaches with eagerness. However, considering the risks that antagonism pose to the collective value co-creation process, marketers and brand managers should carefully evaluate the efforts of seeding consumer actions and encouraging customer engagement (Schau et al., 2009; Schembri & Latimer, 2016b; Seraj, 2012). For example, the hybrid governing system that promoted value co-creation was easily manipulated and hijacked by trolls and misguided players (Johansson, Verhagen, & Kou, 2015). Well-intended policies could fall into misuse and impede the process of community governance. The complexity implies a need to identify which collective actions and interactions should be fostered.

It may seem intuitive to simply evict the trouble-makers. After all, it is the demand of the community that game developers and brand managers put more effort in reconciling the conflicts and deal with the community's toxicity. However, brand managers should also be cognisant of the danger of over-regulating community members' behaviours. First, strict regulations could kill off the freedom of expressions and hinder the dynamics of the community (Kraut & Under, 2009). Second, angry fans cast themselves as loyal consumers who demand reform from a broken system. Therefore, over-regulated punishments are likely to be seen as a grave betrayal that edges them into anti-brand sentiments and taking retaliatory actions. Furthermore, antagonism has been proven to bring certain benefits that contribute to the community identities. As Cruz et al. (2018) emphasised, brand managers should opt for a balance between anti- and pro-social behaviours.

In regards of Riot Games' decisions, a few actions and implications for product development could be adopted. Rather than imposing a strict hierarchy of governance, brand managers should play the role of enablers who foster and provide resources for the community to resolve its conflicts (Fournier et al., 2005).

- Support the community with sufficient tools and resources to swiftly detect antagonists who instigate conflicts (i.e. trolls and intentional feeders)
- Publicly acknowledge and act on community members' concerns: Angry members reframe service failure as a violation of trust. Therefore, a timely intervention (e.g. public apology, working with the community) will ease chances of relationship ruptures and deflate consumers' desire for vengeance (Nada Nasr Bechwati & Maureen Morrin, 2003; Ward & Ostrom, 2006; Weijo et al., 2017).

- Curtail contextual triggers of antagonism and encourage the community to generate resources that members could depend on and reciprocate (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012): In the context of game design, this means that game developers could encourage team members to collaborate by sharing in-game items and currencies that their teammates have been able to obtain.
- Endorse pro-social behaviours: An additional solution lies in using a charismatic figure to inspire community affiliation (Susan & Lara, 2009). Riot Games has taken the right action by promoting the reformation of Tyler1, “one of the most toxic players in LoL” (“The Story of Tyler1 - YouTube,” 2018), who attracted thousands of fans after his commitment to reform his behaviours.
- Embrace consistency and transparency that encourage open dialogues between the brand and the community (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004): Consumers rely on the brands’ actions to validate their world view. Historically, Riot Games have had conflicting treatments when dealing with deviant players (Donaldson, 2017), erupting in an inordinate amount of rumour and controversies within the community. Moving forward, brand managers need to keep a straight and open record that enables the community to interpret meanings and negotiate norms in a positive light.

I admit that these managerial implications have been illustrative rather than giving an exhaustive list of practical solutions. The suggestions are not meant to be generalisable to other brand community contexts but provide suggestions to brand managers to facilitate pro-social behaviours that could counter or at least neutralise antagonistic narratives. Further researches could study antagonism in other contexts of brand communities to seek for the commonalities among online antagonists.

6. Limitations and avenues for future researches

My research paper unveils antagonism and its dynamics - an inherent part of the community that brand managers need to be mindful of. The findings emphasise the need to investigate the heterogeneous nature of consumption communities and its implications, rather than focusing solely on community cohesiveness, as well as call for re-evaluation of value co-creation efforts.

In order to establish generalisation, further researches will need to be carried out. LoL represents the archetype of a highly competitive online community characterised by the prevalence of aggression and violence, while these two elements may not be present in other online brand communities. I would suggest researchers to look into a wider range of research contexts to draw comparisons of antagonist consumers' characteristics.

In addition, it will be interesting to identify similarities and distinctions between antagonists and highly engaged normal consumers. On the basis of the comparisons, researchers may be able to revise and incorporate antagonism into the consumer engagement process.

Due to the time constraint of the thesis research, I did not have the opportunities to encounter antagonists through in-game interactions. Therefore, I suspect that cultural nuances of the community may have not been fully captured during the data collection and analysis stages. I would recommend other researchers replicate the study and undertake a total cultural immersion into the gaming community when they enter the research field.

7. References

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